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A Secular Age: an exercise in breach-mending

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Abstract

This article considers three aspects of Taylor's *A Secular Age*: the issue of the status and authority of theological insights derived from sociological analyses; the irresolvable ambiguities of secularity, where it marks the disappearance of religion but inadvertently affirms its persistence; and the properties of nostalgia and memory that unexpectedly shape post-secularity and the forms of enchantment it seeks.

Keywords

enchantment; nostalgia, secularisation; sociology; theology

Taylor intends his study to be treated as a 'set of interlocking essays' (ix). In the study, he deals with a simple question, one rarely put: why was it seemingly impossible to disbelieve in God, say in 1500 in Western society, but in 2000 it has become inescapable? (25). While recognising that falling church attendance figures are a crucial dimension of secularisation, Taylor has a particular concern with the cultural and social circumstances of modernity, as read from the perspective of the history of ideas, which have undermined the singularity of religious belief and have rendered its exercise an option amongst many.

For Taylor, 'a secular age is one in which the eclipse of all goals beyond human flourishing becomes conceivable' and this closure 'falls within the range of an imaginable life for masses of people' (19–20). Thus, secularity is about self-sufficiency, where reference to God is no longer expedient. A secular age is one where, using Berger's famous phrase, the sacred canopy[1] has been dismantled and the ties to the after-life have unravelled in the context of modernity. In short, the goods for salvation have been placed in the pawnshops of modernity and are now marked down as of little redemptive value.

[1] Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1967).

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The consequence for Taylor is that the narratives of secularisation have 'naturalised' the removal of the vertical from social life, making all seem irredeemably and horizontally cast. All the time, Taylor is concerned with the unthought dimensions of secularisation (427–428). One of these relates to the issue of religion itself and the ambiguous properties it poses to the secularity which posits its disappearance. As he observes 'religion remains ineradicably on the horizon of areligion; and vice versa' (592). Choices are still possible and necessary.

Few other thinkers have dealt so well with the sufferings engendered by the outcomes of the Enlightenment as Taylor, where in *Sources of the Self* he asked, 'do we have to choose between various kinds of spiritual lobotomy and self-inflicted wounds?' In response to this query, he suggested that 'the dilemma of mutilation is in a sense our greatest spiritual challenge, not an iron fate'.[2]

Usually, secularisation is concerned with cold accounts of a descent from belief in God into affirmations of unbelief, from which springs Nietzsche's super-hero, cynical, nihilist, but emancipated from the idiocies of Christianity and free to stand nobly alone. By contrast, the value of Taylor's study lies in the way he re-sets and amplifies the secularisation thesis and gives to it a trajectory that arches into history, philosophy, theology and sociology, where the choice between belief and unbelief is given its proper complexity. It is this enlargement that lends a particular uniqueness to the study and makes it difficult to think of an equivalent work in scale and reach. His concern is with the price of the Enlightenment and the degree to which it shaped modernity and in consequence the secularisation process with which it seemed fatefully entangled. The outcome of these forces is the distinctive emergence in these times of what Taylor terms the 'buffered self', one for whom the presence of God fades and who is no longer 'open and porous and vulnerable to a world of spirits and powers . . .'. This self emerges not only from disenchantment but also from confidence in his or her 'own powers of moral ordering' (27).

Taylor treats what he terms 'Reform' (shorthand for the Reformation) as central to his story 'of the abolition of the enchanted cosmos, and the eventual creation of a humanist alternative to faith' (77). The resources of spiritual, symbolic and cultural capital of the late medieval church provided material for 'the bulwarks of belief'. These were the ingredients of enchantment full of Godly power to deliver, where sacramentals could be turned in faith to holy advantage (34–35). Perhaps not unexpectedly, in Taylor's study, the Reformation is branded as the midwife of the secular age. The outcome of its quest for order and individual accountability was the reduction of the

[2] Charles Taylor, *Sources of Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 520–21.

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transcendent into the immanent frame, rendering the Reformation the gravedigger of religion on the field of culture of modernity.

For his purposes, religion is defined in terms of the transcendent treated by reference to that 'which takes us beyond merely human perfection'. Thus, religion so tagged to the transcendent generates a realisation that 'our lives extend beyond "this life"'. As the limits of the 'natural' span of life and death are brought into view the need to address the possibility of transformation, of a redemptive agape comes to the fore as a characterising and enduring property of religion (20). In an age imbued with the conceits of secularity what is of the beyond, as shaped by traditional religion, no longer forms part of the social imaginaries of people - their images, stories and legends, their communal practices that reflected shared legitimacy and their sense of the ordering of space and their 'repertory' of collective actions (172–173).

These contractions led to surrogates, to what Taylor terms 'Providential Deism' and the sway of 'The Impersonal Order' (chapters 6 and 7). Each of these bore a price, of a decline in the capacity to cope with the fragilities of life and with what is enduringly irresolvable of the human condition, notably its endemic propensities for evil and gratuitous violence which even, or most especially, in modernity are peculiarly resistant to eradication. It is perhaps Taylor's hope that these dark traits of the contingency of life, to suffer and to die will sting the insensible into attending to the need for agape, a transcending power of bonding and a healing realised in the bestowal of mysterious gifts of transformation. Whilst the subtractive properties of secularisation that enervate belief are well chronicled, what gives the study its power is the magnetic pull of belief that gives motive force to its narrative.

It is against this background that Taylor's final chapter on conversions needs to be understood. He takes two converts as exemplary: Péguy and Hopkins. They are 'in one clear sense impeccably orthodox Catholics . . . . in the continuity with their predecessors' (765). In breaking the mould of the immanent frame, they stand as 'modern civilization's "loyal opposition"' (745). Converts are heroes, but ones unfit for exhibition in the sociological imagination.[3] They are the saboteurs of the secular age who unsettle scoffers with their turnings from unbelief to belief. As outlaws on secularity they are inconvenient re-adjusters of social imaginaries in ways that affirm the inexhaustible capacities of religion to re-invent itself and to plant anew.

Unexpectedly, *A Secular Age* is a perplexed account of the changing contexts of modernity that influence '*what it is to believe'* (3),

[3] Kieran Flanagan 'Conversion: Heroes and their Sociological Redemption' in Giuseppe Giordan, ed., *Conversion in the Age of Pluralism* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), pp. 33–71.

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hence why the final part is entitled 'Conditions of Belief'. As a *rara avis* in secular academic culture, a Catholic, Taylor's stance of belief marks him as an outsider on unbelief. He faced an earlier criticism that his Catholicism lay too implicitly in his academic writings.[4] Taylor responded to this point in a slightly diffused way.[5] The same criticism, however, cannot be made of *A Secular Age.* It is what Taylor terms 'a continuing polemic against what I call "subtraction stories"'. These relate to what modernity has lost, or marginalised as a result of the rise of secularisation (22). Whilst acknowledging the decline of religion, Taylor speaks of '. . . my own view of "secularization", which I freely confess has been shaped by my own perspective as a believer . . .'. His ambition is to find 'a new placement of the sacred or spiritual in relation to individual and social life' (437).

While the study is a narrative of the facets of modernity that facilitate unbelief, it is also a tale, an anticipation of other social arrangements, those that would enable belief to flourish and this ambition shapes his understanding of religion, the form posited against secularisation. But this vision of propitious circumstances of inculturation of belief is at odds with the responses to modernity made in Vatican II. It affirmed an opening to the world, a dismantling of the fortress whose foundations were laid at Trent. Far from resisting modernity, Vatican II sought to connect to it in a strategy where relevance was given a theological mandate, based on a Conciliar invocation of the Spirit.

In an odd alliance with conservative Catholics, some sociologists were sceptical of this uncritical affirmation of this world and the necessity so uncritically affirmed of seeking relevance for faith within it.[6] For sociologists, this world was less safe, more devious, more complex and more a realm of bad faith which only a fallen discipline such as sociology could see starkly as oddly unfit for the redemptive hopes of the Council. In their deductive and inductive readings, theologians and sociologists spoke past each other.

A famous and early example of such a critical rejoinder to the Council can be found in Berger's marvellous little study, *A Rumour*

[4] See Charles Taylor's lecture 'A Catholic Modernity?', the response from George Marsden, 'Matteo Ricci and the Prodigal Culture' and Taylor's concluding reflections, in James L. Heft, ed., *A Catholic Modernity?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 13–37, 83–93, 105–25. For a perceptive review of this work, see Hans Joas, *European Journal of Social Theory,* vol. 5, no. 2, 2002, pp. 291–301. In his review, Joas refers to Paul Ricoeur's horror as a Christian philosopher 'of being perceived as nothing but a "crypto-theologian"', p. 291. See also George M. Marsden and Bradley J. Longfield, eds, *The Secularization of the Academy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

[5] Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), pp. 193–194.

[6] See Bill McSweeney, *Roman Catholicism: The Search for Relevance* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), especially chapters 6–7.

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of Angels, published in 1969. He wondered at the 'noises of a fearful modernity sufficient to put the most "radical" Protestants to shame' that came after Vatican II. For Berger, the irony of the situation was that liberals who ranked 'sociology high in their hierarchy of secular revelation' failed to see the perils posed by an undifferentiated opening to the world.[7] It might seem that these perils have become magnified and lately recognised in current ecclesial readings of modernity, where the term 'secular' is treated as aggressive, if not pernicious. What the term disguises is the issue of who reads the cultural times best: the sociologist or the theologian, the one who seeks to represent belief in relation to the ground of culture? In their effort to be credible to the world, some academic theologians have managed to dress up their discipline in 'bad' sociology to such an extent, that some non-theologians, to remedy the situation have produced 'good' theology.

In many respects the sociological fears expressed in the 1970s and 1980s were realised, for the modernity which the Council blessed in the 1960s collapsed two decades later into the chaos of postmodernity. It represented the hubris of modernity. Perversely, modernity had lost faith in itself just at the point when theologians were affirming its security. Even worse, those who adjusted their theologies to the frets of the world, to connect to where life seemed at, and who sought to read culture by reference to its domain concerns with gender and sexuality, drank a toxic brew. The divisive effects of the intoxication have become all too apparent. It would seem that theologians have become singularly unqualified to read the cultural times given their incontinent affirmation of secular ideals of inclusiveness.

In a warning which Taylor's *A Secular Age* would endorse, Berger suggested that

> Most sterile of all is any renewed effort to make Christianity palatable to what is deemed to be the secular consciousness of modern man. Such an effort is ironically futile in that precisely this modern secularity is in crisis today. The most obvious fact about the contemporary world is not so much secularity, but rather its great hunger for redemption and transcendence.[8]

[7] Peter L. Berger, *A Rumour of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), pp. 27–28. The worry that Vatican II had inadvertently accelerated a process of secularisation was explored in François-André Isambert, 'La sécularisation interne du christianisme', *Revue Française de Sociologie*, vol. 17, 1976, pp. 573–589. The notion that Vatican II in many aspects left Catholicism vulnerable to secularisation was a view by no means confined to supposed reactionaries. For instance, Berger referred to Catholicism in terms of its heroic defiance of modern secularity. He went on to observe that, since Vatican II, there has 'appeared a kind of "Protestantization" with large numbers of Roman Catholic theologians going through the cognitive miseries long familiar to their Protestant conferees'. See Peter L. Berger, *The Heretical Imperative* (London: Collins, 1980), p. 57.

[8] Ibid., pp. 183–4.

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Dalliances with modernity seem filled with peril when secularity holds the trump card giving it powers to disqualify religion, most notably in its traditional forms, from the games played on the fields of culture. But these efforts to drive the stake of secularity into the heart of religion and to proclaim it dead to the age are illusory.

Writing in 1990, the French sociologist Hervieu-Léger drew attention to the way the link between modernity and secularisation can generate new forms of religion. As she noted, while 'modernity has historically been built on the ruins of religion', it never managed to emancipate itself from these remains. The need to find new forms of religion endured and the replacements sought seemed contaminated by properties of what had been rejected. This led her to assert that 'the logic of how modernity produces its own religious universe must be examined'.[9] Strangely, not only is secularity captive to what it despises, religion, it has also discomforting powers to facilitate its re-invention. Taylor recognises this point when he asserts: 'in a sense, the only possible stance for a Christian is to recover something like the pre-modern one I described above, to see God as helper, and not cruel puppet-master' (389).

As a fellow traveller along a secular disciplinary path, sociology whose directions also lead to theological ends, one has a particular curiosity in reading *A Secular Age*.[10] Taylor seems to embody the curious catch-22 of those venturing from secular sciences into theology. His study is of the marginalisation of religion as realised by secularisation and as a believer he views this process from the outside, but the insights he realises, their shapes, their stresses and vision place him at odds with the conventional responses made by theologians to the same issues. Their reconciliations of faith with culture seem estranging to Taylor who has a different reading of these matters, one peculiarly derived from the analytical path his study opens out. What is the status and authority of such extra-mural forms of theology?

Extra-mural theological deliberations

Predominantly in the United Kingdom, theological witnessing has been the preserve of departments of theology and religious studies; these lie on the edge of the academic field, tolerated in the secular academy but kept distant from its domain values. As compensation for the marginality of theology, as a discipline operating in a

[9] Danièle Hervieu-Léger, 'Religion and Modernity in the French Context: For a New Approach to Secularization', *Sociological Analysis*, vol. 51, Summer 1990, p. 22.

[10] Kieran Flanagan, *Sociology in Theology: Reflexivity and Belief* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

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secular ethos, it is given the right to monopolise understandings of and with God.[11] But, as Fitzgerald has well indicated, these privileged claims have given these departments a right to ignore those spiritual, religious and theological insights which might emerge from other ancillary disciplines such as philosophy, sociology and anthropology that also have claims to scrutinise the link between culture and belief.[12] Whether due to paranoia or academic incompetence those in philosophy and sociology encounter deep hostility from their rivals in theology. Often, to invoke Bourdieu (his comments as a sociologist were directed to philosophy) these disciplinary interlopers are treated as 'failed theologians'.[13] Yet, oddly, there are some benefits to *not* being classified as theologians. Von Balthasar provides comfort for those in disciplinary denial in his biography of the French novelist Georg Bernanos, perhaps most famous for his novel *Diary of a Country Priest.*

Very much a man of the world, Bernanos was married, worked for a time as an insurance salesman, was a motor cycle enthusiast and had a seemingly worldly interest in jazz. Like Flannery O'Connor,[14] he had a gift of discerning and writing of the power of grace acting on the ordinary in paradoxical and extraordinary ways. He managed to produce insights of awesome theological wisdom, yet despite these gifts, as Von Balthasar remarked, 'Bernanos continually defended himself against being mistaken for a theologian . . . '. As with others, he felt guided by the spirit of the penny catechism. It sufficed.[15] Von Balthasar recognised the price of this denial when he noted that the layman is one 'who must bear the naked brunt of responsibility for the world' without sacramental power and with no 'tactical cover' to hide behind. Writing with some feeling, von Balthasar observed that this plight had certain advantages, not least of being freed from 'the yoke of ecclesial obedience'. As a consequence, the layman is

[11] On the mapping of disciplines on the academic field, see Pierre Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus*, trans. Peter Collier (Cambridge; Polity Press, 1988).

[12] Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), see especially chapter 1.

[13] This relates to a point Bourdieu made in interview, that some in the École Normale in the post war period felt that those in sociology were there because of their failures in philosophy. The title of the interview, 'Fieldwork in philosophy', indicated the way Bourdieu, who was well read in philosophy, turned the tables on these critics to sustain the autonomy of sociology and its distinctive insights. See Pierre Bourdieu, *In Other Words: Essays Towards a Reflexive Sociology,* trans. Matthew Adamson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), pp. 5–6.

[14] A stunningly original writer, Flannery O'Connor illustrated in her writings the mysterious exercise of grace in unexpected circumstances, where the blind learnt to see. This paradoxical basis of theological insights is well illustrated in her most famous work, *Wise Blood* (London: Faber and Faber, 1980). See also Brad Gooch, *Flannery: A Life of Flannery O'Connor* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2009).

[15] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Bernanos: An Ecclesial Existence* trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996), p. 114.

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called 'to be a Christian in the world who dares all and is exposed to all'. In being rendered so vulnerable, the layman can be gifted to give a unique witness to the intersections of 'supernatural ecclesial structures', but from within a particular place.[16]

In other words, discernments of belief emerging from the unpropitious fields of modernity, that come without apparent reference to grace and the enabling structures that give theologians their security in declaration, can have special claims to credibility. They arise in circumstances where there is little incentive, or support to seek these insights and to that extent what emerges of theological worth might have a particular value simply because of its unexpected gestation. Whether as natural or practical theology, the insights are marked by disinterest and to that degree have peculiar claims to credibility.

Von Balthasar's appreciation and endorsement of lay witness was understood by reference to existentialism. Set in the ambit of theology, the aim was to give comfort to the questing of the lonely individual. These endeavours are now given a social location, a milieu of academic production with its own resources to confer legitimacy secured by reference to secular values of the disinterested pursuit of knowledge without reference to theological qualifications. As a consequence, those theological insights which emerge unexpectedly from this ambit, as in the case of *A Secular Age* have properties of rarity difficult to categorise. Their theological location is problematic.

In his unexpected endeavour of seeking to wrest theological insights from the terrains of sociology and philosophy, Taylor forms part of a dispersed, almost invisible cohort of academics whose varying affiliations with Catholicism shape the innovative basis of their contributions to history, philosophy and anthropology. In history, one thinks of Michael Burleigh and Eamon Duffy and in philosophy, of Elisabeth Anscombe and Alasdair MacIntyre both of whom rehabilitated virtue ethics. But it is in English social anthropology, as Hamnett indicated, that Catholicism was of unexpected significance in shaping the concerns and insights of the discipline.[17] Mary Douglas, E.E.Evans-Pritchard and Victor and Edith Turner were all Catholics.

Their disciplines have their own certainties and own canonical traditions.[18] Because their insights are dispersed in many disciplines, the Catholicism of those instanced above has never cohered into some school of theology that might be given ecclesial recognition. They are as academic sheep with no theological pen to occupy. Bleating

[16] Ibid., pp. 115–116.

[17] Ian Hamnett, 'A Mistake about Error', *New Blackfriars,* vol. 67, no. 788, February 1986, pp. 69–78.

[18] See for example, William Outhwaite, 'Canon Formation in Late 20th-Century British Sociology', *Sociology*, vol. 43, no. 6, December 2009, pp. 1029–1045.

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alone, they seem to produce insights credible in their own disciplines but in voices that seem discordant to theological ears. *A Secular Age* is likely to perplex theologians over what it ignores that they regard as of self-evident concern if an authentic reading of the link between faith and culture is to be understood.

This point is illustrated by reference to what is *not* in the index of *A Secular Age.* Only passing references are made to Islam and none appear on Judaism, ecumenism, the Church of England, feminism, liberation theology and inter-faith dialogue. Vatican II is only mentioned briefly and is treated in a slightly muffled way in relation to the choices facing Péguy (752–4). Significant references do appear on the afterlife, notably on hell. Surprisingly, the index does not pick up references to sin (see pp. 83–84, 618–623; 653–6). The result is a nice old-fashioned cast to Taylor's Catholicism, expressed in terms of dilemmas well considered in chapter 17. Further indications of the traditional form of Catholicism shaping the study can be found in the index which has one whole column covering 869–870 referring to saints.

In his concerns with the after-life, Taylor's study can hardly be read as an exercise in ecumenism. Repeatedly, Protestantism, and the Reformation are seen as hand-maidens of secularity. In one instance, Taylor accuses the Reformation (Reform) as coming close to wiping out the dualism of St. Augustine's City of God (265). Lest these theological concerns seem odd in a study operating at the intersections of sociology and philosophy, one has to bear in mind the precedent set by Weber's *The Protestant Ethic*, whose thesis was concerned with the contrasting effects of strategies for seeking salvation by reference to this world or the other world.[19] Consideration of these theological choices shaped his understanding of the genesis of modernity.

If there is a weakness in *A Secular Age* it relates to his deference to the few zealots in British sociology who treat the secularisation thesis as irrefutable. In the sociology of religion, the thesis is more precarious and more complex than *A Secular Age* might in indicate.

Secularisation: the life, death and resurrection of a concept

In 1992, Wallis and Bruce claimed that 'the secularization thesis is one of sociology's most enduring research programmes . . . '. [20]

[19] Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (London: Unwin, 1930). The notion that sociologists are doomed to theological illiteracy is severely undermined in Joachim Radkau, *Max Weber: A Biography*, trans. Patrick Camiller (Cambridge: Polity, 2009).

[20] Roy Wallis and Steve Bruce, 'Secularization: The Orthodox Model', in Steve Bruce, ed., *Religion and Modernization: Sociologists and Historians Debate the Secularization Thesis* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 8.

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Although the thesis is cast in disinterested terms and deals with what he termed 'actualities', Wilson, one its main proponents, observed, rather sadly, that the issue 'appears to arouse passions and to give rise to the charge that the concept is the pure and fictive creation of a counter-religious ideology'. Somehow, Wilson found these disputes trying, all the more so as the study of religion seemed 'peripheral' to most of his colleagues. 'Not infrequently', he noted, 'they express some amusement that religion should be given the serious attention which I and others in the sociology of religion devote to it'.[21]

Of late, the term secularisation has come to the fore in contemporary debates in British society on the value and place of religion in the public square. These debates reveal some odd paradoxes. Whilst the majority in the British 2001 Census indicated affiliations with Christianity, attendance figures for the main Churches have been in long decline since the 1960s. Christianity is no longer the dominant influence on contemporary culture. It has been marginalised and rendered impotent as a result of deference to other values, visions and ideals denoted as being of supreme importance in contemporary British society. Political and civil sentiments are now shaped by deference to the absolute needs of inclusiveness, equality, and individual rights. Christianity is treated as no longer singular in witness or as peculiarly gifted to supply the nation with exemplary forms of solidarity. These movements signify the 'actualities' which Wilson noted. His notion suggests a fated property to secularisation, as a process that just happens in modernity, something that inheres in its ethos. But this is to ignore the strategies that structure religion out of modernity.

These are well known both in the U.S.A. in terms of the constitutional prohibitions on religious activities within schools and also in France in terms of the internal strategy of *laïcité* which in the interests of equality of its citizens prohibits religious activities in state institutions, a practice prevalent also in Turkey and in recent controversies over the display of religious symbols in England and Italy. These illustrate the progressive tenor of secularisation and its linkages with democracy, where all citizens are equal in their rights of representation. Religion is treated as the antique usurper of these ideals of inclusivity for all citizens. It sins by marking theological differences amongst the citizenry by appeal to revelation. Secularity thrives on indifference to such matters.

Secularisation further enhances its credibility by cultivating amnesia regarding the foundational contributions of Christianity to modernity. Cases in England relate to universities, schools, hospitals and charitable bodies such as the Samaritans and Oxfam to name a few.

[21] Bryan R. Wilson, 'Reflections on a Many Sided Controversy', in ibid., p. 210.

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As a result, Christians find themselves pitied strangers in the very institutions they founded. Furthermore, they are treated as uncivil when they protest at the denial of recognition of their predecessors who, in piety charted their foundation. The Anglican Bishop of Winchester articulated their plight well when he observed that Britain, 'which owes so much to its Christian heritage' has become a 'cold place' for Christians.[22] Such has been the advance of secularism of late that unbelief is deemed civil and religious belief is designated as uncivil. Somehow, it has become unpatriotic to assert an identity that defines being British by reference to Christianity. In some quarters such assertions are treated as politically incorrect, divisive and dangerous. It is paradoxical that a legacy of Blair, who converted to Catholicism and who did so much to advance New Labour has been a pervasive and growing sense that Christianity has no place in British political or civil life. This feeling has developed so much that the Minister responsible for dialogue with faith communities felt it necessary to deny that the Government had a secular strategy to marginalise Christianity in particular.[23]

As a term, secularisation has made little impact on the mainstream of the discipline of sociology, it being delegated to its sub-branch, the sociology of religion, to deal with the conundrums of the thesis. But that sub-branch lost interest in the term. A prominent sociologist of religion, Stark expressed this disinterest well when he noted that 'after nearly three centuries of utterly failed prophesies and misrepresentations of both present and past, it seems time to carry the secularisation doctrine to the graveyard of failed theories, and there to whisper "'*requiescat in pace*"'.[24] Another eminent sociologist of religion, David Martin treated the concept of secularisation as meaningless and unproductive.[25] Berger, much given to reversing positions, saw secularisation as passé.[26] Why did the term become so treated with disdain in the sociology of religion?

[22] Foreword by Michael Scott Joynt, *The Abolition of Slavery and Public Christianity: Reflections on the Dangers of Privatising Faith, Mindful of Contemporary Challenges Facing Britain Today* (London: Christian Action Research and Education 2009), p. 7.

[23] See report of the speech by John Denham, Secretary of State for Communities in *The Church Times* 23rd October 2009.

[24] Rodney Stark, 'Secularization, R.I.P.' in William H. Swatos, Jr. and Daniel V.A. Olson, eds, *The Secularization Debate* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), p. 62.

[25] David Martin, 'Towards eliminating the concept of secularisation', in J. Gould, ed. *Penguin Survey of the Social Sciences*', Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965, pp. 169–182. It should be said that Martin slightly reversed his disdain for secularisation and returned to explore its wider political and social implications. See David Martin, *A General Theory of Secularization*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1978.

[26] See the excellent essay by William H. Swatos, Jr. and Kevin J. Christiano, 'Secularization Theory: The Course of a Concept', in *The Secularization Debate,* op.cit., p. 13 for the reference to Berger.

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The term was charged with confusing the weakening of institutional affiliation with a decline in belief in higher powers; with failing to realise how exceptional the decline of religious practice was in Europe and especially in England, compared most particularly to the U.S.A.[27] 9/11, the advance of Islam in the West and the degree to which multi-culturalism had been entangled with religion left sociologists wrong-footed in regard to secularity. Somehow, this dead term had come back to life, but in a new ethos. No longer tagged with sects and cults, the term resurrected itself unexpectedly, exhibiting its symbiotic relationship to religion but in ways that pointed to matters of theological concern.

The trouble with the term secularisation is that it is overloaded with contradictory meanings and expectations. One meaning suggested an overall deference to the logic of this world, and in that sense links to the Reformation in Taylor's reading of the process. It also relates to Weber's linkage of disenchantment and secularisation, the two processes rendering modernity the site of lost dreams for enchantment. But another equally definite meaning of the term secularisation treats it as a form of theft.

This form is of especial sociological significance for, instead of treating secularity as some fateful ethos of modernity that causes religion to wither, it treats displacement as a definite process, a social construction and as such, one open to resistance. As long as religion is a treasure trove of spiritual, symbolic and religious capital, then it will be always open to that other property of secularisation: peculation. Its most conspicuous manifestations occurred with the Napoleonic secularisation of church in 1803 and Bismarck's *Kulturkampf*.[28]

Ecclesial capital has always been subject to war, plundering and misappropriations that signify the venality of the human condition. Relationships between civil and religious powers have always been marked by strife, plunder and persecution. To the degree to which this denotes the displacement of religion from the public square, secularisation might seem the heir of these long-standing misappropriations. The term takes on distinctive properties in its suggestive relationship to modernity. But when that relationship is subject to critical scrutiny, what seems peculiar to secularisation, as a process of unravelling the basis of belief is something endemic in modernity itself.

[27] See Peter Berger, Grace Davie and Effie Fokas, *Religious America, Secular Europe? A Theme and Variations*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008. See also José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

[28] Anthony J. Carroll, *Protestant Modernity: Weber, Secularisation, and Protestantism* (Scranton: University of Scranton Press, 2007), pp. 5–7 and 15–17. See also Antônio Flávio Pierucci, 'Secularization in Max Weber. On the Current Usefulness of Re-Accessing that Old Meaning', *Brazilian Review of Social Sciences,* special issue, no. 1, October 2000, pp. 149–151.

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Modernity has strange powers of de-contextualisation that confuse and unsettle the unwary. These powers become intensified, pervasive and unsettling, not only in relation to religion but also in regard to adjacent areas such as intimate relationships, identity and culture. Thus, the processes of displacement that seem to exhibit the powers of secularisation are also characteristic of modernity itself and most notably in its maturation into postmodernity. The endless capacities of postmodernity to signify escape from the confinements of place are matched by feelings of having no fixable place. This oscillation between place and escape accounts for the unexpected emergence in postmodernity of the crisis of the self. Contrary to the sense of indifference to the beyond, so central to Taylor's characterisation of *A Secular Age,* postmodernity has had the opposite effect. Faced with a gnawing of emptiness and bored with endless opportunities to escape to other sites of vacuity, the self wearily turns to explore what modernity denoted as incredible: the beyond. With everything marked as incredible, that beyond seems to have taken on an unexpected credibility as the universe within which the self finds comforts of enchantment. Contingency has become a prison for the self. Relativism, often cast with secularisation as the evil of the age, offers the key for release from this prison. It opens doors to the beyond.

These points give a wider context to Taylor's worries over the demolition of the bulwarks of belief. Their loss haunts *A Secular Age*, a sense of grief intensified by the crisis modernity signifies of not being able to create replacement bulwarks. Modernity seems to have neither the capacity nor the vision to supply these. In this sense and again Weber looms in the background, Taylor posits a disenchantment that disenchants, for the surrogates for the bulwarks yield no sensibilities of what lies beyond that which reason is too enfeebled to grasp. That beyond pertains to the impulse to fill the void with the sublime and Taylor is excellent on this process in chapters 10–11. He is especially good on connecting the slide of reason and Reform into intolerable states of de-spiritualisation, an emptiness that gives rise to Romanticism.

Taylor uses well Schiller's *Letter's on the Aesthetic Education of Man* to signify the need to recover a sense of beauty, of play and symbols (358–359). Their spiritual properties transcend and heal the fracturing of the self and its social milieu which, as Taylor observes so haunted Schiller. Similar concerns are elegantly explored in a sensitive treatment (chapter 11) of Carlyle and Arnold who, with others felt the need to 'search for a new age of faith' (383).

There is much in Hadden's claim (made with others) that secularisation is 'a *doctrine* more than it is a theory'.[29] As such,

[29] Jeffrey K. Hadden, 'Toward Desacralizing Secularization Theory', *Social Forces,* vol. 65, no. 3, 1987, p. 588.

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paradoxically, the process of secularisation comes to mimic the very properties of religion it so despises. This is very evident in the formation of sociology which Comte treated as the handmaiden (another employee of modernity) of a religion of positivism, one unfortunately conceived in the image and likeness of Catholicism. Secularisation never escapes the notion that its thesis is teleological, that there is an unfolding minded purpose in the progress that supposedly leaves religion to sink in its wake. But the forces of modernity, that so fractured religion, can be turned against secularity itself.[30] As Swatos and Christiano noted, 'postmodernity, so called, is nothing more than the disenchantment of that sacrality the Enlightenment gave to Reason. It is the secularization of secularism'.[31] As a doctrine, secularity too becomes a victim of the disenchanting powers of modernity which slaughtered traditional religions. What undermined religion, the failure to galvanise commitment and obligation, to secure solidarity, to bind into a sense of what ultimately matters, also betrays secularisation. As it becomes the ultimate resource for modernity, it too becomes a religion and it too secularises itself. As politics seeks to represent itself as a civil theology, it too suffers the fate of all claiming the exalted status of embodying absolute values, finding its commonwealth riddled with disenchantment.

The credibility of secularisation rested on the solid foundations of modernity. Not only have these fractured in postmodernity, they also seem to have melted in the context of what Bauman has termed the emergence of liquid modernity, where what is solid and substantial melts. Even worse, forms of patterns of dependency and interaction also become liquefied.[32] This descent into meaningless and disconnection which secularity marked as the fate of religion can no longer be deemed singular but is a general property of modernity. It is the strange fate of reason that in the context of the maturation of modernity it too has become subject to charges of bad faith.

Writing over a long career, as an agnostic Jewish sociologist from Poland, Bauman has different reasons for marking the limits of reason to Taylor. Bauman was concerned with the unfettered powers of reason to classify, to be intolerant of indeterminacy and to extol the values of calculation as the hallmarks of modernity. Their outcomes in Bauman's regard were nefarious not speculative, for these ingredients facilitated the industrialised murder of millions of Jews in

[30] For recognition of this ironical point, see Jean-Paul Willaime, 'The Cultural Turn in the Sociology of Religon in France', *Sociology of Religion,* vol. 65, no. 4, 2004 especially pp. 375–381.

[31] 'Secularization Theory', op.cit., p. 17.

[32] Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000), pp. 6–8.

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the Holocaust.[33] For Bauman, ambiguities had an important function of preserving openings to understandings in ways that undermined efforts by excessive deference to reason to close these down. Towards the end of his sociological career, Bauman's concerns move to those of love, the mutuality of regard that is distinctively human, but these movements led him also to concerns with light and dark, admittedly derived from Seneca rather than John, and to concerns with the rehabilitation of what has been lost to view with the advance of modernity.[34]

In a sense, he exhibits a similar mourning for a time when religious belief seemed more possible. In Bauman, one sees similar concerns to Taylor who expresses these more specifically, where the demise of the bulwarks of belief (chapter 1) led to the emergence of the buffered self, denoted as isolated, autonomous, immune to the spiritual and to enchantment (38–39), one also insensible to what is beyond. But, as suggested above, the maturation of modernity has undermined indifference to what is beyond. A choice has been forced on the individual either to treat everything as limitless and therefore meaningless, or to recognise that there are limits which in turn require attention to what is beyond.

The advance of secularity has given rise to a phenomenon peculiar to the maturation of modernity: holistic spirituality. Usually, spirituality is understood to be channelled through traditional religions in their rituals and creedal formulae. Holistic spirituality presents something new, what Taylor terms a personal religion, individualised and packaged to maximise expressivism without obligation to the demands of more traditional forms of religion.[35] Holistic spirituality owes much to the insights of William James.[36] But Taylor finds these wanting, noting James' 'exclusion of theology from the center of religious life'.[37] Taylor is unexpectedly critical of the emergence of holistic spirituality, treating it as a 'kind of myopia', adding, 'I insist on this point because in a way this whole book is an attempt to study the fate in the modern West of religious faith in a strong sense', by which he means 'belief in transcendent reality, on the one hand and the connected aspiration to a transformation which goes beyond ordinary human flourishing on the other' (510).

The rise of holistic spirituality has generated disputes amongst sociologists as to whether it is to be regarded a new expressive and individualised form of religion, one peculiarly dealing with the

[33] Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991), p. 206.
[34] Zygmunt Bauman, *The Art of Life* (Cambridge: Polity 2009).
[35] Charles Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today. William James Revisited* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003) pp. 12–14.
[36] William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1920).
[37] *Varieties of Religion Today,* op.cit., pp. 25–26.

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sacralisation of the self or if it is to be treated as either therapy or a leisure activity.[38] A particular issue confusing relationships between holistic spirituality and religion emerges over the status of the body.[39]

In a sense the emergence of holistic spirituality might seem of marginal concern to sociology, being but an odd by-product of secularisation. But as a phenomenon, its emergence might cause sociology to have second thoughts about secularity itself. As Taylor rightly suggests, these new forms of spirituality denote a post-Durkheimian age, one that makes the sacred a matter of individual rather than of societal consequence (486–495). Given its stewardship of the social, sociology is likely to look at secularity in a new and less benign light than hitherto.

The issue of finding a replacement of and for religion, combined with a sense of the persuasiveness of apophatic arguments have led to the reluctant recognition of a new term, post-secularity.[40] Morozov aptly suggests that 'the postsecular age sees the Pyrrhic victory of secularism and the revenge of religion'.[41] In many ways, post-secularity is a misleading term. It assumes a boundary, a success of secularisation after which there is a free space to conceive of the ultimate direction of life without reference to the clutches of Christianity. Secularisation and post-secularity are victims of a peculiar property of Christianity: its genius for re-inventing itself, for drawing from tradition and presenting what seemed antique and useless as new and useful. This process of renewal gives rise to a process that forms an important thread to be found Taylor's *A Secular Age.*

Progressive retreatism: old and new forms of enchantment

Theologians might behave like frightened rabbits gazing down the highways of modernity and seeing truck loads of secularists driving up with bad news. Sociologists are less paralysed. They are used to

[38] See Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, et al., *The Spiritual Revolution: Why religion is giving way to spirituality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005. This study has generated vigorous debate over the characterisation of these forms of spirituality. See David Voas and Steve Bruce, 'The Spiritual Revolution: Another False Dawn for the Sacred' and Paul Heelas, 'The Holistic Milieu and Spirituality: Reflections on Voas and Bruce' in Kieran Flanagan and Peter C. Jupp, eds, *A Sociology of Spirituality* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), pp. 43–61 and 63–80.

[39] Giuseppe Giordan, 'The Body between Religion and Spirituality', *Social Compass,* vol. 56, no. 2, 2009, pp. 226–236.

[40] Carroll traces the term to Klaus Eder, the German sociologist of religion. See *Protestant Modernity,* op.cit., p. 21. Habermas refers also to Eder and uses the term in his debate with Ratzinger, who agrees with its significance. See Jürgen Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger, *Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion* trans. Brian McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006) p. 46 and p. 77.

[41] Aleksandr Morozov, 'Has the Postsecular Age Begun?', *Religion, State and Society*, vol. 36, no. 1., 2008, p. 41.

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jumping on and off these highways; that is their calling. For them, secularisation is just another social construction and one also ripe for de-construction. Times change and as Pierucci indicates in his subtle analysis of Weber on secularisation, disenchantment and modernity, '. . . developed societies are being re-enchanted as a counter attack. As we can see, the revenge of the religious sociologists of religion is to be feared, and not that of God. They are having their heyday'.[42] Taylor forms part of that celebration.

In the end, and notably in his chapter on conversions, Taylor brings out well the need to search for new forms of language that will resonate within (759). What he seeks is a means of offsetting the effects of Reform and the more cerebral forms of Christian faith and ritual it has generated (766). This can be accomplished by reference to a paradoxical term he uses: the 'future of the religious past' (770).

The fate of secularisation is to generate that which it despises: religious flourishing. The more secularisation advances, the more its clammy hand coagulates what it grips and the more the actor writhes in revolt at being cast in the snuff movie of modernity, mysteriously finding the spirit to refuse this nefarious handshake. Thus, perverse as it might seem, Pierucci is right: it is vital not to let go of secularisation.[43] It is more ambiguous, more enabling than theologians realise. Secularisation gives a distinctive witness to what Taylor terms the horizontal, most notably by expressing its limits but these form the basis of what he terms the 'immanent revolt' (723).

Were no reference to be made to the overall arch of *A Secular Age*, its movement from unbelief to belief via secularity, then its love of late medieval Catholicism might seem perverse, the nostalgia of a philosopher in his Indian summer for times of exemplary flourishing before the Reform (264–267). In being influenced by late medieval Catholicism in *A Secular Age*, Taylor is by no means alone. Weber was fascinated with its properties and Bourdieu was deeply influenced by it in his celebrated and influential sociology of culture. This concern with the 'future of the religious past' responds to a wider point, a realisation that whatever the advances of modernity in science and technology, these generate a retreat from a time in late medieval Catholicism when the after life loomed large. That time left a legacy, one marked by a genius for giving the sacred canopy an enveloping sense of presence in this world in ways that elicited responses in art, liturgical orders and Gothic cathedrals. They produced standards of edificatory excellence which the creatures of modernity can only gaze on as awed spectators.

[42] See 'Secularization in Max Weber', op.cit., p. 133. In ways that illuminate present debates on identity rights in the United Kingdom, Pierucci draws attention to the degree to which Weber's approach to secularisation is closely connected to law. See pp. 145–148.

[43] Ibid., p. 152.

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Somehow, the fascination with the medieval keeps hovering at the door of modernity, in the neo-Gothic revival and in the works of Pugin and Scott to name but two. The works of the Camden society revived that medieval imagination in liturgy in the nineteenth century, which the misguided zeal of liturgists after Vatican II managed to destroy with their own efforts at Reform. The phrase attributed to Benedict XVI, a hermeneutic of continuity, reflects the need to reconnect, to re-weight liturgical forms with a sense of the sacred and with the past, unfortunately not in medieval but in Tridentine innovations. This papal reading of the times accords with what some sought in a recent study of the Post-Boomers in California, forms of rite that appeal to the mind, the senses and the imagination, thus making new forms of connection to supposedly past dead forms of liturgy so capriciously jettisoned in the past four decades.[44]

Repeatedly in Taylor's study, the Reformation is blamed for the loss of enchantment, the emergence of the disembodied self of modernity, the de-ritualisation of worship that closed down the imagination of the other world, and most importantly, for providing a deluding theological niche for the buffered self. As Taylor observed rather acidly, 'someone deeply into the buffered identity could feel quite secure in his Christian allegiance, say as an Anglican' (264). What Taylor mourns is the loss of the capacity to break through the immanent frame, to invert it to reveal a sense of the transcendent. His stance is definite: that '. . . . the direction of this Reform was towards a far-reaching excarnation; that is one of the main contentions of this book' (614). The term 'excarnation' refers to 'the transfer of our religious life out of bodily forms of ritual, worship, practice, so that it comes more and more to reside "in the head"' (613). In response, Taylor is looking for new forms of ritual that would replace what is lost and these have a decidedly aesthetic and traditional cast.

Taylor employs Turner's notion of the liminal to illustrate the powers to invert in the pre-Reformation period. Examples he uses relate to carnivals and, for instance, the ceremony of the Boy Bishop in the medieval cathedral (48–54).[45] These subversions of the immanent frame had democratic properties of drawing all into a realisation that social orders were contingent and passing and could be harmlessly

[44] Richard Flory and Donald E. Miller, *Finding Faith: The Spiritual Quest of the Post-Boomer Generation* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2008), see chapter 5, 'Reclaimers'. It should be said that these questings under this category were using Episcopalian and Greek Orthodox Churches to reclaim lost traditions. Their reasons for reclaiming these bear similarities to the attractions Taylor finds in late medieval Catholicism.

[45] See Kieran Flanagan, *Sociology and Liturgy: Re-presentations of the Holy* (London: Macmillan, 1991), pp. 112–113. In this study, the liminal was used in reference to the minor actors of liturgy and their unexpected powers of inversion.

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inverted. These rituals characterised by liminality accomplished two contradictory tasks at once. They affirmed the stability of the social order at the same time as they gave witness to its pliability. For Taylor, the secular age has lost the self-confidence to use rituals to invert the social order, possibly fearing it might fall apart altogether. As he notes, the 'drive to order is both offended and rendered insecure by the traditional festivals of reversal. It cannot stomach the "'world turned up-side down"' (125).

In chapter 17, 'Dilemmas I', Taylor draws attention to the decline in culpability for immoral actions, where 'what was formerly sin is often now seen as sickness' and can be transferred to the therapeutic where the self is empowered to absolve itself (618). This has advantages for clients for 'what keeps them on the therapy side is that the original aetiology has no Lucifer element' (619). His strictures echo those above on holistic spirituality. Therapeutic interventions and the self so constructed have been long subject to scepticism in sociology in ways that express the limits of unbelief and the choices these surrogate religious processes mask.[46] Pathologies have replaced inquests on spiritual disorders in ways that lock the buffered self further into the immanent frame, without prospects of deliverance.

For Taylor, the secular age still has a dark side, one that emerges in his treatment of violence, evil, sin and mortality, entities that undermine the capacity of the buffered self to live in tranquillity in the frame of immanence. His inclinations towards Catholic orthodoxy emerge in his reference to 'the striking modern phenomenon, which has been described as "'the decline of hell"' (650). His interest in hell arises in the context of his concerns with sacrifice, sin, forgiveness and redemption, dilemmas which a secularised modernity has diluted but in ways that diminish humanity. Taylor is especially good on linking sacrifice and violence to the issue of evil and the temptations to ignore its existence. For him, 'God's pedagogy' is to teach man to overcome the fallen condition denoted by evil (668–669). Secularity abolished these lessons but in doing so, it also generated circumstances of uncertainty over the link between God and the social ordering of responses to His presence. Gone is the time when, as Taylor observes, 'God's power was there for you in the micro-functioning of your society' (43). It is as if the hand of God has been withdrawn in response to the conceits of modernity.

[46] See: Phillip Reiff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966); and Maxine Birch, 'The Goddess/God Within: The Construction of Self-Identity through Alternative Health Practices', in Kieran Flanagan and Peter C. Jupp, eds., *Postmodernity, Sociology and Religion* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), pp. 83–100.

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The myopic powers of secularity

Other gods and other galaxies now bedazzle and the myopia they generate relates to what Taylor terms a 'super-nova' (300). This signifies the endless expansion of options generated by the knocking away of 'the bulwarks of belief' (chapter 1). As links are loosened between moral and spiritual paths, Taylor suggests that 'we are now living in a spiritual super-nova, a kind of galloping pluralism on the spiritual plane'.[47] This would relate to the rise of holistic spirituality as discussed earlier.

The limitless questing that characterises the 'super-nova' needs to be linked to the unsettlements secularity exasperates but does not resolve. Some of these outcomes, well covered in chapter 8, 'on the malaises of modernity' are a proneness to boredom and heightened sensibilities of emptiness. The problem is that the 'Providential Deism' (chapter 6) which accentuates individualism bears a price: it 'blanks out communion almost totally' (280). It is this loss of reference to the social that marks the price of the individualism which so facilitates the rise of secularity. To that degree, both sociology and theology have common concerns over the outcomes of an excess of deference to secularity, for the subtraction it signifies to Taylor pertains not only to belief but also to the realm of the social which is the particular remit of sociology's stewardship.

This chaos can be linked to his notion of 'spin' (555–556). Taylor uses this term to refer to the capacities of the immanent frame to control the pictures, the background to thinking that opens out or closes down belief. For him, 'the spin of closure which is hegemonic in the Academy is a case in point', one with crucial bearings on the perpetuation of secularity (549). Some seek to revolt against this dominant state of affairs within the academy and to re-set an inconvenient theological witness into its secular ethos.[48] Spin relates to a capacity to create and to sustain illusions. The outcome is that 'blindness is typical of modern exclusive secular humanism' in the

[47] This notion was anticipated earlier in *The Heretical Imperative,* op.cit., where Berger referred to the 'close connection between secularization and the pluralization of plausibility structures', p. 26.

[48] See for example, Mark R. Schwehn, *Exiles from Eden: Religion and the Academic Vocation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). Given the highly secularised ethos of the English university, these American concerns have only lately and exceptionally been discussed. See Gavin D'Costa, *Theology in the Public Square: Church, Academy and Nation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005). See also the report on a new programme to affirm the value of religion in the face of secular criticism that is being organised by the Faith and Civil Society Unit, Goldsmiths College, London, *The Church Times,* 29th January 2010.

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way it often becomes devoid of humanity (698).[49] Forms of self-authorisation and the illusions they generate illustrate the price of the subtraction stories of secularity. In his use of spin, Taylor comes close to MacIntyre's notion of emotivism, which also points to the perils of self-legislation most especially for the formation of character.[50]

Unlike another celebrated work with some similar themes,[51] Taylor's work is perfectly fitted for the fruitful sociological extension of its themes. The trouble is that his buffered self is not so much insulated from forms of enchantment as engulfed by them in a culture increasingly given to forms of expression by visual means. Computer games, science fiction, Harry Potter, *Lord of the Rings* and *Avatar* all offer unprecedented outlets for the imagination of many who seek tales of heroism, sacrifice, hope and the wresting of good from evil. These movements in the past two decades illustrate the importance of Taylor's term 'social imaginaries' in bringing into focus the displacement of themes seemingly encased in the provenance of theology but now set free in the mass media for spectators to roam without reference to tradition or constraint. New 'gospels' abound that offer new myths of secular salvation, rendered credible by technological means as fantasy solutions to disenchantment.[52]

The term 'super-nova' has stellar properties of revealing constellations in sights unseen, where the Internet seems to have cast the prospect of seeing through a glass darkly (1 Cor. 13:12) as antique and this is where secularity takes on its most glittering and deceiving allures, confusing the seen with the unseen in ways that feed the conceits of curiosity rather than the needs of piety.[53] The outcome is a chaos in discernment, a fulfilment of the solemn declaration in the Magnificat: 'he hath shewed strength with his arm: has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts'. Somehow in the visual plenitude, too much is seen to be named, and as in the case of some explorers of modernity, some lose their head.[54]

[49] His term relates to the notion of blindsight (a capacity to see but not to name) that seems to characterise secularised forms of visual culture. This forms a central concern of *Sociology in Theology,* op.cit.

[50] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* second edition (London: Duckworth, 1985), chapter 3.

[51] John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

[52] Steven Greydanus, 'Another Myth of Secular Salvation', *The Catholic World Report*, February 2010, pp. 41–43 commenting on the film *Avatar*. See also Lynn Schofield Clark, *From Angels to Aliens: Teenagers, the Media, and the Supernatural* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

[53] Kieran Flanagan, *Seen and Unseen: Visual Culture, Sociology and Theology* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

[54] Kieran Flanagan, *What's in a name? the fate of sociology in theology,* The Michael Keenan Memorial Lecture 2007 (Saskatoon, SK: St. Thomas More College, 2009).

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The elegiac cast of *A Secular Age* comes to the fore in a short but brilliant section on ruins and the wilderness, two sites that signify the dolorous outcomes of secularity. The wilderness is an empty unsettling place, devoid of reference points, but to be explored if one is not to be lost (337–8). It is also an exemplary site for the irruptions of the sublime that break the immanent frame. But it is in regard to the ruins that Taylor finds his most telling metaphor for secularisation.

They stand as incomplete, as fractures and fragments of the capriciousness of history. Inspection of the ruins, as Taylor indicates, generates awe at the brokenness they signify whose remains demand inquests on their plight (333–4). If ruins are of religious origin, they command attention to re-imagine the round of life of those long gone but whose witness yet lives on uncannily in the fragments. By some mysterious means, those who lived lives of pious endeavour, now long gone home, return as ghosts on the sites who scorn the promise secularity made to modernity to exorcise these figures to nullity by invocation of the powers of reason.

In what might seem the fulcrum chapter of the study, on nineteenth century trajectories (chapter 11), Taylor finds in Arnold a realisation of a society whose 'fragmentation and loss of depth is part of the price we pay for the ending of the Christian era' (381). *A Secular Age* is a recognition that what has come to pass in the changing circumstances of modernity is 'a delinking of religion from society, or rather a transfer of spirituality to a new kind of niche in society' (419) and this realisation leads on to Part IV on the narratives of secularisation that underpin this unforeseen transference.

In Part V, on conditions of belief Taylor seeks solutions to what has gone before in the study. Breaking out of the immanent frame demands bold forms of resistance to the narratives of secularisation. This requires a change of attitudes, for as he writes: 'religion emanates from a childish lack of courage. We need to stand up like men, and face reality' (561). Even if this reality is unpropitious and riddled with the dilemmas of the age (chapters 17–18), the outcome of secularity involves living life on the 'unquiet frontiers of modernity' (chapter 19) which generate their own particular unsettlements and bleak prospects for religion. It might seem that secularity has won, for as Taylor notes, 'the present, fractured expressivist culture, with its advancing post-Durkheimian understanding, seems very inhospitable to belief' (727). If the society of *A Secular Age* has moved beyond Durkheim, then not only is belief in peril, so too is sociology itself. Durkheim left to sociology a surrogate form of religion, one not marked by inconvenient deferences to Deity, but rather one conceived to realise necessary properties of solidarity and to mark the social with properties of the sacred. Rightly, Taylor sees

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that religion has failed. It can no longer surmount and transcend the individualism of the age. Thus, in a strange way, the outcome of secularity is to give to both sociology and theology a common purpose of restoration of a sense of what has been lost: society and God.

The vision of the study points to the need to find new resonances and new soundings of belief. With its ear habitually planted on the field of culture, sociology, with rightful religious dispositions is well fitted to hear these resonances uniquely in ways theologians high up on the walls of the city of God might not. But these new possibilities do not come easily to any, for as Taylor indicates sacrifices are required. Recognition of these leads him on, perhaps, unexpectedly to affirm asceticism and renunciation and these provide the basis of revolt against a world increasingly becoming homogenised.

At the end of the study, Taylor places much value on an insight of Robert Bellah, a slogan of his that 'nothing is ever lost' (772). The slogan implies that all can be recovered and so to that degree *A Secular Age* fittingly points to a promise and hope that '..*they that shall be* of thee shall build the old waste places: thou shalt raise up the new foundations of many generations; and thou shall be called, the repairer of the breach, the restorer of paths to dwell in' (Isaiah 58:12).

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Charles Taylor replies:

Kieran Flanagan treats *A Secular Age* as it should be treated, as a set of 'interlocking essays'; and that means he rightly treats it as radically incomplete and inadequate to its defined goal, which is to characterize modern Western secularity by tracing its rise. In other words, I am treating secularity as something which is path-dependent. But this path is immensely complex, more an interlocking skein of highways and byways than a single giant autobahn. My book treats only a small and idiosyncratic collection of byways. It leaves much relevant material quite untouched. This idiosyncratic feature emerges from my index, as characterized by Flanagan (page 707).

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