Open Itineraries: Engaging Charles Taylor in the Evangelical Church

by

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Chapter 1

Introduction

There are many books available advising churches and pastors on how to ride the most recent wave of fad, cultural compulsion, or zeitgeist. However, there are few authors who attempt to place the successes and dilemmas of our current situation within a long narrative of how we came to this point. Over and over, through multiple books, Charles Taylor asks and attempts to answer this difficult question. In the process, he produces a nuanced account of the current context which is marked by careful listening, generosity toward opposing positions, and openness to finding good wherever it may be found.

While interpreting the journey the Western world has been on for centuries, Taylor is able to elucidate features of today's "secular age" against this contextual background. His discussions of the understanding of the modern self, the development of moral sources, changes in the social imaginary, fragility and cross-pressures within belief, the connection between language and new moral understanding, and what "fullness" and transcendence mean to many people today, all open windows on our cultural embeddedness and historical situation.

This paper proposes to explore the implications of Charles Taylor's work for American evangelical churches. Though Taylor is living and his work is still being debated point by point, most of his critics will agree that the analysis of Taylor is insightful and breath-taking in its integrative scope. So, if Taylor's work is taken as an apt description of the world in which the church lives and works, what will this mean for a church that wishes to be missional, evangelical, and in dialogue with that world? What are the new possibilities and problems created for a church living within Taylor's "secular age"?

To begin with an autobiographical disclosure, the author has been raised within and works with churches of the American evangelical/fundamentalist range. I say evangelical/fundamentalist range because most evangelical churches will have those leaning toward or sliding into strict propositionalism present and even the most conservative Christian fundamentalist churches will have those who are beginning the move toward less restrictive stances. While acknowledging that there is much within Charles Taylor that is of vital use to churches today, it is also recognized that the evangelical/fundamentalist range may have the greatest difficulty among Christians recognizing the value of Charles Taylor's work. Part of the strength of Taylor's arguments, particularly on the current fragility of belief, depends upon the reader's experience of those cross-pressures. However, those who have grown up within a highly homogeneous, sectarian, cohesive community may have escaped much of the tension which Taylor is exploring. For most people, though, denial of these tensions may be more of a reactionary defense mechanism than a true lack of cross-pressures. In the age of mass communications, it is possible to live in the woods and watch only VHS tapes, but maintaining that level of isolation is very difficult. As Anthony Giddens notes, "it is probably rare for even the most fundamentalist of fundamentalist believers to escape radical doubt entirely."[1]

Throughout this paper, the author is attempting to speak toward these communities that would identify themselves as "evangelical." There are times that the criticism in this paper may seem overly sharp or focused on these communities without equal representation of other groups that may deserve the same criticism. This is an effort by the author to speak from and reflect upon his lived experience and community rather than making generalizations about other Christian groups. Though sometimes hard on evangelicals, the hope of this paper is that

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[1] Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 181.

evangelicals would have more thoughtful and positive interactions in the future and contribute well to the larger conversation in the Church and the world.

Overtly, the evangelical emphasis has always been on outreach of some sort: mass preaching, mission, hospitality, and social action (although this social action may be spiritualized as necessary to evangelism). I say overtly because the reality is that many American churches of all types degrade into enclaves divided by class and race which play lip service to outreach and may give money to foreign missions, but do not want people from other cultures or religions moving into the neighborhood. Yet, that overt emphasis on evangelism should give plenty of reason to listen to what Charles Taylor has to say. He gives us a chance to understand and connect with the current situation for many people, whether or not we recognize that situation within our particular communities. Any group that expects to evangelize without understanding the people they are talking to and the milieu in which we live is self-deceived and will inevitably be unsuccessful.

Chapter 2

Taylor's Method

Pick up a book or essay by Charles Taylor and there are good odds that it will begin with, focus on, or be generally suffused by a history. Whether it is a book on the modern self, secularism, or how language should be understood, the reader finds herself whisked back hundreds of years to some medieval town or Enlightenment philosopher's study in some corner of the Western world. There the story opens and Taylor begins the long march toward the question of where the modern world stands today. This march is not a nonchalant stroll. Taylor pours over cultural detail, backtracks, looks at features from different vantage points, and generally displays his love for the subject matter he is inviting the reader to enjoy.

These long, looping narratives are not a hook to keep the reader interested or a professor being overly zealous about the origins of his subject matter. These narratives are necessary to Taylor's project. In fact, when he is challenged on the details and length of the story he is telling, he may recognize the point, but he is unapologetic on the method. "To challenge [various secularization narratives], you have to tell another story. Hence the length of the book. But the book could have been – in a sense should have been – longer."[2] Taylor realizes that his narrative may be weak in multiple areas, partially because of the ambitious nature of his undertaking, but he is challenging other narratives that are circulating. Certain details may be shown to be in need of revision, such as the challenge made that his narrative of the Western world is incomplete because it says little of colonialism and Western interaction with other

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[2]Charles Taylor, "Afterword: Apologia pro Libro suo." in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, ed. Michael Warner et al. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 301.

civilizations,[3] yet that does not invalidate Taylor's project. The goal of his narrative is to situate where we find ourselves today within a more convincing narrative of how we arrived at this point. As long as Taylor's narrative has greater persuasive power than other narratives on offer, criticism of certain details does not damage the global thrust of his argument.

Taylor is also drawing the reader along on this narrative journey because it is necessary for the reader to take this pilgrimage in order to understand Taylor's conclusions. There is a pedagogical necessity in narrativity when it comes to reflexively and hermeneutically understanding ourselves. This is different than defending a scientific theorem or a mathematical proof. "In general, to learn about contemporary natural science, you don't need to know how we got there; to learn Newton, you don't need to read about Aristotle and the preinertial theory of natural places. But things are very different when it comes to human affairs."[4] The self-understanding of human beings is historical and narrative in form, so explication of the motives, morals, and worldviews of human beings requires a narrative approach, not ahistorical abstractions.

Robert Bellah et al., citing Jürgen Habermas and Alasdair MacIntyre as supporting examples, agree. "Narrative is a primary and powerful way by which to know about the whole. In an important sense, what a society (or a person) is, is its history… Such stories can, and must, be contested, amended, and sometimes replaced."[5] Although all of these authors are creating narrative accounts and attempting to create as persuasive an account as possible, there is no illusion here of finality. Human narratives make the best sense they can of experience, but there

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[3] See Nilüfer Göle, "The Civilizational, Spatial, and Sexual Powers of the Secular," in *Varieties of Secularism*, 243-64.

[4] Charles Taylor, *The Language Animal* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), 316.

[5] Robert Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1985), 302.

is an inherent openness to our interpretive self-understanding. Refutation of a narrative does not come by pointing out a single incoherence, but by providing a more persuasive narrative.[6]

"My claim could be put in these terms: understanding the outlook (O) at which some agent has arrived may inseparably require that one understand the experience (E) which led her to it."[7] Taylor expects that, in order to reach an understanding of the various viewpoints explored in his works or even Taylor's own viewpoint, the readers must engage in a journey of understanding. So, he asks us to step into another worldview, to feel the cross-pressures of different moral sources, and to listen to the poets and saints of times distant, but not-so-distant, from our own. Taylor is unapologetic about the long march to understanding, but he is a sensitive and congenial guide.

Unfortunately, the constraints of this paper will not allow any mimicking of Taylor's method. This paper will attempt to provide summaries of a few major areas of Taylor's thought and draw out implications from these areas for today's evangelical church. The author quite agrees that the best way to understand Taylor is to go on a pilgrimage with his through one of his histories, but this paper cannot replicate that experience. For the reader who is discontented with the abstractions found here, this author can do no better than to recommend reading the primary sources directly.

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[6] While Taylor is aware of the post-modern suspicion against metanarratives, he is not so convinced that the usefulness of metanarratives is at an end. He writes:

> An important feature of the modern world is that these narratives have come under attack. It is the claim of a certain trendy 'post-modernism' that the age of Grand Narratives is over, that we cannot believe in these anymore. But their demise is the most obviously exaggerated in that the post-modern writers themselves are making use of the same trope in declaring the reign of the narrative ended: ONCE we were into grand stories, but NOW we have realized their emptiness and we proceed to the next stage. This is a familiar refrain.

> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 717.

[7] *Language Animal,* 311.

Chapter 3

The Modern Self

"To ask what a person is, in abstraction from his or her self-interpretations, is to ask a fundamentally misguided question, one to which there couldn't in principle be an answer."[8] What we are as human beings cannot be separated from what we believe we are, the ways that we see ourselves, the reflexive stories we tell obsessively. It is perhaps not surprising, given the above discussion of Taylor's method, that his analysis of the self should also require a narrative element. "We grasp our lives in a narrative," and forming a life-narrative seems to be a necessary part of human flourishing.[9] Because narrative is the means by which we as human beings understand ourselves, the self expressed through this narrative requires the elements which structure any narrative: language, setting, relationships, flow of time. A self is situated, inextricably connected to an interpretation of family, friends, enemies, past, future goals, home-town, and one's own body.

This description of the self differs greatly from certain popular conceptions of the self in the Western world. There is an ideal of heroic loneliness, originality, and autonomy which runs through many modern individualistic accounts. Robert Bellah et al. note that "American cultural traditions define personality, achievement, and the purpose of human life in ways that leave the individual suspended in glorious, but terrifying, isolation."[10] "Glorious" because there is such a strong positive value placed on self-creation, "self-responsible independence" to use Taylor's term,[11] yet "terrifying" because the rejection of authority, tradition, society, anything that would

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[8] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 34.

[9] *Sources*, 47.

[10] *Habits of the Heart,* 6.

make a claim upon the self, leaves the individual with an impossibly monumental task. How does one create meaning out of the nothingness of this isolation? The immenseness of this freedom can be as frustrating and crushing as the authorities and traditions which were cast off. This is where "the line between ethical heroism and madness vanishes, and the destructive potentiality of a completely asocial individualism is revealed."[12]

Both Bellah and Taylor agree that this description of the isolated self, the radical individual is a practical impossibility.[13] These theories only arise through "ignoring our embedding in webs of interlocution."[14] The self is formed within these "webs of interlocution." In *The Language Animal,* Taylor discusses the way that human beings come to have intersubjective awareness. While some would start from the individual and try to explain how this self comes to recognize other selves, Taylor writes that "[George Herbert] Mead sees the building of the 'me' as occurring *alongside* the opening of [intersubjective] access."[15] So, for Mead, the self is constituted in conjunction with the "internalization of the other's view and expectation of me."

Taylor, though, wonders if this should be taken one step further. Perhaps the intersubjective awareness precedes the formation of the self. "We could see self-awareness as emerging out of a prior intersubjective take on things."[16] As grounds for this hypothesis, Taylor considers the activities which young children share with their caregivers. These activities require what Taylor

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[11] *Sources,* 185.

[12] *Habits of the Heart,* 145.

[13] *Habits of the Heart,* 154. *Sources,* 39.

[14] *Sources,* 39.

[15] *Language Animal,* 65.

[16] *Language Animal,* 65.

calls "communion" or "commonly focused attention" or "joint attention."[17] In these moments of playing, bathing, cooing at one another, the parent and child share a frame of reference. These moments provide an intersubjective background which allows language learning to take place. Taylor also sees this joint attention as the background on which the self is brought into relief. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann describe this self as "a reflected entity, reflecting the attitudes first taken by significant others toward it."[18] In Taylor's view, the self is not the primary hook on which meaningful relationships are attached or the isolated point which extends itself toward the other. Instead, relationships, communion, and intersubjective awareness have developmental priority to the self.

These formative relationships are powerful, but they are not determinative. The self is in dialogue with other selves and the world. "It is through the power of making and understanding stories that I have access to myself as a self. But we also say that it is only in this, at first dialogical, but later potentially monological, discourse of storytelling that I *become* a self."[19] "Dialogical" suggests agency, perhaps growing agency of the self in the formation of the self over time. Thus Taylor's self is changing over time, but has solidity through time because of the relationships in which it has been formed and the narrative which is continuing. "An identity is something that one ought to be true to, can fail to uphold, can surrender when one ought to."[20] This is different from Erving Goffman's enlightening but incomplete analysis which suggests that the self is a point on which are placed a series of shifting role-masks which the individual

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[17] *Language Animal,* 52-64.

[18] Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Anchor Books, 1996)*,* 132.

[19] *Language Animal,* 318.

[20] *Sources,* 30.

passes through in a utilitarian fashion.[21] No, there is a continuity to our webs of relationships

and our narrative which does not change in such an arbitrary manner. This location of the self

provides stability of identity. "To know who I am is a species of knowing where I stand….

[Identity] is the horizon within which I am capable of taking a stand."[22]

In contrast to the Cartesian "punctual" self which "gains control through disengagement,"[23]

distance, and objectification, Taylor's self is involved, dialogical, moving within these webs of

relationships. Instead of the ideal of stepping back from an experience and seeking abstracting

objectivity, it is also possible to find truth through more deeply engaging the experience. Human

beings can step back from an experience or they can engage an experience in order to "attend to

the object through the experience as Merleau-Ponty and Michael Polanyi have variously

described it. What Descartes calls on us to do is to stop living 'in' or 'through' the experience,

to treat it itself as an object."[24] Taylor gives an example here of feelings of annoyance that one

person may have toward another person, in this case an irritating aunt. A person can try to

distance the self and that experience by saying the experience is "just a reaction" which should

be suppressed. This makes the experience of annoyance the focal object of perception, the

annoyance is something within the person (not the aunt) which must be dealt with. On the other

hand, one could push into the experience of annoyance and keep the irritating aunt in view as the

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[21] See Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1959). Neuhaus seems to be referring to Goffman when he describes part of the problem of modernity as the sense that "moving between worlds, we take off and put on different selves, until we are no longer sure which is the true 'self.'" Richard John Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America,* 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1984), 28.

[22] *Sources,* 27.

[23] *Sources,* 160.

[24] *Sources,* 162.

focus of perception. It may be that my experience of annoyance reveals "a valid perception" about the aunt in view. In the first case, by attempting to objectify the experience of annoyance, the experience no longer provides any information about the aunt. In the second, by engaging with the irritating aunt through the experience, something is perceived about the other, the aunt, not simply about the self and its reactions.[25] These are both ways of encountering an annoying aunt, but post-Cartesian rationalism has favored disengaged perception far more than engaged perception.

In the great curve of Western history, Taylor traces a movement in the understanding of the self over time. There is a movement from the traditional society where the individual was strongly socialized, permeable to spiritual forces, and firmly located within the cosmos, toward the modern self with its sense of being buffered from external spiritual forces, its "senses of inwardness, freedom, individuality, and being imbedded in nature."[26] This curve has brought the West through the idea of dignity, to humanism, and on to the ethics and politics surrounding authenticity and recognition. None of these developments was guaranteed or inevitable, but the piecemeal construction over time of the modern self has created a corresponding shift in the conversation in the public square surrounding issues of self-identity, of which the evangelical church must be aware if it would participate well in those conversations.

An example of a haphazard way in which the church has attempted to engage the culture has been in the area of gender identity. Many arguments have been made from the standpoint that gender identity is an ontological component, that it is just as much a given as the physical

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[25] *Sources,* 164.

[26] *Sources,* ix
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characteristic of one's biological sex (which, of course, is not seen as a fixed given anymore).

But those arguments assume a set of objectified and legitimized meanings surrounding gender

which are held in common by the society. Sociologists remind us that "nothing is clearer than

that gender is a matter of learning and continuous 'work,' rather than a simple extension of

biologically given sexual difference."[27] There are biological differences between the sexes

which provide some background to gender difference, but the expression of that difference is not

a "simple extension;" it is primarily a socially constructed system of signs. These external signs

of gender are built and rebuilt over time, as one can see in the total lack of concern most in the

West have about women wearing pants when that was a big deal at one point in the past. In an

age where expressive individualism and the ideal of being authentic combine with a greater

awareness of the socially constructed features of our society, attempts to shore-up gender

identities and roles with arguments that assume their objective meaning for all those involved

will seem naïve at best.

At worst, it will be seen as an attempt to oppress another group of people and limit their

self-expression. "The development of the modern notion of identity has given rise to a politics

of difference… *Everyone* should be recognized for his or her unique identity…. The idea is that

it is precisely this distinctness that has been ignored, glossed over, assimilated to a dominant or

majority identity."[28] Christianity in the United States, then, often especially comes under fire

because it has long been a part of the majority, dominant identity. This makes a difference in the

way Christians can enter the conversation and the attitude that should be taken upon entering.

Whereas, before, ranting about the sinners on the outside of the church was the bread and butter

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[27] *Modernity and Self-Identity,* 63.
[28] Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," in *Multiculturalism and "The Politics of Recognition,"* ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 38.

of some preachers, in an age of individual expressivism and a shift toward ethics that are guided

by being authentically who one is, such devaluing statements are taken as far more harmful than

they used to be. Many now would see this as abusive because "the projection of an inferior or

demeaning image on another can actually distort and oppress to the extent that the image is

internalized."[29]

Whether or not those of us within evangelical churches agree with these definitions of the

self and identity which are put forward in the surrounding culture, Taylor gives us tools in his

analysis for understanding where the conversation is. While even the most isolated have had

their self-understandings shifted by the larger cultural moves that have occurred, many inside the

church have remained oblivious to these changes or chosen to continue having conversations and

attempting to do apologetics or evangelism with little interest in what has changed. Because of

slowly changing understandings of the self, people have different moral understandings today.

The evangelical church must learn to be a careful listener once again, and Taylor can be an ally

in this area.

Conversion and Questing

According to Bellah et al., "Traditionally, Protestant piety demanded that a young person

experience a unique conversion experience of his or her own, even while specifying more or less

clearly the content of that experience."[30] Anyone who has been to a youth bonfire or camp-

meeting testimony service can understand what Bellah et al. are saying here. Within the

evangelical movement, extreme stress has been placed on individual conversion experiences, yet

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[29] "Politics of Recognition," 36.
[30] *Habits*, 63.

there are certain formulas and frameworks which are passed on by communities. No matter how unique the experience is, the language within the community is fixed. While listening to youth talk about their struggles over the past year and the events of the past week at camp, one can predict which pattern the testimony is going to fall into. In groups like the American Holiness movement, where there is a very specific order and structure to soteriological experiences of prevenient grace, salvation, justification, regeneration, sanctification, and being fully sanctified, changing the order or not using community vocabulary can cause considerable consternation among listeners.

Structuring one's narrative, no matter how divergent it may be from the normative patterns, within the narrative of the community is one sociological way of ordering the reality of the individual within the larger structure of the community. This can be easily seen in the requirements by a denominational committee or mission board that new candidates agree to certain doctrinal formulations or tell their story using recognized categories, whether those categories involve endorsed items like predestination or entire sanctification. For many, there is something reassuring about being able to order one's experience in this way within the larger structure of the community. Taylor describes the necessity of this structuring thusly:

> All experiences require some vocabulary, and these are inevitably in large part handed to
> us in the first place by our society, whatever transformations we may ring on them later.
> The ideas, the understanding with which we live our lives, shape directly what we could
> call religious experience, and these languages, those vocabularies, are never those simply
> of an individual.[31]

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[31] Charles Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 27-28.

No matter how radical, unique, and unrepeatable the experience of a religious epiphany may be, there are limitations on what can be expressed by the person who has had that experience. Language, tradition, and society put boundaries on what the individual can express to those who might listen. So, within any community with a tradition of its own, one would expect that descriptions of religious encounters would follow certain broad contours. Within a cultural climate, though, where the value of the individual is so strongly affirmed and the norms of traditional cultures regarding sex, gender, belief, and family seem to be dissolving around us, what will conversion look like in the future? If the uniqueness of the individual experience comes to the fore, will there still be a place for tradition to organize the reality of the individual?

Protestant belief and especially the evangelical revivals and language surrounding the "personal conversion experience" have often been pointed to as both causes and symptoms of the weakening of tradition and growth of individualism in the United States. The tent-meeting is an event which can happen away from the communal structures of the parish, the sacraments, and the regular power structures of the denomination. People from many different churches and backgrounds come together voluntarily to hear evangelists who may not be endorsed by their regular bishop or pastor. "Through the peculiarly American phenomenon of revivalism, the emphasis on personal experience would eventually override all efforts at church discipline."[32] The structure of the tent-meeting is repeated through time in youth rallies, Billy Graham Crusades, mission conferences, and Promise Keeper events. Taylor, though, in looking at what happens in a revival meeting, does not see an *individuating* experience. These people "come to conversion at that climactic moment of decision when the preacher calls on people to come

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[32] *Habits of the Heart,* 233.

forward and declare their faith. This can be a white-hot experience, but in what sense is it individual?"[33] There is something happening in these events where the individual is riding a wave of solidarity with the people at the event, even though this might be a temporary group. Taylor does not doubt that people may "meet God" in events like this, but this is also a group response where the individual is caught in a Durkheimian wave that carries that individual along in the rush toward the altar with a hundred other people who all confess dark sins to a relative stranger, weep on that strangers shoulder, and then rejoice with the other hundred people who came down with them that they all experienced "conversion." Is evangelical conversion individualizing? Yes, in some ways, but, in other ways, the evangelical event is creating a temporary solidarity group over a very short period of time to which the individual attaches herself or himself.

Within these groups, especially ones which became regular events like the Holiness camp-meetings, there are commonly held understandings, maybe even large amounts of commonly held doctrinal understandings. In the United States, even the proverbial rebel or sinner who slunk into the back pew of a revival meeting was expected to understand the broad strokes of what was happening at this event and how his or her "sinful" actions were perceived by this particular group. The position of the evangelist was widely respected, understood, and the pronouncements from the pulpit, backed by the Bible, had a normative power. This would not have been possible without broad agreement on certain background understandings.

In the current cultural configuration, that broad, commonly held background cannot be taken for granted. Someone from another religion, from a secularized background, from a culture which has been isolated from or negatively exposed to evangelical practices and

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[33] *Varieties of Religion Today*, 29.

understandings, cannot be expected to walk into one of these evangelical events and understand the broad strokes of what is happening. They cannot be expected with high probability to identify with the temporary solidarity group and be moved within a short space of time to a conversion experience. Some would describe this as "resistance to the Gospel," but this is a spiritualized description of a change in many other factors. Larger and larger groups within the United States are far enough outside these evangelical practices and meanings that emphasis on converting people through traditional revival events means that large swathes of the population are going to be ignored and unreached by those events. Rather than being "resistant," certain evangelical practices are simply being rendered incomprehensible or farcical by shifts in the cultural conversation. In such a situation, one would expect that conversion, when it happened, would require long-term investment by the church and slow growth of understanding on the part of the convert.

Even so, this does not mean that many people are not looking for religious experiences. Instead of being fully socialized into solid and coherent symbolic worlds, many people today are what Taylor would describe as "seeking" or organizing their story in terms of a "quest." These people may join a church with its particular traditions, yet "not only do they embrace these traditions tentatively, but they also often develop their own versions of them, or idiosyncratic combinations of or borrowings from or semi-inventions within them."[34] There is not an expectation here to be given the right answer or the final solution by an authority that has it all worked out. A life-narrative organized around questing suggests the possibility of closure, but when the object of the quest is God or Enlightenment or Truth closure seems unlikely. Alasdair MacIntyre sums up the open-endedness of this human questing quite well: "the good life for man

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[34] *Sources*, 17.

is the life spent seeking for the good life for man, and the virtues necessary for the seeking are those which will enable us to understand what more and what else the good life for man is."[35] Given this open search, if a tradition no longer seems helpful in the quest toward God, it may be exchanged by these questers in a much more casual way than our Western ancestors who fought the Thirty Years War ever could have imagined. Instead of a traditional mode of obedience and submission to authority and the community even if one disagrees, a quest is active, critical, and personally driven.

Within the current situation, "many people are incomprehending in the face of the demand to conform."[36] This is an important point to linger on for many pastors. Where doctrinal nonconformity and dissent may have been a point of conflict and crisis in the past, it must be a point of conversation today. Pastoring which requires lay people to all be "brought into line" or uses condescension and ridicule to suppress disturbing lines of questioning will tend to be ineffective beyond certain closed communities. If the goal is to create a small sectarian community of "perfection," then this might be a possible strategy, but the evangelical aspiration has generally been to be in conversation with the world beyond the boundaries of the church. If that is the case, much more patience and conversations will be needed in the future. This does not mean that all beliefs are equal or that there is nothing toward which the pastor should be giving guidance, but it does mean that time and toleration of difference and disagreement will mark sensitive pastoring within this cultural milieu. If "the most important vehicle of reality-maintenance is conversation,"[37] then pastors and churches in eras of contested and competing worldviews should expect to have many, many conversations.

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[35] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue,* 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 219.

[36] *Varieties of Religion Today,* 101.

[37] *Social Construction,* 152.

On the other hand, "the new framework has a strongly individualist component, but this will not necessarily mean that the content will be individuating. Many people will find themselves joining extremely powerful religious communities, because that is where people's sense of the spiritual will lead them."[38] We should not be surprised to find modern questers in a rigid fundamentalist community or enjoying a Roman Catholic prayer retreat or in a Greek Orthodox church every time the doors are open. The stance of these questers within these communities, though, will be different than the more traditional members and far more tentative.

Though employing words like "seeker" and "quest," this section is not a plea for the "seeker-sensitive church" model. While the attempt by the seeker-sensitive church to make church more accessible to those who may have had difficulty entering a traditional church is laudable, many of the attempts in the United States have been faddish, commercial, and stripped the church of much of its depth. Sermons that incorporate clips from popular movies or secular songs in a worship service may be trendy, but is this a trivialization of the quest rather than an aid to it? The church must be sensitive to the people crossing its threshold for the first time and to the surrounding culture, but the church must not sacrifice its depth, mystery, and difficult truth for communication lacking in content.

<div align="center">Ecclesiology: Role of Community</div>

Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann remind us, "To have a conversion experience is nothing much. The real thing is to be able to keep on taking it seriously; to retain a sense of its plausibility. *This* is where the religious community comes in."[39] This is a given in the sociology

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[38] *Varieties of Religion Today,* 112.
[39] *Social Construction*, 158.

of religion, yet community is a difficult thing to maintain today. Urbanization, immigration, high mobility, lack of front porches, text messaging at dinner tables… there are hosts of reasons why community is something which must be fought for. In a setting dominated by eclectic questing individuals who may casually create and break relationships with a given church, is there a role for the body of believers? Is commitment to be a body of believers even possible in the current era?

No matter how fragmented society becomes, there will always be a need for communities with traditions, practices, and stories large enough to join in. We need stories. We must be connected to tradition in order to find those wide spaces of meaning. "A human being can always be original….But the drive to original vision will be hampered, will ultimately be lost in inner confusion, unless it can be placed in some way in relation to the language and vision of others."[40] Many times evangelistic sermons have focused on a sense of guilt or a "God-shaped hole" – the sense that something is lacking which one cannot fulfill.[41] Taylor's quote here, though, might suggest that the primal starting point for the lonely individual who has rejected traditions and been trying to build her or his world from the ground up, is confusion. Maybe that individual will hear a description of guilt and restructure the feeling of confusion in terms of guilt, but maybe the inchoate inner confusion could be more directly addressed. Whether or not the individual is able to recognize it, a community is necessary for the larger needs of human life. An individual can provide itself with food, shelter, and the basics of survival, but a human being must be situated in a larger community in order to live in a satisfying and meaningful way.

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[40] *Sources,* 37.

[41] "You've realized that instead of nagging questions about God or the afterlife, your neighbors are oriented by all sorts of longings and 'projects' and quests for significance. There does not seem to be anything 'missing' from their lives – so you can't just proclaim the good news of Jesus who fills their 'God-shaped hole.'" James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2014), vii.

Even having an identity requires community. "The full definition of someone's identity thus usually involved not only his stand on moral and spiritual matters but also some reference to a defining community."[42]

So there is good news and bad news for the church today. "A post-Durkheimian age may mean a much lower rate of intergenerational continuity of religious allegiance. But the strongly collective options will not lose adherents…. People still seek those moments of fusion, which wrench us out of the everyday, and put us into contact with something beyond ourselves."[43] Taylor tells us here to expect that it will be harder for our children to stay in church simply because that is what we do and who we are, but we can still expect that people will be looking for those communal religious experiences and encounters with the numinous. Much of the strain within evangelical churches has been over a failure to understand this new setting. There is still a lingering expectation for many people that the community around them should know that they should be in church because their parents were Christians or they are Americans or it's just the right thing to do. Rather than being places where everyone does their duty and clocks in and clocks out on Sunday, churches are going to have to focus once again on being guides and mediators of that contact with the transcendent. In the evangelical church, this would probably be aided by attempts to regain some of the older practices and forms of church life which have fallen out of much Protestant practice. "If the church is the locus and vehicle of the sacred, then we are brought closer to God by the very fact of belonging and participating in its sacramental life. Grace can come to us mediately through the church, and we can mediate grace to each other, as the lives of the saints enrich the common life on which we all draw."[44]

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[42] *Sources,* 36.

[43] *Secular Age,* 517.

[44] *Sources,* 216.

George Hunter, in his book *The Celtic Way of Evangelism*, does a masterful job of using Celtic Christianity as a lens to look at the world the church finds itself in today. He maps out the ways that the Celtic church encountered their non-Christian neighbors who had little or no understanding of Christianity by setting up permeable communities alongside the communities they were hoping to share the beauty of Jesus with. These communities were permeable in that people flowed back and forth between them, experiencing aspects of Christianity as they moved in and out of the missionary community. Hunter looks at this and the situation the church finds itself in today and suggests that, in a culture of searching and questing individuals, perhaps truly evangelical churches will have to open more space for the "belonging that comes before believing."[45] This does not mean that the church must discard its criteria for membership or necessary boundaries, but it does mean that evangelical churches may need to change their assumptions on how long someone can come to the church before they are expected to shape up and fall in line, where non-Christian people can be meaningfully involved and contribute to the life of the church, and which of our actions or narratives may unintentionally express unwelcome and lack of value to those who are not full members.

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[45] George Hunter III, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism: How Christianity Can Reach the West…AGAIN* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010), 44. The quote here is attributed originally to John Finney, a research for the United Bible Societies in Great Britain.

Chapter 4

Moral Sources

Taylor spends much time developing his conception of moral sources within his works. By moral source, Taylor is referring to the "considerations which (for us) inspire us to embrace [a specific] morality, and the evoking of which strengthens our commitment to it."[46] Within the Western world, Taylor sees three major moral sources which underlie the modern moral order: theism, human dignity, and nature. While theism is an adequate moral source on its own, the other two developed out of theistic perspectives in the West and they do not share the same self-sufficient adequacy that theism does as a moral source.   Human dignity gives rise to secular humanism and the language of human rights, while nature gives rise to affirmations as diverse as the goodness of nature, of being connected to nature, of LGBT moral arguments concerning biological factors, and of Nietzsche's affirmation of human nature. Taylor emphasizes that "the three frontiers are related; and this comes out in the mutual influence and inter-change between them."[47] There may be conflicts and heated disagreements between proponents of certain moral sources, but the reality is that in the modern world, we have all been touched by more than one moral source.

These moral sources organize our valuations of the good. Descriptions of human reality which leave out or deny the validity of valuations are inherently inadequate. Taylor targets naturalism as providing supposedly value-free, objective descriptions which are incapable of completely describing human reality. "Human science can no longer be couched in terms of physics. Our value terms purport to give us insight into what it is to live in the universe as a

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[46] *Secular Age,* 693.

[47] *Sources,* 318.

human being, and this is a quite different matter from that which physical science claims to

reveal and explain."[48] A naturalistic explanation which reduces all morality to evolutionary

leftovers, herd instinct, or utilitarian considerations under-explains the way these moral sources

impinge upon us and make claims upon us. No healthy human being lives within a world that is

devoid of moral value. Whether or not a person recognizes it or has language to express it, every

person, however distant or poorly oriented the connection may be, is oriented toward a moral

source which provides a framework for evaluation of good and evil, right and wrong, better and

worse. This orientation to a moral source, with the moral intuitions which flow out of that

orientation, shapes our moral and spiritual perspective on the world. "A person without a

framework altogether would be outside our space of interlocution; he wouldn't stand in the space

where the rest of us are. We would see this as pathological….the horizons in which we live *must*

include strong qualitative discriminations."[49] Since those who claim to espouse a strict

naturalism do not necessarily function as human beings in a pathological way, one would expect

that they are living within the same world of strong valuations as the rest of us.

So, trying to describe human reality without an orientation to any good is a mistaken

endeavor, but this does not mean theism is the only option. Secular humanism and Nietzschean

thought have both open moral understandings in the absence of or in opposition to a transcendent

reference. While Taylor does not find these moral sources to be philosophically satisfying, he

does see the importance of the values and considerations they have brought to the ethical

conversation. Unlike Alasdair MacIntyre, Taylor sees the language of human rights as an

important and helpful concept which humanism has bequeathed to humanity.[50] For secular

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[48] *Sources,* 59.

[49] *Sources,* 31-32.

humanists, this inherent and unquestionable dignity of the human being is that which inspires the ethical life. There is an orientation here which makes moral demands upon us. "An insight into moral goodness shows us something we can admire, something we are drawn to bring about in our own lives,"[51] and the secular humanist has found an inspiring reference which guides morality and changes the perspectives surrounding human value and suffering.

"Moral sources empower. To come closer to them, to have a clearer view of them, to come to grasp what they involve, is for those who recognize them to be moved to love or respect them, and through this love/respect to be better able to live up to them."[52] Christians understand what is being described here as that sense that one is growing deeper in the spiritual life. It is that sense of connection, that rush of understanding which puts life into clearer perspective, makes us surer of what the good actually is. This is not only an experience that Christians have, and it is an experience that even those whose moral source is not transcendent may experience. Human beings have a desire to frame their understanding in relation to these moral sources and to be living in a well-related manner to that source.

Yet, as inspiring as these moral sources may be, we do not always maintain our orientation to them. We can become morally lost and distant from the sources we would claim to espouse. "Because my orientation to [the good] is essential to my identity, so the recognition that my life is turned away from it, or can never approach it, would be devastating and insufferable."[53] There must, then, be ways to reorient one's life to these moral sources. It is here that Taylor finds art a

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[50] "There are no such rights, and belief in them is one with belief in witches and in unicorns." *After Virtue,* 69. Maybe from a philosopher's perspective, there is no real grounding to human rights, but from a sociologist's perspective, when people find the language of rights to be binding upon them, there is a reality there which is not subjective and internal to the individual.

[51] *Language Animal,* 206.

[52] *Sources,* 96.

[53] *Sources,* 63.

powerful way that people can reconnect to moral sources. "We frequently find in powerful

works of art what we might call epiphanies of sources. The epiphanies of art increase/intensify

our attraction to, commitment to, admiration of, longing for the realities they disclose."[54] When

Taylor says "art" here, one might think of the usual items on display in museums: sculpture,

paintings, items of delicate design and beauty. These representatives of art are definitely in view

and they have been easily overlooked in the Protestant world which stripped church sanctuaries

to a level of simplicity and functionality. However, Taylor is not discounting poetry, novels, and

sacred texts. To continue the quote from above, "articulation can bring [moral sources] closer.

That is why words can empower; why words can at times have tremendous moral force."[55]

Though some value the Bible for its accuracy or inerrancy, part of the reason the Bible moves us

and speaks to us is not that it is historically or scientifically accurate, but because it is an artful

articulation that puts us in contact with our moral sources. It is a book which, when we are in

contact with it, "can infuse [moral] strength in us."[56]

Missiology: Respect

"Christians especially should affirm humanism. After all, we are the ones who say that

God became a human being, and you cannot get any more humanistic than that."[57] Neuhaus here

asks us to see the good in humanism by relating it in Christian terms. Many times, though,

evangelicals have not been good at seeing the good within other *Christian* options, let alone non-

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[54] *Language Animal,* 249.
[55] *Sources,* 96.

[56] *Language Animal,* 213.

[57] *Naked Public Square*, 25.

Christian worldviews. Because of the eternal stakes involved, there is a tendency to boil

everything down to whether or not one has accepted Jesus as her or his Savior. If one has, that is

good, if not, you are a sinner, lost, foolish, self-deceived, wandering in darkness, heading toward

an eternity without God. If this is the framework which dominates the interaction with people

outside the church, then it is very hard to see a non-Christian as someone with something to

teach us about goodness, mercy, and love.

However, Taylor's writings are marked with a humility toward voices he may disagree

with on many points. He really believes that Christianity is better now because of its interaction

with naturalists, secular humanists, and Nietzscheans. Because of the way secular humanists

unfolded human dignity as a moral source, churches have had to look once again at their stance

toward hierarchy, human value, suffering, death, and our responsibility toward our fellow human

beings. The church has had to go back to its sources and decide whether the way we had been

living was truly faithful. That is a good thing. It can also be a very threatening thing when the

question is posed for the first time, and churches have not always reacted well to constructive

criticism. When people are really in touch with moral sources and consciously pursuing the

good, though, those people are worthy of our respect and we should be ready to learn from such

a person.

This respect and humility applies also to other religions. When discussing other

religions, Taylor has a respectful stance, but not a stance of cultural relativism.

> As a presumption, the claim is that all human cultures that have animated whole societies
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> over some considerable stretch of time have something important to say to all human
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> beings. I have worded it in this way to exclude partial cultural milieu within a society, as
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> well as short phases of a major culture. There is no reason to believe that, for instance,

the different art forms of a given culture should all be equal, or even of considerable

value; and every culture can go through phases of decadence. [58]

So, there is a starting expectation here that Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism etc., will have something

important for "all human beings" to understand. The reason that they could sustain societies for

so long is that there is some orientation to moral sources which allows that culture to flourish.

Even though there may be many aspects which we cannot agree, there will be other areas that are

truly and refreshingly good. At least that is the stance which Taylor recommends we enter into

the study of another culture. Again, Taylor is not a cultural or moral relativist and believes that

judgments can be made as to better or worse between cultures and ethical outlooks. As Amy

Gutmann notes, "not every aspect of cultural diversity is worthy of respect. Some differences –

racism and anti-Semitism are obvious examples – ought not to be *respected,* even if expression

of racist and anti-Semitic views must be *tolerated.*"[59]

     The outlook of many evangelical churches, though, does not ready their members to

encounter another culture or moral understanding with respect. There is still an understanding

that the non-Christian world is haunted with the demonic in such a way that the Christian risks

pollution by coming into too close of contact with the non-Christian world. Of course, there is a

risk here by increasing contact with the non-Christian world, risks to one's own plausibility

structures, risks that the person on the other side might actually be very persuasive and it might

no longer be possible to maintain the same view of the world. In a modern world with high

amounts of contact between people of differing worldviews, though, isolation also has risks.

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[58] "Politics of Recognition," 66.
[59] Amy Gutman, "Introduction" in *Multiculturalism,* 21.

Harmartiology: Seeing Our Weaknesses

There has been too much tendency among Christians to reduce the ethical life to sheer moralism. This is not just in religion; Taylor writes that much "moral philosophy has tended to focus on what it is right to do rather than on what it is good to be, on defining the content of obligation rather than the nature of the good life"[60] However, there is something particularly sad when religious authorities trade a moral code for a living vision of the good life. We have to attempt to express and articulate our moral sources, but there are times when those articulations have gone dead and no longer move us in the right direction. Instead of powerful articulations that connect us to value, goodness, and truth, we can cling to rules and clichés which do not move or challenge us any longer. "Trite formulae may combine with the historical sham to weave a cocoon of moral assurance around us which actually insulates us from the energy of true moral sources."[61] One can think here of that caricature of Holiness people, the little, old lady who knows every rule, has every conviction, always has a Bible verse ready for every occasion, stands up and tells everyone in church how long she has been entirely sanctified, yet is as merciless and mean as a junkyard dog. The language, the articulations which are supposed to be about connection to God are actually insulating her from life-changing contact.

Taylor is not a fan of moralism. To the shock of our evangelical sensibilities, our Protestant love of the disciplined, orderly life, Taylor says that there are times that moralistic codes need to be "swamped" "on pain of rigidity, enervation, the atrophy of social cohesion, blindness, perhaps ultimately self-destruction."[62] Now, why would he say something like that?

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[60] *Sources,* 3.
[61] *Sources,* 97.

[62] *Secular Age,* 50.

After so many generations of discipline and ratcheting further and further down on human error and sin, why would one ever want to swamp a moral code? There comes a time to swamp them because all moral codes fail to point us to the good at some point. They cannot deal well with the variety of situations we encounter, the many different goods which are always in play, and the real dilemmas that arise from conflicting goods.[63] When we face a real moral dilemma, because there are goods in conflict, we cannot always say that "some position is correct absolutely, but rather that some position is superior to some other."[64] There are times when following the moral code might actually put one in a place where it could be said that "I followed the rules," but it could not be said that "I did the right thing."

This section is called "harmartiology," because there have been times that in pursuing one certain good or a certain community's moral code that we have done what is wrong. There is a point where zeal for a certain good can lead us into sin. Living the ethical life takes reflection, virtues, and spiritual growth. A blind pursuit of one good may lose "from sight that there is a genuine dilemma here, that following one good to the end may be catastrophic, not because it isn't good, but because there are others which can't be sacrificed without evil."[65] One thinks here of those who decided it was right to murder abortion doctors. While we can agree that there is a moral dilemma here, we cannot agree that pursuing the stoppage of abortion by becoming a murderer was good. On the smaller scale, though, while there may be times when it is right to stand up for one's convictions, there are also times when the rigid assertion of one's

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[63] *Secular Age,* 704-705.
[64] *Sources,* 72.

[65] *Sources,* 503.

convictions are unnecessarily damaging to a relationship. There are goods in conflict and moral codes do not always give us the flexibility to weigh those goods properly.

There are also parts of our ethical frameworks which are missing and invisible to us unless we are open to hearing voices that are different than ours. An example of one of those pieces which seems unpopular in many conservative groups right now is the ethics surrounding ecology. Taylor wishes that this was a part of more ethical consideration saying, "It would greatly help in staving off ecological disaster if we could recover a sense of the demand that our natural surroundings and wilderness make on us."[66] There may be many reasons why this piece is missing from someone's ethical framework, but the point is that these are recoverable, if we are willing to listen widely and carefully, if we open our hearts once again in humility to God and neighbor.

For all the complexity that there is in the ethical life, it is still possible to know something about what is right and wrong, good and bad, better and worse. We can carefully indwell an "ethical package" and, in spite of our limitations, find truth through it. "What is it to be convinced of one such package? At base and unsubstitutably, it is to have the felt intuition, even when one has done the maximum one can to control for confusion, blindness, inability to face certain realities, and the like."[67] Even though human beings are limited, sinful, selfish, all of which affects our ability to say anything with absolute certainty, we can have the felt intuition that there is real good to be pursued and pursue it.

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[66] *Sources,* 513.

[67] *Language Animal,* 214.

Chapter 5

Social Imaginaries

In order to define Taylor's concept of "social imaginaries," we must first define and

explore three related concepts: "background," "legitimation," and "plausibility structure."

Taylor is using the term social imaginary to carve out a delicately nuanced term somewhere

between and overlapping these three terms. There are times when his use of "social imaginary"

sounds like it is either "background" or "legitimation" or "plausibility structure" *simpliciter.* Yet,

this term is key to much of his work and is necessary to understand what he is looking at and

trying to feel the edges of when he does his historical research and reconstructions. Studying

social imaginaries allows Taylor to access a new angle on historical human motivations.

The first related concept, "background," is an epistemological concept. Background is

that web of knowledge and relationships which are not the focus of thought, but allow focused

thought to happen. "Sometimes I recognize something and I can't say very much if anything

about why. I just *know* that that's a classical symphony we're hearing."[68] No matter how much

we as human beings try to make this background obvious and map it out, it always recedes

before us, like trying to look directly at a floater in one's eye. "There is this vast latent content to

our awareness of things, an indefinite multiplying of patterns only tacitly there, unthematized

relations in our 'pre-objective world,' as Merleau-Ponty says; or connections which we attend

from in order to attend to what is focal for us, as Polanyi describes it."[69] Focused, attentive

thought is set off from this necessary background, but to trace all of the connections and

relationships which make that thought possible would be an endless, tedious task. Wittgenstein

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[68] *Language Animal,* 6.

[69] *Sources,* 468.

gives the example that "my research into rock formation takes for granted that the world did not start five minutes ago."[70] This assumption is a necessary assumption for geology, but it is so obvious as to be an absolutely invisible assumption most of the time. No geologist stays awake worrying about whether she can really justify her knowledge that the world did not begin five minutes ago.

Our inability to grasp all of these connections at once means that our knowledge is never completely transparent to ourselves. This is part of our inherent fallibility. "We are in fact all acting, thinking, and feeling out of backgrounds and frameworks which we do not fully understand. To ascribe total personal responsibility to us for those is to want to leap out of the human condition. At the same time, no background leaves us utterly without room for movement and change."[71] We are not totally transparent to ourselves, but neither are we opaque.

The second related concept is a sociological one, "legitimation." "Legitimation is this process of 'explaining' and justifying. Legitimation 'explains' the institutional order by ascribing cognitive validity to its objectivated meanings."[72] Legitimations give cognitive validity; they explain why something is done this way. It may be that it was done that way as far back as anyone can remember and nobody really knows why, but when the question comes up, there is a sudden threat to the legitimation of the practice. When a Holiness person of bygone days is asked why he or she does not play pool, the answer might be that, usually, the only place to play pool is in a pool hall where there is drinking, smoking, gambling, cursing (maybe even dancing), so playing pool is just a short hop to falling into those sins. The slippery slope

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[70] *Secular Age,* 13.
[71] *Secular Age,* 387.

[72] *Social Construction,* 93.

argument is a legitimation for the Holiness conviction. It attempts to give an answer for why this person will not play a rack of pool in your basement.

Closely connected are plausibility structures. Meredith McGuire defines a plausibility structure as "social processes within a network of persons sharing a meaning system that enable those persons to accept that meaning system as taken for granted and believable."[73] So, this describes the way groups of people can maintain certain beliefs or a cluster of beliefs as true in the spite of challenges to that truth. A ready example is American creationism. For much of the surrounding world, Christian and non-Christian alike, the denial of evolution and selective Biblical literalism of creationist is curious at best, pathological at worst. Yet, for those inside the creationist network, the mutually reinforced plausibility structure has the feel of the best answer. This is maintained by limiting contact with opposing authorities, consuming information from creationist authorities, contact and conversation with other creationists, and discrediting opposing science as misguided, biased, deceitful, or demonic. Within this structure, the cluster of beliefs around creationism became common knowledge for the social network, taken as reliable. Another recent non-religious example would be the Comet Ping Pong Pizzagate scandal where an internet conspiracy theory became so talked about and repeated that it reached a level of plausibility which was baffling to many outside that conversation and nearly ended in violence. The reinforcement caused by those social interactions created a meaning system which allowed the people involved to take this conspiracy theory seriously. Of course, everyone is moving and acting within certain plausibility structures. The difficult question is whether those structures are opening us to more truth and greater contact with reality, or whether those

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[73] Meredith McGuire, *Religion: The Social Context,* 5th ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Thomas Learning, 2002), 337.

structures are isolating us within worlds of meaning which leave us with more dilemmas and tensions than they solve.

In *Modern Social Imaginaries,* Taylor describes why he chose the term "social imaginaries" rather than "social theory" and he gives three reasons. First, because it focuses on the way people imagine their surroundings, which is not something that is expressed in a theoretical way. It is pre-theoretical. In this way, it is similar to the background. Second, it is shared by a large group of people, whereas the people who are able to explain a theory are a limited group. In this way it is like a plausibility structure shared through a network of people. Third, "the social imaginary is that common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy."[74] This is, obviously, where we can see a connection to legitimation, giving the sense that there is a "why" for what is being done.

Note the differences, though. The concept of the background helps us think about what is necessary for *any* kind of thought. It is, thus, a very general concept. A plausibility structure allows certain things to be believable. A legitimation gives us satisfaction when we ask why. A social imaginary, though, is more explicitly attached to certain practices. This attachment is reciprocal in relationship; the social imaginary makes the practice possible and the practice reinforces or alters the social imaginary. Because it is pre-theoretical, it is like the background, but it is more like a piece or sector of the background which is related specifically to a network of practices. It is like a plausibility structure in its social aspect, but it, again, is more about making networks of certain actions possible. It could be drawn on to legitimate something, but for most people it is so obviously the way things are that it would be difficult to pull a

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[74] Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (London: Duke University Press, 2004), 23.

legitimation out of it. It provides legitimation by simply being the way things are for a group of people.

What sorts of practices are related to social imaginaries? In *Modern Social Imaginaries,* Taylor explores three "forms of social self-understanding" that are "crucial to modernity": the economy, the public sphere, and democratic self-rule.[75] To take democratic self-rule as an example, Taylor is going to claim that major differences between the American Revolution and the French Revolution are partially caused by the different social imaginaries at work in these two nations. In England and the United States, there were already practices in play for many years which had been shifting the social imaginaries of British citizens. There is a movement from the time of the Magna Carta through the rising importance of Parliament, the relative autonomy of the colonies in every day affairs, the practices of town hall meetings, and the weakening of the hierarchical understanding of society which prepares the way in the United States for the social imaginary which undergirds democratic self-rule. In France, many people we thrust very quickly from peasant life to being sovereign people. As a peasant, if something was wrong, the way to get the attention of those above you was to riot. "European peasants rebelling against landlords didn't usually challenge the fact of hierarchy, only an excessively repressive and exploitative application of it."[76] After the riot, a scapegoat could be killed, taxes dropped or the price of bread subsidized, and everyone went back to their regular business. Just telling people that they were now going to be citizens of a democratic nation did not immediately give them a social imaginary compatible with democracy. Instead, France experiences the Terror where scapegoats were sought over and over again.

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[75] *Modern Social Imaginaries,* 69.
[76] *Secular Age,* 577.

Voting is a specific practice which this social imaginary supports. Most people do not ask the question of why allowing the majority of people, whether they are well-educated, thoughtful, taking their vote seriously or not, to make major decisions is a good way to do things. It simply is the way things are done. Voting reinforces the social imaginary of democratic self-rule and that social imaginary provides the aura of legitimacy to the practice, even if specific legitimations could not be generated by the average voter.

Another example is that Taylor can talk about the social imaginary which is behind American denominationalism. "The denominational imaginary made possible a flexibility unknown to most continental societies."[77] Whereas the state church and sometimes tolerated sectarians were the models in Europe, the experience of life in the colonies had open new possibilities and shifted the social imaginary to the point where, even if denominations did not like each other or agree, they could imagine living side-by-side without trying to dominate or eliminate each other violently or politically (though they may try to out-compete one another for adherents). This was something new. "Indeed, in the United States, the church type [referring to the Troeltsch-typology for a state-church] has become harder and harder to understand."[78]

Cosmos and Universe: Changing Landmarks

The way that societies imagine the world shifts over time. Just as the social imaginary around democratic rule can arise over time, it can also break down until "many people can no longer accept the legitimacy of voting and the surrounding institutions, elections, parliaments etc., as vehicles of social decision."[79] What does this have to do with the evangelical church?

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[77] *Secular Age,* 450.
[78] *Habits of the Heart,* 244.

Because social imaginaries shift, practices which were obvious and understandable previously can become unintelligible over time, much like the King James Bible. Suddenly, we find that we are being asked to legitimate practices which previously did not need legitimation.

When that happens, also like the King James Bible, there can be an urge to cling to the practice and try to rehabilitate the social imaginary without attempting to understand what has shifted. There can be a desire to blame the shift on a "conspiracy" which is pushing secularism in our schools, for example. Yet, "there need not be a conspiracy… for ideas and prejudices to insinuate themselves into our thinking and acting. They become part of the conceptual air we breathe."[80] Neuhaus's language here, "prejudices" and "insinuate," has negative connotations, but he is trying to capture something of the shift that is constantly happening around us. For many people, school prayer has become a practice which is in tension with the diversity of public schools. If all the varieties of beliefs and unbelief cannot be represented, which is something that most Christians who complain about the loss of prayer in public schools would not wish to have happen anyway, then one solution is that no faith be represented. Perhaps there are occasions where this is not the best solution, but the conversation surrounding prayer in public schools shifted a long time ago. It is a practice that no longer carries an obvious meaning for everyone in the community, and it is not helpful to continue claiming that this practice is obvious.

Taylor describes some of the shifts that have occurred in the modern world in this way: "We…feel particularly strongly the demand for universal justice and beneficence, are peculiarly sensitive to the claims of equality, feel the demands to freedom and self-rule as axiomatically justified, and put a very high priority on the avoidance of death and suffering."[81] Notice that

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[79] Charles Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 91.

[80] *Naked Public Square,* 25.
[81] *Sources,* 495.

Taylor is simply describing the shape of the social imaginary today, not making a statement about what people should be. He is saying that, for those of us living within the modern world, it is difficult to avoid these moral outlooks. They have a pull on us. Especially the latter part about avoidance of suffering and death changes the understanding of many ancient Christian practices. Forms of asceticism, justifications for divine punishment, and so many of the descriptions surrounding hell (Dante) become alien, brutal, and grotesque because of this shift in the social imaginary connected with these practices.

Just because the social imaginary shifted does not mean that tradition and Christian practices need to be jettisoned willy-nilly. That is a reactionary route. It does mean, though, that we can be more open and ready when a practice becomes unintelligible to the people around us to listen, try to discover what is being communicated by the practice, and discuss what this practice has meant to generations of Christians in the past even if we cannot live in those same meanings today. When we are asked to legitimate something that has never needed legitimating before, it is easy to be defensive and perceive the lack of understanding as a threat. The request for legitimation, though, is a chance of a conversation where all parties can understand one another better.

Hermeneutics: Bible and Social Imaginaries

As was mentioned above, the post-Enlightenment shift in the social imaginaries surrounding suffering and death has created major ripples in the skeins of meaning in which church happens. From the outside looking in, this affects the ways that people read stories containing seemingly casual violence in the Bible. It is hard to read the images of domestic abuse in Ezekiel in a group without many disclaimers and a detailed discussion of issues

surrounding violence toward women. It is hard for people to relate to metaphors connecting Jesus' crucifixion with the sacrificial system because both seem grotesque and difficult to understand for a modern person in the West who has been insulated from violence, but also has little context for why killing a goat could solve anything, especially if one is talking about fixing a relationship between a human being and a personal God.

It is in this context that it would be a fruitful study to carefully analyze the social imaginaries that Biblical authors and characters are working under. What kind of social imaginary allows the practice of blood sacrifice to be meaningful? How did that imaginary change over time from the practices in the Pentateuch to Jesus' time? What was similar and different between this imaginary and the imaginary that Greeks carried toward sacrifice? A study like this which takes a practice in the Bible and attempts to trace the features in the social imaginary which sustained this practice would be enlightening and it would help bridge the distance between moderns who live in a very different pre-cognitive world than the people who wrote the Bible.

It also would be helpful for us to realize how different the Biblical worldviews actually are from ours. Within the evangelical church it is sometimes said that people are trying to inculcate a Biblical worldview within church people. Within this statement there is the suggestion that there is only one Biblical worldview, that there are not multiple worldviews within the Bible, and that the proper Christian worldview is one that was formed long, long ago. Taylor would be dissatisfied with any of these frozen formulations. Referring to the thought of Charles Péguy, Taylor writes that "a crucial concept for Péguy was *fidelité*, a faithfulness to the tradition which precisely excluded just going back. Going back was a betrayal, because it

replaced the creative continuation of the past with a mechanical reproduction of it."[82] The idea is

to look back to the tradition to understand, but not to mechanically reproduce.

A careful study of the Bible would show that there are parts of the worldview or social

imaginary that we would have no desire of replicating or forcing people to believe today.[83] Even

if the author of the Genesis 1 may have had the understanding that the sky is a hard blue ceiling

which opens to allow the waters above to rain down on the waters below, not even a creationist

can change their beliefs about the sky to match those beliefs. Is it wrong to not have exactly the

same beliefs about all things as the Bible does? No, and anxiety that one has to make sure the

Bible can only say things which can fit into one's plausibility structure will only distort what the

Bible is trying to say. Our practices and social imaginaries are very different from the world of

the Bible, but that does not preclude understanding and it does not make the Bible any less

inspired. It may, though, threaten some definitions of what inspiration means.

An understanding of these shifting imaginaries within the Bible itself would also make it

less possible for us to hide behind the lame attempt to short-circuit discussion with "the Bible

says so." What the Bible says is a starting point for questions of what the author means and what

the text is doing and how the text was used and all those important questions of hermeneutics.

Bellah et al. tell us that modern individualism "has come into confrontation with those aspects of

biblical and republican thought that accepted, even enshrined, unequal rights and obligations –

between husbands and wives, masters and servants, leaders and followers, rich and poor."[84] We

do not want to keep chanting "the Bible says so" if what we are actually communicating is not

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[82] *Secular Age,* 747.

[83] Even if someone could be forced to believe something, which, really, is not possible. See Kevin Kinghorn, *The Decision of Faith: Can Christian Beliefs Be Freely Chosen?* (New York: T&T Clark International, 2005).

[84] *Habits of the Heart,* 143-144.

what the Bible means and it is something that the culture around us viscerally feels is wrong; like

that rich men are more valuable than poor women. That would be a bad interpretation of the

Bible, and it would also not take into account the moral trajectory of the movement of the Bible.

Chapter 6

Fragility and Cross-Pressures

Perhaps one of Taylor's most insightful ways of understanding the current religious situation

is through the connected ideas of fragility of belief and cross-pressures. Within modern

societies, there is a high amount of contact with people who hold different or competing

worldviews. "Since individuals typically move between different milieux or locales in the

course of everyday life, they may feel uncomfortable in those settings that in some way place

their own lifestyle in question."[85] This statement by Giddens is rather understated in the current

climate of the West. Whether it is conservative Christian parents pulling their children out of

public school, Democrats and Republicans self-segregating themselves into certain sectors of the

country, or the widely different experiences of people of different races, incomes, and education,

the polarization and attempts at insulation within the United States are evidence of more than just

feeling "uncomfortable." There is a sense of breakdown, lack of cohesion, inability to hold

"commonsense" in common.

These worldviews do not simply bump up against one another or exist in parallel, the fact

that someone holds beliefs that are different from one's own can be a threat to the stability of

one's own worldview. This threat can be felt at the level of the individual, but it can also cause

stress on the societal level because the order "is continually threatened by the presence of

realities that are meaningless in *its* terms….*All* social reality is precarious. *All* societies are

constructions in the face of chaos."[86] These constructions are built in such a way as to hide its

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[85] *Modernity and Self-Identity*, 83.

[86] *Social Construction of Reality*, 103.

feet of clay. For most people living within in them, they appear unquestionable, obvious, and solid. To continue with the analysis of Berger and Luckmann, the social order is reified in a very natural way for anyone who was socialized within a given context. "Maximal success in socialization is likely to occur in societies with very simple division of labor and minimal distribution of knowledge."[87] Therefore, one should expect that maximal socialization would be increasingly difficult within our highly fragmented, specialized, Information Age. This incomplete socialization makes the individual more likely to "dereify" his or her social context. Berger and Luckmann note that there are also other social circumstances which favor this dereification "such as the overall collapse of institutional orders, the contact between previously segregated societies, and the important phenomenon of social marginality."[88]

As the world today reels from Brexit, the rise of nationalist regimes, mass migration, and the discrimination against minority groups which seems to be inherently wrapped into all these phenomena, the social environment is not one where one would expect to find fully reified, easily-take-for-granted, comfortable symbolic universes. In fact, there are many signs of extreme stress which is driving these reactionary nationalist moves. Although this reactionary attempt at universe maintenance is one move in the game of keeping up one's worldview-integrity, it is also possible in this environment for individuals to become aware of the constructed nature of their social environment. "Reification *as* a modality of consciousness is dependent upon an at least relative *de*reification of consciousness, which is a comparatively late development in history and in any individual biography."[89] This consciousness of reification is

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[87] *Social Construction of Reality,* 164.

[88] *Social Construction of Reality,* 92.
[89] *Social Construction of Reality,* 90.

part of what makes sociology possible. This dereification, though, can be a disorienting, vertigo-inducing discovery, which is why many would unconsciously avoid such an epiphany. The unshakeable absoluteness of any framework of belief becomes untenable and worldviews seemingly become blocks of options. The authority of any given institution is undercut by the understanding that it does not necessarily have to be so.

In this environment, the temptation to fundamentalism is powerful. Fundamentalism is not so much a return to traditional society as a modern response to threats to worldview-integrity. Fundamentalism is a toolbox of aggressive measures to shore up the certainty and the absolute reliability of a given worldview. Anthony Giddens states that religious fundamentalism "provides clear-cut answers as to what to do in an era which has abandoned final authorities…. The more 'enclosing' a given religious order is, the more it 'resolves' the problem of how to live in a world of multiple options."[90] "Religious fundamentalism" within this quotation could probably be replaced with any type of fundamentalism. More than the era having "abandoned" final authorities, though, it would be more apt to say that final authorities have become more and more untenable. On the one hand, this can make some cling to such authority in an exaggerated way, as in fundamentalism, or, on the other, it can lead to the radical relativizing of all authority. Yet, there are many positions in between, positions which may acknowledge the tentative nature of human constructions and authorities, positions which may be cautious or skeptical while still holding on to hope that there is truth to be found within or through these constructions and still something to be learned from the humbled voice of authority.

Within traditional societies where this contact between groups was rarer, where contact with worldview-outsiders could be limited or negated when it happened, where the important people

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[90] *Modernity and Self-Identity,* 142.

in one's life agreed across a broad spectrum, maintenance of a worldview did not rise to the same

level of desperation or despair that it does within the modern world. People living within

traditional societies did not have to face the questions the modern world raises, or even have to

face the idea that there could be questions posed to the absoluteness of one's worldview. Today,

however, the features of the modern world collude to create a space where the beliefs of other

worldviews are constantly pressing, cross-pressuring upon one's worldview. Beliefs once held

as obvious are faced not just with the acid skepticism of modernity, but with the fact that the

neighbor next door may hold the opposite belief in just such a common-sense manner.

As Anthony Giddens notes of pre-modern cultures, "Even when there were vying traditions,

involvement in a traditional framework was normally quite exclusive: others were thereby

rejected."[91] Whereas, in a traditional society, one's community would provide mechanisms like

ridicule to successfully neutralize threats to the commonly held system of beliefs,[92] in the

modern world there is a particular problem with this. Not only are our communities made up of

more and more diverse worldviews, those who hold these threatening worldviews are harder and

harder to ridicule as barbarians. The modern world presses us together and presses us toward

homogeneity. "We are more and more like each other. The distances which keep the issue

between us at bay get closer and closer. Mutual fragilization is at its maximum."[93] In an

isolated, traditional society, where "we" have our ways and "they" have their misguided ways,

worldviews have a buffer of strangeness. In a modern cosmopolitan setting where Hindus,

Buddhists, Jews, Christians, Muslims, and Scientologists all work side-by-side on the factory

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[91] *Modernity and Self-Identity*, 195.

[92] See the discussion of "nihilation" in *Social Construction,* 114-116.

[93] *Secular Age*, 304.

floor and then go to a buffalo wings restaurant afterward to watch the football game, "they" no longer seem so different from "us." "They" can no longer be disregarded so quickly as ignorant, backward, or barbaric. Suddenly the fact that there is another way of thinking exerts force on one's own (previously firmly and unthinkingly held) beliefs.

This creates the possibility of what Taylor calls the "Jamesian open space." This is named after the philosopher-psychologist William James, who Taylor sees as providing the premiere description of this space in the modern world: "James is our great philosopher of the cusp. He tells us more than anyone else about what it is like to stand in that open space and feel the winds pulling you now here, now there."[94] In a highly cross-pressured world where both belief and unbelief are volatilely fragile, those living within this fragility may change beliefs, convert and reconvert, shift from one pole to another rapidly and often. These individuals are not necessarily aware of the unease or the volatility that is being generated by their cross-pressured situation. They may flip from one framework to another, but, once that flip has happened, there is a normalcy and self-evidence to the framework which renders other beliefs (even previously held beliefs) as foreign or abnormal. These people are being affected by the cross-pressured fragilization of belief, but they are not experiencing the Jamesian open space. These people are either at the starting point of being unable to comprehend another worldview or at the second step of struggling to understand another worldview.[95]

Rather than flipping from belief to unbelief or vice-versa, "standing in the Jamesian open space requires that you have gone farther than this second state, and can actually feel some of the force of each opposing position. But so far apart are belief and unbelief, openness and closure

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[94] *Varieties of Religion Today,* 59.
[95] *Secular Age,* 549.

here [in the modern West], that this feat is relatively rare."[96] In an earlier paragraph on the same page, he describes this space as "where you can feel the winds pulling you, now to belief, now to unbelief." This tenuous position between seemingly exclusive and unchallengeable frameworks is a delicate possibility in a fragile world.

Balancing on that tipping point is not the most common response to the unease and uncertainty created by cross-pressures. More common are the fanaticisms, fundamentalisms, and even militant relativisms which make themselves so stridently present. As Richard John Neuhaus says, "the true believer refuses to move beyond the temple precincts of certain sacred meanings, lest those meanings be questioned through engagement with alternative truth claims."[97] That applies just as well to the "true unbeliever" also. Yet, Taylor sees this type of reaction as "spin," an attempt to protect oneself from the unease of holding cross-pressured beliefs by making one's position seem far more assured and inevitable than it really is. "The sense of 'obvious' closure is not a perception of rational grounding, but an illusion of what I have been calling 'spin.'"[98] Note the word "illusion" here. It is an illusion because it is an attempt to ignore, deny, or silence the pull of the alternative framework. It presents its view as more certain or unassailable than it really is just like political spin or "alternative facts."[99]

The Jamesian open space, though, exposes another option. There is the uncomfortable possibility of understanding and remaining open to the pull, the truth, the beauty, the temptation of the other side. The people on the other side of the line may also be seen as clear-headed and pursuing truth as best they can, as frightening and worldview shaking as that may be. There is

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[96] *Secular Age,* 549.

[97] *Naked Public Square*, 16.

[98] *Secular Age,* 555.
[99] That infamous phrase which has entered our vocabulary thanks to Kellyanne Conway.

the possibility of holding to the fragile raft of one's own beliefs while seeing the good in and not being threatened by the other fragile rafts floating by. Or, while feeling the threat of negation and acknowledging the reality of that threat, the person in the Jamesian open space refuses to jump for strategies of defense and nihilation. This person, while holding a framework, feels the full force of the cross-pressure winds. The rhetoric of our highly polarized environment does not notice the growing existence of this space. The vociferous spinners of polarization paint the situation as a war between belief and unbelief, yet that is an oversimplification. There is "a space in which people can wander between and around all these options without having to land clearly and definitively in any one. In the wars between belief and unbelief, this can be seen as a kind of no-man's-land; except that it has got wide enough to take on the character rather of a neutral zone, where one can escape the war altogether."[100]

It is the view from this open space that gives the writings of Charles Taylor their characteristic empathy. His philosophy is not one more weapon to be wielded apologetically by a believer against unbelief. While holding onto his framework of belief and being persuasive for the truth he has discovered through this framework, he is not deaf to the beauty of the music coming from across the border of belief. Although he disagrees with Nietzsche, he is able to wander through Nietzsche's thought and point out those brilliant places where Nietzsche hits the nail on the head. Although he finds closing one's framework in a naturalistic way to be terribly short-sighted, he spends time elaborating why one might make such a choice and the good that one might be able to find within such a position. While he is attempting to be persuasive, he does not underestimate the winsomeness of other positions or (though not all his critics will agree) overestimate the power of his own position.

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[100] *Secular Age,* 351.

Homiletics: Certainty and Assurance

This brings up the question of homiletics in a cross-pressured world. As was noted above, one possible response to the fragility of belief in the modern world is to deny that fragility. This is the fundamentalist's option and is very evident in much that passes for evangelical preaching. Some might dismiss this as simply a result of evangelical preaching being uneducated, low-brow, or populist in nature, and these criticisms ring true of many sermons in the history of evangelicalism and especially revivalism. However, in the world of evangelical preaching, there are those who are attempting an apologetic engagement with the world around them and it would be to their advantage to engage Charles Taylor at this point.

It becomes very difficult in the modern world for appeals to "absolute truth" to be heard as anything more than bluster. Many times the "absolute truth" of the Bible is thrown out in a sermon as a supposed counter to the "post-modern philosophies."[101] If we are talking about absolute truth in the sense of Cartesian certainty, Cartesian certainty is very limited and of very little use after all of the philosophical criticism which followed Descartes. Of course, most preachers are using "absolute truth" in a far more colloquial form to refer to supreme authority or unquestionable authority. However, for a thoughtful modern person, these claims transparently lack content. In the past, for many evangelicals, what was said from the pulpit was a direct voice of strong authority, highly legitimated by the social status of the preacher and doctrines concerning the way the Holy Spirit works through preaching. Scandals involving pastors, contact with other denominations holding alternative interpretations, more generalized familiarity with Biblical criticism, the authoritative voice of science within our culture, the

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[101] "Postmodernism, to the degree that we understand it, poses both opportunity and challenges to evangelical Christianity. But surely its greatest challenge is the denial that we can discover absolute truth." Douglas Moo and Andrew Naselli, "The Problem of the New Testament's Use of the Old Testament," in *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures,* ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2016), 725.

alignment of Christian leaders with nationalist politics, broader education, and pastors who cling uncritically to past theological formulations which have become unintelligible to the surrounding culture (from lack of cultural translation and verbal petrification) have all undermined the ability of the pastor to make sweeping, authoritative, "absolute" statements from the pulpit.

The power context is different than it used to be. I have sat in a camp-meeting service where a man who spent his lifetime as an evangelist, lamented the resistance of people today who would not listen to God and run to the altar.[102] That statement and most of the sermon were filled with assumptions which were oblivious to the much changed context in which he was moving. The complaint of resistance from his listeners was a heavy-handed measure to pass the responsibility for the lack of response onto the listeners and an obvious ploy to motivate the listeners to not be like those who were "resistant." In response to this sort of preaching, Taylor makes this prescient statement: "the preaching of the Gospel, if it is to be other than an expression of the felt superiority of the preacher, demands this close and respectful attention to the life of the addressee as it is prior to the grace which the Gospel will bring."[103] Taylor here strikes true. Too much preaching is dismissive of or pays little attention to the changed and changing cultural context in which that preaching is taking place while expecting to make authoritative statements to the listener.

Many preachers seem be struggling, chafing against this situation of reduced power. This might account for some of the temptation among Christian leaders to run after nationalist politicians and their promises of renewed status for Christians within society. However, as Christians, we should be able to recognize that a situation of reduced power is not necessarily a

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[102] This was recently in the summer of 2016 in upstate New York.

[103] *Secular Age*, 95.

bad thing. The reduced power of Christians opens the possibility of listening once again. There has been too much preaching which demonized or marginalized certain groups as a threat to society. Surely it would be better to be able to hear the quite justified criticisms these groups have made of Christianity and stand in that Jamesian open space for a moment where these other worldviews are not as foreign or unreasonable as they are often painted. Preaching too often perpetuates caricatures, stereotypes, and polarizations of groups assumed to be external to the congregation. For many within the congregation, though, these negatively characterized worldviews are represented in their daily lives by people who are kind, honorable, moral, thoughtful, and not at all the demons that are portrayed in some pulpits. In the close contact and homogenization of the modern world, this kind of preaching will only create greater and greater cognitive dissonance within the minds of the congregants which will lead to either a break from the church or moves toward greater isolation from the demonized groups, neither of which is a positive outcome.

Preaching that reaches for the levers of legitimation, that shrouds every statement with "Thus saith the Lord," will seem dishonest in a cultural context where these levers are dereified and seen as levers. Preaching that denies the existence of cross-pressures and the siren call of neighboring worldviews will not address the world in which the listeners are living and may be seen as hiding a deep-seated insecurity. Preaching that claims absoluteness and perfect certainty of truth may be tempting to some already within that cultural sphere, but it will seem like pompous and laughable naïveté to those living within the fragility of all human knowledge.

Preaching that is marked by a sort of theological reductionism also becomes more and more untenable or seen as dangerous in the current context. Claims that "all you need is Jesus" or "Jesus is the answer to all of life's problems" are trite but unproblematic when they are taken

in a loose, metaphorical sense. When they become an excuse to reduce life down to only religious concerns and answers, when the believer disregards medical, psychological, sociological, or economic explanations, then this stance can become pathological. For those looking at Christianity from the outside, those who reach for such reductive explanations or act on the basis of such a reductionism are written off as dangerous, fanatical, and stupid.

It is obvious to most that life cannot be reduced to religion and that understanding the world is multi-faceted. As Merleau-Ponty writes, "We must seek an understanding from all these angles simultaneously, everything has meaning."[104] This means that life is irreducibly complex, even if one is trying to reduce life to the powerful symbolic world of religion. Taylor puts it this way in a discussion of Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*: "Human life is irreducibly multilevelled. The epiphanic and the ordinary but indispensable real can never be fully aligned, and we are condemned to live on more than one level – or else suffer the impoverishment of repression."[105] Preaching that attempts to shore up its importance within the pull of cross-pressures by claiming that everything comes down to religious answers does a disservice to religion and to the human beings who are listening. This preaching can only produce an anemic, childish faith, and "the more childish one's faith, the easier the flip-over" from one system of belief to another.[106] Cross-pressures cannot safely be avoided through reduction.

Some preachers may rage about the hard-heartedness and resistance of the modern world, but bad preaching has consequences and preaching that repeats formerly successful formulas can

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[104] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "What is Phenomenology?" in *Phenomenology of Religion,* ed. Joseph Dabney Bettis (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), 28.

[105] *Sources,* 480.

[106] *Secular Age,* 307.

be extremely damaging. Taylor uses this example of preaching in medieval Roman Catholicism

as an example:

> A great deal of Catholic preaching on sin and repentance was based on the principle that
>
> the ordinary person was so insensitive that they had to be terrified into responding. They
>
> had to be woken with strong effects. Preachers tried to culpabilize their audiences to the
>
> extreme. Even venial sins were talked up as something terrible, because, after all, they
>
> also involve offense to God. But just cranking up the fear may have helped people to
>
> respond to Luther's reversal of the field.
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> The irony is perhaps compounded when we see how some Protestant preaching repeats
>
> the same pattern…. Did this prepare the desertion of a goodly part of their flock to
>
> humanism? I believe this to have been so.[107]

The parallels here between the Roman Catholic preaching before the Reformation and recent

evangelical preaching are so clear that Taylor's note on Protestant preaching hits like a lightning

bolt. The overuse of that staple of revivalism, the hellfire-and-brimstone sermon, could have

been a major reason why turning away from a Protestant context toward secular humanism could

have come as such a release and relief to so many. By instrumentally exaggerating the fear

within sermons to get the sought-after results of crowds rushing to the altar, preachers may have

actually created the long-term outcome of future rejection of the church. When people have

more than one option and one of those options, humanism, reduces the level of existential terror,

that option is going to be rather tempting.

What can preaching become in this context? Perhaps, standing on the cusp, openly

acknowledging the fragility of belief and unbelief, the pastor can offer up a glimpse into the

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[107] *Secular Age,* 75.

fragile and tentative truth which she or he has discovered while pursuing Jesus. This pastor may be fully assured and satisfied with the truth that has been found, but can also recognized that within the limitedness of humanity, she or he may come to realize that she or he may have been mistaken. This does not change the Christian's ability to witness to her or his experience or pursue truth. It does take account, though, of our context of greater epistemological humility.

In the current context, there will always be those who flock to vitriolic preaching which unites "us" against a demonized "them." There is something deeply rooted in the human psyche which finds great comfort in having a clear enemy. However, this will never amount to truly evangelical preaching. Evangelical preaching has to move within an understood respect; a careful recognition that disagreement does not mean lack of value. The Good News is especially good to those who are marginalized. The Jamesian open space gives us a new opportunity to look at who we have been marginalizing and how the Good News can be good to them.

Theology: Listening

The theology of Charles Taylor is marked by an amazing amount of listening to the critics of belief. This is not a listening characterized by the search for weaknesses in the critics for apologetic counterstrikes. This is a listening which is open to self-critical reflection and agreement about the inadequacies of many theological formulations. As seen in the above recognition that human life is irreducibly complex and multileveled, Taylor's theology is in conversation with a broad spectrum of thought. It is informed by psychologies surrounding human violence, evolutionary biology, history and politics of religion, sociology of religion, atheist philosophers' criticisms, studies of Church Fathers like Irenaeus and Augustine, and deep reflection about the goals and meaning of the Biblical message, to name a few. By being open to

work through all of this, Taylor provides a model of how sensitive, highly-nuanced theology can

be done within a highly cross-pressured environment without falling back into a sheltering

fundamentalism or forfeiting one's belief.

Taylor recognizes that theology is different, maybe harder from this position. "The main

feature of this new context is that it puts an end to the naïve acknowledgement of the

transcendent…. Naïveté is now unavailable to anyone, believer or unbeliever alike."[108] Yet, even

while standing in the Jamesian open space and feeling the currents swirling around him, this does

not preclude Taylor from taking nuanced theological positions and making a case for them. One

cannot live totally devoid of some framework of belief altogether. "Just as the life can't be

separated from its collective expression, so it can't be isolated from a minimum of express

formulation. The faith, the hope are in something."[109] One cannot just have faith without any

propositions with which to describe what that faith is in. Theology and carefully articulated

beliefs are not out-of-bounds, even in an era of fragility. While readers may disagree with any

single point of Taylor's theology, the fact that he is doing this theology in widely read and

acclaimed books makes it quite a feat to behold.

To take one example, there is a tension within much evangelical theology, recognized or not,

of how to deal with the history of religion which extends far beyond the narrative confines of the

Bible and with the modern repulsion toward religious acts within the Bible which today seems

barbaric or genocidal. Taylor explores both of these tensions within *A Secular Age* in a

discussion of Irenaeus and "God's pedagogy." God is a God of all history, not just Bible history.

God's pedagogy has been at work guiding the development of human religion in general, even

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[108] *Secular Age,* 21.

[109] *Varieties of Religion Today,* 26.

the forms which are ethically repugnant today.[110] However, again, Taylor is rather specific about the movement of this pedagogy: it is directed along the "path of agape," a path which human beings often resist. God is at work through human history "slowly educating mankind, slowly turning it, transforming it from within."[111]

This process, again, is not a linear process. It is constantly being resisted by the fallen condition, the evil that we succumb to and pass on. He leans upon Irenaeus to explain this long pedagogy. In Irenaeus's thought, God did not start with a perfect human couple full of every virtue and fully grown. Though the Bible does not say the age of Adam and Eve, Irenaeus thinks of them as children, still in need of growth and education. Adam and Eve are at the beginning of their journey, heading toward a *telos* they have not yet achieved. The Fall, for Irenaeus, is not so shocking or difficult to explain. Irenaeus's theological framework does not depend on a myth of former perfection, as some theological explanations do. Likewise, Taylor thinks of God being at work educating humanity from "point zero," a "human animal."[112] So it is to be expected that we can find God at work, guiding and educating humanity through all of human history (and pre-human history). By not relying on a theology which depends on the former perfection of creation and human beings, evolution and the history of religions can be easily assumed into Taylor's theological framework. Even so, between this slow growth and constant resistance, there are "leaps" which break through the historical process and push the conversation to a new level (Taylor gives the example of Abraham here). These leaps happen, but humanity cannot simply make one giant leap of religious epiphany all at once. We are constantly pushing through

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[110] *Secular Age,* 673.

[111] *Secular Age,* 668.

[112] *Secular Age,* 668.

the sediment that has accrued on our past progress and past dead ends. We struggle against the evolutionary bent toward power, violence, and scapegoating which remain rooted in our psychology and pops up so often in our religious expressions. The patient God, though, continues to work with the clay that is there, molding the material that is available. Even though this is not a linear progress, "there is a movement of God's pedagogy through history, so that some forms which are utterly unconscionable now, were more excusable earlier, such as sacred war or even human sacrifice."[113] One can easily see through this quotation how Taylor would meet the criticisms of violence in the Bible and how he would interpret those passages. As there is movement in the history of religions, so there is also movement within the Bible itself. Interpretation must take proper account of this. Otherwise we end up with the caricatured angry, bloodthirsty God who is incomprehensible to both those inside and outside our churches today.

Yet, even as he avoids having to morally embrace the sacred warfare in the Old Testament, Taylor does not shy away from interpreting the meaning of the crucifixion in relation to the human situation. Human violence is still an ever-present part of our world and must be addressed. Can a respected philosopher with a book in the social sciences section of the bookstore make clear, orthodox points about human violence, the crucifixion, and soteriology? Apparently Charles Taylor can. After an exploration of the relation of sex and violence to religion in *A Secular Age*, Taylor begins a very lucid discussion of what it means for a crucifixion to be at the center of a religion. He discusses why it is so difficult for the modern mind to come to terms with the sacrifice of Christ.[114] In an amazingly compact paragraph he is able to begin an exposition of theories of the atonement by summing up the Christian faith in two

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[113] *Secular Age,* 673.

[114] *Secular Age,* 650.

mysteries: "one is why we are in the grip of evil… incapable of helping ourselves overcome this condition…the other is how the sacrifice of Christ broke through this helplessness."[115] Through his discussion of violence, he is able to orient Christ's sacrifice in relation to human violence in a way that would make a staunch pacifist applaud: "violence is turned around, and, instead of breeding counter-violence in an endless spiral, can be transformed."[116] Christ opens a new possibility within the human cycles of violence. Grasping this allows for a transformation of all human suffering, it can be given back to the God who suffers with us. Taylor is quite aware of the difficulties posed by the crucifixion for modern people, but he strongly argues that the cross cannot be marginalized to the outside edge of Christianity if Christianity is going to be meaningful within the violence-soaked human world.

Another area where we can see Taylor's listening theology at work is when it comes to the doctrine of hell. Of course, the doctrine of hell is a perennially touchy subject in evangelical circles, especially because it grounds so much of the evangelical motivation for evangelism and mission. Even if one disagrees with the conclusions Taylor reaches, he is in touch with many of the issues surrounding this doctrine and has interacted with the conversation the modern world has been having. Even if not finally persuasive, looking at the way he works through this issue can be informative.

Taylor approaches the doctrine of hell with doctrines on predestination and providence in view. Taylor can argue almost as an aside (from his position within Roman Catholicism), that those who advocate a deterministic view of Providence with a "Total Plan" end up producing "such repulsive results, that the main claimants to the Total Picture are now atheists, wielding

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[115] *Secular Age,* 651.

[116] *Secular Age,* 654.

theodicy like a club."[117] Obviously, there are plenty of strong Calvinists today who are still what

Taylor would call hyper-Augustinians (and Taylor is aware of this), but he is right that their

arguments tend to have a negative impact on current debates. What was meant as a theodicy

instead becomes a blunt weapon that is used against Christians. The problem of evil looms very

large within the modern mind and deterministic stances aggravate the size of that problem.

Answering the question of why there is an all-powerful, good God and evil in the world with

"Because God made it that way" and "God's ways are higher than our ways" no longer achieve

the intended result. At one point, Taylor goes after the Reformers by calling the "doctrine of the

damnation of the majority of humans" and double-predestination "counter-intuitive" and

"horrifying."[118] So, it is not hard to see where Taylor stands.

In opposition to this view, Taylor advocates a view of Providence where God is far more

personal and responsive in his interactions with the universe and human agency. "God is like a

skilled tennis player, who can always return the serve" (We will come back to this point later).[119]

In specifying both the universe and human agency, Taylor shows a theology where freedom is

not just granted to the human agent, but the universe itself is allowed to develop and put spin on

the tennis ball. This discussion happens with support by references to the Easter vigil and the

Good Samaritan where response to contingent events is emphasized rather than a universe where

all circumstances are preordained. This is a helpful bridge to his diverse audience, although

many Calvinists would probably find the Good Samaritan a perplexing Bible reference from

which to argue against predestination. There is little interest, though, throughout *Secular Age* in

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[117] *Secular Age,* 278.

[118] *Secular Age,* 78.

[119] *Secular Age,* 277.

becoming bogged down in exegesis. The intended audience would have little patience for such Biblical fisticuffs anyway. The point is made and Taylor moves on, allowing others to flesh out the details as they wish. He goes on to argue that, in the face of human suffering and modern atrocities, we need a premodern view of God, "to see God as helper, and not cruel puppet-master."[120] This personal nature of God is necessary for proper theodicy.

So, Taylor has very little patience for those who would talk about double-predestination or who would relegate masses of people to hell simply because they had not heard the name of Jesus. There are no painstaking discussions of certain Bible passages which one would expect from a book on theology, which will certainly count as a strike against Taylor for those who wish to hold such positions. Taylor's position, though, is not aimed at convincing hyper-Augustinians. He is a man who is attempting to hold a conversation with those outside the church, those who may recognize the reality of religious experiences but do not know how to interpret them. For these people, the hardline idea of hell is a major point of revulsion within Christian doctrine. The exclusivist idea that millions and millions of people are constantly dropping into a joyless eternity because they never claimed Jesus as their personal savior is more and more difficult to hold in the age of globalization.

Some may say that Taylor is watering down his position in order to create an argument that is palatable to the surrounding culture, but I do not think that is the case. He takes far too many risks in order to be clear and orthodox on other positions to be accused of knuckling under on hell. Taylor sees the "decline of hell" as a "gain,"[121] but he does not see this as the elimination of hell. "Hell, the ultimate separation from God, must remain a possibility for human freedom,

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[120] *Secular Age,* 389.

[121] *Secular Age,* 671.

but all the presumptuous certainty that it is inhabited must be abandoned."[122] In this way, Taylor

sounds much like the position of N.T. Wright who advocates "a universal *hope,* but in a way that

avoids the 'double dogmatism…both of the person who knows exactly who is and who isn't

"going to hell," and that of the universalist who is absolutely certain that there is no such place

(as hell).'"[123] Like Wright, Taylor is concerned with the effect certain doctrines about hell have

on the conversation with secular individuals. He even goes so far as to estimate that the

exclusivism which motivated much missionary endeavor also "helped to propel many people

outside the faith."[124] That exclusivism was a powerful motivating factor for the modern mission

movement, one which is difficult to replace. However, its over-simplified view of "the lost,"

easily created abuses of that heady power of certainty and mutilated other human goods. Today,

the drive to define and gain certainty about who does and who does not go to hell is seen as

naïve, prideful, and egocentric. Perhaps the most honest Christian response to the question of

who is ultimately saved is both trust in the goodness of the Judge of the earth and a little

agnosticism.

   For many evangelicals who have read this far, there are probably a few points in the above

discussion which cause discomfort. One of those issues is probably the very fact that Taylor is

listening and responding to criticism from outside the church while doing theology. What does it

matter what people outside of the church think about our doctrines? The only thing that matters

is whether those doctrines are true or not. That is part of the problem, though. We are unlikely

to understand our own doctrines, what they mean, who they affect, how they are abused, without

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[122] *Secular Age,* 656.

[123] N.T. Wright quoted in Anthony Thiselton, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2015), 389.

[124] *Secular Age,* 652.

listening to as many voices as possible. It is easy for us to get lost in our own interpretations. I have heard far more claimed about what hell is and who goes there in sermons than I have found justification for in the Bible. If nothing else, a theology that listens to previously ignored and marginalized voices is a call to return to the sources of our theology once again.

We have discussed in this section a few examples of Charles Taylor's theology, but how does Taylor see theology itself? First of all, it is probably not surprising that, as a sociologist, he sees many of the forms that theology takes as very much influenced by human expectations and situatedness. He makes the very pertinent note that Protestants who looked internally for confidence that they were saved are very hard pressed to define the difference between searching for these internal assurances and "trying to bring them on…particularly when so much rides on the answer."[125] This inability to define and draw lines, though, is part of the messiness of being human. "We are in fact all acting, thinking, and feeling out of backgrounds and frameworks which we do not fully understand."[126]

This sounds like an affirmation in the line of Michael Polanyi. There are things that we know how to do without knowing how to do them, like riding a bike. We can only be focally aware of something by depending on a subsidiary awareness of many other things. If we shift our attention to attend to a detail we had been holding tacitly before, we will still be attending to this detail through the subsidiary awareness of much that we could not fully explain if we were asked to. This inability to pin everything down is a normal feature of human knowledge, because "subsidiary awareness and focal awareness are mutually exclusive."[127] Theology, then,

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[125] *Secular Age,* 83.

[126] *Secular Age,* 387.

[127] Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958)*,* 56.

like all human knowledge, is going to only be possible within these frameworks which we do not

fully understand and cannot totally define. This should give us reason to pause when we attempt

to make absolute statements about the nature of the divine. However, being unable to fully

describe or escape the frameworks within which we think does not make truth claims impossible.

As Dan Stivers has written on the philosophy of religious language, "the fact that we cannot get

outside of this frame does not in and of itself mean the window is opaque."[128]

Even so, theology, for Taylor, is a very tentative thing. He believes that there is

something amazingly unique about Christianity, something which really does provide a sudden

turn within the history of human religion. Christianity bursts the categories of previous religious

expectations. Taylor recognizes, though, that this is precisely why it is so hard to continue to

think in a Christian way. Within Christian theology, there is a constant temptation to slide back

into pre-Christian understandings of what religion is really about. "The wrong categories often

come more 'naturally' to us. So we operate with a certain amount of unclarity and confusion.

This is the condition of doing theology."[129] It is obvious from this statement that Taylor may be

a Roman Catholic, but his stance toward dogma is not characterized by a stereotypical rigidity.

In fact, he is quite willing to place the infallibility of the Pope next to the fundamentalist reading

of the Bible and label them both as an "obsession… with ultimate, unattainable and finally self-

destructive precision."[130] Modernism has been obsessed with this self-destructive precision and

the church should not join in this obsession. No, Taylor would argue that the "attachment to

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[128] Dan Stivers, *The Philosophy of Religious Language: Sign, Symbol, and Story* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 204.

[129] *Secular Age,* 643.

[130] *Secular Age,* 512.

inessential doctrines which can be refuted" has been one of the reasons people have turned away from religion toward science.[131]

Christian theology is not a perfect, complete explanation of reality. Taylor, unlike many Christian ministers, is quite willing to admit this. There are unresolved tensions within Christianity and there are problems which both Christianity and humanism share because of the features they hold in common.[132] Theology is something that must be done with humility, knowing that our knowledge is never complete lest we become like the "fanatics" who enjoy the "false confidence of their own hard-edged truths."[133] Instead of pretending that we have a complete theological picture which gives perfect access to reality as it is, "we can, as individuals, and as churches, hold open the path to the fullness of the kingdom."[134] We get glimpses of what this fullness of the kingdom is like through the lives of mystics and saints. These are the examples we have of "idiosyncratically-enfleshed individuals" who flourish "through his/her network of friendships."[135]

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[131] *Secular Age,* 80.

[132] *Secular Age,* 726.

[133] *Secular Age,* 769.

[134] *Secular Age,* 643.

[135] *Secular Age,* 740.

Chapter 7

Secularism

One of Taylor's great concerns is to change the narrative surrounding secularism. The competing narrative is the Enlightenment, naturalist narrative which sketches the decline of religion and the rise of secularism as one in which humanity woke up one day and realized that there really was no need for religion anymore. Taylor calls this a "subtraction narrative" because it supposes that the only move made was that of getting rid of religion. However, the story he wants to tell is about the path toward the rise of secularism that was filled with many intervening moves which show that our arrival at this point was far from inevitable.

Because of the many meanings of the word secular, Taylor has to separate out what exactly he is talking about. There is "secularity 1 (the retreat of religion in public life) and 2 (the decline in belief and practice)… and 3 (the change in the conditions of belief)."[136] Whereas secularity 1 refers to how and when religion may or may not interact in politics and spaces of public interaction, secularity 2 is more about the waning of religious participation in the West: church attendance, membership, self-identification. Secularity 2 is where the proponents of the subtraction story go to get statistics to support the eventual death of religion and the triumph of a purely naturalist worldview. While Taylor spends much time exploring both secularity 1 and 2, he is most interested in secularity 3, the changing conditions of belief. Secularity 3 is wrapped into secularity 1 and 2, but is attempting to answer the question of why believing in the modern world is different than it was in traditional societies. It is here that the above discussion of cross-pressures and fragility of belief comes to the fore.

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[136] *Secular Age,* 423.

For the evangelical church, though, it is important to take our bearings within this secular situation, especially for the evangelical church in the United States. The state of secularism in the United States is different in both senses 1 and 2 from the situation in Europe. While secularity 2 has risen in the United States, church attendance numbers and self-identified Christians are still far higher than in Europe. Secularization in the sense of secularity 1 has taken a long time to pick up speed and religion is still highly influential in the United States. Because of the heterogeneous nature of the United States, though, secularity 3 is quite present. The givenness of belief is different today than it was in the past.

One might look at all three of these types of secularity and think, "Those are all bad news." However, for Taylor, this is not necessarily so. For the most part, Taylor would agree that secularity 1 has been a good thing for Christianity. It is good that a state church does not have its hands wrapped around the levers of power. It is good that the church does not have the temptation to use coercive force. It is good that institutions like the Inquisition and the Crusades do not exist. The question always remains, though, of how denominations, churches, and religious people will be able or allowed to interact in the public square. There is not one type of secularity 1; there are various flavors. Japan, France, Germany, the United States, Turkey, and Canada all have forms of secularity 1, but they answer questions like where and when religious practices and symbols are allowed differently. Secularity 1 and the high level of diversity among populations is new enough that the boundaries of secularity 1 are still being tested. Hence Taylor and Jürgen Habermas's debates over what sort of language should be used in the public square. Both agree that laws should be written in a way that does not favor a religion or give reasons based on religion (but Taylor would say that we should not isolate religion here. Laws should also not be written with Marxist or Kantian rationale). However, if we say that neutral

language must be used in public debate (Habermas), are we unfairly handicapping religious

people from accessing the most persuasive and meaningful language available to them (Taylor)?

Are we creating a stigma that religious language is inferior and unworthy of being heard in

public? The debates continue.[137]

Even though many American Christians still chafe under the secularity 1 which has

eliminated school prayer, religion still has a massive amount of influence in the United States.

Richard John Neuhaus cogently analyzed the rise of the Religious Right in the United States in

1984, at a time when defining the meaning of secularity 1 had reached a new level of urgency.

Many of the features he saw at that time seem now to have reached a more volatile phase with

the rural, white, male, evangelical backlash that elected Donald Trump. Neuhaus noted that the

experiences of conservative and liberal Americans was different under the presidency of the

opposite party. "Under a conservative government left-of-center Christians do not feel

themselves assaulted in the way that right-of-center Christians feel they are assaulted under a

liberal government."[138] There are levels of anger, indignation, and just mean-spiritedness which

were tapped by Candidate Trump that were generated by what was seen as a cultural assault on

conservative Christians by the Obama administration in areas like homosexual marriage and

immigration. The rhetoric on the other side also seemed like a repeat of Neuhaus. "In a public

discussion of the religious new right a prominent liberal rabbi in New York declared, 'Look, you

people are making this too complicated. They're Yahoos and rednecks and racists and

KuKluxers and we're not, and that's the difference.'"[139] The volume seems to get louder and the

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[137] See Eduardo Medieta and Jonathan VanAntwerpen, eds. , *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

[138] *Naked Public Square,* 31.

[139] *Naked Public Square,* 56.

characters are more and more exaggerated, but are we seeing something new under the sun? The

volatility of the political conversation today may partially explain the strange pairing of

conservative Christian America with Donald Trump, but this too was on a trajectory traced by

Neuhaus. "Consider, for example, how Adlai Stevenson's divorce worked against his

presidential aspirations, while thirty years later the most righteous-minded Americans

overwhelmingly supported a divorced Ronald Reagan."[140] Jump forward another thirty years

and we have one more data point with the twice-divorced, thrice-married Donald Trump who

rode a wave of American evangelical support. Rather than being a voting block of discernment

and standards, it seems the populist tone and visions of regaining Christian power over cultural

issues were highly persuasive in the most recent elections (or, at least from their perspective,

renewed legitimacy on the public square).

Within the realm of secularity 2, the waning of religious belief, most analysts have realized

that the world today is not heading for a religionless future. The worldwide power of

fundamentalisms of all stripes has shown this to be the case. Even so, historical developments in

the West have opened up the possibility of for unbelief in a way that was unavailable in the past.

Whereas in the Western past, people tended to live within an ordered cosmos and the chain of

being that stretched from God through the king to the ruled subject, most people in the West no

longer have this frame as the background of their beliefs. In the transcendent frame the highest

goods are linked, oriented to God. However, the loss of the ordered cosmos and its replacement

with the universe, decentering of humanity within that universe and within the long stretches of

universal time, disembedding from traditional societies and the disenchantment of the world, the

rise of the Cartesian punctual self and the buffered self distant from and unable to be influenced

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[140] *Naked Public Square,* 203.

by external powers, the rise of Deism: all of these moves piled up and reinforced one another until it became possible to imagine the godless universe: the immanent frame. The ancient cosmos and the immanent frame are backgrounds to belief. They are images of the world that we find ourselves in before we think about the world that we find ourselves in, so this would be one type of social imaginary. In one, belief in God is obvious and orients the highest good for that individual. In the immanent frame, though, there are two versions: the open and the closed immanent frame. The closed immanent frame is the stance of a naturalist: there is no transcendent to connect with. The open immanent frame is open to the possibility of the transcendent, the experience of God. Most Christians today live in a version of the open immanent frame because the features of their frame match on many points those of the naturalist: universe not cosmos, buffered self closed to external spiritual manipulation, disenchanted world. However the Christian immanent frame is open to outside influence, to the possibility of God.

Secularity 3 has changed the map of religious life in many ways. It is very closely linked to Taylor's concepts of cross-pressures and fragilization, so the reader will be referred to that section of this paper to explore how belief has become so fragile and difficult to sustain in today's world.

Polis: Christendom Mentalities

Taylor has many concerns about the stance of the church today in relation to society. One of those concerns is that churches are unable to communicate a positive message to the world around them. Any attempt to speak to the outside world is rendered unintelligible by an "attachment to a rigid code, as well as the sense of being an embattled band of the faithful,

developed through the defensive postures of the last two centuries."[141] Taylor believes that the church truly has something to share with the world around it, but has lost its creative ability to build bridges. No matter how much the church may wish to return to Christendom, that is not the current reality in the West. The church may feel nostalgic for the cohesive society formed around a single religion, but it will be more effective responding to the feelings of "fragmentation and loss of depth" in the post-Christian West rather than denying they exist or railing against the decline of Christian dominance.[142]

This does not mean that Christians should be silent in modern society. Taylor has a vision of a dialogue within democratic societies where, after the breakdown of dominance by one religion, each religious community is still able to speak openly and from its own unique perspective in public debate. Faith is not something that must be privatized; "religious discourse will be very much in the public square."[143] This is a point where Taylor may be too optimistic. Within American society there has been a loss of Christian dominance, but does secularization mean that space with be opened for diverse voices or does it mean that another voice will achieve dominance in the name of objectivity and neutrality? Even though Christianity may not be the uncontested, Neo-Durkheimian framework in the United States any longer, there is still a societal memory of cultural dominance, and voices jockey forcefully for a chance to step into the power vacuum and become the next hegemonic framework. Will secularized democracy forever be marred by the drive to achieve societal dominance?

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[141] *Secular Age,* 494.

[142] *Secular Age,* 381.

[143] *Secular Age,* 532.

This was one of the major concerns of Richard John Neuhaus within his book, *The Naked Public Square.* Among some advocates of secularism, there is an idea that things could be perfect if religious entities were simply barred from public discourse. But Neuhaus's maxim is that "the naked public square cannot remain truly naked."[144] Religion is not the only institution which organizes human worlds,[145] political forces can just as easily be endowed with sacred status. When religious entities have been eliminated from public discourse, it is far easier for political ideology to dominate the landscape in a totalitarian way. "The emptiness of the public square will be filled by a state-promulgated civil religion….Or the emptiness will continue until the public square is finally invaded by one or another existing belief system."[146] Neuhaus shows us that there are stakes in this game of secularization for all sides. It is too simple to assume that either religion should be given free reign or forced out entirely. The careful theorist of secularism and public spaces is looking for that knife-edge where dynamic conversation between as many participants as possible is protected and one voice or type of voice is not allowed to drown out the rest. "We must move beyond patterns of antagonism and warfare. The 'victory' either of the forces of secularism or the forces promoting an uncomplicated view of Christian America would be disastrous."[147]

Jürgen Habermas is quite aware of the way the supposedly neutral space that secularization opens can instead become a place where the closed immanent frame becomes the assumed victor and ruler of that space. From his non-Christian perspective, he warns that those

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[144] *Naked Public Square,* 102.

[145] "Historically, roles that symbolically represent the total institutional order have been most commonly located in the political and religious institutions." *Social Construction,* 76.

[146] *Naked Public Square,* 79.

[147] *Naked Public Square,* 165.

working for a liberal democracy should be careful not to "be perceived as crusaders of a competing religion or salespeople of instrumental reason and destructive secularization."[148] Habermas has become very aware of the danger that, in a secular public square, it can be assumed that religious voices are less valuable and can be pushed to the margins. Opposing this, Habermas argues that there is still important wisdom within religious systems that cannot be fully reduced to scientific terms. There is still "semantic potential" within religious traditions which has not been "exhausted" in modern translations of these traditions.[149] To wipe religious content out of public discussion would be to lose the needful untranslatables which religion brings to the public policy debate, but it would also be the loss of liberal democracy by the homogenization of diversity. Rather than remaining at the margins or in some private sphere, religion "should intervene in the public sphere and use its founding documents and traditions to refine 'moral intuitions.'"[150] Both Taylor and Habermas are looking toward a secular space where churches can have a voice in the public square, but the dynamics of that space today seem to be unstable and hotly contested. Both the church and secularized society must find new ways of meeting one another within the public square.

For evangelical Christians, there always seems to be a temptation here to fix the tensions within our society by swinging toward the Christendom-esque option. The temptation is strong because it simplifies the conversation. Instead of continuing to deal with a fragmented society, claiming that the United States is a Christian nation, marginalizing those who are unable to affirm such an identity, and uniting under a shared category, "Christian," is always there to

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[148] Jürgen Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), 103.

[149] *Future of Human Nature,* 111.

[150] Phillippe Portier, "Religion and Democracy in the Thought of Jürgen Habermas,"*Society* 48.5 (2011): 426.

create a ready-made "us" to combat some looming "them." Within our political discourse, we definitely see religious faith used as a uniting factor for nationalism in the United States, but nationalism does not seem to reciprocate in the same way anymore. Taylor believes that "it will be less and less common for people to be drawn into or kept within a faith by some strong political or group identity, or by the sense that they are sustaining a socially essential ethic."[151] When people are feeling culturally pressured and it is time to vote, they respond easily to "Christian America," but they are not more prone to show up in church and "act Christian." "America is a Christian nation" apparently does not equal "I'm an American so I should go to church and be a Christian."

The simple answer is tempting. Not having to argue every point before the diverse tribunal of public opinion would be easier. Going back to an America where people generally agreed on what was right, generally knew what a revival meeting was, and knew that they were supposed to come done to the altar when "Just As I Am" began playing on the organ… is a past that never really existed in the United States without ignoring large groups of people (Native Americans, Roman Catholics, Chinese immigrants, etc.), but for many in evangelical churches that is the preferable ideal to the endless variety of faith options, spiritualities, atheisms, new religious groups, and ideologies which jostle and fragment the conversation in the public square today. If you are an evangelical and sing that "everybody ought to know who Jesus is," is it not part of the program to "re-establish something of the fractured neo-Durkheimian understanding that used to define the nation, where being an American would once more have connection with theism, with being 'one nation under God,' or at least with the ethic which was interwoven with

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[151] *Secular Age,* 514.

this"?[152] Neuhaus notes that if you are a part of a group that believes it has "absolute and universal truth" then it is hard to see why society cannot just be ordered by this truth, and "talk about democracy and diversity as part of the divine intent seems to undercut the universal mission of the church."[153]

Perhaps it is fitting for evangelicals to listen to the advice of Charles Taylor, Roman Catholic, on this point. Roman Catholicism has given history, after all, many of the classic examples of Christendom. However, Taylor has no nostalgia for that past. "Christianity has always had a very ambivalent relationship to the societies in which it has existed, and the very concept of Christendom is fraught with theological tension."[154] Over and over again in history, alignment with political power and gaining coercive force has not made Christianity better. Constantine, the forced baptism of the Saxons, the Thirty Years' War, the Salem Witch Trials, the Stolen Generations: the list could continue on and on. Does having the power to drown out diversity in a façade of homogeneity make us more like Jesus? "If [the contemporary age] tends to multiple somewhat shallow and undemanding spiritual options, we should not forget the spiritual costs of various kinds of forces conformity: hypocrisy, spiritual stultification, inner revolt against the Gospel, confusion of faith and power, and even worse. Even if we had the choice, I'm not sure we wouldn't be wiser to stick with the present dispensation."[155]

The question for evangelicals when it comes to pursuing a hegemonic role for Christianity in the United States is whether this is actually a betrayal of what makes an evangelical an evangelical. Evangelicals are supposed to be the people facing outward. We

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[152] *Secular Age,* 487-488.

[153] *Naked Public Square,* 122.

[154] *Sources,* 410.

[155] *Secular Age,* 513.

pride ourselves on our ability to connect with and reach out to those outside the boundaries of the church. Evangelicals have poured massive amounts of money into sending people all over the world to bandage wounds, enter slums, feed children, and to live alongside and love people who are very, very different from your average, white, mid-westerner, evangelical American. Is it consistent with these values to become alarmed and aggressive when those same cultures may be joining our communities? Is it worth gaining power over the nation into which we were born at any cost? What if one of those costs is that we lose the ability to converse with our neighbor? Will we still be evangelicals?

Polis II: Sectarian Engagement

Of course, within the American situation, Christendom mentalities are not the only option. There is a swinging back and forth between Christendom mentalities and the sectarian option. In the United States, many Christian groups have withdrawn from political involvement altogether even though they are neither in the religious minority nor embattled. Bellah et al. make an observation which is consonant with my experience of the church in the United States. They write that "though the nation was viewed as good, "government" and "politics" often had negative connotations. Americans, it would seem, are genuinely ambivalent about public life."[156] In many evangelical churches, there is an underlying assumption about the political stance of everyone in the congregation. Politics may not be discussed openly from the pulpit, but the pastor will couch sermons in a way to line up with these political assumptions. If the lay people make similar comments, that is considered fine, maybe even applauded, until someone disagrees. The possibility of a debate is often seen as threatening and highly unwelcome. That

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[156] *Habits of the Heart,* 250.

is when it becomes "politics," and then, suddenly, "politics," have no business in church. Many times biblical interpretation by these same people will have large blind spots around political life, believing that the characters of the Bible were also not involved in "politics." Far from being apolitical, though, "most local congregations opted for unity and harmony, either excluding those who differed or suppressing controversial issues."[157] Of course, exclusion eventually creates isolation.

While totally escaping the modern pressures Taylor has described is impossible, as James Barr writes, "it is perfectly possible to form a version of Christianity which rejects or ignores large areas of modern thought and knowledge, but which works reasonably well for large numbers of people and is also reasonably stable."[158] In the United States, fundamentalist Christians are very present and their staying power is baffling to many of their Christian and atheist critics. They set themselves up as guardians of truth and true Christianity in the face of an ever encroaching wave of secularization. Yet, Neuhaus makes the important point that these Christian fundamentalisms are more of a catalyst for secularization. "By separating public argument from private belief, by building a wall of strict separation between faith and reason, fundamentalist religion ratifies and reinforces the conclusions of militant secularism."[159] Instead of limiting the encroaching push of secularization, fundamentalism actually becomes an unwitting accomplice to that push.

This withdrawal into a "closed circle of supposedly revealed truth that is neither accountable to nor accessible to those outside that circle" is one response to an unfavorable

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[157] *Habits of the Heart,* 154.

[158] James Barr, *Fundamentalism* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977), 314.

[159] *Naked Public Square,* 37.

cultural/social/political situation.[160] It has long been an option necessary for minority or truly

embattled religious groups. Christianity, though, has been the majority religion in the United

States for most of its history. The closed circle of truth also makes communication with the

outside world that much more difficult. Does this make sectarian evangelicalism an oxymoron?

"Those who claim to possess some wisdom have an obligation to explain it persuasively, starting

from where their interlocutor is…. The attachment to a rigid code, as well as the sense of being

an embattled band of the faithful, developed through the defensive postures of the last two

centuries, makes it almost impossible to find the language." Sectarians claim to have truth, but

the repeated idea of being under attack by the outside world, of being under siege from the forces

of evil, make it nearly impossible to build the bridges to non-Christians that must be built.

The question is, once again, whether the sectarian/fundamentalist stance will be effective for

the evangelical church going forward, especially within our current situation. This is another

dead-end path if the goal is to be evangelicals. An evangelical has to find ways of living

winsomely alongside non-Christians without having to set the terms of the conversation and

without alienating the other parties.

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[160] *Naked Public Square,* 16.

Chapter 8

Multiculturalism

"Where nationalism is strong, it tends to provide the common focus of identity and to fend off fragmentation. But then it is in danger of suppressing dissent and diversity and falling over into a narrow and irrational chauvinism."[161] In this quote, Taylor brings to the fore one of the major problems facing the modern world: how to deal with diversity. On the one hand, there is a move to reaffirm threatened identities and gain some unity of focus in spite of the relativizing, homogenizing influences of modernity. This is the move which we have seen in the rise of various nationalisms throughout the world, often responding violently to modern pressures and "mobilizing against outsiders."[162] On the other hand, there is the liberal, secular move which attempts to make the public square neutral, privatize belief, and affirm diversity no matter how fragmented society becomes in the process. As much as one might be tempted to put Taylor into this category, Taylor's position is a nuanced and self-critical one on this point. He recognizes that "liberalism is not a possible meeting ground for all cultures, but it is the political expression of one range of cultures and quite incompatible with other ranges….Liberalism can't and shouldn't claim complete cultural neutrality. Liberalism is also a fighting creed."[163] While fighting creeds suggest something worth fighting for, they also suggest that someone may get mistreated in the process.

What is it about modernity that seems to exacerbate the tensions in a diverse world? The forces of modernity have a tendency to erase group identities, to homogenize and "obliterate all

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[161] *Hegel and Modern Society,* 117.

[162] *Secular Age,* 692.

[163] "The Politics of Recognition," 62.

previous culture."[164] The rallying points and "sacred canopies" within which the individual

framed her or his story, the traditions and metanarratives, the cosmos and sacred groves have all

come under the wilting stare of skepticism and disenchantment. The ancient structures of cosmic

order "gave meaning to differences between social groups which also bound them into one."[165]

A vivid example of this is the caste system in India. An individual within this system may be in

a devalued, oppressive situation, yet that situation is highly charged with sacred meaning and the

individual understands who she or he is within this ordered cosmos. Someone fully within this

system could despair and be in misery at the implacable cycle of karma, but this person would

not complain that life is meaningless, not in the anomic way a modern person does. The modern

drive toward homogenization "reduce[s] society from an articulated unity to an undifferentiated

'heap' which could only be held together by despotic force."[166] Hence the reoccurring drive to

nationalistic power-grabbing in an attempt to make a meaningful whole out of the fragmented

pieces of modern society.

We have been told since the Enlightenment that reason allows us to cast off the chains of

tradition and that the instrumental power given by this use of reason will be the source of

humanity's salvation. However, "modernity, one should not forget, produces *difference,*

exclusion, and *marginalization.* Holding out the possibility of emancipation, modern institutions

at the same time create mechanisms of suppression, rather than actualization, of self."[167] Some

of the most notorious of those mechanisms of suppression are those of bureaucratic control and

surveillance, which Franz Kafka, George Orwell, and Michel Foucault have illustrated with such

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[164] *Habits of the Heart,* 283.

[165] *Hegel and Modern Society,* 117.

[166] *Hegel and Modern Society,* 133.

[167] *Modernity and Self-Identity,* 6.

detail. While, in a traditional society, everyone is located firmly within a world of meaning, the

modern world produces disenfranchisement, but does not know how to place the disenfranchised.

"Those who for whatever reason do not meet the criteria for full membership are left outside in

way unknown in a hierarchical society. The very existence of groups who do not meet the

criteria for full social participation is anomalous. There should be no such groups."[168] That last

sentence has a sinister edge to it. If there is no place for those who are not "full members" then it

becomes necessary to claim that such groups do not exist or to make them disappear. Jews,

homosexuals, Gypsies, Communists, Aborigines, Native Americans, street children, the mentally

disabled… *difference, exclusion,* and *marginalization* has been the experience of so many people

in the modern world.

In this moment, Taylor asks us to look once again for those we are marginalizing and ask the

question again of how multiculturalism can be made to work in a world that always seems to be

one flashpoint away from the next violent outpouring. While the secular humanist view of the

dignity of human beings along with the accompanying language of rights and equality was a

major breakthrough, there are steps that are beginning to be made beyond this point. "Where the

politics of universal dignity fought for forms of nondiscrimination that were quite 'blind' to the

ways in which citizens differ, the politics of difference often redefines nondiscrimination as

requiring that we make these distinctions on the basis of differential treatment."[169] A blind

nondiscrimination is generally good when it comes to making sure that women and men are not

discriminated against in their wages. However, it is not sufficient when it comes to maternity

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[168]*Habits of the Heart,* 206.

[169] "Politics of Recognition," 39. Taylor also describes this blind liberalism in *Dilemmas and Connections,* 142, as saying, "Respect me, and accord me rights, just in virtue of my being a citizen, not in virtue of my character, outlook, or the ends I espouse, not to speak of my gender, race, sexual orientation, et cetera." He agrees that this is an important facet of liberalism, but it cannot be the final decision-making criteria in every situation. Charles Taylor, *Dilemmas and Connections* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011).

leave or religious observance like the Jewish Sabbath. A blind nondiscrimination would ignore gender and religion in these cases and require that everyone be subjected to the same system, at which point the goal of nondiscrimination has gone from being fair to being oppressive and obliterating difference.

When it comes to real-world issues of difference, navigating them is not as simple as applying a rule. Even pursuing a good that has been the guiding value of a group, like liberty or equality, can create problems. When people from different cultures and different religions come together, there are what Taylor would call "dilemmas" which occur. There will be goods that are in conflict with one another. Every time one of these conflicts occur, people must deliberate, they must employ practical wisdom to the situation. For majority groups this means slowing down and listening to the other voices in their community if they do not wish to alienate and oppress those groups.

An example Taylor refers to in order to illustrate these dilemmas and the need for listening in multicultural societies is in reference to the Muslim headscarf or *hijab*. As Muslim populations have increased in Western nations and extremist Islamic groups have brought these populations greater scrutiny and discrimination, there have been many issues which have become public debates where previously Muslim populations were considered marginal enough to the majority cultures to be generally ignored as anomalous. Lately, the *hijab* has suddenly risen in the minds of many in the West as a symbol of oppression, anti-feminism, extremism, and an unwelcome religious incursion (though these people may have been there for generations). The question has been put to many liberal societies, but the answers have varied.

In France, it was ruled in 2004 that *hijab* could not be worn in public schools. In Taylor's estimation, this was a case of one guiding principle being applied in a way that did not take into account the other goods that were being endangered.

> 'Laïcité' is supposedly a neutral principle, not favoring one religion or worldview over another. On this basis, the headscarves were refused, but other French girls often wear, for example, a cross around their necks, and this was unchallenged. In a 'secular' society, this is presumably often just a 'decoration….' How can one expect to convince Muslims that this combination of rulings is neutral?[170]

Taylor notes two main arguments that took the day in the debate over the *hijab* in France. The first was the suspicion by the commission that students were being coerced into wearing the *hijab*. The second was that the *hijab* was a sign which flaunted, and therefore threatened, the principle of *laïcité,* French secularism. The ruling interpreted Muslim women as wearing the *hijab* in order to be deliberately provoking. "It was in vain that Muslim women protested that 'le foulard n'est pas un signe' (the headscarf is not a sign)."[171]

Of course, this is not the only way to answer this question. When the issue came up in Germany, it was answered by allowing students, but not teachers, wear *hijab*. In the U.K., schools were allowed to decide the question on a school-by-school basis. In each of these cases, goods are being balanced in different ways, some of them more skillfully than others. Not all versions of secularism are the same.[172] While we might side with the German decision over the

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[170] *Dilemmas and Connections,* 143.

[171] Charles Taylor, "Why We Need a Radical Redefinition of Secularism" in *Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, 42.

[172] Nilüfer Göle takes a fascinating look at Charles Taylor, the French laïcité, and then Turkish secularism, laiklik, in "The Civilizational, Spatial, and Sexual Powers of the Secular" in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, 243-264. On page 256, she writes about some of the motivations of these young French Muslim women:

French one, Taylor asks us to look once again at what is being said when students are taught that authority figures should not wear something that would identify them religiously. "Is our idea that only unmarked people can be authority figures? That those whose religious practices make them stand out in this context don't belong in positions of authority in this society? This may be the wrong message to inculcate in children in a rapidly diversifying society."[173] Is it better for children to learn in an environment artificially isolated from all religious symbols or is it better for a student to experience at some level in school the diversity that exists in the world around them?

One of Taylor's examples of multiculturalism being worked out well in the rough-and-tumble world is that of Quebec. For many French-Canadians living in Quebec, Quebec has a purpose: to protect the French-Canadian identity from being eradicated by Anglo-Canadian culture. The central Canadian government has recognized the value of French-Canadian culture in Quebec and has allowed Quebec an autonomy which other provinces do not have. However, it still has to be negotiated where the lines are between preserving French-Canadian identity and discriminating against English-speaking Canadians. Taylor gives the example of signage in Quebec. There is a difference between saying that all signs in Quebec must be in French and saying that all signs in Quebec must *only* be in French. A law proposing the latter was struck down by the Supreme Court. Saying that signs must be in French is a move which preserves the identity and difference of Quebec, while saying that signs must only be in French is a move that can isolate and exclude the members of the Quebec community who do not speak French.

"They want to have access to secular education, follow new life trajectories that are not in conformity with traditional gender roles, and yet fashion and assert a new pious self."

[173] "Why We Need a Radical Redefinition of Secularism," 49.

In general, Taylor sees Quebec as a good example of a sensitive liberalism. It is a minority culture within Canada attempting to protect its identity while also creating space for the minority cultures within itself.

> A society can be organized around a definition of the good life, without this being seen as a depreciation of those who do not share this definition…. A society with strong collective goals can be liberal, on this view, provided it is also capable of respecting diversity, especially when dealing with those who do not share its common goals; and provided it can offer adequate safeguards for fundamental rights.[174]

We can see here that Taylor is working toward a model which meets both the needs that nationalism and a blind liberalism are attempting to meet. In a fragmented modern world, nationalism meets the need for identity and unity. In a modern world of marginalization and injustices, blind liberalism meets the need for equality, dignity, and basic rights for everyone. Taylor, while leaning toward liberalism, envisions a liberalism that can still espouse a view of the good life which can give identity and unity to a society.

This identity must constantly be debated and reassessed. In order for that to happen, conversations must occur between all those involved. Here is where one of Taylor's greatest doubts about democratic societies comes in. If people vote, but they do not share anything in common, there is no conversation happening, and there is no shared idea of the good life, then voting will only be a way that the majority forces its will upon minority groups and democracy will lose its legitimation in the minds of the minority groups who are consistently being left out of the conversation. "It is not enough for a vote to record the fully formed opinions of all the members. These units must not only decide together, but deliberate together…. This necessarily

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[174] "Politics of Recognition," 59.

implies a degree of cohesion. To some extent, the members must know each other, listen to each other, and understand one another."[175] Democracy where every has an equal vote is a good step, but it is not enough to hold a society together if there is not some common understanding between groups. In such a situation, "partial groups become increasingly truculent in their demands, as they see less reason to compromise with 'the system.'"[176] These demands may seem like complaints to the majority culture, but for many of these groups it is a fight for survival. Simply submitting to the democratic will of the majority when that majority is ignoring or silencing the voices of the minority is not going to be enough in today's world to sustain a stable society.

Perichoresis: Space for the Other

One of the Christian images Charles Taylor uses to describe the goal of a multicultural community is the Trinity. He pulls together the ideas of the *imago Dei* and the love which is internal to the Trinity writing "Our being in the image of God is also our standing among others in the stream of love which is that facet of God's life we try to grasp, very inadequately, in speaking of the Trinity."[177] In order to reflect who God is, human beings must stand "among others" within God's love. In pursuit of describing further what this "being among others" would look like, he then draws upon another image, that of the eschatological banquet. "Suppose the highest good consists in communion, mutual giving and receiving, as in the paradigm of the eschatological banquet."[178] How would the way we approached different

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[175] *Dilemmas and Connections,* 129.

[176] *Hegel and Modern Society,* 115.

[177] *Secular Age,* 701.

[178] *Secular Age,* 702.

cultures be different in the church if we did suppose that communion was the highest good, if we saw the life of the Trinity as the model of our stance toward the world? It seems fitting that Taylor here draws from the eschatological banquet, the banquet which Jesus opened, in a shocking, pithy moment, to Romans and others from the east and the west. Jesus was telling the other Jews of his time to get ready, because the patriarchs were going to sit with the Romans, the enemy, the people you do not want to have lunch with. The eschatological banquet is a multicultural feast.[179]

Taylor here also makes the point that communion is giving and receiving. In evangelical churches our programs for evangelism and mission focus on the needy, the lost, the target unreached peoples, but most of the programs and accompanying rhetoric have very little room for receiving. The focus is on what we have to give, what we must give, but there is little emphasis on the ways we are needy and incomplete. "We've a story to tell to the nations," but there is not much emphasis on listening to what we still need to learn about the story from the nations, the ways that we had forgotten the message until it was told back to us, or the ways that we needed our atheist friends to point out our excesses and challenge our sloppy, immature theology. If living in a multicultural world is like the life of the Trinity, then we have to open space within ourselves for others dwell in, we have to be hospitable and generous guests, we have to give *and* receive. "The widest possible capacity to see the human reality of others, to let them get through to us, is a virtue essential to morality."[180]

Sadly, many of our churches do not reflect the eschatological banquet or the life of the Trinity. Churches in the United States have been criticized as being little more than "lifestyle

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[179] Matthew 8:5-13

[180] *Language Animal,* 202.

enclaves," like gated communities in the suburbs or retirement villages where the daily schedule

is patterned around endless rounds of golf, bridge, and shuffleboard. "A lifestyle involves a

cluster of habit and orientations, and hence has a certain unity – important to a continuing sense

of ontological security – that connects options in a more or less ordered pattern."[181] One can see

how there would be a certain allure to a lifestyle enclave in a fragmented society. Instead of

dealing with diversity, doubt about one's choices, and the full force of cross-pressures on one's

beliefs, a lifestyle enclave is a shield, an insulator where the only people that have access to me

are people who share the same values, have similar income, share my cultural assumptions, vote

the way I do, laugh at the same jokes, and, maybe, are the same race that I am.

In *Habits of the Heart* which was an analysis of American culture, Bellah et al. have

many pointed things to say about what the church in America has become. "We talked to many

conservative Evangelicals who have their own version of what an independent organic

community ought to be, but who ended up just as unmistakably members of lifestyle

enclaves."[182] A church that has no space for the other, a church that "is fundamentally

segmented and celebrates the narcissism of similarity" (Bellah et al.'s definition of lifestyle),[183]

is far from the ideal, far enough from the ideal that it is probably counterproductive. "Churches,

no longer made up of the whole community, but only of the like-minded, became not so much

pillars of public order as 'protected and withdrawn islands of piety.'"[184]

Though *Habits of the Heart* is now an aging study, there is much that still rings true. In

many evangelical churches, there is great discomfort with difference, whether that be political,

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[181] *Modernity and Self-Identity,* 82.

[182] *Habits of the Heart,* 74.

[183] *Habits of the Heart,* 72.

[184] *Habits of the Heart,* 223.

cultural, or theological. This, though, is more appropriate of a fundamentalist stance than it is of an evangelical stance. "Fundamentalism as an ideological option is profoundly threatened by the presence of people who do not believe in it, who do not share it, who question it."[185] The authoritarianism within fundamentalism and submission to certain fixed answers means that "they are not accustomed to working in a society in which a multitude of different voices are heard."[186] There is a slippage in evangelicalism back and forth across the boundary of fundamentalism, to the extent that some critics would equate the two. However, if there is to be movement forward for evangelicals in the future, if there is to be an effort to open ourselves to the other in a multicultural world, the answer will not be found on the fundamentalist side of that fuzzy border. As much as evangelicals tolerate and indulge fundamentalists, the world outside the church can see the rigidity, fear, and intolerance within fundamentalism. Evangelicals must find better options if we are to live within a multicultural world.

The Church was not meant to be a lifestyle enclave or a place where only one voice was hear; "the Church was rather meant to be the place in which human beings, in all their difference and disparate itineraries, come together; and in this regard, we are obviously falling short."[187]

Evangelism: Communicating Well

"You can't treat everyone with respect unless you possess certain virtues, for instance a sensitive understanding of cultural differences, and a certain generous outreach."[188] Yes, here we have returned to the issue of respect once again. Is the stereotype of the evangelical sermon

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[185] *Fundamentalism,* 315.

[186] *Fundamentalism,* 112.

[187] *Secular Age,* 772.

[188] *Language Animal,* 201.

that the pastor will speak about people on the outside of the church with respect? When people

think of evangelicals do they think of sensitivity and generosity? After all of the door to door

evangelism, Billy Graham Crusades, Christian music festivals, have we developed among our

members the virtues that allow us to treat others with respect, even if they disagree with us at the

end of the day? Or do these actions, in the end, become little more than commitment

mechanisms to keep the faithful faithful, with little real intention or need to connect to the other?

Part of multicultural respect is the realization that we as Christians will never corner the

market on truth, morality, or being good people. For some reason, God has allowed there to be a

world with great diversity and that implies that there is something good to learn in the midst of

this great diversity. That implies that Christians need non-Christians in order to be good

Christians. There are things that we miss, things we do not understand, things that we need to

learn from non-Christians. Even then, we will still be unable to corner the ethical market.

"People in different cultures have explored the human potential for meaning definition in distinct

directions that cannot be synthesized and may never wholly converge."[189] We only have access

to those insights, then, through our relationships with people who are different than we are.

Evangelism, then, becomes something far more complicated that the image of someone

waiting on a street corner with a tract. We do not know how to tell our story well until we have

spent time listening, understanding, and conversing. In conversation, though, and in taking steps

to understand another person, many things can change: one's own self-understanding, one's

understanding of the message, one's understanding of the act of evangelism itself.

Communication, when it really happens, is not one-way. In order to communicate well, "what

has to happen is what Gadamer has called a 'fusion of horizons.' We learn to move in a broader

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[189] *Language Animal,* 260.

horizon, within which what we had formerly taken for granted as background to valuation can be situated as one possibility alongside the different background of the formerly unfamiliar culture."[190]

The taken for granted background changes. When going into evangelism, many would say that they knew what they goals and motivations were for evangelism. Yet, contact and conversation with the person one is trying to evangelize may change the background surrounding that activity. One might go to Japan with the intention to evangelize the Japanese, but entering that context could call up deeply disturbing questions in an unpredictable way: Do I really believe that God is sending all of these people to hell? What kind of God would do that? Why can't people understand the simple Good News? Why do they have so many questions that I cannot answer? Why do they seem so polite and moral and self-sufficient when they should need the message I have? The background understanding for evangelization that was assumed when the evangelization was attempted has changed.

Does this mean that sharing one's faith should not be attempted or is impossible? No, but it does mean that evangelism that really involves respecting and understanding another person is more complicated than we tend to paint it. The fusion of horizons which happens between two different perspectives will mean that evangelism will change the evangelist in unpredicted ways. This is part of the beauty and the risk of really encountering someone who is different from us.

When it comes to multiculturalism, Taylor's theology allows him to assert that wherever the Gospel is preached, we are invited "to see how God is already present in the lives of our addresses."[191] This is good mission practice in general and it flows from Taylor's theology of a

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[190] "Politics of Recognition," 67.

[191] *Secular Age,* 94.

God who is at work in all people and all religions through all time guiding them toward himself.

Within Taylor's theological framework, we should expect that there is good in other religions,

just as Taylor is able to see real good within an atheist perspective which he is arguing against.

This allows for openness and generosity without relativism.

Chapter 9

Language and Moral Understanding

Charles Taylor's works all express a respect and fascination for the powers of language. One of his favorite phrases (borrowed from Shelley) which recurs in many of his books and essays is "subtler language." This phrase refers to the human ability to extend the power of language and open up new expressive and moral possibilities through language. When extending language in this way, one is not simply seeing a new object and naming it "rock." When subtler language is employed, "something is defined and created as well as manifested."[192] Within his recent book, *The Language Animal,* Taylor trains his full focus upon theory of language and broadens moral understanding in the process.

Taylor opens this book by reviewing two theories of language: the Hobbes-Locke-Condillac (HLC) enframing/designative theory of language and the Hamann-Herder-Humboldt (HHH) constitutive theory of language. In the first (HLC), "words are given meaning by being attached to the things they represented via the 'ideas' which represent them."[193] The word "rock" is connected to the hard, lumpy, heavy thing by the idea of a rock. So, Condillac gives an example of primitive association in an animal or baby's cry of fear. The sound represents the idea of danger to others. In this theory of language there is a certain inherent rightness or wrongness to the use of language: "that is a rock" and "this is a tree" are only correct if what is indicated is a rock or a tree.

The constitutive theory of language, though, is "constitutive of reflection…. We can't explain language by the function it plays within a pre- or extralinguistically conceived

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[192] *Secular Age,* 353.

[193] *Language Animal,* 4.

framework of human life, because language through constituting the semantic dimension transforms any such framework, giving us new feelings, new desires, new goals, new relationships, and introduces a dimension of strong value."[194] This is the theory of language which Taylor favors. Language opens and transforms human beings in ways that constitute and enable the experienced human world. Language is not just an endless series of labels for pre-existing reality. Language transforms and makes possible much of what we experience. Ever subtler language defines and creates as well as makes manifest.

Within the linguistic dimension of human experience, there is a sense of rightness and wrongness of expression. There are times when we experience the frustration of not being able to find the "right word." Our friend may go through a long list of words that are nearly synonymous, but without being able to say what the right word is we will reject every word in the list until that right word is named or comes to mind. Sometimes, though, we have the vague pressure, a feeling that there is no right word, there is no way to properly express a feeling or experience. Taylor notes that this may be part of why toddlers beginning to dabble in language can suddenly collapse into "catastrophic feeling states" where there is inchoate flood of rage, sadness, frustration, but no way to gain control over these emotions through language.[195] Human beings gain a tremendous amount of power over these emotions and transform the experience of them as we are able to articulate anger, rage, wrath, vitriol, bile or sadness, melancholy, funk, grief, depression, despondency. "When we grasp a new vocabulary (e.g. of joy, serenity, remorse, generosity), and hence alter the shape of the issues we recognize, we become capable of explorations we couldn't make before."[196]

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[194] *Language Animal*, 33.

[195] *Language Animal,* 53.

Our powers of articulation invite further articulation. As language opens up new horizons around us, there is also opened a further possibility to articulate, define, and make manifest. "Our linguistically formed experience of the world is full of liminal meanings, which invite articulation, but can easily be ignored, while we are intent in our pursuits of other ends."[197] While we may experience a pressure to articulate when we encounter a situation which seems to be just beyond the grasp of language, not everyone has the ability or focus to extend themselves toward discovering that subtler language. The pressure can be ignored. Yet, discovering a way to articulate may bring the previously inarticulate into sharper reality. "Prior to the articulation, the as yet unnamed import may be felt in a diffuse, unfocused way, a pressure that we can't yet respond to. After articulation, it becomes part of the explicit shape of meaning for us. As a result it is felt differently; our experience is changed; it has more direct bearing on our lives."[198] It perhaps goes without saying that artists and poets are key to this refinement and extension of human expression, making "raids on the inarticulate."[199] Poetry, far from being a bit of cultural froth, extends the borders of the human world.

At the same time, the origins of language and extensions of language are intricately related to bodily and lived meanings. "[Wittgenstein] shows how the explication of meaning must end in a reference to forms of life."[200] Taylor gives the example of a biker. He has in mind a young, leather-jacketed, male biker with a certain way of holding himself, a certain way of walking. This biker has an attitude that is there in his pose, his stare, the way he talks. It is a sort of façade

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[196] *Language Animal,* 193.

[197] *Language Animal,* 334.

[198] *Language Animal,* 189.

[199] T.S. Eliot, "No. 2: East Coker," in *Four Quartets,* section 5 quoted in *Language Animal,* 24.

[200] *Hegel and Modern Society,* 163.

of strength and bravado. Now, someone who is an admirer might say that he is "cool," but that term does not quite express all that is there. Then the mind lights upon the word "macho" and it seems to fit and express what is happening here. The word "macho" brings into focus the features we were only vaguely aware of at first, and the young man is re-gestalted before our eyes.[201]

Taylor describes these phases of articulation as a three-rung ladder. At the ground level, there is the vague pressure of knowing that there is something to be articulated, but not having the words for doing so. The first rung, then, is that embodiment, the way of life, swagger, and attitude, of our young biker. The second rung is the symbolic expression which brings "macho" into distinct reality for us, which makes being "macho" a possibility. On the third rung are the fuller abstractions, analysis, and hermeneutics of this way of living, the explanations of the meaning of macho. Taylor then goes on to apply this to people like Socrates and Buddha, who give bodily expression to the possibility that there is a better way of living. Before they do so, the moral possibilities open by their embodiment remain undefined and inaccessible to the other people around them. We tend to prioritize the importance of the abstract accounts at rung 3, but "the accounts at rung 3 will never be self-sufficient; one will always need to refer back to the second rung and often to the original exemplary enactments at rung 1. In the field of Ethics, exemplars are frequently ineliminable."[202]

One can read a sociological treatise on the typical features of being macho, but this may not transmit the essence of macho in the same way as going to a biker bar. We can see a similar need within Christianity for stories and saints. Jesus embodies the grace, forgiveness, *agape* of

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[201] *Language Animal,* 38.

[202] *Language Animal,* 252.

God. When the author of First John attempts to explain what the love of God is like, he points

the reader to the first rung, the life of Jesus.[203] Rather than a discourse on what *agape* is, the

author points to the life that brought *agape* into focus for the church. The church continues to

need saints who articulate and extend the subtler language of Christian life.

<center>Sanctification: Diachronic Moral Development</center>

So, the continuing articulation of the human world over time slowly changes our lived

experience. This has happened in many different areas. "Language now constructs immense

edifices of symbolic representation that appear to tower over the reality of everyday life like

gigantic presences from another world. Religion, philosophy, art, and science are the historically

most important symbol systems of this kind."[204] It must be remembered that this has been a

historical development. Science did not always dominate the human symbolic landscape in the

way that it does now. Similarly, etiquette has come through a process of waxing and waning

development through time. "Where at one point you are asked not to defecate in hallways [in an

etiquette book], by the end of the process, it would be an indelicacy to mention such a thing in a

book of etiquette."[205]

Of particular interest to Taylor, though, is the way that ethics have development through

the linguistic dimension over time. As he describes it, the "apex morality" of the modern world

is based around dedication to universalism, humanitarianism, and equality.[206] These concepts

did not appear in the Western world fully formed and were not an inevitable terminal in Western

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[203] I John 4:7-12

[204] *Social Construction,* 40.

[205] *Secular Age,* 138.

[206] *Language Animal,* 202-203.

development. Each of these features came through a long process of development and, though they may seem "natural" features of the ethical landscape today, they were not always so.

To illustrate this development, Taylor tells the story of a Persian in Athens. Members of the Athenian polis had a concept of equality which had not been developed in the Persian world. This equality was limited; it did not apply to women, slaves, or foreigners (and could not imagine an equality which included these members of the community), but it was a step along the path toward the versions of equality we have today. For the Persian stepping into Athens, understanding Athenian equality involves more than simple translation. The Athenians' understanding of the good life and articulation of this political equality has opened up new moral horizons for them, defined and manifested by the word *isêgoria.* The Athenians had discovered something in their articulation which the Persian had not yet experienced. Even if he wrote home and tried to express what he was seeing in Athens, he would have to do extensive description of the Athenian institutions and way of life to be understood. The language is not just labeling something that was already there. *Isêgoria* brings into existence new moral possibilities as it defines what previously was only a vague, inexpressible, liminal meaning.[207]

If this moral development is not necessarily linear, how does one know that one is going in a better moral direction or making a better move? What makes universalism better than the tribalism that dominated the moral landscape of so many generations? Our universal humanism and equality of today may have been scoffed as a betrayal of the people who were really important by the members of the Athenian polis. How, then does one judge one moral framework as an improvement on another?

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[207] *Language Animal,* 285.

Taylor gives a few answers to this. First, we can understand that we have moved from a less adequate moral stance to a more adequate one by the way this move: 1. Resolves confusion, 2. Gives weight to repressed consideration, and 3. Alters our view of what was previously valued by opening another facet of a given activity.[208] We can see this in action in the move toward women's suffrage. This move resolved confusion in that there was really no longer any way to legitimate why women should not be allowed to vote. It resolved some of the repressed thoughts that women may deserve to be seen as equal, valuable, and competent, though this was previously repressed in favor of male dominance (which was seen as a good by many). By participating in the drive toward women's suffrage, other positive moral horizons were opened toward greater equality in other areas.

However, secondly, the realization that one has made a positive moral move is known by making the move. Taylor gives the example of a hammer. How does one know that one has achieved a better grip on a hammer or a better view of reality? "Knowing that this is a better hold is inseparable from having achieved this firmer grip…. We know this is the best vantage point [on reality] because we have put ourselves there."[209] Our Athenian, as advanced as his moral horizon may have been for his time period, may have been unable to see the good of universal suffrage after hearing a description of it. Without moving through a process, he would have been unable to make the moral move to achieve the better moral grip. Those of us who stand on the vantage provided by a broader understanding of equality, though, cannot trade this moral vantage for the more narrow horizons of Athenian equality.

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[208] *Language Animal,* 197-198.

[209] *Language Animal,* 199.

Thirdly, the narrative of an individual's history is also important in evaluating these moves. "You come after a long chain of experiences to an insight, about what's important in your life, or in human life in general. You have confidence in this insight, thanks to this chain…you now sense, after what you have been through, that a certain illusion, or certain superficiality of approach you used to have, has been overcome."[210] The individual's story provides background for judging what is actually a moral development and what is not.

These three points by Taylor tell us a couple things. First, it is unlikely that anyone has a finished moral framework which stands at the apex of human development. Even the leap that Jesus brings upon the stage of world history is something that must be unfolded in time. Paul works hard at this, but is not able to articulate completely all of the new liminal moral possibilities that Jesus has released upon the world. The church, in a halting and staggering way, has struggled to live up to and extend these moral possibilities. What today seem like natural and obvious developments in keeping with the teachings of Jesus (such as those pertaining to women and slavery) were not obvious to many, many people in the past.

But, we can also see by Taylor's criteria for judgment of what is a better moral move that we are not set adrift in a sea of relativism just because we are not able to grasp a perfect and final moral system.

> I see that my standard for a good human life has no application before or after there are humans. I can also recognize that the ethic of authenticity I endorse made no sense to people in other cultures and times. But that doesn't prevent me from thinking that these standards are rooted in what we are, even in human nature, to use the traditional

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[210] *Language Animal,* 301.

expression, and that they need to be sought after, discovered, better defined, rather than

being endorsed.[211]

For Taylor, ethical truths have a reality to them that cannot be explained away by mere

preference or choice. No, they are sought after, discovered, defined, and rooted in what we are.

Human beings can make good moves toward better ethical frameworks, even if those moves are

not the end of the journey. "The languages which articulate human meaning (including

enactment) constitute a series of attempts to express and make sense of the meanings which

animate our lives, which attempts can never come to a final closure in a totally adequate form,

needing no further articulation."[212]

All of this should increase our humility toward our own grasp of reality and the good.

There is no room for arrogance when dealing with the moral understandings of people in other

cultures or the past. In some areas we may be able to see the crampedness and deficiency of

positions that they hold, but they may have moral insights in other areas which we may be totally

incapable of articulating now without spending long hours listening and studying their way of

life. Peter Berger teases us on this point by writing, "It is also possible that there was a secret

conclave of Aztec priests who knew something we had not even dreamed of – and that this truth

perished with them, never to be recovered," which is very true.[213] It may be that their enclave

had a moral development possible within the Aztec way of life which is inaccessible to us. We

may need to make more of cultural and historical studies today, if Taylor's evaluation that "we

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[211] *Secular Age,* 589.

[212] *Language Animal,* 260.

[213] Peter Berger, *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (New York: Anchor Books, 1969), 83.

often feel ourselves less able than our forebears to be articulate" is correct.[214] Taylor's studies of

the Romantics seem to be an attempt at recovering some of the articulacy which they discovered.

Hermeneutics II: Texts

This idea of diachronic moral development through language, then, should change the

way we approach the Bible. As much as we may want Moses to endorse universalism rather

than tribalism, Joshua to be more of a pacifist, and Paul to be a feminist, we have to recognize

that there is a movement to moral development and we can see that movement playing across the

pages of the Bible. Moses is articulating new meanings into the ancient world. Paul is making

rapid strides in unpacking the meanings opened by the life of Jesus. Neither, though, is able to

come to the end of moral articulation. There are still moves to be made by the generations who

refer to these writings. We can be more generous to Moses and Paul if we do not expect them to

have everything anachronistically figured out.

That may seem like an obvious thing to say, but emphasis on the absolute perfection of

the Bible and repetition of the exact phrasing of the Bible (to the exclusion of other concepts not

explicitly discussed in the Bible) has become problematic in some evangelical circles. Bellah et

al. sum this up very well: "Direct reliance on the Bible provides a second language with which to

resist the temptations of the 'world,' but the almost exclusive concentration on the Bible,

especially the New Testament, with no larger memory of how Christians have coped with the

world historically, diminishes the capacity of the second language to deal adequately with

current social reality."[215] Using the Bible as a second language is not bad, but it can be bad

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[214] *Sources,* 95.
[215] *Habits of the Heart,* 232.

when the Bible is used in such a way that it does not open us to greater moral articulacy, but instead becomes a dead, frozen language, slavishly adhered to which petrifies moral development.

One can hear this petrification when every position must be proof-texted, concepts are dismissed because they are not in the Bible, and there are attempts to return to a supposedly perfect Biblical worldview or way of life. In this paper, we have already explored Charles Taylor's understanding of sacred violence in the Bible as a step in the larger movement of God's pedagogy, but I have heard other defenses of Biblical violence. These defenses are dismissive of either the modern person's moral sensibilities (violence is a part of life and modern people just need to stop being such bleeding hearts) or their understanding (God's ways are higher than our ways). The understanding here is that no matter how much our moral sensibilities are repulsed by parts of the Bible, what is there is right. Every part of the Bible is a static witness to the pinnacle of moral truth. So, the problem is not with the Bible, it is with the person who feels repulsed.

There are points where this is true; we do resist truth that we do not want to accept. However, for most people today, it is almost impossible to do the moral contortion necessary to be satisfied with attempted total destruction of civilian populations, trial by ordeal for women suspected by their husbands of cheating, etc. If Taylor is correct, the fact that this is a moral contortion makes it unlikely that this is a good moral move. Do I have to see these things as good in order to be a good Christian? I hope not. In fact, Taylor would describe any attempt to deny our moral sensibilities and unreservedly endorse these past understandings as misguided. In religious and moral development, once we have made certain moves, "intellectual regression

would be unthinkable; it would involve pretending that we could go back."[216] While we can

learn from the religious and moral understandings of the past, having a Biblical worldview

should not mean stunting further moral articulation.

Neuhaus complains about this sort of narrow reading and its effect on Christian

involvement in politics. "One finds that the suspicion of the democratic idea is derived from

fundamentalist readings of Scripture that suggest alternative ways of ordering society, ways that

imply one or another form of theocracy."[217] There is no democracy in the Bible, so one who is

slavishly devoted to the exact language of the text has to deny the recent moral developments

which have opened the possibility of democratic governance to the human race. This may seem

ridiculous to some, but there are those who go down this path. If the linguistic dimension is

necessary for the development of better moral frameworks and positions, then one would expect

that stances which freeze language inhibit moral growth. Might this inhibited growth be part of

what makes many evangelical Christians seem so oblivious, retrograde, and generally uncouth

when they attempt to enter the public square?

What positive good then can the Biblical texts do in our lives? If the ancients did not

have it all worked out, is there a need to continue reading them today? As Christians, we still go

back to these words because we still believe there is truth that the Holy Spirit opens to us in these

texts. We need these stories and these articulations to understand our own situation.

> Words may have power because they tap a source hitherto unknown, unfelt, as we see
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> with the Exodus, with Isaiah, with the Gospels; or they may restore the power of an older
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> source that we have lost contact with, as with St. Francis or Erasmus. Or they may have

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[216] *Secular Age,* 289.

[217] *Naked Public Square,* 177.

power in another way, by articulating our feelings or our story so as to bring us in contact with a source we have been longing for. This may come about through recasting our lives in a new narrative, as with Augustine's *Confessions*, or through seeing our struggle through the prism of the Exodus, as with the civil rights movement in America in the 1960's, or in innumerable less famous and fateful places in which people understand their lives through a new story.[218]

Ecclesiology II: Networks of *Agape*

One of the areas where Taylor gives us an example of his attempts to further articulate his moral world in language is through his idea of networks of *agape*. He develops this idea through an interaction with Ivan Illich and the book *Rivers North of the Future*.[219] The major image he draws from in the Bible to illustrate this idea is the Good Samaritan. In this mix of conversation and exegesis, he develops an articulation of what the church is that both challenges the sedimented concepts that dominate our thought and creates an articulation which feels very in touch with the dynamics of the life of Jesus.

In the story of the Good Samaritan, there is a surprising, unequal move made by the Samaritan which is not premeditated and cannot be explained as strict rule-following. There was no code that said the Samaritan had to do this. The Samaritan cannot be explained by moralism. Taylor, in general, has very little good to say about moralism. Instead, he is far more likely to endorse a kind of moral *phronēsis*. As he says in *Sources of the Self*, "The practically wise man (*phronimos*) has a knowledge of how to behave in each particular circumstance which can never

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[218] *Sources*, 96-97.

[219] David Cayley, *Rivers North of the Future: The Testament of Ivan Illich* (Toronto: Anansi, 2005).

be equated with or reduced to a knowledge of general truths. Practical wisdom (*phronēsis*) is a

not fully articulable sense rather than a kind of science."[220] *Phronēsis* is the practical wisdom

which allows someone to respond well to the infinite variety of situations a human being could

encounter. In the Good Samaritan, though, we see a different kind of *phronēsis; phronēsis*

played in a new key. In responding, improvising, to the sudden discovery of a beaten, suffering

Jew, the wisdom at work is not a calculation for the minimum or finding equality. The *phronēsis*

of *agape* finds the maximal good, the imbalancing good, the undeserved, shocking move which

fits the moment beautifully in a gracefully lopsided way.

In this moment, the Samaritan extends his network to this Jew. The categories that separate

them do not matter as much as this improvised relationship which suddenly unites them. "The

lifeblood of this new relationship is agape, which can't ever be understood simply in terms of a

set of rules, but rather as the extension of a certain kind of relation, spreading outward in a

network. The church is in this sense a quintessentially network society."[221] This is a very

different concept from the way many churches in the United States work. Many churches move

in a sectarian fashion with love and acceptance extended inwardly, and that love "is not shared

with the world, except through missionary outreach."[222] There is a problem with love only being

shared through missionary outreach. Missionary outreach tends to form goal-oriented

relationships. Are goal-oriented relationships authentic relationships? Can lopsided, imbalanced

agape be transmitted when the relationships are motivated in this way, when the only time you

show up at my door is to hand me a tract and whenever you have a conversation with me at the

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[220] *Sources,* 125.
[221] *Secular Age,* 282.

[222] *Habits of the Heart,* 232.

office you are looking for an opening to plug your church or your Jesus? Probably not. That kind of spontaneous out-pouring requires open and generous relationships, real, unforced relationships with the outside world.

Spontaneous relationships of "idiosyncratically-enfleshed individuals"[223] are part of how Taylor sees God responding to the world. Rather than a God who is a deterministic puppet-master foreordaining all that happens, Taylor sees the providence of God more like a skilled tennis player. No matter what is lobbed over the net, this player is able to respond to it and get the ball back over the net. "God's Providence is his ability to respond to whatever the universe and human agency throw up… The Samaritan's action is part of God's response to the skewed serve the robbers have lobbed into history."[224] Human agency can be the problem which "skews the serve," but human agency responding to the *agape* of God can also be the way God answers the wrong in the world. There is a very active part here for human agency.

This being in the world and available to the world is necessary to the network of *agape*. "One part of the solution is being there and affirming the good which is never absent. You see the good through the eyes of God. One must be there with those unbelieving solutions, affirming the good, and combatting the demonic. There is perhaps a new, as yet untraveled road from them to God, a way of 'making straight the way of the Lord'."[225] Note here the way Taylor sees a Christian engaging the world. There is no assumption of control, because the Christian is there alongside the "unbelieving solutions." These solutions may not be ideal in the mind of the Christian, but if the choice is to stay or draw back into a sectarian sulk, Taylor sees the best path

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[223] *Secular Age,* 740.

[224] *Secular Age,* 277.
[225] *Secular Age,* 685.

as continuing to be present. The Christian is available, looking for the good, waiting to see if, in the midst of the unbelieving solution, there might be a connection, an epiphany, a new road to God where a new saint gives us a fresh picture of what this *agape* is all about.

Chapter 10

Fullness

An important concept in Taylor's *A Secular Age* is that of "fullness." This is one of the

major themes that provide structure for the book. From the opening pages, Taylor is reaching for

words that will create a semi-neutral starting point for the discussion of the human experience of

the divine. Taylor attempts to frame the discussion of belief and unbelief not as "rival theories"

but as "different kinds of lived experience involved in understanding your life in one way or

another."[226] Belief and unbelief are not just matters of what is thought, but pertain to the human

actions and life which shape those thoughts: social imaginaries. Taylor then begins to describe

this lived experience for his broad audience as occurring within "a certain moral/spiritual shape"

where it is possible to encounter "a fullness, a richness," "peace or wholeness," "integrity or

generosity or abandonment or self-forgetfulness," "joy and fulfillment."[227] These are the

positive and attractive descriptions of religious experience where "our life energies are somehow

lined up," but Taylor also notes the possibility of negative experiences of "a distance, an

absence, an exile… an absence of power; a confusion."[228] This is how the discussion begins to

unfold around the possibility of meeting the transcendent, the numinous, or the divine. There is

a certain art to the way that Taylor is able to discuss religious experience expressively while

using words that do not set him off as advocating a certain tradition. At the same time, the words

used are very descriptive of the actual experience of a religious event in a way that traditional

theological language is often not. Many times theological language becomes loaded with jargon

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[226] *Secular Age*, 4-5.
[227] *Secular Age,* 5.

[228] *Secular Age*, 6.

or traditional terms which are too stale to express the unexpected and surprising nature of "fullness." An example in the Protestant tradition would be the way that testimonies of conversion are expected to repeat certain vocabulary about "being saved," "meeting Jesus," "inviting Jesus into your heart," etc., which gives a standardized way of talking about these experiences within a certain group, but it does not tend to be very expressive of the particularity of the experience and becomes negatively stereotypical to those outside the group.

In his book, *Religion in Human Evolution*, Robert Bellah also starts by trying to describe these religious experiences in a similar way to Taylor (he even uses one of the same illustrations as Taylor: the experience of Václav Havel). Bellah, who is also writing to a secular audience, uses terms like "the feeling of an infinite Whole"[229] or "the felt-whole."[230] He also describes the "unitive event."[231] To further explain, he draws upon the psychological description of Abraham Maslow which calls these experiences "Being cognition" as opposed to "Deficiency cognition."[232] Deficiency cognition is the mode of daily human life where we are striving to fix, earn, solve, and survive. While these descriptions are helpful, they do not cover the fullest range of religious experience. Taylor might be accused of poetic vagueness, but his positive and negative descriptions of religious experience covers a broader range of human religious experiences than Bellah's unitive event does. This broadness is important to the theological arguments of *A Secular Age*.

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[229] Robert Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2011), 6.

[230] *Religion in Human Evolution*, 12.

[231] *Religion in Human Evolution*, 17.

[232] *Religion in Human Evolution*, 5. See Abraham Maslow, *Religions, Values, and Peak-Experiences* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977).

These experiences of fullness undergird much of the movement of Taylor's argument and create the major challenge to the naturalist/materialist/reductionist worldview Taylor is be countering. Taylor argues throughout that human beings have these experiences of fullness and they must be accounted for.

> I believe that there is no escaping some version of what I called in an earlier discussion 'fullness'; for any liveable understanding of human life, there must be some way in which this life looks good, whole, proper, really being lived as it should. The utter absence of such would leave us in abject, unbearable despair. So it's not that unbelief shuns Christian ideas of fullness for nothing at all; it has its own versions.[233]

Unbelief has these ideas of fullness, but it does not, due to its aversion to transcendence, have a place for them its schema. "Taylor assumes secular and religious persons share certain conceptions of the good because we share forms of life in God's good created order; unbelief cannot account for this."[234] In order to interpret humanity in a comprehensive way, interpretations must include these transcendent experiences. This is why Taylor wishes to define the experiences of fullness as broadly as possible: if only the saint has experiences of fullness, then they could be easily disregarded. Instead, this orientation toward fullness is a feature of being human. Our "moral impulses," to give one example, have a level of authority which never seems to be totally explained away by a reductionist description of morality.[235] A description of morality which reduces it to an evolutionary hold-over from the desire to protect a herd made of genetically similar animals never provides a completely satisfying explanation of the lived

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[233] *Secular Age,* 600.
[234] D. Stephen Long, "How to Read Charles Taylor: The Theological Significance of *A Secular Age,"* Pro Ecclesia 18, no. 1 (2009): 98.

[235] *Secular Age,* 581.

phenomena we know as morality. We can feel that there is significantly more going on within

our concepts of right and wrong. These experiences of fullness, then, are far from being devoid

of meaning. They are not hallucinations or malfunctions in the human machine. They carry real

content. They give us an impression of how the world should be and this is common to all

humanity. It is common to all of humanity, but Taylor will still argue that there are those who

are better or worse at achieving or being oriented toward fullness. By the end of the book,

Taylor will have moved to an exploration of the more clearly Christian-mystic variety where the

mystic experience becomes a guide toward the well-lived life.[236]

These experiences are Taylor's argument against the interpretive power of the "closed

immanent frame." To recap, he describes features of the immanent frame as reliance on modern

science, the "buffered identity" (a self which is no longer porously connected to and affected by

the enchanted world, but instead shielded and internalized), the reforms and strictures of the

disciplinary society, individualism, instrumental reason, and action in secular time.[237] None of

these features require an elimination of the transcendent, which is why Taylor discusses both the

closed and open versions of the immanent frame. The closed version, which denies any reality to

the transcendent, is the main antagonist in *A Secular Age* which Taylor is arguing against. This

is a strict materialism which focuses on human flourishing, the sensual, and scientific control

while rejecting mystery and the transcendent. Taylor does not demonize this perspective even

though he is arguing that it is not sufficient. He realizes that the closed immanent frame is a

reaction to the stifling of certain human goods within the Christian world. In fact, Taylor would

describe the drive toward the closure of the immanent frame as "the sense of being menaced by

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[236] *Secular Age,* 729-730.
[237] *Secular Age*, 566.

fanaticism."[238] "Fanaticism" describes those people who are so self-assured in their pursuit of certain religious goods (many times ones beyond this life), that they ignore, stifle, or mutilate other aspects of human flourishing.[239] The fanatics violated "the order of mutual benefit" within society in the name of their religious certainty.[240] While the reaction against fanaticism is understandable, Taylor argues that running to the protection of the closed immanent frame does not provide a fuller description of reality. It also mutilates certain human goods (i.e. by refusing to allow space for renunciation and ascetic practice) in its attempt to elevate the goods which the fanatics marginalized.

In response to the closed immanent frame, Taylor does not reach for rational arguments for the existence of God, but instead draws upon his own personal experience of God. The materialist claims for the closed immanent frame can be opposed "[b]ecause I can also have a religious life, a sense of God and how he impinges on my existence, against which I can check the supposed claims to refutation."[241] God does not stand at a cold, objective distance waiting for a logical argument to reach him. Taylor's God impinges upon his existence. This personal experience provides personal knowledge which Taylor will not allow the reductionist to ignore. Taylor relates this knowledge to loving and knowing another person, by drawing an analogy from Shakespeare's Othello. Othello can know Desdemona through Iago's evidence or he can trust the immediate knowledge he has of the person and the love of Desdemona. Sadly, "Desdemona's voice suffers from the blight of systematic mistrust."[242] Likewise, a riposte to

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[238] *Secular Age,* 546.

[239] *Secular Age,* 263.

[240] *Secular Age,* 239.
[241] *Secular Age,* 567

[242] *Secular Age,* 568.

Taylor that his experience of being impinged on by God was not scientifically objective evidence would be met by acknowledgement from Taylor, but this would not achieve the task of proving his personal, experiential, highly subjective knowledge false. Like Desdemona, Taylor is claiming that the personal experience of God within our society suffers from an unjustified, systematic mistrust.

So, Taylor argues vigorously for the importance of transcendent experiences as a clue to reality and he usually frames these experiences of fullness as broadly as possible to include as many types of religious experience as possible (even those experiences some people may not describe as religious). However, he also gives plenty of examples of who exactly Taylor believes is the source of his experiences of fullness. This is not an amorphous, all-inclusive, divine power of some sort. In his theological conversations, Taylor is attempting to avoid being overbearing in his theological stance, but he feels quite free giving his perspective as a person fully situated within the Christian tradition. Taylor believes that theism best interprets these experiences of fullness. He also believes that certain descriptions of God are better than others.

Pneumatology: Fullness

There is not a large amount of explicit pneumatology within *A Secular Age*, partially, because Taylor's experience of fullness is the way that he is describing spiritual encounters within this book. Daniel Horan notes "Whether that fullness is defined in terms of a sovereign or creator God or in some other way, there is in Taylor's account some consistent telos toward which all of humanity is oriented."[243] This description is quite consistent with the idea that the Holy Spirit is working through these encounters of fullness to orient creation toward the fullness

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[243] Daniel Horan, "A Rahnerian Theological Response to Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*," *New Blackfriars* 95.1055 (2014): 30.

of Jesus. God is continuing to meet and direct us in these encounters, and the traditional theological descriptions of the person involved in such guidance would point to the Holy Spirit. Taylor, though, is less explicit about this point. He does write, however, on 756-757 about the conditions for even understanding the concept of "spirit." Spirit is not something that we can point to in order to define. Instead, Hebrew and Greek point to wind and use it as a metaphor. "Spirit" is a concept that can only reach us through our faculties of language. We take the wind-metaphor and it opens a sense for us of "that gift, that rushing, that onset of strength to reach for something higher, something fuller."[244] Though he does not say "Holy Spirit," we can see the way that he is linking the experience of fullness with the enabling of "spirit." There is a subtle pneumatology at work throughout *A Secular Age*.

Yet, the Holy Spirit is definitely present in Taylor's works and thought. As was seen above, the Holy Spirit is implicitly at work in the divine pedagogy which is guiding humanity through history. And the Holy Spirit can be trusted to already have been at works in the lives of people wherever the Gospel is preached. So the Holy Spirit is there and that expectation that the Holy Spirit is present in many ways: history, politics, world religions, church life, is something that evangelicals could learn from Taylor. Not many evangelicals have this sort of understanding where the Holy Spirit is integrated and expected in so many areas of life. We expect to meet the Holy Spirit in prayer and at church, but what about in a letter to our congressman? Do we expect to see the Spirit's guidance within the wisdom literature of another religion or while studying the arc of Western history? Do we expect to see the Holy Spirit at work within a group of refugees from another culture and another religion who are being relocated into the neighborhood? There is a larger, more integrated expectation of the Holy

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[244] *Secular Age*, 756.

Spirit being present through all of human history in the works of Charles Taylor.[245] This has also

been a development in the Roman Catholic Church in the last century. Instead of the Kingdom

and the Holy Spirit being exclusively the Church's, Roman Catholic theology has opened itself

further to the idea that while God is at work in a special way in the church, his work and

Kingdom are not coextensive with the church.

While some might find the use of the term "fullness" to be a dodge from using terms that

are more clearly associated with theology, Taylor frames fullness in such a way that it can serve

as a bridge between Christians and non-Christians. There is an expectation that, if the person on

the other side is self-aware, there has been an experience of fullness or lack of fullness at some

point in her or his life. Even someone like Abraham Maslow, who is coming from a non-

Christian frame of reference, expects that after explanation of these sorts of experiences, most

people are able to identify some sort of "peak-experience" in their life.[246] This point is a gift to

the evangelical. It means that, somewhere, there is a point of contact, a point for conversation,

where that common experience of fullness can be explored. It can start by using the general term

"fullness," but the conversation does not have to stay there, because of the expectation that the

articulations of this experience by religious communities should have something true to say

about this common experience. By talking about fullness as the rush of the Holy Spirit, God

speaking to us, the experience of Jesus in us, peace that passes all understanding; the Christian

community is extending the boundaries of language to describe this experience. There are

descriptions here that may be quite apt and appropriate to an individual's experience of fullness

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[245] Perhaps something that Taylor picked up from his studies of Hegel's *Geist?* Perhaps.

[246] "As I gathered information, and as I became more skillful in asking questions, I found that higher and higher percentages of my subjects began to report peak-experiences…. I finally fell into the habit of expecting everyone to have peak-experiences and of being rather surprised if I ran across somebody who could report none at all." *Religions, Values, and Peak-Experiences,* 22.

which people cannot find elsewhere. Taylor gives us a chance to have a real conversation by listening to others from whatever background describe their experience of fullness and then share about the experience, traditions, and descriptions that have shaped that experience for us. This should not be viewed as a fix-all hook into which to steer every conversation, but it can be part of our evangelical hope that every person we encounter is encountering the Holy Spirit in some way, even if that encounter is inarticulate or being articulated in a way we do not yet recognize.[247]

Hagiography: Saints

Idiosyncratic embodying is important to Taylor's relational theology where there can be no cookie-cutter formula of what the life that attains to fullness should look like. People like Gerard Manley Hopkins, Francis of Assisi, the Venerable Bede, Jonathan Edwards, G.K. Chesterton, Therese de Lisieux, and so many others give us hints about how to find fullness and how that fullness expresses itself in a very particular life. We do not look for clones of a perfect model life,

> We look for new and unprecedented itineraries. Understanding our time in Christian terms is partly to discern these new paths, opened by pioneers who have discovered a way through the particular labyrinthine landscape we live in, its thickets and trackless wastes, to God.[248]

Theology here is both traditional and new. We attempt to understand our time in Christian terms, drawing on the full resources of the Christian tradition, of those who have opened the path

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[247] Peter Berger also has a fascinating section in his *A Rumor of Angels,* pages 55-85, where he writes about "*signals of transcendence* within the empirically given human situation." His examples are the "argument from ordering," "argument from play," "argument from hope," "argument from damnation," and "argument from humor."
[248] *Secular Age,* 756.

up to this point. However, there is no slavish imitation which can fully navigate the changing environment we find ourselves in. Theology and the pursuit of fullness must continue to be a fresh and extemporaneous response to our unique situation.

The lives of people who embody the fullness with which we are trying to connect give us hope in the midst of the constantly threatening "malaise of immanence." Within the immanent frame, as society is disconnected from the transcendent, there is a "fragility of meaning" which places the human life in the perilous position of not being able to describe why one life-choice is better than another, or whether living has any overarching meaning at all.[249] Because of the careful way that Taylor has attempted to understand this perspective, it is obvious that he is sympathetic to the concerns here, but this malaise does not define Taylor's view and this fragility of meaning, though it makes a naïve, premodern theology impossible today, does not make theology impossible. Both the lives of the saints and our experiences of fullness are real, and they give us hope and direction toward a larger understanding of human life than the closed immanent frame can provide.

In the evangelical church, we have not been very good at remembering our saints. History tends to skip from the Bible to the Reformers to Billy Graham and Bill Gaither for many evangelicals, and especially for those with a more sectarian outlook. There might be a few missionaries thrown in there with Charles Spurgeon and Oswald Chambers, but for many sitting in the pews the number of endorsed Christian lives is rather narrowly defined and recent. These narrow definitions and focus on contemporary examples stunt the imagination. It is important for lay people to have some grasp of church history, because the examples of Christians throughout time give us a taste of the innovation and diversity that is possible within the long

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[249] *Secular Age,* 308.

tradition of which we are a part. If "that old-time religion" actually means doing it the same way it was done fifty years ago, then we are in a dangerous place because we have lost sight of the myriad of possible paths that saints have walked in the past.

In a world of secularism, cross-pressures, the fragilization of belief, and ever expanding multicultural interactions, the next generation of Christians needs as many inspirations and tools in their spiritual backpacks as possible to forge a path through yet unexplored terrain. Encountering a hagiography, the story of a saint, for the first time, can help us imagine a new way forward. "The impact can be described as a regestalting of our world and its possibilities, which opens a new (to us) way of being."[250] The church needs the stories of its saints, from all times and every corner of the tradition, even those corners of the Christian tradition from which we feel estranged. In a time of rapid change, we need new Christian pilgrims who recognize the opportunities before them and fill in their open itinerary with courage, care, and imagination.

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[250] *Language Animal,* 46.

Chapter 11

Conclusion

Matthew Rose argued in an article in 2014 that Charles Taylor misrepresented Christianity and was attempting to remodel Roman Catholic faith in the shape of an unimaginative, rehashed, liberal theology.

By assimilating a secular way of believing with the essential content of Christian faith, *A Secular Age* sanctifies and makes absolute precisely what we should regard as contingent—the age in which we live. This is not to say that much of what Taylor writes about the ways secularity has altered our culture and our sense of self is wrong and should not shape academic debates. His descriptions of the secular age are compelling and deserve the wide discussion they have inspired.

But if it is true that we have reached the end of an era and now live in a secular age, it will be even more important for Christians to know what has been lost and why. This Taylor will not and perhaps cannot teach us. Instead, he makes secularism invincible to the radical criticism it most needs. Like all Hegelians, Taylor is an apologist for the present, a theologian of secular status quo.[251]

This criticism was published in *First Things*. *First Things* is a journal that was founded by Richard John Neuhaus and has a specific concern for discussions involving secularism and faith, so it is quite a fitting place for the works of Charles Taylor to be discussed. In this article, Matthew Rose claims that Taylor is succumbing to the temptation to reform theology in whatever direction the *zeitgeist* is blowing. One can easily understand this criticism. There is an anthropological concern in the works of Taylor. There are detailed discussions of what modern

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[251] Matthew Rose, "Tayloring Christianity: Charles Taylor, Matthew Rose argues, is a theologian of the secular status quo," <u>First Things</u> 248 (December 2014): 30.

people find reasonable, understandable, and believable. In many cases, Taylor is sympathetic to

the difficulties experienced by moderns when encountering faith, doctrines, and dogmas, and he

argues for positions that many times get tied into a bundle with liberal theology (like the decline

of hell). For those who are coming from a strongly conservative position, who are threatened by

political liberalism and multiculturalism, who do not want to face all of the ripples in their skeins

of beliefs that giving Taylor a hearing would entail, Charles Taylor can say many things that

both sting and challenge.

    However, there is a difference between being an apologist for the present age and being a

careful cataloguer of it. Taylor is constantly asking the question of how we arrived at this point

by looking at the past, by tracing long histories, by listening carefully to Church Fathers,

Romantics, the practices of peasants, sociologists, voices of French Revolution, psychologists,

saints, and poets: as wide a range as he can get into his very thick books. This is how he builds

the necessary background for understanding where we are now. That may make where we are

now seem far too solid, it may seem like it is not "contingent" enough, but Taylor is attempting

to tell the story of this point in time as carefully as possible. Part of what Taylor is telling us is

that we have lost is the connection to this long history which has shaped us.

    Matthew Rose is being unfair when he says that Taylor "denigrates the Christian past by

seeing it merely as a dogmatic stage in our advance to the progressive present."[252] It is baffling

to understand how someone could say this of a person who has so much respect for the past and

the lives of Christian saints from the past. There is no denigration of these aspects within

Taylor's thought. Gains that have been made are made because of the past that we have been

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[252] "Tayloring Christianity," 30.

allowed to share in. Taylor believes that there have been real gains made, but being positive about real gains is not the same as being one who denigrates the past.

Is Taylor assimilating Christianity with secularism, or is he describing where we are today to better understand the landscape in which belief happens? There are plenty of places where Taylor has his own opinions and personal insights about the direction he believes the church should be heading. He is sometimes hard on those who do not seem to be sufficiently aware of the changed landscape. However, his point is that the landscape has changed and the church must deal with it. The map he has given us, filled with cross-pressures and social imaginaries, is a tool for making sense of our current position and planning ways to move skillfully through this environment. He is attempting to articulate the rough contours of beliefs and social realities which are lingering in the background of our interactions. In some ways, that does make them more real, but we cannot complain that the mapmakers have made North America more real for us as a thing by making the map. Cartographers do not create maps to endorse Mount Everest, but to show that, in reality *as best as they can grasp it*, Mount Everest is approximately here in relation to other parts of the world.

One can say that Charles Taylor's map is not the best map. To do so, though, one has to produce a better map. If the map is a generally good one, which Matthew Rose seems to affirm, then one cannot fault Taylor for attempting to draw some possible paths through a rugged piece of terrain. If the nature of belief has changed, if there are pressures and dilemmas that are truly new in human history, if we have stepped into a world of global connectivity and diversity which was impossible for all the generations of humanity before us, then living in connection with the past and with fidelity to the long Christian tradition will take more of our powers of engagement, more imagination, more thoughtful responsiveness, more humble listening, and more prayers that

we would be divinely met and aided in the middle of all of this. We have an open itinerary, an as

of yet unplanned space, and it remains to be seen what shape our journey toward God will take.

Rather than denigrating the past or assimilating Christianity, Taylor has given the church an

example of someone living their faith in the midst of the public square. Taylor sees his own

work as reaching out to find and grow people who can encounter diversity and otherness with

understanding and openness. That should be an important goal for any truly evangelical group.

Taylor sees these people as "firebreaks" in a volatile world. If the status quo was really a

progressive paradise, then it is curious that Taylor would see any need for firebreaks. Yet,

Taylor understands that, even with the gains that have been made and the progress that has been

achieved, humanity still stands constantly on the knife edge of violence and self-destruction.

I don't think that we're going to manage to get through this tremendous diversification of

Western society with a decent society unless we not only have the right rules and the right

principles and so on, but have enough people who have this kind of gut sense that there's

something really valuable in that other person – and other view, etc. – and are willing to talk

to them, because when the rubber hits the road and the going gets really tough, when certain

media are, let's say, not behaving entirely responsibly in whipping up the wrong kind of

sentiments, it matters a lot…. If there are enough people here and there who have enough

meeting and understanding of the others, they can stand like firebreaks in a forest fire.[253]

The world needs more firebreaks. The world needs more sensitive, thoughtful Christians

ready to listen, ready to meet someone with respect and love. May we be churches truly

prepared to meet and understand those around us. May we be inspired toward new possibilities

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[253] "Afterword: Apologia pro Libro suo," 321.

and imagine new ways to humbly be salt and light and firebreaks in the world. May the love of

Jesus guide us through our yet unmapped, undecided, open itinerary to God.

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