

# “Godlike intercourse” – Thoreau on religion

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) was not a religious man<sup>1</sup> – at least, not in the traditional sense of the word: he was not a churchgoer nor a bigot, puritanical, New-Englander morality-keeper. Outwardly, in 1841 he refused to pay the church tax to the First Parish of his home city, Concord, and signed off from its tax roll in order to avoid the consequences.<sup>2</sup> Inwardly – it is a more difficult question, and this is what this present paper is about.

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1 By his philosophy. I am aware that this sounds like an *ad hominem*, to identify the man and his work, but it seems valid regarding Thoreau: by his definition, philosophy was the mode of conducting life, so it has to be humble and general in a person (see for example *The Works of Thoreau* Boston, Houghton & Mifflin, 1937), 245-298. and Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Thoreau*, Owen Thomas, ed., *Walden and Civil Disobedience. Authoritative Texts, Background, Reviews, and Essays of Criticism*. New York: Norton and Co. Inc. 1966).

Moreover, in Europe, we should consider that this churchgoing (or the refusal of it) is not only a theoretical topos in the US but more likely a practical one: if somebody is the member of a religious congregation, it means converging background behind him materially – especially in an age like the American Renaissance, when the notions of “secular” and “ecclesiastical” were not very remote ones. So, when Thoreau decided not to take part in a social life like this, he chose the life of an exile, with no unknown-but-unconditional allies. For the history and the theory of this see the third chapter of Max Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* and the relevant parts of F. O. Matthiessen’s *American Renaissance*.

I must note here that the title is a citation from Thoreau as we will see – and the word “intercourse” is not what it means nowadays, not some kind of sexual act but a contact, a get in touch with in a spiritual meaning: when two entities contact, communicates with each other in a way when both of them elevates their existence by the other. However, it seems like a sexual contact for me pretty much and reading Thoreau one never knows but I take it for granted that it would be a very narrow interpretation of his works analyzed below – but of course he could think about this also. The *Walden* (and all of his works) is a quite intimate peace of meditation.

2 Lawrence Rosenwald, “The Theory, Practice & Influence of Thoreau’s Civil Disobedience”, available: <http://thoreau.eserver.org/theory.html>, access: 20 October 2015. These consequences are dim because on January 1, 1834 church and state were formally disestablished in Massachusetts so nobody had to obey to any state law in respect of paying the church taxes – they only had to sign off the roll as was done by Thoreau’s aunts and his mother, Cynthia who anyways rejoined the congregation later. Otherwise, the sources are in contradiction. Rosenwald states that Thoreau refused to pay the tax in 1840, while the historian of the First Parish noted that Thoreau signed off at January 6, 1841.

He was baptized as a Unitarian (his family belonged to the congregation lead by Rev. Ezra Ripley) but as an adult<sup>3</sup> he became a hard critic of the church *qua* church. He was not an anti-Christian but rather an anti-clerical: he rejected most of the institutions of his age – including the church. Institutions, by his definition, were like ligatures than the places of consummation of their ideas, or even one’s self’s. In one respect he dedicated his oeuvre to this theme: we can find the tracts of this critique scattered in almost every one of his works. Mainly, he refers to the peer pressure of the church and the unconscious desire of his fellow people to be led. He thought that the true, honest, humble man carves out his own life by his ‘Genuine Genius’ and does not wait for others, for some supreme authority to tell him where to go, when and how. In some kind of Kantian sense he lived his life in constant criticism, filtered all the so called facts of life through himself in order to preserve and strengthen his life-force. He was a transcendentalist, but much more practical than his peers – and he was a naturalist but with the attitude of the poet: he marveled at nature as *alma natura* and posed Concord as a micro- and macrocosm at the same time.<sup>4</sup> His relation with the classical topoi of western Christianity,<sup>5</sup> the Bible, Christ, God and religiousness itself, in short his faith is miserable. “... a man’s creed can never be written, that there are no particular expressions of belief that

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3 I. e. after his Harvard years, returning to Concord and starting to write his journals at the fall of 1837. For this sense of his life see Robert D. Richardson, *Henry Thoreau. A Life of the Mind* (Berkeley-Los Angeles-London: University of California Press, 1986).

4 So, his method of work is kind of picaresque. Regarding the former see the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of Zsolt Virágos’s *Portraits and Landmarks – The American Literary Culture in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century* (it gives a wide overview of the literature and philosophy of the era of the reformers), for the latter see William Ellery Channing, *Thoreau, the Poet-Naturalist. With Memorial Verses* – although it is not as scientific as it is friendly. When he speaks about ‘higher laws’ as guidance for the individual he refers to his most important observation about nature, namely, that its inhabitants are in a codependent relationship with each other (e. g. that squirrels are not just rodents but the planters of forests by dispersing seeds), where one cannot make it without the other. So as in the human world, he says, if we lavish our forces (to “the disposition of some wild lands a thousand miles off”, i. e. the Kansas-Nebraska Act) instead of gathering them then, soon, the house will be on fire (i. e. slavery, one of the biggest vices of humanity, knocking on our door but “[t]he inhabitants of Concord are not prepared to stand by one of their own bridges”), our familiar life will fall apart quickly (Henry David Thoreau, “Slavery in Massachusetts”, available: <https://sniggle.net/TPL/index5.php?entry=sim>, access: 20 October 2015).

5 It is not a secret that Thoreau was a devoted student of Eastern thought (if we can name that diverse and rich culture with this label), especially of the Hindu, Zoroastrian and Confucian scriptures. This is not a coincidence, his was the era of enthusiastic orientalism. He selected the *Laws of Manu* for *The Dial* which remained one of his perpetual texts for contemplation but I have to point out that his was a critical reading in this respect also: at one time he turned from this philosophy because of its dualism (see the second chapter of Claude Gayle’s *The Intellectual Development of Henry David Thoreau*). In this paper I cannot deal with this Thoreau further.

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deserve to be prominent”, he says,<sup>6</sup> but I take it for granted, that he had some kind of religiousness – even if it was not institutional.

As it seems, one could rate Thoreau’s religion as an individual, eclectic religion. But because this paper has philosophical claims I will do an experiment to unravel this statement and make it a question – i. e. a few questions. Was Thoreau’s aim educational (the kind of platonic, cf. the cave-metaphor), to show his neighbors the method of unchaining themselves and turning their life to a meaningful end? Was he just searched himself, his goal inwardly and independently from any other opinion? What was the Walden-episode about? Was he only a buffoon or did he mean his critique of the church seriously? What do we know about his understanding of God? Is it abstract, unspeakable? How can we locate Thoreau? Was he a pantheist? What can we learn from him in this respect?

While I will try to answer these questions, or at least, some of them, I will read closely two of Thoreau’s essays: *The Christian Fable* and *On Friendship*<sup>7</sup>, and some parts of *Walden* – and I will make some references to his *Journal* as well. My thesis, it seems, has some novelty as far as it can be seen from the literature:<sup>8</sup> in my opinion Thoreau was in an endless communication with God – they were friends, and I deal with friendship here in the Thoreauvian aspect. So, summing up, I examine Thoreau’s conception of religion through his concept of friendship. I propose this because in my opinion in this way Thoreau’s variable, confusing and sometimes paradoxical references to religion itself could be labeled.<sup>9</sup> So, this essay tends to be, in the first place, a meticulous analysis of Thoreau’s own primary texts mentioned above, an

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6 *The Works of Thoreau* 1937, 47.

7 *Ibid.* 747-753 and 754-771. Both of these essays are part of his first book *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849) – but neither of them are organic parts of the work. These are late inserts (*The Works of Thoreau* 1937, 745-746), which therefore should be examined separately from the book.

8 As far as I can tell – of course, there is valid assessments of the topic of Thoreau’s religion [see e. g. the bibliography of Rick Anthony Furtak, “Henry David Thoreau”, in Edward N. Zalta ed., *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2014 Edition), available: <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2014/entries/thoreau/>, access: 20 October 2015 and Christopher A. Dustin, *Thoreau’s Religion*, in Jack Turner ed., *A Political Companion to Henry David Thoreau* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2009)], but these are about his philosophy of nature, that he identifies Nature and God because of their measurelessness. I think this is too simple (risking the accusation of being difficult which does not seem good in any papers referring to Thoreau, the philosopher of simplicity) because nature itself in his philosophy is not only primary to anything but without it his philosophy it would *not exist*. My hypothesis is that everything else is flourishing from this source like concentric circles and identifying something with this mustard-seed is simply robbing his work.

9 To tell the truth Thoreau dedicated poems to this topic also but in this paper I cannot analyze these. For more on Thoreau’s poetic world, see Henry W. Wells, *An Evaluation of Thoreau’s Poetry*, in Paul Sherman ed., *Thoreau. Collection of Critical Essays* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1962), 131-142. and Richardson 1986, 38-42.

analysis in which I try to define Thoreau’s concepts of religion and friendship with and through each other.<sup>10</sup>

## 2. THE CHRISTIAN FABLE

This essay is about Thoreau’s break with orthodox (Unitarian) Christianity. His main thesis is that the creed preached from the pulpit is false because of its exclusivity. He urges his neighbors to think with their own heads instead of some “old Jewish scheme”,<sup>11</sup> to examine their authorities. He seeks a clear sky, a position in which doctrines are no more than doctrines: fields of knowledge, instruments of pursuing happiness, moral guidelines to the individual who wants to get the most out of life – and not mere ligatures with which a few men can govern others in the name of a distant and dim authority. Thoreau points out the weakness of this method by enumerating the trivial bigotry of the church. They “fable ... the ineffable”<sup>12</sup> by setting down and describing a family tree of God’s family, mapping heavens, describing afterlife and analyzing the personality of the Almighty himself in a psychological manner. This is not a problem of its own as long as the church does not claim substantive rights for the souls of men! as long as they do not intervene in one’s private life!<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, Thoreau complains, the church is not a humble institution as it is. Its representatives do not act by their scripture; moreover they do not *read* it – just some comfortable jottings of it. And they plant the seeds of partial knowledge into their pupils’ heads from their childhood... these seeds had grown into prejudices in Thoreau since his boyhood, from the Sunday school, so he did not read the Bible for a long time. But when he did, he found it relieving in its freshness. He found it “truly strange, and heretical, and unpopular”,<sup>14</sup> that this book says that one should not gather immeasurable treasure in this world by selling his own soul or that one could move mountains only with one’s faith. “Let but one of these sentences be rightly read, from any pulpit in the land, and there would not be left one stone of that meeting-house upon another”,<sup>15</sup> concludes Thoreau. He thinks that even the golden rule could be changed into silver coins in his Yankee, profit-oriented, Protestant country.

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10 And because I chose this way of examination, I could not locate it in the history of criticism: simply because this way of analysis does not have one, as far as I know.

11 *The Works of Thoreau* 1937, 747. Of course it is not an anti-Semitic repose. Thoreau’s aim is to exceed the Biblical world view.

12 Ibid. 747.

13 Of course, this recalls Thoreau’s political philosophy, his comprehension of civil disobedience: that a government is not legitimate any more if it offends the Ciceronian *res privata*, the private life of the individual, his properties, his family, and, first of all, according to Thoreau, his principles. As I mentioned earlier, I have a suspicion that Thoreau’s philosophy is concentric (if not organic because it grows from its own standards), so his themes are repeats, at least reflections of each other. This is a great example of this suspicion.

14 Ibid 749.

15 Ibid.

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But Thoreau's main problem here is not even the unconditional acceptance of the doctrines preached from the pulpit, but the consequences of this method. First of all, the lack of subjectivity in his fellow men: that they seek the voice of some *conscience* instead of their higher instinct and "live their life in quiet desperation"<sup>16</sup> because they did not gather any experience of their own.

*"I sit here [...], looking out on men and nature from this that I call my perspective window, through which all things are seen in their true relations. This is my upper empire, bounded by four walls ... three of boards yellow-washed, facing the north, west, and south, respectively, and the fourth, of plaster, likewise yellow-washed, fronting the sunrise – to say nothing of the purlieus and outlying provinces, unexplored as yet but by rats."<sup>17</sup>*

- says Thoreau about subjectivity as it is. Clearly, it does not mean that he has the philosophers' stone, nonetheless this statement is about the absolute freedom of thinking: that my head, of which the above is about, is an open house with a terrace from when I could explore the entire horizon. Thoreau says, therapeutically, that one is the king of one's own life, sitting on a throne – why do we waste this kingdom on some social conventions?

One way to actuate this therapy is to point out examples, e. g. to show representative men to the audience<sup>18</sup> whom manners of problem-solving one could use in one's own daily life. Thoreau's precedent in this essay is Christ, who was a *man* (this is the central doctrine of Unitarianism) but who preached like a spiritual entity. From his speeches (although not by the description of his life, especially regarding his crucifixion) one could enucleate the basis of self-reliance: that the words we spoke, the modes we live are general and eternal. Otherwise, as Thoreau says, "[e]ven Christ, we fear, had his scheme, his conformity to tradition, which slightly vitiates his teaching"<sup>19</sup>. Moreover, one could find some critique regarding his fellow

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16 Ibid. 249.

17 Ibid. 7.

18 It was a common place in the literature of the age, Ralph Waldo Emerson consecrated a whole volume of his essays to this theme (by raising Plato to be the representative Philosopher, Swedenborg as the Mystic, Montaigne as the Skeptic, Shakespeare as the Poet, Napoleon as the Man of the World, and Goethe as the Author), as Margaret Fuller praised the figures of Greek mythology (especially Aeschylus and Isis) in her public addresses as to be followed.

19 Christ was one of his favorite examples and -metaphors. In his speech of John Brown Thoreau compares Brown to Christ because of their sincerity. According to Thoreau, both of them lived their philosophy – and died for it (*The Works of Thoreau* 1937, 827-846), they were men of their words. Not simply brave people but committed (one could approach this topic through transparency, I suppose, when we live our life because and before the whole world – like a Socratic gadfly in some respect. Thoreau's disregard for Socrates is remarkable and, to me, inexplicable because this essay is very loaded with the lone Christ-metaphor. For this, see Jack Turner, *Performing Conscience: Thoreau, Political Action, and the Plea for John Brown*, in Jack Turner ed., *A Political Companion to Henry David Thoreau*, Lexington: University

intellectuals, the Transcendentalists, in the phrase that Christ “taught mankind but imperfectly how to live; his thoughts were all directed toward another world”.<sup>20</sup>

So, Christ was an enlightened preacher who taught his fellow humans to live better; God Almighty is in some kind closed off the field of church by treating him as a convention; and so called Christians are just poor bastards who do not even scratch the surface of the being. This kind of world view sounds post-Christian.<sup>21</sup>

Post-Christianity is a branch of the ‘movement’ called postmodernism. It is about the enlightened and emancipated individual’s attitude toward religion, especially toward his or her culture’s religion.<sup>22</sup> Post-Christians take into account other religions while searching for their own – and beyond. For them, religion is one way of pursuing happiness (and not something to be equated with life itself, not a dogma), and they do not allow themselves the ease of the mainstream. So, for them, all religions are equal. This ideology is not like Occam’s, who sliced the fields of knowledge with his razor to reach the truth, but quite the opposite of it. Let us pile up human knowledge, they say, without discrimination or dogmatization in order to find a general, honest truth about conducting our lives.

In Thoreau’s case post-Christianity means not only that he abandoned the church to praise the Lord under the open sky,<sup>23</sup> but that he had taken into account the natural science of his age, the thoughts of the Orient, the approaches of an anarchist world view, etc. – and Christianity itself in its raw value *without any prejudice!* This is the key moment in his philosophy pursuing the proper way of life. According to him, Christianity is not found in books, not even in churches: these are only fables for children who cannot act on their own, who are still trying to learn to respect themselves. Thoreau’s post-Christianity means that he could observe the sacred in the profane<sup>24</sup> – therefore, for him, the whole world could be a miracle and loses nothing from its own value. Thoreau distinguishes the open religion of the fields and the secret one of the churches.<sup>25</sup> The mentality of churchgoing is to be conscious about our sins and to get a confirmation that we will always have a place to be absolved from them – but, with a downhill argumentation, one could point out that if there is such a place, *institution*, we could be criminals for a lifetime, so we just

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Press of Kentucky, 2009).

20 *The Works of Thoreau* 1937, 749.

21 Cf. Rebecca Kneale Gould, *Thoreau, Henry David (1817-1862)*, in Bron Taylor ed., *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*. (London-New York: Continuum, 2005), available: <http://www.religionandnature.com/ern/sample/Gould--Thoreau.pdf>, access: 20 October 2015.

22 I am sure that there are aspects of postmodern religiousness in every other culture, not just ours (a good example is Orhan Pamuk’s *Istanbul*, a novel about the self-searching individual in the frameworks of Muslim culture, in a city which reflects his own moods).

23 Or to unroof his hut to be a humble servant of the Overseer, like some of the Quakers.

24 See the long description in his journal of Cyrus Hubbard, one of his fellows, a farmer, who was not an office-seeker but a man who gave laws to himself. According to Thoreau, he is a compact universe because he does what he says (*The Works of Thoreau* 1937, 46).

25 This is the lesson of his first publication, *Persius* (Richardson 1986, 76).

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have to confess our sins again... Instead, according to Thoreau, God is everywhere; he is unspeakable but not a rude policeman, not even a bigot preacher. We do not *have to* behave ourselves and go to the churches, but we *must* praise Him with one every of our deeds, be in conversation with him – at all times! To be in conversation with Him means a meaningful, humble, and transparent life.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, this conception means that God is not something distant and categorically distinct from humans but a very existing power, and this relation has serious responsibility. It is, of course, an ideal; let us see how he approaches it.

### 3. ON FRIENDSHIP

This essay has a framing systematization, Thoreau starts and ends it with a lamentation about his actual friends, but in between these he deals with the ideal of Friend and of Friendship itself. In the beginning, he approaches friendship as music – and complains that his friends are just mute lyres and come over to him to play them.

Thoreau's thoughts about friendship can be summed up in five points: (a) it must be transparent, (b) the notions of friendship and love are adjacent and inseparable, (c) friendship has a strong educational function, (d) the notion of silence is cardinal when approaching friendship, and (d) friends are equals by definition.

First, friends are transparent before each other because they are honest (negatively, that they are not enemies, and positively, that they respect each other and themselves at the same time) and because they idealize each another. "When they say farewell, then indeed we begin to keep them company",<sup>27</sup> says Thoreau. This means that we do not deal with the actual person, but the person who we *know* (and *what* we know about him or her). It is with concern to Thoreau's epistemology, that one has to learn to see and know the world around oneself, be always aware, in some kind of constant translational relation with it or else one's senses will cheat one.

Second, friendship is not a business relationship – as Thoreau characterizes his own

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26 Of course, it is a part of the Protestant heritage, the one of universal priesthood: e. g. a radical consideration of Luther, spelling out the priority of the *sola Christus* in spite of the *sola scriptura* – that it is not the church that is important but *The Church*.

27 *The Works of Thoreau* 1937, 755. Of course, this idealization works only when we are physically apart: in the vicinity of our friend we can not violate him or her with our expectations – we could only try to persuade him or her to elevate to a higher level. About this delicate question see Thoreau's journal-entry from May 24, 1853: "tried to talk with R. W. E. [Ralph Waldo Emerson – F. Sz.]. Lost my time – nay, almost my identity. He, assuming a false opposition where there was no difference of opinion, talked to the wind – told me what I knew – and I lost my time trying to imagine myself somebody else to oppose him" (Ibid. 44). In his eulogy of Thoreau (Emerson 1966), Emerson pointed out that Thoreau liked the position of the Devil's advocate, but it seems like sometimes Emerson himself pushed him to this thankless but inspirational state.

age. “If one abates a little price of his wood, or gives a neighbor his vote at town-meeting, or a barrel of apples or lends him his wagon frequently, it is esteemed a rare instance of Friendship”,<sup>28</sup> he says about the merchant-function of friendship. Instead, we should love our friends not for their qualities but for their *humanity*, as a human being. Thoreau confesses that it is the decay of friendship when one treats the other like their surveyor, teacher, handyman, etc.<sup>29</sup> The love is the sum of the virtues, not one of them, he says, and when we find it in each other we should treat it like an egg.

We can and have to elevate our friend to a higher level of being if we respect him, says Thoreau. This level, of course, is our expectation of him – but the source of this expectation is the respect towards us. Who do we want to be and how? What are the main virtues we would like to cultivate in ourselves, which of them do we have and which not? If there is a man with this virtue we must approach him in a friendly fashion. If there is a virtue in us that that man does not have – that is friendship! Expectations are there all over the world, says Thoreau, but in general they are not too high. For example, “[t]he state does not demand justice of its members, but thinks that it succeeds very well with the least degree of it, hardly more than rouges practice; and so the neighborhood and the family. What is commonly called Friendship even is only a little more honor among rouges”,<sup>30</sup> he states. People are too idle because of the making of the living to have higher expectations (even towards themselves) than not to be a common criminal. Thoreau tries to break down the boundaries and teach us to walk again by respecting ourselves. It is clear from that that all the violence of the reformers has precedent among friends, perhaps unconsciously. Moreover, love elevates us from uniformity. “The dull distinguish only races or nations, or at most classes, but the wise man, individuals”,<sup>31</sup> says Thoreau of the distinctive function of love.

Silence is the privilege of friendship. Only friends can understand each other without (many) words:

*“In the evening went to a party. It is a bad place to go to – thirty or forty persons, mostly young women, in a small room, warm and noisy. Was introduced to two young women. The first one was a lively and loquacious as a chickadee; had been accustomed to the society of watering-places, and therefore could get no refreshment out of such a dry fellow as I. The other was said to be pretty-looking, but I rather look people in their faces, and, moreover, I could not hear what she said, there was such a clacking – could only see the motion of her lips when I looked that way.*

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28 *The Works of Thoreau* 1937, 56.

29 It is, clearly, a reference to his friendship with Emerson. Before his Staten Island-episode he lived with the Emersons in Concord for two years, where he was a handyman, an ambitious litterateur and a familiar if not domestic friend.

30 *The Works of Thoreau* 1937, 756.

31 *Ibid.* 755.



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*I could imagine better places for conversation, where there should be a certain degree of silence surrounding you, and less than forty talking at once. Why, this afternoon, even, I did better. There was old Mr. Joseph Hosmer and I ate our luncheon of cracker and cheese together in the woods. I heard all he said, though it was not much, to be sure, and he could hear me. And then he talked out of such a glorious repose, taking a leisurely bite at the cracker and cheese between his words; and so some of him was communicated to me, and some of me to him, I trust.”<sup>32</sup>*

This kind of conversation is something transcendent to be sure. Silence could be only a rhetorical practice in society of more than two people. In society, Thoreau says, people have to tell something, always, less regarding the content than the form. Indeed, in public silence is the place and time for deeds of persuasion for most.<sup>33</sup> “I value and trust those who love and praise my aspiration rather than my performance”,<sup>34</sup> he says, and this means that a man does not exist in his deeds (so not in his public life) but in his thoughts (his private life). Thoreau speaks about “a positive depth of silence”,<sup>35</sup> by which one could judge his friend’s attitude, whether he is an extrovert or an introvert. Thoreau, sure, trusted introverts more.

Concerning equality, Thoreau says that “[f]riendship is, at any rate, a relation of perfect equality”.<sup>36</sup> So, kings and their servants could not be friends – just one honest man and another. About the friendship between the sexes, Thoreau says that a man and a woman are perfect complements of each other – but, therefore, one cannot hope to fully understand the other. If one has to give up something because of his friend (e. g. his expectations towards him) it is not a friendship anymore but the charity of the almshouse.

It is very important that in some of his actual relationships Thoreau acted like a heathen (representative of a bookish religion) who does not respect the other (representative of another bookish religion) because of his own values but because these values for him show the path to a higher life. It is the system of the exclusion: the demonstration of how *not* to live.<sup>37</sup>

At the end of the text Thoreau confesses that even he could not fulfill these requirements – but he, at least, aspires to do so.<sup>38</sup>

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32 Ibid. 41. Regarding the psychical consequences of such an introverted temperament see Richard Bridgman’s *Dark Thoreau*.

33 But it could serve the reverence of the individual. We can think of George Washington when he, as an old man, had taken out his glasses to read before the Congress. No eyes remained dry, they say.

34 *The Works of Thoreau* 1937, 761.

35 Ibid. 763.

36 Ibid. 758.

37 The principal text of this method in Thoreau, in my opinion, is his *Life Without Principle* (available: <https://sniggle.net/TPL/index5.php?entry=principle>, access: 11 March 2016).

38 This confessional mood is reflected in *Walden* also in its Higher Laws-chapter, where

So, friendship for Thoreau is a way of purification and elevation of the self by and because of the other. It is “a fragmentary and godlike intercourse”,<sup>39</sup> he says. Neither accidental, nor destined, he says paradoxically, it is the meeting of two men who meet just because of each other. Some could say that friendship in this respect is like the lotus for lotus eaters who ate lotus not because its healthy consequences but because that was the best of everything ever. *Nota bene*, friendship is some kind of religious relation between the two participants.

#### **4. “WHAT UNDER THE SUN ARE THESE THINGS?”<sup>40</sup>**

Thoreau’s conception of friendship, it seems, is miserable. Perhaps we could understand it properly with the categorization of the ancient Greeks regarding friendship.<sup>41</sup>

Simplistically, there are three forms of friendship, *agape*, *eros* and *philia*. The difference between them is orientation. *Agape* is that kind of friendship when the participators are far away from each other in space, time and personality, and one sacrifices way more than the other for the success of the relationship. This is the way of religious adoration. *Eros* is close to this conception with the remark that in this relation both participants want something (especially sexual joy) from the other and for this sake they are willing to give up some of themselves – so, it is more capable of development than the former. In contrast, *philia* is a humanly method when two people consecrate time and life to each other in order to understanding (the world around them, the other, the meaning of life, etc.). Of course, *philia* could have material sides as well but in this relationship it is not this aspect that is the emphasized.

We could point out that for Thoreau it is not the material benefits that played a central role in friendship. He was not a utilitarian, instead he lavished his forces on anybody who wanted them: as a surveyor, as a handyman, as a buffoon. In fact, generally he was the one exploited by the odd jobs he had done in his life.<sup>42</sup> So, regarding *philia* as the *differentia specifica* of his apprehension of friendship as general<sup>43</sup> - I cannot agree. His friendship is more purified than this, it has a higher end. This is the key motif of my argumentation.

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Thoreau complains about his inner, eternal brutality which he tries to keep chained more or less successfully (see *ibid.* 384-393). So, one could not accuse Thoreau agreeing with both sides.

39 *Ibid.* 762.

40 *Ibid.* 751.

41 For this examination I used Bennett Helm, “Friendship”, in Edward N. Zalta, ed., *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2013 Edition), available: <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2013/entries/friendship/>, access: 20 October 2015).

42 See Richardson 1986, 96-100.

43 Furtak 2014.

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As we see, we can hardly establish that he was a sex-freak. He did not approach his fellow people by their qualities but their substances.<sup>44</sup> So we could reject the *eros*-conception also.

All that left is *agape*. But how can such a human relation be ethereal and religious? In my opinion, it is very simple. I assume that Thoreau had never realized his concept of friendship with anybody. He could and would not. He was an introvert, sucked into Emerson's teaching fairly early, lost his beloved brother as soon as 1841, etc. So, he docked into Walden to search peace – and he found it. At least, he found something (someone) reassuring:

*"I have occasional visits in the long winter evenings, when the snow falls fast and the wind howls in the wood, from an old settler and original proprietor, who is reported to have dug Walden Pond, and stoned it, and fringed it with pine woods; who tells me stories of old time and of new eternity; and between us we manage to pass a cheerful evening with social mirth and pleasant views of things, even without apples and cider – a most wise and humorous friend, whom I love much, who keeps more secret than ever did Goffe or Whalley; and though he is thought to be dead, none can show where he is buried."*

This passage from *Walden* shows Thoreau's unique grammar skills: the word "Pond" means artificial and natural lake *at the same time*. Moreover, he reflects on the pond without article, as a *person*. So, he flutters his message about the lake – the lake, which regularized his life for two years! The lake with which he was in a friendly relationship... It is a miserable fact also, that we do not know the origin of the Walden Pond, whether it is a natural or an artificial lake. It is more important that this passage is about friendship – the Thoreauvian concept of it.

As we see, this occasional visitor does not want to disturb Thoreau and *vice versa*: they just spend their leisure time together. This moment recalls something like mutual respect. Moreover, Thoreau loves this wise and humorous friend, and they do not need anything but each other for a joyful night: they do not meet by their surfaces but their essences, I propose. They are honest with each other naturally: they do not use any manmade excipient to unweave the other. They are equal in their interests – and in their humbleness also. This visitor has his secrets, deeper ones than Goffe and Whalley<sup>45</sup> – but Thoreau has his, too. But these secrets are not important; they are no obstacles to their friendship: they accept each other with these, moreover (and more importantly), they know about the existence of these secrets, so they could be absolutely transparent before one another. As we see, transparency does

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44 See the descriptions of Sudbury Haines, "*the Indian*" and of Melvin "*the brown coated farmer*" in his journals (*The Works of Thoreau* 1937, 43. and 46-47).

45 William Goffe and Edward Whalley were Englishmen, politicians, soldiers, and parliamentarians during the English Civil War. After their involvement in the regicide of Charles I, King of England in 1649, they had fled to Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1660 and lived their lives incognito. Their name was equated with the act of regicide

not mean spotlessness but the mature responsibility for our spots. The foundation stones of the Thoreavian concept of friendship culminate in transparency, in my opinion. Do not change ourselves from intercourse to intercourse, says Thoreau, let our friendship to be a godlike intercourse, a transparent, ethereal, unified one. The friends, in this intercourse, seek each other – and find true social mirth. The religious vocabulary is not a coincidence.<sup>46</sup>

“I am that I am” (Ex 3:14), this is the proper self-definition of God. Accept me fully and I accept you, so we do not have anything to hide. So, we could respect and love each other, and not degrade one another. In this intercourse one could elevate the other in the sense of apotheosis. The standards are high – the possible highest. If we consider, that for Thoreau the notion of friendship is similar to the notion of intercourse with God we could unwrap both of them.<sup>47</sup> We have unconditional love: the love of the seeker, the one who wants to live his life at a higher level and the one who seeks understanding. There is mutual respect: they do not seek each other *for* something (material), they just want to spend some time together when both of them are by themselves. They *consecrate* time for the other (maybe to burn some mirth *de facto*). They are thirsty for silence: the society of the mass is noisy, there is no place for thoughts – and they are silent naturally. Maybe they are not equal, but there is no complete equality in the natural world, Thoreau knew that, there are only complementary relations.<sup>48</sup> There is only equality in the aspirations – in the aspiration for transparency. And, as we saw, God does not get what he deserves from his so called believers. They respect him only partially, they select his teachings by their taste and they do not consecrate the time: Yankees always run for their money and spend their Sunday in the churches only because they have to, because this is their tradition. Thoreau instead refused this civil obedience in order

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46 And the reference to the rumored death of this friend is not a coincidence either if we assume that this friend who dug the lake before any time could be God himself: in this case Thoreau preceded Friedrich Nietzsche with this concept.

47 And in this method we can use the consideration of the consideration *Amici Dei* of Marsilio Ficino and the renaissance also: this means that the relationship between man and God is somehow communicative, that we can speak *with*, and not only *to* Him.

Here I should acknowledge the help of my consultant, András Czeglédi, assistant professor at the Department of Philosophy, University of Szeged for his insightful comments which I used in the second part of the first note, in the 25<sup>th</sup> note and here above. I cannot be thankful enough for his constant support.

48 “When I see Concord to purpose, I see it as if it were not real but painted, and what wonder if I do not speak to thee? I saw a snake by the roadside and touched him with my foot to see if he were alive. He had a toad in his jaws, which he preparing to swallow with his jaws distended to three times his width, but he relinquished his prey in haste and fled; and I thought, as the toad jumped leisurely away with his slime-covered hind-quarters glistening in the sun, as if I, his deliverer, wished to interrupt his meditations – without a shriek of fainting – I thought what a healthy indifference he manifested. Is not this the broad earth still? he said” (*The Works of Thoreau* 1937, 27-28).

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to correspond to a moral one. He criticized the religion and the friendship of his age for the same reason: because they do not fulfill their ends. Men of his age fool themselves in both of them when they think something else than what they speak. Thoreau revealed himself – and tends to break the chains of his fellows too.

First, I am sure that Thoreau's concept of friendship cannot be forced into the frames of the classical Greek *philia*, it is more than that: by friendship he means an elevating process and an unconditional love and acceptance, which means that both of the participants are elevated. Second, I am not sure that this process could be labeled as *agape*, which means unilateral and distant relation, where the concepts of respect and equality are hardly interpretable. My proposal is only that we should approach his concept of friendship through the one about religion because his concept of God describes a friendly intercourse and, inversely, we could only understand his concept of God if we assume that he approaches Him in friendly ways: like one outcast and forgotten to the other.

Thoreau had nothing to regret, to be sure, he lived a meaningful and transparent life. His last words are evidence of this. His aunt Louisa asked him if he had made his peace with God and Thoreau responded: "I did not know we had ever quarreled."<sup>49</sup> Yes, friends do not quarrel because they understand each other completely.

## 5. CONCLUSION

So, as we have seen, Thoreau's concepts of religion and of friendship can be apprehended through each other. What does it mean? In my opinion it means that, according to Thoreau, we should live our life in a very *personal* manner. For him the traditional concept of religion, the one as a mere *praxis* is empty because it gives us nothing but demands everything: there is no place in it for subjectivity, for a particular point of view, for our own and intimate experiencing, for faith itself. And this is the destructive moment for the individual according to Thoreau, when not he is the one who selects his devices to pursue happiness. We are taught how to praise the Lord, how to confess our sins, how to understand the words of Christ – but these are but mere ligatures from which we cannot break out. There are many religions, many different ways of communicating with the Almighty – but all of them divulge exclusiveness! And this is mere madness, according to the Concordian, because life is infinite, so why not the methods to improve it? And yes, religion is a method to pursue happiness, but not *praxis* as fixedness. For Thoreau, nothing could be more important than one's life, the life of the mind. So everything with which a group of people would like to regulate another group is lethal for him, it means the end of life and the beginning of death when it comes to not thinking with our own heads. In my opinion, in the essay discussed above, Thoreau wants to awake us, his neighbors that religion is as personal in one's life as everything. We should seek the opportunity of communication with the indescribable, all things to

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49 Simon Critchley, *The Book of Dead Philosophers* (New York: Random House, 2009), 181.

make it describable in our own way, because when we accept old schemes we just give up ourselves and the scheme we accepted means nothing.

So, this is the case with friendship too. It cannot be rote; it should be something constantly and vividly individual – because at the moment, when the relationship between two persons become something beneficial, something connected with any kind of interest, it becomes unequal and distant also. They are not equal anymore, and they meet only with their surfaces: in sexual desire, economic interest, the need of intellectual elevating, etc. So, we cannot label a relationship with the name of friendship when it comes to something impersonal: when one of the participants wants something more or less than the essence of the other – and this essence could not be something ephemeral, but only ethereal. That is because, in my opinion, Thoreau’s concept of friendship could not be described with terms like *eros*, *philia* or *agape*. It is something else, something ultimately personal – and something in connection with the principle that runs through his oeuvre that life is individual, that he is the unappealable forum of everything that happens to him. This is the radical individuality of the natural world; this is the key of the life of a young tree struggling for a sunny, watered spot. So I cannot demand anything else from my friend just his personality. In other words, I cannot expect that life will happen to me: I should “happen” to it! It is not friendship when the one is just waiting for the other to make him move – to make him do anything. The basis of the transparency and the equivalency is our own self-relation: that I do not adjust myself to some kind of level of expectation of anything, just to myself, to my own expectations about what I should do. Swimming in the sea of opportunities and methods – and seeing them just as opportunities and methods. This is the key of Thoreau’s teaching in my opinion. The source of respect towards us is our self-respect, which means that we are individuals mature and responsible enough to select our modes to pursue our own happiness. Friendship and religion are modes of it according to Thoreau, as I see it, but we should learn to weight the facts of the world and tend to the absolute.

So, this is a little bit perplexing, is it not? Religion becomes some ultimately individual communication with the Universal from mere tradition, useful way of confession – and friendship becomes the song of myself from some kind of gregarious relationship in which both of the participants could rest. But if we think it through, we may find Thoreau’s point. Both religion and friendship are relationships, they originates from the urge to overcome loneliness and, even, solipsism, to break out the core-like individuality. This “interpersonality”<sup>50</sup> is a field of human life just like the relationship with nature (as an inhabitant of it) or the one with society (as a civilian, as a person disobedient to any kind of corrupt authority). Taking into account Thoreau’s view to filling life fully, we see that every mode of pursuing the happiness is accidental when they shouts exclusiveness: they cannot bear each other. But by interpreting friendship as religion, at least, connection with God, and

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50 I am aware that this notion has a huge history in philosophy – and I do not want to deal with it. I mean it simply as the mode of connecting with other people as people.

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this connection as friendship, we may find the key to clear them up, as we have seen. Religion as friendship means personal, unconditional interrelation with God, not something distant and fearful. Friendship as religion means complete humility, a relationship in which the one could rest because one has got nothing to hide. There are no expectations just the drive to take time with each other – and the drive to elevate our own soul to a level we think the other would like from us. Not *get* this elevation but *make* it. The urge of friendship as elevation emerges from us in this case. This is the Thoreau's message, I think.

Thoreau is not label able. He is a pantheist, an idealist, a classicist, a pragmatist, a politician, a seeker, an observer – a philosopher. In his social relations he searched for the transcendent, in his idealistic natural philosophy the concrete. What he can teach us nowadays is that we should not give up our ideals; idleness is suicide, and we only live in our dreams. It is very important to point out concerning his work that before the Walden-episode (and after the death of his brother)<sup>51</sup> his philosophy was more pessimistic than optimistic – but at Walden he learned how to laugh because he found out that there exist actually no frames of human life (not even God, as we have seen), just Nature itself. It is up to only us to make it meaningful, to find our places under the sun like the young trees in the forest. In my opinion, this is his topicality. As Attila József, the great Hungarian poet said in his poem *Ars Poetica*, “measure yourself with the universe!”<sup>52</sup> As we have seen, the two thinkers meet in this consideration.

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51 Richardson 1986, 113-116.

52 Lóránt Czigány's translation.

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