THEOLOGICAL ROUNDTABLE

Rethinking the Secular

J. Matthew Ashley, Maureen O'Connell, Mary Doak, Thomas Beaudoin

Introduction

In 1994 Jose Casanova published a book that called into question the received wisdom in sociology of religion on secularization and attempted (among other things) to adjudicate a debate among sociologists as to whether the United States or Europe is the "exceptional" case when it comes to the link between modernization and secularization.[1] He distinguished between (1) "secularization as the decline of religious beliefs and practices in modern societies," (2) "secularization as the privatization of religion, often understood as a general modern historical trend and as a normative condition, indeed as a precondition for modern liberal democratic politics," and finally (3) "secularization as the differentiation of the secular sphere (state, economy, science), usually understood as 'emancipation' from religious institutions and norms."[2] He showed that these different possible manifestations of secularization constellate differently in different societies (in North America and Europe, for instance), and argued against the empirical and normative validity of the privatization thesis (that is, the normative positing of the second sense of the term). This opened an on-going debate over the status of secularization as a descriptive category for understanding the place of religion in societies undergoing processes of modernization, a debate that has been further complicated by debates over the relationship between "modernization" and "globalization."

Four years earlier, John Milbank had published his own sweeping, if controversial story of the origins and status of secularity.[3] His refusal to allow Christian faith and theology to be positioned by normative claims about secularization represented an intensification of reserva-

[1]Jose Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

[2]This summary is found in Talal Asad "Rethinking Secularization: A Global Comparative Perspective," *The Hedgehog Review* 8, nos. 1–2 (Spring-Summer 2006): 7–22, at 7.

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

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tions about the secular that had been present even in the 1960s. Yet, the fragmentation of the standard view on secularization, which was often the foil against which Christian theological evaluations of modernity were deployed (including Milbank's) but which was done in by Casanova's work (among others, of course), has only increased the complexity of an already labyrinthine set of theological arguments. In the meantime, the contest of the sociologists continues unabated, and has even spilled over into the popular media, with an article in the *New York Times Magazine* by Mark Lilla.[4]

This collection of four essays, which originated in a panel presentation and discussion at the annual meeting of the College Theology Society at Salve Regina University (Newport, RI) in May 2008, does not aspire to be a full cross-section of recent reevaluations of secularization, but attempts, rather, an initial reconnaissance of the ways that the terrain is shifting when it comes to views on "the secular" as a hallmark of modern society, and then asks how theology should respond. The first essay, by Matthew Ashley, takes up Mark Lilla's *The Stillborn God,* in which a prominent proponent of a traditional, normative view of secularization as a necessary ingredient for modern liberal democracy lays out his case. Next, Maureen O'Connell considers Charles Taylor's magisterial work (of over 800 pages!), *A Secular Age*, as an instance of a philosopher more sympathetic and attentive to the nuanced ways that the intertwined narratives of belief and unbelief can help us understand the complicated situation in which we find ourselves today (and who offers along the way his own taxonomy of secularizations). Mary Doak then takes up the dialogue between Jürgen Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger, published in *Dialectics of the Secular.* She probes the surprising rapprochement between a thoroughly modern philosopher who was once convinced of the importance of secularity in all its senses but now hews to a less strident line than Lilla, and a Roman Catholic cardinal and now pope who is well known for his determination to reverse the secularization of Europe, at least in the first and second senses that Casanova lays out, but is more open than one may have thought to secularization in its third sense. Finally, Thomas Beaudoin considers the work of Talal Assad in *Formations of the Secular*, who draws on the philosophy of Michel Foucault to construct a genealogy of the secular that highlights its historically fortuitous character, as well as its impact on modernity's "others." If these essays will have piqued the readers' appetite for a deeper investigation into the ways that this crucial de-

[4]Mark Lilla, "The Politics of God," *New York Times Magazine*, August 19, 2007. This article preceded and offered something of a précis of the book, *The Stillborn God*, discussed below.

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scriptor of modernity is being re-envisioned and what that might mean for modern theology, then they will have succeeded.

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I. "Saving the Secular: Mark Lilla's The Stillborn God

Mark Lilla's *The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics, and the Modern West*[5] is no more written for theologians than John Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory* was written for sociologists. Lilla is enough of a modern thinker to subscribe to the quintessential modern narrative that tells the story of humanity (or a portion of it, at least) coming of age in the Enlightenment, emerging from the superstition and fanaticism of the Dark Ages (a term he does not use but surely implies at the few points where he discusses the Middle Ages). But he joins many postmodern theorists in the recognition that there is nothing inevitable about this history, and that, moreover, its justification cannot be founded in an apodictic metaphysics of history or human nature.

The Stillborn God is, consequently, a call to arms to all those of "us" in the modern West who have chosen "to keep our politics unilluminated by the light of revelation" (SG 309), in the face of threats to what he calls "the Great Separation." The Great Separation arose in the sixteenth century as "the liberation, isolation, and clarification of distinctly political questions, apart from speculations about the divine nexus [between God, human beings, and the world]. Politics became, intellectually speaking, its own realm, one deserving independent investigation and serving the limited aim of providing the peace and plenty necessary for human dignity" (SG 162). This is secularization, then, as a process that leads to the autonomy of public spaces, and is concomitant to the privatization of religion.

The threat to the Great Separation is political theology, an inextirpable propensity or habit of mind by which human beings seek a grounding and justification of their politics in a transcendent framework. There are at least two elements to this habit of mind. Echoing Kant's first critique, Lilla speaks of the natural propensity of human reason to move upward in chains of reasoning, asking questions that can only be answered by moving beyond finite human experience, ultimately to some purported context within which the divine, the cosmic, and the human are comprehended and connected. Secondly, however, a powerful temptation arises to draw from this divine nexus

[5]Mark Lilla, *The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics, and the Modern West* (New York: Knopf, 2007); henceforth SG.

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warrants for the exercise of political authority. Some cultures (he names China, classical Greece, and the modern West), have succeeded in cutting this propensity off at the pass, particularly in its second movement; most have not. What is crucial is the character of the "pictures" by which *homo religiosus* articulates for her- or himself the divine nexus. Lilla's sociology of religion is simple: "To the simple it [religion] offers pictures; these pictures then give rise to puzzles the reflective must unravel" (SG 24). This unraveling process does give rise to reasoned discourse—and Lilla does insist that political theology has a *logos* to it—but as it turns out this reasoning cannot but be incomplete; always deficient, it can never be organized into an account of human life that is coherent and stable enough to put brakes on the more dangerous elements of the human relation to the divine, particularly the dangerous "messianic political theology" that, Lilla argues, broke out in Germany after World War I, as the heir to liberal theology (SG 10, 308). But, I am getting ahead of the story. Whatever their inadequacies, these "pictures" of the divine-human nexus can—happily for the story Lilla tells—introduce enough instability and slippage into political theology that a clever thinker can find a way to evade its logic altogether. On Lilla's account, our advantage in the West, if we have one, is that certain elements of the Christian pictures—especially those connected with the doctrine of the Trinity—have made Christian political theology a particularly difficult and unstable enterprise and thus one open to subversion (SG 35–39).

Enter the hero of Lilla's story, Thomas Hobbes, who opted out of the logic of political theology in *Leviathan* by "changing the subject." Instead of arguing over divine revelation and the claims it might make on our politics, Hobbes sought to undermine the whole enterprise by talking about religion as a human phenomenon, confining revelation to the intra-human world by asking after its origins in the human (for Hobbes, in human fear). Lilla willingly concedes that this is no knockout argument against a political theology that takes its bearings from a revelation that transcends the human; but by changing the subject so forcefully, and thus opening the floodgates for a whole genre on the origins of religion, Hobbes put the political theologians on the defensive. The result is that claims about how we ought to act in the *polis* based on the authority of revelation could never again enjoy their taken-for-granted legitimacy. In addition, Lilla apparently believes, by the nature of the case this legitimacy simply cannot be secured argumentatively.

Yet Lilla knows that Hobbes' account of religion, whatever its utility for making the Great Separation possible, was crude. Religion is about more than fear; a more adequate account must find room for its

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roots in human curiosity, hope, despair and "the vexing matter of conscience" (SG 112). Rousseau gave a more sophisticated account of religion than Hobbes, but in doing so he deviated from Hobbes by proposing not only that religion is an inextirpable human urge (which Lilla concedes) but also a necessary one for our social flourishing (which he will not). Kant picked up on this way of thinking about religion's role in social life, however much he attempted to discipline it within his critical apparatus in *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*. This marks the catastrophic turn in the story that Lilla tells.

The opening for an appeal to religion as foundational (at least in part) to political praxis was expanded by Hegel and led to a resurgence of political theology by the proponents of liberal theology: Albrecht Ritschl, Adolf Harnack and Ernst Troeltsch. Lilla can scarcely contain his contempt for these men, at one point repeating H. Richard Niebuhr's wonderful line about the Ritschlians' God: "a God without wrath brought men without sin into a Kingdom without judgment through ministration without the cross."[6] This is the "stillborn God" of the book's title, a God unable either to generate any critique of the status quo or any reason why a good German citizen need bother with either God or Christianity, thus construed. One would think this God relatively harmless, but Lilla's critique looks forward to the reaction the Ritschlians engendered: Barth and the Neo-orthodox theologians. According to Lilla, Barth's theology reintroduces a full-blown, premodern mode of theological discourse that is at least in part responsible for Christian accommodation to fascism. Speaking of Barth and his Jewish counterpart in Lilla's narrative, Franz Rosenzweig, Lilla makes this assertion:

> Neither Rosenzweig . . . nor Barth . . . recognized the connection between the rhetoric of their theological messianism and the apocalyptic rhetoric that was beginning to engulf German society. Their books did nothing to cause that political development, which had much deeper sources. But they did unwittingly help to shape a new and noxious form of political argument, which was the theological celebration of modern tyranny.[7]

In what is probably the least persuasive part of the book, Lilla concedes Barth's opposition to the Nazis as well as Bonhoeffer's, but

[6]SG 248. What Lilla does not do, however, is point out that this line comes from a more recent generation of political theologians in the United States, indicating therby how selective his story is.

[7]SG 278. There is a Jewish subplot in Lilla's story, in which Hermann Cohen and Franz Rosenzweig play the parts of Ritschl and Barth. This story has its own puzzles, but I do not follow them here.

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adduces other figures such as Friedrich Gogarten and Emanuel Hirsch as proof that the apocalyptic rhetoric used by Barth's *Römerbrief* reintroduced a form of eschatological politics that was dangerously underdetermined, such that it could just as easily nourish a Bonhoeffer or a Hirsch: "Eschatological language breeds eschatological politics," Lilla tells us, "no matter what dogmatic limits theologians try to impose on it" (SG 285).

Here Lilla's story ends with the summary statement that these figures "brought modern Western argument over religion and politics to an inglorious close, by returning it to where it began" (SG 278). He does not go on to discuss the next generation of North American and European political theologians: the Niebuhrs, Langdon Gilkey, Jürgen Moltmann, Dorothee Soelle, Johann Baptist Metz, or Oliver O'Donovan, to name a few. Nor does he consider the rise of liberation theologies in Latin America and the United States.[8] Presumably he believes he has made his point: there is no third way between the "Great Separation" and theocracy; between sober discourse "within the limits of reason alone," and dangerously unstable "world-view-thinking" of the utopian and eschatological imagination (which is what political theology inevitably comes to on his reading): "The river separating political philosophy and political theology is narrow and deep; those who try to ride the waters will be swept away by spiritual forces beyond their control" (SG 308). Ironically, on this point he agrees with Milbank's counter-narrative. His is a prime example of what Charles Taylor calls a "subtraction theory" of secularization (world – God = secularism); it shares all the blind spots that Taylor identifies.[9]

An air of desperation, however, hovers over Lilla's story. The Great Separation arose through an entirely fortuitous sequence of events in the West. The Jewish and Christian pictures of God and world have certain unique tensions and instabilities that enabled certain early modern political thinkers successfully to "change the subject" on the relation of God to human. Yet the possibility of backsliding continues because human beings naturally ask questions about a transcendent ground or context within which to make sense of our ethical and political desires and fears, hopes and anxieties. As Lilla's discussion of Hegel's political and religious philosophy makes clear, he also grants that human beings have an unsated hope for a reconciliation that will

[8]To be fair, he warns readers in advance that he will not consider the history of the Catholic Church's engagement with "the Great Separation." It is enough for the story he wants to tell simply to note the Catholic hierarchy's resolute opposition to it (SG 12n.). Yet given his favorable opinion particularly of the English strand of political philosophy, his exclusion of O'Donovan is puzzling, to say the least, particularly insofar as he continues a position that is at root Barthian and which, therefore, demands treatment.

[9]On Taylor, see the essay by Maureen O'Connell, below.

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bring together and heal the otherwise shattered fragments of their histories. This is a hope that continually tempts them across the narrow river of the Great Separation. Yet, if he can appeal to a strict intellectual ascesis to police this boundary among academicians (SG 307), why should anyone outside the academy pay attention?

Herein lies Lilla's dilemma. For if the "stillborn God" of the nineteenth-century German liberal theologians was "unable to inspire genuine conviction among those seeking ultimate truth" (SG 301), is Lilla's chastened politics any better off, offering us only the existential satisfaction of "going it alone" without any sense that the human project makes sense on the broader stage of the cosmos? And is that approach any more immune to political dysfunction? Lilla's claim that political theologies lead to unconstrained violence rings hollow without a discussion of the wars and genocides of the twentieth century, all fruits that ripened in fields tilled on *this* side of the Great Separation. Indeed, if he had bothered to consult Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich or Langdon Gilkey, among others, he would have had to ponder their conclusion that simply "changing the subject" in the face of the power of the sacred dimension of human experience (which can be either creative or demonic, to use Tillich's language) is a dangerously irresponsible luxury that we can no longer afford. To be sure, he does argue that modern politics has to be far more attentive to religion and its political effects (SG 203), and clearly, he is aiming for a more nuanced account of religion than that offered by the classic Anglo-American liberal tradition. Yet it must also be one that avoids the opening to theology that Rousseau's and Kant's created; it must stay firmly anchored in the "turn to the subject," that understands religion as a factor of human needs, fears and hopes—continuing to change the subject whenever the question arises: is religion also an address on the part of God to us? Can religion ever be fully understood unless we also reckon for that address, which transgresses the boundaries set by any finite human horizon of knowledge, desires, hopes and fears?

Bernard Lonergan used to say that "that which is arbitrarily asserted may be arbitrarily denied," and there is so much arbitrary assertion in Lilla's story that, on first reading, I was tempted to take that advice. It is worthwhile, however, to think about the positive theological agenda outlined by Lilla's narrative, above and beyond the negative one of pointing out its many omissions and misreadings. One might choose to counter Lilla's story with a Milbankian one, since Lilla's either-or confrontation of political theology and political philosophy, combined with his admission that the Great Separation is held open not by a foundational philosophical anthropology or ontology of history but by a continual policing of human questioning, gives us the

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mirror image of Milbank's account of the origins of the secular.[10] More creative options lie in continuing the tradition of finding a *via media*, which Lilla himself fails to discredit, in large measure because he never really explores it with any breadth or sophistication. For example, Lilla never explores the possibility that there might be grounds within political theology to hold open at least a relative separation between claims drawn from within a religious tradition and their direct application in the political realm in a pluralistic society. The Habermas-Ratzinger exchange explored by Mary Doak offers an instructive example of this possibility. Finally, while nineteenth-century liberal theology was judged deficient before Lilla's book came along, the way that he frames its rise and fall does point to the perennial challenge that confronts political theology. On the one hand, theology must respect the transcendent, interruptive power of revelation. To domesticate it, as liberal theology did, is to miss it. On the other hand, political theology is challenged in every generation and context to develop criteria for distinguishing the unruliness of revelation from the destructive force of human sinfulness. Perhaps another lesson to be learned from Lilla's story is that it is difficult to do this from the centers of power and privilege, just as it appears to be for Lilla to see that the Great Separation has not been an unmitigated good for the Enlightenment's others (as Talal Asad points out). As Gustavo Gutiérrez notes the most important resource for contemporary political theologies may well be the irruption of the poor (or, as J.B. Metz would say, the victims) into theology.[11]

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II. Theology in A Secular Age

Charles Taylor offers important insights for making sense of seemingly contradictory reactions to the relation between faith and reason that I encounter regularly in the undergraduate classroom. With the

[10]The reference to the disciplining of argument (leaving open the question of how Lilla's "simple believers" are to be disciplined) is also certainly vulnerable to a critique along the lines of Talal Asad's. On this, see Tom Beaudoin's essay below.

[11]For a relevant collection by Gustavo Gutiérrez, see *The Density of the Present: Selected Writings* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999), especially the following essays: "New things Today: A Rereading of *Rerum Novarum*" (39–58), "Toward the Fifth Centenary" (102–12) and "Friends of God, Friends of the Poor" (147–56). For Metz's assertion of the importance of attention to the victims for understanding the relationship of Politics and religious faith, see his essay, "Monotheism and Democracy: Religion and Politics on Modernity's Ground," in J.B. Metz *A Passion for God: The Mystical-Political Dimension of Christianity,* trans. , ed., intro. by J. Matthew Ashley (New York: Paulist, 1998), 136–49; and, more recently, J.B. Metz, *Mysterium Passionis: ein provozierendes Gedächtnis in pluralistischer Gesellschaft* (Freiburg: Herder, 2006), passim.

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help of his 750-page *A Secular Age*,[12] I realize that my "millennial generation"[13] students—who on the one hand vehemently deny that religion makes positive contributions to society, and on the other wave to the Pope as he passes crowds on Fifth Avenue in New York City in the Popemobile—are not necessarily schizophrenic. Rather, as one of the first generations to "experience the world entirely as immanent," they simply reflect many of the characteristics of what Taylor calls "secularism 3" or "the changing conditions of belief and unbelief" that shape our current social reality.

Taylor posits that, unlike previous periods in history, our contemporary age offers a multiplicity of entry points into the search for human "fullness", a multiplicity of ways of experiencing that fullness, and then a multiplicity of ways of expressing the authenticity that arises from these experiences. This radical possibility for multiplicity endows our secular age with characteristics that separate it from those dating back to the Axial Age including: (1) the rise of "closed world structures" (both religious and non-religious) which are inherently uncomfortable with all of this multiplicity-ness; (2) an epistemological preference for those entry points into, and expressions of, fullness that reflect intellectual maturity, rigor, and courage; (3) "cross-pressures" such as the need to reject religious belief as unsophisticated while simultaneously needing to participate in collective experiences that are larger than the individual self; and (4) a prevailing sense that religion is either "a threat, danger or distraction to the greatest good or something which satisfies our deepest craving for that good"(SA 548–49).

With these characteristics in mind, Taylor challenges believers and unbelievers alike to move beyond thinking about secularism in terms of our public spaces "being emptied of God" (secularism 1) or "the falling off of religious belief and practice" (secularism 2). He contends that these prevailing "subtraction theories" (World – God = secularism), have wrongly captured and then divided the secular and religious imaginations. For example, in relying on subtraction theories *non-believers* fail to recognize that the very capability to reject religious belief has historical foundations in continually evolving and sophisticated religious sensibilities, and that even "a disenchanted view of the world needs a theory to explain the power of the transcendent erupt[ing] into our lives however well we have organized them around immanent under-

[12]Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007); henceforth SA.

[13]This is a term used by James Davidson, Dean R. Hoge and Mary L. Gautier to name the generation of Americans born after 1983. See William V. D'Antonio, et al., *American Catholics Today: The New Realities of Their Faith and Their Church* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007).

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standing of order" (SA 518). Subtraction theories also fail to encourage *believers* to recognize that this same history reveals that, when it comes to the transcendent, multiplicity is nothing new or revolutionary, even within Christianity. In fact, Taylor suggests "there has always been a penumbra around the core of orthodox, fully practicing believers, whose beliefs shade off into heterodoxy" (SA 519).

Subtraction theories, therefore, miss a far more interesting story of how we arrived here in this secular age, and they fail to offer constructive ways of engaging closed world structures and cross-pressures. In short, Taylor argues that the other models miss the insights to be gained by a mutually self-critical examination of the ways in which human beings have always been innovators when it comes to shaping the contexts in which our moral, spiritual and religious searches for "fullness" take place. He shifts the focus from social and economic theory, demographic analysis, assessment of changing dogmatic beliefs, or even "clash of civilizations" language to a *narrative* account of the enmeshed history of belief and unbelief. The tale he tells largely plays out in Western Christianity and stars communities of believers at various socio-economic levels, as well as a cast of individual witnesses (mostly converts) and intellectual elites. By telling this story, Taylor invites us to move beyond theory and speculation. Instead we are to reflect on what he calls the "unthought" aspects of secular and religious belief that we use regularly to navigate the tensions of the secular age: among our colleagues and neighbors, and in our classrooms, parishes, and politics.

With this invitation in mind, let me present three contributions that Taylor makes to theological discourse on secularization, three caveats that contemporary theological discourse might offer to him in return, and three new directives for theologians in a secular age.

Contributions to Theological Discourse

First, Taylor presents a compelling notion of fullness. Fullness is "an experience which unsettles and breaks through our ordinary sense of being in the world, with its familiar objectives, activities and points of reference" (SA 5). In other words, to experience "fullness" is not to be affirmed, or actualized, or integrated but rather to be interrupted, disrupted, or unsettled. A desire for fullness is a desire to break through the way things are, to move beyond the familiar and the ordinary, to be affected by alternatives to the mundane. This challenges what believers and unbelievers might normally consider "fullness" to mean (e.g., integrity, authenticity, happiness, flourishing, therapeutic well-being). In

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so doing it creates the possibility for common ground, whether through the acknowledgment that all persons are looking for more, through a shared critical examination of less authentic promises of fullness in economics, politics, or culture, or through a commitment to finding religious and secular alternatives to the prevailing methods for that search. Moreover, this type of fullness combats the demoralizing and dehumanizing psychological or emotional toll that life in an increasingly globalized world exacts from us. Fullness interrupts the unreflective and self-perpetuating momentum of what Anthony Giddens calls our "runaway" global world, what Anthony Elliot and Charles Lemert consider the "isolating individualism" of consumerism, what William Schweiker calls the "titanic sense of power" that gives us a false sense of control over our lives, the moral incoherence of what Kenneth Gergan calls the "saturated self," or finally what Taylor himself describes as the prison-like "malaise of the buffered self" (SA 302).[14]

Second, Taylor relies on the power of memory to unveil the reality that "our past is sedimented in our present, and we are doomed to misidentify ourselves, as long as we can't do justice to where we come from" (SA 29). He dedicates most of the book to remembering the gradual movement from the "porous" to the "buffered" self, from an enchanted to disenchanted world view, from kairotic to chronological time, from an unlimited cosmology to a bounded universe. Along the way, with the help of primary and secondary sources, he lifts out important particularities that sparked these ongoing transitions. This narrative points to important common ground where the seeds of our current multiplicity were planted.

More importantly, Taylor uses memory as an important corrective both for believers and non-believers in resisting closed world structures that arise with the arrival of the immanent frame in our contemporary context and protect against the "fragilization" of one's position (SA 556). These expressions of closed logic polarize groups, deny the possibility of dialogue, and problematize positions that run counter to the often competing claims about the "naturalness" or "giveness" of reality. Memory reminds us that most of our values and world views are socially constructed and reflect a long (and not necessarily inbred) genealogy. A commitment to memory requires the cultivation of the virtue of humility which can break through the closed and defensive logic of

[14]Anthony Giddens, *Runaway World: How Globalization is Reshaping our Lives* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 2; Anthony Elliot and Charles Lemert, *The New Individualism: The Emotional Costs of Globalization* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 43–78; William Schweiker, *Theological Ethics and Global Dynamics: In the Time of Many Worlds* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 3–24; Kenneth Gergen, *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 81–110.

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closed world structures with simple acknowledgements of the strengths and limits of porous and buffered selves, of enchanted and disenchanted world views, of cosmic and bounded humanisms.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, Taylor offers the concept of the social imaginary as the place where belief and unbelief have long converged. By this term he means "the ways in which people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations which are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images which underlies these expectations" (SA 171). Our social imaginary is not a set of theories, intellectual suppositions or even abstract principles devised and then promulgated by the intellectual or cultural elite. Rather, social imaginaries are far more democratic and hands-on: they are practices and behaviors in public spaces that form and inform a shared vision of who we are and who we want to become as a community. Taylor rightly reminds us of the historical contribution that religion makes to the social imaginary by empowering moral agency and forming the moral imagination of believers. He implicitly calls for this agency in shaping our contemporary social imaginary, particularly if we acknowledge that imagination overcomes the fear-driven logic of closed world structures that deny pluralism, shut down the possibility for collective imagining, and deny a much-needed inclusive approach to common morality. This concept becomes increasingly important in our contemporary global reality in light of the increased need for collective moral agency in shaping kind of globalization that continues to unfold in our overlapping political, economic and cultural spheres.

Theological Contributions to Taylor's Discourse

Despite the thoroughness of his historical survey and resulting argument, Taylor leaves at least three stones unturned. Contemporary Catholic theology might assist in examining them. First, Taylor offers a limited notion of Christian humanism. He identifies a variety of expressions of humanism throughout Christian history which have contributed social imaginaries. However, his analysis of Christian humanism does not extend far beyond the "devout humanism" of Ignatius of Loyola in the sixteenth century (SA 227). The historical event and theological significance of Vatican II go largely unexamined, revealing a significant gap in his presentation of the changing conditions of believing. Here Taylor might find a humanism that struggles to integrate the historical tensions he describes, whether balancing the desire to "dwell" in the sanctuary of traditional belief, authority and

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notions of fullness with the search for alternatives to fullness via engagement in the wider world, or affirming the importance of material well-being without rejecting the significance of the spiritual dimension of human development, or affirming the desire for both authentic discipleship and citizenship, or holding a focus on the Kingdom of God that awaits us as well as on the global common good we are called to construct in the here and now. Moreover, many Catholic scholars have built on the humanism of Vatican II to articulate practices that shape believers' inclusive engagement in the social reality which challenges closed world structures of believers and non-believers alike. In particular, William Schweiker's recent articulations of theological humanism in the context of what he describes as the "many worlds" of globalization makes him an ideal dialogue partner for Taylor. Schweiker's approach, rooted in the theological anthropology of Vatican II, seeks after "integrity of life" and fosters the kind of morally empowering engagement in the tradition which our secular age demands—thinking critically about alternatives to the dangerous drive to "overhumanization" and empowering the conscience in order to find the "we" among the many "I".[15]

Second, I do not completely agree with Taylor's diagnosis of the decline in the transformation perspective as a symptom of the new secular age. He attributes this decline to the gradual arrival of what he calls the "immanent frame." By this he means that as buffered, disciplined, self-examined, and self-developed authentic individuals, human beings prefer to operate today in a "natural" or "this-worldly" order "which can be understood in its own terms, without reference to the 'supernatural' or 'transcendent'" (SA 594). In this immanent frame we abandon a sense that there is a world beyond the immediate here and now, ways of relationship beyond the boundaries of our buffered individuality, or goals or ends beyond concrete human flourishing to which persons might aspire. Certainly, Taylor is right in noting this dynamic in privatized expressions of faith. However, in bypassing the humanism of Vatican II he misses the immanent or socially-directed virtue of justice which in many contexts is synonymous with Christian self-understandings and commitments expressed in unprecedented ways. Here I am not speaking of distributive or commutative justice that might be connected with personal development or social stability, two places where belief and unbelief frequently intersect in Taylor's historical account. Rather, I mean social and restorative versions of justice that offer radically different visions of human flourishing, re-

[15]William Schweiker, *Theological Ethics and Global Dynamics: In the Time of Many Worlds* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004).

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flect more contemporary Christian notions of the transcendent, and integrate both the immanent and transcendent nature of Christian belief, in terms both of *content* and practice of belief.

Lastly, while Taylor acknowledges the parameters that he places on his attempts to answer questions raised by the arrival of our secular age, his analysis nonetheless reflects his social location as a white, North American male. To some extent, therefore, he operates safely in what Peter Berger calls the "bubble of the global elite" which isolates and protects humanitarians and corporate CEOs alike from "on-the-ground" perspectives different from their own.[16] For example, few female scholars or even historical and religious figures are incorporated in his sweeping treatment of Christian history. Several, particularly the mystics—Julian of Norwich, Hildegard of Bingen, Teresa of Avila, Simon Weil, Dorothee Soelle, even Mother Teresa, whose personal writings reveal deep mystical experiences—might offer important contributions to notions of fullness. Moreover, Taylor's depictions of the more contemporary Age of Mobilization might look different from perspectives of those whose ideas were drowned by the dominant (i.e., white and male) view. For example, Seyla Benhabib, Traci West, and Miguel A. De La Torre offer alternative perspectives of philosophical and theological anthropology and likewise understandings of justice that have significantly reshaped the social imaginary.[17] Taylor's "Age of Authenticity" (the search for individual identity and corporate manipulations of that identity reign) might also be defined differently from the standpoint of those whose authenticity is largely defined by choices that others make. Margaret Farley's project of debunking the religious and secular beliefs surrounding HIV/AIDS, which privileges the perspectives of African women struggling with this pandemic, offers a good example of such a prophetic corrective.[18] Or Taylor might have considered more contemporary articulations of theodicy in light the natural disasters of the new millennium. These events create a porousness in our contemporary immanent frame and present challenges to believers and non-believers alike. For example, Michael Eric Dyson's discussion of frames of reference that shape theodicy in light of Hurricane Katrina or Jon Sobrino's reflections after a massive earth-

[16]Peter L. Berger and Samuel P. Huntingdon, eds., *Many Globalizations: Cultural Diversity in the Contemporary World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 6.

[17]Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Community, Postmodernism and Contemporary Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Traci West, *Disruptive Christian Ethics: When Racism and Women's Lives Matter* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2006); Miguel A. De La Torre, *Doing Christian Ethics from the Margins* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004).

[18]Margaret Farley, *Compassionate Respect: A Feminist Approach to Medical Ethics and other Questions* (New York: Paulist, 2003).

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quake in El Salvador in 2001 would be helpful in this regard.[19] All of these "peripheral" perspectives might burst the bubble of Taylor's unintended global elitism.

Directives for Theologians in a Secular Age

A Secular Age implicitly acknowledges the ways in which theologians, and particularly lay theologians with different ideas about "fullness," have contributed to the multiplicity we now encounter. To that end, Taylor implicitly points to three important places where theologians might engage the critical work of addressing the harmful characteristics of the secular age, tease out the unexplained ambiguities even in the tightest of closed world structures, and construct a rich social imaginary.

First, Taylor's secularization thesis calls for a renewed commitment to exploring faith in the context of science and vice versa. For example, there is the work of theologians such as Barbara Fiand, who engages quantum physics in shaping a new theological cosmology and notions of God, and John Haught whose work in evolutionary theology suggests new ways of understanding human origins and God's interaction with creation.[20] These theologians challenge the closed world structures held by scientists (that science is not about a search for intangible meaning but about tangible empirical evidence, that human agency can be defined by behaviorism or reduced to evolutionary biology) and by those in religious traditions (the inherent duality of reality, that God is best understood as a personal and anthropocentric deity, that creation is a historical rather than ongoing event). Their work moves away from close-minded debate to more open-minded dialogue.

Second, *A Secular Age* encourages engagement not only in *religious pluralism* but also in *cultural pluralism*. One of Taylor's variations on his basic definition of "secularism 3" proposes that secularity is people coming together, expressing and employing their own moral agency, in the public square around a common idea (SA 185–210). This echoes an important insight expressed by Hans Küng, who, in his work with the Parliament with World Religions in the early 1990s, suggested that "there will be no survival of democracy without a coalition of

[19]Michael Eric Dyson, *Come Hell or High Water: Hurricane Katrina and the Color of Disaster* (New York: Basic Books, 2007), 178–202; and Jon Sobrino, SJ and Margaret Wilde, *Where is God?: Earthquake, Terrorism, Barbarity and Hope* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004).

[20]Barbara Fiand, *Awe-Filled Wonder: The Interface of Science and Spirituality* (New York: Paulist, 2008); John F. Haught, *God After Darwin: A Theology of Evolution* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2007).

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believers and non-believers in mutual respect."[21] Taylor's imperative suggests that we might need to return to the mindset of Paul Tillich, apostle to the atheists, to see the need for a religious pluralism that engages non-believers, given the expanding common ground on which we all stand. Perhaps we might follow Terrence Tilley's lead in exploring our "secular age" as a new "site" for a theology which does not attempt either to correlate the past with the present or belief with non-belief, or posit that the content of belief might continue to ring true despite changing background or conditions, but rather constructs ways of thinking about theology by examining practices that "reflect on and in . . . the practice of believing" in this new location of secularism.[22] In addition, Taylor reinforces the trajectory of a variety of scholars who examine theologically the cultural influences on our social imaginary. For example, Mary Elizabeth Hobgood considers impact of a culture of unearned privilege, Laurie Cassidy and Alex Mikulich evaluate a culture of whiteness, and Vincent Miller analyzes a culture of consumerism.[23] Their work reflects much needed critical engagement with cultural pluralism.

Third, Taylor's emphasis on the importance of the religious imagination as an avenue for encountering fullness and for shaping the social imaginary encourages us to continue to explore the rich intersection of religion and the arts. Simply said, art moves us in no small part because it facilitates experiences of interruptive, unsettling fullness. As such it creates a constructive way for believers and non-believers to account for "the specific force of creative agency, or ethical demands, or for the power of artistic experiences" which unite us (SA 597). Moreover, art underscores the importance of the intersection of creative agency and moral agency, of emotive reasoning and logical reasoning, of artistic vision and ethical vision. The arts offer possibility of experiencing fullness more radically, inclusively, and perhaps with more interruptions. Therefore, we need to be more attentive to cultivating the Catholic sacramental imagination and exploring its ethical applications.

Conclusion

Taylor raises critical awareness of the increasingly viable role of the theological discipline in examining the presuppositions of faith

[21]Hans Küng, *A Global Ethic for Global Politics and Economics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 92.

[22]Terrence Tilley, *Religious Diversity and the American Experience* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 8.

[23]Mary Elizabeth Hobgood, *Dismantling Privilege: An Ethics of Accountability* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2000); Laurie Cassidy and Alex Mikulich, eds., *Interrupting White Privilege: Catholic Theologians Break the Silence* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2007); Vincent Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2004).

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and notions of fullness that contribute to our contemporary secular milieu. His book offers the optimism needed to move beyond the paranoia and polarization that arise from viewing secularization as simply a process of "subtracting God." He reminds us of our responsibility to continue shaping our contemporary reality's social imaginary: "the interesting story is not simply one of decline, but also of a new placement of the sacred or spiritual in relation to individual and social life" (SA 437).

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III. The Dialectics of Secularization

The much-discussed public dialogue between Jürgen Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger in early 2004 has recently been published in English translation as *The Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion*.[24] Despite the rather heavy title, these two presentations provide concise and substantive positions on the specific topic of "the pre-political foundations of a free state." Both thinkers here engage an essential issue underlying much of our current reconsideration of the secular society: does secularity so undermine the necessary societal bonds that liberal democracy cannot provide sufficient basis for an adequately functioning political community? Many have come to believe that a political community united merely by agreed-upon political procedures is too "thin" to withstand the global market forces that undermine community bonds and encourage the privileged to seek their own advantage without concern for whatever communities they may (temporarily) belong to. Can the secular state be held together simply by the stipulated procedures for political decision-making, or will the pressures of each one seeking his/her own good ultimately cannibalize the larger community?

In addressing the question of the moral foundations of the democratic state, Habermas and Ratzinger also contend with what is perhaps the most bedeviling practical question of secularity: what role ought religion to play in the secular society? It seems that religion is not dying out after all, and religious people are increasingly unwilling to accept that religion is a purely private option. Indeed, as many have been arguing for some time, denying the religions a public voice and role not only deprives society of important insights but is in fact unacceptable to those for whom religious faith is the all-encompassing commitment orienting their lives. Yet the current tendency (especially common in

[24]Jürgen Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger, *The Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion*, ed. Florian Schuller, trans. Brian McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006).

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the United States) to defend religiously-based legislation as an expression of religious freedom risks a religious establishment that sacralizes politics and denies the religious freedom of the politically less-powerful. In our contemporary pluralistic societies, religion is more likely to be a factor of division than the source of common social bonds. Are we forced to choose between the Scylla of privatized religion and the Charybdis of religious establishment, or is it possible to chart a course that avoids both dangers?

It is not, however, merely the fact that these influential European figures address a topic of considerable theoretical and practical importance that makes this book significant. What is perhaps most striking about this succinct discussion is that these two very different figures largely agree in their prescriptions for a secular society concerned with a common moral vision and able to accord religion a place in the public life of a thoroughly pluralistic society. Despite the similarity of their conclusions, though, it is difficult to exaggerate the fundamental disagreement implicit in the presuppositions of their arguments. Habermas is well-known as the quintessential secular philosopher who tends to be religiously tone-deaf, and who has dedicated his intellectual life to the development and defense of the ideal of an unfettered conversation as a replacement for reasoning from foundational truths. Ratzinger, on the other hand, is a nearly ideal example of the theist who, as professor and as church leader, is committed to Christianity as the truth that should govern all aspects of our lives. Publicly opposed to the relativism of contemporary society, Ratzinger insists that the truth revealed by God must be maintained against what he sees as the arbitrariness of majoritarian perspectives. Yet these two have come together in a constructive dialogue and largely agree in supporting a pluralistic public life that would avoid both the privatization of religion and the identification of church with state. This fundamental agreement provides hope that we might move beyond oppositional posturing in favor of a common vision acceptable not only to those committed to a pluralistic and inclusive society, but also to those for whom religion orients all aspects of their lives as well as those who ascribe to both of these positions.

The shared vision that emerges from these presentations centers on an agreement that the democratic project depends upon citizens committed to the common good—citizens, moreover, who are willing to seek this good together through inclusive, pluralistic public discussions. Habermas and Ratzinger agree that all religious and ethical perspectives belong in this public conversation, and that society endangers itself to the extent that it privatizes or marginalizes religion. Democracy, as here understood, demands much of its citizens, who

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must cultivate a concern for the common good and the willingness not only to tolerate but also to risk engagement with different perspectives. Religion is thus integral to the functioning of democracy not only because of the ethical insights religion contributes but also because religion can inspire the necessary political virtues that enable people to seek the greater good.

Habermas' defense of the inclusion of religion in a pluralistic society is based on his argument that solidarity and a concern for the common good are essential pre-political foundations of the democratic state. Though he remains committed to the possibility of ethical reasoning without recourse to religion, Habermas has come to recognize that democracy depends on political virtues and on a sense of solidarity deeply threatened by a market economy that increasingly diminishes the sphere of public decision-making. Habermas now acknowledges that, if we want to develop citizens who seek the common good rather than using their rights as weapons to secure personal gain at the expense of others, society must nurture all sources of solidarity and ethical wisdom, including religions.

In keeping with his commitment to the ideal of unfettered communication, Habermas further insists that the secular state must be truly neutral, providing procedures consistent with a variety of religious and non-religious positions without favoring any of them. Advocating a position that seems closer to the United States' version of religious neutrality than to the European alternatives of religious establishment or absolute secularism, Habermas favors a secularity that does not preclude or impede the public expression of religious views. Of course, this argument for religious freedom as full inclusion in public life is also a development of his insistence (shared by Ratzinger) that the law must be used as an instrument of the common good rather than for the privileging of one's own group (whether that group be religious or non-religious). For Habermas, it follows that one ought not to seek legislation based on religious reasons that are in principle acceptable only to the members of that religion. Rather than rejecting expressly religious arguments, however, Habermas challenges all (including the non-religious) to engage proffered religious perspectives with the intent of uncovering any universally accessible insights they might embody. He cites the Catholic tradition of natural law reasoning as consistent with this search for the common good, ordering society without recourse to revelation.

Interestingly, Ratzinger distances himself from the natural law tradition that Habermas embraces, and instead defends the importance of a pluralistic conversation through his discussion of the danger of separating religion and reason. While he acknowledges that religion can

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become distorted and violent when divorced from reason, he argues that reason can also be dangerously destructive without the limits provided by religion. Atomic bombs are a product of reason, Ratzinger reminds his audience, and even democracies must accept limits lest the rights of the minority be sacrificed for the benefit of the majority. Apparently presuming here an instrumental definition of reason (perhaps because he find this to be the dominant—and problematic—concept of reason in society), Ratzinger insists that reason needs religion to provide the goals and the limits for the use of reason, even while religion must be purified of its distortions by reason.

At this point, Ratzinger's position differs considerably from Habermas' in that Ratzinger's argument appeals to religion as an authority necessary to limit and to direct the uses of reason, whereas Habermas is willing to trust an unfettered conversation as the only authority. However, Ratzinger pushes his argument further, pointing out that neither Christianity nor western forms of rationality have achieved worldwide recognition of the universal validity they claim. Therefore, Ratzinger argues, we need a global conversation including all religious and ethical traditions. Only in this way might we encounter the essential ethical truths that all know or sense, truths Ratzinger refers to as "that which holds the world together" (the title of his essay). Thus Ratzinger concludes by espousing the unlimited, pluralistic conversation that Habermas has long advocated, not because we create the truth through our agreement but rather, Ratzinger contends, because such conversation is our best hope for recognizing universally-binding ethical truths.

It is not insignificant that both thinkers call for respectful conversation not primarily as an argument intended to vanquish the opposition but rather as a means of learning through others' perspectives. Notwithstanding their considerable differences on whether democratic societies must be based on a non-democratically authorized truth, both Habermas and Ratzinger eschew the "culture war" approach that seeks to use public debate to outmaneuver and marginalize, if not obliterate, other viewpoints. Habermas is surely correct in his observation that western societies are so deeply pluralistic that no position can realistically hope to be the one dominant perspective that structures society; instead, we must all accept that alternative views will persist and we must take the risk of engaging them. Ratzinger's argument further suggests that a stance of dialogue with other perspectives need not be predicated on a relativism that presumes all views are the same. Rather, Ratzinger would have us engage others so that we can learn together the truth that precedes and is in some way known (or knowable) by all of us.

We might well ask, then: where do the significant differences be-

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tween Ratzinger and Habermas lie? Perhaps unsurprisingly, given that both thinkers argue in favor of seeking consensus, their differences are downplayed in this public exchange that instead celebrates their common ground. Nevertheless, there are points of disagreement evident even in this limited conversation, and we should consider whether these are differences that make a difference for how we envision (or enact) secular society.

Certainly one key disagreement between them is that Ratzinger denies the ability of democratic procedures to provide an in-principle protection for minorities, so that he raises the question of the need for religion as a non-democratically constituted authority, an authority that would establish the limits of democratic processes, and thus prevent majorities from agreeing to violate the rights of minorities. Habermas, on the other hand, insists that the rights of minorities and the limits of democratic decisions can and should be incorporated into the foundation of the structures and procedures of the democratic state; he is not convinced that religion is the essential source of values able to guide and to limit the use of reason in a democratic society (however much religion ought to be nurtured as one such source). Thus, Ratzinger seems to agree with those who judge that the democratic state depends upon an extra-political authority that the state itself is subject to, whereas Habermas rejects the idea of any essential non-democratic authority.

If we were to explore further the question of whether societies' degrees of justice vary according to their acceptance of religious authority, we would have to sort through much conflicting evidence. Indeed, there seems no end to the tendentious debates over whether religious or non-religious societies have been most likely to wield power in violently abusive ways. (One might conclude that it is neither religion nor atheism, but humans who are inclined to violence and injustice.) Nevertheless, an issue that can be profitably, albeit briefly, explored here is the ambiguity in Ratzinger's remarks about the necessary guiding role of religion. Ratzinger is rather vague on this point, perhaps deliberately so. If he intends to defend religion as a source of wisdom, the acceptance of which he advocates as good for society, many may disagree but only the most vehemently anti-religious will consider the argument itself out-of-bounds. If, however, he instead envisions religion as the authority that circumscribes the democratic process and directly determines which topics reason is and is not allowed to explore, he has set his ship for the Charybdis of established religion and the concomitant disenfranchising of religious minorities and the non-religious. We must acknowledge that Ratzinger is sufficiently ambiguous here that the question remains open whether he continues to

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maintain his earlier agreement (published in English translation twenty years ago in his *Church, Ecumenism and Politics*) with the still common presumption that our only alternatives are privatized or established religion.[25] To be sure, Ratzinger's acknowledgment of the value of an open conversation among the various religious and ethical perspectives might suggest that he would not accept the religious establishment that necessarily precludes serious consideration of the perspectives of religious minorities and the non-religious. Still, the issue is significant and complex enough to warrant more clarity.

There are also further questions about Habermas' understanding of the process of translating religious perspectives into what all have in common. We can easily grant that the achievement of shared insights is a significant goal of public debate, as Ratzinger also affirms. Yet we might wonder whether Habermas construes this search for common understandings of the public good to be an effort only to find the least common denominator we can all accept, so that the particularity of religions is rendered publicly irrelevant. If Habermas intends to maintain that we must always abstract from the specificity of religious beliefs, I would argue to the contrary that we would do better to seek common understandings in and through our differences. Are not a robust religious freedom and a genuinely pluralistic conversation undermined by a least-common-denominator approach which suggests that particularity and difference are inherently irrelevant to public life? Again, more clarity is needed.

This public exchange between Habermas and Ratzinger is further evidence that, while there is much to be gained from grand theories about secularity and about the role of religion in public life, the devil is in the details, especially when so many presume that the choice between privatized religion and established religion is a forced option. This dialogue between a non-religious philosopher and a Catholic theologian-now-pope holds out hope that, at least in the West, disagreements about the role of religion in public are not insoluble. Rather than a "culture war" without end, these presentations indicate that it is possible for those committed to religious freedom and those committed to the political significance of religion to unite in supporting a religiously-saturated secularity. Nevertheless, the ongoing debate suggests also that the path between privatized and established religion, if there is one, is narrow indeed.

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[25]Joseph Ratzinger, *Church, Ecumenism and Politics: New Essays in Ecclesiology,* [trans. Robert Nowell and Frideswide Sandemann] (New York: Crossroad, 1988).

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IV. Asad on the Secular

In the Catholic theology of the last generation there has been tremendous interest in the elaboration of theological anthropologies. It is especially with respect to what is meant by an anthropology, and how anthropologies are put to use, that Talal Asad's work is of special interest. For Asad, the drama of the secular is the trauma of the anthropological, particularly in the ways that authoritative construals of the human have configured and damaged the lives of secular modernity's "others." Asad's research can intervene in Catholic discourse, therefore, by clarifying how far our theological anthropologies participate in the secular.

This is possible because Asad's concern is a genealogy of the secular.[26] Taking up the line of inquiry elaborated by Michel Foucault, Asad holds open a culturally complex and intellectually unruly space called the secular, seeing this space as ingredient to the constitution of modern subjectivities. He asks what economies of knowledge, power, and truth have contributed to this space that disciplines us Westerners and those who are subject to our world. In making genealogy the way to comprehend the "secular," Asad elects to teach an "unpacking [of] the comprehensive concept" of the secular that we typically take as meaningful, given, natural, or stable in our theories and everyday lived experience, and carefully dissolve it "into heterogeneous elements according to its historical character."[27]

For Asad, the secular is a way by which we are taught to govern ourselves. It is a force field of formations that have converged to create our present a dangerous one, the costs of which have not been accounted. The secular should be understood from the point of view of its others and its victims—that is to say, of its violences. It is a category from and for law and politics, and for everyday experience that operates only out of its own genealogy. The secular thereby has four aspects:

First, it is a legal-political instrument. It is embedded in the powers of the modern nation-state, and especially of those most powerful Western nation-states in a world of profoundly unequal nation-states, where these nation-states must define legally and enforce politically what secularity is. Even the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*,

[26]Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003). Henceforth cited as FS. The conversation on Asad's genealogy of the secular continues in David Scott and Charles Hirschkind, ed., *Powers of the Secular Modern: Talal Asad and His Interlocutors* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006).

[27]Adapted from Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 54. Henceforth cited as GR.

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typically treated as one of secularity's most successful exhibits, "implicitly accepts the fact that the universal character of the rights-bearing person is made the responsibility of sovereign states, each of which has exclusive jurisdiction over a limited group within the human family" (FS 137). To maintain this jurisdiction, the nation-state must make people governable, that is, enforce a citizen-subjectivity that incorporates individuals into the powers of the nation-state, making them think of themselves as bearing rights protected by the government. It must "create an exclusive national identity in each of its citizens" (FS 137–38). It does this through various ideological uses of media. Thus the secular nation-state, in the view of the *Declaration* and in the practices particularly of American society, suggests that the "authority of norms corresponds to the political force that supports them as law," giving secular moderns "sacred laws that must ultimately depend, *as laws*, on their recognition by states."[28]

Second, it is a disqualification of "religious" ways of life. Beliefs are evacuated of content by being defined, and colonially and capitalistically defended, as a basic right of expression that will rarely touch the power of the nation-state. Any agreement about a sacral character of human life that religions might find acceptable in the secular state must remember this:

> *Sacredness* in the modern secular state is attributed not to real living persons but precisely to "the human" conceptualized abstractly, or imagined in the state of nature. Every *real* person who belongs to a particular nation-state is always subject to its institutional violence—including the violence of its law, and liable to military conscription that can result in his death (FS 143).

Secular rights language that religions may find appropriate (for example, faith, dignity, or rights) betrays its colonializing force insofar as they are, as a matter of practice, defined by the United States through global institutions and not made reflexive within the United States.[29] This arrangement sets the terms for what all other peoples must become. It is a non-reflexive, universalizing power of ordering by the (most unequal of the) nation-state(s).

[28]FS 138. Asad's perspective on the increasing development and enforcement of transnational or international laws is that these laws come from groups of states that act together as joint states on the one hand, and that typically lack power to make their transnational law effective in member states, on the other. (FS 139)

[29]"I point to a basic assumption about 'the human' on which human rights stand: Nothing essential to a person's human essence is violated if he or she suffers as a consequence of military action or of market manipulation from beyond his own state when that is permitted by international law" (FS 129).

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Third, it is a cultural ensconcement of the colonial knowingness of the Western study of religion. In a crucial exploratory chapter titled "What Might an Anthropology of Secularism Look Like?" Asad begins to track the constitution of the "epistemological assumptions" (FS 25) of secular life through the varieties of uses of myth in modernity. He finds that what becomes characteristic of Enlightenment thought is that myths are positioned as inaccurate and immature reports concerning otherworldly beings, and yet also as materials for moral education for the privileged classes, as ways of talking about the negotiation of modern values and psychological questions about the passions. Reason will become the regulator of myth, lest myth draw moderns back into the childish, the dangerous, the untamed, the unrefined: primitivity (FS 29–30). This template of oppositions, a map for power, runs through the modern study of religion in the realms of scripture and the discovery of "primitive" religions.

A modern, objective and reasonable approach to the Bible in the "higher criticism" articulated a deep shift in the meaning of inspiration and myth, and therefore in the articulation of the secular. Asad follows John Montag and Michel de Certeau in arguing that revelation was made into an epistemological problem in modernity, with Scripture now read as containing claims whose inspiration needed critical investigation. This shift covers a mutation in the discipline of Christian auditors and readers, insofar as the prior encounter with Scripture was implicated in a network of learned practices, rituals of training undergone for being made Christian in and through the senses via social practices. The new learned approach, in wanting to know how the Bible comes from the historical—as natural—world, seeks to intervene in a biblical content now read as propositions, statements, or indications from an original setting in a world history. Even as there is a "historicizing" of scripture, there is an "interiorizing" of its address toward the (now immature, now mature) mind of the believer. The critical Christian approach to texts, which was never far from the critique of Christian institutions and practices, will contribute to the constitution of history as a secular space from which the sources of belief can be put in question or, said differently (and this is Asad's deeper point), they can be put together in a new way. This new way will be about determining "what really happened" to make the stories that the Bible offers to the believer, and the new disciplines will focus on theories of inspiration as artistic production. What cannot pass the test of verifiable historical background can still be valued as mythopoetic production of spiritual inspiration—revelation as ahistorical poetic insight. This represents a shift in the disciplining of Christian sense and a further formation of the secular in giving history its role as guarantor

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of secular truth, delimitating Scripture to concepts for investigation, and creating-through-remaindering a realm of mystery for authentic inspiration that exceeds the natural world. Now-familiar oppositions that will be intrinsic to secularity are setting in.

The eighteenth-century European discovery/denomination of "shamans" among native peoples came to have a lasting significance, too, for the shaping of the secular. The proliferation of studies of practices of healing, magic, divination, and the vicissitudes of native cures and curers occupied an influential place in the modern anthropological imagination. Shamanic discourse now becomes the place where a new "secularization of pain" can in part constitute itself through a foil, where pain can be understood as this-worldly in the experimental science of physiological analysis (FS 48). Pain is increasingly divided off from sin. And just as the prophet becomes the bearer of poetic inspiration in the development of modern biblical criticism, so too the shaman is the bearer of inspired mythological action and speech. Indeed, shamanism was to become one important model for theories of genius, and thereby of inspiration, in the eighteenth century, as the classification of those demonic individuals whose creativity answers to an obscure but singular stimulation, a holy command. The secular gains traction in the "abilities of the 'natural body' and [in] their social demonstration" (FS 51).

Fourth, it is an epistemological shift to the self-as-agent that renders one available to state authority. The secular represents a shift in the disciplining of everyday life from the medieval to the modern age, or from a discipline comprehended by the concept of "*habitus*" to one defined by individual "agency." When discussing premodern religious subjectivities, Asad references Marcel Mauss for a concept now more popularly associated with Pierre Bordieu: "*habitus*," that is, "historically constituted practical knowledge, which articulates an individual's learned capacities" (GR 76). For Asad, the premodern comprehension of the role of power in shaping sensibility, in making particular religious persons, yields in secular modernity to the subject as agent who owns oneself and is essentially a freedom to be realized. The older religious way of making subjects is a way that not only can integrate pain into its person-making rituals but can make pain an aspect of individual life, a part of how people make their life in a tradition. In a secular world built on the ideology of self-determination, self-ownership and agency, pain is to be done away with as much as possible in individual life—except insofar as it is freely chosen (as in sports), or required by the state (as in war). Power and pain are thought to come from outside the body—precisely what the secular nation-state wants the people it forms to presume. It is against this free secular self

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that Asad counterposes Susan Wolf's notion of the "sane self": "a desire that one's self be *controlled by* the world"—from Asad's point of view, a disciplining of habits in the rigors of everyday bodily training—"in certain ways and not in others."[30] I here wish to emphasize that for Asad this is not masochism; it is a training for "knowing the world practically and being known practically by it, a world of accumulating probabilities rather than constant certainties," where agency becomes a matter not of unvarnished freedom but the outcome of a "habitual engagement with the world" (FS 73).

Asad's approach, in sum, makes of modern secularity not a great unfinished project, but a particular "temporalization of power." Is this good news for Catholic theology?

In *Genealogies of Religion*, Asad surmised critically that the "standpoint of theology" involved "insist[ing] on the primacy of meaning without regard to the processes by which meanings are constructed" (GR 43). In *Formations of the Secular,* in what reads like a related provocation to theologians, he commends "shift[ing] our preoccupation with definitions of 'the sacred' as an object of experience to the wider question of how a heterogeneous landscape of power (moral, political, economic) is constituted, what disciplines (individual and collective) are necessary to it. This does not mean that 'the sacred' must be regarded as a mask of power, but that we should look to what makes certain practices conceptually possible, desired, mandatory—including the everyday practices by which the subject's experience is disciplined" (FS 36).

A Catholic theology may contribute to addressing this problematic insofar as Catholicism bears an historical investment in the making of subjectivities through the disciplines that are increasingly recognized under the resonant if ambiguous category of "spiritual exercises," ways of shaping the relation of the self to itself and others, types of producing and managing Christian subjectivity, forms of working up what counts as a self with and before God and others.

A Catholic intellectual commitment to practice in faith and life, then, as particular adventures of disciplined strangeness, makes of Catholic invocations of the secular in particular a critical curiosity. Indeed, the very denomination of "lay" Catholic life as "secular" life in ecclesial teaching is problematic. I only note here that the so-called "secular" vocation of work, family, sexuality, and civic life, which is praised by Church documents and prescribed as the domain for a lay Catholic spirituality both distinctive and everyday, is not a natural

[30]Susan Wolf, "Sanity and the Metaphysics of Responsibility," in Ferdinand Schoeman, ed. *Responsibility, Character, and the Emotions: New Essays in Moral Psychology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 55, cited at FS 73.

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constellation of categories for governance of a lay self. More critical work on the history of this economy of knowledge of the lay self would be a profitable step for Catholic thought.

A significant amount of "progressive" Catholic theology that makes positive use of the secular can also be more critically examined from these postmodern/postcolonial perspectives. To take just one example, the recent and influential work of Paul Lakeland on lay Catholic theology, which has been so helpful in the midst of the ongoing sex abuse crisis, prescribes a lay identity that from an Asadian perspective raises questions. Lakeland makes a strong case for an incarnational understanding of secularity, and for secularity as intrinsic, at least from a Catholic perspective, to lay life, indeed for all human life.[31] Indeed, Lakeland suggests, "We are secular beings."[32] His account draws theologically on Karl Rahner, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, William Lynch, and Harvey Cox. This constellation of thinkers emphasizes the thoroughgoing inescapability, and positive theological value, of the "materiality," "worldliness," and "profanity" of the world. The categories Lakeland uses for secularity, however, tend toward the abstract, essential, ahistorical:

> We are people in a human world, and we are organisms in a material universe. We live simultaneously in a world of meanings and a universe of causes and effects. There is human intentionality and the blind chance of physical reality. Both the struggle for meaning and the experience of chaos are inescapably part of the secular . . . We are born, live, and die within the secular world.[33]

What gets bracketed here is the question of secularity as an historical period, on the one hand, and the question of the incitement to recognition of secularity, on the other. The category here and elsewhere in progressive Catholic theology seems too theologically natural, given, self-evident. And without an account of the twentieth-century provenance of the secularity of Lakeland's interlocutors (which are quite different kinds of secularity), it is unclear whether the formation of lay people as secular will provide the kind of relationship a Christian needs in regard to herself and the world. Such observations are barely a beginning of a Catholic engagement with Asad's rich researches.

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[31]Paul Lakeland, *The Liberation of the Laity: In Search of an Accountable Church* (New York: Continuum, 2003), especially 149–85.
[32]Ibid., 151.
[33]Ibid.

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