

Charles Taylor, Michael Polanyi
and the Critique of Modernity

Charles W. Lowney II
Editor

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Pluralist and Emergentist Directions

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ABBREVIATIONS

BOOKS OF CHARLES TAYLOR (1931)

- ASA *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007.
- DC *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays*. Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011.
- EA *The Ethics of Authenticity*. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1991; published in Canada as *The Malaise of Modernity*.
- MSI *Modern Social Imaginaries*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004.
- PA *Philosophical Arguments*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995.
- RR ——— and Hubert Dreyfus. *Retrieving Realism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015.
- SS *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

BOOKS OF MICHAEL POLANYI (1891–1976)

- KB *Knowing and Being*. Edited by Marjorie Grene. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969.
- M ——— and Harry Prosch. *Meaning*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975.
- PK *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958.
- SFS *Science, Faith and Society*. 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1964.

- SM *The Study of Man*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972 [1959].
TD *The Tacit Dimension*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1966.

CHAPTER 6

“Transcendence” in *A Secular Age* and Enchanted (Un)Naturalism

David James Stewart

Taylor is an eminent scholar whose work is ever mindful of the tacit dimension of knowledge. For those interested in a broadly Polanyian approach to constructive theology, my hunch is that a careful reading of Taylor’s treatment of transcendence in *A Secular Age* will prove interesting.¹ What I find is that, given the shift in background assumptions, we can no longer treat transcendence as unproblematic, nor assume that naturalism is its opposing alternative. Even if there are aspects of my presentation the reader finds contentious, I nonetheless hope that this analysis helps us gain a greater appreciation for the role of tacit knowledge and our fundamental theological assumptions when it comes to inquiring into the characteristics of “belief” and “unbelief” in secular contexts. The majority of this chapter will focus on Taylor and the shift in historical assumptions that underlie Christianity in the secular age. At the end will I indicate how all of this opens up to a connection between Taylor’s thinking and that of Polanyi and Hegel.

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GENERAL OVERVIEW OF *A SECULAR AGE*

In summarizing the purpose of *A Secular Age*, Taylor states that he is mainly concerned with the transition from an era where religious belief was nearly ubiquitous to an era where unbelief has become the default. In other words, he isn't going to focus on any single religious belief or doctrine *per se*, but rather, it is precisely the *transition* between these two eras that he wants to "describe, and perhaps also (very partially) explain" (*ASA* 14).¹ Before saying more about this, notice the contrast he sets up between "description" and "explanation" here. The difference seems obvious enough. He is not only going to tell us what secularity is all about (i.e., describe), but he is also going to show us how and why our world came to be secularized in the first place (i.e., explain). As far as I'm concerned, his description and explanation of the advent of secularity is simply brilliant—and this is not just a lame attempt at flattery, it is almost universally recognized that Taylor's analysis of the phenomenon that is "secularity" is nothing short of groundbreaking. And yet . . . it seems to me that there is, in fact, more going on in his narrative than just description and explanation. I simply cannot shake the feeling that just below the levels of description and explanation, there is an aspect of the narrative that can only be labeled as *prescription*. In short, I am claiming that *A Secular Age* is haunted by a nostalgia for the supernatural, transcendent God of classical Christian theism. The bulk of this chapter attempts to explain this.

To begin to understand what I mean with the above claim, we first need to get a proper handle on what exactly Taylor is doing in this book. It can be said that the entire argument of *A Secular Age* essentially develops as a response to the following questions: Why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God during certain eras of Western society (e.g., during the Middle Ages), whereas today, belief is not only no longer the default option, but also highly contestable in itself? Furthermore, how did alternative belief and unbelief systems become thinkable? (*ASA* 25)

Taylor's thesis can thus be understood as comprising three interrelated claims. First, "a secular age is one in which the eclipse of all goals beyond human flourishing becomes conceivable" (*ASA* 19). Second, the transition to a secular age marks the end of naïve commitment to the "transcendent." And third, the transition to secularity is related to the emergence of new conditions of belief, which are in turn directly related to the advent of "exclusive humanism" (*ASA* 21). The preliminary conclusion to be drawn here is that secularity is not synonymous with

unbelief, but rather, it has to do with the *contestability* of belief and the shift in conditions of background knowledge that made all of this possible.

As you can see, his thesis is straightforward enough, but the narrative he unfolds to support it is quite intricate.

SUBTRACTION STORIES, CROSS-PRESSURE, AND THE NOVA EFFECT

An abiding feature of his narrative is a polemic against “subtraction stories.” Contrary to conventional wisdom, Taylor claims that accounting for the myriad changes that made possible the advent of exclusive humanism is no easy task. Accordingly, he sets out to show how exclusive humanism crept up on us in intermediate forms such as deism and humanism, and that both of these emerge from developments within the Christian tradition itself (*ASA* 19). In other words, the advent of modernity and secularity cannot be described in terms of human beings liberating themselves from primitive illusions; it is not enough to baldly assert that modernity and secularity is what is left over after we have sloughed off our naïve commitments to religion, transcendence, etc. Subtraction stories simply offer no plausible explanation for why devout believers would ever abandon their faith. Moreover, the argument that begins with the findings of Darwin and proceeds to the refutation of religion—a common motif of such theories—is anything but cogent (*ASA* 4). He finds these theories “very unconvincing” (*ASA* 21). As far as Taylor is concerned, modernity and secularity are rather the fruit of new “inventions, newly constructed self-understandings and practices, and cannot be explained in terms of perennial features of human life” (*ASA* 22). In order to account for the transition from a “naïve” religious disposition to a more “reflective” one, we have to account for the change in presuppositions at the level of background knowledge (*ASA* 13). For instance, it is not enough to recognize that the rise of secularity is related to the collapse of an “enchanted” worldview, what is needed is an account of how an *alternative* worldview became a viable option in the first place (*ASA* 26).

One of the many admirable features of Taylor’s narrative is that he is ever mindful of how the achievements of secularity impact the lived experiences of real people. For example, he notices that in secular contexts people are constantly pushed and pulled in different directions by competing ideologies and belief systems, a phenomenon he refers to as “cross-pressuring.” The upshot of cross-pressuring is the “nova effect,”

where options for belief and unbelief perpetually multiply (*ASA* 302), further complicating what was already a difficult situation (for believers and unbelievers alike). All of this, of course, has significant implications for how we experience the world and understand ethics, morality, etc. Taylor is particularly interested in exploring how secularity and all it entails influences the way we conceptualize, pursue, and experience “flourishing” and “fullness.” Here, “fullness” is shorthand for “the condition we aspire to” (*ASA* 780n8).

WHAT IS “SECULARITY”?

Key to understanding Taylor’s argument is the way he develops the notion of “secularity.” Secularity is generally one of those terms that folks tend to use idiosyncratically. Consequently, there are numerous ways of understanding the concept, and this, of course, can result in confusion. To get a better sense of the aspect of secularity Taylor is interested in exploring, let us briefly consider his threefold taxonomy of the concept.

Secularity 1 (S1): This mode of secularity refers to public spaces that have allegedly been “emptied of God, or of any reference to ultimate reality” (*ASA* 2). Interestingly, especially in the US, the majority of people who occupy these spaces continue to believe in God or the transcendent. Taylor points out that the displacement of God from public space is perfectly compatible with the fact that many people continue to believe (in something).

Secularity 2 (S2): This has to do with the general decline of belief in God and religious practice (*ASA* 2). From this perspective, it is clear that Western Europe has become secularized (and this holds true even for those countries that still make reference to God in the public sphere).

Secularity 3 (S3): This mode is Taylor’s own invention, and it has to do with the *conditions* of belief rather than the *content* of belief or the spaces in which these beliefs are manifest. From this perspective, the shift to secularity consists in the move away from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and unproblematic toward a society where belief in God is merely one option among others, and no longer the default option at that (*ASA* 3).

Each mode can be understood as a family of theories that are united by a common feature.² Each mode makes a common reference to “religion,” but whereas the first two modes are concerned with the *content* of religious belief and the spaces where these beliefs play out, the third

mode is unique in the sense that it has to do with the *conditions* of religious belief and practice. In other words, Taylor’s interest in secularity has to do with the entire “context of understanding” in which our moral, spiritual, or religious experiences take place (*ASA* 3).

THE POLANYIAN ASPECT OF *A SECULAR AGE*

This is where we encounter the Polanyian dimension of Taylor’s narrative: his goal is to make explicit the initially tacit “background” of the conditions that make possible particular constellations of belief and unbelief in secular contexts. He does mention Polanyi in the introduction to *ASA*, but to be fair, he doesn’t explicitly invoke the notion of the tacit dimension. Instead, he appeals Heidegger’s notion of “pre-ontology.” Either way, even if these concepts aren’t perfectly synonymous, the point remains the same. His examination of our society in terms of S3 focuses on the shifting assumptions in our tacit background, changes in our collective “social imaginaries” (*ASA* 171–176), and the developments that created the condition of possibility for the transition from belief as default to belief as one option among many.

If you’ve read *A Secular Age*, you know that it isn’t easy to classify the book as a whole. What *exactly* is Taylor up to here? Clearly, he is doing more than straightforward historical analysis. Nor does he limit himself to social theory or plain old philosophy. It’s ultimately a unique blend of multiple discourses. For me, this seamless interweaving of discourses is what makes it such a fascinating read. With that being said, I think it would be fair to describe Taylor’s narrative in terms of a phenomenological analysis of shifting sociohistorical conditions (that allowed for the invention of a disenchanted worldview, the collapse of an enchanted worldview, and thus, the advent of secularity). At the same time, I would also submit that there is a very specific set of theological convictions informing his argument at the tacit level. Given the subject matter (viz., the contestability of religious belief, etc.), how could this not be the case? Admittedly, the language of “informing” does not do justice to his multifaceted narrative; it might even give the impression that I think Taylor’s argument is somehow blindly driven by unexamined theological presuppositions, and this is not the case. At the same time, I do think it is important to recognize that his argument does unfold in the context of a particular theological paradigm, even if—no, *especially* if—this paradigm is operative primarily at the tacit or background level.

Consider that his description and explanation of the advent of secularity begins by assuming that in premodern, pre-secular contexts, religious belief, *in general*, was normative. Indeed, the ubiquity of religious belief during such eras is more or less an objective fact that will not be disputed here. At the same time, his narrative also seems to imply that a particular *kind* of belief was normative—at least with regard to the belief systems of Christians. This is not to suggest that Taylor implies that in pre-secular contexts there was *uniformity* concerning the object of belief in traditional Christianity. Clearly, he does not, and rightly so. It is to suggest, however, that despite the obvious lack of total uniformity regarding the character/content of the object of devotion among pre-secular Christians, Taylor’s narrative does seem to normalize a particular *version* of Christian belief during those times. Clarification: is this another way of saying that Taylor’s narrative proceeds on the assumption of an *orthodox* core in historical Christianity (a core that eventually becomes contestable for various reasons)? In short, yes—and in and of itself, this is not a problem (nor is it a very interesting observation either). Obviously, that there was/were forms(s) of Christianity throughout history that was/were considered “orthodox” is objectively true. The problem, however, is this: Considering that we do in fact live in a secular age, where one of the features of our context is the very contestability of religious belief itself, it seems problematic to assume that what was once considered orthodox/normative should continue to be considered orthodox/normative; moreover, we should give serious consideration as to whether the very category of “orthodoxy” continues to be meaningful any longer, let alone helpful. One doesn’t have to be a church historian or an über-postmodern pluralist to recognize that what is considered orthodox or normative in the context of religious experience and belief is highly relative (even within the Christian tradition).³ Let me give a specific example of what I’m talking about.

THE “GREAT INVENTION” OF THE WEST

In the introduction, Taylor plainly identifies one of the key factors in the rise of secularity: the concept of an “immanent” order in Nature, which he refers to as the “great invention” of the West (ASA 15). In short, the transition to a secular age is directly related to the emergence of exclusive humanism—the movement through which “the eclipse of all goals beyond human flourishing becomes conceivable” (ASA 19). This, in

turn, is a development of earlier forms of deism and humanism, and ultimately, of orthodox Christianity itself. There is an important connection here between the emergence of exclusive humanism and the invention of an immanent order in Nature. With this turn to immanence, Nature came to be explained on its own terms, leaving open the question of whether it had any “deeper significance” and whether or not it was necessary to infer a transcendent Creator beyond it (*ASA* 15). Notice that Taylor’s formulation here implies an inherent connection between “significance” (i.e., *meaning*) and a “transcendent Creator” (who in effect acts as a fixed reference point and thus a guarantee for ultimate/cosmic meaning). This is by no means a settled issue: does the meaning/significance of Christianity depend on whether or not “God” is and has been a self-conscious metaphysical super-agent from time immemorial? Taylor, of course, has not set out to explicitly answer this question, but he does point out that the invention of an immanent order involved denying or problematizing “any form of interpenetration between the things of Nature, on the one hand, and the ‘supernatural’ on the other, be this understood in terms of the one transcendent God, or of Gods or spirits, or magic forces, or whatever” (*ASA* 16).⁴ As far as I can tell, Taylor does not raise the issue of whether or not the notion of the “supernatural” might, in fact, deserve to be put on trial. Can the changes in the conditions that (begin to) make belief in the supernatural contestable really be separated from what the concept of “supernatural” intends to signify? In other words, even in an analysis in terms of S3, should we divorce *conditions* from *content*?

Given this turn to immanence, then, Taylor suggests that instead of asking whether the source of fullness (“the condition we aspire to”) is experienced as originating from “without” or from “within” human nature, we could ask whether people recognize something “beyond” or “transcendent” to their lives (*ASA* 16). He then proceeds to lay out the parameters for his phenomenological analysis of moral/spiritual experience (*ASA* 780n10) and religion, claiming that “whether one believes in some agency or power transcending the immanent order is indeed, a crucial feature of ‘religion’, as this has figured in secularization theories” (*ASA* 20). This “crucial feature” of religion, in turn, must be understood in the context of the first two modes of secularity: it is our relation to the transcendent God that is displaced from the center of social life according to the theories of S1; it is faith in this transcendent God whose decline is tracked in the theories of S2.

Taylor then supplements his account of religion (as belief in the transcendent) with a practical question: what constitutes the fulfilled life? In other words, does “the highest, the best life” involve seeking, acknowledging, or serving a good which is “beyond, in the sense of independent from, human flourishing” (ASA 16)? From the perspective of the Judeo-Christian tradition, Taylor says the answer is “yes.” While human flourishing is good as far as the Judeo-Christian tradition is concerned, it is not the ultimate goal—the ultimate goal is loving and worshipping God; this is indicative of a “fundamental tension in Christianity” (ASA 18). Taylor tells us that the whole point of making a distinction between “human flourishing” and goals which go “beyond” this is that with the advent of modern secularity, for the first time in history we see a type of humanism where there are no “final goals beyond human flourishing, nor any allegiance to anything else beyond this flourishing” (ASA 18). In other words, while Taylor recognizes that the notion of “flourishing” has been problematized by the inventions of secularity, it seems to me that he does not sufficiently consider whether premodern conceptions of “flourishing” are in fact problematic. My point is not to offer an answer one way or the other, but only to suggest that this is a question that cannot be left off the table in an analysis of secularity.

Nevertheless, throughout the entire book, to his credit, Taylor is ever mindful of the “slippery” (ASA 16) nature of words like *transcendence* and *immanence*. And yet, given the contestability of religious belief in a secular age, and given the obvious problems related the notion of “transcendence” in general, we should ask if it is still appropriate to define religion in terms of whether or not one believes in some agency or power *transcending* the immanent order. It is undeniable that this used to be a crucial feature of the Christian religion, but is this still necessarily the case? Regardless, even if most Christians do in fact continue to believe that “God” is some sort of transcendent, supernatural agency, does that make it true?⁵ Regardless of how one answers this, once again, it seems to be the precisely the kind of question that has become essential to ask in a secular context.

TAYLOR’S “PHENOMENOLOGY OF MORAL/SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE”

Given that one of the fundamental aspects of a secular age is the very contestability of belief, it makes perfect sense that Taylor would begin by speaking to the differences of lived experience between “believers”

and “unbelievers.” Instead of discussing “belief” and “unbelief” as “rival theories,” however, he decides to discuss them in terms of the different kinds of experiences that shape the way we understand our lives (*ASA* 4; Taylor’s emphasis). By honing in on what it is like to be a “believer” and what it is like to be an “unbeliever,” Taylor sets up “belief” and “unbelief” as competing hermeneutical grids by which we all interpret our moral/spiritual lives (*ASA* 5). Keep in mind that Taylor acknowledges there are many viable options between fundamentalism and atheism (*ASA* 4), even though he doesn’t explore the phenomenon of secularity from any of those perspectives in particular. One of the implications of my claim is that it is an open question as to whether or not an account of secularity would look different if analyzed from one of these other perspectives.⁶

We all see our lives and/or the spaces in which we live our lives as having a certain moral or spiritual shape, Taylor avers. Consequently, “Somewhere, in some activity, or condition, lies a fullness, a richness: that is, in that place (activity or condition), life is fuller, richer, deeper, more worth while [sic], more admirable, more that it should be. Perhaps this sense of fullness is something we just catch glimpses of from afar off” (*ASA* 5). With this in mind, Taylor offers a threefold “phenomenology of moral/spiritual experience” (*ASA* 780n10), suggesting that the typical dimensions of human moral/spiritual life can be understood in terms of (1) fullness, (2) modes of exile, and (3) variations of a “middle condition” (*ASA* 8). With respect to these three modes or dimensions of moral/spiritual life, Taylor suggests that there are some obvious differences between believers and unbelievers.

The most obvious difference between believers and unbelievers has to do with references to or a sense of “God.” For believers, an account of the place of fullness clearly requires reference to “God,” which is to say, reference to “something beyond human life and/or nature” (*ASA* 8). This is not the case for unbelievers insofar as they tend to understand fullness “naturalistically” (an extremely problematic term in its own right); that is, in terms of a human being’s intrinsic potential (*ASA* 8). In short, believers *believe* in something “beyond” while unbelievers, quite simply, do not. In Taylor’s analysis, it is with respect to belief in this “beyond” that distinguishes one group from another.

Another important difference between the two groups has to do with the “whence” of fullness, specifically whether it comes from “within” human nature or from “without.” For the believer, the sense is that fullness *comes to* them, as a gift, a grace. Fullness is something the believer

receives. Through this, believers also receive something like a personal relationship “from another being capable of love and giving” (*ASA* 8). The story is more complicated for unbelievers. In general, the unbeliever believes that the power to experience fullness is “within.” Taylor notes that there are at least two variations on this theme, both of which are related to our nature as rational beings.⁷ In short, there is a mode in which disengaged reason *is* enough to achieve this sense of fullness, and a mode in which disengaged reason *is not* enough (*ASA* 8–9). Taylor cites the “Kantian variant” as a clear example of the former, and those theories of immanence that emerge from the Romantic critique of disengaged reason (e.g., deep ecology) as instances of the latter.⁸

Again, pay attention to the ambiguity of terms like “without” or “within” here. Forget the different understandings of the “whence” between so-called believers and unbelievers, how about the differences between Christians themselves? In short, a Christian who indwells a theological worldview where God is a supernatural agent, utterly transcending the created order will have a different sense of the *agapeic* love that comes from “without” compared to a Christian who wholeheartedly believes in God and yet rejects the notion of God *qua* supernatural big Other (i.e., with a Christian who understands God—and here I again invoke this somewhat regrettable term—*naturalistically*).⁹ Once again, if it is in fact the case that even among Christians there are a number of possible ways to understand “transcendence,” and I’m not sure how this can be disputed, how are we to maintain that there are “crucial features” of religion *at the level of these deeply problematic concepts* (let alone that belief in a “transcendent” God is one of them)? If there are crucial “belief” features of the Christian religion, and I believe that there are, then at the very least, given our secular context, upon identifying one these “crucial features,” we simply must say more about what we mean when using them.

Granted, for the most part, when Taylor speaks of “transcendence,” he is speaking of a flourishing that goes “beyond” mere human flourishing—and he is perfectly clear about this. Nevertheless, when he identifies a “crucial feature” of religion in terms of belief in an agency or power transcending the immanent order (*ASA* 20), it is clear that the “transcendence” he has in mind has to do with God’s relationship to the world and not just the “whence” of fullness. The problem is not that he uses the same term to refer to slightly different concepts (viz., the ultimate source of meaning/fullness, God’s relationship to the world, etc.), but that not enough attention is paid to the relationship between our

conception of God’s relationship to the world at the *tacit-background* level and the way in which we experience the significance of our religious experiences in general. When accounting for the “whence” of fullness in a properly secular context, we simply cannot understand the “without” or the “within” without first accounting for the numerous possible ways that God could be related to the world (which, I claim, is an idea that functions primarily at the tacit level). For instance, it is possible for a Christian to reject the notion of a transcendent, supernatural God, and still experience fullness as coming from “without,” as a gift. Is this just an example of what Taylor has in mind when he references “deep ecology?” I don’t think so, for the simple reason that “deep ecology” was offered as an example of an *unbeliever* who considered disengaged reason to be insufficient concerning the experience of fullness. Not only am I claiming that someone who rejects the notion of God *qua* metaphysical super-agent can still be a Christian “believer,” but also that such a person can experience fullness as coming from “without,” as a gift. Taylor seems to overlook this possibility.

More to the point, even if we claim that belief “in Christ” is a crucial feature of Christian belief, and I think it is, this idea is hardly self-explanatory. If anything, it is precisely these extremely familiar terms (e.g., dwelling “in Christ,” “transcendence,” etc.) that we need to invoke with the most care and precision given our secular contexts. As Viktor Shklovsky once noted, “People living at the seashore grow so accustomed to the murmur of the waves that they never hear it. By the same token, we scarcely ever hear the words which we utter. . . . Our perception of the world has withered away, what has remained in mere recognition.”¹⁰ Hegel suggests the same thing: “Quite generally, the familiar, just because it is familiar, is not cognitively understood.”¹¹ Perhaps my claim is simply that we should never let these concepts become so familiar that they cease being strange and wonderful. The trick is to figure out how to maintain a critical stance with these familiar concepts without letting it render us incapable of indwelling them in the context of religious experiences.¹²

THE CONTESTABILITY OF (CERTAIN) BELIEF(S): FURTHER ANALYSIS

At this point, we need to attend to the arbitrary, fluid character of the categories of “belief” and “unbelief.” It could just as easily be said that the “believer” in Taylor’s account is an unbeliever in another account

(e.g., Taylor's believer is really an "unbeliever" with respect to a human's ability to experience fullness without recourse to a supernatural deity). Granted, in the broader context of Taylor's argument (viz., how belief, *in general*, was nearly ubiquitous at one point in time and only later became one option among many), his normalization of "belief" in general makes perfect sense. At the same time, we should also keep in mind Taylor's insightful analysis into the occasionally problematic nature of theological categories inherited immediately from our traditions. He points out that the categories passed down through tradition are often difficult to escape, and even if we become aware of their problematic nature the way forward isn't always obvious. Accordingly, "we operate with a certain amount of unclarity [sic] and confusion. This is the condition of doing theology" (ASA 643). Taylor offers the example of how our understanding and experience of personal transformation plays out differently if we understand the flesh/spirit binary (e.g., Romans 7: 5–6, 8: 1–17; Galatians 5: 17–21) in terms of the body/soul dichotomy endemic of a disengaged Enlightenment rationality rather than the way Paul meant it. His general point is that we *can*, in fact, identify the erroneous judgments of our tradition; the misidentification of flesh/spirit with body/soul is case in point. In the context of spiritual formation, he points out that our experience of agape doesn't take place along the axis of body/soul but rather flesh/spirit. This might seem like a minor difference, but Taylor is right: indwelling Paul's flesh/spirit binary in terms of body/soul has significant consequences for the way we experience spiritual formation. Flesh/spirit implies a struggle of desire (i.e., whose desire are we, as Christians, going to submit to); body/soul implies something totally different (viz. a form of ontological dualism). When Paul speaks of flesh/spirit, he is not talking about a body/soul dualism. The point here is simply that *X* religious experience will look and feel different depending on if it is (tacitly) interpreted in light of *Y*, or in light of *Z*.

I want to make a similar argument with respect to the notion of "believer." If for no other reason, the contestability of belief (in terms of S3) means that we should be hesitant about normalizing belief or unbelief at all—and this is coming from one who identifies as a *Christian* (i.e., a "believer," a follower of Jesus of Nazareth). Perhaps it will be helpful to take this point out of a polemical context and offer a parallel example. Back in the day when folks were allowed to smoke in restaurants, I always resented the fact that the choices offered were the "smoking" or "non-smoking" sections. (My dad's smoking always bothered me,

not because I cared how it was perceived socially, but because it made breathing less than pleasant. I do think he was amused, however, when I suggested that the sections of the restaurant should be labeled “breathing” or “non-breathing.”) Why define the non-smoker in terms of a “non” in the first place? Wouldn’t it be equally fair to label the same groups in terms of “healthy” and “non-healthy?” Along these same lines, it needs to be acknowledged that we are all atheists with respect to some concept of God or other. This is indisputable, and has nothing to do with the sophomoric notion that “everything is relative.” Neither does it have anything to do with political correctness—in fact, let the record show that political correctness is the least of my worries here. Rather, my concern is with the tacit theological background supporting the normalization of “believer” in terms of one who believes in something (metaphysically) “beyond.” My issue is not with the category of “beyond” in and of itself. Rather, my point is that, given the general contestability of belief in our context, it is not enough to simply acknowledge that “beyond” is a tricky concept. Instead, once again, the *content* of “beyond” itself has to be made a part of the inquiry. Unless we claim to be disinterested observers, it seems undeniable that the ways in which we indwell certain theological concepts at the tacit level will influence our assessment of the “achievements” that lead to distinctions between believer/unbeliever and within/without—distinctions indicative of a secular age.

Can we see that in a secular context, even as a confessing Christian, what counts as “without” and “within” (with respect to the “whence” of fullness, or even God’s relation to the world for that matter) is far from clear, far from unproblematic? If Taylor is correct that secularity problematized the “whence” of fullness, then it also problematized the notions of “transcendence” and “immanence,” and accordingly, the notions of “without” and “within” as well. My point is that even though Taylor repeatedly acknowledges that these are “slippery” categories in general, he occasionally deploys them without properly accounting for what makes them conceptually problematic. At the same time, he does admit that “all this is rather confusing, and suggests that we need a new, more nuanced map of the ideological terrain. Modern culture is not just the scene of a struggle between belief and unbelief” (ASA 636). That being said, given Taylor’s perspicacious analysis of the contestability of religious belief in our secular age, it is somewhat surprising that he doesn’t give more attention to the contestability of particular beliefs, for

instance, whether or not belief in a supernatural agency metaphysically transcending the created order *should* still be considered a crucial feature of the Christian religion. In other words, he doesn't give enough consideration to whether or not certain beliefs or concepts (or even practices) deserve to be thoroughly reimagined in light of what we are continuing to learn about the world.

And yet, interestingly, he is not averse to occasionally calling into question the so-called orthodox doctrinal formulations of pre-secular Christianity. His treatment of the relationship between violence (viz. the wrath of God) and the atonement is case in point (*ASA* 649–56).¹³ I concur that the penal substitutionary model of atonement is one of the most contestable paradigms ever to fly under the banner of Christianity (I refuse to concede that it was ever “orthodox”) and that few doctrines are in more need of being reimagined. But that is not our interest here. The point is that Taylor is clearly willing to depart from what was once considered orthodox, and that he does so with respect to the atonement and not transcendence seems to support my claim that just below the surface of all the description and explanation, Taylor wants to show that belief in the supernatural God of classical theism is still warranted.

Granted: perhaps it can be said that I am asking *A Secular Age* to answer questions that it never asked in the first place, perhaps I want Taylor's narrative to be more theological than phenomenological. This is a fair rebuttal. However, I don't think it is unreasonable to suggest that the problematic nature of certain theological concepts not only needs to be acknowledged, but also made a central feature of the inquiry. Even if the theological question is not one that he explicitly sets out to ask (let alone answer), the question is nevertheless implied by the subject matter.

Let me try to say all of this in slightly different terms. Over the course of Taylor's narrative, just below the surface of his description and explanation of secularity, there seems to be a sense of longing for a theological vision that has been lost, a lament for a theistic worldview that is no longer the default position, one that has become deeply contestable from the perspective of a disenchanted worldview. And so when I suggest that there is a subtle hint of “prescription” just below the levels of description and explanation, what I mean is that while Taylor plainly acknowledges something has been lost with the transition to a secular world with respect to the normativity of (a particular constellation of) religious belief, in both form and content, there seems to be a sense in which he thinks that *it should not be so*. What, exactly, should not be so?

I am not saying that Taylor thinks secularity is somehow bad or unfortunate in and of itself. Clearly, his attitude toward secularity is far more nuanced than this. What I am saying, however, is that while Taylor acknowledges that religious belief has become problematic in secular contexts, he nevertheless thinks that such belief does not and/or should not have to be problematic for those who still find it to be meaningful and consider it a true account of the world. And so, when it comes to his treatment of transcendence, my claim, once again, is that without necessarily advocating for a return to a pre-secular world or a premodern metaphysics, Taylor’s description and explanation of the emergence of secularity is nevertheless haunted by a nostalgia for the supernatural, transcendent God of classical theism.

Admittedly, Taylor states that his whole book is an attempt to study religious faith in the West in a “strong sense,” which entails belief in a transcendent reality and the related aspiration to a type of transformation that goes beyond ordinary human flourishing (*ASA* 510). But once again, this only raises the question of how an analysis of secularity might proceed differently if it accounted for religion in a “non-strong sense,” whatever that might mean. We can agree with Taylor that religion in a “strong sense” has emphatically not been rendered meaningless by the advent of exclusive humanism, but is this enough? Arguing that we are warranted in holding a particular belief is different from arguing the merit of the belief itself. The issue is not whether our religious beliefs can be “proven” or even whether we are warranted in holding certain beliefs, but rather whether or not we insulate our beliefs from critical scrutiny, public and personal. In no way am I claiming that Taylor holds his religious beliefs uncritically. I am only saying that the religious beliefs he does hold seem to be treated as irrevocably orthodox/normative in the context of his argument. I consider this to be problematic for the simple reason that secularity, by Taylor’s own definition, is related to the (change in conditions in background knowledge that led to the) very contestability of religious beliefs. Perhaps this is not enough, perhaps an account of secularity not only has to account for the contestability of religious belief in general, but also the contestability of specific beliefs in particular. It is one thing to notice that “transcendence” has become a contestable concept, and it is quite another to examine why, to examine whether or not the term as it has been historically employed deserves to be contested. Consequently, as a committed Christian who nevertheless doesn’t share a commitment to the ostensibly “orthodox” belief in a

supernatural God who transcends the created order and guarantees cosmic meaning, I cannot help but conclude that Taylor and I will probably arrive at different understandings of human “flourishing,” and thus, we will understand the challenge of secularity to religious belief differently.

It seems to me that the contestability of the category of “orthodoxy” is one of the gifts of secularity to theological and religious discourse, for it serves as an invitation to embody a critical stance toward our religious experiences and beliefs even while we continue to give ourselves wholly to them. This can go a long way in preventing our beliefs from becoming sterile and our practices from becoming rote. This, at least, has been my experience. Indeed, there is an important connection here between a theological hermeneutics of secularity and Polanyi’s notion of “dynamic orthodoxy.”¹⁴

What this essentially means is that theological discourse—something that we all participate in whenever we reflect on our religious experiences or beliefs—is far more complicated in a secular age than it was in pre-secular contexts for the simple reason that we can no longer deploy theological concepts without making their contestability a central part of our inquiry.¹⁵ Regardless of how we feel about this, unless we are content to slide toward a fundamentalist posture, there is no going back. There is certainly a chance for a second naiveté, as it were, but Taylor is right, our beliefs will probably always be burdened by a sense of inadequacy and uncertainty.

What are the implications of my analysis of Taylor’s argument? Let me be perfectly clear: in no way does any of this diminish the value of his project as a whole. It does, however, suggest that our fundamental concept of God, insofar as it operates at a tacit level, significantly influences our attitude toward and experience of secularity. Conversely, it also suggests that an analysis of religious belief in a secular context must take into account one’s own operative concept of God insofar as religious experiences cannot be properly divorced from tacit theological assumptions. I will let you decide if these are contestable claims. Either way, what I am basically saying is that even if someone is totally ignorant of concepts such as “transcendence” and “immanence,” their religious experiences are nevertheless filtered through these categories (even if they would use completely different terms). Consider whether or not it is even possible to have a religious experience that isn’t predicated on some sort of tacit belief system concerning how “God” relates to the “world.” Or, in light of Taylor’s argument, consider whether or not it is possible

to reflect on the “whence” of human flourishing without having in place some basic formulation of God’s relationship to the world.

It seems to me that at times Taylor unintentionally drives a wedge between our tacit theological assumptions (or could we say our theological “worldview”?) and our lived religious experiences. Consequently, he ends up normalizing a particular kind of religious belief, which in turn influences his treatment of “flourishing” and “fullness.” This is equally true when it comes to categories such as “without” and “within” regarding the “whence” of fullness and human flourishing. The irony, from this perspective, is that Taylor is keenly aware of how theory and practice, of how experiences and beliefs, are inextricably intertwined: “Just because human practices are the kind of thing which makes sense, certain ‘ideas’ are internal to them; one cannot distinguish the two in order to ask the question, which causes which” (*ASA* 212). My issue with Taylor’s argument is not that it proceeds from a particular theological vantage point (unacknowledged or otherwise)—indeed, it would be a problem if didn’t—but rather, by failing to adequately acknowledge the properly theological and conceptual dimensions of religious experiences of “transcendence” (and “immanence” for that matter), these complex and ambiguous terms become problematic to the point of being rendered meaningless. Bottom line: if we are giving an account of secularity in terms of whether or not human flourishing can still be conceived of in terms of belief in something “beyond,” then it behooves us to be as clear as possible when using this term and others like it.¹⁶ For instance, it goes without saying that a Barthian and a Hegelian will have different conceptions of what is meant by “transcendence,” “immanence,” “beyond,” etc. And so, unless we are content to normalize our own tacit theological background, we have to make the problematic nature of these concepts (which, incidentally, all happen to be spatial metaphors) a central part of our inquiry even if we want to limit ourselves to a phenomenological analysis of religious experience.

EPILOGUE: FROM TAYLOR, TO POLANYI AND HEGEL

My hunch is that all of this will be neither problematic nor obvious to those for whom the supernatural, transcendent God of classical theism continues to be a meaningful object of belief and devotion. Let the record show that I’m not interested in problematizing the supernatural for those who don’t already find it problematic. In the words of Carl

Jung, there is a sense in which “I do not expect any believing Christian to pursue these thoughts of mine any further, for they will probably seem … absurd. I am not, however, addressing myself to the happy possessors of faith, but to those many people for whom the light has gone out, the mystery has faded, and God is dead.”¹⁷ With that in mind, my hope is that throughout the course of this analysis it has become clear that rejecting a supernatural God need not entail a wholesale rejection of Christianity. Moreover, I hope we are not led to adopt such vulgarities as “Christian atheism,” or to throw out the word “Christian” altogether. The former is a knee-jerk reaction and a failure of the imagination, the latter misses out on the prophetic aspect of theological vocation.

Regardless, I am convinced that if we attend to the properly conceptual dimensions of “transcendence,” we will quickly find ourselves in the midst of a key theological issue: the God/world relationship. Soon thereafter, if we press on, we will encounter the issue of supernatural(ism) versus natural(ism). Each of these concepts are extremely complex, and none are immediately clear in and of themselves. “Naturalism” is an especially pesky term. Without diving headlong into that can of worms, let me just say, once again, that when I speak of “naturalism,” what I mean is “non-supernatural.” In short, if classical Christian theology is rooted in the belief of a “supernatural” God who metaphysically/ontologically transcends the created order, then “naturalistic” Christian theology is an attempt to conceive of God without drawing an absolute divide between God and the world. But even within this, there are a variety of positions and options that would need to be explored. Moreover, to speak of “naturalism,” and heck, why not, even “materialism,” is by no means to suggest that the material is “all there is” or that every single phenomenon in the universe will eventually be explained by physics or whatever discipline is taken to be the key that unlocks all its secrets.

To reiterate, in no way am I suggesting that *A Secular Age* is somehow diminished by Taylor’s allegiance to the supernatural God of classical theism, nor am I even claiming that Taylor is wrong in this allegiance. I am only suggesting that at the very least, our attitude toward secularity will be different depending on how we conceptualize God, and more specifically, how we envision God’s relationship to the created order at the level of our background knowledge.

In conclusion, my suggestion is that by attending to the nuances of “transcendence” in *A Secular Age*, we can, perhaps somewhat artificially, begin to open the door to making connections between Hegel and

Polanyi. But that story will have to wait until later. Here, I only want to indicate that the Polanyi and Hegel connection will be developed in terms of the contestability of supernaturalistic theology. In short, Polanyi and Hegel each offer alternatives to belief systems rooted in the supernatural. Polanyi's inclination for a post-supernatural form of Christianity is most easily detected in his provisional endorsement of Tillich in *Personal Knowledge* (PK 283n1); Hegel's quest for a post-supernatural form of Christianity is inextricably linked to the logic of a speculative metaphysics, where “the true is the whole,”¹⁸ God is the ultimate whole, and thus the ultimate truth.¹⁹ They certainly offer different visions on this account, but in no way are they mutually exclusive. I don't think it would be unfair to suggest that the key difference between a Polanyian and a Hegelian post-supernatural form of Christianity would be the point of emphasis: Polanyi would emphasize the “meaning” of religious practice and belief, Hegel would emphasize their conceptual “truth.” Both envision forms of religious belief and practice that do away with the supernatural, but without declaring “a pox on all transcendence” (ASA 629), and without falling into the traps of exclusive humanism, vulgar atheism, or reductive/eliminative materialism.

G.K. Chesterton was right: If we take away the “super” from the supernatural, what remains is not the natural, but rather the “unnatural.”²⁰ To say that humanity is revealed not as natural but as unnatural when stripped of a supernatural reference point is to say that we, that *life*, cannot be explained in purely naturalistic, reductive, or mechanistic terms. It is to say that to find ourselves at all is to find ourselves *already* in an enchanted universe, in a cosmos (ASA 61; 232). Accordingly, even the possibility of imagining a worldview along the lines of an enchanted (un)naturalism will be an achievement in its own right and not something that is simply left over after we have sloughed off the supernatural. Regardless of what kind of Christian theology emerges from this endeavor, it will harbor no pretense of being the single correct version to replace all the wrong ones. In fact, it may be an achievement that ends up being one of the “clearly wrong versions of Christian faith” (ASA 643). But this is the risk of doing theology in a secular age.

NOTES

1. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

2. The notion of “modes” shouldn’t be understood in terms of eras or even versions, such that we come to the conclusion that European secularity is different than American secularity, or that early modern secularity is different from late modern secularity (even though this might very well be the case). Rather, the notion of “modes” of secularity should be understood in terms of how we approach the concept of secularity in the first place. Taylor is essentially claiming that it is not enough to simply speak of “secularity” (or “modernity” for that matter), as if the concept is obvious in and of itself. Instead, we have to specify not only the key features of a secular age (which is what Taylor does by differentiating S1 from S2), but then we have to adequately account for how this transition in epochs occurred (which is what is encapsulated in S3).
3. Here, I would like to point out a few key similarities and a few key differences between the argument I unfolded here and the argument of William David Hart in, “Naturalizing Christian Ethics: A Critique of Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age*,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 40: 1 (March 2012): 149–170. Hart sets up Taylor as a “Catholic” thinker, and claims that Protestantism seems to be a “second string” player *ASA* (Hart 150). This is a key difference: I’m not interested in pitting Catholicism against Protestantism; there is too much diversity within these traditions for this to be a meaningful or helpful point of reference. That being said, Hart agrees with me that Taylor’s treatment of “transcendence” is construed along “supernatural” lines (he actually uses the language of “superhuman” at one point; Hart 150), and that this has serious implications for the way Taylor fleshes out the notions of flourishing and fullness (as we will see shortly). Another key difference is our evaluation of “naturalism” and its implications for Christianity. In short, we both agree that the concept is laden with ambiguity, but we ultimately disagree as to whether or not “the ontology of sacred realities” is *merely* the product of the human imagination—he says yes, I say no: the issue is far more complicated than simply claiming that “sacred” realities are products of the human imagination. From where I stand, Hart’s account leads to a naturalistic Christianity that is Christian in name only, or better yet, a naturalism covered with a Christian veneer. In short, Hart’s argument is more or less a redoing of Feuerbach, or perhaps, to offer a more contemporary example, Henry Nelson Wieman. That being said, we both agree that “the world of the naturalistic Christian is hardly disenchanted” (164), and that this is something Taylor does not give enough attention to in *ASA*.
4. Taylor does acknowledge that there is historical precedent with such an idea, e.g., the Epicureans, but he goes on to claim that “it is first in the modern West, especially with post-Galilean science, that the immanent order becomes more than a theory; it is rather the background to all our thinking” (*ASA* 780n17).

5. Pannenberg is one theologian, in particular, who has recognized that the consensus theory of truth has been rendered suspect by the inventions of modernity. Rather than reflecting truth, he points out that conventional wisdom (ostensibly derived from a consensus) may instead reflect the inevitable human desire for comfort or the desire to protect our most deeply held convictions from being challenged: “Conceivably, some ideas and convictions are so deeply rooted in human nature that they can never be overcome even though they are false. An invincible prejudice would then be entrenched in the whole species which is invincible because it has become part of the inherited structure of the species. Yet the consent of every single individual would not make this consensus true.” Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 12–13.
6. And just to be clear, in no way am I insinuating that Taylor is some kind of fundamentalist.
7. Taylor points out that there is also a third viewpoint. This third perspective is inconsequential for my argument here, but it bears mentioning: it is related to contemporary iterations of a “postmodern” attitude that deny the claims of self-sufficient reason but then fail to offer a positive account of how we are capable of achieving or experiencing fullness (*ASA* 9–10).
8. Taylor alludes to another commonality: For the believer and unbeliever alike, regardless of how the “whence” of fullness is conceptually worked out, experiencing fullness is often burdened by a sense of doubt, perhaps even inadequacy. We’re never really sure that what we believe is *it*. Accordingly, we’re occasionally compelled by alternative paths to fullness. In Taylor’s estimation, this is typical of the modern condition (*ASA* 10–11).
9. When I use “naturalistic” in a theological context, what I really mean is “non-supernaturalistic.” In no way is it necessary to read “naturalistic” as eliminative or reductive, but it is understandable why some do so.
10. Quoted in Victor Erlich, *Russian Formalism: History—Doctrine*, 3rd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 177.
11. G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 18/¶31.
12. According to Hegel, a word like “God” is a mere name, a meaningless sound in and of itself, and because it is a concept we inherit from the immediacy of our tradition, it is a concept we know how to use without knowing exactly what it means. Accordingly, when it comes to our religious experiences, failing to come to a critical moment in theological inquiry, that is, contenting ourselves with the familiarity of the familiar, inevitably means stopping short of truth and settling for “mere edification” (Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 10/¶19).

13. As an aside, this is one point where James K.A. Smith critiques Taylor in his recent book, *How (Not) To Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014). This critique stands in sharp relief to the rest of the book (which often gushes over Taylor and *A Secular Age*). I bring this up because Smith, who I would label as a conservative evangelical (not that there's anything wrong with that!), only takes umbrage with Taylor's treatment of atonement and *not* his treatment of transcendence, which lends credence to my claims here.
14. Michael Polanyi, "The Republic of Science: Its Political and Economic Theory," *Minerva* 1:1 (September 1962): 70. On this topic, see my paper, "The Fulfillment of Polanyi's Vision for a Heuristic Theology: David Brown's Reframing of Revelation, Tradition, and Imagination," *Tradition and Discovery* 41:3 (2014–2015): 4–19.
15. According to Pannenberg, for Christian faith to renounce the claim to a prior guarantee of its truth is not to abandon the truth claims of Christianity in the least, but rather it is to make the contestability of the claim a central theme of theology. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 48; cf., Wolfhart Pannenberg, forward to *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology: Wolfhart Pannenberg and the New Theological Rationality*, by F. LeRon Shults (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), ix.
16. When offering these further explanations, we simply have to embrace the risk of saying something stupid, "unorthodox," or not totally worked out. This is the cost of doing theology in a secular age.
17. C.G. Jung, *Psychology and Religion: West and East*, in *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung*, ed. G. Adler, M. Fordham, Sir H. Read, and W. McGuire, trans R.F.C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953–1979), 11: §148.
18. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 11/¶20.
19. G.W.F. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, trans. A.V. Miller (London and New York: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1969), 50.
20. G.K. Chesterton, *Heretics* (Sioux Falls, SD: NuVision, 2007), 46.