

**Charles Taylor and the Place of the Transcendent  
In Secular Modern Lives**

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores the thought of Charles Taylor about “our present predicament.” Western secular modernity poses a serious predicament because it marginalizes the place of “past goods” and the transcendent horizon not only in the public sphere but in our individual lives. Moreover, it posits the need for everyone to face up to a high stakes choice in their lives between belief and unbelief. The study argues that beneath his eclectic appearance as a philosophical anthropologist, Taylor’s work is actually the work of what he calls “a hedgehog.” He focuses on a reinvigoration of the transcendent in Western modern secular culture and a “rather tightly related” philosophical and theological agenda in support of that objective. Appropriating Hegel’s dialectical perspective, Taylor contradicts the dominant linear subtraction theories of secularity and redefines the debate by focussing on changed conditions of belief and unbelief. These offer modern individuals unprecedented freedom of choice between living flourishing lives with perhaps some degree of fullness in the immanent frame, or aspiring to flourishing lives with the possibility of the fullest of fullness of life living in a horizon of the transcendent. The choice entails potential risks in the exclusive humanist and antihumanist positions because of the nihilism, decadence and violence foreseen by Nietzsche for those living in the “pitiable comfort” of the exclusively immanent frame. However, despite its “post-revolutionary” context, Taylor is a “booster” of secular modernity because it has greatly advanced the Gospel in Western societies through unquestionable benefits to human lives that would not have been possible in the conditions of Christendom. He recognizes the validity of Hegel’s “spiral” view of the movement of history as opposed to the linear or deterministic theories of such as Marx, Freud and others. He therefore anticipates a reconciliation of contemporary “contradictions” in the form of individual personal transformation towards a new “agapaic” transcendent synthesis. This hopeful message does not envisage a restoration of the past but rather sees a recovery of spiritual goods and articulacy from the richness of the past. These will foster a new place for the fullness of the transcendent in our secular modern lives.

The heart has its reason of which reason has no knowledge.

Le coeur a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît point.

Pascal – Pensée 423

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I am a much blessed person. Deo gratia.

## INTRODUCTION

*Exclusive humanism closes the transcendent window, as though there were nothing beyond ... as though it weren't a crying need of the human heart to open the window, gaze, and then go beyond; as though feeling this need were the result of a mistake, an erroneous worldview, bad conditioning, or, worse, some pathology. Two radically different perspectives on the human condition: who is right?<sup>1</sup>*

### Introducing the Study

Charles Taylor, Canada's pre-eminent philosopher, begins most of his books, papers and lectures posing or implying a question. Indeed, the titles of his work are often in the form of a question. This is helpful to know for a novice reader of Taylor's sometimes complex work. Once Taylor's question is clear in our minds it can provide a helpful thread for following his argument. In that spirit, this study's title poses what we claim is Taylor's underlying question throughout most of his work: what should be the place of transcendence or the transcendent in our secular modern lives? Beneath that question, he is asking whether we can enjoy a life of fullness in secular modern culture in the absence of a transcendent horizon? Can you be fully human without God? Answering these questions in the context of the conditions of belief and unbelief in Western secular culture has become a matter of personal choice. He sees this choice to be the modern human "predicament." The central purpose of this study is to explore Taylor's answers to these questions and that predicament.

Clearly, the meanings Taylor assigns to the terms "transcendent" and "transcendence" and their suggested equivalents are very important to the discussion. They and other key terms will be outlined in Chapter 3. However, at this initial stage, we need to know that Taylor admits at a certain point to having gone to some lengths to avoid using either of these terms. In

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Taylor, "A Catholic Modernity?" in *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 178.

comments he makes in reply to observations posed by dialogue partners in an edited book by James L. Heft concerning Taylor's Marianist Award Lecture,<sup>2</sup> he notes some misgivings about using the word transcendent. "The words just aren't adequate for what has to be said ... how could I have used such an abstract and evasive term? ... What pressures led in the end to its rehabilitation? ... I needed a term to talk about all those different ways in which religious discourse and practice went beyond the exclusively human, and in exhaustion I fell back on 'transcendent.' (But I haven't given up hope of finding a better term.)"<sup>3</sup>

To help communicate these somewhat ambiguous words, Taylor advances two contrasting terms of art, "fullness" and "flourishing," to convey a qualitative difference for individuals that distinguishes between living in the immanent frame of exclusive humanism and the transcendent frame of believers. "For believers, often or typically, the sense is that fullness comes to them, that it is something they receive; moreover, they receive in something like a personal relationship, from another being capable of love and giving ... but the receiver isn't simply empowered in his/her present condition; he/she needs to be opened, transformed, brought out of self ... [whereas] for modern unbelievers, the predicament is quite different. The power to reach fullness is within."<sup>4</sup> Consequently, while in principle a degree of flourishing and fullness are both achievable by an individual whether living in the immanent or transcendent frame, the term transcendent implies to a believer that the "place of fullness requires some reference to God, that is to something beyond human life and/or nature."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> James L. Heft, Editor, with responses by William M. Shea, Rosemary Luling Haughton, George Marsden, and Jean Bethke Elshtain *A Catholic Modernity? Charles Taylor's Marianist Award Lecture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> *A Catholic Modernity?* 105-106.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 8.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 8.

Turning to the personal side of understanding Taylor, the first thing to notice about him is that he is a “Montrealer,” born and bred. Anyone walking down the streets of inner Montreal today who remembers those same streets fifty and more years ago, especially on a Sunday or major Christian holiday, cannot possibly but feel a sense of overwhelming change and even loss for a bygone culture and way of life. Left and right one sees abandoned churches and seminaries, mainly Catholic, but also Protestant in the Anglophone areas, which until quite recently bustled with religious life. Many of them have been converted to “secular” uses, reminding us of the comparatively new “background framework,”<sup>6</sup> of secularization that has seized the “social imaginary,” not only of Quebec with its “révolution tranquille” of the 1960s, but that of much of the Western secular modern world. It is therefore not surprising that Taylor, who was raised as a committed Roman Catholic in Montreal, frequently observes that he has lived through revolutionary times<sup>7</sup> and now sees us

living in something analogous to a post-revolutionary climate ... [which is] extremely sensitive to anything that smacks of the ancien régime ... it is by virtue of its post-revolutionary climate that Western modernity is very inhospitable to the transcendent. This of course runs contrary to the mainline Enlightenment story according to which religion has become less credible, thanks to the advance of science.<sup>8</sup>

In this light, it is also not surprising that he has dedicated his professional life to exploring the issues of changed conditions of belief and unbelief in “the secular age.”<sup>9</sup>

All this reminds us that perhaps the oldest question posed by human beings is whether or not there is an invisible “beyond,” or transcendent reality, beyond perceived everyday physical

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<sup>6</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 13.

<sup>7</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 53.

<sup>8</sup> Charles Taylor “A Catholic Modernity?” in *A Catholic Modernity? Charles Taylor’s Marianist Award Lecture*, James L. Heft, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 24-25.

<sup>9</sup> Note: This is the title of Taylor’s most important book on the theme, but as will be discussed below, the original title of the Gifford Lectures on which it was based was “Living in the Secular Age,” which suggests a significantly different emphasis.

experience. It is a debate that is both philosophical and theological. Neither proposition can be proved or disproved by science. Nonetheless, it has immense personal, social, economic and political implications, and every day's news demonstrates that its importance is increasing in our 21<sup>st</sup> century pluralized and secular societies of democratic Western modernity. Indeed, it is now becoming obvious that a central challenge facing humanity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century - perhaps *the* pre-eminent challenge - is the arbitration or accommodation, if not the resolution, of deep and dangerous global as well as "local" differences among religious beliefs and various forms of "unbelief."<sup>10</sup>

While this debate can be defined broadly as between contemporary "belief" and "unbelief" and their respective social and cultural ramifications, it is important to distinguish this broad debate from the controversy launched in a 1993 article by Samuel P. Huntington under the title of "The Clash of Civilizations?"<sup>11</sup> His controversial but influential article and subsequent book by the same title predicted that international relations in the 21st century would be characterized by increasing conflict among and between major global cultures. Huntington's "hypothesis" was that

the fundamental source of conflict in this new world ... will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural ... the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of nations of different civilizations ... the fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future.<sup>12</sup>

In contrast, the clash of belief and unbelief which this present study addresses has been developing for over five hundred years *within* Western culture. This is what Taylor characterizes as "the scene of a three-cornered, perhaps ultimately a four-cornered battle (where) there are

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<sup>10</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 4.

<sup>11</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs* 12, no.3 (1993): 22.

<sup>12</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?" 22.

secular humanists, there are neo-Nietzscheans, and there are those who acknowledge some good beyond life”<sup>13</sup> or transcendent reality.

It is a debate that clearly requires interdisciplinary contributions from many relevant fields of knowledge. However, we claim that it calls above all for the methods and insights of philosophy and theology. This is because the challenges and conflicts of belief and unbelief are fundamentally about what it means to be human. This is what history’s outstanding thinkers such as both St Thomas Aquinas<sup>14</sup> and Jean Calvin<sup>15</sup> identified as the primary concern of philosophy and theology. Putting it in a contemporary idiom, Taylor suggested in informal conversation with the author that a philosopher’s first question might well be “what the hell is going on here?”<sup>16</sup> It appears that he meant this in the sense that understanding what it means to be human begins with understanding the underlying as opposed to surface sources of meaning in peoples’ lives. This suggests that when it comes to belief and unbelief, our primary concern should be to discern the conditions of belief under which or within which people are actually living. In this regard, in the same conversation, Taylor alluded to the objectives of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) as laid down by Pope John XXIII and reflected in his opening address, *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia*,<sup>17</sup> in which he referred to the need to understand “the signs of the times” and the “new era.”<sup>18</sup> The Pope’s two chief objectives for the Council were “updating (‘aggiornamento’) and renewal of the

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<sup>13</sup> Charles Taylor, “A Catholic Modernity?” in *A Catholic Modernity?* 29.

<sup>14</sup> Anton C. Pegis, ed. *Introduction to St. Thomas Aquinas: The Summa Theologica* (New York: The Modern Library, 1948), 3-4.

<sup>15</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Henry Beveridge, trans. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers Marketing LLC), 4.

<sup>16</sup> This comment was made in an informal conversation with the author of this study on April 14, 2015 and is quoted with Professor Taylor’s written permission.

<sup>17</sup> John XXIII, AS I/1, 166-75. English translation in Floyd Anderson, ed. *Council Daybook, Vatican II: Sessions 1-4*, 3 vols. (Washington, DC: National Catholic Welfare Conference 1965-1966) I: 25-9.

<sup>18</sup> John W. O’Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 37.

Catholic Church ... [and] ... the restoration of Christian unity.”<sup>19</sup> Taylor observed that one can only know those signs and identify where renewal is needed if one is fully aware of what is “going on” at the level of lived human life.

In this vein, he writes in his most important book that he wants “... to talk about belief and unbelief, not as rival *theories* ... [but] rather what I want to do is focus attention on the different kinds of lived experience involved in understanding your life in one way or the other, on what it’s like to live as a believer or an unbeliever.”<sup>20</sup> Understanding what is really happening in a contemporary context including its underlying “background framework” and its “social imaginary” (terms to be explained below) is an essential first step, in his view, for discerning desirable responses to the challenges of what it means to be human and to live lives of fullness in our secular age. Directly and indirectly, this is what much of his life’s work has addressed and it is the subject of this study.

We have seen, then, why this study focusses on Taylor’s work as a philosopher and, arguably, as a *de facto* theologian, even though both these disciplines have been to one degree or another marginalized in the modern Canadian academy and workplace by career-oriented disciplines such as business administration, medicine and engineering, which emphasize instrumental and objective ways of thinking. Precisely because the issues of belief and unbelief, and of fullness of life, are primarily subjective in nature, matters of personal experience, Taylor adopts a combined multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approach to scholarship. He disregards and even thumbs his nose at the conventions of scientific method in philosophy and other human and social sciences. The result has meant that his life’s work offers exceptionally innovative and

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<sup>19</sup> Catherine E. Clifford, *Decoding Vatican II: Interpretation and Ongoing Reception* (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2013), 1-2.

<sup>20</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 4.

important insights for human beings aspiring to lives of fullness in our secular age. People recognize themselves in the mirror of his work.

He seems, in everything he writes, to be attuned, or viscerally “wired,” to avoid extremes and to look for middle path compromises or reconciliations of contradictions and oppositions.<sup>21</sup> Concrete practical evidence of this can be found in the use of the word “reconciliation” in the title, as well as in most of the specific recommendations of the report of the Quebec Bouchard-Taylor Commission of Inquiry into the legal principle of “reasonable accommodation.”<sup>22</sup>

Drawing on Hegel’s way of thought, Taylor believes that there is good reason in all situations of contradiction and opposition to expect reconciliation. To support this he points to the quantum scientific concept of the oppositions of matter and anti-matter, and how they are seen to neutralize each other and eventually achieve a type of reconciliation or harmony.<sup>23</sup>

### **Introducing Charles Taylor**

Born in Montreal in 1931, Charles Taylor (“Chuck” to his friends) is Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at McGill University. He is Canada’s most celebrated living philosopher. Even in so-called retirement, he maintains a vigorous pace as illustrated by his recent publication at the age of 85 of his new book<sup>24</sup> fifty-two years after publishing his first book in 1964.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Ruth Abbey, *Philosophy Now: Charles Taylor*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 7.

<sup>22</sup> The “Bouchard-Taylor Report”, *The Consultative Commission on Accommodation Practices Related to Cultural Differences, Building the Future: A Time for Reconciliation*, (Quebec, Quebec: Government of Quebec, 2008).

<sup>23</sup> “Matter/antimatter asymmetry,” *CERN Accelerating Science*, downloaded October 8, 2016. Note: Taylor refers to the concept of “structure” and “anti-structure” on pp 52, 53 and 58 of *A Secular Age*.

<sup>24</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Language Animal: The Full Shape of the Human Linguistic Capacity* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016).

<sup>25</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Explanation of Behaviour* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964).

He is one of the most prolific and eclectic thinkers about the human condition in the modern era with a five decade *oeuvre* of 24 published books.<sup>26</sup> Fourteen of these are referenced in this study and listed in the Bibliography as primary sources, while an outline of the six most important of them for our purposes is found below in the Literature Review. The 14 books amount to 4236 pages plus 202 pages of notes while the short list of seven comes to a total of over 2000 pages. In addition, Taylor has published well over 170 peer reviewed articles.<sup>27</sup>

With this kind of record it is not surprising that Taylor has received numerous major international and Canadian awards and recognitions over his lifetime. These include being named in 1996 Companion of the Order of Canada, in 2000 Grand Officer of the Ordre national du Québec or Order of Quebec, and being honoured by the 1999 Canadian Broadcasting Corporation Massey Lectureship, the 1996 Marianist Award Lectureship, the 1998-99 Gifford Lectureship, the 2007 Templeton Prize, the 2002 Institute for Human Sciences Vienna Lecturer, the 2008 Kyoto Prize (known as the “Japanese Nobel Prize”), and the 2015 John W. Kluge Prize awarded by the U.S. Library of Congress for lifetime achievement in the social sciences. Recently, he was named recipient of the first Berggruen Prize in philosophy for a thinker “whose ideas have helped shape human self-understanding and the advancement of humanity.”<sup>28</sup>

After Taylor received a BA in history with honours from McGill University at the age of twenty-one he went on with his studies as a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford University where he received a BA, MA and Doctorate in Philosophy by the age of thirty. One of his tutors at Oxford

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<sup>26</sup> John M. Templeton Jr. Chairman of the Templeton Foundation, on the occasion of Taylor receiving the \$1.5 million 2007 Templeton Prize for Progress Toward Research or Discoveries About Spiritual Realities, March 14, 2007, accessed under Templeton Prize Press Conference, New York City, at <templetonprize.org> This data has been updated in a website previously managed by Ruth Abbey and noted below.

<sup>27</sup> The number of peer reviewed articles is based on a statistic quoted in the speech by John M Templeton noted above on the occasion of Taylor being awarded the Templeton Prize for 2007.

<sup>28</sup> “Canadian philosopher named winner of first Berggruen Prize,” *Toronto Globe and Mail* (October 5, 2016), A13.

was the renowned Sir Isaiah Berlin, holder of one of the most prominent philosophy chairs in the world, the Chichele chair in political and social theory. Taylor was named a successor in that chair in 1976 at the age of thirty-five. Subsequently, he returned to McGill in 1981 where, other than various short stints at Harvard, Northwestern and other notable international universities and institutes, he remained a professor of political philosophy for the rest of his career.

Isaiah Berlin decided to make a mid-career switch and moved from philosophy to the history of ideas.<sup>29</sup> Although they did not share identical beliefs, this no doubt influenced Taylor's own remarkably interdisciplinary approach to academic philosophy. Taylor's fields of teaching and research listed in his biographical note published on the McGill Faculty of Philosophy website include nine main "areas."<sup>30</sup> However, even though extensive in breadth, they do not fully cover the range of Taylor's interests and expertise reflected in his writing over the years. For example, religion, theology, sociology and literature each play prominent roles in his most widely known books, yet are not mentioned in the McGill listing. Even more remarkable, the study of the secular and secularity, which are central to this study and are specifically implied in the title of *A Secular Age*, his *magnum opus*, and with which he is widely associated among Canadian and international scholars, are not mentioned at all. Why is this? Our claim is that secularity is not really his main concern at all. Rather, his main preoccupation is with the place of the transcendent in the culture of secular modernity. We will substantiate this below.

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<sup>29</sup> Isaiah Berlin's self-portrait in *The Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy* (London: Penguin Books, 1999), 67.

<sup>30</sup> Taylor's 2016 teaching and research areas include "philosophy of action, philosophy of social science, political theory, Greek political thought, moral philosophy, the culture of western modernity, philosophy of language, theories of meaning, language and politics, German idealism. They were downloaded at <http://www.mcgill.ca/PHILOSOPHY> on 08/01/2016.

## Taylor's Scholarly Perspective: Philosopher, Philosopher of Religion, Theologian?

Our foregoing discussion may have fostered the misleading impression that Taylor considers himself to be a philosopher of religion or even a theologian. Reflecting the narrow scientific thrust of Anglo-American 20<sup>th</sup> century analytical philosophy to which Taylor takes great exception, David Stewart quotes and paraphrases John Hick<sup>31</sup> in defining a contemporary philosopher of religion as someone who undertakes detached or “philosophical” thinking not about religion in general but about “the *problems* raised by a particular religious tradition, and religious problems in particular.”<sup>32</sup> The question in this light is where theology fits in Taylor’s view of his scholarly vocation. In fact, he goes to considerable pains to disabuse interlocutors of the notion that he is a theologian in any respect. For example, in a public debate organized by the Philosophy Club at the University of Ottawa on March 18, 2016, he announced that he makes no secret of his commitments as a Christian Catholic, (“... or at least a sinner,” as he put it with a modest chuckle), but he views himself as having a “very weak” understanding of theology.

This is a quite questionable assertion because Taylor often shows a dazzling grasp of Christian and other religious theological themes in his writing and speaking. Abundant evidence of this can be found, for example, in his 1996 Marianist Award Lecture noted above. However, at the same time, we should also note that at the outset of that lecture before an audience of religious believers, he announced his intention to raise on an exceptional basis “some [belief-related] issues that have been at the center of my concern for decades. They have been reflected in my philosophical work, but not in the same form as I raise them this afternoon, because of the

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<sup>31</sup> John Hick, *Philosophy of Religion*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Foundations of Philosophy Series (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1973), 2.

<sup>32</sup> David Stewart, *Exploring the Philosophy of Religion*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1992), 4.

nature of philosophical discourse (as I see it anyway), which has to try to persuade honest thinkers of any and all metaphysical or theological commitments.”<sup>33</sup>

Taylor as early as 1985 defined himself as a “philosophical anthropologist,”<sup>34</sup> a term which implies a philosopher who is not afraid to take human behaviour into account despite the professional strictures of the discipline. He has referred to these in a recent media interview after being named the recipient of the first Berggruen award for Philosophy. In it, he is quoted as saying,

Je crois que la philosophie, c’est très important, mais que pour s’attaquer aux véritables problèmes fondamentaux de l’humanité, la morale, la politique, la coexistence, il faut toujours allier la philo à la science politique, à la sociologie, à l’histoire et aux autres disciplines. Il ne faut pas trop respecter les lignes de frontières entre les disciplines ... (Mais) c’est difficile, car on est très critiqué ... dans le milieu universitaire, on nous dit que pour progresser, il faut se consacrer à une spécialité très étroite.<sup>35</sup>

This is one of his core ideas, yet it is notable that once again he does not include theology in the list. In other words, Taylor may be saying that he feels inhibited for rhetorical reasons from fully expressing his “subjective” theological commitments and expertise in order to give greater objective credibility and persuasive force to the theological components of his philosophical arguments. This is an important perspective for us to note.

### **Taylor’s “Post-Revolutionary Climate”**

As we noted above, Taylor points to massive change in the Western social imaginary prompted by cultural forces emanating from the Reformation and the Enlightenment. In Taylor’s view these forces in particular have brought about a “revolution” in modern Western culture,

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<sup>33</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Catholic Modernity?* 13.

<sup>34</sup> Charles Taylor, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 1.

<sup>35</sup> “Personnalité de la Semaine Charles Taylor,” *La Presse*, section ACTUALITÉS, écran 23, le 9 octobre 2016.

leading to today's "post-revolutionary" context in which the place of God has been radically displaced in people's lives. As we have seen, this seems to have been his underlying preoccupation for over five decades of prolific work in his field of "philosophical anthropology, although this term seems to make English-speaking philosophers uneasy."<sup>36</sup> He believes that Western secular modernity is living in a post-revolutionary context because, in the space of five centuries, the debates and conflicts over matters of belief and unbelief, over what it means to be a human, have been fundamentally transformed.

Exploring this phenomenon, he identifies a new form of secularity, one that shifts the boundaries of the mainline meanings of secularity by focusing on "new conditions of belief."<sup>37</sup> This, as we shall see, takes the emphasis away from the effects of secularity, to its causes and its remedies, placing priority on the actual beliefs or un-beliefs of the human person. These and his idea of the importance of "the common understanding" (to be discussed below) make possible escape from Weber's "iron cage"<sup>38</sup> of confining and meaningless modernity. Thus Taylor seeks to shift the longstanding debates about secularity based on negative "subtraction stories" towards important new directions that take better account of the human factor and the place of the transcendent within a more appropriate understanding of secular modernity.

In this regard, Taylor believes that addressing our predicament cannot be done purely with modern knowledge and least of all by relying on the knowledge of the so-called human sciences that systematically exclude from consideration human subjectivity and experience of the transcendent. Rather, or in addition, Taylor believes that we need to draw on the wisdom and insight from the past because it is of intrinsic relevance to today's human problems, and because

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<sup>36</sup> Charles Taylor, *Philosophy and The Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers 2*, 1.

<sup>37</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 3.

<sup>38</sup> Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), 181.

we, as humans, are partly constituted by our past. What Taylor calls our “background framework”<sup>39</sup> is part of who we are, whether we like it or not, and indeed, whether we know it or not. This is the line of thought that prompted Taylor to undertake the “act of retrieval” which underlies his major books and ideas. The past is the avenue to understanding the present and to building a flourishing future.<sup>40</sup>

In Western civilization, this debate can be seen to have begun nearly twenty-five hundred years ago with the philosophers Plato and Socrates who adopted a metaphysical perspective to posit the existence of an invisible transcendent horizon. In contrast, their pupil, Aristotle, placed a priority in his philosophy at the other end of the telescope of what it means to be human by emphasizing an epistemological perspective focusing on sensible, observable or tangible reality. As believers, they entered the debate with unbelievers from both those philosophical perspectives which in important ways mirror the basic “immanent” versus “transcendent” oppositions of contemporary contention which are central to Taylor’s argument in *A Secular Age* and will be discussed below.

The insights and arguments of these philosophers have been an important backdrop to the perennial debate between “belief” and “disbelief” which has waxed and waned for centuries in Christian and other societies. It has waxed particularly vehemently in the centuries following the Enlightenment often described as “modernity” or sometimes “postmodernity.” Indeed this debate has reached a fever pitch in recent years with the writing of such non-philosophers and non-theologians as Richard Dawkins,<sup>41</sup> who is a scientist and best-selling polemical atheist, and Christopher Hitchens who, until his recent death, was a journalist and what might be described as

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<sup>39</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 13.

<sup>40</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity*, 80.

<sup>41</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006).

a professional atheist.<sup>42</sup> But the debate is by no means a recent phenomenon and to understand it properly and discern where it may be going in future, Taylor believes that one has to trace its development through the centuries.

This is exactly what Taylor has done in over five decades of eminent scholarship. His insights into the perennial debate deserve to be better known and more widely debated by thoughtful observers. Nobody can afford to ignore the risks to flourishing life identified by Nietzsche and Weber, among others, a life in which “God is dead,” nor can anyone ignore the fullest possible fullness that Taylor posits can come only with belief in one form or another in the transcendent horizon. But at the same time, the exclusive humanist in his view is not denied the possibility of obtaining some degree of fullness in the immanent frame as suggested by the epiphanic experience of Vaclav Havel reported by Taylor.<sup>43</sup> He sums up his insight as follows:

Some people want ... to declare a fundamental opposition between this search for [personal] integrity and the transcendent ... there is no reason to buy into this kind of myopia. I insist on this point because in a way this whole book is an attempt to study the fate in the modern West of religious faith in a strong sense. This strong sense ... I define by a double criterion: the belief in transcendent reality ... and the connected aspiration to a transformation which goes beyond ordinary human flourishing.<sup>44</sup>

In this light, this study will focus on Taylor’s ideas and persuasive strategies concerning the place of the transcendent in secular modernity and the transformative power of belief.

### **Charles Taylor Superstar: A Question**

It follows from the foregoing that this study sets out to understand an exceptionally important thinker of the modern era. If Taylor’s vocational field of labour were hockey instead of philosophy, Canadians would consider him the equivalent of such superstars as Maurice Richard

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<sup>42</sup> Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve Hachette Book Company USA, 2007).

<sup>43</sup> Vaclav Havel, quoted in Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 728-729.

<sup>44</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 510.

or Gordie Howe. However, if he is indeed of such outstanding calibre in the variety of interacting scholarly fields in which he has worked and gained international repute, the question is why do Taylor and his important ideas seem to be largely invisible or a matter of indifference to most Canadians and other non-specialized publics? Indeed, informal soundings during the research for this study suggest that even in the academy, Taylor and his work are either entirely unknown or only superficially understood, beyond a limited number of social sciences and theological specialists in a secular academic climate dominated by pervasive unbelief.<sup>45</sup> It is probably not an exaggeration to suggest that vastly more Canadians know the Canadian TV comedian Rick Mercer than know about Taylor, their country's most famous philosopher. This is in itself highly regrettable, but it is all the more so when we recognize that Taylor has done some of his most important thinking about one of Canada's, even the world's, most threatening philosophical, religious and political issues: how are we to live flourishing lives in a modern democratic society buffeted by the "cross pressures" between belief and unbelief in an increasingly pluralistic culture?

### **Partial Answer**

Part of the answer to this question of Taylor's relative invisibility, is that, as in the case of many philosophers dealing with complex concepts and terminology, understanding Taylor's work for the uninitiated can be challenging to the point of exasperation. Sometimes his use of unusual and "appropriated" terms, including many words that he invents for his purposes, seems to require the reader to learn what amounts to a new foreign language. Examples abound, but a particularly notable instance is his coining of synonyms for variants on the central concept of the

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<sup>45</sup> Note: A crude but telling modern-day measure of this observation is that when "Googled" on Google Canada, Taylor's name only comes up on the computer screen after several up-front references to another Charles Taylor: the bloodthirsty war criminal who formerly ruled Liberia.

transcendent. These include: “the higher life,”<sup>46</sup> “the good,”<sup>47</sup> “something beyond,”<sup>48</sup> “transformation beyond ordinary human flourishing,”<sup>49</sup> “communion with (love of) God,”<sup>50</sup> and so on. Moreover, in addition to Taylor’s use of such words, designed it seems to be resonant in contemporary idiom and removed from doctrinal language, he is a polyglot philosopher. He works in several non-English or French languages, including Greek, Latin, Italian and especially German. Sometimes this leads him to use key terms in another language without translation such as, for example, his untranslated and undefined use of “La Lotta Continua”<sup>51</sup> as a chapter title in his 1990 CBC Massey Lecture Series published under the title of *The Malaise of Modernity*<sup>52</sup>. (In the context, it appears he meant “the struggle continues” or perhaps “the unending struggle,”<sup>53</sup> perhaps reflecting Taylor’s penchant for the metaphor of conflict or battle in his work, as we will see below.)

The language challenge of Taylor’s writing is especially true in relation to German terminology because of the central role that German philosophers have played in modern Western philosophy and in Taylor’s thought, and the difficulty many translators have rendering German philosophical terms into accurate English or French equivalents. An example of this would be the translation of Hegel’s term *Vorstellung* which Taylor tells us is in the domain of religion and represents “an inward form of consciousness” as distinct from *vorstellen* which

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<sup>46</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge MA: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 20.

<sup>47</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 45.

<sup>48</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 16.

<sup>49</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 430.

<sup>50</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 278.

<sup>51</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity*, (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1991) 71.

<sup>52</sup> Charles Taylor, *Malaise*, Chapter VII.

<sup>53</sup> *Barron’s Foreign Language Guides, Italian-English Pocket Dictionary*, s.v. “lotta” 218, “continua” 97.

“makes use of images, of the sensuous and the pictorial” as in the arts, and then goes even further to meaning “characterizing the absolute.”<sup>54</sup>

Hegel is the subject of two of Taylor’s earliest books<sup>55</sup> which are said to have catalyzed a rediscovery of Hegelian thought in Anglo-American philosophy in the 1960’s.<sup>56</sup> In part, the way of thinking to which Taylor has referred is Hegel’s dialectical method of analysis. This will be explained in Chapter 1, but for now it suffices to point out that Hegel’s “ontological dialectics ... involve three terms”<sup>57</sup> in which we begin with an existing situation or standard which we gradually see is inadequate to meet “the criterial properties ... of the standard or purpose concerned. But, secondly, we also have from the beginning some very basic, correct notions of what the standard or purpose is which it must meet. It is these criterial properties which in fact enable us to show that a given conception of the standard is inadequate.”<sup>58</sup> This is the contradiction or antithesis that, thirdly, calls for correction through a synthesis. This rather confusing effort at explanation demonstrates that Hegel’s and therefore Taylor’s dialectical approach can remain disorienting to readers accustomed to linear modes of thought because it tends to be inherently and stylistically nonlinear.

A further effort to simplify his dialectical approach may not offer much additional help. Taylor tells us that he sees the three terms to be: (1) the criterial properties defining a standard or purpose, (2) inadequacy of a conception intended to meet those properties, and (3) construction of a new reality or attempt to embody the standard or purpose. Taylor points out that “Hegel calls

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<sup>54</sup> Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 480.

<sup>55</sup> Charles Taylor, *Hegel*, and *Hegel and Modern Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

<sup>56</sup> Frederick Neuhausser in the Preface to Charles Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society*, vii.

<sup>57</sup> Charles Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society*, 58.

<sup>58</sup> Charles Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society*, 58.

this kind of argument ‘dialectical’ by glancing back at Plato, for Plato’s argument can sometimes be understood on this model.”<sup>59</sup>

This three stage way of confronting contradiction in a process of an upward-tending spiral or “zigzag” of “ascending” development is sometimes further simplified into the three terms: thesis, antithesis and synthesis. We will claim below that Hegel’s dialectical approach is implicit in Taylor’s philosophical method and therefore offers a framework for the organization of our study and for understanding the movement in Taylor’s argument concerning the place of the transcendent in secular modern lives. For that reason, as can be seen from the Table of Contents, this study is structured in dialectical terms. Chapter 3 discusses the “thesis,” Chapters 4, 5 and 6 discuss broad elements of the “antithesis,” and Chapter 7 identifies what we will claim is the synthesis of Taylor’s argument. Finally, before leaving this discussion of the challenges of Taylor’s writing style and method, we should reiterate another quite severe constraint on public awareness and appreciation of Taylor’s work – that is, as noted above, the prodigious volume of Taylor’s lifetime *oeuvre* which will be presented in some detail in Chapter 1.

## **A Problem**

As a result of this overwhelming combination of linguistic and conceptual complexity compounded by more than five decades of prolific scholarly output, there is reason to fear that Taylor’s valuable insight for people wishing to live lives of fullness in modern secular culture could become lost to present and future generations. We claim that an example of this can already be discerned in the fact that, in public discussion, the relative importance of the central

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<sup>59</sup> Charles Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society*, 58.

transcendent theme in Taylor's thought, compared to what we view as the secondary secularity theme, has been reversed. This results in the secular "tail" tending to "wag" the transcendent "dog" in public understanding of Taylor's most important insights and messages. For this reason, we claim that it is a matter of considerable importance in a world increasingly fraught with religious tension and conflict that Taylor's legacy not be allowed to become eclipsed and lost to future generations. That, at any rate, has been our main reason for undertaking this study in the first place. In Taylor's terms, we regard it as contributing to a needed "work of retrieval."<sup>60</sup>

### **The Hypothesis**

As we have already seen, Taylor is an exceptionally multifaceted philosopher. As a result, his work seems to go in so many directions that it is very easy to get lost in the "trees" without seeing the "forest." Our hypothesis is that there is indeed a clearly discernible forest or guiding idea, a type of "Ariadne's Thread," underlying Taylor's entire life's work. The guiding idea is that living within a transcendent horizon is essential for a person to live a life of fullness. However, for that reason, there is a need to rescue the transcendent from its marginalization in today's modern secular culture and to restore it as a recognized element of what it is to be human. We further claim that supporting that idea is a focused agenda of a few key supporting strategies. Immediate warrants for these claims include the fact evident throughout Taylor's life that he is ardently committed to promoting flourishing life on the part of his fellow humans. This is evidenced by his socialist political activism in his younger years. Mark Redhead explains in a criticism that Taylor "was a prominent member of the New Left in Britain, indeed one of the founding editorial board members of the *New Left Review*, and wrote a number of articles on Marx during the Cold War in his Oxford days. Later, of course, he became quite critical of Marx

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<sup>60</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity*, (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, Ltd., 1991), 97.

and Marxism.”<sup>61</sup> Also, he was a candidate four times in Canadian Federal elections for the socialist CCF and New Democratic Party, including running in the election of 1968 against his friend, the future Prime Minister, Pierre Elliot Trudeau.

A striking further example of this humanistic and activist tendency was his decision to rush to Hungary from Oxford University on the eve of its failed revolution in 1958 to show solidarity for fellow students, and his subsequent efforts from Vienna to coordinate refugee movements towards Canada.<sup>62</sup> Still further evidence that Taylor is a people-centred activist not content to sit on the sidelines can be seen in the individuals or “heroes” he repeatedly mentions in his writing all of whom are motivated to help people because of an inner concern for their physical and spiritual welfare. These include Mother Teresa, Jean Vanier,<sup>63</sup> Charles Péguy,<sup>64</sup> Dr Rieux of Albert Camus’s *The Plague*<sup>65</sup> and St. Francis of Assisi.<sup>66</sup> Finally, there is his frequent reference to the values and way of life called for by Jesus’ Gospel. All this bespeaks a person concerned to promote flourishing and “fullness”<sup>67</sup> of life in which, for him, fullness refers to a good that is “quite beyond ordinary flourishing, and perhaps even incompatible with making this flourishing our highest end.”<sup>68</sup>

In this way, we claim that at the top of a pyramid consisting of a three-pronged strategy stands Taylor’s “single guiding idea.” We claim that the three “prongs” of his tightly related agenda or strategy are (1) a work of recovery, (2) a work of polemics targeting the

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<sup>61</sup> Mark Redhead, “Haunted by Marxism,” *The Review of Politics* 70 (2008), 641-88. A book review of Ian Fraser’s, *Dialectics of the Self: Transcending Charles Taylor* (Exeter, UK: Imprint Academic, 2007).

<sup>62</sup> Note: This was confirmed by Taylor in an email dated November 4, 2016 responding to a question from the author.

<sup>63</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 517.

<sup>64</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 744-52.

<sup>65</sup> Albert Camus, *The Plague (La Peste)*, Stuart Gilbert, trans. (London: Penguin Books, 1960).

<sup>66</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 93. Note: Taylor references St. Francis 13 times in this book.

<sup>67</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 622 and 769.

<sup>68</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 611.

marginalization of the transcendent in social and human sciences, and (3) a work of persuasion aimed at promoting understanding and support for his position on the place of the transcendent in secular modern lives. A compelling warrant for Taylor's having a single guiding idea and associated agenda can be found in Taylor's own self-explanation, in a kind of *apologia pro libro suo* published in the first lines of the Introduction to his 1985 *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*" *Philosophical Papers 2*. Here he explains that

despite the appearance of variety in the papers published in this collection, they are the work of a monomaniac; or perhaps better, what Isaiah Berlin has called a hedgehog. If not a single idea, then at least a single rather tightly related agenda underlies all of them. If one had to find a name where this agenda falls in the geography of philosophical domains, the term 'philosophical anthropology' would perhaps be best, although the term seems to make English-speaking philosophers uneasy.<sup>69</sup>

We claim that this passage not only explains the approach he adopts for that book's argument, but also reflects the larger strategy that Taylor adopts in his overall *oeuvre*.

If this is so, perhaps it still calls for further explanation of Taylor's specific guiding idea and the specific elements of his related agenda. Our hypothesis is that Taylor's single or guiding idea is that fullness of human life, as opposed to mere human flourishing in the immanent frame, can only be attained within a transcendent horizon which, in Taylor's case but not necessarily everyone's, lies within a transcendent horizon defined by the *agapē* of a loving God, "the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob."<sup>70</sup> If we live in a secular age, there must remain a place for the transcendent horizon if there is to be fullness in human lives. Yet that horizon is threatened with

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<sup>69</sup> Charles Taylor, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers 2*, 1.

<sup>70</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 385.

marginalization and possible eclipse in secular modern culture which Taylor describes as extremely inhospitable to the transcendent.<sup>71</sup>

Thus, Taylor's tightly related people-oriented agenda underlying his "single idea calls for (1) "a work of recovery" locating modern life in the genealogy and values (moral sources) of what was once seen as the "Great Chain of Being"<sup>72</sup> and, in modern times, as the flow of historical development; (2) acts of polemical opposition against those ideas, people and fields of study that blind others from awareness of transcendent reality. This would entail "a complex many-levelled struggle, intellectual, spiritual and political in which the debates in the public arena interlink with those in a host of institutional settings;"<sup>73</sup> and (3) "an act of persuasion,"<sup>74</sup> by which we claim Taylor broadly means persuasive "Ricci-like"<sup>75</sup> teaching that opens the transcendent realm to everyone while putting an end to the marginalization of the transcendent in modern culture.<sup>76</sup>

It is important to note that in each of these categories there is implied a "transformation perspective."<sup>77</sup> That is, a Hegelian-type movement in which there can be discerned a series of stages or transformations. First there is a stage of "composition," then a stage of "decomposition," which eventually leads to a form of "re-composition," moving in a "zigzag"<sup>78</sup> but upward-tending trajectory or spiral. This is in sharp contrast to the deterministic models of historical change entailing, for example, a recurring "will to power" as seen by Nietzsche, or

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<sup>71</sup> Charles Taylor, "A Catholic Modernity?" in *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays*, 177.

<sup>72</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 129.

<sup>73</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity*, 120.

<sup>74</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity*, 72.

<sup>75</sup> Charles Taylor, "A Catholic Modernity?" in *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays*, 186-7.

<sup>76</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Catholic Modernity*, 36-7 and 118-9.

<sup>77</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 654-6.

<sup>78</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 95.

decline and fall espoused by the likes of Gibbon,<sup>79</sup> Nietzsche,<sup>80</sup> and Spengler.<sup>81</sup> We claim that Taylor opts instead for a more dynamic, less predictable model which consists of a dialectical sequence of composition – decomposition – re-composition as suggested above.

Among other things, this means to Taylor that the emergence of secularity in modernity need not be seen as permanent nor the cause of decline but as the hope-filled precursor of new forms of human experience including the possibility of personal transformation and retrieval in Western culture of a reconstituted transcendent horizon. While different than the past, Taylor believes that it will nonetheless be reconstituted under the influence of past human experience because, in Robert Bellah’s words cited by Taylor on the last page of *A Secular Age*, “nothing is ever lost.”<sup>82</sup> In the same book from which this quote is taken, Bellah echoes and more clearly articulates Taylor’s optimistic line of thought when he (Bellah) quotes Eric Chiasson, professor of physics and astronomy at Tufts University, bluntly declaring that “humankind is entering an age of synthesis such as occurs only once in several generations, perhaps only once every few centuries.”<sup>83</sup> Could this have suggested in Bellah’s and Taylor’s minds the not inconceivable hope for the emergence of a post-secular Axial-type Age in which “people of all cultures can readily understand and adopt” common values?<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, J.B. Bury, ed. (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd. 1912).

<sup>80</sup> Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (New York: Princeton University Press, 1968), 149.

<sup>81</sup> Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West, Form and Actuality* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1918.)

<sup>82</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 772, quoting Robert N. Bellah, *Religion In Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 13.

<sup>83</sup> Robert N. Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*, 46.

<sup>84</sup> Robert Bellah, *Human Evolution*, 46.

## Thesis Structure

This study is based upon a framework that begins with Taylor's initial research question: why, in about 1500, was belief in God in Western civilization widespread and unproblematic whereas in today's secular modernity non-belief in God "is not only easy but inescapable?"<sup>85</sup> Broadly, discussion of Taylor's answer to this question provides the structure of what follows. We will begin in Chapter 1 with an exploration of Taylor's personal "background framework" that tells us, in contemporary parlance, "where he is coming from" as a philosopher, teacher and public intellectual. We will then discuss in Chapter 2 aspects of Taylor's "social imaginary" which is the framework of ideas and values he works and lives within. Then in Chapter 3 we describe what we will call in dialectical terms the "Thesis" of the "enchanted world" which refers to the conditions of personal and social belief in pre-Modernity.

In response or as a reaction to the Thesis, Taylor believes that there emerged a multi-faceted "Antithesis" over the last five hundred years. He describes it as a "massive shift" or mutation in the common framework of understanding and belief in Western culture compared to pre-Modernity. Taylor sees it as a cultural revolution and he believes that its origins and pathways need to be fully understood to allow us to comprehend the context and content of our present situation, and the predicaments of our modern culture. Thus, in Chapter 4 we will discuss the first of three broad antitheses with the emergence of radically changed conditions of belief in a "disenchanted world." They opened the way to unprecedented individual freedom of choice about religious belief in Western modernity including the option of "exclusive humanism" which vaunts no belief beyond ordinary human flourishing in an exclusively immanent world.

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<sup>85</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 25.

Chapter 5 takes up a second antithesis consisting of the move to secularity and secularization in the Western world. It will include detailed discussion of Taylor's polemical critique of the half-century old mainline secularity thesis in Western societies. In it, he presents an important new definition described as Secularity 3 that fundamentally redirects the secularization debate away from its heretofore deterministic path towards more constructive directions. Whatever else may be behind the phenomenon of modern secularity, Taylor sees it principally as a matter of changed conditions of belief.

A final important antithesis will then be presented in Chapter 6 in the form of Taylor's heuristic portrait of the multi-cornered battle of belief and unbelief being waged in secular modern culture and in individual lives. This will include discussion of the perils of meaninglessness and despair said to be associated with atheistic secular modernity by influential thinkers such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Max Weber, Sartre, Camus and the "neo-Nietzscheans." Taylor's attacks against the non-theistic options, and particularly against the culturally dominant option of exclusive humanism, are of central importance in his unfolding argument.

After the foregoing discussion of the three broad antitheses, Chapter 7 will turn to the "Synthesis and Conclusion" or proposed reconciliation of the antitheses with a forward-looking section reflecting Taylor's speculations and hopeful arguments looking to a transformation of the spiritual contradictions in lives lived in secular modernity. It would allow Western society to escape "the [Nietzschean dilemma] that the highest spiritual aspirations must lead to mutilation or destruction ... the dilemma of mutilation is in a sense our greatest spiritual challenge, not an iron fate."<sup>86</sup> Fundamentally, Taylor points to the incomparable qualitative difference between "flourishing" lives in the exclusively immanent frame and lives of "fullness" in a transcendent

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<sup>86</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 521-2.

horizon. Here, he suggests the possibility of further mutations in Western culture bringing about new forms of the transcendent encounter and possibly even new conditions of belief in an entirely different re-enchanted world based on the power of the *agapē* of God. This, in part, is what Taylor describes as the “future of the religious past.”<sup>87</sup> The chapter will then close by summarizing the thesis.

## **Methodology**

The fundamental purpose of this study is to identify and understand Taylor’s thought about a key question for people living in the secular modern culture: what is or ought to be the place of the transcendent in our lives? Our methodology for understanding Taylor’s thought and elucidating our hypothesis is to rely selectively on his own written *oeuvre* by focusing primarily on seven of his principal books as judged by their relevance to the hypothesis and their prominence in Taylor’s thought and public discourse. These will be identified in the Literature Review in Chapter 1. We will supplement these principal books where desirable with references to other of Taylor’s writings and to selected secondary literature by authors addressing Taylor’s thought.

In parallel with our proposed methodology relying principally on Taylor’s own words and ideas in his published books, we propose to use Hegelian dialectic both as an organizing principle for our analysis and also as a mirror for understanding the development of Taylor’s thought. This and offer a way to explain the structure and sequence of ideas in Taylor’s most important book, *A Secular Age*, which we claim is consciously presented by Taylor on a Hegelian model. That is to say, Hegel is the key to understanding it. The ensuing synthesis will

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<sup>87</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 770.

confirm our hypothesis of the central importance Taylor attaches to the transcendent horizon as the royal road to fullness in every individual's life in contemporary Western plural culture.

## CHAPTER 1

### TAYLOR'S BACKGROUND FRAMEWORK

*Adopting a stripped-down secular outlook, without any religious dimension or radical hope in history, is not a way of avoiding the dilemma ... because this too involves its 'mutilation.' It involves stifling the response in us to some of the deepest and most powerful aspirations that humans have conceived ... Is this the last word? Does something have to be denied? Do we have to choose between various kinds of spiritual lobotomy and self-inflicted wounds? Perhaps. Certainly most of the outlooks which promise us that we will be spared these choices are based on selective blindness.<sup>1</sup>*

#### 1.1 Introduction

This chapter will introduce two pivotal concepts that Taylor introduces for understanding personal and social forces that underlie every human's values, goals, expectations and actions. These are the concept of a person's "background framework" and the separate but related concept of the person's "social imaginary." Then the chapter will explore aspects of Taylor's own background framework, building on but not duplicating information about his life history and personal traits already covered above in the Introduction. Finally, the chapter will provide a literature review outlining the key primary sources in Taylor's own *oeuvre* which are most relevant to the hypothesis, as well as a brief selection of secondary literature in dialogue with aspects of Taylor's thought most relevant to the study's hypothesis.

#### 1.2 Two Fundamental Concepts in Taylor's Thought: The "Background Framework" and the "Social Imaginary"

We begin with an explanation of two fundamental concepts in Taylor's thought. These are his concept of the "background understanding" (or "background framework") and his related

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 520.

but different concept of the “social imaginary.” They play an important role in several of his major books and are central to his analysis of the revolutionary shift that transformed religious belief between 1500 and the present. In addition to whole societies or epochs, these concepts can also apply to the lives and beliefs of individuals. In this light, we will attempt to discern Taylor’s own background framework. Chapter 2 will address key aspects of Taylor’s social imaginary relevant to our study.

### **1.2.1 Background Framework or Understanding**

Taylor credits philosophers including Wittgenstein, Heidegger and Polanyi for identifying an important analytical concept they called the “background” or “background framework.”<sup>2</sup> In different contexts, Taylor similarly refers to them in slightly varied terms including “background understanding”<sup>3</sup> or “background framework.”<sup>4</sup> These terms refer to “that largely unstructured and inarticulate understanding of our whole situation ... our implicit map of social space.” Taylor says that a background framework often affects us without our noticing it. As regards belief and unbelief, the concept entails recognizing that “all beliefs are held within a context or framework of the taken-for-granted which usually remains tacit, and may even be as yet unacknowledged by the agent, because never formulated.”<sup>5</sup> Consequently there can be shifts in the background framework, including ones that are unobtrusive. Thus, for example, in looking at the difference between pre-modernity and today’s modernity, there has been a shift according to Taylor in the whole background framework in which one believes or refuses to believe in God, a shift he construes as being from a “naïve” to a “reflective” framework.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: the Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 13.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 172-3.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 18-19.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 13.

<sup>6</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 13.

In the same respect, Taylor refers to Heidegger's interest in "'the meaning of being' and its usually unspoken, background understanding of what entities are, which can change from epoch to epoch."<sup>7</sup> The term "background understanding" can, therefore, for purposes of this study, be seen as meaning the same as "background" or "background framework." However, it is notable that Taylor for his part takes the meaning of these terms further by defining, "a framework [as] that in virtue of which we make sense of our lives spiritually. Not to have a framework is to fall into a life which is spiritually senseless. The quest is thus always a quest for sense ... the problem of the meaning of life [including] the existential predicament [of] meaninglessness in modern Western secular life is therefore on our agenda."<sup>8</sup> In other words, Taylor says that people seek meaning, indeed crave meaning, in their lives, and they find it within an implicit framework with a related more or less explicit social imaginary. He says that, as a result, "much of our deep past cannot simply be laid aside ... there is no place for unproblematic breaks with a past which is simply left behind us ... how we got here is inextricably bound up with our account of where we are, which has been a structuring principle of ... [Taylor's] work throughout."<sup>9</sup>

These framework concepts play an important role in Taylor's explanation and genealogy of the evolving fundamental ideas or self-understandings of Western societies from pre-modernity to secular modernity. They also play an important role in forming Taylor's directly related insight that he names the "social imaginary."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 95.

<sup>8</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 18.

<sup>9</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 772.

<sup>10</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 171.

## 1.2.2 Social Imaginary

Taylor assigns so much importance to the concept of the social imaginary that he dedicates 52 pages (Chapter 4) of *A Secular Age* (2007) to discussing it after having already published a full 200 page book on the theme in 2004.<sup>11</sup> However, it bears noting that both of these appearances stem from the same original source in his writing in his 1998-99 Gifford Lectures in Edinburgh. In other words, the social imaginary as an idea has been central to Taylor's thinking for some time. He uses the term, he tells us, in a

much broader and deeper [sense] than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality [i.e. social theory] ... I am thinking rather of the ways in which they imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others ... the expectations which are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images which underlie these expectations ... I'm talking about the way ordinary people 'imagine' their social surroundings ... often not expressed in theoretical terms ... [but rather] in images, stories, legends, etc. ... It is shared by large groups if not the whole society ... it extends beyond the immediate background understanding which makes sense of our particular practice.<sup>12</sup>

In this way, a social imaginary to Taylor's way of thought is a kind of social map telling one what is good, what is expected of you, what is "the common practice ... it is both factual and normative."<sup>13</sup> Therefore it entails and carries moral values. Finally, it can be infiltrated or subtly influenced and can therefore evolve and change. With this in mind, we will now move to an exploration of Taylor's own background framework.

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<sup>11</sup> Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

<sup>12</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 171-3.

<sup>13</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 171-3.

### 1.3 Charles Taylor – The Person

*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 faithful, developed through the defensive postures of the last two centuries, makes it almost impossible to find the language. The break has been very profound ... Thus the generations which have been formed in the cultural revolution of the 1960s are in some sense deeply alienated from a strong traditional model of Christian faith in the West.<sup>14</sup>*

Understanding and describing Charles Taylor the person in a relatively short space is not a straightforward matter because, while there is a fair amount of more or less “surface” information available about him in the public domain, there is no reliable biography or autobiography. There appear to be several layers to his inner self, which he, with few exceptions, seems to go out of his way to keep strictly private. Indeed, he is not only reserved and unforthcoming about his inner-self, he sometimes gives the impression of trying actively to mask it. In other words, there is more to Taylor than he lets out, and we need to try to approach him hermeneutically to understand him fully.

We will do that taking two approaches. First we will look at him as he has been presented factually to the public, building on the biographical information provided in the Introduction. Second, we will look at him from the perspective of his presumed “background understanding.”<sup>15</sup> We will supplement this hermeneutical background search with some rare but important public self-description from Taylor’s writing about the context of his youth in a multicultural milieu. Thirdly, we will look closely at what his actions, observed behaviour, and priorities over his lifetime can tell us about his principal traits, qualities and motivating concerns. We suggest that these approaches taken together will provide a description of “the self-

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<sup>14</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 494-5.

<sup>15</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 171-6. Both these important terms are further explained in these pages.

understandings that have been constitutive of [him] ...” or his background framework,”<sup>16</sup> These aspects will then furnish a basis for exploring our view of his personal social imaginary in Chapter 2.

### 1.3.1 An Outline of Taylor’s Life History

Taylor was born in Montreal, Canada, in 1931. His upbringing at home was bilingual and bicultural – English and French – but his secondary and McGill as well as Oxford education was fully in English. He admitted publicly that he felt cut-off from the French-speaking intellectual milieu in his youth because of the context in Quebec known as “the two solitudes.”<sup>17</sup> His mother was multi-generational French Canadian. Taylor’s father was an industrialist from an English Canadian Anglican family from Toronto. He is said to have lost eyesight in one eye as a soldier during the First World War. This would imply that he was affected by the Conscription Crisis that severely divided English and French Canadians, with wounding after-effects that were again revived with the same issue emerging in the Second World War when Taylor was in his teens.

His mother was devoutly Catholic in contrast to her own father Taylor described to the author, with a twinkle in his eye and much evident affection, as “Voltaire,” meaning a person who expresses incredulity, or is skeptical or anticlerical.<sup>18</sup> While Taylor as a youth was sent to an elite English-speaking Montreal private boys’ school (Selwyn House) which had an underlying but not pronounced British Anglican culture, he was most strongly influenced in religious matters by his mother and her family tradition, and is said to have become a committed and devout Catholic in his teens, strongly influenced by the preaching of Jesuit priests in a well-

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<sup>16</sup> Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 1.

<sup>17</sup> Charles Taylor: *Reconciling the Solitudes: Essays on Canadian Federalism and Nationalism*, Guy Laforest, ed. (Montreal-Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1993), 135.

<sup>18</sup> *Dictionnaire Historique de la langue française*, Alain Rey, ed., s.v. “Voltaire” (Paris, Dictionnaires Le Robert, 2006), 4123.

known Church (Saint-Viateur) in the prosperous French speaking district of Outremont. Of great importance in his personal religious and spiritual development may have been his rumoured experience in his teens “of the power of God.”<sup>19</sup> However, in an email exchange with the author dated November 3 and 4, 2016, Taylor denied this without offering alternative details of his spiritual development.<sup>20</sup> (He is well-known to guard his private life intensely.)

Although Taylor is usually reticent or veiled about expressing his religious views in his writing, he does offer here and there early references to his religious commitments. For example, in an early discussion of moral ontology he declares “I am not at all neutral on this controversy, but I do not feel at this stage in a position to contribute in a helpful way to it.”<sup>21</sup> Such references gradually become more overt, and are expressed “in technicolour” when he addresses what we claim is his “single idea” on the place of the transcendent in secular modernity. For example, he says more recently that

In our religious lives we are responding to a religious reality. We all have some sense of this, which emerges in our identifying and recognizing some mode of what I have called fullness, and seeking to attain it ... If I am right that our sense of fullness is a reflection of transcendent reality (which for me is the God of Abraham) ... then there is no absolute point zero. But there is a crucial point where many come to rest in our civilization, defined by a refusal to envisage transcendence as the meaning of this fullness. Exclusive humanism must find the ground and contours of this fullness in the immanent sphere... the door is barred against further discovery.<sup>22</sup>

His strong affiliation with the religion of “Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” in general, and with the Roman Catholic Church in particular, is unmistakable in both his major books. *Sources of the*

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<sup>19</sup> Charles Templeton, Chair of the Templeton Foundation, made this comment in his speech on the occasion of awarding Taylor the Templeton Prize.

<sup>20</sup> Background family information provided with permission in a private interview between Charles Taylor and the author on April 12, 2015.

<sup>21</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 12.

<sup>22</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 768-9. Note: This is an important quotation that illuminates Taylor’s easily misunderstood insight that the condition of “fullness” overlaps with the concept of transcendence and is obtainable by secular humanists and all other “unbelievers” as well as by “believers.” However, he makes it clear that fullness can have a qualitatively different reception and impact in the individual who misconstrues its transcendent source.

*Self and A Secular Age*, as well as his Marianist Award lecture<sup>23</sup> and, most recently, his essay “The Church Speaks - To Whom?”<sup>24</sup> These make very clear his religious commitments and basic religious beliefs. He is not kind about the Church’s faults but he makes his fundamental loyalty to it very clear. For example, he comments about ten years ago that “part of what it has normally meant for the patterns and cycles of any life to have meaning and validity for me is that they are those of my forebears ... they are continuous with theirs, segments of the same story.”<sup>25</sup>

Taylor completed a Bachelor of Arts degree in history at McGill in 1952 and soon thereafter transferred as a Rhodes Scholar to Oxford where he gravitated from studies in politics, economics and history, to graduate studies in philosophy under the tutorship of Sir Isaiah Berlin, receiving his doctorate (DPhil) in 1961. This led to teaching positions in that field initially at the Universities of Montréal and McGill, and then at Oxford from 1976 to 1979 where he was a successor of his former tutor as the prestigious Chichele Professor of Social and Political Theory.<sup>26</sup> This was despite his having contradicted his former teacher’s signature philosophical argument on behalf of “positive freedom.” Taylor saw it as deficient because “it gave no adequate account of why freedom mattered so much to individuals.”<sup>27</sup> He came back to Canada and McGill in 1979.

Taylor’s areas of teaching and research currently listed on the website under his name as an Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at McGill University in Montreal include no less than nine

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<sup>23</sup> Charles Taylor, *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays*, 187.

<sup>24</sup> Charles Taylor, José Casanova, George F. McLean, eds., *Church and People: Disjunctions in a Secular Age: Christian Philosophical Studies 1* (Washington, DC: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2012), 17.

<sup>25</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 718-9.

<sup>26</sup> Charles Taylor, *Reconciling the Solitudes: Essays on Canadian Federalism and Nationalism*, Guy Laforest, ed. (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1993), xiii.

<sup>27</sup> Michael Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin: A Life* (Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2000), 322.

broad themes.<sup>28</sup> However, philosophy can be seen as the connecting thread among them. For his part, Taylor, a deceptively humble and unassuming man, has frequently described his work as “philosophical anthropology”<sup>29</sup> even though it is not specifically among the themes in his McGill listing. One suspects a tongue-in-cheek or even polemical side to this self-reference given his frequent and strenuous denunciation of contemporary academic philosophy for its exclusion of human sensibility and subjectivity from its ambit.

If “philosophical anthropology” amounts to a contradiction in terms for contemporary academic philosophical orthodoxy which narrowly emulates the natural sciences, it sums up neatly the core of Taylor’s personal philosophy and lifework. He is keenly interested in the ideas and perspective of philosophy precisely because of their relevance to understanding the subjective dimensions of what it means to be human. While history remains an important interest and genealogy is one of his standard methodological approaches, their perspectives inform but remain subordinate to Taylor’s guiding idea identified in our hypotheses and to be demonstrated below. Our claim is that his principal concern, or the Ariadne’s thread in his life’s work, boils down to the crucial place of the transcendent as a condition of the fullest fullness in individual secular modern lives.

### **1.3.2 Taylor’s “Background Framework”: A “Revolutionary” Context**

We will now attempt to explore Taylor’s own context from the perspectives of the background framework underlying his philosophy, religious beliefs, and teaching. By his definition, we cannot hope to understand his thought processes if we are blind to these

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<sup>28</sup> <http://www.mcgill.ca/philosophy> - downloaded January 8, 2016: Philosophy of Action, Philosophy of Social Science, Political Theory, Greek Political Thought, Moral Philosophy, the Culture of Western Modernity, Philosophy of Language, Theories of Meaning, Language and Politics, German Idealism.

<sup>29</sup> Charles Taylor, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 1.

perspectives. He is the centrepiece of our study and understanding their place in his life will help us to locate him more clearly.

An important starting point in Taylor's life pertains to a contextual fact that he happens to share with many of the greatest philosophers of Western history, many of whom have had a strong influence on his thought. They include notably Plato, Aristotle, , St. Paul, Augustine, Aquinas, Descartes, Pascal, Kant, Rousseau, Hegel, De Toqueville, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Herder, Gadamer, Heidegger, Wittgenstein and Berlin. All these lived at turning points of history marked by real or incipient revolutionary change.

People who have lived within some or all the decades since Taylor was born in 1931 are bound to be well aware of the almost constant and often radical changes over the course of their lives. However, instead of Taylor pointing in his writing to any obvious extreme changes such as the World Wars I and II, the Holocaust, the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the rise and fall of Soviet Communism, or history-changing technological innovations like aviation, film, television, penicillin, antibiotics and the computer age, he singles out one specific revolution.

I believe ... that our North Atlantic civilization has been undergoing a cultural revolution in recent decades. The 1960's provide perhaps the hinge moment, at least symbolically ... as well as moral/spiritual and instrumental individualisms, we now have a widespread 'expressive' individualism. But this has shifted onto a new axis without deserting the others ... What is new is that this kind of self-orientation seems to have become a mass phenomenon.<sup>30</sup>

This is the "cultural revolution"<sup>31</sup> which brought about what he describes as "a titanic change in our Western civilization."<sup>32</sup> "We have changed not just from a condition where most people

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<sup>30</sup> Charles Taylor, "The Future of the Religious Past," in *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 239.

<sup>31</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 473.

<sup>32</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 12.

lived ‘naïvely’ in a construal (part Christian, part related to ‘spirits’ of pagan origin) as simple reality, to one in which almost no one is capable of this, but all see their option as one among many.”<sup>33</sup> This insight appears in the very early pages of his *magnum opus* and gets directly to the heart of Taylor’s teaching, even proclamation, to the world, which he spells out in detail in hundreds of pages of the rest of his book. Taylor says in a nutshell, “... we have ... changed from a condition in which belief was the default option, not just for the naïve but also for those who knew, considered, talked about atheism; to a condition in which for more and more people unbelieving construals seem at first blush the only plausible ones.”<sup>34</sup>

This radical change was particularly shocking for a devout Quebec Catholic believer like Taylor. He could see everywhere he looked, especially in his home province, the effects of a lost religious naïveté, the associated loss of the transcendent horizon and, therefore, the loss of fullness in so many lives compared to the pre-revolutionary cultural context. He saw, in short, that there had been a massive change in the background framework and its traditional Christian social imaginary. This in his view explained the revolution that had taken place in Quebec and more generally in the modern secular Western world. However, as a Hegelian thinker, he knew this change was not a dead end. As we will see below, further change, post-revolutionary “zig-zag” change, “one full of unintended consequences,”<sup>35</sup> was to be expected sooner or later in Western culture and societies. This would imply the hope of likely recovery of some of the lost “goods” even if there could be no possibility of a return in Western civilization to the *status quo ante* of the social imaginary of the “enchanted age” of pre-modernity or “Christendom.”

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<sup>33</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 12.

<sup>34</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 12.

<sup>35</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 95.

This together with the fact he was not satisfied with other interpretations of the philosopher's signature question noted above (that is, "what the hell is going on here?") explains in our view why Taylor decided to invest so much of his life to understanding and teaching about this revolution and its possible positive or negative future trajectories in human lives. He is concerned about the place of meaning and fullness, that is of the possibility of the transcendent, in everyone's life, but he is especially concerned about those tempted by the philosophies and teachings of anti-theist anti-humanists such as Nietzsche, Marx, Sartre, Foucault, and Dawkins, and, because of their modern cultural dominance, of atheistic exclusive humanists such as, for example, Camus.

In this scenario of a radical shift in the background framework and social imaginary of lost transcendent horizons, and lost fullness in individual lives, our hypothesis claims that Taylor saw a type of call or mission akin to that of Matteo Ricci. Ricci was the first Jesuit missionary to China in the 16<sup>th</sup> century despite its being an entirely unknown culture. He set an example of how the Christian teacher needs to find a way to dialogue with differences of culture in terms which the other culture can understand. We suggest that, like Ricci, Taylor has seen his role as being a kind of "missionary" for the promotion of the fullness of the transcendent in the language of the transformed social imaginary of 21<sup>st</sup> century secular modernity.

#### **1.4 Taylor's Major Traits and Qualities**

As we have seen, in Canada and abroad, Taylor is admired as a leading political and moral philosopher, gifted teacher, and public intellectual. In fact, he is of even "broader gauge" than those words suggest. The regrettably outdated term "philologist"<sup>36</sup> or perhaps the neologism

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<sup>36</sup> James Turner, *Philology: The Forgotten Origins of the Modern Humanities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), ix.

“inter-disciplinarian” would come closer to describing Taylor’s exceptional ability to grasp and integrate a vast cross-section of disciplines, languages, cultures, and fields of classical and contemporary knowledge. For over six decades of his adult life, he has illustrated Pascal’s admonition that it is better “to know a little about everything than everything about something.”<sup>37</sup>

Given his enthusiastic interest in virtually everything, this section of the Background Framework chapter aims to come at understanding Taylor from the perspective of what we claim are his most important traits and qualities as evidenced in his observed behaviour and expressed interests.

#### **1.4.1 Taylor the Teacher**

Over the course of more than five decades as a teacher, Taylor has exemplified the ideal teacher. Informal discussions with representatives of four generations of his former students confirm that Taylor was among the most important teachers of their lives. Indeed it was one of these former students who first alerted the author of this study in the 1980’s to the exceptional qualities of Taylor as a teacher.

A very tall man, Taylor mixes a type of shyness or inner reserve with external warmth, good humour and curiosity that enraptures a class. His eyes do a lot of the communicating. He is a humble, patient teacher, but when challenged, he shows a quick intelligence and sharp tongue while suppressing overt annoyance sometimes to a fault. These characteristics are apparently habitual because they continue to be evident in more recent learning encounters and interviews

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<sup>37</sup> Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, translated with an Introduction by A.J. Krailsheimer (London: Penguin Books, 1966), 58, and quoted in Robert N. Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 709.

with him twenty-five years later. Moreover, something already noticed about him in the past has not been lost over the years: Taylor still colours or blushes when he laughs! He is usually gentle, gentlemanly, and “old-world charming” without being pompous.

Beyond such impressionistic evidence, many have recorded their direct experience of Taylor the teacher. For example, Ruth Abbey, a distinguished scholar and former doctoral student of his, noted that he has “an almost conversational writing style and use of everyday examples.” She records that Sir Isaiah Berlin, his tutor at Oxford in the 1950’s, observed that “his work enjoyed an authenticity, concreteness, and a sense of reality.” Abbey says “I see Taylor’s approachability as a philosopher as intimately connected to his work as a teacher.”<sup>38</sup> On the other hand, while he is generally straight-forward in arguing a point, the author when observing Taylor on five different occasions, noted a sometimes frustrating tendency on his part to back away from direct confrontation in argument.

Perhaps the most striking example of the importance he attaches to teaching came in his 1996 Marianist Award acceptance lecture titled “A Catholic Modernity?” In it, he answered the lecture’s title by choosing as his theme the words of Jesus to his disciples in the Gospel of Matthew in his “Great Commission” spoken in his last recorded appearance following the Crucifixion where he calls on them to: “Go ye and teach all nations” (Matt 28:19). What is particularly striking is not that Taylor would emphasize the teaching vocation to an audience with many teachers, but that he chose the word “*teach*” used uniquely in the Gospel of Matthew in the English of the King James Version of the Bible<sup>39</sup> or its derivatives like the Rheims

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<sup>38</sup> Ruth Abbey, *Philosophy Now: Charles Taylor* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000), 6.

<sup>39</sup> Charles Taylor, “A Catholic Modernity?” in *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 167.

Bible.<sup>40</sup> This we claim is peculiarly revealing because Taylor could easily have made the same basic point about teaching to his Marianist audience in contemporary language. Instead, he linked the importance of the function directly to Christ's mission everywhere on earth. It is also interesting that he opted to use the wording from the traditional Protestant Bible. It is the only major English translation that uses the word "teach," whereas the Vulgate and all the main modern English and French translations of the Bible consulted show that the commission passage is translated as "make disciples of all nations," not "teach all nations."<sup>41</sup> This is not a minor distinction. One imagines that perhaps Taylor chose it intentionally because it reflects what appears to be his lifetime calling. But, in the context of our hypothesis, he probably chose to highlight Ricci as a symbol of the vector of Taylor's three part "agenda" concerned with an "act of persuasion." He knows, as Plato and Aristotle and Ricci knew before him, that proselytizing does not have the same persuasive effect as dialogical teaching and personal example.

It is notable that this sort of perspective seems to have informed and even dominated the report he co-authored concerning "reasonable accommodation" in Quebec.<sup>42</sup> This report was the culmination of an exercise in public consultation on the sensitive issues related to the principle in Quebec law that reasonable efforts must be made to accommodate cultural differences in provincial public institutions. For this challenge, Taylor was the perfect choice. A commission of inquiry is fundamentally an evidence-based device for public and governmental learning and teaching in an often "hot potato" public policy context. This setting allowed him to combine his

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<sup>40</sup> John Kohlenberger III, ed., *The Precise Parallel New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 174-5.

<sup>41</sup> The source of the differences in translation of the passage seems to be that the Vulgate was based on a Latin translation from a Greek text whereas much of the King James Version was based on Tyndale's translation from Hebrew and Aramaic translations. In Latin the text for Matthew 28:19 in Latin translating Greek was: "euntes ergo docete omnes gentes bapuzantes eos in nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritu Sancti."

<sup>42</sup> The Consultation Commission on Accommodation Practices Related to Cultural Differences: Government of Quebec, 2008.

political, philosophical, and outstanding bilingual teaching and communicating abilities to help bridge the gulf between public perceptions and reality rooted in genuine ignorance of the religious and cultural “other”.

Taylor’s wish to teach all sorts and conditions of people reflects his exceptionally broad approach to diversity in all forms. It also illustrates his characteristic teaching style – dialogical, humble, and sensitive to interlocutors as people as well as to their ideas. But he always seems to have a clear idea of where he is going – as suggested by our hypothesis, he has “an agenda” that can be single minded. When he disagrees, he disagrees amiably and with an obvious effort to accommodate the other point of view. It is no accident, therefore, that his Marianist lecture highlights the *example* as well as achievement of Father Matteo Ricci, founder of the first Jesuit mission in China (recently canonized by the Catholic Church) who emphasized the need to adapt to and accommodate as much as possible other cultures on their own terms in acts of persuasion.<sup>43</sup> In this regard, he counsels his audience

to take a Ricci-like distance to get close to (modernity) in the proper way ... the Ricci voyager carries the point of comparison [with past forms and traditions] ... within himself ... I think that a better understanding emerges from this – better, that is, for Christians who want to know how to live in modernity ... we escape the narrowness that I tried to designate (unfairly, I am sure) with the term ‘a modern Catholicism.’”<sup>44</sup>

This is a complex sentence and the full paragraph in which it is set is even more bewildering. It can be read on more than one level because, among other reasons, it was delivered to a Catholic audience in 1996, a time when rumblings in the Roman Catholic Church between forces of conservatism and reform, tradition and modernity, had intensified. Hence, Taylor was speaking to a probably divided audience about a *via media* approach to teaching and conversion which

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<sup>43</sup> Jonathan D. Spence, *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985).

<sup>44</sup> Charles Taylor, “A Catholic Modernity?” 107.

would probably satisfy neither perspective. Yet, in his view, it was the only way for a teacher to speak to the contemporary secular and plural modern world, as demonstrated earlier in his *Malaise of Modernity* when he drew on Pascal's insight about the need to balance the "grandeur" and the "misère" that characterize modernity.<sup>45</sup>

Indeed, Taylor's rather convoluted expression in parts of the Marianist Award lecture (and occasionally elsewhere in his writing) may perhaps be explained by his wishing to demonstrate discretely the very rhetorical device that he was recommending to his audience, in this case the well-known principle – if in doubt, mumble! He was trying to speak to the different perspectives in a diverse audience in terms meaningful to their respective frameworks. He may also have been recognizing the important differentiations in Augustine's rhetorician's insight that "there be three times, a present of things past, a present of things present, and a present of things future."<sup>46</sup> People tend to live and find meaning in one or other of these time frames but all three have to be taken into account by a teacher hoping to speak meaningfully to a modern audience.

It is in this light that one senses in much of Taylor's teaching very well honed classical rhetorical skills going back to Aristotle's *Rhetoric*<sup>47</sup> and highlighted as a cornerstone of Jesuit teaching by Ignatius.<sup>48</sup> This would explain the rather sudden emergence of Ricci in Taylor's Marianist presentation. In an entirely unforeseen new cultural context akin to Taylor's contemporary post-revolutionary context, Ricci's rhetorical insights from a classical European education of the 16<sup>th</sup> century were put to persuasive use. Taylor was advising his audience to take Ricci's example into account in their own Christian teaching and evangelism. So, here, we

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<sup>45</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity*, 121.

<sup>46</sup> Jonathan D Spence, *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), 16.

<sup>47</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric (Rhetorica)*, translated by W, Rhys Roberts (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc., 1952), 587-675.

<sup>48</sup> Jonathan D. Spence, *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci*, 14-15.

perhaps see evidence for what our hypothesis claims is Taylor's underlying "single idea" and "single tightly related agenda." We are claiming that the retrieval of the transcendent horizon within the post-revolutionary culture of secular modernity is his life's mission and goal as a teacher, philosopher and committed Christian. All this, then, suggests that it is reasonable to think that we should see Taylor as much as a teacher with Gospel-based objectives as a philosopher of secular modernity.

### **1.4.2 Committed Christian**

We have already seen above something of Taylor's religious background framework in which his mother's practicing Roman Catholicism and family background in Catholic Quebec clearly had a major impact on his developmental context. We have also noted Taylor's evident predilection as an adult for seeking and advancing middle path solutions to bridge gaps between sharply opposed positions, such as between supporters and opponents of what he sees as our secular modern culture. Time and again in his writing he seeks to bridge divisions and conciliate gaps. In part this could be explained by his Hegelian way of thinking, but all the evidence of his life and writing as a scholar, philosopher and public intellectual shows that he lives by Jesus' admonition: "blessed are the peace makers"<sup>49</sup> while also framing much of his philosophical anthropology in terms consistent with Christ's teaching in the Beatitudes. In short, Taylor makes it clear, at first subtly but later openly and candidly, that he is a fully engaged "practicing" Catholic Christian.

Hints and evidence supporting this are found throughout his major publications, but as we have seen, the clearest statement of his beliefs and their place in the religious context of

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<sup>49</sup> Matthew 5: 9.

modernity can be found in the Marianist Award lecture that Taylor delivered in January of 1996. It was reprinted in 1999 with several commentaries and Taylor's response to each of them in *A Catholic Modernity?*<sup>50</sup> edited by James L Heft. Then, it was reprinted in 2011 as an essay published in his own book *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays*.<sup>51</sup>

However, this is not to say that this lecture was the first example of Taylor's religious and Christian perspectives. It is true that in most of his writing he seems reticent about bold theological statements, preferring instead hints, metaphors, and subtle uses of ambiguous language, to suggest rather than proclaim his religious commitments. This often requires the reader to decode precisely what he means when touching on the religious realm. However, when necessary, he makes his religious commitment resoundingly plain and candid, such as when he offers the following remarkable testimony of the transcendent directly relevant to our hypothesis in the early pages of *A Secular Age*:

What does it mean to say that for me fullness comes from a power which is beyond me, that I have to receive it, etc.? Today it is likely to mean something like this: the best sense I can make of my conflicting moral and spiritual experience is captured by a theological view of this kind. That is, in my own experience, in prayer, in moments of fullness, in experience of exile overcome, in what I seem to observe around me in other people's lives – lives of exceptional spiritual fullness, or lives of exceptional self-enclosedness, lives of demonic evil, etc. – this seems to be the picture which emerges. But I am never or only rarely, really sure, free of all doubt ... this is typical of the modern condition, and an analogous story could be told by many an unbeliever.<sup>52</sup>

This is one of the most direct expressions in Taylor's writing about the extent and intensity of his faith but also an admission of his ongoing occasional doubt about this belief. His seeming ambivalence, he explains more recently, is not about the doubt that is a normal

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<sup>50</sup> Charles Taylor, Chapter 1, "A Catholic Modernity?" and Chapter 6, "Concluding Reflections and Comments," *A Catholic Modernity? Charles Taylor's Marianist Award Lecture*, 13-37 and 105-25.

<sup>51</sup> Charles Taylor, "A Catholic Modernity?" Chapter 9, *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 167.

<sup>52</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 10-11.

characteristic of our era, but rather is because he intentionally downplays the particularities of his Catholic context for a purpose. “I felt a need to take a distance, to open up the range of possibilities ... I think that a better understanding emerges from this – better that is, for our purposes, for Christians who want to know how to live in and with modernity.”<sup>53</sup> In other words, Taylor understands that he cannot personally be or *be seen* to be too closely invested in a subjective Catholic normativity for his philosophical teaching to retain credibility among those who would be put off by too obvious signs of such subjectivity, of preaching instead of teaching. His message as a philosopher points to a universal human experience, or at least “pre-sentiment,” of a reality beyond oneself that in one form or another can be considered an intimation of the transcendent. If people recognize that fact in modern life, he is confident that they will find their way to a form of expression of that experience that fits their circumstances.

However, we should note that, with such a balancing act, Taylor risks getting himself caught in a “damned if you do, and damned if you don’t” situation. An example of this is the criticism of bias levelled at him by W. D. Hart, an American Professor of Religious Studies, of declared but undefined atheistic “naturalistic” belief, who charged Taylor in a 2012 article with having a bias in favour of a Christian and Catholic mode of belief in his work.<sup>54</sup> It is hard to evaluate this claim. On the one hand, Taylor, throughout his work, goes to great, even excessive, lengths to demonstrate even-handed objectivity in his analysis. But on the other hand, as we have seen, he has announced publicly that he is “a believer,” a Christian believer, and a practicing Catholic. This opens the possibility that in presenting his philosophy of living in modernity, he

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<sup>53</sup> Charles Taylor, “Concluding Reflections and Comments,” in *A Catholic Modernity?* 106-7.

<sup>54</sup> William David Hart, “Naturalizing Christian Ethics: A Critique of Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age*,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 40, no. 1 (2012): 150.

may not be regarded so much as an objective analyst as perhaps an apologist for Christian faith and an advocate of a particular faith point of view.

This charge is taken up in a thoughtful article by a British philosopher, Fergus Kerr, OP who lays out a helpful interpretation of Taylor's two major books. He says,

it becomes clear that he [Taylor] was never out just to identify phenomena; he always wanted to show us how to expose and resist certain tendencies, in particular certain philosophical theorizings, that obscure and distort the possibilities of our being as fully human as we might be ... seeking some non-anthropocentric ethic as the corrective to the 'bad meta-ethic' which excludes the search for sources of morality that would 'restore depth, richness, and meaning to life.'<sup>55</sup>

In that context, without ignoring such alternatives as the Buddhist or Heideggerian options, Taylor, according to Kerr, makes an objective case for a Christian theistic view of the world as the best available alternative to the "spiritual lobotomy" risked by the exclusive humanist variants. But this does not make him biased necessarily. However, Kerr points out that the British philosopher, Stephen Mulhall, would not agree entirely with that view. He has accused Taylor, in effect, of speaking in his own religious voice without quite admitting it and suggests that *Sources of the Self* should be rewritten "in a form which makes it clearer that it always ... was a personal moral manifesto."<sup>56</sup>

This accusation is not unreasonable and it certainly reflects "the other side of the coin" in relation to Taylor's criticism of modern, and especially British, analytic and utilitarian philosophy for excluding real, lived human experience from its purview, therefore partially blinding itself. However, it also demonstrates the fine line Taylor has had to walk in his career to avoid such charges of mixing inappropriately his personal faith commitment with his philosophy.

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<sup>55</sup> Fergus Kerr, OP, "How Much Can a Philosopher Do?" *Modern Theology* 26, no. 3 (July 2010), 331.

<sup>56</sup> Fergus Kerr, "How Much Can a Philosopher Do?" 332.

On the other hand, Kerr's article and Mulhall's criticism of bias actually strengthens support for our hypothesis. As a devout and clearly learned Christian, Taylor will naturally consider and draw on the Christian spiritual sources that underlie his faith. They are the background framework of his thinking and idea of the transcendent. His quest or agenda to help steer individuals amidst the potential pitfalls of secular modernity towards fullness of life automatically obliges him to draw upon his own empirical experience of fullness as a human being. Is that not the role of a teacher and a philosopher, to share their learning of "the beautiful, the noble, the true and the good?"<sup>57</sup>

Moreover, we will claim below that, in doing so, Taylor almost over-compensates for perceptions of bias by intentionally using the term "transcendent" precisely because it is a word and concept that has distinct meaning and resonance in a broad variety of faith positions including the modern atheist and exclusive humanist positions. In short, arguing for a transcendent horizon is not uniquely Christian. Even if one is strongly committed to a religious point of view, as is Taylor, the word and the place of the transcendent is not exclusively Christian and can be discussed as an objective fact of life.

Where the issue of bias might be more relevant is not in the description of "our present situation" as much as it would be in any prescriptions he might offer for what the subject should be or do in response to that situation. This will therefore be an issue below in our support for our claim concerning Taylor's approach to the transcendent in secular modernity. Only then will we be able to draw conclusions concerning whether or not the hypothesis of this study has been adequately defended and whether or not it reflects bias. This also reinforces the corollary of our

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<sup>57</sup> David W. Livingstone, quoted by Patrick Keeney in "The Learned Society: Why There is No Substitute for a Liberal Education," in *The Literary Review of Canada* 24, no. 4 (May 2016): 6.

hypothesis. We claim that it is not the description of secular modernity that should be seen as Taylor's primary concern in his life work, but rather, his warnings about the potential consequences of some of the secular belief "options" that people have to choose among that exclude the transcendent and incur potential "spiritual lobotomy."<sup>58</sup>

Our claim in this regard is that his overriding objective, based on his own religious experience, is to see how the best of our legacy from the past can be preserved and adapted to our spiritual lives in the new secular circumstances. Taylor's focus is on clearly understanding those circumstances and clearly understanding our moral sources as a basis for averting spiritual disaster.

Before leaving Christianity as a crucial element of understanding Taylor's personal context, it seems significant to mention that in 1969, just as Taylor was grappling with the "cultural revolutions" of the 1960s, including the seismic developments of the Second Vatican Council, Malcolm Muggeridge, a formerly socialist and atheist British author with a global reputation as editor of *Punch Magazine*, published a book much noted around the world called *Jesus Rediscovered*.<sup>59</sup> It appeared four years after the publication of Harvey Cox's diametrically opposed *A Secular City*. Muggeridge's recent conversion to Christianity had astounded many of his former fellow-socialists including many of Taylor's British colleagues with whom, as noted above, he had helped found a well-known British socialist periodical – *The New Left Review*. This was in the midst of Cold War tensions that included intense debate about the contradiction between theistic religious belief and neo-Nietzschean and Marxist atheism. Indeed there seems to have been even more amazement in Muggeridge's social circles about his turn to religion than

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<sup>58</sup> Charles Taylor, *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays*, 172.

<sup>59</sup> Malcolm Muggeridge, *Jesus Rediscovered* (London: Wm Collins & Sons Fontana, 1969).

there was in the same social circles over the treachery of Kim Philby and the other Cambridge Communist spies. Muggeridge sums up the challenges of teaching a religious based perspective when he says "... since I began to try to be a Christian and endlessly talk about it, the chilliness with which I have long been regarded in Establishment circles ... has turned into a positive ice age."<sup>60</sup>

One factor that is immediately striking about Muggeridge's book in the context of this study is how similar his list of his spiritual "masters" is to the major figures mentioned in Taylor's own work. "My own masters (... from the frequency with which I quote them) have been a cherished few – the Gospels, of course, and the Epistles, especially St. Paul's, the ever-beloved Augustine, and St. Francis, Bunyan, Blake, Pascal and Kierkegaard, Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, Bonhoeffer and, to me, the most luminous intelligence of our time, Simone Weil."<sup>61</sup> All of these are also landmarks in Taylor's writing about his own intellectual and faith journey. Moreover, in different ways, they both announce their "deep dissatisfaction with prevailing twentieth century values ... and a sense that there is an alternative propounded two thousand years ago by the Sea of Galilee and on the hill called Golgotha."<sup>62</sup> What is different about both writers, other than being separated by two generations, is that Muggeridge was an ardent public communicator and apologist – in short, an outspoken preacher, for Christianity. He decisively chose a side in a conflict, whereas we claim that Taylor's generally understated faith message has consistently sought to find the middle ground as, rhetorically, the best way to keep minds open and to be persuasive in faith-based argument.<sup>63</sup> It also reflects his commitment as a

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<sup>60</sup> Malcolm Muggeridge, *Jesus Rediscovered*, 10.

<sup>61</sup> Malcolm Muggeridge, *Jesus Rediscovered*, 8-9.

<sup>62</sup> Malcolm Muggeridge, *Jesus Rediscovered*, 7.

<sup>63</sup> For an interesting discussion of Taylor's alleged "partiality" to Catholicism in his *A Secular Age*, see the Editors' Introduction in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, edited by Michael Warner, Jonathan VanAntwerpen, and Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 5-7.

former politician, lifelong political philosopher, and concerned Canadian, to the importance of modern Western democratic and plural societies building and preserving habits of political and cultural tolerance as the pre-condition for peaceful social coexistence.

### 1.4.3 Linguist and Communicator

Another of Taylor's important traits and qualities is his exceptional knowledge of and ability to speak and interpret multiple languages, particularly those most relevant to Western philosophy. These include written and spoken Greek, Latin, Italian, French, English and German. Perhaps this is not unusual for many theologians and philosophers. However, it is essential in somebody who at an early stage showed an interest in a combination of genealogy, philology, philosophical anthropology, and the philosophy of language. All these require exceptional mastery not only of key languages but of advanced insights into the nature of language itself as a window into what it means to be human. Here, Taylor also stands apart. Of his current list of nine teaching or research areas at McGill University two are specifically language oriented: the philosophy of language, and theories of meaning, language and politics.<sup>64</sup> The first book of his career published in 1964 already showed profound interest in these areas when he challenged the behaviourist school of theory by attacking its approach to "data language" which excluded concepts which "involve consciousness or intentionality, those referring to knowledge, belief, expectancy, wanting and action."<sup>65</sup> We can see here where Taylor's "polemic" against what he regards as the self-blinding social sciences began. However it did not end there since Taylor's most recent book fifty-two years later is even more directly concerned with language.<sup>66</sup> One

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<sup>64</sup> Downloaded September 18, 2016 at McGill.ca (<http://mcgill.ca/PHILOSOPHY> ([https://www.mcgill.ca/PHILOSOPHY/People/Faculty \(philosophy/people\)/Faculty \(philosophy/people/faculty\)](https://www.mcgill.ca/PHILOSOPHY/People/Faculty%20(philosophy/people)/Faculty%20(philosophy/people/faculty))))

<sup>65</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Explanation of Behaviour* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964), 73.

<sup>66</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Language Animal: The Full Shape of the Human Linguistic Capacity* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016).

observer says that this book “demonstrated how the very study of language over time embodies the evolving human effort to extend our understanding – not only of language, but of the very self (that) language helps to describe, propel, and transcend.”<sup>67</sup>

Closely related to his interest in language and languages, Taylor can also be seen as a master communicator. His prolific written *oeuvre* speaks for itself, but he also excels as a public lecturer, speaker and debater. His basic method is dialogical or conversational in the manner of Plato (which also may explain Taylor’s longstanding readiness to participate in public debates). A good example of this trait can be seen in the summary report discussed above of the *Bouchard-Taylor Commission on Accommodation Practices Related to Cultural Differences*<sup>68</sup> which presents a series of issues each of which is structured around three parts: a thesis, a counter-thesis or “antithesis,” and the Commission’s resolution or synthesis of the issue.

All this said, we do not claim that Taylor is always easily understood as a writer or speaker. On the contrary, Taylor’s texts are not always clear or entirely understandable. There are several reasons for this. First, while brilliantly learned, creative and far-reaching, Taylor’s *oeuvre* is prolific and immense. Never mind his copious articles, lectures and media interviews, mastering even a few of his fourteen books cited as primary sources in the bibliography requires concentrated application and thought. One can be selective, but in researching his views one can be overly limiting and easily miss that small point here and there that he sometimes injects into his writing or verbal asides, that can significantly change the understanding of his thought.

An example is the importance of the debate mentioned above in the Heft book on Taylor’s Marianist Award lecture which unexpectedly turns out to be a key document for

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<sup>67</sup> Maryanne Wolf, Tufts University, quoted on the flyleaf of Charles Taylor, *The Language Animal*.

<sup>68</sup> The Consultation Commission on Accommodation Practices Related to Cultural Differences, *Building the Future: A Time for Reconciliation; Abridged (Bouchard-Taylor) Report* (Quebec, QC: Government of Quebec, 2008).

understanding Taylor's views on the place of the transcendent in secular modernity.<sup>69</sup> Another example is the discovery of a polemical charge by Taylor about "secular-liberal triumphalism" in his two page by-invitation Preface to David Martin's *On Secularization*<sup>70</sup> which opened new doors for our hermeneutic understanding of Taylor's ideas and underlying thought. Specifically, it suggested that more than the strictures in the Academy against subjectivity in the social and human sciences discussed above, there may even be what amounts to ideological strictures or unspoken censorship against any form of religious or related thought in the public universities in secular countries. This is an important point in Taylor's thought, but if one had not read Martin's book one might have missed it.

A final example of this dilemma is that when Taylor refers to himself as a "philosophical anthropologist" in his 1985 *Philosophical Papers 2*<sup>71</sup> he fails to define the term despite implying that it might be a questionable category among non-European scholars. It was only a matter of chance that we spotted his 1964 definition of the term while researching his language interests for this study. In *The Explanation of Behaviour*, Taylor states that his definition of "philosophical anthropology (is) the study of the basic categories in which man and his behaviour is to be described and explained."<sup>72</sup>

A second broad challenge to the average reader of Taylor's work is that understanding the meaning of the essentials of the many pages requires a significant amount of background knowledge and secondary reading. Taylor will, for example, make passing reference to many notable thinkers and assume a level of knowledge about them which is not generally realistic,

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<sup>69</sup> James L Heft, Editor, *A Catholic Modernity? Charles Taylor's Marianist Award Lecture*, 105-25.

<sup>70</sup> Charles Taylor "Foreword" in David Martin, *On Secularization: Towards a Revised General Theory* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2005), ix.

<sup>71</sup> Charles Taylor, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers 2*, 1.

<sup>72</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Explanation of Behaviour*, 4.

especially with the increasing number of graduates lacking the kind of classical, theological or literary knowledge that was once the norm in Western educational culture. Therefore, for example, many contemporaries would have difficulty reading Taylor's, *The Malaise of Modernity*, in which he mentions with minimal explanation *inter alia* Aristotle, De Tocqueville, Weber, Nietzsche, and Pascal, in their own right or as metaphors, to explicate different key points he wants to make. Thus, for a related example, Taylor uses a quote in French from Pascal about "the grandeur" and "the misère"<sup>73</sup> of human beings to underline the central point of his lecture/book but with no more than a superficial explanation of the deeper and, in the context pivotal, French meaning intended by Pascal in using the phrase. The book consists of the scripts for Taylor's CBC Massey Lecture series. There must have been many listeners for whom points presented like this simply went over their heads, with the result that his important insights could totally have escaped the broad audience for whom they were presumably intended. In that respect, it is often unclear if Taylor himself or his publishers have thought through his communication strategy since, obviously, speaking to an audience of scholars is different from speaking to the broader public.

A third challenge in understanding Taylor's work is the fact that quite naturally his ideas or ways of expressing them evolve over time. One sees this starkly in the difference one observes between what Taylor said he was setting out to achieve with his *Sources of the Self* and the shift of emphasis that clearly takes place in his thought by the time he publishes *A Secular Age* eighteen years later. His ideas evolve in particular because of his dialogical technique of "conversation" with dialogue partners such as, for example to name just a few, giants like Plato, St Paul, Augustine, Aquinas, Descartes, Kant, Rousseau, Hume, Hegel, Fichte, Kierkegaard,

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<sup>73</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity*, 121.

Nietzsche, Marx, Camus, Sartre, Arendt, Cantwell Smith, Habermas, Rawls, Heidegger, Gadamer, Illich, Kolakowski, and Bellah. Moreover this list does not mention the numerous “subtler voices” among the great poets, playwrights and theologians who Taylor recognizes as having an authentic contribution to make in matters of the transcendent epiphanic experience. These include Luther, Calvin, Edwards, Wesley, Goethe, Wordsworth, Pope, Herbert, Schiller, Bede, Bonhoeffer, Havel, and so on.

However, despite these challenges, it remains quite remarkable how over the length of his scholarly career Taylor’s thinking, his way of thinking and his major dialogue partners have remained consistent. This is partly, but not only, because of his exposure to Hegel who Taylor credits with helping “to shape the terms in which I think.”<sup>74</sup> It seems clear that Taylor has had certain fundamental ideas from the beginning.

Sometimes Taylor chooses to express his ideas using other thinkers as positive or negative “foils” (i.e. “a person that sets off another thing, person or idea by contrast.”<sup>75</sup>). Thus, as we will see, he often refers to the thought of Nietzsche as a central contrast case to his own thinking. Nietzsche’s perspective is fundamentally the antithesis of Taylor’s view of reality, and therefore a useful foil for making his arguments. However, in his writing, Taylor often seems to prefer not to mention him by name but by reference to the ideas of which Nietzsche is the originator or instigator such as “the neo-Nietzscheans,” that is, people like Foucault and Derrida. Taylor often does the same with Weber whose “iron cage” metaphor<sup>76</sup> sums up another of the potential perils of living in a “disenchanted” industrial secular modernity. The important point to note in this is that Taylor’s principal focus of concern, at least in *A Secular Age*, is not outright

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<sup>74</sup> Charles Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society*, xiii.

<sup>75</sup> *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English, Seventh Edition*, s.v. “Foil.”

<sup>76</sup> Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, translated by Talcott Parsons (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1958), 181.

atheists and anti-humanists like Nietzsche, but atheist or agnostic secular humanists who are dominant in the modern Western culture. While by definition atheists, perhaps they appear more salvageable, even “redeemable,” to Taylor. More likely, however, he is concerned by their infectious cultural hegemony which Taylor clearly sees as the biggest threat.

A fourth and final challenge for the reader is the fact that Taylor albeit a philosopher of language, is like many philosophers before him: he is either fond of or obliged by lack of apposite words and concepts to invent conceptual and linguistic terminology in order to communicate his ideas to contemporary readers. Even when he seems to be flippant, he has seemingly thought out his terminology. Like other philosophers, he has to use neologisms and other unusual language to attempt an enrichment of what he calls the “cramped”<sup>77</sup> language of academic philosophy, or to escape the limits of accepted usages that do not perfectly fit his intended meaning and pedagogical or rhetorical objectives. In this regard, we could look at his key words one-by one, such as, for example, “flourishing” and “fullness.” However, since we will address these later, one example will perhaps suffice: Taylor speaks meaningfully of his “paradigm purposes”<sup>78</sup> without much explanation of his meaning, requiring the uninitiated reader to read several paragraphs to get a vague understanding of the term and its significance to him. Sometimes one is tempted to think that, as a lover of language, he just likes the flavour of a neologism or unusual usage, perhaps thereby acknowledging the importance Aristotle attaches to style in rhetoric of persuasion.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 3.

<sup>78</sup> Charles Taylor, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers 2*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 4.

<sup>79</sup> Aristotle, *The Art of Rhetoric*, ed. H. C. Lawson-Tancred (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 215.

Sometimes this liking for unusual almost “hip” language is helpful or colourful when, for example, he coins non-stuffy contemporary language such as “boosters” and “knockers”<sup>80</sup> to identify two poles of debate about selfhood in modernity. Sometimes, however, it is difficult to see why common nomenclature would not have been equally or even more helpful in conveying meaning to the ordinary intelligent reader or listener. In short, in our view, Taylor is more complicated than he has to be. A significant example of this, as we have seen above, is Taylor’s shying away from use of the word “transcendent” and using instead such terms as “fullness,” or “beyond human flourishing”<sup>81</sup> to communicate the same meaning. Another example of unusual terminology for the ordinary reader is his borrowing of terms unfamiliar to non-philosophers that appear to come from usages or neologisms introduced by other philosophers like Kant, Pascal, Hegel or Heidegger, of which “act of retrieval”<sup>82</sup> and “work of persuasion”<sup>83</sup> are important examples that underlie key concepts in Taylor’s thought and writing. All this means that many ordinary readers of Taylor’s work must either “learn” Taylor’s language, almost like a foreign language, in order to engage with his ideas, or have them “decoded” by an intermediary - or just give up, close the book, and move on. This study is intended to help avoid the latter option.

## 1.5 Literature Review of Primary Sources

According to the invaluable registry at Notre Dame University in Indiana initiated by Ruth Abbey<sup>84</sup>, Taylor has written 24 books of which 14 are referenced in this study in one context or another. In addition, he has co-authored 8 books and over 500 articles. And he is the subject in whole or in part in over 1700 secondary source books and articles. This prolific output

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<sup>80</sup> Taylor, *Malaise*, 72.

<sup>81</sup> James L. Heft, *A Catholic Modernity?* 109.

<sup>82</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity*, 72.

<sup>83</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity*, 72.

<sup>84</sup> The electronic registry of the Taylor Bibliography is accessible at <[www3.nd.edu/~rabbey1](http://www3.nd.edu/~rabbey1)> and is managed now by Bradley Thames whose email address is <[bradleythames@gmail.com](mailto:bradleythames@gmail.com)>

might seem to make supporting our hypothesis based on Taylor's writing almost unmanageable. However, we have mitigated this challenge by focussing our analysis on seven of Taylor's key books using three criteria related to our hypothesis. These are: (1) Taylor's books that provide significant insight into the evolution of his thinking about the modern identity; (2) his books that shed light on the changing conditions of belief which underlie his understanding of the personal "predicament" people face living in the culture of secular modernity; and (3) his books supporting our thesis about the crucial place of the transcendent in modern secular lives. The seven books identified by this selection process are summarized below. As suggested, this does not mean that others of Taylor's books are neglected entirely. Rather, they are adverted to where they are particularly relevant on certain points.

### 1.5.1 *Hegel and Modern Society*<sup>85</sup>

Taylor presents this book published in 1979 as a "condensation"<sup>86</sup> of his earlier, fuller book titled *Hegel*<sup>87</sup> published in 1975. He states that his purpose in writing it was to make it "more accessible."<sup>88</sup> However, this is not an entirely accurate account since Taylor tells us that in this much shorter book he drops Hegel's *Logic*, his interpretation of the *Phenomenology*, and the chapters on art, religion and philosophy. This is because he says that he wants to achieve a different emphasis by identifying "ways in which Hegel is relevant and important to contemporary philosophers."<sup>89</sup> He intends to show how Hegel "still provides the terms in which we reflect on some contemporary problems and dilemmas."<sup>90</sup> Moreover, he also personalizes his

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<sup>85</sup> Charles Taylor, *Hegel and the Modern World*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

<sup>86</sup> Charles Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), xiii.

<sup>87</sup> Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

<sup>88</sup> Charles Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society*, xiii.

<sup>89</sup> Charles Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society*, xiii.

<sup>90</sup> Charles Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society*, xiii.

purpose in a very significant way for our understanding of Taylor's thought by saying "I wanted to show how Hegel has helped shape the terms in which I think."<sup>91</sup>

As will become clear below, Taylor's explanation of Hegel's sometimes difficult thought was not only invaluable for helping us to understand Hegel but also to recognize Taylor's reliance on dialectical analysis throughout his writing. Taylor characteristically looks for the middle path or synthesis in any debate between opposite positions. This partly comes from this Hegelian influence.

### **1.5.2 *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers II***<sup>92</sup>

This is a collection of twelve of Taylor's papers published in 1985. Their "variety" seems unfocused. However, on the contrary, Taylor says that they reflect "if not a single idea, then at least a single rather tightly related agenda."<sup>93</sup> He declares that his initial "polemical concern" in compiling them was to argue against "an influential family of theories in the sciences of man whose (ambition is) to model the study of man on the natural sciences. Theories of this kind seem to me to be terribly implausible."<sup>94</sup> These theories are "reductive" and "are all trying to avoid recognizing some important and obtrusive aspect of human life."<sup>95</sup> Taylor links this tendency to an ongoing thread of naturalism in Western culture that ignores the notion of self-interpretation by which "our self-understanding essentially incorporates our seeing ourselves against a background of what I have called "strong evaluation ... distinctions of ... worth ... of

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<sup>91</sup> Charles Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society*, xiii.

<sup>92</sup> Charles Taylor, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers II*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

<sup>93</sup> Charles Taylor, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, 1.

<sup>94</sup> Charles Taylor, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, 1.

<sup>95</sup> Charles Taylor, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, 2.

categoric value.”<sup>96</sup> This idea or set of ideas is important because it lays out the basis for the insight represented by our hypothesis and the structure and content of the study.

### **1.5.3 *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity***<sup>97</sup>

Reflecting Taylor’s view that a primary purpose of social theory is to find a more satisfactory fundamental understanding of what is happening in contemporary culture, this five part book published in 1989, is an ambitious attempt to trace the genealogy and emergence of secular modernity. It is based on his position that “we cannot understand ourselves without coming to grips with this history.”<sup>98</sup> Consisting of twenty-five chapters, each of its five parts covers the thinkers and ideas of each broad stage in Taylor’s analysis of the evolution of the modern identity.

That term means to Taylor the philosopher “what it means to be a human agent, a person, or a self”<sup>99</sup> or, in theological terms, what it means to be fully human, in secular modernity. He says, “I wanted to show how the ideals and interdicts of this identity ... shape our philosophical thought, our epistemology, and our philosophy of language, largely without our awareness.”<sup>100</sup> In part I Taylor discusses “selfhood and the good” and in Parts II to V he provides the history and analysis of modern identity. In addition to providing a sense of the essential landmarks of Taylor’s thinking, two major ideas in *Sources of the Self* remain central throughout his *oeuvre*. These are: (1) the turn to inwardness or individualism after roughly 1500 CE, and “the

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<sup>96</sup> Charles Taylor, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, 3.

<sup>97</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

<sup>98</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, ix.

<sup>99</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, ix.

<sup>100</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, ix.

affirmation of ordinary life.”<sup>101</sup> These were (and are) key enablers of modern secular modernity and they, in turn, underlie our understanding of modernity and our hypothesis.

#### 1.5.4 *The Malaise of Modernity*<sup>102</sup>

This book is based on Taylor’s Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) Massey Lectures of 1990 in which he critically analyzes the pluses and minuses, or, as he puts it in Pascal’s language, the *grandeur* and *misère*, of the transformations in modern culture and society. He concentrates on three malaises or “worries”: “individualism”<sup>103</sup> arising out of the “disenchantment of the world;”<sup>104</sup> “the primacy of instrumental reason”<sup>105</sup> and the scientific and technological development associated with it, and thirdly, the risk of a “great loss of freedom” resulting from De Toqueville’s feared “soft despotism.”<sup>106</sup>

This rather muddled book based on radio lectures is important in providing a very condensed understanding of the evolution of some key aspects of Taylor’s sometimes confusing thought. It demonstrates his fundamental philosophical (or perhaps personal) characteristic of avoiding extremes and expecting paradoxes. These underlie the personal transformations supporting our hypothesis. It was used in this study mainly to check deeper perceptions underlying other of Taylor’s writing. The lectures were clearly not Taylor’s finest hours. Maybe we can blame it on the CBC! But they do show the difficulty of communicating philosophy and theology with general audiences, a challenge Taylor addresses in much of his writing which is frequently based on his public or university lectures.

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<sup>101</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, x.

<sup>102</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity*, (Toronto: The House of Anansi, 1991).

<sup>103</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity*, 2.

<sup>104</sup> Charles Taylor. *The Malaise of Modernity*, 2.

<sup>105</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity*, 5.

<sup>106</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity*, 8-9.

### 1.5.5 *Modern Social Imaginaries*<sup>107</sup>

This 2004 book along with *Varieties of Religious Experience* and *A Secular Age* were based on Taylor's 1998-99 Gifford Lectures. (The texts of the lectures themselves were not published.) Much of the book is reiterated in Chapter 4 of *A Secular Age*. However, it remains an important book for our purposes because its theme is central to Taylor's understanding of how cultures understand themselves, evolve and change. It goes beyond the original thoughts in the lectures four years before, and separate publication reduced the risk of its being buried in the midst of a larger work. It is also valuable because it grapples straightforwardly in Chapter 13 with some of the questions surrounding the debate over secularity with which our study is concerned because of the link Taylor draws between the transcendent horizon and some definitions of the slippery term "secularization." This provides a basis for a clearer understanding of Taylor's sometimes complicated thinking on that theme and provides a concept that allows for further evolution in the present dominant "secular" social imaginary in the Western world.

### 1.5.6 *A Secular Age*<sup>108</sup>

Together with *Sources of the Self*, Taylor is quoted as regarding his 2007 volume, *A Secular Age*, as his most important book.<sup>109</sup> It is without doubt his most relevant book for the purposes of our study. It is 857 pages in length and is said to be 1.3 kilos in weight. It has twenty chapters in five parts. Their titles are helpful in tracing how he develops his argument. However, the Preface and Introduction to the book are particularly important for the reader to be able to follow the threads of the rest of the book. Here, in particular, Taylor presents three definitions of secularity of which two are conventional and a third – "Secularity 3" – is his own original

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<sup>107</sup> Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

<sup>108</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

<sup>109</sup> "Personnalité de la Semaine Charles Taylor," *La Presse*, 9 octobre 2016.

insight. It reframes and indeed redirects the decades-old secularity argument away from the conventional mainstream understandings of Secularity 1 and Secularity 2 which, respectively, identify the retreat of the Church from the “public square,” and the decline in religious belief and practice. Secularity 3, on the other hand, addresses the changing conditions of belief which Taylor sees as characteristic of secular modernity.

Part I of the book covers “The Work of Reform”<sup>110</sup> in which Taylor identifies cultural forces unleashed before, during and after the Reformation that gradually dislodged the preceding dominant social imaginary of Christendom. This is what he calls “The Great Disembedding.”<sup>111</sup>

Part II, “The Turning Point,”<sup>112</sup> shows how these forces brought about a new social imaginary through the concept of “providential deism.” It produced an anthropocentric shift in the ends of life leading to the modern “ethic of authenticity” and a change in the understanding of God’s relation to the world. These changes are characteristic of Western secular modernity. They are crucial to understanding the emergence of secularity and the fading of the previously dominant transcendent horizon. Most important for Taylor, and most regrettably in his view, is the fact they contributed to the emergence of a secular humanist alternative to Christian faith.

Part III, “The Nova Effect,”<sup>113</sup> refers to a second stage in the evolution of Secularity 3 featuring a further proliferation and diversification of new positions of belief and unbelief. It “broke out of the humanism of freedom and benefit”<sup>114</sup> in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and prevails up to the present day. Taylor calls it the “nova effect” because our predicament offers a gamut of moral/spiritual options that never existed before. This fractured culture spreads from the elites

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<sup>110</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 23.

<sup>111</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 146.

<sup>112</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 219.

<sup>113</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 297.

<sup>114</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 299.

and becomes integral to our present culture. It reaches a culmination in the late twentieth century with a “generalized “culture of authenticity” or expressive individualism, in which people are encouraged to ‘discover their own fulfillment.’”<sup>115</sup>

Part IV, “Narratives of Secularization” presents itself as the continuation of “this story of the rise of modern secularity.”<sup>116</sup> Taylor acknowledges that Secularities 1 (separation of church and state) and 2 (decline in level of faith and practice) are realities. However, he shows that his Secularity 3, which highlights changes in the conditions of belief, allows for a more precise nuancing, and is therefore more useful for understanding “what’s happening here?” This nuancing requires the introduction of “Weber-style types” to understand shifts in the “locus” of religious practice. To do this, he appropriates the approach of the French sociologist, Émile Durkheim, to contrast differing social-religious dispensations.

“Durkheimian”<sup>117</sup> is a word that means that the “church and social sacred remain close” while the paleo-Durkheimian<sup>118</sup> situation is equivalent to the traditional or hierarchical “ancien regime.” neo-Durkheimian<sup>119</sup> emerges from the “Age of Mobilization” in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in which people are persuaded, pushed, dragooned, or bullied into new forms of society, church, or association. A very important dimension of this process was the breaking out of religious denominations which, in Taylor’s view, was a very powerful transformation perspective. Taylor uses this model in the forms of a three layered dwelling to illustrate the stages of evolution in religious adhesion. It is a shorthand intended to improve communication of his ideas. It boils down to the pattern of modern religious life under secularization being one of

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<sup>115</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 473.

<sup>116</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 422.

<sup>117</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 454.

<sup>118</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 455.

<sup>119</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 455 and 458.

composition followed by destabilization and then recomposition, a process which can be repeated many times.

Taylor says that the Age of Mobilization extended from about 1800 to 1960. It was succeeded by the Age of Authenticity which brings about a “cultural revolution” based on a change in the self-understanding. There is now “no way of being in the ‘church’ except through a choice.” The focus is now on my spiritual path not this or that “framework.”

The decade of the 1960s was unsurprisingly one in which the ground-breaking Second Vatican Council took place. It “is recognized today by scholars from across disciplines as the most significant event in the last century of religious history.”<sup>120</sup> The “current cultural revolution” destabilized the age of Mobilization leaving a “new spiritual landscape.” Important, however, is the fact that the landscape is quite different as between “post-secular’ Europe and the United States.

Part V, “Conditions of Belief,”<sup>121</sup> returns to the question of the conditions of belief in the modern West. It is the most relevant part of the book for our hypothesis. Taylor explains that so far the book has emphasized how we got to where we are, but secularization stories also involve some picture of the spiritual shape of the present age. He outlines the sequence of developments he has discussed: that is, driven by Reform, disenchantment replaces the porous self with the buffered self where meaning is in our minds, not the outer world. The “frontier of self-exploration expands.” Buffer leads to self-discipline and individuality. They interlock and mutually reinforce, and drive to a new form of religious life, that of personal responsibility, and instrumental rationality in which time is pervasively secular. Taylor describes this amalgam as

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<sup>120</sup> Catherine E. Clifford, *Decoding Vatican II: Interpretation and Reception*, (New York: Paulist Press, 2014), 1.

<sup>121</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 536.

the self-sufficing “immanent frame”<sup>122</sup> without reference to God – a “self-sufficing immanent order.”<sup>123</sup> It is seen as a natural order to be contrasted with a “supernatural one.”

In the second part of the first chapter, Taylor addresses four levels of “the death of God account” which is important for understanding his heuristic of the three or four cornered battle of belief and unbelief, an important part of this study in Chapter 6. It is also valuable for his discussion of the “contemporary moral predicament,” the notion of what he calls “spin”<sup>124</sup> and his concept of the cross-pressured individual in our culture caught between the dichotomy of the world of scientific laws and man’s inner world.

### **1.5.7 *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays***<sup>125</sup>

*Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays*, published in 2011, has no introduction and no conclusion. It is a hodgepodge of sixteen essays, articles and one lecture (i.e. a repetition of “A Catholic Modernity?” originally delivered in 1996 and published in an edited format in 1999 featuring Taylor with four dialogue partners and edited by James L. Heft<sup>126</sup>). However, that is not to say that some of the essays in *Dilemmas and Connections* are not of considerable interest or value from the point of view of the evolution of Taylor’s thought and support for our hypothesis. In particular, *A Catholic Modernity? Charles Taylor’s Marianist Award Lecture* is one of Taylor’s most revealing and insightful writings. He shifts from philosopher to theologian

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<sup>122</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 542.

<sup>123</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 542-3.

<sup>124</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 549.

<sup>125</sup> Charles Taylor, *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays*, (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011).

<sup>126</sup> James L. Heft, editor, with responses by Charles Taylor to papers by William Shea, Rosemary Luling Haughton, George Marsden and Jean Bethke Elshtain, *A Catholic Modernity? Charles Taylor’s Marianist Award Lecture*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.)

and committed Christian Catholic. One sees him at his best as a brilliant thinker, teacher and communicator.

He begins by expressing appreciation for the opportunity to speak about things very much on his mind over the years but which he was constrained from expressing as a philosopher. However, in speaking about the dilemmas facing Catholics, he sees himself raising issues common to people of all faiths in the secular modern world. He argues that it is wrong for them to be offered the simplistic choice between either commitment to traditional religious expressions or to “exclusive humanism” which denies religious belief. Either of these ways is a type of “self-mutilation.” He emphasizes the vital role of teaching in strengthening faith and in particular he points to the former Jesuit missionary to China, Matteo Ricci, as an example of the importance of being able to speak about spiritual matters in a language interlocutors can understand.

Chapter 11, “The Future of the Religious Past”<sup>127</sup> and Chapter 13, “What Does Secularism Mean?”<sup>128</sup> are particularly relevant to and helpful in our study. In the former, Taylor takes the risk of predicting the future. He anticipates ongoing “forward movement” but all change entails “a price.” Part of each change involves ambiguity as well as usually a sense of regret for what has been lost. Backward movement is not out of the question.

In the latter essay he has much to say about secularization that is repetitive of past writing. However, he makes a significant point when he says: “Now I believe that one of our basic difficulties ... is that we have the wrong model ... we think that secularism (or *laïcité*) has to do with the relation of the state to religion; whereas in fact it has to do with the (correct)

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<sup>127</sup> Charles Taylor, *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays*, 214.

<sup>128</sup> Charles Taylor, *Dilemmas and Connections*, 302.

response of the democratic state to diversity.”<sup>129</sup> Overall, the book is addressing a church and religious tradition as well as their adherents under great stress because of the cultural and other upheavals of the revolutionary and post-revolutionary periods of modernity.

## **1.6 Secondary Literature Review**

### **1.6.1 Introduction**

The seven books outlined above amount to a third of Taylor’s lifetime’s book publication record but they are only a small fraction of his overall written *oeuvre*. His peer reviewed scholarly articles and contributions to a wide variety of publications over more than sixty years attest to his being one of the most prolific academic and public policy thinkers and writers of his era. This huge volume of primary and secondary sources forces the researcher to be highly selective in a literature review. It is for that reason that the methodology of the study, as noted above, focuses primarily on Taylor’s own writing to support the hypothesis.

What is most remarkable about Taylor’s work is the overall consistency of his insight and teaching over the decades. He delves into many old and new fields of knowledge but his key interests and underlying messages do not appear to change substantially over time. He was clearly not exaggerating when he warned us in his 1985 book that “his papers were the work of a monomaniac, or perhaps ... a hedgehog. If not a single idea, then at least a single rather tightly related agenda underlies all of them.”<sup>130</sup> He was referring to the papers in that particular book, but the insight seems to apply to his lifetime’s contribution – as we will see in the warrants for our hypothesis and the study that follows.

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<sup>129</sup> Charles Taylor, *Dilemmas and Connections*, 310.

<sup>130</sup> Charles Taylor, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, 1.

A number of the more relevant secondary sources consulted in this study are listed in the Bibliography. However, because of space limitations, it is evident that any secondary literature review concerning Taylor's work relevant to this study can only be highly selective and partial. Of course, in this we are aided by the focus of our study which addresses in particular only one of several major vectors of Taylor's thought, albeit, we claim, the most important one, and the one that makes sense of all the others. That is, the theme of the place of transcendence in the lives of people living under the conditions of belief in secular modernity in which faith has become "an option."

To help focus our limited selection of secondary sources, we have divided them into three categories, recognizing that Taylor's dialogue partners can very roughly be divided into those who are broadly supportive of his thinking, those who are broadly neutral, and those who seem broadly critical. To some extent, this tripartite division seems to reflect the stances of individual authors with regard to their own beliefs or disbeliefs. This reflects Taylor's categorization found in one of the most compelling jointly authored sources encountered in this study, *Church and People: Disjunctions in a Secular Age*.<sup>131</sup> In it, Taylor makes a distinction between the stages of faith of "dwellers," that is people who are already fully and comfortably in a transcendent faith, and "seekers" who are "in a mode of spiritual seeking which is very widespread in the west today, but which the official church often seems to want to rebuff ... [with] certain already worked-out answers."<sup>132</sup> To these, we would need to add a third category of writers who seem to be opposed to theistic accounts in the social and human sciences in principle. We suggest that these might be categorized as "deniers" However, this categorization is more contestable and

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<sup>131</sup> Charles Taylor, José Casanova, George F. McLean, *Church and People: Disjunctions in a Secular Age*, *Christian Philosophical Studies, I* (Washington, DC: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2012).

<sup>132</sup> Charles Taylor quoted in "Introduction" by George McLean in *Church and People*, 5.

distracts from the proof of our hypothesis based primarily on primary sources. What follows, therefore, is a sample of secondary readings from the tripartite perspectives outlined above: that is, broadly supportive, broadly neutral, and broadly critical of the theme of transcendence in Taylor's thought.

### **1.6.2 Dialogue, Dialectic and Conversation**

Before leaving the question of what sources and interlocutors to consider in a selective review of secondary literature, it may be helpful for us to note that a significant characteristic of Taylor's way of thinking and methodology adds a further challenge in making our selection. That is, he consistently attaches high importance to dialogical or dialectical processes of written and verbal interaction with an immense variety of interlocutors or dialogue partners. The result of these verbal interactions is often transcribed, becoming part of the written record. This means that Taylor's comments and responses in such dialogical settings become a type of hybrid between a secondary and a primary source. Some of the most valuable insights into his thinking come from these interactions in which it can be difficult to know where to draw the line between an interlocutor's input and Taylor's response.

### **1.6.3 Secondary Literature Broadly Supportive of Taylor's Thought**

The approach to dialogue or dialectic, while originating with Plato, and developed by Collingwood and Hegel, reflects a very important more recent development in modern philosophy and theology which is often associated with the hermeneutical insights of Hans Georg Gadamer.<sup>133</sup> He developed the idea that life and knowledge are constituted by a principle of ongoing "conversation." One scholar whose writing emphasizes this idea and whose work

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<sup>133</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, translation revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

consistently draws on and reinforces Taylor's approach to the transcendent is Ralph Heintzman of the University of Ottawa. Transformation through conversation is a notable theme in his first philosophical book<sup>134</sup> and it is the central theme of its forthcoming sequel. He says that Gadamer

suggested that human understanding is not at all like [a] mathematical or pseudo-scientific model [of contemporary social sciences]. It is much more like a process of conversation and communion than like a process of inductions and axioms to self-evident truth. For Gadamer the human condition is like a conversation into which we have tumbled long after – ages after – it began.<sup>135</sup>

Another of Taylor's strongly supportive interlocutors is James Gerard McEvoy, the distinguished Australian theologian and scholar. He similarly underlines the importance of conversation and language in a book in which he draws heavily and approvingly on the thought of Taylor.<sup>136</sup> He argues that understanding cultural transitions, such as the major transition emerging in the 1960s that Taylor describes as the "culture of authenticity," is vital for the survival and success of the churches. But they can only accomplish that understanding on an ongoing basis by carrying out their role of proclamation, including guiding people to the fullness of the transcendent horizon, by speaking to the culture they are facing with contemporary language and cultural insight. This, he says, can best be achieved through dialogue or conversation, and not by traditional unidirectional declamation.

Indeed, McEvoy goes further in three articles<sup>137</sup> in which he claims that a major turning point of the Second Vatican Council was the adoption of *Gaudium et Spes*, the Pastoral

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<sup>134</sup> Ralph Heintzman, *Rediscovering Reverence: The Meaning of Faith in a Secular World* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2011).

<sup>135</sup> Ralph Heintzman, *The Human Paradox: Rediscovering the Nature of the Human*, publication forthcoming. Quoted by express permission.

<sup>136</sup> James Gerard McEvoy, *Leaving Christendom for Good: Church World Dialogue in a Secular Age* (Toronto: Lexington Books, 2014)

<sup>137</sup> James Gerald McEvoy, "Proclamation as Dialogue: Transition in the Church-World Relationship," *Theological Studies* 70, no. 4 (2009), 875-903; and "Living in an Age of Authenticity: Charles Taylor on Identity Today",

Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. This is because he sees it as having called for revolutionary change in traditional Church communicative modes by mandating a new open approach to proclamation. This echoes Catherine Clifford's observation that "the opening lines of *Gaudium et Spes* are among the most frequently cited of all the council documents, as they express perhaps more than any other the momentous turn to the world that distinguished Vatican II from previous ecumenical councils."<sup>138</sup> As McEvoy puts it, "the major cultural shifts ... first in the late eighteenth century, and later in the 1960s, required a new approach to the task of proclaiming the gospel, a new understanding of the church's relationship to the 'world' or to cultures. It is this relationship, encapsulated in the word 'dialogue' or 'conversation' that is envisaged in *Gaudium et Spes*."

In short, these writings catalyzed in part by Taylor's insights on the theme of conversation as communion and proclamation can also be seen as offering important insights for communicating Taylor's message of the fullness of the transcendent horizon to the post-revolutionary Western culture. Moreover, by setting a remarkable example of such interlocution in his daily work and writing, Taylor is actually modeling a new form of religious teaching and proclamation very much in the persuasive spirit of Matteo Ricci who sums up the third sub-element, the act of persuasion element, of what we are claiming is Taylor's three part strategy supporting his central message, as noted above.

Another notable strong supporter of Taylor's thought in general and also of his view of the crucial place of the transcendent horizon in a life of fullness is Hans Joas. He is a contemporary German theologian and scholar in deep dialogue with counterparts in North

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[online] *The Australasian Catholic Record*. 86, no.2 (April 2009), 161-72; and "The Conversation's the Thing: The Gospel in Australian Culture," *The Australasian Catholic Record* 93, no. 1 (January, 2016), 68-80.

<sup>138</sup> Catherine E. Clifford, *Decoding Vatican II: Interpretation and Ongoing Reception*, (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2014), 83.

America and especially, it seems, with Charles Taylor.<sup>139</sup> This is reflected by the fact that Joas' book *Faith as an Option: Possible Futures for Christianity*<sup>140</sup> pivots around Taylor's third definition of secularity in which he identifies a change in the conditions of belief. Taylor says that this brings about for the first time in history the possibility of an individual being free to choose to believe or not to believe in the transcendent – that is, free to choose faith as an option, what Joas calls “the secular option.”<sup>141</sup> This for Joas is a particularly dramatic issue for “post-totalitarian” people who have experienced “detranscendentalization” by repressive regimes such as in Hitler's Germany or Stalin's Soviet Union.<sup>142</sup>

Joas identifies four intellectual challenges facing Christianity of which the fourth is “transcendence.”<sup>143</sup> He makes no bones, as the saying goes, about calling Christians and other Abrahamic faiths “to go on the offensive against the conscious efforts in the philosophic culture, and politics of the century to regress from this demand for a transcendence that relativizes every aspect of earthly existence.”<sup>144</sup> Here again, Joas is clearly on the same wavelength as Taylor but with one important exception: Joas is far more straightforward and obviously militant than Taylor in identifying the transcendent “problem,” that is, the marginalization of the transcendent in contemporary Western culture, and calling for action to counteract it. From that point of view, the tactical difference between their two approaches raises the not insignificant question of why Taylor's approach to the transcendent problem seems at first blush to be so comparatively halting, if not “wishy-washy.”

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<sup>139</sup> Note: When asked in an interview with the author of this study on May 15, 2015 who Taylor would identify as the most worthwhile contemporary thinkers to read, Joas was at the top of Taylor's list.

<sup>140</sup> Hans Joas, *Faith as an Option: Possible Futures for Christianity* (Stanford, Ca: Stanford University Press, 2014).

<sup>141</sup> Hans Joas, *Faith as an Option*, 141.

<sup>142</sup> Hans Joas, *Faith as an Option*, 134.

<sup>143</sup> Hans Joas, *Faith as an Option*, 133.

<sup>144</sup> Hans Joas, *Faith as an Option*, 133-4.

We will conclude this section on publications reflecting a broadly supportive perspective on Taylor's thought on the transcendent by reference to Brian J. Braman's book, *Meaning and Authenticity: Bernard Lonergan and Charles Taylor on the Drama of Authentic Human Existence*.<sup>145</sup> This excellent book contrasts the thought of these two Canadian "giants" of philosophy and theology. Both Lonergan and Taylor emphasize the absolute importance of the transcendent horizon as the pinnacle of human existence but they come at it from somewhat different directions. Moreover, "both Taylor and Lonergan think that human authenticity – the truth of human existence – involves the experience of conversion. In Taylor this is essentially moral or religious. For Lonergan it is explicitly named intellectual, moral and religious conversion."<sup>146</sup>

#### **1.6.4 Secondary Literature from a Broadly Neutral Perspective**

We will now turn to secondary literature in what we are calling the broadly neutral category. It is writing that occupies a sort of open-minded but critical middle ground in dialogue with Taylor's views about the place of the transcendent in secular modernity. The authors converse objectively with Taylor but tend to be agnostic about his philosophical and faith positions in relation to the place of the transcendent in secular modernity and his claim about the fullness that he claims accompanies it. In this regard, one of the most useful sources for this type of perspective can be found in some of the many edited collections of articles addressing aspects of Taylor's multi-disciplinary thought. This helps place his eventual focus on the place of the transcendent in secular modern lives in the broad sweep of his interconnected insights and arguments. An example of works of this sort is *Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism: The*

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<sup>145</sup> Brian J. Braman. *Meaning and Authenticity: Bernard Lonergan and Charles Taylor on the Drama of Authentic Human Existence* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008).

<sup>146</sup> Brian J. Braman, *Meaning and Authenticity*, 75.

*Philosophy of Charles Taylor in Question*<sup>147</sup> edited by James Tully. It comprises thirteen contributors and a response by Taylor. The chapters most directly relevant to our study are by Michael J. Morgan on “Religion, History and Moral Discourse,” and by Daniel W. Weinstock on “The Political Theory of Strong Evaluation.” Morgan criticizes Taylor’s theism and explores epiphanies and epiphanic art as a source of a post-Romantic immanent transcendence. Weinstock discusses Taylor’s concept of “strong evaluation” and challenges Taylor’s notion of a “hypergood” that is limited to any particular “conception” (i.e. specific religious belief) in the context of a liberal, democratic and plural society. A disadvantage of this book is that it focusses on Taylor’s earlier work well before his Gifford Lectures and *A Secular Age* highlighted on an increasing basis his personal faith commitments. Nonetheless, Weinstock anticipated what we suggest has eventually become a sticking point for many in being persuaded by Taylor’s message about the fullness of life in the transcendent horizon.

A similar but more recent edited volume is *Aspiring to Fullness in a Secular Age: Essays on Religion and Theology in the Work of Charles Taylor*, edited by Carlos D. Colorado and Justin D. Klassen.<sup>148</sup> It offers a rich array of ten thoughtful articles including many authors known as “Taylor experts.” The Introduction by the editors is particularly notable in relation to our transcendent theme because it provides an overview of the give and take of the book’s conversation which discusses both favorably and critically several of Taylor’s key ideas. This is reflected in the chapter titles which include specific references to such typical Taylor terms as “Transcendence, “‘Spin’ and the Jamesian Open Space,” “Transcendent Sources and the Dispossession of the Self,” “Fragilization,” “Humanism and the Question of Fullness,” “the

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<sup>147</sup> James Tully, ed., *Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism: The Philosophy of Charles Taylor in Question* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

<sup>148</sup> Carlos D. Colorado and Justin D. Klassen, eds., *Aspiring to Fullness in a Secular Age: Essays on Religion and Theology in the Work of Charles Taylor* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014).

Network of Agape,” “Enfleshment,” and “Transcendence and Immanence in a Subtler Language.” However, unfortunately, on this occasion the book does not include a Taylor response. It would have been interesting, for example, to see how Taylor reacted to the strongly critical ninth chapter by Ian Angus who attacks a key element of Taylor’s thought (and of our hypothesis) – his search for a “Hegelian Reconciliation” between philosophy and social reality.

One final book of collected essays will have to suffice before bringing individual writers into this discussion of Taylor’s thought by scholars from the “neutral” perspective. It is *Charles Taylor: Religion et secularisation*, edited by Sylvie Taussig.<sup>149</sup> It consists of 17 chapters by individual authors and a brief foreword by Charles Taylor. In general, its limited value to our understanding of Taylor’s thought about the transcendent horizon in secular modernity is that it offers distinctive critical or supportive readings of his thought from the religious and philosophical perspectives of European French thinkers as opposed to Canadian francophone or anglophone thinkers. Émile Poulat, for example, draws attention to the fact that two important terms in France that go to the heart of the secularity debates have little equivalent resonance or history in Canada: “laïcité” and “freedom of conscience.” This leads him to conclude that “Charles Taylor vit sur un autre continent”<sup>150</sup> in his work on secularity and religious belief.

Moving to broadly neutral secondary literature by individual scholars, there is much that is interesting and valuable in Nicholas H. Smith’s finely argued book, *Charles Taylor: Meaning, Morality and Modernity*.<sup>151</sup> For our purposes, Chapter 8, “Modernity, Art and Religion” is of particular interest because it challenges three of Taylor’s principal arguments: first, that theism offers a superior way of life compared to even the most flourishing life in the immanent frame of

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<sup>149</sup> Sylvie Taussig, Directrice, *Charles Taylor: Religion et secularisation* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2014).

<sup>150</sup> Sylvie Taussig, *Charles Taylor*, 24.

<sup>151</sup> Nicholas H. Smith, *Charles Taylor: Meaning, Morals and Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002).

an exclusive humanist; second that unconditional love or *agapē* is possible for humans with God's grace; and third, that Nietzsche's immanent counter- Enlightenment, having no place for a constituting *good* beyond life, that is to say a good that transcends life, is therefore bound to fail. Smith sums up his philosophical argument bluntly but also reflectively for an apparent atheist: "Taylor's argument is not compelling. But for non-theists ... they must ask themselves if they have a better way of sustaining their hope in the human. It is now up to secular humanists to meet Taylor's challenge."<sup>152</sup>

Michiel Meijer's "Nietzsche and Taylor Between Truth and Meaning"<sup>153</sup> is also an exceptionally interesting scholarly analysis. It offers us a deeper insight to Taylor's thought by contrasting the place of truth in Nietzsche's thought and the place of the transcendent in Taylor's understanding of the potential for fullness of life. Meijer observes that Nietzsche plays a much bigger role in Taylor's philosophical thought than is generally recognized. Indeed, he thinks Taylor understates this role and fails to recognize that his view of the flatness of life without transcendence aligns quite closely with the nihilism of atheism that Nietzsche foresaw ushering in dire consequences for humanity.

A strong instance of a publication that provides an admirable summary of Taylor's philosophical and theological project along with thoughtful criticism is *How Much Can a Philosopher Do?* by Fergus Kerr, OP.<sup>154</sup> He debates in particular the question of to what degree a philosopher can cross the line into his personal religious commitments in expounding philosophy. In this regard Kerr outlines three separate critical approaches or "philosophical practices" based on D.Z Phillips' extension of "Paul Ricoeur's well-known distinction between

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<sup>152</sup> Nicholas H. Smith, *Charles Taylor*, 242.

<sup>153</sup> Michiel Meijer, "Nietzsche and Taylor Between Truth and Meaning," *Bijdragen: International Journal in Philosophy and Theology* 73, no. 2 (2012): 168-89.

<sup>154</sup> Fergus Kerr, OP, "How Much Can a Philosopher Do?" *Modern Theology* 26, no. 3 (July 2010): 321-36.

different modes of interpreting religion in religious studies.”<sup>155</sup> These are the hermeneutics of suspicion, the hermeneutics of recollection, and the hermeneutics of contemplation. He uses an expert knowledge of Taylor’s lifetime work to defend him against criticisms by some philosophers that he crosses the line too far by emphasizing the fullness of the transcendent horizon as, in effect, constituting the Good. He concludes that, taken as a whole, Taylor’s philosophy stays well within the bounds “even to the extent of ‘giving the Devil his due.’”<sup>156</sup>

Peter E. Gordon provides a further challenging analysis in “Must the Sacred be Transcendent?”<sup>157</sup> Pivoting off Heidegger’s insight that “any metaphysical picture both reveals and conceals aspects of our experience,” Gordon argues that “Taylor’s own description of sacred and non-sacred experience within the immanent frame seems to rely upon this foundational distinction, without entertaining the possibility that the language itself may very well distort what our experience is like ... [by using] criteria we have inherited from post-axial religion.”<sup>158</sup> He doubts the validity of Taylor cleaving “with genuinely religious conviction to the overwhelming power of the axial inheritance, and ... therefore being unwilling to consider the more radical possibility that the very architecture of our metaphysical world-picture might be susceptible to historical transformation.”<sup>159</sup>

It should be noted that this article is a sequel to Gordon’s equally thoughtful and worthwhile article, “The Place of the Sacred in the Absence of God: Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age*.”<sup>160</sup> In it, he challenges Taylor’s basic position that “exclusive humanism closes the

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<sup>155</sup> Fergus Kerr, *How Much?* 333.

<sup>156</sup> Fergus Kerr, *How Much?* 334.

<sup>157</sup> Peter E. Gordon, “Must the Sacred be Transcendent?”

<sup>158</sup> Peter E. Gordon, “Must the Sacred be Transcendent?” 126.

<sup>159</sup> Peter E. Gordon, “Must the Sacred be Transcendent?” 133.

<sup>160</sup> Peter E. Gordon, “The Place of the Sacred in the Absence of God: Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age*,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 69, no. 4 (October 2008): 647-73.

transcendent window.”<sup>161</sup> Central to this line of argument, Gordon declares that Taylor’s disengagement model of the post-Cartesian subject “is wrong. *It simply doesn’t capture what it is like to be a human being.*”<sup>162</sup> But he acknowledges that this and other of his arguments are not decisive in countering Taylor’s ultimate belief that “the sacred is historically invariant, *always and only God.* Other experiences (for example, a Romantic’s experience of the natural sublime ...) do not count in his view as *actual* transcendence since they are ultimately reducible to an exclusive humanism.”<sup>163</sup>

We will wrap up this discussion of secondary sources written by broadly neutral scholars with a recent book from a Canadian perspective, *Solidarity with the World: Charles Taylor and Hans Urs von Balthasar on Faith, Modernity, and Catholic Mission* by Carolyn A Chau.<sup>164</sup> This work discusses the possible recovery and renewal of Christian mission, and Catholic mission in particular, in light of the opening in a secular age of the church to other cultures following Vatican II. Chau explores this challenging question in light of the thought of both Taylor and von Balthasar. She lauds Taylor’s guidance to the Church on the nature of secular modernity, but she says “what Taylor does not do is this: he is not able to name as a philosopher, Jesus Christ as the answer to every person’s seeking.”<sup>165</sup> She concludes by proposing a new vision of the church’s approach to mission in a “post-Christian world”<sup>166</sup> and affirms that the subjectivity of postmodern culture can be tempered by the “the One who relativizes everything to His goodness and His Truth ... this is what the Church can offer if it retrieves once again its sense of forming

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<sup>161</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 638.

<sup>162</sup> Peter E. Gordon, “The Place of the Sacred,” 668.

<sup>163</sup> Peter E. Gordon, “The Place of the Sacred,” 670.

<sup>164</sup> Carolyn A. Chau, *Solidarity with the World: Charles Taylor and Hans von Balthasar on Faith, Modernity, and Catholic Mission* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2016).

<sup>165</sup> Carolyn A. Chau, *Solidarity*, 200.

<sup>166</sup> Carolyn A. Chau, *Solidarity*, 156.

disciples as its chief task and mission.”<sup>167</sup> To state the obvious: such a mission would involve a recovery of the transcendent horizon within the Church and in lives lived within secular modern plural culture.

### **1.6.5 Secondary Literature from a Broadly Critical (a.k.a the “Denier”<sup>168</sup>) Perspective**

It is not surprising that Taylor’s wide-ranging *oeuvre* has attracted considerable controversy and opposition. Some of the opposition comes from scholars occupying opposing poles to Taylor’s “believer” pole in his heuristic of the three- or four-cornered battle of belief and unbelief to be discussed below. Sometimes an attack will come from a believer.

An example of this is “Tailoring Christianity,” an article by Matthew Rose of the Berkeley Institute. It appeared in *First Things*,<sup>169</sup> an influential American monthly publication oriented to Catholicism in particular and theology in “the public square” in general. In it, he discusses the practical implications for the Catholic Church and Christian life in the modern secular era of Taylor’s innovative but, to his mind, “liberal Catholic” ideas. The article illustrates deep contemporary divisions in the Catholic Church on dogma and belief including about the place of the transcendent in secular modernity. It also offers an example of dialogical conversation as an avenue to truth through two sharply dissenting replies to the article in the subsequent issue of the magazine from two eminent experts on Taylor’s thought, Justin D. Klassen and James K. A. Smith. Rose argues that “*A Secular Age* encourages nothing less than the reform of Catholicism, whose message of radical *agapē*, Taylor believes, has been long

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<sup>167</sup> Carolyn A Chau, *Solidarity*, 206.

<sup>168</sup> Note: The “denier” perspective is a concept coined by the author to round out the most useful distinctions of “Dwellers” and “Seekers” outlined in articles by George F. McLean and Charels Taylor in Charles Taylor, José Casanove, George F. McLean, *Church and People: Disjunctions in a Secular Age*, *Christian Philosophical Studies I*, (Washington, D.C., The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2012), 1.

<sup>169</sup> Matthew Rose, “Tailoring Christianity,” *First Things* (December 2014): 25-30.

suppressed by dogmatic metaphysics.” Rose rightly sees Taylor believing that “renewal of Christian life can be found only through a spirituality of transformative love” which goes beyond the traditional hierarchical leanings and teachings of the Church. Rose finds fault with that perspective in the light of Catholic theological and philosophical traditions going back to and beyond Augustine.

Ian Fraser is a Marxist humanist. In his book, *Dialectics of the Self: Transcending Charles Taylor*<sup>170</sup> he claims that Taylor formerly was sympathetic with that position when, early in his career, he was in the words of Mark Redhead, “a prominent member of Britain’s New Left” and wrote a number of pieces on Marx, becoming critical of Marx and Marxism only later. Fraser claims that the Marxist humanist tradition has continuing relevance because Taylor has not rejected it. In a review of that book by Redhead, he describes Fraser’s book as “lobbing critical flak at Taylor’s concept of the strongly evaluative self, his understanding of Catholicism, and his limited understanding of transcendence and epiphany.”<sup>171</sup> Secondly, Fraser holds that Taylor’s criticisms of Marx, Marxism and certain Marxist writers “are mistaken.” Thirdly, he argues for the continuing relevance of class conflict to historical analysis and the limitations that capitalism places “on the development of the spiritually fulfilled self that Taylor yearns for.”<sup>172</sup>

In another thoughtful article concerning Taylor’s view of the place of the transcendent in secular modernity, Mark Redhead discusses “Charles Taylor’s Nietzschean Predicament.”<sup>173</sup> Taylor, according to Redhead, has argued himself into a corner by approaching Nietzsche as the anathema which Redhead claims he is not, and thus misses the opportunity Nietzsche offers to

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<sup>170</sup> Ian Fraser, *Dialectics of the Self: Transcending Charles Taylor* (Exeter, UK: Imprint Academic, 2007).

<sup>171</sup> Mark Redhead, “Haunted by Marxism,” *The Review of Politics* 70 (2008): 641-3.

<sup>172</sup> Mark Redhead, “Haunted by Marxism,” 642.

<sup>173</sup> Mark Redhead, “Charles Taylor’s Nietzschean Predicament: A Dilemma More Self-Revealing than Foreboding,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 27 (2001):81.

provide his theoretically inspired moral thought with “the one element it desperately lacks – a means of elucidating how its values resonate within the actual profane existences of both Catholic and non-Catholic individuals.”<sup>174</sup> This would seem to be a serious attack on the practicality of Taylor’s argument on behalf of the transcendent horizon within a secular, plural democratic society.

Space only permits one final secondary source in the “broadly critical” category. That is, William D. Hart’s “Naturalizing Christian Ethics: A Critique of Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age*.”<sup>175</sup> Despite its polemical title, Hart tells us that “the broad outline of Taylor’s argument is persuasive” but then he goes on to propose fundamental shortcomings in Taylor’s thought about the place of transcendence in secular lives. “I wish to contest Taylor’s account of transcendence, which is part of my critique of what Taylor calls the ‘immanent frame’ of the secular age.” The heart of this objection (no pun intended) is, first, Hart’s criticism of “Taylor’s account of transcendence as a superhuman phenomenon;” second, “his claims regarding its relation to the spiritual or ethical life: and the invidious distinction he makes among ‘orthodox’ Christian ethics, the ethics of secular humanism, and, presumably my own naturalistic Christianity. Taylor assumes that a fully significant life cannot be lived without transcendence whose meaning must resemble the ‘orthodox’ Christian notion.” The lengthy paper then elaborates these and other criticisms. And with this background, we draw to a close our selective Secondary Literature Review.

To conclude chapter 1, we have introduced two valuable analytical concepts that Taylor identifies for philosophical anthropologists to better understand, in his words, “what the hell is

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<sup>174</sup> Mark Redhead, “Nietzschean Predicament,” 102.

<sup>175</sup> William D. Hart, “Naturalizing Christian Ethics: A Critique of Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age*,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 40, no 1 (2012): 149-70.

going on” around us. First, we pointed to the importance of his ideas of “the background framework” and “the social imaginary.” Then we explored his own personal “background framework” with its traits and qualities and its more or less inherited but perhaps under-recognized influences, motivations and values. An individual’s particular background framework is often tacit or unacknowledged even by the subject, but it is more or less unchanging throughout one’s life. With this background perspective, we then identified selected primary and secondary sources in the scholarly literature for a closer and more rounded understanding of Taylor’s thought and for demonstrating our hypothesis. We will now proceed to explore Taylor’s personal social imaginary in Chapter 2.

## CHAPTER 2

### TAYLOR'S SOCIAL IMAGINARY

#### 2.1 Introduction

We briefly discussed above the distinction Taylor makes between a background framework and a social imaginary. At one level a social imaginary for Taylor means a “conception of the moral order of society.”<sup>1</sup> Unlike the “background framework” which provides an implicit self-understanding of the deep and more or less permanent basis for, or meaning of, the practices of a society or person, the social imaginary involves conscious awareness of the present practices themselves of the society and the individual. It is subject to change over time. In short, Taylor says “the social imaginary is that common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy.”<sup>2</sup> In this light, this chapter will provide background insight into Taylor’s social imaginary as an extension of the preceding discussion of his background framework. Together they provide the “ground zero” or basis for his view of the existing versus the desirable place of the transcendent in secular modern life.

#### 2.2 Three Influential Vectors in Taylor’s Thought About Secular Modernity

We will focus on three prominent aspects of his intellectual, vocational and personal contexts: the religious/theological, philosophical, and sociological. These come together as building blocks to shape his thinking about the place of the transcendent in secular modernity. Their relative weight in his thought is hard to measure because his views on people living within a transcendent horizon in secular modernity are a blend of them all.

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 23.

### 2.2.1 Religious/Theological Influences

One area of expertise and interest absent from Taylor's McGill University listing of subjects of research interest might be thought a glaring omission and error. It is the field of theology in which Taylor specifically denies any expertise yet frequently demonstrates considerable mastery. We claim that religion and theology are indeed central threads in Taylor's thought and that his masking (but not outright suppression) of theology in much of his writing is disingenuous, and part of an intentional rhetorical pedagogical strategy. We will want to return to this issue later in this study because of its relevance to our overriding hypothesis concerning the place of the transcendent in Taylor's understanding of secular modernity. However, it is notable that he flags what we would describe as his theological interest and recognition of the importance of the transcendent for the human person at an early point. In the mid-1980's he describes

a crucial point ... that our self-understanding essentially incorporates our seeing ourselves against a background of what I have called 'strong evaluation.' I mean by that a background of distinctions between things which are recognized as of categoric or unconditioned or higher importance or worth, and things which lack this and are of lesser value.<sup>3</sup>

He restates this point a few years later in more straightforward theological language when he declares that his broad purpose in embarking on a study of the sources of the modern identity is because "I want to explore the background picture of our spiritual nature and predicament which lies behind some of the moral and spiritual intuitions of our contemporaries."<sup>4</sup> However, he goes well beyond these rather philosophical terms to intense and outright theological language in both his major books. For example, in *Sources of the Self* in a chapter titled "Rationalized

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<sup>3</sup> Charles Taylor, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers 2*, 3.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 3-4.

Christianity,” he outlines his understanding of Locke’s influence on Reformation theology as follows:

The ideal would be a much higher and better ... way to be. But we can’t somehow get it together. This is where God comes in. Through his revelation he makes his law known to us, in an unmistakable fashion ... this happens particularly through Jesus Christ, who attests to his status as God’s messenger through the miracles he performs ... The rules of the game established by the Christian revelation are that those who have faith in Christ and repent and sincerely attempt to amend their lives, will be saved.<sup>5</sup>

However, Taylor quickly challenges this interpretation:

Seen from this perspective the legislative, self-proclaiming God is a great benefactor to mankind ... today this may be hard to credit, because the contemporary scene is dominated on the one side by unbelievers and on the other side by believers from [sic] whom this kind of faith seems at best flat and even repugnant (I confess to being in this latter category) ... We now have a reasonable Christianity without tears ... (but) the place for grace tends to disappear.<sup>6</sup>

These demonstrate clearly Taylor’s theological knowledge and critical viewpoint with regard to some of the ideas arising from the Reformation which play a particularly central role in his account of the rise of secular modernity in general, and the secularization process in particular.

Here is one of many telling passages in *A Secular Age* reflecting Taylor’s theological insight and thought:

I want to focus not only on beliefs and actions ‘predicated on the existence of supernatural entities’ (a.k.a. ‘God’) but also on the perspective of a transformation of human beings which takes them beyond or outside of whatever is understood as human flourishing ... in the Christian case, this means our participating in the love (*agapē*) of God for human beings, which is by definition a love which goes way beyond any possible mutuality, a self-giving not bounded by any measure of fairness.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 241.

<sup>6</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 241

<sup>7</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 430.

The foregoing suggests that however Taylor may describe himself, he is thoroughly theological and even distinctly religious in his personal thought and social imaginary. Indeed, he seems to go so far as to suggest that the categories of modern theology and philosophy should be recognized as construals that need to be reconstructed to allow for a recovered recognition of an overlapping relationship between philosophy and theology. Both are concerned with understanding and attesting to truth and what it means to be human.

However, he has good professional and rhetorical reasons for going to significant pains to mask or subordinate his theological or religious views to his larger philosophical and pedagogical objectives. He admits as much in his reply to five interlocutors, three of them professional theological scholars, following their comments and criticisms of his Marianist Award lecture *A Catholic Modernity?*<sup>8</sup> He says that he abstracted his comments in that lecture from a specifically Catholic perspective because “I felt (feel) the need to take a distance, to open the range of possibilities ... [to go beyond the prevalent view that] ... modernity comes with the destruction of traditional horizons, of belief in the sacred, of old notions of hierarchy.”<sup>9</sup>

Taylor steadily emphasizes that those who resist change in the name of tradition are not adequately aware of the degree to which changes in conditions of belief have brought about “a great deal of ... what is essential and important about our age ... such as the affirmation of ordinary life, the new forms of inwardness, and the ‘rights culture, among others.’”<sup>10</sup> These of course can be seen as constituting a new “social imaginary.” In this way, Taylor frequently signals in his writing not only his theological insights but especially his personal social imaginary of religious belief and practices.

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<sup>8</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Catholic Modernity?* in James L. Heft, Editor, with responses by William M. Shea, Rosemary Luling Haughton, George Marsden, Jean Bethke Elshtain, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 105-25.

<sup>9</sup> Charles Taylor, “Concluding Reflections,” in *A Catholic Modernity?* 106.

<sup>10</sup> Charles Taylor, “Concluding Reflections,” in *A Catholic Modernity?* 107.

As we have seen above, it is interesting and revealing that in another part of the same comments just quoted Taylor provides a candid defensive view of his use of the word “transcendent.” He says, “I needed a term to talk about all those different ways in which religious discourse and practice went beyond the exclusively human, and in exhaustion I fell back on ‘transcendent.’ (But I haven’t given up hope of finding a better one.)”<sup>11</sup> We believe that this is an important insight for our study because it underlines and provides a warrant for our claim that Taylor has rhetorical objectives in his work and tries to choose language that avoids turning his audience off because of the prevalent social imaginary in Western modernity of discomfort with public discussion of religion. In particular, he seems here to admit that he has persuasive objectives in attempting to reach what we claim is his intended audience and especially the audience of exclusive humanists.

But his observations are also important because they draw attention once again to the partly but not wholly overlapping meanings of key terms in his argument: “flourishing,” “fullness” and “transcendent.” These three concepts can to a degree apply to human experience in both the immanent and transcendent frames. Taylor is aware that these terms can introduce ambiguity to his argument on behalf of the ultimate desirability of lives lived under the conditions of the transcendent. However, the sense they impart of a type of evolutionary or sliding scale in meaning is necessary to highlight the transformation dynamic in each of the terms in the actual lived experience of the subject. For example, Taylor’s emphasis on Charles Péguy’s “personal itinerary to the faith” resulting in his reconversion to devout Catholicism illustrates this kind of multifaceted, interacting transformative dynamic in a person’s lived life

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<sup>11</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Catholic Modernity?* 106.

experience.<sup>12</sup> It might be added in this respect that, while Taylor does not discuss Karl Jung in either of his two major books despite the prominence of the Swiss psychiatrist's ideas through much of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century, Jungian psychology addresses transformations of the kind Taylor is positing. It argues that, *contra* Nietzsche and Freud, the ego does not produce them. That is why "a higher or a transformed consciousness can be seen as the very stuff of the Transcendent," an insight or synthesis that Hegel's dialectical structure can support.<sup>13</sup>

Ruth Abbey of Notre Dame University in Indiana is a leading expert on Charles Taylor having studied with him as a doctoral student at McGill University. Her book published in 2000 *Philosophy Now: Charles Taylor*<sup>14</sup> is an early authoritative source for insight about Taylor and the continuity of his thought over his lifetime. She was one of the first scholars encountered in the research for this study who identified the salience of Taylor's "religious turn"<sup>15</sup> in his philosophy. She dated it to about the time he published his *Sources of the Self* in 1989. In the final page of her book she points out that

Taylor's project includes a reading of what he calls 'contemporary spiritual experience' which speaks to the spiritual hungers and tensions of secular modernity.' What seems to underpin this is a view of human nature as including a fixed need for contact with the transcendent ... this means that another ontological property of selfhood can be inferred from his more recent work, that humans aspire to some form of transcendence ... it seems to me that what is only intimated in his previous writings acquires a firmer role in his analysis of secularity.<sup>16</sup>

In our research for this study we sought Taylor's help through an email exchange in order to pin down more closely the place of religion in his overall *oeuvre*. Our research question to him

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<sup>12</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 744-755.

<sup>13</sup> Based on comments provided by Dr. Mark Slatter of St Paul University, Ottawa, who suggested this line of analysis in a private written communication to the author, May 18, 2017.

<sup>14</sup> Ruth Abbey, *Philosophy Now: Charles Taylor*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

<sup>15</sup> Ruth Abbey, *Turning or Spinning? Charles Taylor's Catholicism: A Reply to Ian Fraser*, *Contemporary Political Theory*, 5 (2), 163.

<sup>16</sup> Ruth Abbey, *Charles Taylor*, 2000, 212.

was to the effect that some insightful observers had identified a certain “religious turn” in his writing having taken place around the beginning of the 1990s or the publication of his *Sources of the Self*. In our message, we suggested that this would imply that

religion/transcendence did not figure in or influence your previous thinking/writing up to that point. I [the author] argue that secularity was not your primary focus but that your work reflected your religious/transcendent perspective and concern in one way or another, directly or indirectly, in all your books from “Explanation of Behaviour”<sup>17</sup> onwards or at least thereabouts. Could you please advise if I am right or wrong, or at least on the right track?

Taylor’s answer came startlingly quickly for a very busy scholar on a Sunday afternoon, reflecting his well-known efforts to be accessible to students even in his eighties. It read as follows: “You’re certainly on the right track. The influence/orientation was there since the beginning, and reflected in very early articles, like “Clericalism” (1958) and the lectures on Dostoevsky at Berkeley (1974); but the focus came later, with *A Catholic Modernity*.”<sup>18</sup>

### **2.2.2 Philosophical Influences**

Having already discussed above the particular attraction and influence on Taylor of the study of philosophy, and his ongoing “polemic” against modern philosophy in the Academy, it may be helpful now to look selectively at some of the philosophers who have influenced his philosophical thought and teaching as a philosophical anthropologist. To remind the reader of the relevance of the discussion that follows, we are trying to identify key elements of Taylor’s social imaginary or, to use a slightly different but more contemporary term, the worldview that seems to underlie Taylor’s way of thinking and his values.

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<sup>17</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Explanation of Behaviour*, (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964).

<sup>18</sup> Partial text of an email exchange between Charles Taylor and the author of the study, Sunday May 14, 2017.

We have already noted that, for Taylor, philosophy in its modern analytical form has difficulty as a discipline understanding the modern identity which underlies secular modernity because its “richness is rendered invisible by the impoverished philosophical language.”<sup>19</sup> At the outset of his *Sources of the Self* he puts the problem even more squarely: He wants “to say something about selfhood and the good, or ... selfhood and morality.” Yet he acknowledges “much contemporary moral philosophy ... has given such a narrow focus to morality that some of the crucial connections (he wants) ... to draw here are incomprehensible in its terms.”<sup>20</sup> Taylor clearly sees a need for philosophy to take a much broader approach than would be considered appropriate in the contemporary academy. In contrast, we can see just how broad his approach to philosophy is from Taylor’s lengthy McGill listing of his areas of interest.

In effect, one could say that he sees the role of philosophy or at least philosophical anthropology as being to address “la condition humaine”<sup>21</sup> writ large – a horizontal knitting of vertical fields of human thought. If so, this would amount to a significant redefinition of philosophy as it has been practiced for over a century in the Anglo-American academy. In particular he criticizes its fixation on analytical correctness (to coin a phrase) which results in a “cramped and truncated view of morality in a narrow sense.”<sup>22</sup> As a result, 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: and it has no place left for a notion of the good as the object of our love or allegiance.”<sup>23</sup> This can be seen as constituting a further definition of Taylor’s idea of the nature of transcendence. His use of the idea of the good opens

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<sup>19</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), x-xi.

<sup>20</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 3.

<sup>21</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958).

<sup>22</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 3.

<sup>23</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 3.

the boundaries of the transcendent experience and the possibility of transformation beyond the confines of Christianity. But his strong statement can also be read as a polemical critique in terms of one of the main strands of the agenda of our hypothesis. It can be seen as an attack not only on contemporary academic philosophy but also on the lingering “Ultramontane” social imaginary of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Catholic Church. In contrast, his enthusiastic interest in a variety of “newer” academic sub-disciplines or social sciences has helped him to cast new light on the whole human person as a subjective, normative being. These disciplines include sociology, psychology, political science, economics, linguistics, neuro-science and, from his point of view if not the Academy’s, his innovative person-oriented anthropological approach to philosophy.

### **2.2.3 Plato and Aristotle**

In light of the foregoing, it does not come as a surprise that Taylor, like Hegel before him, has been inspired by Plato’s example as a thinker and teacher. Plato, for illustration, is referred to 41 times in the index to *A Secular Age* compared to 10 times for Hegel, another of Taylor’s chief philosophical intellectual influences.<sup>24</sup> Taylor frequently refers with particular respect to Plato’s ideas. In particular he underlines Plato’s understanding of the existence and importance of “forms” or invisible forces, a “beyond” of ultimate importance. Taylor addresses Plato’s “thought” in depth in Chapter 6 of *Sources of the Self*.<sup>25</sup> Here, he lays out several basic principles that carry over into his own philosophical anthropology. These include the fact that the oppositions that are crucial to Plato are those of the soul as against body, of the immaterial as against the bodily, and of the eternal against the changing. In addition, “the vision of the good is at the very centre of Plato’s doctrine of moral resources. The good of the whole, whose order

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<sup>24</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 861 and 867.

<sup>25</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, “Plato’s Self-Mastery,” 115-26.

manifests the Idea of the Good is the final good, the one which englobes all partial goods ... since the Good is what commands our categorical love and allegiance ... it is the ultimate source of strong evaluation.<sup>26</sup>

Although he does not consider Plato's precise metaphysical ideas to be tenable, these principles sum up the commanding place in Taylor's thinking of Plato's moral philosophy. Even more important for the purposes of this study, is the fact that Plato introduced and legitimized the idea of a transcendent horizon or reality in Western philosophy. It also introduced language that Taylor uses to explain his thought in much of his written work, not only in both his major books. Such words as "the Good" are important to this thesis because they are other words for the idea of "the transcendent."<sup>27</sup>

Consequently, Plato and his student Aristotle are of foundational and ongoing importance in the thought and philosophy of Charles Taylor. Together with Hebrew theology, Plato's idea or "Form" of the Good has been a significant current in Christian thought and its concept of the transcendent. However, while important, it is also appropriate to recognize that that influence is clearly secondary in its powerful influence on Taylor as compared to the pivotal place of the teaching and example of Jesus's life summed up in the Beatitudes of Matthew 5. The difference might be said that while Plato discerned the transcendent, Christ embodied it.

In this regard, Taylor describes how Plato challenged

the honour ethic ... whereby the [public] life of the warrior or citizen or citizen-soldier is deemed higher than the merely private existence devoted to the arts or peace and economic well-being ... against this, we have the celebrated and influential counter-position put forward by Plato. Virtue is no longer to be found in public life or in excelling in the warrior agōn. The higher life is that ruled by reason, and reason itself is defined in

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<sup>26</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 122.

<sup>27</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Catholic Modernity?* 105.

terms of a vision of order, in the cosmos and in the soul ... already in this transvaluation of values something else has altered in addition to the content of the good life ... Plato's ethic requires what we might call today a reasoned account of what life is about, and why one way is higher than the others. This flows inescapably from the new moral status of reason.<sup>28</sup>

This quotation and the prominence Taylor gives it would seem to provide significant warrant for our study's hypothesis. On the other hand, Taylor points out that this line of Plato's thought eventually leads to a contradiction. This is in the form of a "framework" that brings about the post-Enlightenment idea of the disengaged self who acts rationally and instrumentally, paving the way to our inward secular modernity. On the other hand, this line of thought had theological variants including Platonism's injection of the idea of a transformation of the will, "a work of grace."<sup>29</sup> Similarly, Taylor points out that the notion of disengaged self-mastery has subsequently evolved more recently into altruism with its many modern human benefits. On the other hand, notwithstanding its Christian origins, "the secular ethic (of altruism) has discarded something essential to the Christian outlook, once the love of God no longer plays a role ... it is a long way removed from Platonic self-mastery."<sup>30</sup>

Turning to Aristotle, he was Plato's student almost 500 years before Christ. He did not share Plato's belief in a reality beyond the sensible world. Instead, he propounded an influential three-part structure of the "Aristotelian sciences." It has influenced Western, and more recently global culture, ever since it was "rediscovered" in Western Europe via Muslim/Arab scholars in the 13<sup>th</sup> century AD. In it, Aristotle distinguished between theoretical sciences, practical

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<sup>28</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 20-21.

<sup>29</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 22.

<sup>30</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 22.

sciences, and productive sciences. “Of these, the theoretical ones are the Aristotelian paradigm since they provide us with knowledge of universal necessary truths.”<sup>31</sup>

In that theoretical category, Aristotle included four sciences: theology, philosophy, mathematics, and natural sciences. This was the beginning of an uneasy relationship in Western thought between theology and philosophy that in the modern Academy, as we have seen, has amounted to estrangement and divorce. It partly, but we will claim *only partly*, explains why Charles Taylor insists on being seen as a philosopher and downplays suggestions that he is also a theologian. He takes this position despite the fact that, as we have already attempted to show, Taylor’s lifetime work in his self-described field of “philosophical anthropology”<sup>32</sup> is both thoroughly philosophical and deeply theological.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, two knowledgeable observers, Charles Mathews and Joshua Yates, are not alone in describing him “as one of the most sensitive and discerning religious thinkers of our time.”<sup>34</sup>

This is not a contradiction since Aristotelian philosophy has had an immense impact on the development of Christianity and the social imaginary it has embedded in Western culture, including in Taylor’s own social imaginary as a Christian and especially as a Roman Catholic. This is because of St Thomas Aquinas’ (†1274) powerful appropriation of Aristotelian thought in

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<sup>31</sup> Richard McKeon, Editor, *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: The Modern Library, 2001), xvi.

<sup>32</sup> Charles Taylor, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 1.

<sup>33</sup> Note: Charles Taylor makes a key distinction in his thought about moral sources in *A Catholic Modernity?* 120. He notes that “the principal moral question (for Kant) is, What ought we to do? as against (Plato’s and Aristotle’s) What is it good to be? Or, What should we love?”

<sup>34</sup> Charles Mathews and Joshua Yates in Carlos D. Colorado and Justin D. Klassen, Editors, “The ‘Drive to Reform’ and Its Discontents” in *Aspiring to Fullness in a Secular Age: Essays on Religion and Theology in the Work of Charles Taylor*, (Notre Dame, Indiana: The University of Notre Dame Press, 2014), 155.

the 13<sup>th</sup> century in his *Summa Theologica*<sup>35</sup> and its longstanding dominance in Catholic Scholastic theology lasting until the Second Vatican Council of the 1960's.<sup>36</sup>

We have already touched on one particularly important strain of Aristotle's thought which we claim has influenced Taylor's approach to thinking and to the communication of his ideas. This is Aristotle's foundational teaching about the art of rhetoric which was concerned with training people to speak in public assembly and to be persuasive. "Rhetoric was defined as the art of using language well (*ars bene loquendi*), in contrast to grammar (*ars recte loquendi*), which was defined as the art of using language correctly. Both were among the seven liberal arts in the medieval curriculum"<sup>37</sup> – divided as they were into the *trivium* and the *quadrivium*. The former included three subjects (grammar, logic and rhetoric) which were for centuries the basic curriculum of Western universities.

As a result, rhetoric has played an immense role in Western thought through the centuries, beginning as a basic field of study in the standard curriculum for the education of the Greek and Roman elites from the time of Cicero (106-43 BC). St. Augustine was a renowned teacher of rhetoric in the 4th century AD. Before his conversion to Christianity he was employed by the Bishop of Milan in one of the most prestigious teaching positions in the Empire as a teacher of rhetoric. This was the context for his famous mystical experience, or experience of grace, in the garden near Milan Cathedral. Perhaps, if we may speculate, his daily teaching of falsity for persuasive purposes clashed revealingly with this encounter with blinding "truth."

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<sup>35</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Introduction to St. Thomas Aquinas: The Summa Theologica*, Edited by Anton C. Pegis (New York: The Modern Library, 1948,).

<sup>36</sup> John W. O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 46.

<sup>37</sup> *The Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy*, 1999, s.v. "Rhetoric."

Although the dominance of rhetoric in Catholic training of the young gave way to the inclusion of other practical disciplines, it remained influential in Catholic learning into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Indeed, it was one particular rhetorical technique to assist a speaker's memory and power of recall which the Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci learned in his 16<sup>th</sup> century Italian schooling that he subsequently adapted with great effect in his efforts to convert eminent Chinese to Christianity.<sup>38</sup> This, we suggest, demonstrates Taylor's own awareness of and use of the persuasive techniques of rhetoric in pursuing his own teaching objectives. However, that would not have been the only influence in that direction for a scholar formed in a century that saw rhetoric for the purposes of political propaganda and commercial marketing developed into a high art. In that sense, Aristotle's influence continues inescapably into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

#### **2.2.4 Descartes**

This is not the place to give an exhaustive overview of the life and work of René Descartes (1596-1650). He was a philosopher and mathematician who as a student had been educated in theology at a Jesuit school in Anjou where he came to question every aspect of the philosophy he learned there. This eventually led him to be "perhaps the most important figure in the intellectual revolution of the seventeenth century in which the traditional systems of understanding based on Aristotle were challenged and ultimately overthrown. He was the founder of the modern age."<sup>39</sup> In his work on metaphysics, Descartes addressed the issues of "doubt and the foundations of belief" exercising a radical skepticism or "argument for doubt"

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<sup>38</sup> Jonathan D. Spence, *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), 3.

<sup>39</sup> *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), s.v. "Descartes, René."

and arrived at what he regarded as the one certainty expressed in his famous *cogito ergo sum* (“I am thinking, therefore I exist.”)<sup>40</sup>

For Taylor, this concept not only launches modernity but launches the most important revolution of modern Western history. Taylor presents this insight by outlining three historical “transpositions” of the way human moral sources have been situated in Western philosophy.<sup>41</sup> These transpositions proceed from (1) the Ideas of Plato and the Forms of Aristotle located outside of us to<sup>42</sup> (2) Augustine’s view that our moral sources are inward but derived from an external source (God),<sup>43</sup> and then (3) to “Descartes’ formulation [which] was one of the most important and influential ... (he places) the moral sources within us ... we no longer see ourselves related to moral sources outside of us ... an important power has been internalized.<sup>44</sup> [This is what Taylor calls] “the internalization wrought by the modern age.”<sup>45</sup> As a result, Taylor says

the order of ideas ceases to be something we find and becomes something we build ... (but where) the order of the representations has to be developed in such a way as to generate certainty ... through a chain of clear and distinct perceptions<sup>46</sup> ... there is no such order of Ideas to turn to ... we have to objectify the world, including our own bodies, and that means to come to see them mechanistically and functionally, in the same way that an uninvolved external observer would.<sup>47</sup>

In this way, Taylor concludes that “Descartes is a founder of modern individualism”<sup>48</sup> and disengaged reason. That may sound like praise but much of Taylor’s writing argues that along

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<sup>40</sup> *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, s.v. “Descartes, René.”

<sup>41</sup> Note: Because Taylor presents his summary in a rather lengthy and non-discursive fashion the following points are isolated in a logical order with corresponding references to specific pages in a three page portion of the *Sources of the Self*, 143-5.

<sup>42</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 143.

<sup>43</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 143.

<sup>44</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 143.

<sup>45</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 143.

<sup>46</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 144.

<sup>47</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 145.

<sup>48</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 182.

with unquestionable human benefits, the Cartesian emphasis on “reason only” made exclusive humanism appear reasonable and unquestionable and therefore eventually a threat to the place of the transcendent in human life.

### 2.2.5 Pascal

Another important influence in Taylor’s thought is Blaise Pascal. This may seem questionable since there is a whole line of major thinkers who clearly affect Taylor’s argument about the sources and characteristics of modernity but who cannot be discussed in this study for lack of space. Therefore, Pascal could perhaps be easily overlooked in this overview. However, we suggest that, like Hegel, Pascal has particular importance in this study because of his influence on *the way* Taylor thinks, not only *what* he thinks. Pascal emphasizes paradoxical thinking whereby the inherent stark paradoxes of human existence need to be understood in order to navigate the spiritual and mundane dualisms of human life. Finding the compromises among conflicting tendencies, finding the middle path,<sup>49</sup> depends on grace in Pascal’s view, but it can be helped along by the human agent. This way of thought flows quite naturally because

the pattern ... of all Pascal’s religious writing, is the stark contrast between man in his state of fallen nature and in a state of grace ... human nature was so corrupted by the Fall that only the direct intervention of God’s grace, mediated by the redeeming power of Christ, could enable man to do good and be saved ... but man could remove some of the chief obstacles to grace and thus create in himself a disposition more favourable to its reception.<sup>50</sup>

With regard to Pascal’s influence on *what* Taylor thinks, Pascal’s theory of the three orders of human knowledge drawn from his work on mathematics seems to have provided Taylor with a useful heuristic for discussing his ideas. According to Pascal, “that which is proper to the body

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<sup>49</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity*, 11.

<sup>50</sup> A. J. Krailsheimer, Translation and Introduction, *Pascal Pensées* (London: Penguin Books, 1995), xxi.

(the senses), to the mind (the reason), and to the heart are of different orders and must be carefully distinguished if error is to be avoided.”<sup>51</sup> Taylor uses the images of body and mind in tracing the evolution of secular modernity, but most strikingly, he refers unreservedly to the heart as a key dynamic element in his approach to the place of the transcendent in modern secular life. This in turn explains why Taylor gives such prominence to poets and writers like Wordsworth and Dostoyevsky who speak from and for the heart of humanity.

Moreover, Pascal provides Taylor with one of his most important lines of thought in analyzing modernity. It is first expressed in Taylor’s *The Malaise of Modernity* when he declares in the book’s final sentence, “As Pascal said about human beings, modernity is characterized by *grandeur* as well as by *misère*. Only a view that embraces both can give us the undistorted insight into our era that we need to rise to its greatest challenge.”<sup>52</sup> Taylor only glides over his specific meanings in using this paradoxical language, but a reading of Pascal clarifies the point since the paradox is central to Pascal’s own philosophy. For example, *Pensée* 122 is titled “Greatness and wretchedness” and reads: “it is certain that as man’s insight increases so he finds both wretchedness and greatness within himself ... man knows he is wretched ... because he is so, but he is truly great because he knows it.”<sup>53</sup> Taylor uses this point to underline his criticism of the “boosters” and “knockers” of modernity, another central theme and image in his work. He sees both sides as offering inadequate arguments – the truth is somewhere in between. We are sinners but we are capable of being saints.

This prompts a related relevant observation concerning the influence of theology on Taylor’s philosophical thought. Pascal was a Jansenist, a French/Belgian doctrinal heresy

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<sup>51</sup> A. J. Krailsheimer, “Introduction,” in *Pascal Pensées*, xxiii.

<sup>52</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity*, 121.

<sup>53</sup> *Pascal Pensées*, 31.

because of its Augustinian/Calvinist-influenced ideas on the efficacy of grace. The Jansenists became the political and theological enemies of the French Jesuits in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>54</sup> Pascal's religious views no doubt coloured his philosophical views as well as his way of formulating them, as we can see in the above quotation. Similarly, Lutheranism clearly coloured Hegel's philosophical views over a century later. These two examples illustrate that Taylor's philosophical dialogue partners over the centuries include a considerable diversity of religiously influenced philosophical views. Taylor clearly goes out of his way to open himself to the broadest possible range of such views including the perspectives of atheists like Jean-Paul Sartre, secular humanists like William James, and Christian humanists like Charles Péguy and Ivan Illich. When we come to discuss Taylor's three- or four- cornered battle of modern belief and unbelief in Chapter 6, these different perspectives become central in clarifying and supporting our hypothesis.

### **2.2.6 Johann Gottfried von Herder**

Although not known as being in the top rung of the great philosophers, the philosopher/theologian Herder plays a particularly important role in Taylor's thought. This is evidenced by the relative frequency with which Taylor refers to him in his writing. Perhaps Taylor's evident enthusiasm for Herder can be partly explained by the fact that "Herder was an intellectual maverick and provocateur."<sup>55</sup> One suspects from his own career that Taylor might have found that an appealing example for a philosopher to follow. However, the initial reason for Taylor's respect for Herder seems to have been the influence of his Oxford tutor, Isaiah Berlin.

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<sup>54</sup> *The Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy*, s.v. "Blaise Pascal."

<sup>55</sup> *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, s.v. "Herder, Johann Gottfried von."

Indeed, Berlin deserves to be among this section's short list of principal influences on Taylor's thought. An admirer of Berlin when introducing an anthology of his essays, said:

rooted as he was in the English tradition of philosophy, he rejected much that was fashionable among his contemporaries. He thought logical positivism no less disastrous than determinism. The natural sciences were not the paradigm of knowledge. Too much of what we know and value in life is excluded by this way of categorizing thought. For what is remarkable about the body of his work is that it recognizes how valuable, how challenging, how original were the contributions of the German philosophers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These were the men who were revolting against the soulless, mechanical ideas of the French Enlightenment.<sup>56</sup>

We have no difficulty seeing here Berlin's strong influence on Taylor's thought. It certainly included an admiration for Herder. Taylor comments as follows in an essay published in 1995:

Isaiah Berlin helped to rescue Herder from his relative neglect by philosophers. His seminal role in the creation of post-Romantic thought and culture has gone largely unnoticed, at least in the English-speaking world. The fact that Herder is not the most rigorous of thinkers probably makes it easier to ignore him. But deeply innovative thinkers don't have to be rigorous to originate important ideas. The insights they capture in striking images can inspire other, more philosophically exigent minds to more exact formulations. This was exemplified, I believe, in the relation of Herder to Hegel ... the earlier thinker drops out of sight, and the later becomes the canonical reference point for certain ideas, such as what I call the expressive understanding of the human person.<sup>57</sup>

Taylor does an important service in bringing forward Herder's main ideas. In particular, he emphasized the importance of Herder's overturning of the Hobbes-Locke-Condillac "enframing" theory of language. This, they drew from "within the confines of the modern representational epistemology made dominant by Descartes" by which "the introduction of language gives us for the first time control over the whole process of association."<sup>58</sup> Herder upends this theory. His "intuition is that language makes possible a different kind of

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<sup>56</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997), xi.

<sup>57</sup> Charles Taylor, "The Importance of Herder," Chapter 5 in *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 79-99.

<sup>58</sup> Charles Taylor. *The Language Animal*, 4-5.

consciousness” which he calls ‘reflective’.”<sup>59</sup> It is too complex to delve into here, but its first precondition points in the direction to which it leads: “you have to place yourself in the standpoint of the speaker, and ask yourself what he or she has to understand in order to learn a new word ... which invokes the subject’s other meanings and his beliefs and desires.”<sup>60</sup> Taylor’s effort at a fuller description of his thinking is presented in his essay on “The Importance of Herder” where he claims that Herder’s expressivist theory of language was one of the contributions which makes Herder “the hinge figure who originates a fundamentally different way of thinking about language and meaning ... he swings our thought about language into a quite different angle ... (and this is) the Herder revolution.”<sup>61</sup> In sum, we can see that Taylor’s ongoing interest in the philosophy of language owes much to Herder.

### 2.2.7 Hegel

Beyond our references to his philosophy earlier in this study, further reference to Hegel’s important ideas and formative influence on Taylor no doubt risks being seen by the reader as tiresome duplication. However, the preceding references were offered in different contexts than the present chapter in which our purpose is to trace and explore the influences and ideas that have shaped Taylor’s social imaginary. In terms of philosophical and also theological influence on Taylor’s thought, George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) doubtless occupies a place in the front rank. Early in his career, while a full time teacher of philosophy, Taylor completed and published remarkably quickly not just one but two books on Hegel in 1975<sup>62</sup> and 1979<sup>63</sup> which are still in print. The first, *Hegel*, is 575 pages in length. The second, a condensation of part of

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<sup>59</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Language Animal*, 6.

<sup>60</sup> Charles Taylor, “The Importance of Herder,” *Philosophical Arguments*, 81.

<sup>61</sup> Charles Taylor, “The Importance of Herder,” *Philosophical Arguments*, 79-80.

<sup>62</sup> Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 79. Original version 1975.

<sup>63</sup> Charles Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society*, 1979.

the first, and titled *Hegel and Modern Society*, is slightly over a third that length at 167 pages. He was credited for the first book with bringing Hegel out of eclipse in Anglo-American philosophy thereby helping to bridge the longstanding gap between Anglo-American analytical philosophy and Continental philosophy. To repeat in this context a revealing insight about Taylor mentioned above: “the current resurgence of Hegelian thought outside Europe – unimaginable forty years ago – would not have been possible without Taylor’s pioneering work.”<sup>64</sup>

This reinforces a point that Taylor makes, speaking of Herder’s experience of having been overshadowed by later philosophical luminaries, to the effect that by returning to the forgotten or neglected work of a previous genius we can unearth valuable new insights. “The losing sight of origins can be of more than historiographical significance. It may also mean that we still have something important to learn from the original statement of certain foundational ideas that has yet to be captured in recognized ‘philosophical’ formulations.”<sup>65</sup> Here again, Taylor seems to be sliding in a comment whose larger intent may be polemical and related to the element of “a work of recovery” singled out as part of Taylor’s “rather tightly related agenda” of our hypothesis.

Taylor does not explain his background motivation, as opposed to his immediate purpose, in writing these books until the Preface of *Hegel and Modern Society*. Here he describes his purpose as

...not just to expound Hegel, but also to show how he still provides the terms in which we reflect on some contemporary problems ... I wanted to show how Hegel has helped shape the terms in which I think. But such modesty ... would be insincere. In fact, I believe that Hegel has contributed to the formation of concepts and modes of thought that

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<sup>64</sup> Frederick Neuhauser in his Preface to Charles Taylor, *Hegel in Modern Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), vii.

<sup>65</sup> Charles Taylor, “The Importance of Herder,” *Philosophical Arguments*, 79.

are indispensable if we are to see our way clear through certain modern problems and dilemmas.<sup>66</sup>

These are notably strong words, especially for a philosopher. They show that Hegel's articulation of the philosophical predicament of his generation seems to have resonated with Taylor's view of "the predicament"<sup>67</sup> with which he sees his own generation contending in the immediate aftermath of such social, cultural and moral revolutions as in 1960s Quebec, Paris in May, 1968, and Woodstock, New York in August, 1969.

This explains why the three chapters of the shorter book concentrate on Hegel's relevance for the contemporary world and overlook sections of the larger work, such as his four chapter discussion of "Logic" in Part III. Taylor had described this part as "indispensable" for people to read who wish "to understand how Hegel's philosophy was authenticated in his own eyes."<sup>68</sup> Evidently, the shorter book was aimed at demonstrating in an interesting way for students or non-experts the relevance of philosophy in general and Hegel in particular, but not all his important ideas. That, we claim, is why the shorter book does not duplicate all the six parts and 22 chapters of the larger volume even though it is still considered a treatise of essential value to anybody interested in the history of ideas.

Indeed, contrary to misperceptions, the author of this study found it surprisingly accessible to a non-philosopher and confesses that he wishes that he had read at least its opening chapter, "Aims of a New Epoch,"<sup>69</sup> if not the whole book, before embarking on Taylor's subsequent books. Many of the words and ideas and philosophical personalities, as well as definitions of key German language terms encountered in Taylor's two principal books, as well

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<sup>66</sup> Charles Taylor, *Hegel in the Modern World*, xiii.

<sup>67</sup> Charles Taylor, *Hegel*, 29.

<sup>68</sup> Charles Taylor, *Hegel*, vii.

<sup>69</sup> Charles Taylor, *Hegel*, 3.

as in his *Malaise of Modernity* on the theme of secular modern culture, are placed in context and defined in *Hegel*.

In addition to the basic principles of Hegel's philosophy beginning at page 25, Taylor defines or clarifies key terms he later uses in his own philosophy such as "predicament." In this regard, he says:

We have drawn a portrait of expressivist consciousness as an aspiration to escape from a predicament in which the subject is over against an objectified world, to overcome the gap between subject and object, to see objectivity as an expression of subjectivity, or in interchange with it. But does not this imperious desire to unite with the world threaten the existence of the subject? This is the question or dilemma that inescapably arises ... the radical objectification of the Enlightenment ... this revolution of radical freedom ...<sup>70</sup>

Other terms or philosophers whose ideas Taylor explains or sketches in *Hegel* which are central to his later works include "sacred,"<sup>71</sup> "objectivity," "mechanistic" and "atomistic,"<sup>72</sup> "the post-Aristotelian sense of the self" and "self-mutilation,"<sup>73</sup> "synthesis and "spiral vision of history,"<sup>74</sup> "the oppositions,"<sup>75</sup> the creative importance of Schiller,<sup>76</sup> and the perception of Fichte "that spirituality, tending to realize spiritual goals, is of the essence of nature. Underlying natural reality is a spiritual principle striving to realize itself."<sup>77</sup>

Taylor's interest in Hegel, an interest that demanded learning German and dedicating nearly a decade of his life to writing his two studies, seems perhaps to have been spurred by the insight that the first philosophical resistance to the Cartesian epistemological revolution which atomized and instrumentalized the Western social imaginary and discounted the transcendent

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<sup>70</sup> Charles Taylor, *Hegel*, 29.

<sup>71</sup> Charles Taylor, *Hegel*, 9.

<sup>72</sup> Charles Taylor, *Hegel*, 11.

<sup>73</sup> Charles Taylor, *Hegel*, 15.

<sup>74</sup> Charles Taylor, *Hegel*, 35.

<sup>75</sup> Charles Taylor, *Hegel*, 36-37.

<sup>76</sup> Charles Taylor, *Hegel*, 37-38.

<sup>77</sup> Charles Taylor, *Hegel*, 39.

horizon seems to have come from the young generation of German Romantics of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. The generation of the late 1790s included Goethe, Schiller, Fichte, Schelling and Hegel, though not all of them can be classed as Romantics. They were looking for a way to a new unity to replace the “beautiful Greek synthesis (which) had to die because man had to be inwardly divided to grow. As Hölderlin put it in the *Hyperion Fragment*, ‘there are two ideals of our existence ... (one is a condition) where our needs accord with each other ... just through the organization of nature without any action on our part ... and the other is a condition of the highest cultivation where this accord would come about ... through the organization we are able to give to ourselves,’”<sup>78</sup> Therefore, “the prime tasks of thought and sensibility were seen as the overcoming of profound oppositions ... which expressed most acutely the division between the two ideals of critical freedom and integral expression.”<sup>79</sup>

This sounds more complicated than perhaps it needs to be. As we have seen, Descartes introduces the discipline and individualism of French Enlightenment reason. But the German version of the Enlightenment rebelled against the strict French version because it flattened, denied or homogenized human experience. This reaction led to the naturalism of the German Romantic movement in the late eighteenth century, precisely during Hegel’s prime time. This in turn opened the door to the insight about human self-expression suggested by Herder and others. But the objectivity, discipline and radical freedom of Cartesian reason, that is “the intellect,” inevitably conflicted with the subjectivity of self-expressiveness or integral expression – rationality trumped feeling and intuition. Hegel and Fichte were looking for a synthesis to overcome this split or “opposition.” (This idea of “oppositions” becomes central to our analysis of Taylor’s thought on the place of the transcendent in secular modernity in Chapter 7.)

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<sup>78</sup> Charles Taylor, *Hegel*, 35.

<sup>79</sup> Charles Taylor, *Hegel*, 36.

It was Fichte who figured out how to bring about a philosophical reunification of critical freedom and integral expression in the face of this seeming impasse. In 1794 he published a theory that Taylor said was “immensely exhilarating ... the pain of division could be overcome by pushing the initially divisive self-consciousness to its fullest development ... where it would be seen to englobe its opposition.”<sup>80</sup> (Note: The precise meaning of this sentence is less important than the concept of transformation through an englobing process that it embodies, as we will see in Chapter 7.)

By extension Fichte was providing “an ontological foundation for the [desired] unity...if the highest spiritual side of man, his moral freedom, is to come to more than passing and accidental harmony with his natural being, then nature itself must have to tend to the spiritual ... then ... nature must ... [have a] bent to realize spiritual goals ... this is to say that spirituality, tending to realize spiritual goals, is of the essence of nature. Underlying natural reality is a spiritual principle striving to realize itself.”<sup>81</sup>

Although initiating this line of thinking earned Fichte the credit for catalyzing what evolved into Hegel’s spiral vision of history, it took Schiller and eventually Hegel to bring about what Taylor refers to as

the desired synthesis of subjectivity and objectivity ... (with his idea of) spirit, or *Geist*, although he is often called ‘God,’ and although Hegel claimed to be clarifying Christian theology, it is not the God of traditional theism, he is not a God who could exist quite independently of men, even if men did not exist, as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob before the creation. On the contrary, he is a spirit who lives as spirit only through men. They are the vehicles and the indispensable vehicles, of his spiritual existence as consciousness, rationality, will. But at the same time *Geist* is not reducible to man, he is not identical with the human spirit, since his is the spiritual reality underlying the universe as a whole ... for the mature Hegel, man comes to himself in the end when he sees himself as a vehicle of a larger spirit.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Charles Taylor, *Hegel*, 36.

<sup>81</sup> Charles Taylor, *Hegel*, 38-39.

<sup>82</sup> Charles Taylor, *Hegel*, 44-45.

But this insight did not dispose of the issue of reason (or ‘understanding’ as Hegel described it) which was fundamental to the Romantics. Because it “divides, analyses, individuates, kills.”<sup>83</sup>

According to Taylor, Hegel saw rational understanding therefore requiring

a clear consciousness of the distinction between subject and object, self and other, the rational and the affective. And just because of this Hegel will insist that the ultimate synthesis incorporate division as well as unity. Once again, Hegel will attempt to combine the seemingly uncombinable. He will claim to arrive at the ‘identity of identity and non-identity’ ... the unity of the single current of life and the division between subject and object implicit in rational consciousness. This is perhaps the central and most ‘mind-blowing’ idea of the Hegelian system ... Hegel shared the hope that this unprecedented and epoch-making synthesis could be made only if one could win through to a vision of a spiritual reality underlying nature, a cosmic subject, to whom man could relate himself and in which he could ultimately find himself. And as a result he produced one of the great monuments to the aspiration of his age – a seminal age for modern civilization ... with this in mind we can already see why the Hegelian synthesis is of perennial and recurring interest in our civilization. For the two powerful aspirations – to expressive unity and to radical autonomy- have remained central preoccupations of modern men ... the Romantic rebellion continues undiminished ... but we cannot avoid (referring back to ) the first great synthesis which was meant to resolve the central dilemma, which failed but which remains somehow unsurpassed.<sup>84</sup>

In other words, Hegel is saying that consciousness is the link between the soul and nature.

Consciousness is the dialectical point of reconciliation or synthesis they were seeking.

We can see why Taylor’s discovery of Hegel played a big role in Taylor’s decision to change his initial course as a scholar, and to embark on a career as a philosopher instead of as a historian. Perhaps as a student encountering the comparatively neglected Hegel, he saw a need in the Anglo-American academic community that he could help meet. He could see that the conditions of belief and unbelief were evolving in significant and potentially perilous ways. The transcendent horizon was being increasingly suppressed or marginalized in society and in the

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<sup>83</sup> Charles Taylor, *Hegel*, 48.

<sup>84</sup> Charles Taylor, *Hegel*, 48-50.

lives of people. Perhaps he saw that Hegel's ideas and way of thinking could help people live more fully in secular modernity, just as they appeared to have in his own life.

It was Fichte, a near contemporary of Hegel, who developed the dialectical method, but both philosophers had recognized a natural dialectical process in which a "thesis" generates an "antithesis" leading to a transformation to a reconciling "synthesis." which then becomes another "thesis." It is a concept so central to Taylor's philosophy and method, as we have seen above, that it is the "system" or principle that we have appropriated as an organizing principle for the structure of this study. We discern in Taylor's work on secular modernity and especially in *A Secular Age* a dialectical structure to his thinking and exposition that will gradually lead us, as suggested in our hypothesis, to a transformed spiritual synthesis. This may be why Taylor described Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*,<sup>85</sup> which laid out Hegel's ideas, as "the most powerful and exciting of Hegel's books."<sup>86</sup>

Summarizing complex philosophical ideas that seem to underlie much of Taylor's thought, a notable Canadian scholar of Taylor's philosophy, Ralph Heintzman, explains that

Hegel ... suggested ... that human experience (both individual and collective) takes a shape somewhat like that of a spiral staircase: a circular pattern of development in which humans keep moving through familiar forms or stages, returning to the same place, over and over again, but at successively higher levels, or perspectives ... each of these stages of human development is an image of the whole pattern, the whole nature of the human.<sup>87</sup>

This insight is crucial to understanding Taylor's thought and the hypothesis of this study. This understanding of the change process consists of, in Taylor's own words,

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<sup>85</sup> G.W.F Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, translated by A.V. Miller, foreword by J.N. Findlay (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

<sup>86</sup> Charles Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 53.

<sup>87</sup> Ralph Heintzman has kindly authorized use of this extract from a draft of his forthcoming book, *The Human Paradox: Rediscovering the Nature of the Human*, 16.

a spiral view of history ... (which) holds that each of these oppositions becomes initially sharper as man develops; but when they reach their fullest development the terms come to reconciliation of themselves. And 'reconciliation' doesn't mean simply 'undoing;' there is no question of returning to our primitive condition ... on the contrary, the aspiration is to retain the fruits of separation. [That is] free rational consciousness, while reconciling this with unity ... philosophy [therefore] plays a crucial, indeed an indispensable role in revealing this reconciliation ... that is why Hegel holds the ordinary viewpoint of identity has to be abandoned in philosophy in favour of a way of thinking which can be called dialectical.<sup>88</sup>

In contrast to the models of historical change entailing a recurring "will to power" as seen by Nietzsche, or decline and fall espoused by the likes of Gibbon,<sup>89</sup> Nietzsche,<sup>90</sup> and Spengler,<sup>91</sup> Taylor endorses a model which consists in a dialectical sequence of composition – decomposition – re-composition in which historical development involves a "zigzag," "spiral" or almost circular movement but with an ascending tendency over time. This means to Taylor that the emergence of secularity in modernity needs not be seen as permanent nor the cause of violence or decline, but as the precursor of new forms of human experience including the possibility of retrieval in Western culture of a reconstituted transcendent horizon – a further ascending step on the spiral staircase.

### 2.3 Influential Sociologists

As noted above, Taylor defines philosophical anthropology as "the study of the basic categories in which man and his behaviour is to be described and explained."<sup>92</sup> In a separate reflection, Taylor says that "social theory is ... concerned with finding a more satisfactory description of what is happening. The basic question of all social theory is in a sense: what is

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<sup>88</sup> Charles Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society*, 14.

<sup>89</sup> Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Vols. 1-7 (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd. 1912).

<sup>90</sup> Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (New York: Princeton University Press, 1968), 149.

<sup>91</sup> Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West, Form and Actuality* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1918.)

<sup>92</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Explanation of Behaviour*, 4.

really going on?”<sup>93</sup> Consequently, in a time of rapidly expanding knowledge in the social and human sciences, including expanding categories and sub-categories, the ambit of Taylor’s fields of study has clearly expanded continuously throughout his career. This partly accounts for the broad array of fields of knowledge alluded to in his writing. Although other fields might be discussed, we propose to conclude this background chapter with one final major area of high relevance in understanding Taylor’s ideas: the field of sociology. Given its quite recent development in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, it is a field that was relatively nascent when Taylor began his academic career. However, it plays an increasingly prominent role in his thinking as reflected especially in his more recent publications. In this section, we will look at two pioneering sociologists who play a prominent role in Taylor’s writing about religion and the conditions of life and belief in secular modernity: Émile Durkheim and Max Weber.

### **2.3.1 David Émile Durkheim**

Durkheim (1858-1917) was a French academic, a teacher who considered himself a scientist. He is considered one of the founders of the field of sociology and “established sociology as an academic discipline in France.”<sup>94</sup> He was a descendent of a long line of Jewish rabbis but was not a believer. His names were symbolic of his Jewish parentage and family’s ardent allegiance to the Third French Republic. After years of successful academic and happy personal life, the First World War intruded cruelly. Many of his friends and, worst of all, his son, were killed in World War I. As a result, he was said to have died of a “broken heart.”<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Charles Taylor, “Social Theory as Practice,” in *Philosophy in the Human Sciences, Philosophical Papers 2*, 92-93. Note: One can perhaps see here the wellspring and meaning of Taylor’s question noted above: “what the hell is going on here? In short, his argument is that philosophy must not marginalize or ignore sociology.

<sup>94</sup> *The Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy*, s.v. “Durkheim.”

<sup>95</sup> Mark S. Cladis, “Introduction” to Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), ix-x.

Durkheim initially “understood religion as collective beliefs and practices that shape a society’s moral identity ... (and was) convinced that ... in modern democratic societies religion plays an increasingly minor role.”<sup>96</sup> Consequently, he was interested in the question of what supplies an alternative “sense of belonging and moral scaffolding in modern societies...if religion has been in a continuous state of decline, what will take its place in the future?”<sup>97</sup> His views changed, however, when his studies (initially of primitive Australian “totemism”) revealed to him that this way of thinking did not reflect the facts. He began to realize that

the elementary forms of religious life permeate not only traditional but modern societies as well. Although its tenets and rites have changed, its basic forms have not. The political, economic, and even scientific realms are infused with the religious. Individual rights, notions of economic fair play, and the spirit of free enquiry, for example, are charged with the sacred. You now have a powerful vocabulary for articulating the normative, communal aspects of modern democratic societies – the vocabulary of religion.<sup>98</sup>

Robert Bellah, the distinguished American sociologist, summed up Durkheim’s “central insight ... that religion always is an expression of the society in which it exists ... and that religion is an essential form that creates and sustains the society in which it exists, so there is a two-way relation between society and religion in Durkheim’s mature theory.”<sup>99</sup> In other words, Durkheim had used Cartesian methods of science to demonstrate the natural prevalence of religion in one form or another in all societies.

This innovative and hopeful line of thought caught Taylor’s eye. This is why eventually “Durkheim” and “Durkheimian” are terms that figure prominently in Taylor’s later writing.

However, the first time we run across Durkheim’s name in his major books is not until page 442

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<sup>96</sup> Mark S Cladis, “Introduction” to Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, vii.

<sup>97</sup> Mark S. Cladis, “Introduction” to Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, vii.

<sup>98</sup> Mark S. Cladis, “introduction” to Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, vii-viii.

<sup>99</sup> Robert N. Bellah, “After Durkheim,”(blog), *The Immanent Frame: Secularism, religion and the public sphere*, *ssrc.org*, (Social Science Research Council of Canada), filed under “A Secular Age”, accessed September 22, 2016.

of his 2007 *A Secular Age*. This was rather late in Taylor's own voyage of intellectual discovery as illustrated by the fact that *Sources of the Self*, a book in which Durkheim's insights would have been helpful, was published eighteen years earlier with no mention of the French sociologist.

Taylor's initial reference to Durkheim is followed for much of the rest of the book with Taylor's interpretation of his ideas about "the imagined place of the sacred"<sup>100</sup> in any society. Taylor proposes a three-tiered typology which he refers to repeatedly in several of his subsequent publications.<sup>101</sup> While important and creative, it must be said, however, that Taylor's first effort at adapting Durkheim's approach in *A Secular Age* could hardly have been expressed in a more confusing manner. Perhaps this showed that Taylor found it difficult to apply Durkheim's ideas convincingly to his philosophical purposes.

Taylor's typology names and defines three broad "dispensations" based on Durkheim's theory. The "paleo-Durkheimian" is based on the post-Westphalian norm where church and state can be described as "hand-in-glove." "The Church is that of the whole society, to which everyone must belong."<sup>102</sup> The Church itself in that role can be described as "Durkheimian" because "the Church and the social sacred are one."<sup>103</sup> Taylor also refers to this as the "ancien regime model which interwove church and state, presented us as living in a hierarchical order,

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<sup>100</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 486.

<sup>101</sup> For example, note the number of references in the text or indexes to Durkheim or Durkheimian variants in Charles Taylor: *A Secular Age* (31), *Dilemmas and Connections* (43), *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited* (multiple references in the second half of the lecture - Parts 3 and 4).

<sup>102</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 442.

<sup>103</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 442.

which has divine endorsement ... authority itself was bound up with the divine ... (and in its earlier form) was connected to what one might call an ‘enchanted world.’”<sup>104</sup>

The second dispensation Taylor calls “neo-Durkheimian.”<sup>105</sup> In it the sacred fades from centrality in society to be replaced in a process of “Mobilization”<sup>106</sup> by new self-identifications with the polity against an “established synthesis.” These might be, for example, the idea of Design, or of God’s Providence, or the sense of setting an example of civilizational order to other “lesser” countries, such as the British and others assumed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In this dispensation, one identifies socially with the state as a type of sacredly sanctioned entity but achieves community through affinity groups. These sometimes are or include religious denominations. “God may be central to our political identity, without being linked to any pre-eminence in the broader order.”<sup>107</sup> Taylor illustrates this with the example of the presence of “God” in the American Declaration of Independence but not in the American Constitution.

Taylor calls the third level the post-Durkheimian dispensation. It is the most controversial of the three. Bellah, for example, generally an unreserved fan of Taylor’s, did not accept Taylor’s idea of a “post-Durkheimian” stage, seeing it as contradicting basic sociological principles.<sup>108</sup> However, Taylor sees this dispensation as emerging in Western culture in the 1950s. It supplants his construct of the “Age of Mobilization”<sup>109</sup> which he associates with the neo-Durkheimian stage discussed in Chapter 12 of *A Secular Age*. The new stage or dispensation corresponds to what he calls the “Age of Authenticity” discussed in Chapter 13. It is one in

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<sup>104</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 446. Note: It is significant that Taylor credits Max Weber’s use of the term “disenchanted” as providing him with the antonym of the “enchanted” world which will be reflected below in our study.

<sup>105</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 455.

<sup>106</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 455.

<sup>107</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 457.

<sup>108</sup> Robert N. Bellah, “After Durkheim,” (blog), *The Immanent Frame: Secularism, religion and the public sphere*, Web page of the SSRC accessed September 22, 2016.

<sup>109</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 471.

which “the ‘sacred,’ either religious or ‘laïque,’ has become uncoupled from our political allegiance” and it ushers in a transformation that “changes utterly the ways in which ideals of order used to be interwoven with the polemic of belief and unbelief.”<sup>110</sup>

Taylor concludes his introduction of these ideas demonstrating the strong influence of Durkheim, with the following qualification: “Paleo-, neo-, post-Durkheimian describe ideal types. My claim is not that any of these provide the total description, but that our history has moved through these dispensations, and the latter has come to colour more our age.” Indeed, he takes this one step further and suggests that in some cases it may be useful to use the term “non-Durkheimian.”<sup>111</sup> By providing novel and scientifically-based ideas on which to base this three or four layer explanatory template, Durkheim provided substantial support to Taylor’s effort to think through and explain the development of secular modernity as well as to give scientific credence to the ongoing human instinct for the transcendent horizon.

### **2.3.2 Max Weber**

Perhaps surprisingly, Charles Taylor takes special account of the ideas of Max Weber (1864-1920) in both his major books. In *Sources of the Self* and *A Secular Age* Weber is referenced in the index eleven and twenty-nine times respectively. This supports our claim that Weber plays a particularly influential role in Taylor’s thinking about the forces behind the emergence of secular modernity. That, however, does not mean that this influence translates into mutual agreement of view. In fact, the thought of Taylor and Weber is far apart in matters of the spiritual. Therefore, while Weber the atheist serves Taylor’s thinking with challenging concepts and terminology, his principal influence is as a dialogue partner and foil for his ideas.

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<sup>110</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 487.

<sup>111</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 486.

“Weber’s social theory was influenced philosophically by both neo-Kantianism and Nietzsche, creating tensions in a theorist who focused most of his efforts on Occidental rationalism and yet was a noncognitivist in ethics.”<sup>112</sup> (Noncognitivism means disbelief in there being knowable ethical facts.<sup>113</sup>) In relation to both the industrial order (Weber’s ideas on capitalism and bureaucracy) and in the general theoretical field (the role of values in society), Talcott Parsons wrote that “the important thing about Weber’s work was not how he judged the relative importance of ideas or economic factors, but rather the way in which he analyzed the systems of social action within which ideas and values as well as ‘economic forces’ operate to influence action.”<sup>114</sup>

Taylor would no doubt agree with Parsons on that point. Although he disagrees with Weber in other fundamental respects, Taylor expresses admiration in both his major books for Weber’s ideas even when they are in his view misguided. For example, in an exploration of the conflict over instrumentalism, Taylor says, “I haven’t mentioned Weber, principally because I have many fewer criticisms to make of his theory. His is one of the most profound and insightful in my view, not less because it has a lively sense of the conflict among goods. But even Weber, under a subjectivist interpretation of Nietzsche, has no place for this exploration.”<sup>115</sup> By this, we think Taylor is alluding to the basic fact, which he considers lamentable, that Weber despite his brilliance was not a believer and supported the secularity thesis to be discussed below.

There are three specific ways that Weber influences Taylor’s thinking. (1) He provides innovative and helpful language and concepts for analyzing modernity. (2) He provides helpful

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<sup>112</sup> *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, s. v. “Weber, Max.”

<sup>113</sup> *The Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy*, s. v. “Cognitivism.”

<sup>114</sup> Talcott Parsons’ Preface to Max Weber, , *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, translated by Talcott Parsons, (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1958), xvi.

<sup>115</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 511-12.

insights about how the Reformation and religion generally contributed significantly to the secularization of secular modernity. (3) He plays the role of a quasi-dialogue partner in debating certain issues on which the two thinkers do not agree, but where their differences as recorded in Taylor's writing are illuminating.

Among the best known examples of important terms of art relevant to secular modernity invented or appropriated by Weber would be the words "disenchantment" (*Entzauberung*) and "iron cage." Weber also coined the famous but over-simplified concept of "the disenchantment of the world" which he defined narrowly as "the elimination of magic as a salvation technique."<sup>116</sup> Many have extended the term's meaning to imply the process of secularization. Weber used the word "disenchantment" to describe the widespread decline of traditional religion in European culture. Taylor comments early in *Sources of the Self*, that

what Weber called 'disenchantment,' the dissipation of our sense of the cosmos as a meaningful order, has allegedly destroyed the horizons in which people previously lived their spiritual lives. Nietzsche used the term in his celebrated 'God is dead' passage: 'How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the whole horizon? ... The loss of horizon described by Nietzsche's fool undoubtedly corresponds to something widely felt in our culture.'<sup>117</sup>

This comment also underlines the affinity between Weber and Nietzsche with which Taylor has no sympathy. It is an affinity of destructive nihilism far from the horizon of the transcendent.

In this context, Taylor says he means by the word "horizon" that "the forms of revealed religion continue very much alive, but also highly contested. None forms the whole horizon of the whole society in the modern West."<sup>118</sup> Taylor uses the word as a useful way of drawing the

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<sup>116</sup> "Foreword" by Charles Taylor, in Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 3.

<sup>117</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 17.

<sup>118</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 17.

line between what he called the “enchanted”<sup>119</sup> pre-Reformation European religious culture, and the post-Cartesian “disenchanted” modern world described in his books. He makes an important point for his larger argument when he says, for example, that “science in helping to disenchant the universe, contributed to opening the way for exclusive humanism. (But) a crucial condition for this was a new sense of self and its place in the cosmos: not open and porous to a world of spirits, but what I want to call ‘buffered.’”<sup>120</sup>

Weber’s “iron cage” is another term that Taylor debates as a concept but then goes on to use throughout his work as a type of two-word metaphor or code for the ideas it represents. Here is how Weber expresses it referring to the transvaluation of work and frugality from the monk to the modern Calvinist worker:

The Puritan wanted to work in a calling; we are *forced* to do so. For when asceticism was carried out of the monastic cells into everyday life, and began to dominate worldly morality, it did its part in building the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order. This order is now bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production which today determine the lives of all the individuals who are born into the mechanism, not only those directly concerned with economic acquisition, with irresistible force.<sup>121</sup>

Weber concludes this major idea by referring to the cloak of the ascetic monk who set an example of hard work and restricted consumption and thereby ushered in the changed social imaginary of the Reformation. The problem was that the cloak could not be thrown off lightly and “fate decreed that the cloak should become an iron cage.”<sup>122</sup>

According to Taylor, this term was actually borrowed from Marx’s theory of capitalism. It refers to Weber’s “quasi-coercive ... notion of modern society as an ‘iron cage’ ... [because]

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<sup>119</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 71.

<sup>120</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 27.

<sup>121</sup> Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, 181.

<sup>122</sup> Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, 181.

the exigencies of survival in capitalist (or technological) society are thought to dictate a purely instrumental pattern of action, which has the inevitable effect of destroying or marginalizing purposes of intrinsic value.”<sup>123</sup> This means a “loss of meaning [through] division or fragmentation”<sup>124</sup> - one becomes a cog in a machine with no way out. This is a powerful image. Weber accepts it as an inevitable feature of modernity. Taylor sees it as inhuman and a motivation to seek and anticipate a better solution.

The second zone of strong influence on Taylor’s thinking is Weber’s insight into the impact of the Protestant Reformation on modernity. As a Catholic contrasting pre-modern “enchanted” and post-Disenchantment European culture, a central part of Taylor’s story of Western modernity has to grapple with the differing paths to modern conditions of belief of the distinct Catholic and Protestant Christian cultures. This is particularly so because Taylor locates the main driver of secular modernity, and particularly the phenomenon of secularization, as originating in Protestantism and especially Puritan and Calvinist Protestantism. These forces are discussed in the five chapters of Part I, of his *A Secular Age*<sup>125</sup> - *The Work of Reform*. In it, he draws insights from Weber’s classic, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, noted above. This is “Weber’s thesis about the development of the Protestant ethic and its relation to capitalism. This indeed is close to what I am saying here. Weber is obviously one of my sources.”<sup>126</sup>

In other words, secular modernity threatens us because it imprisons the modern individual within a vicious circle, an iron cage, by making us dependent on instrumentally produced material goods. Sounding the alarm about this iron cage prophecy together with

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<sup>123</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 500.

<sup>124</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 500.

<sup>125</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 25-218.

<sup>126</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 156.

Nietzsche's warnings about the future of a world without God, neither of which Taylor feels he can disprove empirically, becomes both a *leitmotif* and a metaphor through much of Taylor's work. It is one of the threatened consequences posed by secular modernity in general and exclusive humanism in particular, as will be discussed in Chapter 6.

There is a third important way in which Weber strongly impacts Taylor's thought. Weber acts as a sort of dialogue partner for Taylor. Though dead before Taylor was born, Weber takes positions on philosophical anthropological issues with which Taylor engages in the development of his own ideas relevant to the emergence of secular modernity. A key one in this respect is the issue of meaning. Taylor takes direct issue with the ideas of Weber and others like Habermas who insist on approaching values and meaning on an objective basis. They therefore refuse to recognize anything but an "objective order" of values "in the sense of a publicly accessible reality."<sup>127</sup> They fail to recognize that the only way to get at the "loss of resonance, depth, or richness in our human surroundings"<sup>128</sup> is to recognize that "the order is only accessible through personal, hence 'subjective' resonance."<sup>129</sup>

Another clear illustration of the Taylor-Weber dialogue can be found running through much of Taylor's discussion of three specific malaises in his CBC Massey lecture published as *The Malaise of Modernity*.<sup>130</sup> In the debate about the perils of disengaged, instrumental modes of life, Taylor's view, echoing Weber and De Toqueville, is that such a way of life "empties life of meaning, and ... threatens public freedom, that is the institutions and practices of self-government."<sup>131</sup> However, in contrast to Weber and others, he does not share their pessimistic

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<sup>127</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 510.

<sup>128</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 501.

<sup>129</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 510.

<sup>130</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity*.

<sup>131</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 500.

view of modernity being caught in a vicious circle that it cannot escape because of these malaises. “I believe that [their] strong theories of fatality are abstract and wrong. Our degrees of freedom are not zero.”<sup>132</sup>

## 2.4 Conclusion

That upbeat note is a good place to bring this chapter discussing aspects of Taylor’s social imaginary to a conclusion. We have concentrated on three vectors that are particularly pronounced in Taylor’s mindset. They were the religious/theological, the philosophical, and the sociological. The discussion could easily have been considerably broadened because not only does Taylor’s McGill University list of interests go well beyond these three major vectors, but the concept of philosophical anthropology suggests that no field of knowledge affecting what it means to be human would be entirely outside Taylor’s scope of interdisciplinary interests.

We now move on to Chapter 3 and the central argument of our study beginning with an understanding of the social imaginary of pre-Modern society and individuals – what we will describe in dialectical terms as “the thesis.”

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<sup>132</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity*, 8.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE “THESIS”: AN “ENCHANTED” WORLD

*In the past, in the sixteenth century ... Christianity was the very air we breathed in what we call Europe and what was then Christendom ... Today we make a choice to be a Christian or not. There was no choice in the sixteenth century.*<sup>1</sup>

#### 3.1 Introduction and Overview

Following the chapters describing Taylor’s background framework and social imaginary, this chapter has a three-fold purpose. First, it will introduce or further clarify the meanings of several terms and terms of art used by Taylor relevant throughout our study.. Second, it will explain the dialectical concept which is to be used as a template or structure for the main body of the study starting with this chapter which is described as the “thesis.” Third, its main purpose will be to outline several broad characteristics of the social imaginary of the “enchanted world” of pre-modernity as identified by Taylor in relation to subsequent contrasting characteristics of modernity. As the dialectical “thesis” stage of our study, preceding the multiple “revolutions” of the modern period, it is the point of departure for our exploration of Taylor’s thought in relation to our “present predicament,” that is, the predicament of faith as one option among many, and our hypothesis about the place of the transcendent in the secular modern world.

As we have indicated above, this study is intended in part to be a “retrieval” of what we claim are some of Taylor’s key messages expressed in accessible language intended for general, as opposed to specialized, audiences. We propose to do this by focusing on what we claim is his “single” most important or “guiding idea” and on three key related supporting ideas or strategies

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<sup>1</sup> Lucien Lefebvre, *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century: The Religion of Rabelais* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 336.

referred to in the hypothesis. In terms of the perennial question launched by Plato, as between belief in a “beyond” and unbelief in it, or between faith and non-faith, we claim that Taylor’s answer is clear. Our hypothesis is that Taylor believes that the individual in secular plural modern society can only achieve “a transformation which goes beyond ordinary human flourishing” within a transcendent horizon. In other words, we can live lives of the fullest fullness in secular modern culture, as opposed to merely flourishing lives, only if we tend to our souls by opening ourselves to the possibility of the self-transformative power within a transcendent horizon.

We claim that this central idea, reinforced by Taylor’s “single rather tightly related agenda” discussed above, (i.e. polemical debate, acts of recovery, and acts of persuasion and teaching) can be seen as the “pole star” governing his thought and priorities over more than sixty years as an engaged philosopher, public intellectual and committed Christian.

### **3.1.1 Definitional Issues**

The starting point for philosophy is reason, and the first step in reasoning is clarity of definition of the key terms under discussion. We therefore need to clarify some of the most important words and concepts used by Taylor in the balance of the study. The opening and closing chapters of *Sources of the Self* and *A Secular Age* provide the most helpful guidance in this respect. Drawing on them as well as other primary and secondary sources, the following section defines key terms or concepts that are central to Taylor’s work and the demonstration of our hypothesis.

## *Secularity*

What does it mean to say that we live in “a secular age?” This is Taylor’s first sentence in his major book. He acknowledges that there is no simple answer. He offers two common or mainline broad definitions and then introduces a third meaning which is substantially different from the mainline definitions. He numbers them. *Secularity 1* is the fact that “churches are now separate from political structures” and “religion or its absence is largely a private matter.” “The political society is seen as that of believers (of all stripes) and non-believers alike,” and “public spaces have been emptied of God.”<sup>2</sup> *Secularity 2* “consists in the falling off of religious belief and practice, in people turning away from God and no longer going to Church.”<sup>3</sup> But “what makes examination of this age as secular worth taking up (is) in a third sense”<sup>4</sup> which Taylor labels *Secularity 3*. It involves a change in the “conditions of belief.” “The shift to secularity in this sense consists, among other things, of a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged ... to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace.”<sup>5</sup> Secularity and its variants or derivatives will be further defined and debated in Chapter 5.

## *Belief and Unbelief*

Taylor says he wants to speak about belief and unbelief in a secular age not as “rival theories” but as “different kinds of lived experience in understanding your life in one way or another.” In other words, what does it feel like, or what does it do to your social imaginary, what does it do to your values and priorities and human relationships to believe, or not believe, in a

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<sup>2</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 1-2.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 2.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 2-3.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 3.

transcendent horizon? Taylor elaborates: they are “alternative ways of living our moral/spiritual life, in the broadest sense ... we all see our lives ... as having a certain moral/spiritual shape. Somewhere, in some activity or condition, lies a fullness or richness.”<sup>6</sup> This term, fullness, helps him to distinguish qualitatively between the distinct experiences of living under conditions of belief and unbelief even though, he makes clear, degrees of fullness are obtainable within belief and unbelief.

### *Fullness*<sup>7</sup>

Fullness is one of two contrasting and somewhat ambiguous terms of art that play a crucial role in Taylor’s thought about conditions of belief in secular modern culture and human life in general. The other term is “flourishing.” These terms as discussed above, help support a further key distinction he makes between the imminent and the transcendent horizons or “frames” because he uses the term fullness at its fullest to suggest the qualitative or spiritual difference of living in the transcendent frame or horizon. Therefore, for Taylor’s purposes, while fullness in ordinary language is a broad term with a variety of nuanced meanings, for him it describes

that place (activity or condition) [where] life is fuller, richer deeper, more worth while [sic], more admirable, more what it should be ... this is perhaps a place of power: we often experience this as deeply moving, as inspiring ... [or] this sense of fullness is something we just catch glimpses of from afar off ... [or] it is an experience in which ‘ordinary reality’ is abolished and something terrifyingly *other* shines through ... it ... has a negative slope; where we experience above all a distance or absence, an exile ... ennui or captivity in the monstrous.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 5.

<sup>7</sup> Note that “fulness” and “fullness” are both recognized as acceptable spellings by the Concise Oxford Dictionary, 7<sup>th</sup> ed., s. v. “ful(l)ness.” In Taylor’s books, both spellings occur. This possibly reflects a difference of custom or preference between British (one “f”) or North American editors (two letters “f”).

<sup>8</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 5-6.

Taylor elaborates that “for believers, the account of fullness requires reference to God, that is, something beyond human life and/or nature. For modern unbelievers the predicament is quite different. The power to reach fullness is within ... except that the sources of power are not transcendent. They are to be found in Nature, or in our own inner depths, or in both.”<sup>9</sup>

### ***Flourishing***

This term serves to distinguish a different kind of lived experience for both believers and unbelievers. In both cases there can be degrees of flourishing life but for unbelievers their goals are limited to goals of human flourishing as distinct from lives oriented in addition to the fullness of the transcendent. Human flourishing for Taylor’s typological purposes is concerned with physical, emotional, mental and social well-being. In the immanent frame human flourishing makes no reference to the beyond or God. In the case of believers, on the other hand, flourishing life will often be associated with the transcendent frame even though believers in the transcendent frame take the view that “the highest, the best life involves our seeking , or acknowledging, or serving a good which is beyond, in the sense of independent of, human flourishing.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, it is not an either/or proposition in Taylor’s view because it is quite possible for a person to seek to live a flourishing life as a subordinate part of a life oriented to the fullness of the transcendent “or something other than (only) human flourishing.”<sup>11</sup> In Taylor’s words,

the point of bringing out this distinction between human flourishing and goals which go beyond it is this. I would like to claim that the coming of modern secularity in my sense has been coterminous with the rise of a society in which for the first time in history a purely self-sufficient humanism came to be a widely available option. I mean by this a

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<sup>9</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 8-9.

<sup>10</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 16.

<sup>11</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 16-17

humanism accepting no final goals beyond human flourishing, nor any allegiance to anything beyond this flourishing.<sup>12</sup>

This is a notable comment because, in it, Taylor is introducing an unorthodox definition of secularity that diverges from the dominant 20<sup>th</sup> Century secularity narratives. As Taylor's elaboration of Secularity 3 evolves, he moves from the idea that secularity entails changed conditions of belief, to the idea that the subject for the first time in history has a choice whether to believe in the transcendent or not, and this in turn prompts the mutation by which individuals see themselves free to opt for exclusive or self-sufficient humanism with no allegiance to anything beyond human flourishing.

### ***Religion***

Taylor notes that all three of his definitions of secularity contain the word "religion." Yet, it is a famously difficult word to define because it covers a very broad swathe of human experience. Noting that his purposes in speaking about religion are relatively limited to the issues of changed beliefs in Western culture, he adopts a definition based simply on the distinction between the immanent and transcendent. He says that "'religion' for our purposes can be defined in terms of 'transcendence'."<sup>13</sup> Therefore, his definition is simply that "'religion' is belief in the transcendent."<sup>14</sup> This, he says, (no doubt with a chuckle at an intentional pun) is a "move tailor-made for our culture that would not necessarily apply more broadly."<sup>15</sup> Nonetheless, he elaborates by incorporating the idea of fullness into his definition of religion. He notes that every society has a sense of the desirable "final ends." It often gets codified in "philosophical theories, sometimes in moral codes, sometimes in religious practices and devotion" which answer the

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<sup>12</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 18.

<sup>13</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 20

<sup>14</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 16.

<sup>15</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 15-16.

question of whether “the highest, the best life, involves our seeking, or acknowledging, or serving a good which is beyond, in the sense of independent of human flourishing.”<sup>16</sup> Thus, he offers the example of the Judaeo-Christian religious tradition in which the answer to this question is simply that “loving, worshipping God is the ultimate end.”<sup>17</sup>

### *Transcendent/Transcendence*

Taylor makes it clear on more than one occasion that he has had to struggle with the meanings of the transcendent and transcendence and with the desirability of using these words at all. For example, as noted above, he says in a response to comments about his use of the terms in his Marianist Award Lecture, that “the words just aren’t adequate for what has to be said. You struggle, then put down one term, then erase it impatiently, and try another, and another.” Then he goes on to say

I feel this again about ‘transcendent.’ How could I ever have used such an abstract and evasive term, one so redolent of the flat and content-free modes of spirituality we can get maneuvered into in the attempt to accommodate both modern reason and the promptings of the heart? I remember erasing it with a particular gusto. Why ever did I reinstate it? What pressures led to its grudging rehabilitation? Well, one was that I wanted to say something general not just about Christians ... I needed a term to talk about all those different ways in which religious discourse went beyond the exclusively human and, in exhaustion I fell back on ‘transcendent.’ (But I haven’t given up hope of finding a better term.)”<sup>18</sup>

Taylor made that confession seventeen years ago!

As Taylor sees it, debates about religion and secularization boil down to whether or not one believes “in some agency or power transcending the immanent order.” He outlines three ways in which religion relates to “a beyond.” The first is that we have “the sense that there is

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<sup>16</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 16.

<sup>17</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 17.

<sup>18</sup> James L. Heft, ed., *A Catholic Modernity? Charles Taylor’s Marianist Award Lecture* (NY: Oxford University Press 1999), 105.

some good higher than, beyond, human flourishing.”<sup>19</sup> In the Christian case we could think of this as *agapē*, “the love which God has for us, and of which we can partake through his power ... a power of transformation is offered, which can take us beyond merely human perfection.”<sup>20</sup> The second dimension is that this notion of a higher good attainable by everyone only makes sense “in the context of belief in a higher power, the transcendent God of faith.”<sup>21</sup> Third, “the Christian story of our potential transformation by *agapē* requires that we see our life as going beyond ... ‘this life’.”<sup>22</sup> In the struggle or debate over religion and unbelief in our culture, Taylor sees these “three dimensions of transcendence” as defining “religion.” In short, the battle of belief and unbelief in Taylor’s thought can be (over-) simplified as being one between “this triple transcendence perspective and the total denial of religion.”<sup>23</sup>

### ***Geographic Ambit of the Study***

Because he believes that the world actually has “multiple modernities,” Taylor cautions against “global generalization” of his positions in the secularity debate. If there are multiple modernities this automatically implies that there can be “multiple secularities” which was the important, carefully researched insight of David Martin<sup>24</sup> and José Casanova.<sup>25</sup> Secularity for our purposes, as Taylor frequently points out, needs to be seen as limited to “the Western or the

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<sup>19</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 20.

<sup>20</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 20.

<sup>21</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 20.

<sup>22</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 20.

<sup>23</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 20.

<sup>24</sup> Charles Taylor, “Foreword,” in David Martin, *On Secularization: Towards a Revised General Theory*, (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2005), ix.

<sup>25</sup> José Casanova, “A Secular Age: Dawn or Twilight,” in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, ed. Michael Warner, Jonathan VanAntwerpen and Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 265-281.

North Atlantic world; or ... the civilization whose principal roots lie in what used to be called 'Latin Christendom'."<sup>26</sup>

### 3. 1. 2 Structural Issues

We have indicated above that the structure of our argument in this study will be dialectical, reflecting what we claim is Taylor's way of thinking and his Hegelian-influenced approach to what he describes as the "zigzag" process of historical change. This way of thinking, as we have seen, is heavily based on insights reflected in his two studies of Hegel. These are summed up by Hegel's apparently paradoxical insight that "the Absolute ... is the identity of identity and non-identity; opposition and unity are both together in it."<sup>27</sup> Taylor, as previously indicated, describes this as "perhaps the central and most 'mind-blowing' idea of the Hegelian system."<sup>28</sup>

An earlier formulation of this thought by a younger Hegel quoted by Ralph Heintzman is easier to understand. "Contradiction is the root of all movement and life, and it is only in so far as it contains a Contradiction that anything moves and has impulse and activity."<sup>29</sup> This means that "contradiction is built right into the structure of life and of the universe."<sup>30</sup> This important insight of Hegel's suggests that a process of composition, decomposition and re-composition is a natural dynamic in which a "composition" or existing situation can be viewed as a type of "thesis" while its contradictions or oppositions can be seen as constituting one or more antitheses. Their reconciliation or recomposition then constitute a synthesis.

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<sup>26</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 21.

<sup>27</sup> Ralph Heintzman, *The Human Paradox: Rediscovering the Nature of the Human*, (Unpublished manuscript pending publication, quoted by kind permission of the author), 642.

<sup>28</sup> Charles Taylor, *Hegel*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 49.

<sup>29</sup> Ralph Heintzman, *The Human Paradox*, 642.

<sup>30</sup> Ralph Heintzman, *The Human Paradox*: 642.

Contradictions and oppositions are to be expected in the natural course of events but they should not be seen as automatically negative since they inherently contain the seeds of a resolution or reconciliation of the contradictions or oppositions in the form of a synthesis. This synthesis in turn becomes a further “thesis” which will prompt further oppositions or antitheses needing resolution, and so on indefinitely.<sup>31</sup> We showed above how these concepts have been meaningful in Taylor’s way of thinking. It is on that basis that we claim that it is possible to discern a dialectical structure in much of Taylor’s work but, in particular, it can be found in his *A Secular Age*, which together with *Sources of the Self*, is the most important source of support for our hypothesis. Interestingly, its five parts can be subdivided in dialectical terms, with the “thesis” being presented in Part I (The Work of Reform), the antitheses in Parts II (The Turning Point), III (The Nova Effect) and IV (Narratives of Secularization), and the synthesis in Part V (Conditions of Belief).

Against this background, we now turn to a discussion of what we describe as the “thesis” stage of Taylor’s argument. It is the opening condition that sets the stage for the antitheses that drive his theory and genealogy of the evolution of secular modernity. It is the *status quo ante* that posed the contradiction(s) which Taylor sees as having provoked strong initial reactions in European culture in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Reflecting the dialectical ascending but not linear spiral of history, the main elements of this strong reaction shaped the antithesis stage of the process. Therefore, each of Chapters 4, 5 and 6 that follow will discuss important elements of three distinct “antitheses” which reflect stages, change points or contradictions that have played a leading role in bringing about the cultural revolution of secular modernity. Their repercussions can be expected to bring about in one form or another a new synthesis. This, in turn, will

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<sup>31</sup> Charles Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 14.

generate negations and oppositions which will constitute one or more antitheses driving ongoing development, transformation and change in the ascending “zigzag” or upward tending spiral of human historical and philosophical experience.

But, those features of fundamental change in modern Western culture, amounting to what Taylor claims are changed conditions of belief, can be expected in turn, despite their “grandeur” or undoubted benefits, to produce consequences or “misère”<sup>32</sup> in the lives of people living in that culture. They may, for example, challenge the human aspiration to a life that is beyond flourishing. Such a change in the conditions of belief can be expected then to engender a new synthesis to be discussed in our concluding Chapter 7. However, according to this dialectical structure, these changes will not be the end of the road. They can be seen as ushering in the subsequent stage, the future, by forming the next “thesis.” Hegel would tell us that when it emerges, it will in turn create a new negation demanding reconciliation”<sup>33</sup> or “synthesis.” This will then advance us into a further stage in the “spiral” process of historical and personal transformation where the past is embedded in the old but the new is substantially transformed. It is in this context that Taylor will argue that we can hope for an eventual recovery of some further developed form of the transcendent horizon in Western culture.

### **3.2 Taylor’s Framing Questions**

Taylor’s immense *oeuvre* can be approached from either end of the telescope: either we begin with the hundreds of pages of detail and extract an overview, taking the risk that we will be drowned in the details, or we look for clues that help us to perceive the overview or framework from which his detailed ideas can be distilled. We claim that the latter course is

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<sup>32</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1991), 121.

<sup>33</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity*, 121.

assisted by the way that Taylor often structures his thought in his writing by posing key questions, sometimes at the beginning of a text or sometimes in the title of a book or article.

Thus, the very first sentence of the Introduction to his *A Secular Age* is a question: “What does it mean to live in a secular age?”<sup>34</sup> Similarly, a few pages later, the very first sentence of Chapter 1 reads: “the question I want to answer here is this: why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable?”<sup>35</sup> Although, ironically, the second question can be seen as answering the first, both questions helpfully point us in the direction of Taylor’s objectives in his subsequent twenty-one chapters. Taylor provides a quick preliminary answer to the second of the two questions:

the rise of modernity isn’t just a story of loss, of subtraction. The key difference we’re looking at between our two marker dates is a shift in the understanding of what I called “fullness,” between a condition in which our highest spiritual and moral aspirations point us inescapably to God, one might say, make no sense without God, to one in which they can be related to a host of different sources, and frequently are referred to sources which deny God ... [but] we can certainly go on experiencing fullness as a gift from God even in a disenchanted world, a secular society, a post-cosmic universe. In order to be able not to, we needed an alternative.<sup>36</sup>

A few paragraphs later Taylor further specifies this question with a further question,

... how (could) something other than God become the necessary objective pole of moral or spiritual aspiration, of fullness? ... the big question of what happened is, how did alternatives to the God-reference of fullness arise? What I will be concerned with is the *Entstehungsgeschichte* [origin] of exclusive humanism.<sup>37</sup>

This is the first indication that Taylor gives us of the centrality of exclusive humanism in his polemic against the negations of modernity. We claim that compared to the issue of exclusive humanism and its implications for the place of transcendence in secular modernity, the issues of

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<sup>34</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 1.

<sup>35</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 25.

<sup>36</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 26.

<sup>37</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 26.

secularity are relatively secondary in Taylor's overall thought. As conventionally defined before Taylor added a third definition, Secularity is an effect not a cause of spiritual decline.

In order to answer his questions, Taylor proposes to "tell the story" of the rise of the contrast in the conditions of belief between 1500 and 2000. "Why tell a story?" he asks. And replies that his goal is to use a historical comparative description because

... it is a crucial fact of our present spiritual predicament that it is historical; that is, our understanding of ourselves and where we stand is partly defined by our sense of having come to where we are, of having overcome a previous condition. Thus we are widely aware of living in a 'disenchanted' universe, and our use of this word bespeaks our sense that it was once enchanted ... In other words our sense of where we are is crucially defined in part by a story of how we got there ... our past is sedimented in our present.<sup>38</sup>

In short, Taylor's questions frame the main issues that his book addresses.

### 3.3 The Pre-Modern "Enchanted World"

Taylor describes the pre-1500 or pre-modern world as "enchanted." This is because in many ways that world in the West was characterized by conditions of life quite opposite to those described by Max Weber nearly five centuries later when he coined the influential term "disenchantment of the world"<sup>39</sup> (*Entzauberung der Welt*) to describe the rationalized conditions of scientific, utilitarian modernity<sup>40</sup> or "our modern condition."<sup>41</sup>

In describing the premodern Western world by its antonym, that is, as an enchanted world, Taylor emphasizes three prominent features of that world. First it was a world in which the active presence and divine purpose of God was all-pervasive not only in the natural world but

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<sup>38</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 28-29.

<sup>39</sup> Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation," in H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, eds. and trans., *Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York, 1946), 139.

<sup>40</sup> *The Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy*, s.v. "Weber, Max."

<sup>41</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 25.

in the cosmos as a whole. Second, God was a central presence in the community and society and vice-versa. Third, the Christian God offered protection against the forces of darkness including such perennial threats as crop failure. Consequently, God was the ultimate guarantee that good would triumph. “Atheism comes close to being inconceivable with these three features.”<sup>42</sup> These factors were reinforced by an additional important fact of life in pre-modern society. It shared a common understanding of time different from the sense of time in modernity– it was either “higher” or it was “profane.” The term “secular” applied initially to being conceptually in-between. Eventually, secular time became equated in modernity to profane time.

These factors shaped the social imaginary of the time and therefore characterized pre-modern society, the society known as Latin Christendom. Taylor also refers in this context to the parallel concept of “naïve understanding.” This use of the word naïve seems to imply to modern ears a type of simplistic ignorance. However, instead, he is referring to “our contemporary lived understanding; that is, the way we naïvely take things to be ... the construal we just live in without ever being aware of it as a construal or – for most of us – without ever even formulating it.”<sup>43</sup> Thus, for example, in premodern times, Taylor says that “the spirits were just unproblematically there”<sup>44</sup> in the naïve understanding of reality.

On the other hand, Taylor observes that if any aspects of this naïve understanding were to be shifted, this would constitute a change in the conditions of belief. In this way he seems to be establishing a basis for our understanding of the significance of his definition of Secularity 3 and also of the factors that brought about the shift to modernity. It will take new “naïve understandings” to bring about the radical shift to the new conditions of belief in modern life.

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<sup>42</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 25-26.

<sup>43</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 30.

<sup>44</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 30.

Thus, Taylor tells us that he is “interested in the naïve understanding, because my claim will be that a fundamental shift has occurred in naïve understanding in the move to disenchantment.”<sup>45</sup>

### **3.4 Two More Key Taylor Terms: “Porous” and “Buffered”**

Taylor recognizes that describing historical change runs directly into the problem of the natural human tendency to read or receive insight about past cultures with the categories and interpretive lenses of the present. This leads to distortion and misunderstanding. Therefore, he sets out to help the reader truly understand the radical change in the conditions of belief from the pre-Modern culture of late Christendom to the changed conditions of belief of modernity by discussing comparatively their “thoughts,” “perceptions” “beliefs or propositions.”<sup>46</sup> Taylor sees this as “very important for my purpose here. Getting a clearer view ... we get to the heart of secularity in my third sense.”<sup>47</sup> Therefore, with these goals in mind, he proceeds to reinforce the factual developments outlined above with a discussion of the mindset or commonly understood meanings for people living in the respective eras of pre-Modernity and Modernity.

He introduces two helpful descriptive words to distinguish the mindsets of both cultures, and in particular their respective loci of meaning. The pre-Modern mindset was “porous” and its locus of meaning was open and omni-directional. The porous subject makes no clear distinction in the boundary between mind and world. However, s/he is “vulnerable to a world of spirits and powers.”<sup>48</sup> “Evil spirits cannot be restricted to the external realm.”<sup>49</sup> This creates in pre-Modern humans a sense of vulnerability to benevolence or malevolence which is more than human. In other words, the enchanted or porous mindset had no boundaries, or only “fuzzy” ones.

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<sup>45</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 30.

<sup>46</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 31.

<sup>47</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 31.

<sup>48</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 27.

<sup>49</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 36.

The Modern mindset, on the other hand, is “buffered” or closed, and the locus of thoughts and meanings is “only in minds ... the clear boundary between mind and world which we mark was much hazier in (the) earlier understanding.”<sup>50</sup> A key difference between these two existential conditions is that the “porous self is vulnerable, to spirits, demons, cosmic forces. And along with this go certain fears which can grip it in certain circumstances, (whereas) the buffered self has been taken out of this kind of world of fear.”<sup>51</sup> As a Modern “buffered” self, “my ultimate purposes are those which arise within me, the crucial meanings of things are those defined in my responses to them.”<sup>52</sup>

This transformation from porousness does not occur overnight, of course. Taylor devotes most of Part I of his *A Secular Age* to describing the process of what he calls “disembedding.” This entails an evolution in which “the three dimensions of embeddedness” of the porous culture of pre-modernity gradually become disembedded. They are: (1) the individual’s identity as part of a common social order and social life in which “we primarily related to God as a society,”<sup>53</sup> (2) the individual and society being seen as embedded in a cosmic order, meaning that, for example, “a particular geographic terrain is essential to our religious life” or that “we relate to the ancestors and to ... higher time through this landscape.”<sup>54</sup> (3) The third form of embeddedness is illustrated by what people in pre-Modern societies looked for from the divinities: that is, prosperity, health, long life, fertility, and so on. Taylor notes that these can be seen as related to “a certain understanding of human flourishing.” However, they lack “the idea that we have to question radically this ordinary understanding, that we are called in some way to

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<sup>50</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 35.

<sup>51</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 38.

<sup>52</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 38.

<sup>53</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 148.

<sup>54</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 150.

go beyond it.”<sup>55</sup> In other words, in porous culture, “Divinity’s benign purposes are defined in terms of ordinary human flourishing.”

By contrast, with Christianity or Buddhism, for instance, there is a notion of our good which goes beyond human flourishing, which we may gain while failing utterly on the scales of human flourishing ... the paradox of Christianity, in relation to early religion, is that ... it seems to assert the unconditional benevolence of God towards humans ... and yet it redefines our ends so as to take us beyond flourishing. In this respect, early religion has something in common with modern exclusive humanism.<sup>56</sup>

A crucial factor in the enchanted worldview was the place of God, that is, the place of the transcendent. Taylor points out that in that social imaginary,

disbelief is hard ... because God figures in this world as the dominant spirit and...the only thing that guarantees that in this awe-inspiring and frightening field of forces, good will triumph ... this means that the prospect of rejecting God does not involve retiring to the safe redoubt of the buffered self, but rather chancing ourselves in the field of forces without him ... (or) to seek another protector (such as) ... his arch enemy, Satan.<sup>57</sup>

Consequently, disbelief or challenging God was not a healthy proposition in that pre-Modern age. When the transition to the buffered self took place within Modernity, “it removes a tremendous obstacle to unbelief. But ... it was not enough. There still had to be a positive option of exclusive humanism on offer ... it opened the way to the kind of disengagement from cosmos and God which made exclusive humanism a possibility. A possibility, but it is still not a reality. In order to see how it became that, we have to follow the actual progress of disenchantment.”<sup>58</sup> The story of that progress determined the shape of our Western secularity today, as we will see in the following chapters of this study.

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<sup>55</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 150.

<sup>56</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 151.

<sup>57</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 41.

<sup>58</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 41.

In conclusion, the foregoing factors go a long way to answering the first part of Taylor's framing question – "why was it virtually impossible in 1500 not to believe in God?" Taylor's analysis demonstrates the thesis stage of his dialectical understanding of the emergence of our secular modernity which provides the beginning of an answer to the second part of his framing question about why the situation of belief had changed by 180 degrees by the year 2000. An outward-looking porous social imaginary gradually gave way to an inward-looking buffered social imaginary. It ushered in changes in belief including, above all, that of exclusive humanism. Out of the positive and negative features of the enchanted world, therefore, one can discern the negations which set in motion responses in the period Taylor describes as "Reform" and in the subsequent phases leading to today's modern Western secular modernity. These responses can be seen as antitheses consequent to the thesis stage. They will be discussed in the next three chapters.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE ANTITHESIS PART I: A DISENCHANTED WORLD

*To see what is new in this, we have to see the analogy to earlier moral views, where being in touch with some source – God, say, or the Idea of the Good - was considered essential to full being. Only now the source we need to connect with is deep within us. This is part of the massive subjective turn of modern culture, a new form of inwardness in which we come to think of ourselves as beings with inner depths. At first, this idea that the source is within doesn't exclude our being related to God or the Idea, it can be considered our proper way to them.<sup>1</sup>*

#### 4.1 Introduction

The purpose of this Chapter is to discuss the first part of a three-part “antithesis” in the historical process that “brought about the massive shift of horizon which has been identified as the rise of modernity.”<sup>2</sup> We repeat that the reason we adopt a Hegelian-type dialectical structure in this study is because it seems a useful explanatory heuristic for simplifying understanding of a great deal of historical, philosophical, theological and sociological complexity. It helps us to recognize Taylor’s own dialectical way of thought, debate, and persuasion in his writing.

In Chapter 3 we saw how an established cultural status quo or “social imaginary” prevailed in European civilization with regard to religion and belief up to the 1500’s which permeated every dimension of society and profoundly shaped social and personal life at all levels. Appropriating the opposite of Weber’s insight, Taylor summarizes this period as an era of “enchantment” in contradistinction to the “disenchanted” and secular world that succeeded it over the subsequent roughly 500 years. We described the main features of this enchanted world for purposes of our study as “the thesis” stage of a dialectical analysis of socio-cultural,

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1991), 26.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 294.

philosophical, theological and historical change in Western European culture. However, we could see that, even before it came to an end about 1500, the seeds of negation and contradiction were already evident within that culture, calling, in terms of the Hegelian spiral of history, for countervailing reactions and corrections each of which is describable as an “antithesis.” This Chapter 4 is the first antithesis or Part I. It focusses on Taylor’s views on some of the most important of the revolutionary changes in the background framework and social imaginary of the Western world bringing about an end to pre-Modernity and the emergence of what Taylor describes as a culture of “disenchantment.”

Taylor identifies five specific “corrections” or fundamental changes<sup>3</sup> arising in late pre-Modernity each of which implies a negation in the preceding concept: (1) from enchantment to disenchantment in which the only locus of thoughts, feelings, spiritual élan is in what we call “minds” within us; (2) from a common vertical understanding of higher, secular and profane time, to a horizontal or non-common understanding of time; (3) from the old idea of cosmos in which humans are embedded, to the idea of “the neutral modern universe” which is “constituted by the possibility of introspective self-awareness; (4) from the naïve acceptance of the existence of God, and other spiritual creatures to “a sense that to affirm or deny them is to enter disputed terrain, there are no more naïve theists, just as there are no naïve atheists.” (5) The centrality of the sole Christian Church in society changed with the rise of Christian Protestantism and pluralism generally. This fundamentally altered the relationship of individuals to the sacred, especially under Calvinism and Puritanism, and their offshoots.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 29-30.

<sup>4</sup> Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1958), 89.

Beneath these changes, Taylor identifies specific changes in the social imaginary including “the development of the disciplined, instrumentally rational order of mutual benefit which has been the matrix within which the shift could take place. This shift is the heartland and origin of modern ‘secularization,’ in the third sense in which I have been using this term.”<sup>5</sup> (Taylor’s reference to the third sense refers to changed conditions of belief which will be further explained in Chapter 5.)

Within this background context, we now look further at the radical changes in the European background framework and social imaginary constituting, in Weber’s terms, a “disenchanted” modern culture. Taylor explains repeatedly that he is not proposing a linear approach to history but rather a way of getting at a jumble of developments by using a type of “zig-zag account, one full of unintended consequences.”<sup>6</sup> These consequences impacted on the ideas, beliefs and understandings that constituted the social imaginary of individuals living their lives in Western culture at any given time in this period and these impacts produced other unintended non-linear consequences.

#### **4.2 Revolution in Taylor’s Thought**

We claim that the concept of revolution is central to Taylor’s analysis of modernity. Indeed, if personal transformation can be seen as a type of personal revolution, the concept goes beyond the historical and philosophical to the personal and the transcendental. That said, Taylor does not delve into the historical sides of revolutions as much as explore the ideas associated with them and their impact on fullness of life. This may be partly the result of the fact that the central focus of his work as a philosophical anthropologist is “to understand just what makes up

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<sup>5</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 295.

<sup>6</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 95.

this new age we are living in”<sup>7</sup> and not be drawn as a non-historian into historical debates which are not central to his purpose. In this respect, in an interview with the author, Taylor said that he abandoned history as his academic field when he went to Oxford because he found that “the kind of issues being debated then in philosophy and especially Continental philosophy were more interesting and relevant to the world he was living in than the issues then being studied in history with their focus on the past.”<sup>8</sup>

This raises the question again of what Taylor sees as his main purposes. We have already identified what we claim is his guiding idea and “closely related agenda” of concerns or central purposes in our hypothesis. He elaborates on them in his 1995 book of essays, “*Philosophical Arguments*.” In it, he defines three (or four) themes that recur in his work, “issues that go on worrying me, where I feel I never have said, fully and satisfactorily, what I want to say.”<sup>9</sup> The three themes he lists are: first, an attack on the blindness of Cartesian epistemology that sidelines human subjectivity in its view of scientific reality;<sup>10</sup> second, understanding the nature of language and in particular the conflict between the instrumental and expressivist views of language;<sup>11</sup> and third, he wants to “attempt to define the political culture of modernity.”<sup>12</sup> Taylor goes on to say that “the intuition behind this is that modern society is different from those of preceding ages, not just in the novel institutions of representative democracy, the market economy ... not just in moral and political principles ... [but also] alongside these changes ... is a set of changes in the way we have come to *imagine* society.”<sup>13</sup> Then Taylor, in a familiar move when putting forward lists, adds a fourth theme: “I am struggling to find a language to

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<sup>7</sup> Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), xi.

<sup>8</sup> Charles Taylor Comment in an interview with the Author, April 15, 2015. Used by permission.

<sup>9</sup> Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments*, vii.

<sup>10</sup> Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments*, vii.

<sup>11</sup> Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments*, ix.

<sup>12</sup> Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments*, x.

<sup>13</sup> Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments*, x.

understand and mediate cultural difference.”<sup>14</sup> In all four of these areas of concern, the ideas behind or resulting from the revolutions of modernity have had a significant impact.

However, Taylor’s interest in revolution as a phenomenon goes well beyond the historical, theological and philosophical. If we consider that there are broadly three phases to a revolution: the run-up to the revolution, the revolution itself, and its fall-out, we can see this as a dialectical structure with each phase responding to and creating contradictions including of course in social and personal impacts. Taylor expresses a pronounced insight into after-revolution impacts. Perhaps it reflects his personal experience in Quebec following the revolutionary years in that province especially between 1960 and 1995. We can see evidence for Taylor thinking this way in an important but somewhat opaque extract from his 1996 Marianist Award Lecture where he says:

We live in something analogous to a post-revolutionary climate. Revolutions generate the sense that they have won a great victory and identify the adversary in the previous regime. A post-revolutionary climate is extremely sensitive to anything that smacks of the *ancien régime* and sees backsliding even in relatively innocent concessions to generalized human preferences. Thus Puritans saw the return of popery in any rituals, and Bolsheviks compulsively address people as Comrade, proscribing the ordinary appellation ‘Mister’ and ‘Miss.’ I would argue that a milder but very pervasive version of this kind of climate is widespread in our culture. To speak of aiming beyond life is to appear to undermine the supreme concern with life of our humanitarian, ‘civilized’ world. It is to try to reverse the revolution and bring back the bad old order of priorities, in which life and happiness could be sacrificed on the altars of renunciation ... My claim is that this climate, often unaccompanied by any formulated awareness of the underlying reasons, pervades our culture ... the thesis I am presenting here is that by virtue of its post-revolutionary climate that Western modernity is very inhospitable to the transcendent.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments*, xi.

<sup>15</sup> Charles Taylor, “A Catholic Modernity?” in James L. Heft, ed., *A Catholic Modernity? Charles Taylor’s Marianist Award Lecture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 24. Note: It is speculative but this remarkable, almost angry, comment can perhaps be partly explained by the fact that it occurred in the immediate aftermath of the 1995 Quebec Referendum on possible separation of Quebec from Canada.

In short, Taylor's whole life has been lived in a time of what amount to different phases of almost continuous revolutions. Many of them have affected the emergence of Western secularity and challenged the place of the transcendent in the lived lives of secular modern people. These reasons are why we claim that understanding Taylor's views on the place of the transcendent in secular modernity requires understanding the wide-ranging effects, including religious and spiritual effects, of the major revolutions of modernity.

### **4.3 Some of the Revolutions of Early Modernity**

As noted above, Taylor's framing question for his study of secular modernity was "why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy but even inescapable?"<sup>16</sup> Obviously, a broad answer to Taylor's broad question would arguably be that the history of the five hundred year period since about 1500 has been chequered with a number of fundamental revolutions of the kind that Thomas Kuhn, a scientist and historian of science, described as bringing about "paradigm" changes or shifts. His view was that contrary to the "logical empiricist view of the scientific theory of change which (saw such changes) as smooth and cumulative ... scientific change occurs by 'revolutions' in which an older paradigm is overthrown and is replaced by a framework incompatible or even incommensurate with it."<sup>17</sup> Consequently, we suggest that one way to view the paradigm shift of modernity, and the emergence of secularity as one of its defining features, is to see it as partly the result of a series of major "revolutions" with not only political, social and economic, but cultural, technological, philosophical and theological impacts.

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<sup>16</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 25.

<sup>17</sup> *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, Robert Audi, ed., c .v. "paradigm."

Because of its lasting effects, any assessment of the revolutions of modernity needs to begin in the 15<sup>th</sup> century with the Gutenberg Revolution. The invention and development of the mechanized printing press in the 1440's made printing articles and books comparatively fast, accessible and cheap. It was the beginning of the "mass media." It was arguably the single most significant factor in ending the era of pre-modernity, and it has clearly played a continuing role in all the subsequent revolutions reshaping modernity.

Beyond that seismic development, we suggest that key revolutions shaping the culture of Western secular modernity, and in particular the place of belief and unbelief, can be broadly divided into two periods. First, there were the revolutions between 1500 and the end of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Period in 1815. Second, there were the revolutions between 1815 and today. In the first category there was the Protestant Reformation beginning with Luther in 1517 and accentuated by Calvin in the 1530's and onwards. While reshaping the social imaginary of many national cultures in the West, it deeply divided Christianity, and did so much more deeply and violently than the previous bifurcation of Christendom by the Great Schism of 1054 between the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches.<sup>18</sup> Other than the serious doctrinal issue of the *filioque*, the Great Schism divided the church mainly geographically (East and West) and culturally (Slovak/Greek and Latin). However, the Protestant Reformation and Catholic Counter Reformation divided the institutional or ecclesial structure and the theological content of much traditional Christian belief and practice within Western Europe. The resulting violence was far deeper and bloodier after 1617 than after 1054.

This came principally in the form of the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) which devastated a large proportion of the population of Western Europe before bringing about the Peace of

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<sup>18</sup> Diarmid MacCulloch, *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* (London: Viking Penguin, 2010), 374.

Westphalia of 1648. This established the concept of the early modern state in which religious power was defined by the geographically-defined state and by the religious persuasion of its ruler. His or her religious affiliation defined the religion of all individual subjects within the state. This mixing of politics with religion and imposition of church affiliation in effect by the state was a crucial step in the later development of the modern secular state and the politicization of the churches.

One important implication of these developments for our study is that Taylor's own background culture and personal social imaginary, as well as the cultural divisions in the country of his birth, were fundamentally shaped by both sides of the divide coming out of 1517 and its aftermath. As it affects our study, it is of particular relevance that the understanding of how an individual achieves access to and experience of the transcendent was a central issue and cause of violent disagreement between the churches involved in the Reformation disputes. We suggest that that divergence on such a sensitive theological point was carried through into the religious cultures of modern Canada, including into Taylor's personal views about the place of the transcendent in secular modern culture.

Taylor pays a great deal of attention in his work to the confluence of the sub-revolutions instigated by the Reformation. He refers to the whole phenomenon as "Reform" and dedicates the first five chapters and more than 200 pages of his *A Secular Age* under the title of *The Work of Reform* to analyzing its "zig-zag" path and profound consequences for faith and secular modern culture. He sums up the transition from pre-modernity to modernity by referring to the disappearance of the three dimensions of the presence of God – God in nature, God "everywhere" in society, and God in the "enchanted world" of the individual.

The key difference we're looking at is a shift in the understanding of what I called "fullness," between a condition in which our highest spiritual and moral aspirations point us inescapably to God, one might say, make no sense without God, to one in which they can be related to a host of sources, and frequently are referred to sources which deny God ... [but] we can certainly go on experiencing fullness as a gift from God, even in a disenchanted world, a secular society, and a post-cosmic universe. In order to be able not to, we need an alternative ... the big question of what happened is, how did alternatives to the God-reference to fullness arise?<sup>19</sup>

In short, he wants to explain the origins of "exclusive humanism" and begins by looking at the revolutionary currents unleashed by the Reformation. These, he believes, contributed to the emergence of exclusive humanism as well as other beliefs and disbeliefs to be discussed in Chapter 6. They also were the foundation for Taylor's Secularity 3 – the changed conditions of belief that he maintains underlie secular modernity. By revolutionizing the self-identity from porous to buffered, he observes that

the new buffered identity, with its insistence on devotion and discipline, increased the distance, the disidentification, even the hostility to the older forms of collective ritual and belonging, while the drive to reform came to envisage their abolition. Both in their sense of self, and in their project for society, the disciplined élites moved towards a conception of the social world as constituted by individuals.<sup>20</sup>

This brings us to another major epochal revolution of the early modern period. This was the Cartesian epistemological revolution. It enthroned reason and the individual and eventually science and technology as the arbiters of knowledge, challenging and undermining doctrines and insights based on the inherited structure of Platonic and Aristotelian as well as Christian epistemology and values. Taylor inveighs vehemently against the very short-sighted mindset fostered by this revolution throughout his work. It is the primary polemic he mentions in his tightly related agenda discussed in the Introduction and in our hypothesis. It is also the first of the four items he listed in his more recent comments about his main themes or concerns, as noted

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<sup>19</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 156.

<sup>20</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 156.

at the outset of this chapter. In a nutshell – *cogito ergo sum* – “I think therefore I am,” becomes radically opposed to the Christian concept of human identity willed by and under God. When the scientific method evolves to the point of excluding the subjective experience, including of the transcendent, from human understanding, Taylor believes very strongly that the scientific method can only give a distorted and misleading picture of what it means to be human.

A third epochal revolution in this early modern period is the Newtonian Revolution. “The term Newtonian ... denoted the view of nature as a universal system of mathematical reason and order divinely created and administered. The metaphor of a ‘universal machine’ was frequently applied. The view is central to the 18<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment.”<sup>21</sup> The Enlightenment was a “current in the cultural and intellectual history of Europe that gradually gained influence from the 1680’s to the 1780’s, characterized by belief in progress expected to be achieved by a self-reliant use of reason, and by rejection of traditionalism, obscurantism and authoritarianism.”<sup>22</sup>

Newton’s insight upended the longstanding Platonic and Christian social imaginary of the cosmos and everyone’s place in the hierarchy leading to and from God in a Chain of Being. In many ways this single concept or social imaginary had literally provided the background framework for Medieval or pre-modern society. The effect of its loss particularly among an increasingly urban population now able to read because of the earlier Gutenberg Revolution of the printing press, is incalculable. Moreover, the scientific view that emerges becomes for some a religion or belief system of its own.

One final major revolution in this itinerary towards Taylor’s understanding of modernity is of importance. It was the revolution in ideas arriving at a new and expressivist love for nature.

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<sup>21</sup> Robert Audi, *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, Robert Audi, ed., s.v., “Newtonian.”

<sup>22</sup> *The Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy*, Thomas Mautner, ed. s.v. “Enlightenment.”

This was a parallel but opposite set of ideas to Descartes' widely influential epistemology of the primacy of reason. Indeed, it was partly a reaction against that idea.

Taylor traces the evolution of new ideas about the place of nature in culture, linking them at each stage with their moral sources. He takes us through a complex, non-linear, historical causation. It stems from or rather mutates in a circular fashion in which new philosophical ideas interact with cultural values. Consequently, there is a shift from Deism's Providential approach to nature. It opened a door for the first time to natural feelings and sentiment within a strict disciplinary context. Taylor notes in particular the emergence of the idea of "the companionate marriage," "the demand for privacy," as well as "sentiments of love, concern, and affection for one's spouse ... [and] the affection of parents for children."<sup>23</sup>

Then followed the Enlightenment's reason-based approach to nature in which there is no place for the transcendent. From this, there emerged a "new philosophy of nature"<sup>24</sup> which Taylor describes as follows: "If your access to nature is through an inner voice or impulse, then we can only fully know this nature through articulating what we find within us ... its realization in each of us is a form of expression ... or what I call 'expressivism.'" This focus on nature as a spiritual source has become deeply entrenched in modern culture. It offers a "secularized variant of agapē implicit in reason."<sup>25</sup>

Thus, the view of nature arrived in the late 1700s, especially in Britain with Shaftsbury and with the German Romantics, as a "relation predicated on the modern identity."<sup>26</sup> It emphasized expressivism. "Nature that can move us and awaken our feelings is no longer tied to

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<sup>23</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 291.

<sup>24</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 174.

<sup>25</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 367.

<sup>26</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 300.

us by a notion of substantive reason ... rather we are defined by purposes and capacities which we discover within ourselves. What nature can now do is awaken these.”<sup>27</sup>

In this way, Taylor concludes that the new identity of disengaged reason wins out against the pre-modern “ontic logos.” However, he notes that it takes time for language to catch up with changed cultural reality. The new order of nature had “to take shape out of the resonances of the world within us. It is a ‘subtler language.’”<sup>28</sup> In this way Taylor introduces us to concepts that we will see again in the final chapter of *A Secular Age* and in the “Synthesis” Chapter 7 below.

However, it is important also to note in the context of this study’s hypothesis that Taylor comments in conclusion that

the relationship of this [discussion] to modern secularism can seem obvious ... people begin to be interested in nature, in the life around them, ‘for their own sakes,’ and not just in reference to God. Where before they had one goal in portraying or thinking about nature or human life, now they have two. They have taken the first step on a journey which leads to us ... [while] reference to the divine atrophies. Until finally, they are modern exclusive humanists, or at least secularists.<sup>29</sup>

It follows that, the revolutions of the 16<sup>th</sup> through 18<sup>th</sup> centuries discussed above all had important interacting and variable influences. In one way or another they paved the way to radical change in the social imaginaries and therefore beliefs of people in what Taylor calls the Western world. They also paved the way to the American Revolution and, much more grotesquely, to the French Revolution at the end of the 1700’s. They represented the culmination of many of the new ideas and social imaginaries that characterized the disenchantment of early modernity. However, the brutal, anticlerical and secular excesses especially of the latter

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<sup>27</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 301.

<sup>28</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 302.

<sup>29</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 92.

revolution shocked many and these negations among others brought about many counteracting reactions in the aftermath.

#### 4.4 The Revolutions of Late Modernity

The point of discussing the revolutions of early modernity has been to identify what Taylor regards as some of the leading forces behind “the massive shift of horizon which has been identified as the rise of modernity.”<sup>30</sup> Taylor points out that the shift up to this point has had the particular effect of reducing the previously dominant place of the transcendent in the social imaginary of early Modernity, though it far from extinguished it.

We turn now to the second category of revolutions in late modernity that Taylor sees as having had a major impact on the social imaginary of modern society and the emerging conditions of secular modern belief and unbelief. As Taylor lays out his argument about changed conditions of belief in both *Sources of the Self*, and later in *A Secular Age*, he touches on some of the many history-changing revolutions over the past two hundred and more years which can be seen as further elements or “antitheses” of the late modern era. That is, many of them have been sparked directly or indirectly, partly or wholly, by the breakdown of the “thesis” of the enchanted era before the 1500s. In this section of the chapter, however, we only have space for a cursory overview of the major historical developments in late modernity because, instead of historical *events*, we want to adopt Taylor’s approach of emphasizing the emergence in this period of revolutionary new *ideas* about belief and unbelief. They have further placed in question the fundamental place of the transcendent, in secular modern society, including whether it has any place at all. According to Taylor, they pose the contradictions and oppositions and changed

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<sup>30</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 294.

conditions of belief that constitute “our present predicament”<sup>31</sup> in secular modernity which will be discussed below.

The most destabilizing political events in the early part of this period were arguably the defeat of Napoleon and France at Waterloo in 1815, the Revolutions of 1848, the American Civil War, the rise of Prussia leading to war and partition of Denmark, and the eventual unification of Germany. These led to the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, the First World War of 1914-18, the Russian Revolution of 1917, the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the emergence of the United States as a global power, the rise of Hitler in the 1930s, the Second World War of 1939-45, the Holocaust, the first use of nuclear weapons in the war with Japan, and the outbreak of the Cold War with the forced formation of the Soviet Union.

There were similarly momentous economic and social developments in this period of late modernity including the Irish Famine, rapid industrialization and urbanization, mass migration from Europe, world-wide colonialism, occasional global economic recessions and food shortages culminating in the Great Depression of the “dirty thirties,” an increasing role of women in the workforce with important implications for traditional social and family life, the expansion of educational opportunity, and the fading away of the class system in the West.

Of course, mention also needs to be made of the quantum increase in the amount of scientific, technological and agricultural change in this period affecting every aspect of life, especially in the developed countries of the West. Closely related have been the huge changes in the fields of communications and transport.

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<sup>31</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 315, *The Malaise of Modernity*, 100, and *A Secular Age*, 772.

An important consequence of all these changes has been an increased life expectancy for developed countries. Coupled with birth control technology, this has paradoxically produced both shrinking and aging populations in the West. Therefore, Western countries have become dependent on inward migration from developing countries where population numbers are generally high and increasing. Importantly, this feature of modernity has significant implications for religious adherence and secularity in developed countries because of increasing religious and ethnic pluralism as illustrated by Taylor's work on the Quebec Commission of Inquiry on Reasonable Accommodation mentioned above.

Taylor comments that these remarkable developments have been so far-reaching and variable in their repercussions that perhaps we need to recognize that there is, not one, but "multiple modernities."<sup>32</sup> Consequently, he warns us not to adopt a one-size-fits-all analysis in our understanding of "what is happening here." Moreover, far-reaching as these changes are in shaping modernity, Taylor suggests that the most important driver of change in this period in Western secular modernity, as it relates to conditions of belief, has been an extended ongoing battle of ideas going back to the French Revolution and before. He says "we live still in the aftermath of modernism; indeed we are still in the aftermath of almost everything I have been talking about in these pages, of the Enlightenment, of Romanticism, of the affirmation of ordinary life. But in particular, modernism shapes our cultural world. Much of what we live today consists of reactions to it."<sup>33</sup>

In the context of this study, the important thing to note in the foregoing overview is that the emerging and evolving social imaginary of secular modernity has not only been influenced

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<sup>32</sup> Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 195.

<sup>33</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 482.

and even shaped by these major political, social and economic developments, but that it has actually played a role in bringing them about in the first place. A social imaginary is a source of ideas. As Taylor's mentor, Isaiah Berlin put it, there is "power in ideas ... I do not mean that all historical movements or conflicts between human beings are reducible to movements or conflicts of ideas or spiritual forces, but I do mean that to understand such movements or conflicts is above all to understand the ideas or attitudes to life involved in them."<sup>34</sup>

This perspective greatly influenced Taylor in his early years studying at Oxford, and it explains much of Taylor's philosophical anthropological approach in his work today. This is reflected elegantly in comments Taylor made in a personal tribute to Berlin on his death, with whom he had many disagreements intellectually and especially spiritually, but of whom he was most fond: "Isaiah in a certain way left philosophy. He emigrated. That is, he called what he then went on to do something else, perhaps the history of ideas."<sup>35</sup>

Among the most important ideas bitterly debated in late modernity, were utilitarianism, mercantilism and protectionism, capitalism and socialism. They were concerned with economic efficiency and social equity but also with the nature of history, whether or not it is deterministic in terms of Marxist theory. Malthus, John Stuart Mill, and John Maynard Keynes were among the most important of the thinkers in these areas during this period.

Another important family of ideas in this period was scientific and technological. Among them, none was more far-reaching and controversial in terms of the traditional social imaginary than the discoveries of the biologist Charles Darwin. He reported them in his 1859 book *On The*

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<sup>34</sup> Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," an essay in *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays*, Henry Hardy and Roger Hausheer, eds. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997), 193.

<sup>35</sup> Charles Taylor "Tribute by Charles Taylor" to Isaiah Berlin, 2000, Downloaded from The Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library at [digital.humanities.ox.ac.uk/project/isaiah-berlin-virtual-library](http://digital.humanities.ox.ac.uk/project/isaiah-berlin-virtual-library).

*Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* which argued for an evolutionary, as opposed to “design,” basis of life.<sup>36</sup> This controverted Scripture and other key tenets of the Abrahamic faiths including Christian belief and tradition. It was seen by some as proof of the non-existence of God and it contributed powerfully to what Taylor describes as the modern belief position of “exclusive humanism.” Taylor is never too precise about its meaning, but he seems to see the term “exclusive” as implying that it excludes God and the transcendent horizon. As such it is distinguished from Christian humanism which does not. This position has variants, but in our day it could arguably be most associated with people such as the scientist Richard Dawkins. However, the term does not apply to certain post-Second World War French “Existentialists,” notably Jean-Paul Sartre,<sup>37</sup> whose influential philosophy came into vogue in the 1940’s but is associated with the “anti-humanists” like Nietzsche.

Albert Camus, on the other hand, could be considered an exclusive humanist. He is often thought to be an Existentialist, though he did not agree that his philosophy fit that mold. Be that as it may, Taylor respects Camus and repeatedly refers to him in his work (eleven times in *A Secular Age*). His respect derives both from the writer’s artistry and because of the way he expresses the human condition in his novels, such as *The Plague*,<sup>38</sup> demonstrating the underlying human orientation, instinct or need, even against personal convenience or danger, to know and serve “the good.”<sup>39</sup> He was much closer, as far as one can see, to being in what Taylor describes as the “cross-pressured”<sup>40</sup> position which involves being caught between an inherent instinct or recognized need for the sacred as a human being, but deterred through intellectual or

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<sup>36</sup> Thomas Mautner, Editor, *The Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy*, 120.

<sup>37</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism & Humanism*, trans. Philip Mairet (London: Methuen, 1973), s.v. “Darwinism.”

<sup>38</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular age*, 699.

<sup>39</sup> Albert Camus, *The Plague*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (London: Penguin Books, 1960).

<sup>40</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 600.

ideological indecision. (Indeed, Camus was even rumoured to have come close to converting to Christianity days before his death in a car accident in Provence.) In this regard, Taylor says,

in the cross-pressured fields, what is the debate ultimately about? One crucial choice which the immanent frame offers us is whether or not to believe in some transcendent sources or power; for many people in our Western culture, the choice is whether to believe in God. For many it may not seem like a choice, because it has been foreclosed by their milieu, or their affinities, or their deep moral orientations, but the culture of immanence itself leaves the choice open.<sup>41</sup>

In short, being in the cross-pressured position implies uncertainty about which way to go in the debate between belief and unbelief, while not setting aside the underlying question of the sources of fullness. “It is a debate about what real fullness consists in.”<sup>42</sup>

Before leaving this brief contact with Existentialism, we should note that among the most influential philosophers about belief and unbelief of late modernity was Søren Kierkegaard. He is often credited with being the originator of that field of thought and belief. However, although he was writing in the 1840s well before people like Nietzsche in the 1880s, he was unknown outside his native Denmark until after his death. Although his and Nietzsche’s thought and writing style have much in common, there is no evidence that Nietzsche had heard of him or read his anguished writing before writing his own books prior to succumbing to dementia in 1890. However, ultimately Kierkegaard became and remains an extremely influential and still original Christian thinker,<sup>43</sup> though he was indeed a somewhat unorthodox Lutheran during his lifetime. Strangely, Taylor refers to him several times in *Sources of the Self* but not at all in *A Secular Age*. This may be because Kierkegaard was a man of deep and almost mystical faith whose complex ideas could mainly be meaningful to a person of deep faith while Taylor had a large

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<sup>41</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 600.

<sup>42</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 600.

<sup>43</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968).

number of much less complicated examples he could refer to in his argument. Another way of putting that point is to surmise that Taylor's writing is not directed primarily at the person of existing faith but rather, as a teacher of "all nations," to the large audience of people who have not yet crossed the bridge of faith.

Having touched on the ideas of the two positions in the modern battle of belief and unbelief of greatest concern to Taylor— that is atheistic exclusive humanism and faith, or unbelief and belief, – there remain two further positions whose perspectives will be more fully described in Chapter 6. Those are, first, the anti-theism of anti-humanists as represented by Friedrich Nietzsche, and such "anti-humanists" as thinkers like Foucault and Derrida. Secondly, Taylor is critical of theists or believers who are firmly cemented to past traditions and resistant to the movement of contemporary culture. While leaving them until later, we should note that not long after Darwin's bombshell biological insights were published questioning the God of "design" there came the 1882 publication of Nietzsche's *The Gay Science* or *The Joyous Science* in which he first declares aphoristically that "God is dead."<sup>44</sup> At first this declaration fell flat but its importance grew to have major direct and indirect impacts in the ongoing fragmentation of belief in the increasingly "disenchanted" spiritual culture of western secular modernity. Nietzsche plays a very significant role in Taylor's thinking. His philosophy can be seen as in many respects the polar opposite to Taylor's, but, even so, Taylor treats it with respect and concern as we will see below.

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<sup>44</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 108, 181.

## 4.5 Conclusion

This chapter has traced Taylor's analysis of the main developments and ideas that brought about the massive shift in secular modern culture summarized by his question: how was it that in 1500 it was impossible not to think of God, while in 2000 it is problematic to do so? Following a Hegelian type dialectical structure, the culture of the former or pre-Modern "enchanted world" of "Christendom" was described for purposes of this study as the "thesis." This chapter has discussed the first part of a three part exposition of elements of the "antithesis" or reactions against the conditions of belief in that "enchanted" s period of pre-modernity. In it, we have outlined Taylor's identification of interacting developments and ideas emerging over the last half millennium that he recognizes as having brought about a fundamental change in the social imaginary in secular modern culture. This in turn has been radically shifting the conditions of belief of people living their lives in this modern culture. Most serious of all, it has introduced the dilemma or "predicament" in which individuals must now choose among an array of belief and unbelief options where the underlying issue is a matter of the place of the transcendent in our lives and society. He does not say it, but Taylor implies that this choice in Kierkegaard's terms should be approached by each free and responsible individual in "fear and trembling."<sup>45</sup> Our next chapter will look at secularity or secularization as a further antithesis, or what we will call Antithesis II. The roots of secularity, one of the main characteristics of modernity can be traced back to contradictions or oppositions in the conditions of pre-modernity.

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<sup>45</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, Introduction and Translation by Walter Lowrie, *Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968).

## CHAPTER 5

### THE ANTITHESIS PART II: SECULARITY AND SECULARIZATION

*‘Secularization’ ... this is a term which is much used to describe modern society; and it is sometimes even offered as a partial explanation for features of this society. But it is more a locus of questions than a source of explanations. It describes a process which is undeniable: the regression of belief in God, and even more, the decline in the practice of religion, to the point where from being central to the whole of life of Western societies, public and private, this has become sub-cultural, one of many private forms of involvement which some people indulge in.<sup>1</sup>*

#### 5.1 Introduction

To situate where the argument of this study has brought us, in Chapter 3, we outlined conditions of belief in what Taylor describes as the “enchanted world” of about the year 1500. “The enchanted world in this sense is the world of spirits, demons, and moral forces which our ancestors lived in [wherein] atheism comes close to being inconceivable.”<sup>2</sup> We labelled this condition of belief, for purposes of our dialectically structured presentation, the “thesis.” Chapter 4 then discussed major forces of change which Taylor identifies that emerged in early modernity radically shifting the social imaginary and cultural and religious context from that prevailing in the pre-modern Western world. Drawing on Max Weber’s insight, this was a transformation from an “enchanted world” to a “disenchanted world”. We suggested that, in dialectical terms, these changes were responses to negations or contradictions in the prior conditions of belief and can be described therefore as “antitheses.” An antithesis in this respect entails reactions or correctives catalyzed by negations or perceived shortcomings in a prevailing background framework or social imaginary that can be described as a thesis.

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 309.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 23-26.

Hence, Chapter 4 was the first of three chapters each discussing a major dimension or antithesis that shaped the social imaginary and conditions of belief in the “disenchanted” modern world. The focus of Chapter 4 was on the evolution from the enchanted world to the conditions of belief of the “disenchanted world.” This, in Taylor’s analysis, reflected Hegel’s “zig-zag” notion of dialectical historical development. Consequently, the first antithesis outlined in Chapter 4 followed a non-linear trajectory of cultural change that brought about “a large-scale transformation in common assumptions and sensibility in England, America, and (for some facets) France,”<sup>3</sup> bringing about what Taylor describes as “a new moral culture” and “a fractured horizon”<sup>4</sup> compared to the highly unified horizon of belief in pre-Modern Western Europe. This transformed context, which Taylor labels a “disenchanted world,” is characterized, most importantly, by the fact that there were seen to be “alternative possible reference points for fullness” and there evolved a “new sense of the self and its place in the cosmos, not open and porous and vulnerable to a world of spirits and powers, but what I want to call ‘buffered.’”<sup>5</sup>

This chapter extends the argument to a further or second dimension of the antithesis. Moving from the forces behind or *causes of* the revolution and transformation in the social imaginary of modernity to one of a disenchanted world, we will now look at *their effects*. That is, on the conditions of belief of people living in the transformed background framework and social imaginary of early secular modern culture. In particular, we will discuss the emergence of one of its primary manifestations – the emergence of “secularity” or “secularization.” Taylor sees secularity as a defining characteristic of modernity.

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<sup>3</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 305.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 305.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 27.

As a major strand of modern culture, secularity reflects a radically reshaped social imaginary. In Taylor's view, unless properly understood and responded to, it poses a serious threat to our being able to live lives of fullness in our age, that is, to live lives within a transcendent horizon. Therefore, this chapter will trace various dimensions of the threats and opportunities, or as Pascal poses it, the "grandeur" and the "misère," of the secularization phenomenon of modernity.<sup>6</sup>

## 5.2 Secularity

As described in the epigraph to this chapter, reflecting right from the start a skeptical view of the matter, Taylor describes "'secularization' ... [as] more a locus of questions than a source of explanations."<sup>7</sup> Secularity and the questions it raises for our study will be the focus of this chapter. Indeed, in order to provide a succinct reading of a very large and contested topic, we will present this "antithesis" by addressing a number of relevant questions. Specifically, they are, (1) Why is secularization considered an "antithesis" in this study? (2) What does "secularization" actually mean? (3) What are Taylor's own definitions of secularity? (4) What is his position on the long-running debates over "the secularity thesis"? (5) How does Taylor view the place of "fullness" in conditions of secularity? (5) Who are leading voices in contemporary discussions of secularity?

## 5.3 Question 1: Why Is Secularity or Secularization an "Antithesis"?

If the omni-present awareness of sacred reality in the social imaginary of the "enchanted world" is taken to be the "thesis" position, then we can readily see why the radical shift to the transformed social imaginary of people living in the secular "disenchanted world" can be seen as

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<sup>6</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1991), 120-121.

<sup>7</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 309.

an “antithesis”. The conditions of belief had been radically changed. Now the sacred is gradually suppressed or segregated in the public sphere and marginalized in the daily lives of people. In place of a sense of community of shared relationships and responsibilities, the social imaginary of individuals in modernity became individualistic and autonomous. This shift was both facilitated by secularity and partly the source of it – it is an iterative relationship between conditions of belief in pre-Modernity and conditions of belief in Modernity. This all seems self-evident and it explains why we view the emergence of secularity as a dimension of the antithesis of the negations of the enchanted world. However, that is not to say that secularization is the cause of that change according to Taylor. That would be a misconception. “To invoke secularization here [as a cause of the transformation] is just to redescribe the problem, not to offer an answer.”<sup>8</sup>

To identify the real causative factor of the revolution, according to Taylor, one has to delve more deeply. “‘Moral sources’ has been my term of art for constitutive goods insofar as we turn to them in whatever way is appropriate to them – through contemplation, or invocation, or prayer, or whatever – for moral empowerment.”<sup>9</sup> “An age of belief is one in which all credible moral sources involve God.”<sup>10</sup> For this reason, in his view, the transformation in the social imaginary in early Modernity was not the result of secularity, but rather the result of a change in perception of moral sources. “The crucial change ... is that people no longer feel ... that the spiritual dimension of their lives was incomprehensible if one supposed there was no God.”<sup>11</sup> Secularization facilitated this change but was not the cause, nor the driver, of what some see as an inevitable change. If anything, in Taylor’s view, it was a *consequence* of that change.

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<sup>8</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 309.

<sup>9</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 310.

<sup>10</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 311.

<sup>11</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 310.

This deeper explanation, broadly allied to, if not the cause of the emergence of secularity, he describes as the emergence of “exclusive humanism.” We claim that it is Taylor’s principal polemical “bete noir” or target in his philosophical anthropological “agenda.” He sees it as the basis for the secularization of modernity and the chief threat to fullness of lives in secular modernity. Secularization in Taylor’s view is not the enemy of fullness of life, exclusive humanism is.

This discussion is significant in the definitional context because what Taylor seems to be doing with this clarification in his thinking is introducing yet another definition of secularity – that is, that secularization is the result of a changed sense of moral sources. However, either as a consequence or as a cause of modernity, secularity and changed perceptions of moral sources can in our view both be seen as parts of the response to the thesis of enchanted pre-Modernity.

#### **5.4 Question 2: Defining Secularity/Secularization**

In this light, Taylor’s problem since the 1960’s was Plato’s problem<sup>12</sup> almost 2500 years earlier - how to understand what was happening in “the present age”<sup>13</sup> and to discern its implications for human “fullness” or “the transcendent horizon” in individual lives in contemporary culture. A dominant answer to that question has been that secularity is a defining characteristic of what is happening in modernity and it is irrevocable. Others vigorously dispute both these contentions. In both cases the essence of the problem is that the opposing views do not share the same understanding of what secularity actually means. That leaves us the questions of what defines secularity and whether or not we really live in “a secular age.”

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<sup>12</sup> Dave Robinson and Judy Groves, *Introducing Plato*, (London: Faber&Faber, 2000), 3. Note: The authors state that “Plato said that ‘all philosophers must soar with unwearied passion until they grasp the true nature of things as they really are.’” This sounds like Taylor’s question noted above: “what the hell is going on here?”

<sup>13</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *The Present Age* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1962), 33.

Therefore, the starting point in discussing the meaning and implications of the secular in our era is definitional. But this is by no means an easy matter because the key terms are ancient in origin, remarkably ambiguous and highly disputed. This is made worse because the definitions can sometimes be folded into rhetorical strategies to support desired polemical objectives. Hence, definitions, and especially Taylor's definitions, are key to understanding "our present situation" from Taylor's point of view, and his thinking about secular modernity and the place of the transcendent in it.

The word "*secular*" itself has a long history, originating from the Latin but with a considerably older origin conceptually. The term has four meanings reported in the Concise Oxford Dictionary:<sup>14</sup> 1) occurring once in or lasting for an age or a century; (2) lasting or going on for ages; (3) concerned with the affairs of this world, not sacred or monastic or ecclesiastical; and (4) skeptical of religious truth or opposed to religious education, etc. Even though the four meanings are divergent, they are helpful because they reflect the historical evolution in the meaning of the word.

They pose a problem for this study, however, because none of them corresponds exactly with contemporary Canadian usage. The word's vernacular meaning is somewhat more accurately reflected in the American Merriam-Webster Dictionary which defines "secular" simply as "not spiritual: of or relating to the physical world and not the spiritual world: not religious."<sup>15</sup> But even though this represents perhaps a commonly accepted definition, it may miss more than it reveals.

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<sup>14</sup> *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*, 7<sup>th</sup> Ed., s.v. "Secular."

<sup>15</sup> *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*. s.v. "Secular," November 16, 2015 @1012 EDT, [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/secular](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/secular)

Moreover, as we shall see, the discussion is further complicated by the fact that these dictionary definitions do not fully square with the most important of the three meanings Taylor gives to the word for the purpose of discussing the nature of secular modernity. In suggesting this, we should perhaps keep in the back of our minds that in definitional debates, there is a rhetorical principle, with which Taylor is obviously well acquainted, that to control the conclusions in an argument, it is important to attempt to control the premises. Definitions are a means of establishing premises that help determine the conclusions of an argument.<sup>16</sup>

Derivative words also have importance in the current debates about the secular, though they also lack totally clear or uncontested definitions. Secularity is a derivative noun according to the Oxford Concise Dictionary covering senses (3) and (4) of the definition of “secular” above. That is, it stands for “concerned with the affairs of the world, not sacred,” or “sceptical of religious truth or opposed to religious education, etc.”<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, the word Secularism has an ideological connotation and picks up the Oxford Dictionary sense of a concern that the affairs of the world, or what some call the public square or sphere, need to be kept separated from the sacred or ecclesiastical spheres. Secularization has become a term used to denote the process leading to decline of religion and religious values and practices within a culture. However, it can also denote in the modern world a policy, or constitutional or legal provision intended to remove the sacred or the church from the public or institutional arena. It does not necessarily refer to decline even if its effect may contribute to declining presence.<sup>18</sup>

Let us look at other definitions before coming back to Taylor’s own definitions.

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<sup>16</sup> *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, s.v. “Argument.”

<sup>17</sup> *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. s.v. “Secular.”

<sup>18</sup> Note; It is a remarkable but little known fact that the United States of America, a theoretically secular polity, makes a reference on the back of its one dollar bill in Latin based on a Greek writer to the concept of the secular as a period of higher time.

### 5.4.1 John Bowden: Definitions

John Bowden was the editor of the admirable *Novalis 2005* scholarly reference volume titled *Christianity: The Complete Guide* and he was the author of its article on “secularization.”<sup>19</sup> He offers some refreshingly clear background to the concept and definitions of the term. He points out that secularization is not a new or late-Modern word or concept. Henry VIII of Britain and the French “philosophes” of the Radical Enlightenment, for example, all supported secularization of Church assets. Hence, in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, the word was used to represent “the transfer of assets and institutions from religious control to the *saeculum*, the worldly authorities.”<sup>20</sup> Later, in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the word took on the meaning of “giving a secular or non-sacred character” to art, morals, and education.”<sup>21</sup> Thereafter it became a “blanket term to describe what was going on in Western society, particularly the falling membership of religious bodies and declining religious practices.”<sup>22</sup>

### 5.4.2 French-English Differences of Meaning

As a final important definitional point, it is important in the Canadian and international contexts, and especially given Taylor’s bilingual and bicultural perspectives, to note that the word secular in French is often rendered as “laïque” or “laïc” which stems from Greek root and subsequently ecclesiastical Latin in which *laicus* means “common to the people” and “non-clerical.”<sup>23</sup> This is a word full of political resonance in Quebec stemming from the anti-clerical dimension of French Revolutionary ideas. It reflects the contemporary heated debate in Quebec politics over what constitutes “reasonable accommodation” of religious symbols in Quebec

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<sup>19</sup> *Christianity: The Complete Guide*, John Bowden, ed., (Toronto: Novalis, 2005).

<sup>20</sup> John Bowden, *Christianity: The Complete Guide*, 1104.

<sup>21</sup> John Bowden, *Christianity: The Complete Guide*, 1104.

<sup>22</sup> John Bowden, *Christianity: The Complete Guide*, 1104.

<sup>23</sup> *Dictionnaire historique de la langue française*, (Paris: Dictionnaires Le Robert, 2006), 1961.

society in which, as noted above, Taylor has played a singularly important role. That resonance differs considerably from the historical and political resonance in English Canada to the word “secular.”

### 5.4.3 Harvey Cox

Harvey Cox was an innovative and controversial contemporary theologian (recently retired from the Harvard Theological School). He was an influential theorist and controversial publicist of the secular in the 1960s. He outlined the theological emergence of the word “secular” in the following helpful analysis: the word’s root is:

the Latin word *saeculum*, meaning this age ... basically is one of the two Latin words denoting ‘world’ (the other is *mundus*). These two words foreshadowed serious theological problems ... [because] *saeculum* is a time-word, used frequently to translate the Greek word *aeon*, which also means age or epoch. *Mundus*, on the other hand, is a space-word, used most frequently to translate the Greek word *cosmos*, meaning the universe or the created order. For the Greeks the world was a place or a location in which things happened *within* the world ... while for the Hebrews ... the world was essentially history, a series of events beginning with Creation and heading toward a consummation. This introduced a tension that has plagued Christianity since its outset. The impact of Hebrew faith on the Hellenistic world ... through the early Christians was to temporalize the dominant perceptions of reality ... from the very beginning of its usage, secular denoted something vaguely inferior. It meant ‘this world’ of change as opposed to the eternal religious world.<sup>24</sup>

In short, our visible world was segregated linguistically from the invisible eternal world. A duality had been introduced into Christianity quite foreign to the original Hebrew sense reflected in the Bible and, of course, completely foreign to contemporary Islam in which there is no such thing as a secular age.

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<sup>24</sup> Harvey Cox, *A Secular City, Secularism and Urbanization in Theological Perspective* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1965), 18-19.

These evolving senses and imprecisions in definitions obviously indicate a problem in discussing this whole area. Consequently, Cox offers further definitions of some of these key words, but they are also contested. *Secularization*, he says,

is a descriptive term that has a wide and inclusive significance. It appears in many different guises, depending on the religious and political history of the area concerned ... Secularization implies a historical process, almost certainly irreversible, in which society and culture are delivered from tutelage to religious control ... which we have argued is basically a liberating development.<sup>25</sup>

This is an influential view against which Taylor takes the greatest exception. However, Cox counterbalances this somewhat polemical and certainly strongly contested definition, by underlining that this word is not to be used interchangeably with *secularism* which is: "... the name for an ideology, a new closed world-view which functions very much like a new religion ... it menaces the openness and freedom that secularization has produced ... and must be watched carefully when it ... seeks to impose its ideology through the organs of the state."<sup>26</sup> This of course is a lively issue in contemporary debates in France, Quebec and other places.

Cox highlights the fact that the word took an important theological turn of meaning in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century when a powerful book by Dietrich Bonhoeffer<sup>27</sup> was published after his execution by the Nazis in 1945. Reacting to the impotence of the Christian Church in the Nazi era, he argued that Christians had to get out of the churches and engage with the world – the opposite of the meaning of secular described above. "Man is summoned to share in God's sufferings at the hands of a godless world. He must therefore really live in the godless world ... he must live a 'secular' life and thereby share in God's sufferings."<sup>28</sup> Thus, secular here is closer

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<sup>25</sup> Harvey Cox, *A Secular City*, 20.

<sup>26</sup> Harvey Cox, *A Secular City*, 21.

<sup>27</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Eberhard Bethge, ed. (New York: Touchstone, 1997).

<sup>28</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters*, 361.

to its original meaning when it referred to the Church performing its role outside the walls of the monastery or church edifice.

Bowden suggests that Bonhoeffer's book stimulated several influential books in the 1960's, including Harvey Cox's *A Secular City*. These books had "a tendency to write off the supernatural dimension of Christianity and religion generally ... they argued that the process of the secularization of religion would continue and that eventually the world would become completely secular."<sup>29</sup> This is one way of expressing "the secularization thesis" which is at the heart of decades of debate in which many scholars, including Taylor, have actively participated, as we will see below.

Harvey Cox' landmark book aroused widespread debate in the late 1960's about the nature and characteristics of secular modernity.<sup>30</sup> However superficial and even wrong parts of it turned out to be, it was given global significance by being a "cover story" in the then highly influential *Time* magazine. This encouraged something of an early international consensus on what later turned out to be a superficial understanding of secularity that has stuck in the public imagination. Widespread alarm and debate about secularity, especially in the United States and the English speaking world generally, seemed to be the result of a general anxiety about the rapidly changing world and the place of the sacred in it. In the US, it fed on public and institutional alarm in the middle of the social divisions of the Vietnam War. The public anxiety continues in the United States and other countries.

Culturally and politically speaking, the American religious experience has followed its own considerably more religious path in modernity as indicated by Robert Bellah's exploration

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<sup>29</sup> John Bowden, *Christianity*, 1105.

<sup>30</sup> Harvey Cox, *A Secular City: Secularism and Urbanization in Theological Perspective* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1965).

of the “American civil religion.”<sup>31</sup> Taylor notes, however, that even in the US, a constitutionally defined secular state, there continues to be “a rift” or deeply divided view about the limits of secularity as reflected in the so-called “culture wars” of recent decades in the United States. Taylor sums it up in this way: “some Americans want to rescue the Constitution from God, whereas others, with deeper historical roots, see this as doing violence to it. Hence the contemporary American *kulturkampf*.”<sup>32</sup>

In this context, Harvey Cox remains a notable voice in the debates over secularity. He is a candid theologian and interesting to read even in retrospect. He explains in a book of essays seven years after his “best-seller” that the thrust of his *The Secular City* was prompted and shaped by a combination of the waning influences on him of the Marxist and Freudian theories of religion, and of the power of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s ideas about a “Religionless Christianity.”<sup>33</sup> However, by that point of writing, he had changed his thinking because “... the sheer fact of ordinary experience has not born out the thesis that religion holds men in servile acquiescence and cowed immaturity. In short the question of the future of religion is open again.”<sup>34</sup>

However, even though much of his original theory was disproven by subsequent developments such as the rise of fundamentalism in the US and of radical Islam globally, it continues to have a lingering influence on public opinion about secularity in contemporary discourse and in the social and human sciences where the decline of religion still tends to be taken as axiomatic and inevitable.

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<sup>31</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 446-450.

<sup>32</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 446-450.

<sup>33</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters*, edited by Eberhard Bethge (New York: Simon & Schuster Touchstone, 1997), 361.

<sup>34</sup> Harvey Cox, *The Seduction of the Spirit: The Use and Misuse of People’s Religion* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973), 150.

On the other hand, it is interesting to note that despite Taylor's considerable contact with Harvard University and despite Cox's popular influence in highlighting secularity as a public issue, Cox's name does not appear in the indexes of Taylor's books. That said, parts of Taylor's analysis of the evolution of secularity in *A Secular Age* echoes Cox's writing. Moreover, one could surmise that Taylor and Cox might agree on the conclusion of a more recent book by Cox where, echoing Taylor, he says in 2009 that there is a "revival of religion and ... religiousness spread around the world ... the extraordinary growth of Christianity beyond the West is helping Christianity regain its initial impetus."<sup>35</sup>

#### 5.4.4 Max Weber

As we have seen above, Max Weber was a sociologist and an intellectual giant of the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. He is clearly a major influence in Taylor's thought. This is for three or four main reasons. First, he introduced ground-breaking approaches that have strongly influenced Taylor's *way of thinking*. In relation to both the industrial order (Weber's ideas on capitalism and bureaucracy) and in the general theoretical field (the role of values in society), Talcott Parsons wrote that, "... the important thing about Weber's work was not how he judged the relative importance of ideas or economic factors, but rather the way in which he analyzed the systems of social action within which ideas and values as well as 'economic forces' operate to influence action."<sup>36</sup>

The second reason is the force of Weber's ideas about the impact of the Protestant Reformation on capitalist and industrial modernity which greatly influenced the intellectual *zeitgeist* of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Judging from what he writes in several of his books, Weber

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<sup>35</sup> Harvey Cox, *The Future of Faith* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2010), 222.

<sup>36</sup> Talcott Parsons' Preface to Max Weber, translated by Talcott Parsons, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), xvi.

obviously influenced Taylor's own analysis of the evolution of modernity and the rise of secularism. Weber says: "... the Puritan outlook ... favoured the development of a rational bourgeois economic life ... it stood at the cradle of the modern economic man ... [moreover, quoting the great English theologian John Wesley, he points to the fact that] ... wherever riches have increased, the essence of religion has decreased in the same proportion."<sup>37</sup> This seemingly paradoxical relationship and sense of inevitability is then carried over among those defending the secularism thesis and other "subtraction theories" of secularism.

However, there is a third important way in which Weber strongly impacts Taylor's thought about secular modernity. That is, through his analysis or dark prophecy that whereas

the Puritan wanted to work in a calling; we are *forced* to do so. For when asceticism was carried out of the monastic cells into everyday life, and began to dominate worldly morality, it did its part in building the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order ... now bound ... to the technical and economic conditions of machine production which today determine the lives of all the individuals who are born into the mechanism ... perhaps it will so determine them until the last ton of fossilized fuel is burnt ... the light cloak of the care for goods on the shoulders of the saint ... fate (has) decreed ... should become an iron cage.<sup>38</sup>

In other words, secular modernity threatens us because it imprisons the modern individual within a vicious circle, an iron cage, by making us dependent on material goods, and unable to back out of it. Sounding the alarm about this "iron cage" prophecy together with Nietzsche's warnings about the future of a world without God, neither of which Taylor feels he can disprove empirically, they become both a *leitmotif* and a metaphor through much of Taylor's writing about secular modernity.

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<sup>37</sup> Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, 175.

<sup>38</sup> Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, 181.

Of course, there is a fourth way in which Weber plays a significant role in Taylor's thinking and communicating about our present situation. We saw above in Chapter 3 that Weber coined the famous but over-simplified concept of "the disenchantment of the world" which he defined narrowly as "the elimination of magic as a salvation technique."<sup>39</sup> Many have extended the term's meaning to imply the process of secularization. However, Taylor's reaction to that is to remind us that "when people talk about 'secularization' they can mean a host of different things" so fundamentally he does not see the concept as helpful for understanding the multiple dimensions of religious development in the world.<sup>40</sup>

### 5.5 Question 3: What Are Taylor's Views on Secularity – Some Oddities?

It is odd that a much-garlanded philosopher like Taylor, with a world-wide reputation associated with the theme of secularity, seems to have approached the subject rather reluctantly. His major work on the making of the modern identity, *Sources of the Self*,<sup>41</sup> published in 1989, pays remarkably little attention to secularity. The words "secular" and its derivatives do not appear in any of the titles of its five parts and twenty-five chapters, nor in the book's index. So it is a surprise when Taylor uses the term "secularization" twice on page 309 even though, as seen above, he seems to approach it as an afterthought and to explain it by redefining it. In addition to meaning a "regression of belief in God, and ... the decline in the practice of religion," which he sees as "undeniable," he explains, as we noted, that the phenomenon at that early stage in his thinking about secularity was the result of a change in "moral sources"<sup>42</sup> or a change in the place of God in the social imaginary of Western modernity.

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<sup>39</sup> Marcel Gauchet, Foreword Charles Taylor, translated by Oscar Burge, *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 3.

<sup>40</sup> Marcel Gauchet, Foreword Charles Taylor, Translated by Oscar Burge, *The Disenchantment of the World*, ix.

<sup>41</sup> Charles Taylor,

<sup>42</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 309.

Taylor's intensive engagement with secularity emerges a decade later with his Gifford Lectures of 1998-99, which he gave under the title of "*Living in a Secular Age*." These lectures provided much of the content, indeed the first three parts, of his five part engagement with the theme of secularization in *A Secular Age* published in 2007. In it, Taylor gets right down to brass tacks, or so it would appear, when in his very first sentence in the Introduction he asks, "what does it mean to say that we live in a secular age?"<sup>43</sup>

This seems to be a reasonable framing question for a philosopher much of whose prolific output over many years has concentrated on understanding and "mapping" the origins, human identity in, and potential consequences of the "disenchanted"<sup>44</sup> culture of Western modernity in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. His innovative thought struck a strong chord nationally and internationally. Multiple major prizes for his books show that he was discussing issues of broad resonance in our culture. Parts of his work, along with that of a few other notable interlocutors to be discussed below, highlighted secularity as a defining feature of modernity. They have rightly or wrongly defined the contours of an international debate over more than half a century concerning what Taylor sees as a fundamental cultural shift in the "social imaginary"<sup>45</sup> as well as in the background understanding behind it, of what it means to live in a secular age.

But, at this point, a bit of mystery intrudes in our effort to trace Taylor's thinking about modernity and specifically his ideas about secularity as reflected in his major books. First, it is odd that Taylor's opening framework question in the first lines of his Introduction mentioned above does not correspond a few pages later with his opening question in the first lines of Chapter 1 of his book. There he states: "One way I want to put the question that I want to answer

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<sup>43</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 1.

<sup>44</sup> Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, T. Parsons, trans. (NY: Scribner, 1958), 181.

<sup>45</sup> Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 1-2.

here is this: why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500, in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable?”<sup>46</sup> His immediate answer in the context also seems odd: “the key difference we’re looking at between our two marker dates is a shift in our understanding of what I called ‘fullness,’ between a condition in which our highest spiritual and moral aspirations point us inescapably to God, one might say, make no sense without God, to one in which they can be related to a host of different sources, and frequently are referred to sources which deny God.”<sup>47</sup>

Then, a paragraph later, he goes on to pose a further seemingly different question: “so the big question of what happened is, how did alternatives to the God-reference of fullness arise?”<sup>48</sup> His immediate comment or answer following that question once again seems strange in the context. He says: “what I’ll be concerned with is the Entstehungsgeschichte [“origin”] of exclusive humanism.” Therefore, after two full pages of scene-setting in the main body of the book, the word “secular” has only been used once, and in a subordinate clause at that, and the main ideas seem to be about a faceoff between fullness and exclusive humanism. This seems like a deliberate effort to shift the direction of the discussion away from secularity.

We want to add a further oddity to this list of mysteries in Taylor’s approach to his book. He tells us that the first three parts of the five part book were originally a portion of his prestigious 1998-99 Gifford Lectures involving ten lectures at Edinburgh. The title of the lectures was “*Living in a Secular Age*” (our emphasis). Ruth Abbey tells us that the pre-publication working title for his eventual 2007 book also originally appropriated the word

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<sup>46</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*

<sup>47</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 26.

<sup>48</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 26.

“living” from the Gifford lectures.<sup>49</sup> Why was the word “living” dropped in his major book’s eventual title? It leaves the emphasis of the book’s title placed on the word “secular.” This was despite the fact that it seems, from his initial answers to the issues mentioned above in his main text, that Taylor’s primary concern was expressed as being about “the shift in our understanding of fullness” in relation to God or God’s absence, and how alternatives to the God-reference emerged, and thirdly, and without much explanation, the origin of “exclusive humanism,” a concept of life independent of God.

In this light, Taylor’s real question seems to be about how humans can live lives of fullness in modernity without God. Remembering that fullness at its pinnacle means for Taylor the transcendent, this suggests that Taylor’s real or at least primary concern is not about the place of secularity, whatever it means, in modern life, but rather about the place of the transcendent in secular modernity. In this light, he is not an opponent of secular modernity, but his concern as a philosophical anthropologist is to understand what it is, and most importantly, to teach how we can live lives of fullness within it. Therefore, it would be more accurate to have allowed his major book to be titled something like “Living Fully in Secular Modernity.”

In terms of this study’s hypothesis, therefore, we are claiming that Taylor’s primary concern in his work is not with secularity *per se* but with the place of the transcendent in our lives given the emergence of many dimensions of secularity in the modern world. But if this is true, then we have to ask why Taylor seems to go to such lengths to disguise his uppermost objective?

A possible or partial explanation of these oddities in Taylor’s opening approach to secularity in his major book is found deep in its Introduction. There, he describes that he has

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<sup>49</sup> Ruth Abbey, *Charles Taylor* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 7 and 95.

been “struggling ... with the term ‘secular’ or ‘secularity’ ... as soon as you do [struggle with it], all sorts of problems arise.”<sup>50</sup> This can be seen as a candid reason prompting him to offer the three definitions of secularity to be outlined below as a way perhaps of grappling with the inadequacies of the dictionary definitions discussed above. As we will see, however, the definitions lead one to wonder whether Taylor actually sees the issues of secularity as a matter of debate about its “secular” details and definitions as much as he might see it as offering an avenue for broaching and debating what matters most to him: that is, the place of “the beyond,” of fullness, or the transcendent within our lives under radically changed conditions of belief in secular modernity.

Given this background, Taylor’s three part definition of secularity is of much interest. He begins with two prominent or conventional mainline definitions and then adds an innovative third definition looking at the concept and its derivatives in a new light. His novel additional definition sees the crux of the matter being that the shift from pre-modernity to so-called secular modernity has entailed a radical change in the *conditions of belief*. But if this is the case, why would Taylor be inclined to “muddy the waters” with these oddities or seeming inconsistencies instead of getting right at his major concern?

The terms of reference of the Gifford Lectures left ample room for him to discuss his main concerns without getting tangled in the endless debates about the nature of secularity. The declared aim of the lectures is to “promote and diffuse the study of Natural Theology in the widest sense of the term – in other words, the knowledge of God.”<sup>51</sup> So he was in the perfect setting for being outspoken about what we claim was his true primary concern. A more likely

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<sup>50</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 14-15.

<sup>51</sup> Ruth Abbey, *Charles Taylor*, 195.

answer to this question is given by Taylor himself when he says that he considers the disenchanted secular age to be a post-revolutionary era and that, in such eras, nothing that smacks of the ancien régime can hope to get a hearing. In this light, it is possible to see Taylor's work on secularity as a conscious strategic or rhetorical way to raise the issues of God and the transcendent at a time, as he says, in which the cultural climate, the western social imaginary, was and is exceptionally inhospitable to discussions of religious belief and the transcendent.

This is compounded by and partly the consequence of the fact, he says, that modern society suffers in his view from a loss of articulacy. "We often feel ourselves less able than our forebears to be articulate ... about traditional frameworks."<sup>52</sup> In other words, Taylor the teacher realizes that his audience is both resistant to and lacking articulacy for the discussion at hand. This forces him, as in the example of Matteo Ricci, to find ways to speak to his audience in language it understands. At the individual "seeker" level, it forces one to internalize the search for understanding of the transcendent and the *agapē* of God. Taylor seems to be saying that God is not "dead" but, as always, hidden.

#### **5.6 Question 4: What are Taylor's Own Definitions of "Secularity"?**

Amidst the debate about secularization spanning several centuries, not just decades, we will now consider Taylor's own definitions to better understand his line of thought about secularity. To understand his definitions, an important starting point is to note a particular phrasing of his objectives found deep into *A Secular Age* when he explains that "secularization

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<sup>52</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 95.

stories” are relevant to his aim which is to develop “some picture of ... the spiritual shape of the present age.”<sup>53</sup> To develop this picture, he identifies a series of

interlocking and mutually reinforcing changes (that have led up to contemporary secularity) ... [starting with] disenchantment ... (with its) ‘inner side, the replacement of the porous self by the buffered self ... which begins to find the idea of spirits, moral forces, causal powers ... close to incomprehensible ... [followed by self-discipline] and then interiorization ... where we now conceive of ourselves as having inner depths ... previously located in the cosmos, the enchanted world ... [so that] buffer, discipline, and individuality ... largely driven by the process of Reform ... results in a new form of religious life, more personal, committed, devoted; more Christocentric which will largely replace the older forms which centred on collective ritual.<sup>54</sup>

We have quoted this at length because it foreshadows and articulates a crucial insight that Taylor draws upon in his later arguments against the perceived inevitability in secularist theory of the decline of religion. It also anticipates his prophecy (though he would not use that word) that contemporary secularization is likely eventually to be seen as another stage in an ongoing historical process of non-linear cultural change and religious transformation. In his view, this process is by no means pre-determined or linear and it “can easily be that an earlier sense of fullness is now given a new and deeper meaning.”<sup>55</sup> In other words, Taylor’s view of change, including change in the conditions of belief, is circular or spiral, interactive and not linear or deterministic. One might describe it, though he does not use these terms, as more “quantum” than “Newtonian.” We will return to this important statement in Chapter 7 when we consider “the synthesis” towards which we claim Taylor has been working throughout his academic career.

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<sup>53</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 539. Note: This is an obvious double entendre linking his word “stories” as in theories and his heuristic in Chapter 12 defining aspects of secularity in terms of a three-storey house.

<sup>54</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 539-41.

<sup>55</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 768.

In his Preface to *A Secular Age*, Taylor begins by announcing that in his book “I am telling a story, that of what we usually call ‘secularization’ in the modern West.”<sup>56</sup> In the Introduction he signals that he agrees “with almost everyone” that in the West “we live in a secular age.” However, then he says that “it’s not so clear in what this secularity consists.”<sup>57</sup> This leads him to propose three definitions of secularization in the first few pages of his book to which he later gives numbers for ease of reference throughout the balance of his work.

- (1) The first or Secularity 1 is defined “in terms of public spaces. These have been allegedly emptied of God, or of any reference to ultimate reality ... [or] the emptying of religion from autonomous social spheres.”<sup>58</sup>
- (2) His second definition or Secularity 2 is that “secularity consists in the falling off of religious belief and practice, in people turning away from God, and no longer going to Church.”<sup>59</sup>
- (3) His third definition or Secularity 3 is a matter of changed “conditions of belief. The shift to secularity in this sense consists among other things of a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others and frequently not the easiest to embrace.”<sup>60</sup>

Taylor comments on all of these, but he dwells at some length only on Secularity 3. He states that what it means to be secular in the third sense, to live a life in that condition, is the focus of the rest of his book. He further clarifies this third definition by stating that “An age or society

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<sup>56</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, ix.

<sup>57</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 1.

<sup>58</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 2.

<sup>59</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 2.

<sup>60</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 3.

would then be secular or not, in virtue of the conditions of experience of and search for the spiritual.”<sup>61</sup>

Taylor says that he does not want to debate as much as he wants to understand what it’s like to live as a believer or an unbeliever in today’s world. “Belief and unbelief are lived conditions.” These are what he is talking about by focusing on “changed conditions of belief.”<sup>62</sup>

The most interesting distinction Taylor brings out in his three definitions is that the first two can be seen as exogenous effects of a variety of societal changes in the public or social imaginary, whereas the third can only be seen as a change in personal options and therefore endogenous choices in which the stakes are personal. This is “an apples and oranges” situation in which the definitions are comparing entirely different and only partially related phenomena. The first definition is political.. The second is sociological. And the third is spiritual. For the latter reason, we suggest, Taylor quickly makes clear that the stakes he is talking about in discussing secularity revolve around the issue of the “place of fullness” in our lives.<sup>63</sup>

However, we should note that Taylor’s Secularity 3 can also be seen as posing a problematic definition because it does not correspond with the meaning ascribed to the word “secular” in general vernacular or academic parlance today. In effect or intentionally, Taylor seems to be trying to change the terms of the secularity debate by changing its premises. What he is saying is that common or routine definitions of the phenomenon are accurate within narrow boundaries but they are misleading in important ways. This risks confusing understanding of the debate about secularity and its meaning precisely because of an “apples and oranges” situation, where interlocutors may end up using the same words without knowing they are talking about

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<sup>61</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 3.

<sup>62</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 8.

<sup>63</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 6.

quite different things – a confusion that, for example, can confuse causes (i.e. Secularity 3) and effects (Secularity 1 and Secularity 2).

### 5.7 Question 5: What is Taylor’s Understanding of “Fullness”

It is at first rather curious but later clear why Taylor quickly follows up his three part definition of secularization (which in the case of Secularity 3 is a radical redefinition vis a vis conventional mainline definitions) with an extended discussion of “fullness.” As we have argued above, fullness turns out to be central to Taylor’s understanding, not of public secularization as implied by Secularity 1 and 2, but to his understanding of Secularity 3. It is the key word and variable in his description of three categories or lived conditions of modern “moral/spiritual life” on a spectrum ranging from belief through to unbelief. The three categories are “identifications of fullness, modes of exile, and types of the middle condition.”<sup>64</sup> It follows that the idea of fullness is crucial in understanding the meaning of secularity in Taylor’s thought.

As we have seen, Taylor says that, “for believers, the account of the place of fullness requires reference to God, that is, to something beyond human life and/or nature; where for unbelievers this is not the case.”<sup>65</sup> But this is focused on the concept of belief, whereas as we have seen, Taylor’s central concern, he makes clear, is the actual lived human experience of belief and unbelief. Hence, he goes on to make a remarkably clear affirmation that the word “fullness” can be experienced at different stages of both belief and unbelief. In comments suggesting that he may be speaking from his own lived experience, he says,<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 7-8.

<sup>65</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 8.

<sup>66</sup> Note: At the ceremony awarding Taylor the 2007 Templeton Prize, John M. Templeton, Jr, the chairman of the Templeton Foundation spoke in his presentation of Taylor’s perspectives “being very much affected by a sense he developed at about fifteen years of age of what he described as the power of God.” Templeton Prize Press Conference, New York, March 14, 2007, accessed at [templetonprize.org](http://templetonprize.org), 10/14/16.

For believers, often or typically, the sense is that fullness comes to them, that it is something they receive in something like a personal relation, from another being capable of love and giving; approaching fullness involves among other things, practices of devotion and prayer (as well as charity, giving); and they are aware of being very far from the condition of full devotion and giving; they are aware of being self-enclosed, bound to lesser things and goals, not able to open themselves and receive/give as they would at the place of fullness. So there is the notion of receiving power or fullness in a relation; but the receiver isn't simply empowered in his/her present condition; he/she needs to be opened, transformed, brought out of self.<sup>67</sup>

This remarkably forthright declaration sounds a great deal like similar testimony of personal epiphanic experience by St. Paul, St. Augustine, Martin Luther and many others. Probably for that reason, Taylor concludes this discussion offering the example of a mystical experience of Bede Griffiths, a "seeker" which illustrates Taylor's detailed description of the experience of fullness. This is found in Chapter 1, page 5, of *A Secular Age*. It seems significant that Taylor later chooses to conclude his large book with a similar mystical account, in Chapter 20 "Conversions," by Vaclav Havel.<sup>68</sup> He was an unbeliever but obviously not really an exclusive humanist either as an artist and politician who undertook mortal risks to his potentially flourishing life under the Czechoslovak communist dictatorship in pursuit of moral freedom and truth. These examples seem to represent Taylor's belief that the potential transforming experience of fullness is not limited to believers. It reflects what seems to be his most important message on the issue of secularity: it is a term that loosely describes changing conditions for the pursuit of fullness in human life which is open to anyone, believers or unbelievers, "dwellers" or "seekers," sinners as well as the righteous. This sounds a lot like Jesus's message in modern terms. By reinforcing the importance of fullness in what it means to be human, and the potential for personal conversion and therefore transformation, we suggest that Taylor is here providing a strong warrant for this study's hypothesis:

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<sup>67</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 8.

<sup>68</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 728.

If I am right that our sense of fullness is a reflection of transcendent reality (which for me is the God of Abraham), and that all people have a sense of fullness, then there is no absolute point zero. But there is a crucial point where many come to rest in our civilization, defined by a refusal to envisage transcendence as the meaning of this fullness. Exclusive humanism must find the ground and contours of fullness in the immanent sphere, in some condition of human life, or feeling, or achievement. The door is barred against further discovery.<sup>69</sup>

## 5.8 Question 6: What is Charles Taylor’s “Polemic” Against the “Secularity Thesis”?

The secularity or secularization thesis originated out of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century Enlightenment and was a thesis (if not an ideological aspiration) of many European proponents of the age of reason who anticipated (or hoped) that it would only be a matter of time before religion, and specifically Christianity, would inevitably decline and wither away in the face of the onslaught of scientific and technological rationality. Taylor’s writing on secular modernity takes a strongly polemical position denying this “secularization thesis” and denigrating it by calling it a “subtraction story” for which he has no tolerance. “I mean by this stories of modernity in general, and secularity in particular, which explain them by human behaviours having lost, or sloughed off, or liberated themselves from certain earlier, confining horizons, or illusions, or limitations of knowledge.”<sup>70</sup> In a word, he directly opposes in principle the views of both Weber and the earlier Cox, while supporting both Martin and the direction of Bonhoeffer’s concern about a Christianity (as well as an academy) walled off from everyday human reality.<sup>71</sup>

In an important passage from the Introduction to his *A Secular Age* Taylor comments, “I will be steadily arguing that western modernity including its secularity is the fruit of new inventions, newly constructed self-understandings and related practices, and can’t be explained

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<sup>69</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 769.

<sup>70</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 22.

<sup>71</sup> Eric Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet and Spy* (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, 2010).

in terms of perennial features of human life.”<sup>72</sup> Similarly, in Taylor’s acceptance speech for the Templeton Prize he said with David Martin that “the main thrust of this work ... is that [for years] secularization theory was not just factually wrong. It misconceived the whole process.” He diagnosed the reason for this as “the deafness of many philosophers, social scientists and historians to the spiritual dimension ... and this is the more damaging in that it affects the culture of the media and of educated public opinion in general.”<sup>73</sup> In other words, Taylor says that contrary to the general contemporary Western social imaginary about the nature of secularity, secularization has been a contingent, not inherent or inevitable, development. It is not an ineluctable process and, in principle, it is subject to change if not reversal.

Thus, Taylor wages a particularly determined battle against the previously dominant but still common assumption, firmly entrenched in the social imaginary of contemporary secular modernity, which holds that our modern Western culture emerged inevitably from the pre-Modern historical and philosophical conditions of the “enchanted world” because of the emergence of reason-based science and education. In addition to being wrong, the central problem of the secularity thesis is that it denies what Taylor calls the “irrepressible need of the human heart”<sup>74</sup> for the transcendent. He refuses to accept that adapting to secular modernity should unavoidably force us to stifle “the response in us to some of the deepest and most powerful spiritual aspirations that humans have conceived?”<sup>75</sup> Clearly, the stakes are higher than most people realize in the work of Taylor and his dialogue partners.

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<sup>72</sup> Charles Taylor, *Secular Age*, 22.

<sup>73</sup> Charles Taylor, Prepared Statement, 2007 Templeton Prize Press Conference, New York, March 14, 2007 at [templetonprize.org](http://templetonprize.org) accessed Oct 14/16.

<sup>74</sup> Charles Taylor, *Secular Age*, 638.

<sup>75</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 521.

## 5.9 Question 7: Who are Other Key Voices in the Debate About the Nature of Secular Modernity?

As we have noted above, it is important in considering the significance of secularity in modern culture and its relevance to the place of the transcendent in contemporary lives that we be aware of the fact that the broad range of definitions and understandings of the meaning of the concept inevitably results in a certain amount of what Taylor calls “inarticulate” debate. He calls the debates about what is going on in modern culture a “many-faceted debate”<sup>76</sup> in which widespread familiarity with the language of the debate about such terms as “secularity” masks the fact that “this great familiarity hides bewilderment, that we don’t really understand these changes that worry us, that the usual run of debate about them in fact misrepresents them – and this makes us misconceive what we can do about them.”<sup>77</sup> Indeed, Taylor explains that he was drawn into the discussion because he was not able to understand the ongoing debate because of too many people speaking at cross-purposes. Who does he admire in the ongoing debate?

### 5.9.1 David Martin

A leading dialogue partner of Taylor is the British sociologist David Martin who has done pioneering work on secularization since the 1960’s. As noted above, in a Foreword to Martin’s recent book, *On Secularization: Towards a Revised General Theory*,<sup>78</sup> Charles Taylor spoke about two fundamental ways in which Martin had “transformed the discussion about secularization.” First, Martin had given it a hermeneutical turn recognizing “a plurality of national and regional trajectories ... (and second, he) made us recognize the different dynamics of ‘secularization’, where the original theories assumed a single one ... that was held to be fixed.”

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<sup>76</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1991), 120.

<sup>77</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity*, 2.

<sup>78</sup> David Martin, *On Secularization: Towards a Revised General Theory* (Farnham, Surrey, England: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2005), ix-x.

In other words, Taylor is saying that Martin had disproved the posited ineluctability of the secularization thesis. Martin shows to Taylor's satisfaction that there are multiple variants of the experiences of secularity, which makes sense to Taylor given that, as we have seen, he believes that "we are more and more living in a world of 'multiple modernities'."<sup>79</sup>

A recent book by Martin combines his two fields of professional specialization, theology and sociology, and offers 13 chapters on varied themes more or less directly linked to our intertwined secular and transcendent themes.<sup>80</sup> The most important parts of the book for our purposes are Charles Taylor's "Foreword," and Martin's introduction and Chapter 9 titled "Secularization: Master Narrative or Several Stories"<sup>81</sup> In the Foreword, Taylor salutes Martin's attack on "the assumption of singularity ... the idea that a single process (of secularization) was marching through history ... to a single ultimate model." And he also approves Martin's "dialectical view" in which a series of "Christian 'incursions,' or attempted remakings of the world to conform to the Gospel are part of a history of reform."<sup>82</sup> From this, Taylor concludes significantly that:

I believe that one should see the secular modern West as the product of one such large-scale 'incursion', that of Latin Christendom which in the later Middle Ages embarked on a long series of reforms that ended up creating the disciplined, productive, pacified, rights-affirming world we live in, within the intellectual framework of a clear natural/supernatural distinction unique in human history hitherto ... for many in our civilization this has become the major implementation of Christian faith.<sup>83</sup>

Taylor here is clearly drawing on and influencing interactively Martin's innovative dialectical approach as a sociologist to the understanding of how and why Western modernity has evolved,

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<sup>79</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 21.

<sup>80</sup> David Martin, *On Secularization: Towards a Revised General Theory*.

<sup>81</sup> Martin, *Future of Christianity*, 105.

<sup>82</sup> Charles Taylor in Martin, *On Secularization*, x.

<sup>83</sup> Charles Taylor, *On Secularization*, x.

whatever name we want to attach to the process. It is based on an account of successive religious transformations which for Taylor in this context means transformations in the place of “transcendence”<sup>84</sup> in the successive social imaginaries.

Martin points out that

a dialectical approach based on an account of successive religious transformations in their varying encounters with social realities (or social nature) as understood by sociology differs considerably from standard narratives of secularization ... [in which] the dialectic of successive Christian incursions becomes occluded, along with the distinctive character of a Christian civilization as compared with any other.<sup>85</sup>

This results in a distortion of historical perception.

Both of Taylor’s major books are obviously strongly influenced in this respect by Martin’s thinking about secularity. Of particular note is Martin’s emphasis on the historically-proven ability of Christianity to adapt and evolve in the face of new challenges. This is a proposition that Taylor clearly takes to heart in arriving at his own optimistic conclusion that “the varieties of religious past that have a future may be much greater than we have been led to expect.”<sup>86</sup> Not only will Western secularity continue to have a strong religious dimension but it may well recover some of its rich Christian background and traditions that may have suffered in the process of transformation.

But it is equally interesting where the two thinkers differ. Martin places strong emphasis on the need to answer the prognostications of people like Nietzsche who prophesized a turn to power and violence as the likely outcome of “the death of God.” Taylor acknowledges the importance of the challenge but seems unconvinced about the coherence and plausibility of

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<sup>84</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 20.

<sup>85</sup> Martin, *On Secularization*, 8.

<sup>86</sup> Charles Taylor, *Dilemmas and Connections*, 286.

Nietzsche as a prophet (or maybe Taylor just wants to avoid giving Nietzsche's already perhaps exaggerated importance any additional attention and credibility). More significantly, Martin believes that the dialectic of religious change will continue even in the absence of the transcendent horizon, whereas Taylor is sure that an exclusively immanent world "shorn of the transcendent" will be flat and lacking in meaning. It will generate for the secular humanist and atheist alike despair as per the insights of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Weber and Sartre<sup>87</sup> who will be discussed in Chapter 6.

The foregoing commentary perhaps helps us to understand why Taylor launched rather belatedly into the more recent phases of the decades-long debate about various aspects of secularity among major academics in the western world. Taylor is firmly of the view that the question of what is going on in a culture and a society is simply not amenable to a linear analysis, nor is it an issue that lends itself to "global generalization" in "a world of multiple modernities."<sup>88</sup> Moreover, he strongly disagrees with the dominant explanations of secularity. In this light, we will conclude this chapter by touching on the views of some of Taylor's other dialogue partners in the ongoing debate.

### **5.9.2 José Casanova**

José Casanova is a professor of the sociology of religion at Georgetown University who published in 1994 a ground-breaking book departing from the kind of common generalizations or "subtraction theories" encouraged by the Harvey Cox "school" of secularist thinking. He was motivated to carry out the study because he found the dominant idea in Europe from the

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<sup>87</sup> Reidar Thomte, *Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1948), 36-37.

<sup>88</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 21.

Enlightenment onwards that modernity would systematically undermine and eventually eliminate religion was itself based on,

an unfounded assumption ... reproducing a myth that sees history as the progressive evolution of humanity from superstition to reason, from belief to unbelief, from religion to science ... what the sociology of religion needs to do is to substitute for the mythical account of a universal process of secularization comparative sociological studies of (actual) historical processes of secularization.<sup>89</sup>

This is precisely what he set out to do with five comparative empirical case studies of distinct late 20<sup>th</sup> Century national or confessional faith itineraries or experiences with secularization. They covered the experiences of Spain, Poland, and Brazil, as well as those of evangelical Protestantism in the U.S. and elsewhere, and the new “deprivatized” or “public religion” of Catholicism in the United States. Robert N. Bellah, the eminent scholar of pre-Axial religion before his recent death, praised Casanova’s resulting book as “stunning.”<sup>90</sup> These studies demonstrated that a single process theory of secularization was indeed mythical and that the dynamic and variable factors catalyzing secularity are the result of multiple variables that are particular to each situation.

It is notable in this connection that as early as 1994, Casanova was loudly asking “Who still believes in the *myth* of secularization? ... the majority of sociologists of religion ... have abandoned the paradigm ...”<sup>91</sup> We find this observation rather startling since it was made thirteen years before the publication of Taylor’s *A Secular Age*. Moreover, as the work of Casanova suggests, the secular age that Taylor’s work has identified may be more of a local than North Atlantic regional, let alone global phenomenon. Perhaps Taylor’s understanding of secular

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<sup>89</sup> José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 17.

<sup>90</sup> José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), Dustjacket attestations.

<sup>91</sup> José Casanova, *Public Religions*, 11.

modernity only describes the situation in Canada, or more narrowly only in Quebec or just Vancouver? Or perhaps his main concern is not secularity *per se* but rather a social phenomenon of much greater fundamental importance to humanity in Canada and everywhere – the discrediting of the transcendent in ordinary authentic life.

Casanova’s analytical critique of Taylor, a philosopher he otherwise showers with adulation, evolves over time and is reflected in an important more recent article: “A Secular Age: Dawn or Twilight?”<sup>92</sup> After criticizing Taylor’s Euro-American-centric focus in thinking about secularism in “our” world, despite empirical evidence of “global denominationalism” and other types of global religious pluralism, he concludes by asking provocatively:

If such a future comes to pass, then Taylor is likely to be recognized as the last philosopher of secular modernity and as the visionary prophet of the dawn of a postsecular age ... who helped ... destabilize our social imaginary and open wider cracks in our secular immanent frame. I doubt, however, that the new postsecular paths of transcendence that may become available to us ordinary humans would be able to satiate Taylor’s personal thirst for transcendent eternity and divine incarnation.<sup>93</sup>

Clearly, in this light, as already argued above, there is some reason to question why Taylor decided to title what more than one writer has called “his magnum opus” *A Secular Age*. Having done so, it is perhaps not surprising that he has come to be perceived in the public mind, and even in large parts of the academic community, as focused primarily on questions about the identity and ethics of the self in secular modernity, rather than on what our hypothesis claims is his primary and most important concern – that is, for how people are to live lives of fullness in the absence of the transcendent. Perhaps one has to consider the possibility that a master thinker and communicator like Taylor has intentionally muddied or occluded his primary message?

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<sup>92</sup> José Casanova, “A Secular Age: Dawn or Twilight” in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, Michael Warner, Jonathan Van Antwerpen, and Craig Calhoun, eds. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 266.

<sup>93</sup> José Casanova, *Varieties of Secularism*, 281.

Perhaps his strategy, decoded, has been to use the leverage of widespread interest in the theme of secular modernity as a rhetorical method, a useful peg on which to hang a larger and more important coat, the question that consumes his life but that he knows will be resisted or ignored in the contemporary culture by those who need to hear it most? In short, does he use the concept of secularity as a type of “Trojan Horse” to communicate his primary concern about what Casanova describes as “openings for transcendence beyond human flourishing?”<sup>94</sup>

### 5.9.3 Peter L Berger

Like Martin, another key contemporary interlocutor in debates about the secular, Peter L. Berger, has injected a quite different position on the nature of the secular. He advances what he calls a “desecularization thesis,” It is based on the fact that “the world today is *massively* religious, *is anything but* the secularized world that had been predicted.”<sup>95</sup> The exceptions to this, he says, are Europe and also “an international subculture composed of people with Western-type higher education, especially in the humanities and social sciences” which is more or less ideologically committed to secularism, something that underlies some of the political antagonism against elites in the culture wars involving fundamentalist Christians in the United States.<sup>96</sup> Taylor acknowledges Berger’s insight and echoes it when he reflects on the possibility, indeed likelihood, of the emergence of “new forms” of religious expression including forms recovered from past tradition.

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<sup>94</sup> José Casanova, “A Secular Age: Dawn or Twilight” in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, 270.

<sup>95</sup> Peter L. Berger, editor, *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religions and World Politics* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 9.

<sup>96</sup> Berger, *Desecularization*, 10.

#### 5.9.4 Grace Davie

Another important dialogue partner for Taylor is Grace Davie, a British scholar at the University of Exeter. Her essay in Berger's book is titled: *Europe: The Exception That Proves the Rule*. She is footnoted six times in Taylor's *A Secular Age*, demonstrating the respect Taylor has for her as a dialogue partner, and for her innovative work. In that respect, he especially singles out her concept of "vicarious religion" which opens the way to her idea of the "believing without belonging" phenomenon. This proposes that the so-called secular world in the West involves, not a reduced religiosity, as much as continuing intensive religious adherences but with less than traditional participation.<sup>97</sup> This line of thought is very important in thinking about the future of the secular in today's world. Davie, like Berger, indeed as well as Taylor himself, points to the ongoing vitality of a spirituality or religiosity outside the traditional institutional forms and norms of the churches. It goes far beyond immanent secular exclusive humanism. This line of thought opens the way to the idea of new forms of spirituality and faith in a post-secular plural world.

#### 5.10 Conclusion

There is enough in these reflections to indicate that the questions and debates about secular modernity are far from over. It seems also clear that these issues are of growing importance for Canada and the rest of the Western world as it becomes increasingly plural with large immigrant populations of deep faith-based cultures for which the word "secular," in any of its meanings, is plainly not apposite. There has been ample evidence, for example, that the battle lines of modern Quebec politics include the defence of secularism. At the same time, as has been

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<sup>97</sup> Taylor, *Secular Age*, 521.

noted above, depending on definitions, there is reason to wonder if we are really living in a secular age after all. We may be living in a world hungering for transcendent meaning and yet swamped in the contradictions or disjunctions to be expected in a plural democratic society. It reflects cultures originating from “multiple modernities” where the outcome of “a three- or maybe four-cornered battle” concerning the place, if any, of transcendent faith in secular modernity has become a matter of individual decision. These are among the issues we will consider in Chapter 6.

## CHAPTER 6

### THE ANTITHESIS PART III: CHANGED CONDITIONS OF BELIEF

#### “The Four Cornered Battle”<sup>1</sup> of Modern Belief and Unbelief

*Wandering between two worlds, one dead,  
The other powerless to be born,  
With nowhere yet to rest my head,  
Like these, on earth I wait forlorn.  
Their faith, my tears, the world deride –  
I come to shed them at their side. (Matthew Arnold, 1850)<sup>2</sup>*

*In the Horizon of the Infinite – We have left the land and have gone aboard ship! We have broken down the bridge behind us, – nay, more, the land behind us! Well, little ship! Look out! Beside thee is the ocean; it is true it does not always roar, and sometimes it spreads out like silk and gold and a gentle reverie. But times will come when thou wilt feel that it is infinite, and that there is nothing more frightful than infinity. Oh, the poor bird that felt itself free, and now strikes against the walls of this cage! Alas, if homesickness for the land should attack thee, as if there had been more freedom there, – and there is no “land” any longer. (Friedrich Nietzsche, 1888)<sup>3</sup>*

*What I have been calling the immanent-counter-Enlightenment thus involves a new valorization of, even fascination with death and sometimes violence. It rebels against the exclusive humanism that dominates modern culture. But it also rejects all previous ontically-grounded understandings of transcendence. If we took account of this, we might change our picture of modern culture. Instead of seeing it as the scene of a two-sided battle, between ‘tradition’ and especially religious tradition, and secular humanism, we might rather see it as a kind of a free-for-all, the scene of a three-cornered – perhaps ultimately a four-cornered – battle. This would allow us to see how greatly what I have called the nova have expanded; positions have multiplied. (Charles Taylor, 2007)<sup>4</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Taylor, *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 22.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew Arnold, *Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse*, downloaded 21/7/16 from Poetry Foundation@poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail43065.

<sup>3</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, “Aphorism 124,” *The Gay Science* (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1910), 90.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 374.

## 6.1 Introduction and Recapitulation

Our study so far of Taylor's thinking about belief and unbelief has demonstrated how he sees Western secular modernity having come about through a series of what he regards as interlocking and interacting cultural revolutions. Each of them has brought about non-linear and unpredictable shifts in the social imaginary of Western culture and in the self-identity and sense of what it means to be human.

In Chapter 3 we discussed the background framework and social imaginary of the "enchanted world" of pre-Modernity. Following a type of Hegelian dialectical approach in our analysis, we described that first stage as "the thesis." Then, in Chapter 4 we outlined Antithesis I, the first of three "antitheses" or reactions to negations or contradictions implicit in the "thesis condition." It ushered in a massive shift in social imaginary, a shift to a "disenchanted world." In Chapter 5 we turned our attention to the second antithesis or "Antithesis II" focusing on the emergence of the phenomenon of secularity and secularization in modern Western culture. Chapter 6 now moves on to Antithesis III, a third major "antithesis" in Taylor's thought about modern culture in Western civilization. It follows from Taylor's positing of what he calls "Secularity 3" which identified *changed conditions of belief* as a further definition of secularity and secularization in western culture. It went far beyond conventional mainstream definitions of the concept of secularity. In fact, it changed the premises of the whole discussion.

There are three main vectors of analysis arising out of Taylor's innovative concept of Secularity 3 which will frame this chapter. Each vector brings about fundamental changes in the social imaginary of secular modernity. The first is that individuals now regard themselves as having freedom to choose in deciding about the place of belief or of unbelief in their lives. It is a

personal choice or decision. This contrasts with the pre-Modern situation in which the nature of one's belief was more or less taken for granted, inherited, or imposed without choice. A related important change with this turn to individual choice to be discussed below is the need for the individual to recognize the meaning and implications of the high stakes underlying their choice. Taylor proposes two concepts or measures that need to be addressed in making that choice: "human flourishing" and "fullness." We have already discussed these terms earlier in this study but more needs to be said about them in relation to the main focus of this chapter which is to portray in broad terms three or four distinct "corners" in the "struggle" or "battle" between and among modern belief or unbelief options.

The second vector of analysis of the changed conditions of belief and unbelief concerns the mushrooming of the "nova"<sup>5</sup> of distinct faith and atheistic options that have burgeoned in modernity from which the individual may choose. These range from various forms of unbelief or atheism ranging from anti-humanism and militant anti-theism through to "exclusive humanism. Similarly, Taylor points to one or perhaps two broad forms of theistic belief options in the field of choice or "battle." These range from belief in the traditional Western or Eastern faiths, through to the "nova" or array of new or reformed theistic beliefs. Taylor sees the most consequential new option among these options, in terms of its threat to theistic and especially western Christian belief is the emergence early in Modernity of what he calls "exclusive humanism." It envisages a life concerned only with human flourishing with no reference to the "beyond" or transcendent.

Taylor describes the resulting jostling among belief and disbelief options as a "free for all" with many people not understanding the implications for the possibility of fullness in their

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<sup>5</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 300.

lives of their choice among the options for the experience of personal fullness. Consequently, the second part of this chapter will portray the main positions among these options using the simplifying heuristic that Taylor describes as “the three-cornered – perhaps ultimately a four cornered battle” of belief and unbelief in modern culture.

Taylor makes it clear that the third and most important vector of analysis of the changed conditions of belief and unbelief concerns the implications of our personal choice for the potential experience of the power of the fullest degree of fullness and therefore of the transcendent in our personal lives. As we have noted above, he introduces the concept of a type of sliding or a graduated scale of “fullness.” It does not exclude the possibility of experiencing a degree of fullness if one chooses to live exclusively in the immanent horizon. However, Taylor argues that a “fuller” and the fullest fullness is only possible living one’s life within the transcendent frame where there is the possibility of personal transformation through the power of an experience of the power and love (*agapē*) of God. We will further discuss this dimension of the changed conditions of belief in the third part of this chapter, thereby offering a warrant for the study’s hypothesis.

## **6.2 New Conditions of Belief – Individual Choice and Responsibility**

The first vector or issue to be discussed under the heading of Taylor’s Secularity 3 or “changed conditions of belief” is the massive shift in the social imaginary of Modernity. This involved a transformation from living in an “enchanted world” where each individual and society lived in a cosmos subject to the conscious presence and power of God, to a “disenchanted world” where growing inwardness, greater focus on the sanctity of personal and domestic relationships, and the personal focus of responsibility flowing from “Providential Deism”, brought about a

“great disembedding.”<sup>6</sup> In pre-Modernity the goal of life was a matter of “flourishing” with God or lesser spirits determining if you, your family and/or your community flourished, or not. Now, in the changed conditions of Modernity, “both the transcendent and the human good are reconceived ... the transcendent may now be quite beyond or outside of the cosmos, as with the Creator God of Genesis, or the Nirvana of Buddhism ... if it remains cosmic, it loses its original ambivalent [i.e. sometimes malevolent] character, and it exhibits an order of unalloyed goodness.”<sup>7</sup> However, it also means that “the highest human good can no longer just be to flourish, as it was before ... our own flourishing (as individual, family, clan or tribe) can no longer be our highest goal.” This calls for “a redefinition of what ‘flourishing’ consists in.”<sup>8</sup>

In short, the changed social imaginary of Modernity shifted the human and sacral focus from community and immanent God, to self and relationship with a transcendent God. Out of this emerged the place of the Modern individual with personal responsibility for a choice about belief or unbelief in her/his life in a world constituted by individuals. This change meant “a profound change in our moral world ... we are always socially embedded; we learn our identities in dialogue by being induced into a certain language. But on the level of content, what we may learn is to be an individual, to have our own opinions, to attain our own relation to God, our own conversion experience.”<sup>9</sup> Later, Taylor concludes that “this is the basis for that sanctification of ordinary life ... which has two facets: it promoted ordinary life, as a site for the highest of Christian life; and also an anti-élitist thrust: it takes down those allegedly higher modes of existence ... and the humble and meek are exalted.”<sup>10</sup> This can be seen as a platform for gradual development of the central place of economic exchange and for notions of democracy in the

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<sup>6</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 146.

<sup>7</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 152.

<sup>8</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 153.

<sup>9</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 157.

<sup>10</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 179.

good or flourishing life. “Things cohere, because they serve each other in their survival and flourishing.”<sup>11</sup>

### **6.3 Changing Conditions of Belief: Taylor’s Heuristic Portrayal of the Options or “Corners of the Battle”**

#### **6.3.1 Introduction**

If the individual has a choice among options of belief and unbelief that involve significant differences in terms of fullness of life, then it is important that individuals living in secular modernity be aware of those options and those differences. We claim that making people conscious of what is at stake in this personal life-decision can be seen as a crucial part of the central teaching “mission” of Taylor’s life, his “Ricci-like journey.”<sup>12</sup>

Taylor dramatizes the array of options using an explanatory heuristic which as noted above he describes as a “three cornered – perhaps ultimately four-cornered battle”<sup>13</sup> among different positions of belief and unbelief. He says that he might have opted instead to present his ideas as a simple binary choice between being a “believer” or an “unbeliever.” But that would prevent his introducing a further important concept or criterion in discussing belief and unbelief in modernity. Today’s world, unlike its pre-Modern predecessor, makes a sharp distinction between the immanent and the transcendent. Before, there was only the transcendent horizon. Today’s social imaginary recognizes that people can live in a horizon of either or both those horizons. Taylor points out that “the big obvious contrast here is that for believers, the account of the place of fullness requires reference to God, that is, to something beyond human life and/or nature; where for unbelievers this is not the case; they rather will leave any account open, or

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<sup>11</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 180.

<sup>12</sup> Charles Taylor, *Dilemmas and Connections*, 186.

<sup>13</sup> Charles Taylor, *Dilemmas and Connections*, 22.

understand fullness ... naturalistically.”<sup>14</sup> In other words, Taylor develops a heuristic that recognizes the potential experience of the fullest “fullness,” or its absence, as a crucial criterion for someone deciding how to live among the various options.

At the same time, Taylor wants to discourage people seeing it as a simple binary choice because he strongly believes that dualisms are misleading. In particular, a simple dualism between the transcendent and immanent frames would fail to take account of the fact that there are differing belief stances *within* the two broad categories of believers and unbelievers. These include in both cases people choosing to live in the “stabilized middle condition to which we often aspire.”<sup>15</sup> This could be seen as a third position between belief and unbelief, but Taylor does not see it as ultimately useful since it begs the fundamental existential question that needs to be faced. Taylor’s argument is that the middle condition is actually a non-position. It only indicates that we have learned how “to escape the forms of negation, exile, emptiness without having reached fullness.”<sup>16</sup>

Remembering that Taylor’s declared central purpose is to provide a sense of the “lived conditions”<sup>17</sup> of each stance including the place of the transcendent, if any, we will now attempt to simplify the discussion before outlining the heuristic of the “battle” options by looking at three issues relevant to how Taylor constructs the heuristic: first, we will further discuss Taylor’s sliding scale understanding of fullness; second, we will look at the meaning of humanism in relation to Taylor’s concern about “exclusive humanism; and third, we will take a brief look at the possible influence on Taylor’s choice of a “battle” heuristic by a giant of 20<sup>th</sup> century theology, Henri de Lubac. We will conclude the chapter by discussing the four options or corners

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<sup>14</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 8.

<sup>15</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 6.

<sup>16</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 6.

<sup>17</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 8.

by personifying each broad position by reference to a notable philosophical proponent and identifying a negation or antithesis it faces.

### 6.3.2 Fullness

As we have noted above, Taylor defines “secularity [as] a condition in which our experience of and our search for fullness occurs; and this is something we all share, believers and unbelievers alike.”<sup>18</sup> Therefore, the meaning of fullness for Taylor is central to understanding his views of the different belief and unbelief options open to the individual in secular modernity. Taylor offers in the early pages of *A Secular Age* details of what he means by “fullness.” Ultimately, it means to him the equivalent of “the transcendent” but he prefers not to use “transcendent” because it is “very slippery” owing to its “vagueness” and because it has been subjected to a variety of redefinitions in “the process of modernity and secularization.”<sup>19</sup> The essence of the issue of the degree of fullness in one’s life can be revealed by asking, he says, whether people recognize something beyond or transcendent to their lives?

Alternatively, he suggests that one can ask “does the highest, the best life involve our seeking, or acknowledging, or serving a good which is beyond, in the sense of independent of human flourishing?”<sup>20</sup> This entails addressing the question in our lives of “final goals.” He says that “in the Judaeo-Christian religious tradition, the answer to this question is affirmative. Loving, worshipping God is the ultimate end.” However, this does not necessarily mean renouncing values of ordinary flourishing. “The call to renounce doesn’t negate the value of

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<sup>18</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 19.

<sup>19</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 16.

<sup>20</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 16.

flourishing; it is rather a call to centre everything on God ... flourishing is good, nevertheless seeking it is not our ultimate goal.”<sup>21</sup>

This opens the issue of “religion” which Taylor tells us, for his purposes, “can be defined in terms of transcendence” but where that word has a triple meaning. That is,

we should see religion’s relation to a ‘beyond’ in three dimensions: 1) there is some good higher than, beyond human flourishing; in the Christian case, we could think of this as *agapē*, the love which God has for us, and which we can partake of through his power. In other words, a possibility of transformation is offered. (2) there must be belief in a higher power, the transcendent God of faith; and (3) the Christian story of our potential transformation by *agapē* requires that we see our life going beyond the bounds of its ‘natural’ scope between birth and death; our lives extend beyond ‘this life.’<sup>22</sup>

This is a notable declaration on Taylor’s part because it not only defines his view of the transcendent in secular modern life but it also implies that the fullest fullness of life beyond ordinary flourishing can only be achieved in a Christian construal or, if there is one, a similarly compelling love-oriented belief. Therefore, from this point of view, “the multi-cornered debate is shaped by the two extremes: transcendent Christian-like religion, on one hand, and its frontal denial, on the other.”<sup>23</sup>

### 6.3.3 Fullness and Kenosis

It is not clear what lies behind Taylor’s choice of the word “fullness” which can have both a relative meaning (i.e. degrees of fullness) or an absolute meaning (i.e. a state of being full). Tracing the word back into Latin and Greek identifies its root possibly as the concept of wholeness. Wholeness is a word less amenable to gradation than fullness – i.e. one is either

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<sup>21</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 18.

<sup>22</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 20.

<sup>23</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 20.

whole or not whole. In that sense, it would seem that what we are calling the fullest fullness of the transcendent could also be rendered by the word “wholeness.”

This is significant in another way in that the opposite of fullness is “emptiness” which is a term that has theological importance in contemporary Christianity. This is because the idea of *kenosis*, whose Greek root means emptiness or emptying, is associated with the word’s use in Scripture especially by St. Paul in Philippians 2:4-8. Verses 2:6-7 read, referring to Jesus: “who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, *he emptied himself*, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.”<sup>24</sup> This underlies the idea of self-emptying as, in effect, the way to the fullest degree of fullness reflected in Kenotic Theology. We make this point to suggest that Taylor’s choice of fullness as a key concept in his explanation of modernity is fundamentally theological. This is not at all surprising since he leaves no doubt that, in his thinking, the human predicament of Western modernity is fundamentally a spiritual predicament.

#### **6.3.4 Humanism**

As we have seen, another issue central to Taylor’s view of secular modernity is humanism and in particular what he describes as “exclusive humanism.” He says, “I would like to claim that the coming of modern secularity in my sense [i.e. Secularity 3] accepting no final goals beyond human flourishing, nor any allegiance to anything beyond this flourishing has been coterminous with the rise of a society in which for the first time in history a purely self-sufficient

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<sup>24</sup> It is also significant that St Paul in this same chapter, at verses 12-13 calls on Christians to “work out your salvation with *fear and trembling, for God is the one who, for his good purpose works in you...*” Some of these words became the title of Kierkegaard’s famous book referenced above..

humanism came to be a widely available option. Of no previous society was this true.”<sup>25</sup> For Taylor, self-sufficient humanism is what he means by “exclusive humanism.”

This point is central to Taylor’s thought and to our hypothesis because Taylor is identifying a form of flourishing life in modernity that can be lived entirely within an immanent frame with no reference to God or the transcendent or to anything beyond “ordinary human flourishing.”<sup>26</sup> This indeed is a radical change in the conditions of belief and it certainly is an antithesis compared to the thesis of the naïve belief of pre-Modernity.

The main feature of this new context is that it puts an end to the naïve acknowledgement of the transcendent, or of goals or claims which go beyond human flourishing. But this is quite unlike religious turnovers in the past, where one naïve horizon ends up replacing another or the two fuse syncretistically ... Naïveté is now unavailable to anyone, believer or unbeliever alike ... the crucial change which brought us into this new condition was the coming of exclusive humanism as a widely available option.<sup>27</sup>

Although he does not say it so starkly, Taylor seems to see the advent of exclusive humanism as posing or pretending to pose an alternative system of belief to Christianity and other transcendent-oriented belief systems. He seems to fear that people do not realize the perils they may incur in terms of flourishing life if they choose an unprecedented and unproved transcendent-denying imposter. This would explain why his writing after the hinge point of the revolution of the 1960’s has consistently given top priority to targeting neither atheism nor anti-humanism, but exclusive humanism.

Humanism has ancient roots. Protagoras the Sophist wrote in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE that “of all things man is the measure.” However, the meaning of the term has shifted considerably over

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<sup>25</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 20.

<sup>26</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 17.

<sup>27</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 18-19.

the centuries, leaving the concept and its variants diverse and multifaceted to this day.<sup>28</sup> Thus, there is Classical humanism (e.g. Epicureanism), Renaissance humanism (e.g. Machiavelli), Enlightenment humanism (e.g. Descartes, Newton), a range of 18<sup>th</sup> century humanisms including Voltaire, Rousseau, Paine, Hume, Comte, Kant, and 19<sup>th</sup> century humanisms based on such as the utilitarian, Darwinian, pragmatic, and existential, philosophies. Then there are the “anti-humanisms” of those such as Nietzsche and Foucault, the “exclusive humanism” of Camus and Dawkins, and finally, the Christian humanism of those such as Matteo Ricci, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Mother Theresa, Jean Vanier, and, we suggest, Taylor himself.

The roots of contemporary humanism can be found in the turn to the individual or “self” of Deism and the Reformation, and the subsequent turn toward Cartesian “reason” and the epistemological primacy of scientific knowledge, discovery and “progress” of the Enlightenment. It also brought about doubt and contestation as characteristic of modern humanism. Insistence on the need for sceptical thinking is one of its hallmarks.

Within contemporary humanism, the divide is felt particularly over attitudes towards religion. It is not just that some humanists assert that atheism should be the determining characteristic of humanism. Many prominent voices argue that the scientific method is the only grounds for sure knowledge, or that a modern society should be one in which religion plays no part.<sup>29</sup>

Despite the ensuing diversity of perspectives and beliefs, there is according to Professor Mark Vernon, general agreement among humanists, including religious humanists, on the following basic or core characteristics of modern humanism. They place a priority on the human and the subjective. They emphasize progress, optimism, human freedom and individualism. They

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<sup>28</sup> Mark Vernon, *Humanism* (London: Hodder Education Hachette Livre UK, 2008), xi-xii and xvi.

<sup>29</sup> Mark Vernon, *Humanism*, xii-xiii.

foster a critical attitude in general and particularly criticize sources of authority. Their central question is what is it to be human?

With regard to exclusive humanism, Taylor underlines that he is not saying that it defines modern secularity. Exclusive humanisms are not the only alternatives to religion. He says that

our age has seen a strong set of currents which one might call non-religious anti-humanisms, which fly under various names today, like ‘deconstruction’ and ‘post-structuralism.’ Their ideas find their roots in immensely influential writing of the nineteenth century, especially those of Nietzsche. At the same time, there are attempts to reconstruct a non-exclusive humanism on a non-religious basis, which one sees in various forms of deep ecology.<sup>30</sup>

Anti-humanist ideas are atheistic if not anti-theistic, and are particularly associated with German philosophers following Heidegger, and French philosophers such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. Anti-humanism is what Taylor dubs “the immanent anti-Enlightenment.”<sup>31</sup> It and exclusive humanism are important threads in Taylor’s thought about the perils of atheism at the centre of humanism. As for Nietzsche, we will return to him below.

### **6.3.5 Henri de Lubac’s Influential Thought - Links with Vatican II**

In this regard, it is interesting to note that Taylor’s corners of the battlefield bear a striking resemblance to and partly overlap with a three cornered “battlefield” described in a 1949 book published in France not long before Taylor visited as a student from Oxford, written by Henri de Lubac. In an important chapter of *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*<sup>32</sup> titled “The Spiritual Battle,” De Lubac singles out three avenues of contemporary atheism: (1) those who deny or declare unknowable “the very existence of a reality higher than the things of this world

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<sup>30</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 19.

<sup>31</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 372-3.

<sup>32</sup> Henri de Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 112-113.

... [forcing] thought to fall back upon immanent positions;” or (2) “the opposite course,” those who disbelieve anything “outside the clutches of reason ... and that means ... the disappearance of the very idea of a mystery to believe in;” or (3) “objections of a social character” leading to insistence on demonstrating “that religion is not the ‘opium of the people’ [nor] indifferent to man’s lot on earth” to such a degree that this concern seems “preponderant” over the Gospel.<sup>33</sup>

What is particularly striking then about de Lubac from the point of view of our understanding of Taylor’s thought is the fact that, having outlined the above three avenues of atheism in the context of a discussion about the Church engaged in a contemporary “battle”, De Lubac then turns his sharp intellect on a fourth factor. He says that “the principal attack comes from elsewhere. What is in the foreground ... is no longer an historical, metaphysical, political or social problem ... it is a *spiritual* problem. It is the human problem as a whole. The Christian conception of life, Christian spirituality, the inward attitude which ... bespeaks the Christian – that is what is at stake.”<sup>34</sup>

This is notable because it seems very reminiscent of Taylor’s own structure of thought underlying this Chapter and the corners of the battle we will be discussing. In it is the underlying issue of the embattled place of the transcendent in secular modern lives which, of course, is nothing less than a spiritual battle.

However, it should be noted that in the margin of his concern about tensions over Church performance on social issues, he makes a particularly pointed criticism against elements of the church who attack the Church from within by drawing justifiable criticism of the Church as an institution and give credence to Nietzsche’s withering observation of a Christianity that allows

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<sup>33</sup> Henri de Lubac, *The Drama*, 112-3.

<sup>34</sup> Henri de Lubac, *The Drama*, 113.

itself to be “seduced ... by the instinct of decadence.”<sup>35</sup> It is in this way that Nietzsche claims “God is dead ... and it is we [i.e. our warping Christian values] who have killed him.” Thus, Nietzsche argues that it is not a matter of spirituality, but rather it is a matter of lost or corrupting substitutes for values. It is not merely a matter of atheism in his thinking, but “antitheism.”<sup>36</sup> In this way, de Lubac arrives at the conclusion that “the most daring and destructive form of modern atheism (is) absolute humanism (which) inevitably regards a Christian humanism as absurd.”<sup>37</sup>

Because of its importance in relation to Taylor’s characterizations of the corners of the battle of modern culture, we wish to reiterate de Lubac’s key point. He says that “the principal attack comes from elsewhere ... it is no longer an historical, metaphysical, political or social problem. It is a *spiritual* problem. It is the human problem as a whole. The Christian conception of life, Christian spirituality, the inward attitude, which ... bespeaks the Christian – that is what is at stake.”<sup>38</sup> De Lubac is decrying “those of the new generation” who are setting aside - and replacing ... the *whole* of Christianity ... [so that] to the Christian ideal they oppose a pagan ideal. Against the God worshipped by Christians they proudly set up their own deities”<sup>39</sup> In this light, we claim that Taylor’s philosophy owes much to the influence of the philosophical/theological debates that he told the author he had found so interesting when he visited France after going to Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar in the early 1950s.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Henri de Lubac, *The Drama*, 117.

<sup>36</sup> Henri de Lubac, *The Drama*, 43. de Lubac is quoting here from Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo* (French translation by Albert), 45 which, is referenced at footnote 10, p.117.

<sup>37</sup> Henri de Lubac, *The Drama*, 24.

<sup>38</sup> Henri de Lubac, *The Drama*, 113

<sup>39</sup> Henri de Lubac, *The Drama*, 114.

<sup>40</sup> Note: the fact of the influence of his encounters with philosophical debate in France as a student was divulged by Taylor to the author in an informal meeting on April 14, 2015 but there were no names mentioned. Hence the suggestion of a link between de Lubac and Taylor is speculative while the impact of his experience in France is recorded with his permission. In an email exchange with the author November 3-4, 2016, Taylor denied a direct

The particular reason we suggest that De Lubac's comments quoted above are important to our study is because they perhaps provide a clue to understanding hermeneutically Taylor's underlying rhetorical objectives. Taylor is known to favour hermeneutical approaches. The approach is named after the Greek god *Hermes*, who was a deliverer of messages. Hermeneutics is about the different types of messages that are conveyed by a basic statement: there is a foreground message conveyed by the words of the statement, a background message implied or intended to be received by the receiver of that message, and, third, the message that is actually received or "decoded" by the receiver and what he/she makes of it. Taking this structure of analysis, it is interesting that de Lubac outlines three specific forms of atheism of concern to Christianity but then announces a fourth major, indeed overriding concern. That is, the danger of the atheist humanist attack directed at the heart or spiritual core of Christianity. We suggest that this approach is so close to Taylor's approach in his three or four cornered battle that it reflects that an idea of spiritual conflict may have been in the *zeitgeist* at this formative time for Taylor's thought. Perhaps there is a link between Taylor's battle scene and de Lubac's focus on the spiritual threat to Christianity. If so, this might be a warrant supporting our claim that Taylor's principal concern in his work is the place of the transcendent in secular modern life?

## **6.4 Taylor's Battlefield Scenario of Belief and Unbelief**

### **6.4.1 Introduction**

We have seen how Taylor's Secularity 3 focusses on changed conditions of belief in three dimensions. First, belief or unbelief in secular modernity has become a matter of individual, personal choice and responsibility. Second, in this context, each individual faces a choice among

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encounter with De Lubac's work in the 1940s but he acknowledges the crucial influence of the writing of Congar, Daniélou and De Lubac on the new departures coming from Vatican II in *A Secular Age*, 752.

numerous options of belief and unbelief, each with their own fundamental defining principles. Third, each option has consequences for the presence or absence of the transcendent, that is, for “fullness,” in one’s lived life. This section will address the options of belief and unbelief and the place of the transcendent for the individual in each case.

In the early pages of *A Secular Age*, which seemed from its title to be focused principally on secularity, Taylor characterizes in general terms what he proposes are four optional, broad “construals,” of belief or unbelief that individuals have the option to choose from in secular modern societies. The principal underlying issue in each case is the question of whether or not and, if so, to what degree, there is a place for the transcendent. Outlining Taylor’s description of each of these options or “corners” and of one or more notable proponents of each option is the objective of the rest of this Chapter.

This may appear to be a wide detour from the main thrust of this study of the place of the transcendent in secular modernity. But we feel it is necessary to explore the surface or foreground level of Taylor’s line of thought in order eventually to be able to better perceive hermeneutically his principal background message. We believe that that message, when seen as such, will support our hypothesis. In this regard, it is important to recall that Taylor believes that “we are just at the beginning of a new age of religious searching, whose outcome no one can foresee.”<sup>41</sup> A widespread understanding of the optional belief positions available to individuals in secular societies is therefore important to their achieving or not achieving, as the case may be, fullness in their lives. It is also necessary groundwork for a possible recovery of past values adapted to new realities in the upcoming religious transformation which Taylor is anticipating and which will be discussed in Chapter 7.

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<sup>41</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 535.

## 6.4.2 Overview of the “Map” of the Corners of the Battlefield

Taylor adopts a heuristic of the scene of a battle to help clarify a confusing picture. He presents in words a “more nuanced map of the ideological terrain”<sup>42</sup> but, while helpful, it also is confusing.<sup>43</sup> Hence, this is a distillation of his distillation to help us to resolve “cross pressures.” Taylor says that these are a common characteristic in individual lives in secular modernity, including, he confesses, his own. That is, although there are options to choose from, the modern individual may continue to feel contrary pressures even after having chosen to lean towards a particular option. So if there are going to be cross pressures, there is a further need for a road map to help us to understand and choose our own spiritual path.

Taylor’s map divides the battlefield of the struggle of belief and unbelief into three corners with a possibility of adding a fourth: Corner # 1 consists of the Neo-Nietzscheans, the Anti-Humanists, and the anti-theists; Corner #2 includes the “secular humanists” or what he calls the “exclusive humanists,” and Corner # 3 is “acknowledgers of transcendence” or “those who acknowledge some good beyond life.” Each of these corners will be discussed in what follows in the chapter. However, Taylor injects some important additional information about his map.

First, he allows for a fourth corner to cover a variety of positions open to the transcendent horizon. This allows him to take account of the division among believers in the transcendent: some of whom want to roll back secular humanism to the days of the metaphysical primacy of traditional religion, while “others, in which I place myself [i.e. Taylor] think that the practical

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<sup>42</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 636-7.

<sup>43</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 636-7.

primacy of life has been a great gain for human kind ... and this gain was in fact unlikely to come about without some breach with established religion.”<sup>44</sup>

A second distinction Taylor makes is his reference to the “immanent counter-Enlightenment,” a term he appropriates to describe the position of such modern anti-humanists as Foucault and Derrida. They are properly lumped with the neo-Nietzschean corner although some would argue they should be a corner unto themselves.

A third and last dimension that Taylor injects into his map involves identifying where each stance is united or separated from other corners. Thus, out of the three groups, only the acknowledgers of transcendence recognize the transcendent, while the others are either atheistic or anti-theistic. However, acknowledgers of the transcendent share with the neo-Nietzscheans low expectations of secular humanism. But “secular humanists and believers come together in defending an idea of the human good, against the anti-humanism of Nietzsche’s heirs.”<sup>45</sup>

In this light, we will now proceed to discuss each “corner” of Taylor’s battlefield, illustrating each by reference to notable voices of the philosophical or theological position in question.

### **6.4.3 Corner #1: Atheism, Anti-Humanism and Anti-Theism – Nietzsche and the Neo Nietzscheans**

#### **6.4.3.1 Introduction**

As we have seen, Taylor takes a dramatically multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approach in his study of the sources, characteristics and implications of modernity. As a result,

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<sup>44</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 637.

<sup>45</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 637.

he engages with a very broad array of dialogue partners whose diversity is partly reflected in the indexes of his two major books. An analysis of these indexes offers insight into Taylor's major preoccupations as a contemporary "philosophical anthropologist." In this respect, it may come as something of a surprise to discover that Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) is arguably, from at least the point of view of frequency of reference, Taylor's primary dialogue partner in both books. In *Sources of the Self* there are 28 references to Nietzsche, Nietzscheanism and neo-Nietzscheans, as compared to the next most referenced individuals: Aristotle (24) and Descartes (19). In *A Secular Age* (whose index is much more thorough) there are 86 references to Nietzsche, Nietzscheanism and neo-Nietzscheans as compared to the next most frequently referenced individuals and their associated thought: Jesus Christ (49) and Aristotle (32). Coincidentally, perhaps these three can be seen as representative of the three "corners" of Taylor's "battlefield."

Indeed, Nietzsche's atheism and anti-humanism and his prophecies about what he regarded as the consequences of the fact of the "death of God" in secular modernity seem to have continuing relevance in 21<sup>st</sup> century Western and even global life. These include social, economic and political decline and decadence spurring the emergence of ever-recurring social violence as a result of the unleashing of a natural human "Will to Power."<sup>46</sup> This, Nietzsche predicted, would lead to a Superman or "Overman" dominating a hierarchical structure composed of a few power holders and many slaves. "*I teach you the Superman. What is the ape to man? A laughing stock, a thing of shame. And just the same shall man be to the Superman ...*

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<sup>46</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Thomas Common, trans. (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1999), 36.

The Superman is the meaning of the earth ... *remain true to the earth*, and believe not those who speak unto you of superearthy hopes! ... despisers of life are they ...”<sup>47</sup>

Nietzsche’s ideas influenced many important thinkers or leaders of historical and philosophical consequence, not least Karl Marx, Adolf Hitler, and Oswald Spengler.<sup>48</sup> The latter brings out an important distinction – Nietzsche not only influenced many by his ideas but also by his way of thinking and questioning. Jean-Paul Sartre and other “Existentialists” are examples of this. Moreover, more recently his ideas figure powerfully in the thought of such “neo-Nietzscheans” as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and in the work of a wide variety of writers, artists and other notable thinkers who profoundly influenced the culture of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with a force that continues to be felt in the present century. These include, for example, William James, James Joyce, and Max Weber who, as we have seen, perceived modernity as “disenchanted” in terms of belief but also threatened by the capture of human life within an “iron cage ... in which material goods have attained an increasing and finally an inexorable power over the lives of men as at no previous period in history.”<sup>49</sup>

#### **6.4.3.2 The “Nietzsche Legend”**

If this outline of the important influence of Nietzsche’s thought is correct, one might well ask why it seems to have been given comparatively little attention and respect in Anglo-American philosophical thought. From the late 1880’s, just before his mental collapse, Nietzsche developed what became a widespread fame and continuing impact on Continental European thought. This is illustrated in part by the fact that, owing to the propaganda skills of his sister,

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<sup>47</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, 3.

<sup>48</sup> Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1919 and 1922), xiv. Here he records that “those to whom I owe practically everything: (are) Goethe and Nietzsche. Goethe gave me method, Nietzsche the questioning faculty.”

<sup>49</sup> Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Charles Scribner & Sons, 1958), 181.

Elizabeth Forster-Nietzsche, Nietzsche had become well enough known in Germany for German soldiers in World War I to be provided with copies for their backpacks of his most influential book, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*.<sup>50</sup> In it, Nietzsche elaborates on his ideas about power, decline and violence stemming from his “God is dead” theme (which was first voiced in his *The Gay Science*.)<sup>51</sup>

On the other hand, in contrast to his European impact, Nietzsche’s reputation and influence was distinctly negative in Anglo-American thought through much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century before perhaps turning a corner later in the Century with the neo-Nietzscheans. This apparent neglect is partly the result of an influential but unscholarly and prejudiced book published by Crane Brinton of Harvard University during the Second World War.<sup>52</sup> But it is mainly the result of the legend that linked his ideas but not his actual beliefs to the two world wars, and to anti-Semitism and the Holocaust. The stigma attached to the legend might also explain why Taylor seems to approach him gingerly or indirectly in much of his writing even though Nietzsche seems in Taylor’s major books to serve indirectly as his undeclared foil. In addition, the Roman Catholic Church certainly and rightly approached Nietzsche as an antagonist, perhaps associating him with the much feared “Modernity” of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and its offshoot, the so-called “la nouvelle théologie,” that sparked much of the debate and rancour behind the eventual success of the Second Vatican Council in the 1960’s. Expert scholars of the Council, like Professor Catherine Clifford of St. Paul University in Ottawa, believe that it would be incorrect to say that Nietzsche’s thought and the threat of its spreading influence in Western culture was the “elephant in the room” during the Council’s effort to discern and respond with

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<sup>50</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, 3.

<sup>51</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 181.

<sup>52</sup> Crane Brinton, *Nietzsche*, (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1941).

reforms to “the signs of the times.” In her view “the big bear was modernity and how the Church would situate itself within this new context of modernity in all its dimensions.”<sup>53</sup> Nonetheless, Nietzsche was certainly considered an important challenge to the Church by some reformers and observers at the Council such as Henri de Lubac who references Nietzsche over 200 times in the index of his 509 page masterpiece, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*.<sup>54</sup>

Two further specific reasons are often suggested for the continuation of this negative “myth” and misleading “Nietzsche legend” through most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century especially outside Continental Europe: first, Nietzsche’s unconventional and idiosyncratic style of writing which nonetheless was later described as “beautiful” prose which people read for “sheer enjoyment”<sup>55</sup> and second, the appropriation by Hitler and Mussolini and the German and Italian Fascists of warped versions of some of his ideas, whipped on as they were by the propagandistic talents of his anti-Semitic and German imperialist sister.<sup>56</sup> She nursed Nietzsche during ten years of insanity in the final years of his life with full rights to his intellectual property. This included the right, which she abused, to edit Nietzsche’s notes and manuscripts, presenting ideas that were often the opposite of Nietzsche’s intended thought. He was, for example, outspokenly opposed to Bismarck’s unified German *Reich* and unquestionably, even violently, opposed to anti-Semitism, directly contrary to the impression left by his supposed “last work”, *The Will to Power*. It was published by his sister in 1901, well after his insanity and death, working from a collage of Nietzsche’s notes for an anticipated book by that name. Therefore, it was not his “last” work, which in fact was *Ecce Homo, his autobiography*, written in 1888, which was his last productive year before the onset of his dementia as his (Nietzsche’s) autobiography. It was suppressed by

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<sup>53</sup> Catherine E. Clifford, in a personal written note to the author, September 8, 2016.

<sup>54</sup> Henri de Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, 511, 519, 529.

<sup>55</sup> Walter Kaufmann, editor and translator, *The Portable Nietzsche*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), 1.

<sup>56</sup> Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist, Third Edition* (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), xiii-xiv.

his sister until its publication in 1908 because it contradicted her interests and ideological preferences.<sup>57</sup> In short, while nursing the by-then infantile Nietzsche, she was chiefly responsible for “nursing the Nietzsche legend” that greatly complicated reception and understanding of his writing and ideas.

As we have noted, we should add as a third major reason for the long eclipse of Nietzsche, at least in Anglo-American and much European theological scholarship, the fact that Nietzsche’s frontal attack on Christianity made him an obvious enemy of all the Christian churches in a deeply ideological era. Nonetheless, it can also be argued, for the same reason, that his anti-Christian thought was a source of a strong readership among people with anti-clerical and atheistic preferences. This was obviously the case among influential thinkers and artists in continental Europe, and especially the traditionally secular France, where atheistic “existentialism” flowered as a powerful cultural and philosophical force under the influence of Heidegger and popular literary writing, especially of Sartre and Camus (though the latter denied being an existentialist and was probably more properly described as an “exclusive humanist” exposed to the cross-pressured condition Taylor discusses. Equally, if not even more important, was the subsequent influence of Nietzsche’s ideas as a “spring-board” in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to new atheistic and anti-humanist interpretations by the so-called “neo-Nietzscheans” including Foucault and Derrida. About them, Taylor remarks:

It is not my intention to claim that exclusive humanisms offer the only alternatives to religion. Our age has seen a strong set of currents which one might call non-religious anti-humanisms which fly under various names today like ‘deconstruction’ and ‘post-structuralism,’ and which find their roots in immensely influential writings of the nineteenth century, especially those of Nietzsche.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Walter Kaufmann, *Basic Writings of Nietzsche* (New York: The Modern Library, 2000), 657-8.

<sup>58</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 19.

Of course, these ideas have had a huge impact on more recent thought, and especially academic thought in Western universities, shaping or warping for better or worse (depending on your point of view) the thinking of several generations of students present and to come. Taylor takes sharp issue with this modern “individualistic” ideal because it fails to recognize the ongoing hold on us of our background tradition and culture. Moreover, it focusses on

a common picture of the self, as (at least potentially and ideally) drawing its purposes, goals, and life-plans out of itself, seeking ‘relationships’ only insofar as they are ‘fulfilling’, [and] is largely based on ignoring our embedding in webs of interlocution. It seems somehow to read the step to an independent stance as a stepping altogether outside the transcendental condition of interlocution ... [however] bringing out the transcendental condition is a way of heading this confusion off.”<sup>59</sup>

This illustrates a huge discord between Taylor’s thought and Nietzsche’s on just about every level of their respective philosophies about what it is to be human. It is in regard to belief in the transcendent horizon and the place of the historical and institutional church in the spiritual lives of people where they are furthest apart. Nietzsche disparages, not simply disagrees, with Taylor’s firmly held views, but not vice-versa because Taylor admits that in the absence of a God of *agapē*. or a secular variant, Nietzsche is probably right.<sup>60</sup>

Taylor also lumps into this corner and attacks contemporary atheistic and anti-humanist voices, including Rawls and Habermas. He does this notably in Chapter 3 of *Sources of the Self*, titled “The Ethics of Inarticulacy.”<sup>61</sup> Here he says with regard to the “theories of obligatory action” of Habermas and Rawls that “the good is what in its articulation gives the point of the rules which define the right. That is what has been suppressed by these strange cramped theories of modern moral philosophy, which have the paradoxical effect of making us inarticulate on

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<sup>59</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 38-39.

<sup>60</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 516.

<sup>61</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 53-90.

some of the most important issues of morality.”<sup>62</sup> This is because “Kant-derived moral theories in our day ... justify the exclusion of qualitative distinctions,”<sup>63</sup> or what in an important part of the chapter he describes as “hypergoods.”<sup>64</sup>

In the meantime, the very influential Nietzsche-tinged Habermas seems to remain in the atheist corner but as an open-minded philosopher, not the closed-minded secularist sociologist he seemed to be earlier in his career. He gives voice to a variant on the relatively straight-forward belief-versus-unbelief type of atheism of the post-Enlightenment, post-Darwinian kind. Taylor calls the variant the “immanent counter-Enlightenment”:

The deeper, more anchored forms of unbelief arising in the nineteenth century are basically the same as those which are held today ... Foucault and others have noticed the watershed that the Romantic age made in European thought, accrediting a sense of reality as deep, systematic, as finding its mainsprings well below an immediately available surface, whether it be in the economic theories of Marx, the “depth psychology” of a Freud, or the genealogies of a Nietzsche. We are still living in the aftermath of this shift to depth ... we might be tempted to say that modern unbelief starts then, and not really in the Age of the Enlightenment.”<sup>65</sup>

Taylor considers this 19<sup>th</sup> century turn to depth a major development in the nature of belief and unbelief and calls it the Modern Schism.

Nietzsche ... brings us to an extremely important turn in the moral imagination of unbelief in the nineteenth century ... ‘post-Schopenhauerian’ visions ... give a positive signal to the irrational, amoral, even violent forces within us ... these cannot be simply condemned and uprooted, because our existence, and/or vitality ... depend on them. This turn finds a new moral meaning in our dark genesis out of the wild and pre-human ... this is a turn against the values of the Enlightenment ... it is not in any sense a return to

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<sup>62</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 89.

<sup>63</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 66. Note: Perhaps this reference to the “exclusion” of qualitative distinctions is the origin of Taylor’s invented concept of “exclusive humanism.”

<sup>64</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 68-73.

<sup>65</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 369.

religion or the transcendent. It remains resolutely naturalist. That is why I will refer to it as the ‘immanent counter-Enlightenment’.<sup>66</sup>

Habermas’ evolving thinking reinforces the impression of his having an open mind appropriate to scholars. This was dramatically reflected in his 2004 debate with his compatriot, then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, a year before he became Pope Benedict XVI. It took place three years after the terrorist attacks of “9/11” had underlined the need for new perspectives on faith in a plural global society. This paradigm shift towards faith-based terrorism in developed countries and its aftermath has heightened concern especially in Europe about growing social disintegration and the threat to the constitutional state. As Habermas says, “the balance achieved in the modern period between the three great media of societal integration is now at risk, because the markets and the power of the bureaucracy are expelling social solidarity (that is, a coordination of action based on values, norms, and a vocabulary intended to promote social understanding) ... this awareness ... is reflected in the phrase: post-secular society.”<sup>67</sup> In this respect, Habermas underlines that the central dynamic in this change is the “political dealings of unbelieving citizens with believing citizens.”<sup>68</sup> This of course was the crucial question addressed in Charles Taylor’s work for the Commission of Inquiry on “reasonable accommodation” in Quebec. It is in the political arena where Taylor’s three or four cornered battle becomes unavoidable in modern Western societies.

### **6.4.3.3 Shifting Appreciation of Nietzsche’s Importance**

Having noted the dramatic influence of Nietzsche’s severely anti-Christian form of atheism in Continental Europe and the lesser initial impact of Nietzsche and Nietzscheanism on

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<sup>66</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 369.

<sup>67</sup> Jürgen Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger, *The Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion*, Florian Schuller ed., Brian McNeil, trans., (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006), 45-46.

<sup>68</sup> Jürgen Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger, *The Dialectics of Secularization*, 45-46.

Anglo-American thought, it is important to recognize that there was a significant if not radical change in the appreciation for Nietzsche's intellectual achievement in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century in English language countries. Impressive scholars of Nietzsche emerged to replace people like Crane Brinton who had tarred Nietzsche's reputation in North America.<sup>69</sup> They were much more fulsome in their praise and less prejudiced about Nietzsche. They brought about a reevaluation of his ideas. R.J. Hollingdale's British perspective aroused readers not only to the richness and dramatic implications of Nietzsche's thought, but also to its underlying coherence.<sup>70</sup> Walter Kaufmann, a Jewish German who emigrated to the US just before World War II, became a leading scholar of Nietzsche's thought. His writing continues to be widely admired for "his powerful defense of Nietzsche."<sup>71</sup> While eschewing many of the philosopher's ideas and values, he describes the eccentric thinker as "probably Germany's greatest prose stylist as well as one of the most profound and influential modern philosophers ... there is no denying [for example] that Aristotle, Hegel, and Nietzsche have vastly enriched the discussion of tragedy – probably more so than anyone else."<sup>72</sup> While criticizing some of Nietzsche's books, he also gives praise where praise is due. For example, he describes *Ecce Homo* as "one of the treasures of world literature" and confesses that he "loves best the five books Nietzsche wrote during his last productive year, 1888 – not least because they are such brilliant works of art."<sup>73</sup>

Another respected expert on Nietzsche, Thomas Common, says that "by living his own philosophy, he identified and conceptualized the will to power as well as the problem of values for the dawn of a new era, and influenced Western culture and thought more than any other

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<sup>69</sup> Crane Brinton, *Nietzsche* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1941).

<sup>70</sup> R.J. Hollingdale, *A Nietzsche Reader* (London: Penguin Books, 1977), 7-11.

<sup>71</sup> Walter Kaufmann, *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, xi-xi. Note: Peter Gay in the Introduction declares that "It is safe to say that in the course of the twentieth century no American academic study has had a wider, or more fully deserved, impact than Kaufmann's *Nietzsche*."

<sup>72</sup> Walter Kaufmann, *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, 5.

<sup>73</sup> Walter Kaufmann, *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, 637.

philosopher of modern times.”<sup>74</sup> Similarly, Gianni Vattimo reports that “in Martin Heidegger’s view (after he completed a two-volume study between 1936 and 1946 titled *Nietzsche* which was published only in 1961) Nietzsche should be related to Aristotle. Vattimo argues that he was not “essentially a metaphysical thinker (but rather) a philosopher in the technical sense of the word, because the oldest and most fundamental problem of philosophy was the central focus of Nietzsche’s attention, namely the question of Being.”<sup>75</sup> (Of course, we probably need to dilute the significance of this commendation written during years in which Heidegger was an active supporter of National Socialism, and the long-dead Nietzsche had been appropriated as a national philosophical treasure by Hitler even though there is no evidence he actually ever read anything by Nietzsche. Even the chapters in his *Mein Kampf* referring to “philosophy” do not come close to Nietzsche or any other scholarly philosophical ideas.)<sup>76</sup>

#### **6.4.3.4 Fullness in the Life Experience of an Atheist: Meaning and Nihilism**

Before closing this discussion, we need to return to a deeper understanding of Nietzsche’s ideas, “prophecies” or warnings about the potential perils for a life lived “*atheos*,” without God. Taylor sees them as the central threats posed to those living in secular modernity as atheists, whether as Neo-Nietzscheans, anti-humanists or, for that matter, exclusive humanists. The starting point for what became Nietzsche’s mission was in August of 1882 when he completed his *The Gay Science (Die fröhliche Wissenschaft)* in which he first proclaimed his vision of the death of God in the famous Section 108: “After Buddha was dead, his shadow was still shown for centuries in a cave ... God is dead; but given the way of men, there may still be caves for

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<sup>74</sup> Thomas Common, trans., *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, iii.

<sup>75</sup> Gianni Vattimo, *Nietzsche: An Introduction*, Translated by Nicholas Martin (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2002), 1.

<sup>76</sup> Adolph Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, Ralph Manheim, trans., (Boston: The Houghton Mifflin Company, 1971), 373-85, 452-62.

thousands of years in which his shadow may be shown.”<sup>77</sup> However, he returns to the theme more substantively in the yet more famous statement of Section 125. “The madman ... the madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes, ‘Whither is God?’ he cried. ‘I will tell you. We have killed him – you and I. All of us are his murderers ... here the madman fell silent ... at last he threw his lantern on the ground ... ‘I have come too early,’ he said then: ‘my time is not yet. This tremendous event is still on its way.’”<sup>78</sup>

The meaning of his thinking is elaborated in what Kaufmann considers the most important related passage in this book – Section 343 – which in many respects sums up Nietzsche’s central message. It is aimed, as de Lubac puts it, at the heart of Christianity. ‘The greatest recent event – that ‘God is dead’, that the belief in the Christian god has become unbelievable – is already beginning to cast its first shadows over Europe ... the event itself is far too great, too remote, too much beyond most people’s power of apprehension, for one to suppose that so much as the report of it could have *reached* them.’<sup>79</sup> Then Nietzsche underlines his dire message when he says, “this lengthy vast, and uninterrupted process of crumbling, destruction, ruin and overthrow which is now imminent: who has realized it sufficiently to-day to have to stand up as the teacher and herald of such a tremendous logic of terror, as the prophet of a period of doom and eclipse ...?”<sup>80</sup> Kaufmann tells us that the meaning of all this for Nietzsche is more coherently developed later in the first seven passages of *Thus Spake Zarathustra*.<sup>81</sup> These spell out Nietzsche’s views of the implications of the death of God including his prophecy of the “last

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<sup>77</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 81.

<sup>78</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 90-91.

<sup>79</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 155.

<sup>80</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 155.

<sup>81</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, , *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, 1-9.

man”<sup>82</sup> and the “Superman”<sup>83</sup> but they also reiterate his frustration at not being heard by his hearers. “The good and the just hate thee . . . the believers in the orthodox belief hate thee.”<sup>84</sup>

The foregoing helps explain why Taylor seems to place Nietzsche at the head of the first corner of his three or four-cornered battlefield, that is, the atheist and anti-humanist corner. That said, it is important to note that it is not correct to consider Nietzsche a conventional atheist (if there is such a thing). He became anti-Christian rather than someone totally opposed to religious belief in general. Indeed, at times he seems quite religious, but of a neo-pagan not Christian sort.

This is evidenced by the fact he set out to study theology at the university level before switching to becoming a philologist, philosopher and professor. He was clearly interested in religion from childhood in his German Lutheran Pietist household. It is also evidenced in his writing when he supports Greek mythological beliefs. He specifically approves of the mythical Greek god Dionysius and sees himself as Dionysian as opposed to Apollonian, not because he believed in any form of absolute truth, but rather because the values of the mythological Dionysius met the supreme test for Nietzsche of the values of a free Superman or Overman/*Übermensch* – that is, they must be life-affirming. A third evidence of Nietzsche’s religiosity, as already noted, can be found in his enraptured description of his seemingly mystical or transcendent experience, he called it an “inspiration,”<sup>85</sup> while out walking near the Lake of Silva-Plana in Italy near Portofino. He described it in his posthumously published autobiography *Ecce Homo*<sup>86</sup> with observations not unlike some of the great descriptions of mystical experience

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<sup>82</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, 6.

<sup>83</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, 4.

<sup>84</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, 9.

<sup>85</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo, How One Becomes What One Is*, translated with notes by R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Books, 1992), 72.

<sup>86</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*: 72-73.

such as by St. Teresa<sup>87</sup>, St. John of the Cross<sup>88</sup> and Evelyn Underhill.<sup>89</sup> In particular he observes its transformative effect on him. Finally, it is interesting that Nietzsche makes frequent reference to the soul, something one would not expect from an absolute atheist. In short, Nietzsche seemed remarkably religious for a philosophical atheist.

However, even if he is not strictly speaking an atheist, he is vehemently anti-Christian, and one can easily see why his vitriolic attacks on Christian beliefs became jumbled with his criticism of the Christian church which, at that time he was critiquing it, was not life-giving. He will have been seen by many as offering persuasive justification for becoming atheists especially among Christians still reeling from the impact of Darwin's challenge to the validity of Scripture. But, even if persuaded intellectually, their actual lived experience as atheists was another matter and the focus of Taylor's critique.

What Taylor emphasizes in several of his books is not Nietzsche's death of God thesis (to which in a sense he responded, as seen above, by his demolition of the Secularization Thesis), nor his attack on Christianity because it is based on "pity" and seeks redemption in an after-life as opposed to the present life. Of most concern to him are the serious implications for fullness of human lives on the part of those who try to live today as atheists and anti-humanists. For Nietzsche, it was relatively secondary whether a religion could be believed as opposed to what life-affirming effects it could have or might stultify. By this standard he saw Christian modernity offering only skepticism, relativism and, worst of all, nihilism. Taylor, on the contrary clearly sees fullness – therein lies the contrast between the first and the third corners of the battle.

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<sup>87</sup> Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*, Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, trans., Raymundo Pannikar, preface. (New York: Paulist Press, 1979).

<sup>88</sup> St. John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*, E. Allison Peers, trans. (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2003).

<sup>89</sup> Evelyn Underhill, *Modern Guide to the Ancient Quest for the Holy*, (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1988).

According to a helpful summary written by Professor Roy Jackson which we have drawn on for much of this interpretation, there are three types of nihilism reflected in Nietzsche's ideas: "Oriental Nihilism" based on Schopenhauer's pessimistic interpretation of Buddhism in which everything in our world and life is illusory. Then there is "European Nihilism" as reflected in Turgenev's 1862 novel *Fathers and Sons* in which younger generations abandon the beliefs and values of older generations and adopt a belief in "nothing" except science. Then there is Nietzsche's nihilism in which "all belief systems ... are fictions ... merely instances of the will to power. The world is the only world, even if it is valueless. There is no 'unity,' no 'truth' ... [but] this fact should not lead to pessimism (but to) a Dionysian 'yes' to life."<sup>90</sup>

Hence, Nietzsche saw modernity driving towards degeneration and decline which he thought would inevitably bring about a return to the debased slavery and herd mentality of the original early Christian experience. In his view, this could only be counteracted by a new quasi-Dionysian spirituality of individuality, self-expression and freedom that would channel the human "will to power" and bring about an aristocracy of stronger beings from which a superior class would emerge dominated by an Overman, *Übermensch* or Superman. This personage would be along the lines of the historical experience of Zoroaster or Zarathustra, the Persian religious leader referenced in Nietzsche's most important book's title. These ideas are clearly anti-humanistic and explain why thinkers included Nietzsche among the "masters of suspicion."<sup>91</sup>

The most disturbing implication of this vision of the future is that Nietzsche sees it as guaranteeing inevitable violence on a continuing basis. In an era of nuclear weapons, this is

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<sup>90</sup> Roy Jackson, *Nietzsche: The Key Ideas* (London: Hachette UK, 2008), 100-2.

<sup>91</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation, Book I Problematic, Section 2: The Conflict of Interpretations: Interpretation as Exercise of Suspicion*, 32.

something to be reckoned with. On the other hand, Nietzsche's prophecy that this sequence would be an eternally recurring pattern that mankind was condemned to repeat infinitely is obviously more difficult to accept precisely because violence involving nuclear weapons and ongoing environmental degradation makes any human future questionable in the event of major global conflict.

Needless to say, Taylor takes seriously many of Nietzsche's warnings about the perils of atheism and anti-humanism for people living in modernity. Many international social, political and technological developments, including the ravages of Hitler and Stalin, since Nietzsche made his predictions, could be said already to have demonstrated aspects of his prophecies. For that reason, Taylor accepts that he is unable to prove Nietzsche wrong about the destructive side of benevolence and concludes that *agapē* is the world's only hope. Taylor does not accept that there is no *agapē* and he rejects the idea that "we have to pay this price – a kind of spiritual lobotomy – to enjoy modern freedom."<sup>92</sup>

On the contrary, he points out in his 1989 Massey Lectures that there is much that is positive in modernity whatever its "knockers" like Nietzsche might say. But it is not as good as its "boosters" argue. He identifies three malaises of modernity in particular, partly agreeing with some of Nietzsche's criticisms. These are a loss of meaning with the fading of moral horizons. The second concerns the eclipse of ends in the face of rampant instrumental reason. And the third is about the loss of freedom. Taylor claims that "the issue is not how much of a price in bad consequences you have to pay for the positive fruits [of modernity] but rather how to steer these developments towards their greatest promise and avoid the slide into the debased forms."<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Charles Taylor, "A Catholic Modernity?" *Dilemmas and Connections*, 172.

<sup>93</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1991), 11-12.

In other words, in terms of the experience of lives lived in modernity in the first corner of the battle of belief and unbelief, Taylor sees the atheism, anti-theism and anti-humanism of Nietzsche and the Neo-Nietzscheans as dooming them to go down a possibly violent, certainly unfulfilling, and therefore soul-destroying blind alley.

#### **6.4.4 Corner # 2: “Exclusive Humanism”**

*Exclusive humanism closes the transcendent window, as though there were nothing beyond – ... as though it weren't a crying need of the human heart to open the window, gaze, and then go beyond; as though feeling this need were the result of a mistake, an erroneous worldview, bad conditioning, or, worse, some pathology. Two radically different perspectives on the human condition: who is right?”<sup>94</sup>*

##### **6.4.4.1 Introduction**

The second corner in Taylor's heuristic of the four cornered battle of belief and unbelief in secular modernity concerns what he names “exclusive humanism.” We have seen in the introduction to this Chapter that he makes it clear that this is the corner of unbelief that he regards as the biggest threat to Christian belief and practice, and to the possibility of fullness in the lives of individuals who opt for that choice of belief. Taylor raises the issue of exclusive humanism early in *A Secular Age* when he says that “Secularity 3 came to be along with the possibility of exclusive humanism, which thus for the first time widened the range of possible options, ending the era of ‘naïve’ religious faith.”<sup>95</sup> So, exclusive humanism as he defines it is characteristic of modern secularity.

Taylor defines the term as meaning belief that life as a human is lived exclusively within the immanent horizon and excludes all higher goods beyond human flourishing. He further defines the idea as meaning “self-sufficing humanism” and this explains why he is especially

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<sup>94</sup> Charles Taylor, “A Catholic Modernity?” *Dilemmas and Connections*, 178.

<sup>95</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 20.

concerned about this corner of the “battle.” The modern individual has unprecedented freedom in this corner, but as a consequence risks “self-mutilation.” Living a disconnected self-satisficing life is reported by Nietzsche, Weber and others as resulting in a flattening or homogenization of life –Nietzsche’s contemptible “pitiable comfort.”<sup>96</sup> Taylor remarks that the continued “popularity” of Nietzsche’s “fierce denunciation of the modern moral order” (by which he meant people living lives of exclusive or self-sufficient humanism) shows that “his devastating critique still speaks to many people today.”<sup>97</sup> What Taylor means is that the nightmare scenario of human consequences prophesized by Nietzsche with the “death of God” including “the will to power,” the rise of the Overman, unavoidable violence and destruction, and eternal return of the same consequences have had an enduring impact on the social imaginary of modern secular societies.

In this regard it may be helpful to reiterate and elaborate the way in which Taylor uses his two important terms of art already presented above that might easily be confused with each other or seen, incorrectly, as interchangeable: *flourishing* and *fullness*. Flourishing in Taylor’s lexicon is a term attached by humanists and others to the goal of promoting individual human happiness in the here and now of human life. Thomas Paine, (1737-1809) for example, a major humanist thinker, believed and proclaimed that “the mark of civilization was the poor being happy.” Similarly, Jean Vanier points to the fact that Aristotle identified “happiness” as “the keystone of human conduct ... it is the goal above all other goals.”<sup>98</sup> But then Aristotle acknowledges that views differ on what constitutes human happiness, and he soon distinguishes in his teaching between satisfying desires for human comfort and the deeper desire for “the good.” Thus Taylor’s answers to the question of human happiness mirror Aristotle’s as reflected by his use of

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<sup>96</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 600.

<sup>97</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 185.

<sup>98</sup> Jean Vanier, *Made for Happiness: Discovering the Meaning of Life with Aristotle*, Katherine Spink, trans. (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2001), 8.

these two distinct words.<sup>99</sup> In his usage, to flourish and to be fulfilled mirror Aristotle's two distinct forms of human happiness and the good. This means that there is a significant difference between their meanings even though to some degree they overlap. They are both conducive to human happiness but of a qualitatively different sort.

This distinction in Taylor's thought is also reflected in his particular use of the adjective "exclusive" to modify "humanism". Humanism, as we have discussed above, is an ambiguous term, but it generally encompasses a primary concern for the "happiness" of the human. Jesus Christ in that light was clearly a humanist, and being a humanist does not necessarily imply being an atheist. Therefore, being a "Christian humanist" is not a contradiction in terms by any means. However, Taylor's invented term "exclusive humanism" signals something quite different. It means, he says, "a purely self-sufficient humanism ... a humanism accepting no final goals beyond human flourishing, nor any allegiance to anything beyond this flourishing." Further, he maintains, "a secular age is one in which the eclipse of all goals beyond human flourishing becomes conceivable; or better, it falls within the range of an imaginable life for masses of people."<sup>100</sup> This means, to repeat, that the exclusive humanist denies religion and the transcendent horizon and lives in and seeks to flourish in the sensible world, that is, the world that can be touched, tasted, smelled, heard and seen.

It seems clear from Taylor's description of exclusive humanism that he is describing what he sees as the dominant "condition of belief" in present Western culture. It is a polar

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<sup>99</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 600.

<sup>100</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 18-20

distance from the three dimensions of the transcendent that he defines as constituting “religion.”<sup>101</sup>

What does this mean for individual lives and humanity as a whole? His frequent references to Dostoyevsky and Camus and peripheral references to Sartre suggest that he finds part of the answer in the works of a wave of literary writer/philosophers associated broadly with the philosophy of Existentialism. By focusing on actual lived experience, they may be seen to have reacted against the systematization and abstractions of Hegel. That is, they were looking for a subjective philosophical perspective based on real lived experience in ordinary life. In this way they were appropriating an important philosophical and theological insight launched by Kierkegaard almost one hundred years earlier that focused on real human “existence,” not abstract theories. As Reidar Thomte puts it, Kierkegaard gave

‘to exist’ and ‘existence’ ... an entirely new connotation. Since man is a synthesis of soul and body, of the temporal and the eternal, existence is defined as the synthesis of the infinite and finite ... to exist means to bring the eternal into the temporal ... the existing subject has the infinite within himself, but being an existing individual, he is temporal and in the process of becoming ... he becomes concrete in his experience.<sup>102</sup>

Kierkegaard’s powerful ideas took many years to germinate but they eventually blossomed, notably in the minds of the French Existentialists of the 1940s and 1950s. Consequently, the work of Sartre and Camus among others offers a window for understanding the second corner of Taylor’s battlefield. However, the window is not only onto the definitions and borders of the exclusive humanist belief system, but, more generally, it casts light on the real lived conditions of lives lived exclusively within the immanent horizon.

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<sup>101</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 20.

<sup>102</sup> Reidar Thomte, *Kierkegaard’s Philosophy of Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1948), 112.

William Barrett warns North American readers that Europeans would not consider Jean-Paul Sartre to be an Existentialist. Sartre appropriated the term as a self-description, perhaps after he discovered how popular the concept became in New York after World War II. Interestingly, given our focus on Taylor, the self-described “philosophical anthropologist,” Barrett notes that

the atmosphere of German philosophy during the first part of [the 20<sup>th</sup>] century had become quickened by the search for a new ‘philosophical anthropology’ – a new interpretation of man – made necessary by the extraordinary additions to knowledge in all the special sciences that dealt with man ... [behind them were] Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, [of whom] Jaspers said that ‘the philosopher who has really *experienced* the thought of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche can never again philosophize in the traditional mode of academic philosophy.’<sup>103</sup>

We might note in passing that this constitutes more of an explanation of the meaning in practical terms of Taylor’s professional self-description than anything encountered in Taylor’s own writing. It is important because it helps clarify Taylor’s interdisciplinary philosophical perspective and openness to new insights from new disciplines about what it means to be human.

#### **6.4.4.2 Is Existentialism an Exclusive Humanism?**

Exclusive humanism, as we have seen, is Taylor’s term to describe a version of the person who sees no transcendent reality beyond ordinary human flourishing. This seems also to describe the beliefs of people who call themselves “Existentialists” who therefore might be seen as representative of the second corner of Taylor’s heuristic of the battle of modern belief and unbelief.

Like the word humanism, the word Existentialism is ambiguous and needs to be used with some qualification for purposes of precision. However, this is made easier by its relatively short history and genealogy, and by the writing of William Barrett, the distinguished American

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<sup>103</sup> William Barrett, *Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1990), 11-12.

philosopher who played a leading role in introducing existentialism to North America. He writes tongue in cheek, that in the 1960's a remarkable thing happened in New York – people who had never been known to think let alone discuss philosophy, began to discuss Existentialism in public places.<sup>104</sup> This wave of interest arrived from France and was made spicy by its writers' French Bohemian allure.

However, as noted, while its literary expression by French writers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus caught attention in the English-speaking world, Barrett traces its philosophical development through Jaspers and especially Heidegger back to Nietzsche, Dilthey and Hegel, but above all to Kierkegaard. They combined philosophical and literary approaches to produce the foundational ideas of what later became known as the philosophy of Existentialism. Barrett makes the important observation that the rather tone-deaf practice of analytic philosophy was actually “playing catch-up” with a “mood” in the culture traced to Dostoyevsky's *Underground Man*.<sup>105</sup>

Kierkegaard, though working a generation before Nietzsche and a century before the modern “Existentialists,” brilliantly anticipated this mood and catalyzed an important new understanding of the human predicament. The new philosophy looked to the lived experience of the individual.

Existentialism ... has attempted to gather all the elements of human reality into a total picture of man. Existential philosophy, as a revolt against such oversimplification [as found in Marxism and Positivism], attempts to grasp the image of the whole man, even where this involves bringing to consciousness all that is dark and questionable in his

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<sup>104</sup> William Barrett, *What is Existentialism?* (New York: Grove Press, 1964), 19.

<sup>105</sup> Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Notes from Underground*, Andrew R. MacAndrew, trans. (NY: Signet Classics, 1961).

existence. [This is] a much more authentic expression of our own contemporary experience.”<sup>106</sup>

It is interesting in this regard to note the existentialist emphasis on the individual and the prism of authenticity, both qualities which Taylor has emphasized in his study of the sources and characteristics of modern human identity and values.

All this poses the question of whether or not existentialism can be characterized as an exclusive humanism? It would seem that the answer is “possibly, but not necessarily.”

Kierkegaard, the fountainhead of the philosophy, worked from a profoundly personal and consistently Christian perspective, indeed a Christian humanist perspective, since his primary concern was to help the individual to answer life’s deepest existential challenges. He was passionately critical of the institutional Lutheran church and its leaders. He asked in 1854 a year before his death, “why do we no longer see the contradiction between Christianity’s nature as polemical and the state’s essence ... Why don’t we see how the state is paying its officers to destroy Christianity ...?”<sup>107</sup> (To this day, Christian clergy and churches are funded by Scandinavian governments.)

This anguish, especially about the performance of the Church, was not the sign of an exclusive humanist. On the other hand, that other major influence on Existentialism, Nietzsche, was rabidly anti-Christian institutionally and doctrinally, as was Sartre. So too, but to a lesser extent was the eventually agnostic Camus. Consequently, it would appear that Existentialism cannot be seen as necessarily a precursor, promoter or, for that matter, philosophically contradictory to exclusive humanism.

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<sup>106</sup> William Barrett, *Irrational Man*, 21-22.

<sup>107</sup> William Hubben, *Dostoevsky, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Kafka* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 26.

Moreover, exclusive humanism and Existentialism as belief positions are not a matter of rigid definition, as we have seen. There is a big difference between a Sartre, who Taylor references only four times in *A Secular Age*, and an altogether more admirable Camus, who Taylor references sixteen times. Taylor makes it clear that the borders are elastic enough that transcendent experience can be perceived and even bring about transformation in the lives of adamant exclusive humanists and Existentialists. This can be seen in Taylor's several references in *A Secular Age* to Dr. Rieux, the exclusive humanist and Existentialist in Camus' *The Plague*, who risks his life against all reasonable self-interest to treat suffering humans.<sup>108</sup>

Sartre's more doctrinaire views are reflected in his brilliant but bleak novel *Nausea*, but much more clearly in a lecture Sartre gave in 1945 titled "Is Existentialism a Humanism?" which was published as a small book a year later. Its purpose he declared was "to offer a defense of Existentialism against several reproaches that have been laid against it."<sup>109</sup> While acknowledging that there were Christian and atheist Existentialists, he begins by distinguishing between Communist critics and Christian or "Catholic" critics and aspires to refute criticism of three features of Existentialism – despair, abandonment and its inducement to "quietism" or inaction. The essence of his defense is that while each of those issues is a part of the self-responsibility and freedom promoted by Existentialism, in each case they imply not only a focus on self but on one's directly related responsibility for all humanity. In this way, he argues that being existential implies being a humanist too. "If it is true that existence is prior to essence, man is responsible for what he is ... And when we say that ... we do not mean he is responsible only for his own individuality, but that he is responsible for all men."<sup>110</sup> "It is not only one's self that one

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<sup>108</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 701-2.

<sup>109</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, Philip Mairet, trans. (London: Methuen&Co., 1948), 23.

<sup>110</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Humanism and Existentialism*, 29

discovers in the *cogito*, but those of others too ... the other is indispensable to my existence ... thus we find ourselves in a world of 'inter-subjectivity.'"<sup>111</sup>

Beyond that effort to soften criticism of Existentialism, however, Sartre does not disguise his own atheism and antagonism to the church expressed in language that eventually seems to have been absorbed by, among others, many French-speaking Canadian intellectuals during and after the *révolution tranquille* of the 1960's.

Existentialism is nothing else but an attempt to draw the full conclusions from a consistently atheistic position ... even if God existed that would make no difference from its point of view ... not that we believe God does exist, but we think the real problem is not that of His existence, what man needs is to find himself again and to understand that nothing can save him from himself.<sup>112</sup>

Consequently by Sartre's as well as by Taylor's definition, exclusive humanism is fundamentally atheistic.

#### **6.4.4.3 Sartre and Exclusive Humanism**

Iris Murdoch, the atheist to whom Taylor dedicates the lead-off essay in his *Dilemmas and Connections*,<sup>113</sup> described Jean-Paul Sartre as a thinker "who stands full in the way of three post-Hegelian movements of thought: the Marxist, the existentialist, and the phenomenological ... [who] takes from Kierkegaard the picture of man as a lonely anguished being in an ambiguous world, but he rejects the hidden Kirkegaardian God."<sup>114</sup> A talented writer, he mixes in his novels a blend of philosophy and personal deep self-reflection recalling both Kafka and Kierkegaard, in which there is much sound, also much pessimism, but not much light, giving his

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<sup>111</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Humanism and Existentialism*, 45.

<sup>112</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Humanism and Existentialism*, 56.

<sup>113</sup> Charles Taylor, "Iris Murdoch and Moral Philosophy," *Dilemmas and Connections*, 3

<sup>114</sup> Iris Murdoch, *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist*, (London: Fontana/Collins, 1976), 7.

existentialism a rather sober, even dreary feel, a feel perhaps inevitable in a French intellectual of the brutal and chaotic 1940's.

For example, his first novel was *Nausea* written in the 1940s in which its protagonist, Antoine Roquentin, experiences a “crisis of despair”<sup>115</sup> He encounters the main themes of Existentialism – the nothing within oneself becomes Nothingness and absurdity, self-doubt and metaphysical anguish, the distinction between existence and essence, and the “feeling” of being overcome by bare existence.<sup>116</sup> This produces the sense of nausea in Roquentin that is only partially alleviated, but alleviated all the same, when he recognizes the slight redemptive relief in the freedom a person has to be creative even in small ways.

Sartre does not go in any depth into issues of religion or transcendence. He is an exclusive humanist up and down. However, there is a revealing section in which he debates whether humanism can provide relief from the “nausea” of existence, where belief in or love of one's fellow man or woman might be a type of viable substitute for religious faith. This is in a conversation between Roquentin, in effect Sartre the atheist, and “the Self-Taught Man”, an ordinary person who is a self-defined “humanist.”<sup>117</sup> The latter does not believe in God because “his existence is belied by science,” but he had found an escape from his constant loneliness in the wartime-enforced company of large numbers of men with whom he developed a sense of solidarity which eventually leads him to Socialism and hope in people. He concludes, “I am perfectly happy.” Roquentin replies sarcastically to himself that “he has just painted a whole

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<sup>115</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, Lloyd Alexander, trans. (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1964).

<sup>116</sup> Hayden Carruth, “Introduction” in *Nausea*, ix-xi.

<sup>117</sup> John-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, 112.

picture of himself, this philanthropist ... his soul is in his eyes, unquestionably, but soul is not enough ...”<sup>118</sup> Roquentin/Sartre wants to vomit, but replies, again sarcastically, to himself:

Is it my fault if in all he tells me, as he speaks, I see all the humanists I have known rise up? The radical humanist is the particular friend of officials. The so-called “left” humanist’s main worry is keeping human values ... but his sympathies go towards the humble ... he weeps at anniversaries, he loves cats, dogs and all the higher mammals. The Communist writer has been loving men since the second Five Year Plan, he punishes because he loves ... the Catholic humanist, the latecomer, speaks of men with a marvelous air ... he has chosen the humanism of the angels ... there are other roles, a swarm of others ... they all hate each other, as individuals naturally, not as men ... I will not be fool enough to call myself ‘anti-humanist. *I am not a humanist.* That is all there is to it.”<sup>119</sup>

The above detail has been offered as a way of letting the exclusive humanist in Sartre speak for himself. It brings out dramatically several of the perils that Nietzsche predicted might sooner or later attend the atheist’s life experience – for whom God has “died.” Sartre offers slim hope for anything but marginal alleviation from despair and abandonment – from nihilism or meaninglessness. He suggests that the Self-Taught Man’s optimism and happiness was based on lies, myths and delusions. Yet he, the exclusive humanist, unlike Roquentin, considered himself happy.

#### **6.4.4.4 Camus, Agnosticism and Exclusive Humanism?**

Albert Camus offers another case study of exclusive humanism or rather, the characters in his books do. Unlike Sartre’s rather heavy-handed almost ideological pessimism in *Nausea*, they show a degree of evolution and even optimism in his thought over time which reflects Camus’ own life experience. He rejected being lumped with the Existentialists and was thought of as an “absurdist.” He died in 1960 in a car crash in his 40’s shortly after receiving the Nobel

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<sup>118</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, 112.

<sup>119</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, 116-8.

Prize for Literature for his work, including his extended essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*. His remains have recently been moved from an overgrown grave near Aix-en-Provence to the Pantheon in Paris on the command of President Sarkozy of France. One certainly suspects that Camus might have been amused by this sequence and have seen it as absurd in the full meaning of the word.

Camus' exclusive humanism as well as his Existentialism is strongly illustrated in his famous book *L'Étranger* (*The Outsider*) where the climax of the book and of the life of its strictly rational protagonist, Meurseault, takes place just before his execution when he refuses confession or even blessing from the prison chaplain. Meurseault recounts,

he started talking to me about God again, but I went up to him and made one last attempt to explain to him that I didn't have much time left. I didn't want to waste it on God ... he seemed so sure of everything, didn't he? And yet none of his certainties was worth one hair of a woman's head. He couldn't even be sure he was alive because he was living like a dead man ... but I was sure of myself, sure of everything, surer than he was, sure of my life and sure of the death that was coming to me. Yes, that was all I had, but at least it was a truth which I had hold of ... and at last I realized I had been happy, and I was still happy.”<sup>120</sup>

Intriguingly, nearly a decade after this book was published, Camus wrote an Afterword responding to what he considered a common incorrect reading of his book's message. Meurseault had been perceived by many readers as “a reject” from society, as opposed to a hero who is an outsider and “who without any pretensions agrees to die for the truth ... I tried to make my character represent the only Christ we deserve.”<sup>121</sup> It is difficult to interpret this significantly changed interpretation of the meaning of the original text in which Meurseault comes across much nearer to the Existentialist with little in the way of beliefs or commitments and nothing in the way of deep human feelings. It can be argued that it was not a misinterpretation of his book, but Camus himself whose beliefs had changed. Perhaps he had moved towards agnosticism or

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<sup>120</sup> Albert Camus, *The Outsider*, Joseph Laredo, trans. (London: Penguin Books, 1983), 114-5.

<sup>121</sup> Albert Camus, *The Outsider*, 118-9.

even belief in a “beyond” and had thought through how the original text could have been altered to convey a more positive religious message. Perhaps he was not so sure that his previous conclusion to the book was what he would consider true to life a decade after writing it. Perhaps he was wishing Meurseault had allowed the chaplain to speak of the *agapē* of Jesus, whose name was not mentioned in any way in the original text but was central in the three paragraph long “Afterword” written in 1955. Like Christ, Meurseault died for the truth – which, when all is said and done, is not only a matter of heroism but of the transcendent.

Further support for this view might also be found in the fact that Camus’ thinking shows significant evolution over the years as demonstrated by the much more optimistic, but still secular thinking reflected in his book, *The Plague (La Peste)*,<sup>122</sup> published in 1947. It is frequently referenced in Taylor’s writing for its tale of duty and honour and “rising to the sense of our own greatness ... (which) can function as its own place of fullness, in the sense of my discussion here.”<sup>123</sup> Similarly, Camus’ 1955 extended essay (which was actually written in 1940) *The Myth of Sisyphus*,<sup>124</sup> based on the Greek myth of that name, also demonstrated a willingness by Camus to contemplate possible personal fulfillment through courage and duty even in the face of an absurd or unjust calamity such as a deadly plague. In the Preface he says “this book declares that even within the limits of nihilism it is possible to find the means to proceed beyond nihilism. In all the books I have written I have attempted to pursue this direction.”<sup>125</sup>

In the face of this degree of moral ambiguity around the foundational beliefs inherent in the exclusive humanism of existentialism, Taylor candidly recognizes that there is undeniable

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<sup>122</sup> Albert Camus, *The Plague*, Stuart Gilbert, trans. (London: Penguin Books, 1960).

<sup>123</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 9.

<sup>124</sup> Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, Justin O’Brien, trans. (NY: Vintage Books, 1991).

<sup>125</sup> Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, v.

public resonance in response to the Existentialist position in Western culture. “Mallarmé, Heidegger, Camus, Celan, Beckett ... have not been marginal, forgotten figures, but their work has seized the imagination of their age. We don’t fully understand this, but we have to take it into account in any attempt to understand the face-off between humanism and faith.”<sup>126</sup>

The main lessons to be drawn from this discussion in the context of Taylor’s perspective on belief and unbelief are (1) that exclusive humanists including many Existentialists do recognize that nihilism, despair and meaninglessness can be actual lived realities in their lives, and (2) that while by definition exclusive humanism excludes theistic belief, the lines between faith and unbelief will always be somewhat tractable, and peoples’ views do evolve with life experience. However, that said, while a humanist existential position open to the transcendent such as Camus’ is a possible position on the spectrum of belief and unbelief, it would not fit easily in this second corner, the exclusive humanist corner, of Taylor’s battle.

#### **6.4.4.5 Sartre’s Three Cornered Proselytism for the “Soul of Modernity”**

There is an intriguing and relevant link one can discern in the discussion above of Sartre’s lecture on “Existentialism and Humanism” between Sartre’s and Taylor’s approach to the question of belief and unbelief in secular modernity. The link is suggested in the book’s lengthy and profound Introduction by Philip Mairet. He sketches a kind of three-cornered conflict in modern thought. On the one hand there is the theistic thought stemming from the Protestant Kierkegaard and the Catholic Jaspers, where there is a shared strong concern in their respective epochs about an impending cultural decline in the Western culture in the face of modern technological civilization where their “ultimate purpose is the rediscovery and

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<sup>126</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 321.

vindication of the traditional faith.”<sup>127</sup> Jaspers sees no escape from the nemesis of our culture “except in man’s recognition that, although he can never be other than a free being, he can also never be self-sufficient; he is free to open his life – but in anguish – to the influence of the living God, or in pride to deny and repel Him.”<sup>128</sup> This Mairet describes as a “religious philosophy” which is the “religious” branch of the existential stream. The other branch is “the secular idealist” stream, and the third is “the anti-religious” stream described by Mairet as the “pitiless atheism, relieved by a tenuous thread of heroism, (which) is canonical doctrine to the French existentialists of the school of Sartre.”<sup>129</sup>

Mairet goes on to point out that in his lecture, Sartre singles out two groups, in addition to his own atheistic existentialist group, to whom he addresses his dulcet efforts to make his form of existentialism more palatable by associating it with humanism. These are the Catholics or “Christian side,” and “the Communists.”<sup>130</sup> Mairet points out that in reality Sartre is engaged in a form of proselytism in his lecture, arguing for an atheistic but humanistic middle way between the two extremes. “A philosophy in which ‘choice,’ in the sense of a crisis of subjectivity, plays a dominant role, is a philosophy of conversion ... viewed externally the protagonists are evangelists *for* something.”<sup>131</sup>

In short, in the battles of belief and unbelief of secular modernity, is it possible that Sartre’s strategy of conversion influenced Taylor’s own conception and strategy for waging the three- and possibly four-cornered battle we are discussing in this chapter, and in this study as a

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<sup>127</sup> Philip Mairet, “Introduction,” in *Existentialism and Humanism*, 8.

<sup>128</sup> Philip Mairet, “Introduction,” in *Existentialism and Humanism*, 11.

<sup>129</sup> Philip Mairet, “Introduction,” in *Existentialism and Humanism*, 15.

<sup>130</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, 23.

<sup>131</sup> Philip Mairet, “Introduction,” in *Existentialism and Humanism*, 18.

whole? Is he like Sartre waging a strategy of conversion? In our view, this is possible but doubtful especially as Taylor explicitly declares that despite there being certain

issues at the center of my concern for decades [i.e. relating to his Christian/Catholic faith] ... they have been reflected in my philosophical work but not in the form as I raise them this afternoon [before a professional Catholic audience discussing Catholic modernity] because of the nature of philosophical discourse ... which has to try to persuade honest thinkers of any and all metaphysical or theological commitments.”<sup>132</sup>

On the other hand, it is also possible that Taylor’s earlier resistance to being identified with a religious perspective gave way later in his career with what Ruth Abbey and others call his “religious turn” which we noted above. In any case, this is a recurrent tension in much of Taylor’s career: where or how to draw the line between philosophy and theology on the one hand, and proselytism through intellectual persuasion like Matteo Ricci without departing from scholarly neutrality and objectivity?

### **6.4.5 Corner # 3: “Acknowledgers of Some Good Beyond Life”**

#### **6.4.5.1 Introduction and Definition**

As we have noted, Taylor describes the battlefield of belief and unbelief in Western modern culture as a site of “a three-cornered, perhaps ultimately a four-cornered battle. There are secular humanists ... neo-Nietzscheans, and those who acknowledge some good beyond life.”<sup>133</sup> So far in this chapter we have discussed the first two corners. In this section we will focus on the third which, in contrast to the first two, broadly encompasses theistic “believers.” Taylor refers to those who acknowledge “some good beyond life” in the title of this corner using very broad terms covering a broad sweep of believing positions occupying this “corner.”

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<sup>132</sup> Charles Taylor, *Dilemmas and Connections*, 167.

<sup>133</sup> Charles Taylor, *Dilemmas and Connections*, 180.

In discussing this third corner of “the battle” we will look to Taylor himself as the principal proponent. To begin with, therefore, we must ask him why he decided to use such a broad and imprecise term as “acknowledge some good beyond life” to describe this third corner? We have already suggested from time to time in this study that Taylor seems to be quite strategic about his use of language, not only because of the basic ground rules of philosophy, but because we suggest that he has rhetorical or persuasive reasons for the way he phrases his messages. Thus, from a hermeneutical perspective, the way he titles a message, in this case the rather ambiguous phrasing of the third “corner,” may help us to discern his deeper communication objectives.

Indeed, Taylor seems to reply to our question about the ambiguous title of this “corner” in many places in his books. He seems to consciously go out of his way to make occasional non-Christian theological allusions such as his frequent expert level discussion of Buddhist insights and beliefs. That is, he goes out of his way to address not only Christians or Catholic Christians but a much wider audience recognizing that the core of his anthropological philosophy addresses a universal characteristic of what it means to be human. In that sense, he makes it clear that he is speaking inclusively to “acknowledgers of some good beyond life” or “beyond ordinary human flourishing.”

In this regard, it is significant that on the same page that he uses his rather equivocal descriptive phrase to refer to Corner # 3 of the battlefield<sup>134</sup>, Taylor uses several distinct synonyms meant to convey a range of closely related terms that help underline what he wants to say without becoming too embedded in any particular religious point of view, at least at this

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<sup>134</sup> Charles Taylor, *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays*, (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 180

stage of the definition. These terms include “acknowledgers of transcendence,” “believers,” “oriented to the beyond,” and “those with a full hearted love of some good beyond life.”<sup>135</sup> All these terms describe a worldview or background framework of belief in the transcendent horizon that adherents of the two preceding corners of the battle do not have, are ignorant of, are indifferent to, or, as in cases like Nietzsche, violently oppose.

In this respect, we should note that Taylor explains how what Jaspers and Bellah<sup>136</sup> describe as the transformation brought about by the “Axial religions” was in fact a defining moment in human history. “More or less radically, they all call into question the received, seemingly unquestionable, understandings of human flourishing, and hence inevitably the structures of society and the features of the cosmos through which this flourishing was achieved.”<sup>137</sup> Taylor points out that this changed the understanding of both the nature of the transcendent and the nature of the human good: they are “reconceived.” “The transcendent may now be quite beyond or outside of the cosmos, as with the Creator God of Genesis, or the Nirvana of Buddhism. Or if it remains cosmic, it loses its original ambivalent character, and exhibits an unalloyed goodness, as with the ‘Heaven’, guarantor of just rule in Chinese thought, or the Ideas of Plato whose key is the Good.”<sup>138</sup>

Taylor underlines that there is also a concomitant fundamental change in the idea of the human good.

The highest human goal cannot any longer be to flourish, as it was before. Either a new goal is posited, of a salvation which takes us beyond what we usually understand as human flourishing, or else Heaven, or the Good, lays the demand on us to imitate or embody its unambiguous goodness, and hence alter the mundane order of things down

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<sup>136</sup> Robert N. Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011).

<sup>137</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 152-153.

<sup>138</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 152.

here ... our own flourishing (as individual, family, clan or tribe) can no longer be our highest goal.<sup>139</sup>

We should note in passing that the way that Taylor structures this initial definitional discussion seems to point unmistakably to the Hebrew and subsequent Christian responses to the Axial Age. Consequently, having defined this corner as broadly as possible, Taylor does not disguise his much narrower criteria in speaking about “religion” which he takes to be central to understanding and living in “corner” #3. As we have already seen, and it is worth repeating, he lays these fundamental criteria out explicitly in *A Secular Age*. First, he says that

‘religion’ for our purposes can be defined in terms of ‘transcendence’, but this latter term has to be understood ... in three dimensions. And the crucial one is ... the sense that there is some good higher than, beyond human flourishing. In the Christian case, we could think of this as *agapē*, the love which God has for us, and which we can partake of through his power. In other words, a possibility of transformation is offered, which takes us beyond merely human perfection.<sup>140</sup>

The second dimension requires “belief in a transcendent God of faith.” The third dimension, he explains, reflects the fact that “the Christian story of our potential transformation by *agapē* requires that we see our lives as going beyond the bounds of its ‘natural’ scope between birth and death ... beyond ‘this life’.”<sup>141</sup> In other words, Taylor’s “three dimensions of transcendence” and therefore of religion, are: (1) belief in a good beyond human flourishing such as the Christian *agapē*; (2) belief in the God of faith; and (3) belief in a life beyond the life of “the immanent frame.”<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 152-153.

<sup>140</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 20.

<sup>141</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 20.

<sup>142</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 539.

#### 6.4.5.2 The Contemporary “Problematique”

While recognizing a great deal of vitality in many branches of Christianity, Taylor also recognizes that in some churches, including his own, the forces of change and resistance to change continue unabated. Tensions and fragmentation continue in all the Western traditional or historical Christian communities to the present day as they have sought to juggle political, cultural and social change as well as doctrinal change in a fast-evolving world of radical technological and demographic change. It is a world of undiminished spiritual need at the human level but the means of meeting those needs have fragmented, reflecting a Western culture in which “one size fits all” is no longer possible. Therefore, in this highly pluralized and segmented world, traditional forms of religious expression live on but in a state of ferment whose outcome(s) is (are) uncertain. The result is a state of ongoing tension over the need for and resistance to adaptation and reform. This has generated internal conflict in religious institutions as well as a great deal of new vitality among those millions on earth who acknowledge some good beyond life.<sup>143</sup>

Going beyond these internal conflicts among believing Christians, Taylor has drawn attention to the larger societal challenges and potential consequences of the changed place of the Christian Church in Western democratic, plural, secular societies. First, is the problem of articulation or the challenge of expressing transcendent meaning in a way that is meaningful and persuasive to others. This is partly owing to a pressure in secular societies for individuals to marginalize and even suppress overt expression of their religious or spiritual commitments. This has the effect of diluting or obviating the learning and habits of behaviour necessary for maintaining and reinforcing our religious culture, traditions and values, especially among the

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<sup>143</sup> Reginald W. Bibby, *Restless Gods: The Renaissance of Religion in Canada* (Toronto: Novalis, 2004).

young. The culture accepts atheists, anti-theists, or exclusive humanists expressing themselves publicly as they please, but the same latitude is not as much there for acknowledgers of some good beyond life.

This contemporary cultural tendency, for Taylor, has the particularly disturbing effect that secular modern society discourages public expressions or sharing of religiously-based transcendent experience. He says,

this is a major gap. It is not just the epiphanic art of the last two centuries which fails to get its due by this dismissal. We are now in an age in which a publicly accessible cosmic order of meanings is an impossibility. The only way we can explore the order in which we are set with an aim of defining moral sources is through this part of personal resonance. This is true not only of epiphanic art but of other efforts, in philosophy, in criticism, which attempt the same search.<sup>144</sup>

This is a concern for Taylor because “the dismissal of this kind of exploration has important moral consequences. Proponents of disengaged reason or of subjective fulfillment embrace these consequences gladly. There are no moral sources there to explore.”<sup>145</sup> They propose what amount to value-free approaches for deciding issues of public values. In this regard, Taylor points critically to Habermas and others as exponents of a proceduralist conception of morality and to another unnamed group, possibly the extreme evangelical stance observed in contemporary North American “culture wars.” This group believes that “a similar containment can be brought about by a certain theological outlook. Our commands come from God, and we can bypass and subordinate the area of personal responsibility.”<sup>146</sup> Taylor makes it clear that “these are questions which we can only clarify by exploring the human predicament, the way we are set in nature and among others, as a locus of moral sources. As our public traditions of

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<sup>144</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 512.

<sup>145</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 512.

<sup>146</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 512.

family, ecology, even polis are swept away, we need new languages of personal resonance to make crucial human goods alive for us again.”<sup>147</sup>

Taylor underlines that to understand his concerns about how secular societies are to make moral decisions in the absence of a common base of “strong evaluation” and faced by the shortcomings he perceives in Habermas’ secular procedural solutions, we need to see that the transcendent is not an “objective order.” The goal has to be to “search for moral sources *outside* the subject through languages which resonate *within* him or her, the grasping of an order which is inseparably indexed to a personal vision.”<sup>148</sup> In other words, the transcendent is not a matter of theory but of personal and shared experience. This points us in the direction of Taylor’s answer to our hypothesis concerning the place of the transcendent in secular modernity which we will come to in our next chapter.

As a final major concern about the religious and spiritual problems of our era, Taylor says that if we, as individuals and society, lose contact with our traditional powerful sources that have undergirded major breakthroughs in human benevolence and personal freedom, this may risk over-loading our capacity even to sustain our moral and human achievements from the past. We may be living in today’s world beyond our moral means. Worse still, he points to Nietzsche’s deep insight.

If morality can only be powered negatively, where there can be no such thing as beneficence powered by an affirmation of the recipient as a being of value, then pity is destructive to the giver and degrading to the receiver, and the ethic of benevolence may indeed be indefensible. Only if there is such a thing as *agape*, or one of the secular claimants to its succession, is Nietzsche wrong.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 513.

<sup>148</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 510.

<sup>149</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 516.

This is a frightening prospect in the absence of a sense of the transcendent given, as we have seen above, that Nietzsche predicts the outcome will be violence and a herding of slaves by a powerful Overman, bringing us back to the situation of the early Christians under the Roman Emperor God (and the Hebrews under the Pharaoh, and Persians under Zoroaster) and so on in what Nietzsche forecasts will be a constantly repeating historical process. A hell with no escape.

Moreover, twelve years before the terrorist attacks of “9/11,” and a quarter century before the more recent attacks on Canadian soldiers and the Parliament and the mosque in Quebec City, Taylor goes on to point out that

In our day ... many young people are driven to political extremism sometimes by truly terrible conditions, but also by a need to give meaning to their lives. And since meaninglessness is often accompanied by a sense of guilt, they sometimes respond to a strong ideology of polarization, in which one recovers a sense of direction as well as a sense of purity by lining up in implacable opposition to the forces of darkness.<sup>150</sup>

In other words, it is not only the enfeeblement of our Christian spiritual resources that we need to fear, it is their possible replacement by alternative beliefs and motivating ideologies that are incompatible with our traditional institutions and values. Thus, we may be on the edge of a continuation of the revolution in our contemporary Western culture that Taylor identifies as having been accelerated and accentuated in the 1960’s.

#### **6.4.6 Corner # 4: The Super-Nova of Modern, Plural Beliefs**

As we have seen, in speaking about belief and unbelief in the context of the debate over what Kierkegaard called “our present situation,” Taylor frequently uses the word or image of “struggle” or “battle.” On some occasions he mentions a three-cornered, perhaps ultimately four-

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<sup>150</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 516.

cornered, battle among different positions of modern belief and unbelief in the secular West.<sup>151</sup>

This Chapter has so far traced what he means by the first three corners. This final section looks briefly at the fourth corner. Taylor did not assign a particular name to it, probably because it is a more diffuse area of several tendencies that are still emergent and not always well defined.

However, given what he says about it, we could perhaps name it the Nova Option, the Individual Choice option, or the Practical Primacy Option since those are the kind of directions it seems to represent. Because of its importance (and difficulty of understanding) we now quote Taylor at length:

A fourth party can be introduced to this field if we take account of the fact that the acknowledgers of transcendence are divided. Some think that the whole move to secular humanism was just a mistake, which needs to be undone. We need to return to an earlier view of things. Others, among whom I place myself, think that the primacy of life has been a great gain for humankind and that there is some truth in the ‘revolutionary’ story: this gain was, in fact, unlikely to come about without some breach with established religion. (We might even say that modern unbelief is providential, but that might be too provocative a way of putting it.) But we nevertheless think that the metaphysical primacy of life is wrong and stifling and that its continued dominance puts in danger the practical primacy.<sup>152</sup>

In short, the cleavage among those who “acknowledge transcendence,” as Taylor puts it, can sometimes pit those who favour seeking transcendence by focusing on support for the immediate human needs of people against those who seek transcendence through traditional worship and community in the church. Taylor asks who is right in this clash of two perspectives on the human condition, but he has clearly identified on which side he stands.<sup>153</sup>

In this “fourth corner of the battle” Taylor is also thinking about the proliferation of the belief options entirely independent of or only loosely connected to traditional mainstream theistic

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<sup>151</sup> Charles Taylor, *Dilemmas and Connections*, 180.

<sup>152</sup> Charles Taylor, *Dilemmas and Connections*, 180-1.

<sup>153</sup> Charles Taylor, *Dilemmas and Connections*, 178.

religions that have emerged in modernity, intensively-so over the last half century. At one level this has involved the splitting away of parts of mainstream Christian churches such as the Pentecostal churches. This movement was only founded in 1906 in Los Angeles from Presbyterian and Baptist roots and is now said to be the fastest growing religious group in the world. Another institutional splitting or division that Taylor clearly has in mind is the cleavage in mainstream churches like the Catholic and the Anglican churches often over doctrinal and ecclesial or institutional issues aroused by the so-call “culture wars” of recent decades especially in areas of human gender and sexuality.

Something new in this split and potentially especially threatening to the unity of longstanding religious institutions is the fracture lines in global churches between leftward “First World” and rightward, or traditionalist, “Developing World” perspectives. This has already fractured the international Anglican communion which is in the invidious position of its North American members being declared out of communion, that is excommunicated, from the traditional mainstream because of their liberal position on cultural issues.

There is a further important split in the traditional Christian churches to which Taylor makes allusion that may also underlie his rather mysterious loose definition or rather lack of definition of the meaning of Corner #4 in “the battle” of belief and unbelief in the culture of Western modernity. That is, the division over the nature of the Christian calling. A large proportion of the traditional churches looks for traditional ecclesial and liturgical approaches focused on personal interiority and institutional community, while another important proportion of the people in the pews of the churches, or rather serving at the soup kitchens, have opted for an outward and social expression of their Christianity following principles reflected in Jesus’ life and teaching, sometimes called “the social Gospel.” This type of *ressourcement*, or going back to

the sources, as de Lubac might have described it, has been called for and modeled by notable voices including, for example, Simone Weil, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Mother St. Teresa, and Jean Vanier.

At another quite different level in this challenge of contention, fragmentation and pluralism, Taylor is thinking of the explosion of new forms of spiritual or quasi-spiritual beliefs and practices that he describes by the word “the Nova,”<sup>154</sup> a clever astronomic term referring to a pluralism of exploding stars, and a Latin word meaning “new.” For him “the nova effect, [is] the widening gamut of new positions – some believing, some unbelieving, some hard to classify – which have become available for us.”<sup>155</sup> In fact, he considers that “we are now living in a spiritual super-nova, a type of galloping pluralism on the spiritual plane.”<sup>156</sup>

Taylor believes that a common source or precursor can be identified for these two strands of contemporary spiritual and institutional fragmentation. The common factor that unites the strand of division in existing churches, and the strand of an emerging plethora of alternative expressions of spiritual belief, is a central theme of his *A Secular Age*. That factor is individualism which he describes as bringing about a profound change in the social imaginary of modernity. He calls this social imaginary the “culture of authenticity.”<sup>157</sup>

To reiterate, he puts it this way: “something has happened in the last half-century, perhaps even less, which has profoundly altered the conditions of belief in our societies. I believe that our North Atlantic civilization has been undergoing a cultural revolution in recent decades.

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<sup>154</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 299.

<sup>155</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 423.

<sup>156</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 300.

<sup>157</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 473-504.

The 1960s provide perhaps the hinge moment, at least symbolically.”<sup>158</sup> In short, he believes that this has brought about Secularity 3, a change in the conditions of belief, which he argues reflects a defining feature of modern secularity. It is this revolution he suggests that explains both contemporary divisions in mainline churches and the “Nova Effect.” The key to this revolution in the conditions of belief in Western culture, in other words the key to Secularity 3, is what he calls “an individuating revolution ... [this was already in place but] this has shifted on a new axis.” This brought about a moral/spiritual and instrumental individualism. But this has now been uniquely reinforced in recent Western culture by “a widespread expressive individualism.” Taylor observes that “what is new is this kind of self-orientation seems to have become a mass phenomenon [instead of an élite preserve] ... A simplified expressivism now infiltrates everywhere.”<sup>159</sup>

Its major characteristics are a “do your own thing mentality” where “personal choice” is both meaningless but still comes up trumps in public discourse in the prevalent culture. This results in each of us feeling entitled to have “our [own] way of realizing our humanity” with no need for conformity with a model. We may even feel that we have a duty to resist ‘bourgeois’ or established codes and standards. Sin isn’t personal.<sup>160</sup> Of course, it is not a long leap from this new social imaginary to different and new types of religious expectations, needs, affiliations, and experiences of the transcendent – in short to division and pluralism where an individual feels free to choose a church, a denomination, or an experience of the transcendent outside denominational confines, depending on how it meets his/her particular spiritual needs. This has, in a sense, marketized or commoditized, modern religious participation. The result is that belief or unbelief

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<sup>158</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 473.

<sup>159</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 473-5.

<sup>160</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 475-80.

in the other “corners of the battle” become challenged to adapt or compete: proliferation and division becomes inevitable and perhaps destructive.

#### **6.4.7 Conclusion**

This chapter has explored different facets of Taylor’s Secularity 3. That is, his insight that a major characteristic of modern secularity has involved a radical change in the conditions of religious belief and unbelief. Taylor defines religion for his purposes as transcendence, so he is really talking about a radical change in the place of the transcendent in modern secular lives. He defines the transcendent as a matter of aspiring to a “fullness” that can only be achieved in human lives within a horizon of the transcendent, well beyond the bounds of ordinary human “flourishing” in what Taylor calls “the immanent frame.”

We suggested that these changes in the conditions of belief should be seen as a further form of “antithesis” (in addition to the two antitheses discussed in the previous two chapters) in reaction to the “thesis” of the “enchanted world” of pre-Modernity in Western culture. The changed conditions of belief involve not only a new freedom of choice for the individual in deciding personal belief or unbelief, but also the availability of personal choice among a spectrum of belief options.

These options were portrayed as corners of an explanatory heuristic outlining a three- or four-cornered battle or “free-for-all” of belief and unbelief suggested by Taylor. It pitted Neo-Nietzschean and anti-humanist atheists in one corner, against atheist exclusive humanists in another corner, arrayed against believers or “acknowledgers of some good beyond life” in the third corner, and finally a corner representing an explosion or “nova” of new forms of belief and

unbelief arising out of the post-revolutionary interiorization, individualization, and self-expressiveness of personal experience of the transcendent in our era.

We will now proceed to the final chapter of this study. We describe it as this study's "synthesis" in view of the dialectical structure of our analysis and the frequent suggestions by Taylor that synthesis and transformation come about through a historical reconciling process that gradually ascends to higher levels of consciousness and meaning. It will present our conclusions from this study of Charles Taylor's view of the place of the transcendent in modern Western secular culture.

## CHAPTER 7

### THE SYNTHESIS: TAYLOR AND THE PLACE OF THE TRANSCENDENT IN SECULAR MODERNITY

*We can now see more clearly the underlying principle of those ascending dialectics in which Hegel will show that finite things cannot exist on their own, but only as part of a larger whole ... as part of the self-movement of the Absolute ... contradiction in the strong sense is what makes things move and change ... thus the absolute is essentially life and movement and change ... it reconciles identity and contradiction by maintaining itself in a life process which is fed on ontological conflict.<sup>1</sup>*

#### 7.1 Introduction

In terms of our dialectical approach to presenting this study, we have discussed in the last three chapters three different but related dimensions of what we described as “antitheses” of secular modernity. All three of the antitheses had the effect of shifting or displacing the place of the transcendent in the culture of societies and in the lives of individuals. These antitheses were reactions that took place in Western culture in response to what we described in Chapter 3 as negations of the historical and cultural “thesis” stage of pre-Modernity, the period of “Christendom” up to about 1500. In it, the dominant social imaginary was of an “enchanted world.”

The first of the antitheses which ushered in Modernity after roughly 1500 was outlined in Chapter 4. It involved a revolutionary change in the social imaginary arising out of what Taylor describes as the forces unleashed by “Reform” (which included but not only the 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformation and the Enlightenment) in which the cultural context evolved from one of

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 107.

“enchantment” to one of “disenchantment,” the focus of the social imaginary shifted from the community to the individual, and the larger context shifted from the cosmos to the universe.

A second broad antithesis was discussed in Chapter 5, that of secularity or secularization which gradually decoupled the place of religion in the affairs of the state and encouraged a new optionality of belief, including the possibility of an “exclusive humanist” choice. Beyond dominant definitions of the elusive meaning of the term secularity, Taylor’s own definition shone the spotlight on the conditions of belief. With that optionality and freedom of choice of belief there emerged as the third antithesis a plethora or “nova” of contesting beliefs which were arrayed by Taylor in a notional three- or four-cornered battle of belief and unbelief in Western secular modernity discussed in Chapter 6. If a free person has a choice of belief or unbelief, he or she has to make a decision understanding its potential implications for the place of the transcendent in their personal lived lives.

So far, we have seen in the course of this dialectical presentation that Taylor’s whole system of thought reflects his evident adoption of Hegelian dialectic as the basis for achieving an understanding of the past, the present and also of the future of secular modernity. Like Hegel, Taylor explores the evolution of secular modernity in an ascending non-linear spiral of “zig-zag” development building according to Hegel to an inevitable reconciliation of contradictions and oppositions, “a union of union and non-union.” In other words dialectical change leads to a synthesis.

This final chapter discusses the synthesis that emerges from Taylor’s dialectical analysis of secular modern belief options. In particular it will demonstrate that Taylor’s synthesis focuses on and reinforces the centrality in his thought of the necessary place of the transcendent in

secular modern lives, as posited in our study's hypothesis. In this way, this chapter will also serve to provide a logical conclusion of our study as a whole.

## 7.2 The Place of Hegel in Taylor's Synthesis

As we have seen, the various forces or antitheses described in the earlier chapters in the context of options of belief and unbelief contributed to or were precipitated by the emergence of key features of the "modern" world. These included the Enlightenment embrace of reason and science, and the historically unprecedented development of a sense of the freedom and autonomy of the individual or self. But, in turn, there gradually emerged a reaction against the Enlightenment "re-composition" in the form of a powerful Romantic movement, especially in Germany, in which individual expressivism and naturalism were widely prized in contrast to the instrumentalism and alienation of Enlightenment reason, creating an internal contradiction in the social imaginary of Modern Western culture. It was Hegel's dream in the midst of revolutionary times, not unlike the contemporary revolution Taylor believes we are living through, to find a way based on reason that would provide a reconciliation or synthesis overcoming that contradiction and bridge those opposed but deeply entrenched aspirations which can be summarized as between objectivity and subjectivity. As we have seen, while finding Hegel's metaphysics unconvincing, Taylor admires Hegel's way of thought, in particular his dialectical method as applied to the change processes of history. Hegel's concept of the reconciling synthesis is therefore the starting point for this chapter, but the main theme is how Taylor envisages adapting it in his search for transformative solutions to "our present predicament."<sup>2</sup> Taylor's book, *Hegel*, provides an overview of Hegel and his times and expounds the main lines of Hegel's work. It has a particularly helpful section on Hegel's effort to find a synthesis for the

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<sup>2</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 448.

major philosophical problem of his age which gives insight to Hegel's ideas but especially to his innovative approach to the criteria for a synthesis that bridges historical oppositions. Hegel, Taylor says, "shared the hope that this unprecedented and epoch-making synthesis could be made only if one could win through to a vision of spiritual reality underlying nature, a cosmic subject, to whom man could relate himself and in which he could ultimately find himself ... and as a result he produced one of the great monuments to the aspiration of his age."<sup>3</sup> Could this be Taylor's own aspiration – to identify an epoch-making synthesis addressing the major philosophical problem of our present so-called "secular age?" As our hypothesis suggests, Taylor clearly sees the fading of the place of the transcendent horizon in the lives of people living in Western secular modernity as the major problem of our times.

In both his books on Hegel, Taylor identifies a historical evolution which was of intense concern particularly to German philosophers in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. This was the clash between the objectivist Enlightenment vision of what it is to be human based strictly on reason and science and a subjective consciousness. The objectivist consciousness was "disenchanted" or "desacralized," and placed priority on the radical autonomy of the self. In contrast, a subjective consciousness of the human emerged which reacted to the alienation, instrumentalization, and atomization of Enlightenment values by giving priority to expressive consciousness. "Human life was seen as having a unity rather analogous to a work of art, where every part or aspect only found its proper meaning in relation to all the others ... and men reached their highest fulfilment in expressive activity."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Charles Taylor, *Hegel*, 49.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Taylor, *Hegel*, 2.

In this regard, Taylor underlines that it is of importance in understanding Hegel's work to recognize that it is strongly anti-dualist: it strives to overcome the body-soul dichotomy, or the spirit-nature dichotomy, which was the legacy of Descartes and others. In contrast, "expressivist theory makes freedom *a*, if not *the* central, value of human life."<sup>5</sup> These distinctions in aspiration can of course be linked to the four corners of the battlefield of belief and unbelief outlined in Chapter 6, with Corners #1 and #2 being oriented more to the Enlightenment model, and Corners #3 and #4 oriented more to the expressivist model.

This cultural difference of perspective had become the primary philosophical concern of German philosophy by the 1790's when Hegel, extending a line of philosophical development running from Kant through Spinoza, Schleiermacher and Fichte, set out to identify a synthesis that would bring these two human tendencies together. In this effort, the German philosophers were particularly fascinated by how the sparkling example of ancient Greece had emerged, blossomed and then withered away. They looked for an insight into the processes of historical change reflected in the Greek experience that would be relevant to their own experience in the tumultuous developments of Napoleonic Europe including Napoleon's take-over of Jena and the closing of the distinguished university where Hegel had been employed as a professor.

From these antecedents Hegel's attempt at a synthesis identified, as we have seen, a process of historical change characterized in particular by the inherency of contradiction or "oppositions," a process of composition, decomposition and re-composition, in the somewhat circular or "spiral" process of historical change and the process of transformation and reconciliation between oppositions before the stage of re-composition. Hegel saw this spiral of historical development, despite its "zigzag" movement, as tending in an upward or ascending

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<sup>5</sup> Charles Taylor, *Hegel*, 24.

direction over time, which means that it cannot go back to the past. This was a dialectical process similar to Plato's way of addressing philosophical quandaries in which clashing positions needed to be resolved in dialectical debate. This was and is a powerful idea that clearly shapes Taylor's thinking about all sorts of philosophical, sociological, political and especially historical issues, wherever there is conflict between oppositions and contradictions in his work as a philosophical anthropologist. This explains why we have adopted a type of dialectical approach to the structure and presentation of this study.

It is notable that despite a strongly pantheistic orientation in his actual religious thought, Hegel always regarded himself to be a Lutheran Christian. As such, he regarded the transcendent horizon as of primary human importance. Much of his effort at defining a synthesis between the expressive and objective poles took on the flavour, if not precisely the substance, of the transcendent in his use of such important words and concepts like "the Absolute" and "*Geist*" (Spirit), as part of an upward hierarchy of meaning, as each succeeding stage of the dialectical process brought civilization closer to or away from the pinnacle. That process Taylor refers to as "the zig-zag" itinerary of history, "one full of unintended consequences."<sup>6</sup>

It is against this background of Hegelian thought that we now return to exploring our hypothesis concerning Taylor's view of the place of the transcendent in secular modern lives. The Enlightenment reason-based, objectified perspective has no place for the transcendent, which means that the second corner or exclusive humanist perspective of the struggle between belief and unbelief has no room for theism. Moreover, as seen above, the first corner of Taylor's battle is not only atheist, it is often militantly anti-theist, and therefore, thoroughly and outspokenly anti-transcendent. On the other hand, the expressivist perspective is conducive to or

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<sup>6</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 95.

supportive of the third and fourth corners of the battlefield, and to a degree perhaps, the second corner too.

### 7.3 Taylor's Ricci-Like Teaching for People Living in Secular Modernity

*Like Ricci ... we had to struggle to make a discernment as he did ... trying to see what in modern culture reflects its furtherance of the Gospel, and what its refusal of the transcendent.*<sup>7</sup>

A philosopher is by definition a teacher. Teachers can be content with descriptive teaching of realities, or they can seek to go a step further by motivating behavior: that is, they can focus on objectively derived diagnosis by itself or they can combine it with prescription. In much of his lifelong work as a philosopher in a secular society within secular educational institutions, Taylor has taken obvious pains in his efforts to distinguish the diagnosis of his teaching from the prescriptions of his personal inclinations and beliefs. He takes a balanced professional approach even on issues which he clearly does not accept, such as, for example, his utter contempt and even fear of the human and historical implications of exclusive humanism which, if Nietzsche is right, will lead to disastrous human outcomes. But increasingly in more recent years, Taylor has not shied away when desirable from expressing views from the standpoint of his personal commitments as a Christian and Catholic. This is partly reflected by his in-depth theological knowledge which shines through in much of his work. And yet he does not claim to be a theologian in any of his professional self-descriptions. Clearly, it is not easy in the modern secular university to be both a philosopher and a theologian, let alone with obvious personal religious commitments. And this is particularly so in an academic culture in which the dominant social imaginary is one of objectivist natural scientific principles that leave no place

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<sup>7</sup> Charles Taylor, *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays*, (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 186.

for the unquantifiable, but very real, lived-experience of the subject, even where your principal scholarly concern, as Taylor puts it, is “what it’s like to live as a believer or an unbeliever.”<sup>8</sup>

In other words, Taylor identifies with the same philosophical and human dilemma Hegel faced almost two hundred years ago. In Hegel’s time, as we have noted, there had emerged a similar sharp opposition or contradiction as there is today, between Enlightenment-based objectivist consciousness and its contrary or antithesis, the subjective consciousness of the Romantics. Hegel sought and, in the view of some, found a synthesis between those two contradictory perspectives. However, what endures from his synthesis is not the substance of his innovative quasi-metaphysical ideas, but rather his method or way of thinking and posing questions to address inevitable oppositions and contradictions in a dualistic setting. This brings us back to our hypothesis which is that there is a guiding idea or Ariadne’s thread and an associated tightly related agenda connecting all Taylor’s work. The idea concerns the new conditions of belief and the consequent receding place of the transcendent horizon in secular modern society, and the loss among unbelievers and potential “seekers”<sup>9</sup> of the concepts and language of fullness inherent in the transcendent. This is the challenge of articulacy. There is abundant evidence of this concern in much of his writing, as we have seen. He believes that with the receding salience of the transcendent in secular modern life, there is a receding capacity or memory about the treasury of words and ideas that constituted our cultural and spiritual origins. He speaks of the fact that “things take on importance against a background of intelligibility. Let us call this a horizon. It follows that one of the things we can’t do, if we are to define ourselves

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<sup>8</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 5.

<sup>9</sup> Charles Taylor, “The Church Speaks - To Whom?” in *Church and People: Disjunctions in a Secular Age*, Charles Taylor, José Casanova, George F. McLean, eds. (Washington, DC: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2012), 17.

significantly, is suppress or deny the horizons against which things take on significance for us.”<sup>10</sup> This is precisely what he alleges happens as people immerse themselves exclusively in the world of immanence or exclusive humanism. They risk losing any sense of meaning in their lives and thereby risk Nietzsche’s dire predictions.

From this perspective, over the course of this study, we have discovered, rather to our surprise, that all along Taylor’s philosophical anthropological target may not have been primarily a matter of debating the ins and outs of modern secularity *per se*. Rather, his primary concern seems to have been identify a synthesis in the spirit of Hegel’s dialectical discovery to reconcile the oppositions and contradictions unleashed by Western secular modernity. Such a synthesis would arm people to understand the crucial place of the transcendent in their lives and warn them against possible serious human and societal repercussions arising out of modern conditions of belief and unbelief that exclude a transcendent horizon. These include the repercussions of nihilism, decadence and eventual violence suggested by, among others, Nietzsche, and the “iron cage” of Weber. If this analysis is correct, the apparent secular focus of his work appears possibly to be in part a type of “cover” permitting and encouraging a conversation to proceed between believers and unbelievers. This is a matter of what he calls “interlocution”- a means to speak persuasively as a teacher like Matteo Ricci to “where their interlocutor is,” that is, to teach about what, not very far beneath the surface, is his true main concern. Thus, our hypothesis claims that Taylor’s central guiding idea in his work primarily focuses on defining and contesting the embattled place of the transcendent in Western secular modern societies and in the lives of people living in those societies. He wants to restore the place of the transcendent in the lives of believers in a transcendent good beyond ordinary life, that is to say, God, and to combat

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<sup>10</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1991), 37.

the invisibility of the transcendent in the lives of non-believers, especially non-believing exclusive humanists who are the dominant position in contemporary Western secular societies. This is the dialectical opposition or contradiction in modern culture for which he is seeking a synthesis. He sees an individual's choice between the options of belief in the transcendent or disbelief as "the modern human predicament."<sup>11</sup>

#### **7.4 Transcendence and the Transcendent in Taylor's Thought**

This discussion raises once again the question of what Taylor means by the transcendent and its place in secular modernity. As we have seen, Taylor refers to the concept, reluctantly he claims, using several related terms or synonyms including "inescapable horizons," and "horizons of significance,"<sup>12</sup> "the place of fullness,"<sup>13</sup> and "the transcendent window."<sup>14</sup> Suffice to say, for Taylor, the transcendent entails a force or pull that he dramatically summarizes as "the crying need of the human heart to open that [transcendent] window, gaze and then go beyond."<sup>15</sup>

Another way in which Taylor addresses the transcendent is when he speaks of "religious faith in a strong sense ... [which] I define ... by a double criterion: the belief in transcendent reality, on the one hand, and the connected aspiration to a transformation which goes beyond ordinary human flourishing, on the other."<sup>16</sup> In other words, the transcendent and personal transformation are for Taylor inter-related fundamental concepts of spirituality in general, and Christianity in particular. Taylor worries about a society that forgets its moral roots and loses even the language for expressing the framing ideas and values that gave rise to secular

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<sup>111</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 513.

<sup>12</sup> Charles Taylor, *Malaise of Modernity*, 37-38.

<sup>13</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 5-6.

<sup>14</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 638.

<sup>15</sup> Charles Taylor, *Dilemmas and Connections*, 178.

<sup>16</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 510.

modernity, fanned and exploited by such mocking atheists and exclusive humanists as Richard Dawkins<sup>17</sup> and Christopher Hitchens.<sup>18</sup>

Taylor underlines the gravity of one's decision between belief and unbelief in secular modernity when he says that "nothing less than "the problem of the meaning of life is on our agenda."<sup>19</sup> Moreover, he says that the challenges of the Enlightenment-blinded scientists, who promote a kind of historical "amnesia [that] ... makes us unable to name that which constitutes us,"<sup>20</sup> are wholly unconvincing. But as noted, so too is the issue of transformation and reconciliation on the agenda because without a commonly accepted moral understanding, moral conflicts in our society will be inevitable unless we can devise an "articulacy"<sup>21</sup> that, reflecting the upward spiral of Hegel's dialectical view of history, promotes a synthesis reconciling previously irreconcilable personal values and contradictory views in our increasingly plural modern society.

What if reconciliation between the atheist, agnostic and theistic perspectives is unachievable? Should those aspiring to the transcendent horizon give way or self-mutilate by suppressing their spiritual values? This could be seen as the Nietzschean challenge: whether in order to avoid the dilemma of the sometimes violent outcomes of religion or moral passion it means that we have to adopt "a sober, scientific-minded, secular humanism" to avoid it?<sup>22</sup> Taylor's answer is that, however desirable that might be, it will not avoid the dilemma because it would require self-mutilation. That is "it [would involve] stifling the response in us to some of

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<sup>17</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: The Bantam Press, 2006).

<sup>18</sup> Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Hachette Book Group USA, 2007).

<sup>19</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 18.

<sup>20</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 503.

<sup>21</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 106.

<sup>22</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 519.

the deepest and most powerful aspirations that humans have conceived. This too is a heavy price to pay.”<sup>23</sup> It amounts to denying our humanity and the fullness of which it might be constituted: “the strong sense that continually arises that there is something more, that human life aims beyond itself [and has] the freedom to come to God on one’s own, or otherwise put, moved only by the Holy Spirit.”<sup>24</sup> Exclusive humanism and anti-humanism, Taylor warns, both entail a “spiritual lobotomy”<sup>25</sup> by suppressing the transcendent dimension that gives meaning and depth to the theist’s life.

## 7.5 Taylor’s “Transformation Perspective”

*Christian faith exists in a field where there is also a wide range of other spiritual options. But the interesting story is not simply one of decline, but also of a new placement of the sacred or spiritual in relation to individual and social life. This new placement is now the occasion for recompositions of spiritual life in new forms, and for new ways of existing both in and out of relation to God.*<sup>26</sup>

So what is the answer? Where does Taylor find hope for the needed reconciliation in secular modern society? It seems that the answer lies in the idea of transformation. Frequently, he points directly or indirectly to the human capacity for “transformation” and the human need for the transcendent in order to live lives of the fullest possible fullness. Can we find a reconciling point or bridge or synthesis between those living in the fuller fullness of the horizon of the transcendent and those flourishing exclusively within the horizon of the immanent? Taylor’s frequent answer to this quandary is to point to transformation. An important example of this comes in his definition of “religion” where he says ““religion can be defined in terms of

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<sup>23</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 519.

<sup>24</sup> Charles Taylor, *Dilemmas and Connections*, 172.

<sup>25</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 520.

<sup>26</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 437.

‘transcendence, but this latter term must be understood in more than one dimension.’<sup>27</sup> Taylor says that the first dimension is

belief that there is some good higher than, beyond human flourishing. In the Christian case, we could think of this as *agapē* the love which God has for us, and which we can partake of through his power. In other words, a possibility of transformation is offered, which takes us beyond merely human perfection. But, of course, this notion of a higher good attainable by us could only make sense in the context of a higher power, the transcendent God of faith ... but then, thirdly, the Christian story of our transformation through *agapē* requires that we see our life as going beyond its ‘natural’ scope ... beyond ‘this life.’<sup>28</sup>

All the way through Taylor’s various works analyzing the human condition leading up to and comprising Western secular modernity, there is a recurrent drumbeat of a series of transformations in the social imaginary of Western culture. Of course, the biggest transformation for Taylor and the one that underlies his life’s work as a scholar and philosophical anthropologist is seemingly reflected in his recurrent question expressed in the first lines of Chapter 1 of *A Secular Age*: “why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable.”<sup>29</sup> However, here and there Taylor alludes to many other historical and cultural transformations, and not least among these is the cultural revolution of the 1960s in Western societies. As we have seen, he points out that post-revolutionary climates tend to be inhospitable to past regimes and this partly explains the difficulty of public discussion of the transcendent in contemporary society. But on the other hand he observes that “perhaps the clearest sign of the transformation in our world is that today many people look back to the world of the porous self [of pre-Modernity] with

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<sup>27</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 20.

<sup>28</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 20.

<sup>29</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 25.

nostalgia, as though the creation of a thick emotional boundary between us and the cosmos were now lived as a loss.”<sup>30</sup>

It is on this basis that Taylor argues for what he calls the “transformation perspective.”<sup>31</sup> He begins by noting that secularization primarily refers to the beliefs of people. The secular refers to a situation in which the lives of fewer people are influenced by religious beliefs. However, rather than trying to define the elusive word “religion,” he notes that “I want to focus not only on beliefs and actions ‘predicated on the existence of supernatural entities’ (a.k.a. ‘God’), but also on the perspective of a transformation of human beings which take them beyond or outside whatever is understood as human flourishing.”<sup>32</sup>

But, he does not leave the idea of a spiritual transformation there. He goes on to define transformation: “In the Christian case, this means our participating in the love (agape) of God for human beings, which is by definition a love which goes way beyond any possible mutuality, a self-giving not bound by some measure of fairness.”<sup>33</sup> He elaborates this crucial idea by noting that it has two dimensions – belief in a supernatural God and belief in what this power calls us to. These coalesce to open the perspective of transformation. Taylor concludes by observing that “the main struggle of modernity has been shaped by a polarization between this kind of transformation perspective ... and a view which sees our highest goal in terms of a certain kind of human flourishing, in a context of mutuality, pursuing our own personal idea of happiness.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Charles Taylor, *Dilemmas and Connections*, 221.

<sup>31</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 430-435.

<sup>32</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 430.

<sup>33</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 430.

<sup>34</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 430.

## 7.6 “Personal Resonance”

We will conclude this discussion with one last important idea already touched on above. It becomes clear that what Taylor calls “personal resonance” could well play a central role in his search for a workable and persuasive reconciling synthesis to heal a deeply divided modern Western spiritual culture. Taylor refers repeatedly to personal resonance in both his major books. It is an idea based on his observation, and quite likely his personal experience, that personal resonance can offer a means to open people to the transformation perspective that can bring about fullness in their lives. It is also a basis for articulating the idea of transformation to another because it is a matter of relationship with, rather than simply experience of the transcendent.

It is therefore no coincidence that, towards the end of Taylor’s argument in both his major books, he highlights the theme of “personal resonance.” After devoting two chapters tracing “the moral sources outside the subject,”<sup>35</sup> in the last chapter of *Sources of the Self*, Taylor more or less gives up the effort. This is because dominant objectivist and scientific thinking in modern culture has relegated the premodern idea that humans are part of a larger order to the sidelines of incoherence. In any case, he observes, it is not a matter of identifying an “‘objective’ order in the classical sense of a publicly accessible reality. The order is only accessible through personal, hence ‘subjective’ resonance.”<sup>36</sup> Consequently, Taylor dismisses all of today’s modern objectivist readings as “too narrow” and he condemns them for sneering at “what I called the exploration of order through personal resonance.”<sup>37</sup> Therefore he concludes that since “we are now in an age in which a publicly accessible cosmic order of meanings is an impossibility the

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<sup>35</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 510.

<sup>36</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 510.

<sup>37</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 511.

only way we can explore the order in which we are set with an aim to defining moral sources is through this part of personal resonance.”<sup>38</sup>

Taylor points out that the stakes are high in this important discussion. If we do not have a sense of moral sources in our culture, then we fall prey to “Nietzsche’s challenge.” As noted above, according to Taylor, “Nietzsche’s challenge is on the deepest level ... it is a deep insight. If morality can only be proved negatively ... then pity is destructive to the giver and degrading to the receiver. Only if there is such a thing as *agapē*<sup>39</sup> or one of the secular claimants to its succession, is Nietzsche wrong.”<sup>40</sup> It appears from all the foregoing that the reconciling synthesis we are looking for in Taylor’s thought must entail the concept of *agapē*.

We now turn briefly to Taylor’s discussion of personal resonance in *A Secular Age*. It concentrates on the way that personal resonance can play a catalytic role in prompting spiritual conversion in an individual and as a result pull her/him away from self-absorbed and meaningless exclusive humanism towards the fullness of the transcendent. He gives powerful examples of three ways personal resonance may be triggered.

First, there is the personal epiphanic experience, “a contact with fullness.”<sup>41</sup> Taylor outlines three different “cases studies” of this phenomenon starting with the non-believer who is transformed, convinced and converted such as Bede Griffiths.<sup>42</sup> Then there is the similar account of “an epiphanic moment” from Vaclav Havel, an atheist, who is inspired in a passing moment

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<sup>38</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 512.

<sup>39</sup> Note: the editor of *Sources of the Self* spells agape and *agapē* interchangeably. We prefer the Greek version but spell it the way it appears in the text being quoted.

<sup>40</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 516.

<sup>41</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 729.

<sup>42</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 728.

by a sense of the power of God, was made to think, but was not converted.<sup>43</sup> Then Taylor turns the spotlight on St. Francis of Assisi who was “seized by a sense of the overpowering force of God’s love, and a burning desire to become a channel of this love ... he was moved to abandon everything in his life for the love of God.”<sup>44</sup> Taylor comments, in this regard that “we have the analogue of a ‘paradigm change’ in science; only one that affects the central issue of our lives.”<sup>45</sup> This suggests that if we as individuals are in the zones of unbelief or of the “cross-pressured” individual like Camus, we may need to be looking for or anticipating a personal paradigm change.

Taylor remarks that “for most people who undergo a conversion there may never have been one of those seemingly self-authenticating experiences ... but they may easily take on a new view about religion from others: saints, prophets, charismatic leaders, who have radiated some sense of more direct contact.”<sup>46</sup> So transformation and conversion by personal resonance can be contagious.

Taylor moves from these instances of individual conversion to a variety of other types of transformation based on personal resonance: instances of groups of people as opposed to individuals, having conversion experiences as a shared experience; conversion resulting from individually identified and often unprecedented “itineraries” such as the route Charles Péguy followed.<sup>47</sup> Then there is the category of contemplative and mystical conversion such as in the case of St. Teresa of Avila, and many others.

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<sup>43</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 729.

<sup>44</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 729.

<sup>45</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 731.

<sup>46</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 729.

<sup>47</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 754-5.

And, finally, there is the avenue to fullness through personal resonance provided by the arts – painting, music, architecture, (imagine for example how many people have been transformed by Chartres Cathedral), prose and poetry. Of these routes, perhaps none is better described by Taylor than his several page reflection on the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins who explored the infinite through exquisite, innovative and resonant language such as his magnificent poem that begins “The world is charged with the grandeur of God.”<sup>48</sup> Taylor, whose fascination with language is evident throughout his career up to and including his most recent book,<sup>49</sup> says, “We are language beings ... spirit enters our world through language.”<sup>50</sup> A few pages later Taylor goes further: “a new poetic language can serve to find a way back to the God of Abraham.”<sup>51</sup>

Thus, to conclude, personal resonance in Taylor’s thought combines with our earlier discussion of Taylor’s relevant ideas. These included ideas concerning dialectical change, the centrality of the transcendent horizon for the possibility of the fullest fullness in ordinary human lives, the transformation perspective, and the power of personal resonance. They can all be seen to be coming together and forging a synthesis in Taylor’s thought that appears to pave his way not only in his own life but also his teaching towards a recovery of the centrality of the transcendent in the secular modern age.

He gives us a sense along these lines of where he is heading in the conclusion of his new book (which he sees as the first of two volumes on the constitutive nature of language) when he wonders if it is possible to live in “a purely disenchanted world?” With the German Romantics,

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<sup>48</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular age*, 757.

<sup>49</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Language Animal: The Full Shape of the Human Linguistic Capacity* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016).

<sup>50</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 756.

<sup>51</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 757.

he replies to this question in the negative and suggests that the answer is to seek “various modes of re-enchantment.”<sup>52</sup> This in many respects is the idea behind the ideas in this chapter. It suggests that re-enchantment, restoring the place of the sacred, the transcendent, in individual modern lives, seems to be the reconciling synthesis Taylor is seeking.

## 7.7 Conclusion

*One feature of this world is that it contains lots of seekers. I mean people who see themselves as such. They are looking for meaning, and often see themselves as looking for more than this, for some form of life which will bring them in contact with the spiritual, however they define this. But in a sense they are not defining it. They see their present tenuous grasp on it as provisional. They are on a journey ... the conversion stage usually presupposes a searching stage.*<sup>53</sup>

Our foregoing presentation of Taylor’s suggested synthesis proposes that conversion, perhaps catalyzed by an experience of personal resonance, can bring about personal transformation leading to the *agapē* and power of God. In this way there can be a possible reconciliation between the contradictions and oppositions regarding the place of the transcendent in Western secular modern culture. It, therefore, brings us to the conclusion of our study because, as suggested above, this culminating reconciling synthesis brings together and demonstrates the elements of our hypothesis. Its principal focus has been Taylor’s “hedgehog,” “guiding idea” or “Ariadne’s Thread” in his work as a philosophical anthropologist. This is the importance of restoring and reinvigorating the transcendental horizon to its necessary place in secular modern lives and culture. It is backed up as we have claimed by the three main components of Taylor’s “rather tightly related agenda” supporting that focus. These are (1) polemical arguments against those who marginalize the transcendent in society, disregard human subjectivity in the academic

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<sup>52</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Language Animal*, 343.

<sup>53</sup> Charles Taylor, “The Church Speaks to Whom?” in *Church and People: Disjunctions in a Secular Age*, editors Charles Taylor, José Casanova, George F. McLean (Washington DC: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2012), 17.

social sciences, and propagate “subtraction stories” arguing for the inevitability of decline in belief; (2) acts of retrieval from the wealth of past spiritual insight and knowledge, and (3) acts of persuasion or teaching that restore the proper place of the transcendent in secular modernity.

Despite his seeming complexity, a close reading of Charles Taylor’s immense *oeuvre* reveals a remarkable consistency and focus over the years on this agenda. As a philosopher he states in *A Secular Age* that his book is “an attempt to study the fate in the modern West of religious faith in a strong sense.” He defines “strong sense” with a “double criterion: the belief in transcendent reality ... and the connected aspiration to a transformation which goes beyond ordinary human flourishing.”<sup>54</sup>

In order to understand that fate, he believes that he must begin with his benchmark question: “Why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but inescapable?”<sup>55</sup> Much of his work over the last quarter century and more has been an effort to provide a genealogical picture of the stages of transformation that brought that massive change about. To that extent, his work has been about the history of ideas and the evolution of the Western social imaginary requiring objective analysis and explanation of human phenomena, as is entirely proper to a contemporary secular philosopher and scholar.

However, that would not be an adequate picture of Taylor’s underlying aspirations as a thinker, teacher and committed Christian. Our study has made clear, we claim, that Taylor’s most important aspirations reach higher than the bounds of contemporary philosophical academic conventions. He has polemical and pedagogical objectives as a philosopher, seeming theologian,

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<sup>54</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 510.

<sup>55</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 25.

and teacher, seem intended not only to illuminate but to persuade and motivate. In that sense, Taylor might be seen to be as much a “preacher” as a “teacher.” But perhaps there is not a big difference in any case between the two. He has a mission and his work suggests that he sees his life mission as being a Ricci-type journey seeking, preaching and teaching.

a type of reconciling synthesis addressing the “predicament” of people living in Western secular modern culture. According to Taylor, this predicament is one created by changed conditions of belief described by Taylor’s “Secularity 3.” They require all of us in Western secular modernity to make an individual personal choice among options of belief and unbelief where whatever choice is made can have serious consequences for the individual.

The choice or predicament concerns how people aim to live their spiritual lives as between belief and unbelief or, otherwise stated, as between the possibility of the fullest “fullness” of life in a transcendent horizon, or a merely “flourishing” life within the strictly immanent horizon. For Taylor, this choice is a “no choice” option if one properly understands it. The fuller let alone fullest fullness of life is incomparably richer within the transcendent horizon, and flatter and less meaningful in the exclusive humanist, atheist or anti-theist corners in the struggle or “battle” between options of belief and unbelief.

In inquiring into what kinds of change or forces of change might bring about the synthesis necessary to form the next “thesis” in the upward dialectic spiral, we have seen that Taylor points to two in particular. First, he argues strenuously for the power in human spiritual lives of “personal resonance” and he discusses various ways in which people experience it. Secondly, Taylor identifies precisely what constitutes the fullness of the transcendent. That is *agapē* or the power of the love of God beyond any mutuality, which empowers humans to carry

out God's calling in their lives. In brief: Taylor suggests that the forces of transformation lead to a sense of the transcendent or at least to a gnawing sense of there being "something more" or something missing in meaningless or flat lives in the exclusive humanist condition. These human responses to secular modern life not only can be but *are* sensed through insights and experiences of "personal resonance." Taylor says that they are the highways towards the transcendent as defined and embodied by humans in the love and power of *agapē*. For Taylor, the love and power of *agapē* define what it is to be human at its highest reaches. It is the reconciling force *par excellence*.

In conclusion, Taylor says that he embarked on his study "not in a downbeat spirit ... [but] as a work we might say of liberation" whose objectives begin with attacking polemically conventional modern philosophy and social sciences which have "read out so many goods from our official story." Second, he carries out "an act of recovery" to retrieve "suppressed goods,"<sup>56</sup> referring to the immense Judeo-Christian inheritance. Third, he aims to "uncover buried goods through re-articulation,"<sup>57</sup> which is another way of saying he is looking for ways of interlocution and articulation allowing for "acts of persuasion" through Matteo Ricci style teaching. His overall aim in his words is "to make these sources again empower, to bring the air back into the half-collapsed lungs of the spirit."<sup>58</sup>

A consequential claim arising out of this study that we suggest has been warranted is that Taylor's primary concern in his work is neither modern secularity *per se* nor the so-called "secular age" but rather the entirely avoidable risk of "various kinds of spiritual lobotomy and

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<sup>56</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 504.

<sup>57</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 520.

<sup>58</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 520.

self-inflicted wounds”<sup>59</sup> arising from the potential loss in modern Western lives of the transcendent horizon. Taylor believes that the fullest possible “fullness” in an individual’s life (as opposed to mere “flourishing”) can only be achieved within a transcendent horizon. That, in the formulation of our thesis, is the necessary place of the transcendent in secular modern lives. And the essence of the transcendent in Taylor’s view is the transformative and interactive experience of *agapē*, God’s unqualified love, which is attainable by all who are not closed to it.

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<sup>59</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 520.

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