CROSS-PRESSURED AUTHENTICITY: CHARLES TAYLOR ON THE CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES TO RELIGIOUS IDENTITY IN *A SECULAR AGE*

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Taylor's landmark work, A Secular Age*, tells a complex story about the fate of religion in the West over the past 500 years. Taking issue with an overly-simplistic secularization theory, Taylor portrays a cultural landscape that, rather than speeding the withering of religion, has instead proliferated a dizzying array of spiritual options. This pluralistic reality places "cross-pressure" on those who inhabit these spiritual positions, fragilizing them through exposure to other lived possibilities. The widely adopted modern value of authenticity increases this pressure, encouraging people to carve out their own unique spiritual path and to eschew traditional, 'spoon-fed' answers to life's existential questions. Yet what remains throughout these modern challenges to religion, says Taylor, is the quintessentially human quest for meaning, and the struggle against a modern nihilism that threatens to deny it. In this contested space, he suggests, humanity's religious past is being called into an as yet unimagined future.*

Modernity, Morality, and Transcendence

Perhaps no other philosopher today better emulates Hegel's description of philosophy as "its own time comprehended in thoughts" than Charles Taylor. Boldly going where angels fear to tread, Taylor's many and diverse interdisciplinary intellectual forays unite around the single project of developing nothing less than an understanding of modernity itself. What makes this effort even more impressive is the fact that, unlike so many others before him, he does not underestimate the enormity of the task he has set for himself; in fact he complicates it by eschewing reductionistic pictures of the modern condition. At the same time, he explicitly recognizes the partiality of his unique perspective, as well as the limits of his competence to speak to all aspects and corners of global modernity.

For example, in his monumental *A Secular Age*, he is quick to insist that his arguments apply only to "Latin Christendom," or "the West, or North Atlantic Worlds," to key historical developments that have taken place in this civilization over roughly the past 500 years. Restricting his focus to the West in this way, Taylor readily admits that "[w]e are more and more living in a world of 'multiple modernities.'" While it is clear to him that modernity has ushered in fundamental changes to the human prospect, changes that are indeed global in reach, he does not think these changes take place the same way or with the same effect in all parts of the globe. Because of such plurality, he advises us to study the crucial changes brought about through the modern era "in their different civilizational sites before we rush to global generalization."[1]

Yet at the same time that he draws our attention to this epistemological limit, fearing that even in restricting himself to the last 500 years of ex-Latin Christendom his "canvass is too broad," he also maintains (just as he did in *Sources of the Self*) that it is still possible—from within such a "regional compass"—to take up a set of issues that are of universal human concern. (SA, 21–22) Already here we see the complexity of Taylor's position emerging: if he is to be successful in what he sets out to do, he must, from within a particular historical and cultural perspective, nevertheless mount arguments and proffer insights that are capable of achieving universal human resonance. And, to make matters more difficult, for Taylor this universal resonance cannot simply be achieved through "reason alone," or through the mere procedural outcome of a purportedly neutral, strictly empirical argument—one that is capable of compelling everyone's assent solely via the unforced force of its formal logical structure. Taylor instead indexes this universal resonance to a particular "ontology of the human," a *thick* moral ontology that makes non-neutral, substantively normative claims "about the nature and status of human beings."[2] As Nicholas H. Smith helpfully summarizes, in struggling to bring this ontology to fuller articulation, Taylor seeks to provide a robust account of the distinctive, essential features of

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[1] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 21. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as SA.

[2] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 5. Here Taylor also explains that our moral reactions have two facets: "On one side, they are almost like instincts, comparable to our love of sweet things, or our aversion to nauseous substances, or our fear of falling; on the other, they seem to involve claims, implicit or explicit, about the nature and status of human beings. From this second side, a moral reaction is an assent to, an affirmation of, a given ontology of the human."

human reality. This account, Smith says, is "philosophical rather than empirical because it investigates the transcendental conditions of human activity, or in other words, the standards that have to be met if a form of life is to be recognized *as* human at all."[3]

Taylor proposes this ontology in *Sources of the Self*. While I cannot explore it in detail here, suffice it to say that in that book Taylor understands human beings as "strong evaluators." We are not inserted passively or neutrally into a world of detached, impersonal objects; rather, the world comes to us as always already meaningful and significant. Our earliest encounters with the furniture of our world are meaningful encounters. "Things" matter for us or concern us. What is more, the world we meet in and through our acculturation into full personhood is one that is populated with what Taylor calls "life goods," or "constitutive goods." For Taylor, "life goods refer us to some feature of the way things are, in virtue of which these life goods are goods."[4] Life goods are thus goods that shape our very understanding of what is good and bad, right or wrong, etc. Indeed, suggests Taylor, without some adherence to such life goods as freedom, altruism, and universal justice, "it is hard to see how one could have a moral theory at all or, indeed, be a self...."[5]

For Taylor, these goods exist independently of us, and yet we cannot be neutral with respect to them. We are the strong evaluators we are because we find ourselves living in a morally meaningful world, a world composed of constitutive goods that not only shape our moral sense, but also empower or inspire our efforts to meet the standard they set for us. So a good or virtuous life for Taylor is not simply one that responds dutifully to ethical obligations imposed from some transcendent source, but rather one that is motivated by a love for these life goods, love that these goods themselves inspire. This question of motivation or inspiration is crucial for Taylor, because he thinks that a full human life is not possible without some form of affective connection to moral sources that are capable of providing such motivation. It is against this background, then, that we must understand what Taylor means by the "malaise of modernity." According to Taylor, even though certain modern developments have done much to further the realization of some of these life goods, indeed to a level beyond anything earlier humans might have imagined, at the same time, certain other modern developments now

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[3] Nicholas H. Smith, *Charles Taylor: Meaning, Morals, and Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), 237.

[4] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 93.

[5] *Ibid.*

threaten to cut us off from those very moral sources that originally inspired them.[6]

For all the gains of modernity, and Taylor does not think these are small, his fundamental diagnosis remains that the ascendant rationalism and materialism of the modern West fails to take sufficient account of the aforementioned ontology of the human, and in fact neglects it, to its peril. We must not forget this deeper context as we approach his arguments in *A Secular Age*; for more than simply providing a defensive apology for the rational credibility of continued belief in divinity or transcendence, this book strives to make the stronger claim that religious insights and orientations can help us retrieve, or render more fully articulate, something that any proper ontology of the human must take into account.[7] This stronger claim is related to Taylor's conviction that the moral sources needed for a full human life transcend the merely human. He thinks that in order to remain human we need to stay in touch with something "beyond" ourselves, and in this effort he considers traditional religious sources of meaning and insight to be of no small moment.

At the same time, for Taylor, there can be no question of simply turning back the clock to a previous age in Western Civilization, an age when belief in divinity and transcendence was the default option, part of the implicit background, or "social imaginary," in terms of which nearly everyone in that civilization understood their being-in-the-world. As Fergus Kerr explains, while Taylor's purpose in *Sources of the Self* is, indeed, to locate moral sources outside the subject, he seeks to do so "not in terms of a person's submission to some cosmic order of meanings, but 'through languages which resonate *within* him or her, the grasping of an order which is inseparably indexed to a personal vision.'"[8] In the modern era, any attempt to

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[6] *Ibid.*, 520.

[7] One must also not confuse the articulation with the particular good in question itself. While striving for articulation can bring us closer to these goods, or inspire us to live by them, as constitutive goods they precede any articulation they may receive on our behalf. As I explore later, however, Taylor thinks that in our current "age of authenticity" premodern articulations of these sources no longer resonate with many. For this reason, many today feel compelled to develop "subtler languages" that might be able to effect the required disclosure of these non-subjective life goods. Language thus has an essential role to play in this process, for it is a *sine qua non* in our efforts to retrieve an appropriate ontology of the human. (see SA, 173; and also Smith, *Charles Taylor*, 226)

[8] Fergus Kerr, "The Self and the Good: Taylor's Moral Ontology," in *Charles Taylor*, (ed.) Ruth Abbey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 90. Kerr here quotes from Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 510.

locate and relate to such transcendent sources must do so within the terms of an emerging "age of authenticity." The contemporary scene, Taylor suggests, has become indelibly marked by the fact that more and more people insist upon the importance of taking their own unique path in response to the sorts of spiritual questions that Taylor poses. Traditional, premodern religious languages are not exactly dead letters for Taylor, yet for the traditions housing them to continue to resonate today, they must learn to reach people where they are at. For him this means honouring the emerging value of personal authenticity.[9]

In drawing our attention to the growing acceptance of the value of authenticity over the past several decades, Taylor underlines the important influence that the tradition of Romantic expressivism has had upon our modern understanding of the self. This tradition emphasizes the importance of making a personally authentic response to received tradition, one that does not simply repeat in an automatic or slavish fashion what it receives from its forebears. Taylor considers this modern development to be on the whole beneficial and worth preserving, so his openness to it further complicates his attempt to encourage the retrieval of the aforementioned ontology of the human. For now the attempt to articulate such an ontology must be pursued in concert with the development of "subtler languages," languages that are able to articulate this moral ontology in a way that also authentically resonates with today's spiritual seeker.[10] Because the modern self is different in fundamental ways from the premodern self, the former languages through which the ontology of the human had been expressed no longer resonate with many of us, and in fact have become deeply problematic. Taylor's hunch is that, even though in our age of authenticity we strive to articulate new, subtler languages to regain contact with the sources of our essential humanity, the development of such language remains a live possibility.[11]

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[9] See SA, Chapter 13.

[10] See SA, 357–61, especially 361: "The loss of pre-modern languages shows how embedded we are in the buffered identity, but the continued attempt to devise subtler languages shows how difficult it is just to leave things there, not to try to compensate for, to replace those earlier vehicles of now problematic insight." In this section, Taylor also draws attention to the fact that these "subtler languages" are often ambiguous with respect to their ontic commitments, a feature that actually enhances their attraction for many contemporary spiritual seekers, including agnostics and atheists who are unhappy with the flattened materialism and lack of depth of life in what Taylor calls the Modern Moral Order. (see SA, 356)

[11] See Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity* (Toronto: Anansi, 1991), 81–82.

All these considerations set the stage for the intellectual narrative Taylor puts forward in *A Secular Age*. This narrative aims to give us a better grasp of our current situation, and in doing so it also aims to depict the possibility and potential of a peculiarly contemporary form of religious identity, one that does not seek conservatively to turn back the clock, but instead affirms the age of authenticity, and in doing so also exposes itself to the "cross-pressures" of the alternative spiritual options that proliferate in our age of authenticity.

Modern Religious Identity in the Light of Two Taylorian Concepts

In *A Secular Age*, Taylor expresses dissatisfaction with one of the major assumptions informing mainstream secularization theories. Whether in the social sciences or in popular culture more generally, those who espouse the position he wishes to criticize readily buy into what he calls "subtraction stories" of secularization. These are "stories of modernity in general, and secularity in particular, which explain them by human beings having lost, or sloughed off, or liberated themselves from certain earlier, confining horizons, or illusions, or limitations of knowledge. What emerges from this process—modernity or secularity—is to be understood in terms of underlying features of human nature which were there all along, but had been impeded by what is now set aside." (SA, 22) Simply put, Taylor doesn't buy it. It is not that he thinks there haven't been dramatic transformations in the religious culture of the West over the past 500 years, to the contrary; he only thinks that subtraction stories fail to tell the tale. He thinks the real story is much more complex, and (as many of us are all too painfully aware) he spends more than 800 pages trying to tell it.

As the title I have chosen for this essay indicates, here I would like to "think together" two key themes that emerge in Taylor's narrative in *A Secular Age*, "cross-pressure" and "authenticity." The idea of cross-pressure has to do with the reality that, in contrast to the subtraction story, the transformations that Taylor understands to have taken place in the West over roughly the last 500 years have brought about a proliferation, rather than a contraction, of livable spiritual options. For Taylor, the secularist position that places great stock in humanity's rational capacities, and disparages what it takes to be vestigial remnants of irrational religious tradition, is itself more than a *negative* option (or, more than simply the rational core that remains once religious superstition has fallen away); this position is, rather, one robust or *positive* spiritual option among others. The idea

of cross-pressure has to do with the fact that, no matter what spiritual option one happens to identify with, people today have a heightened sense of awareness, and even understanding, of alternatives to their own position. So instead of presenting us with an either/or choice between belief and unbelief, Taylor sees these two positions as the extreme poles of an axis, adding that most people find themselves at various places along it. (SA, 676) That is, many people today are able to, and often do, feel the attraction of those positions they themselves do not hold, and this places pressure on their own spiritual position or orientation within the axis. Even those who are firmly entrenched in their positions, whether they align themselves with the so-called "New Atheists" or with some version of religious fundamentalism, can't help but be aware that many people in Western society do not share their views, and this causes no small amount of bafflement, consternation, and even righteous indignation. (SA, 549)[12]

   In addition to the reality of cross-pressure, Taylor, as we have seen, also argues that our secular age is increasingly becoming an "age of authenticity." The emerging mass acceptance of the Romantic expressivist value of authenticity, aided by the various cultural revolutions of the 1960s, signals for Taylor a larger cultural revolution in North Altlantic civilization, one that we are still living through. In becoming a "culture of authenticity," says Taylor, we have come to value "the understanding of life which emerges with the Romantic expressivism of the late-eighteenth century, that each one of us has his/her own way of realizing our humanity, and that it is important to find one's own, as against surrendering to conformity with a model imposed on us from outside, by society, or the previous generation, or religious or political authority." (SA, 475) Whether one is religious or not, Taylor says, it has become an important value for people today to find their own way into whatever spiritual position

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[12] Here Taylor suggests that this increased sensitivity to difference can take different forms. Evoking Wittgenstein, Taylor argues that one can remain trapped in one's picture, unable to see it as one picture among possible others (a position he describes using the word "spin"), in which case other positions can only seem monstrously alien. Or, one can recognize one's picture as a picture (a position he describes with the word "take"), but even so one might still have great difficulty making sense of surrounding alternatives. Or finally, says Taylor, one can come to stand in the "Jamesian open space," where one "can actually feel some of the force of each opposing position." It is in this open space where the effects of cross-pressure are most acutely felt, and my discussion of cross-pressure refers mainly to this space, as opposed to the other two positions. See SA, 551.

they happen to hold. It is important for people to understand their spiritual position as, at least in part, the result of personal searching and struggling. Even religious people to a large degree do not simply accept spoon-fed answers to their existential questions, and those given the authority over the teaching and transmission of religious tradition have had to adjust to this new reality on the ground, to greater or lesser success.[13]

When we examine how the two Taylorian themes of cross-pressure and authenticity come together in the lives of many religious persons (not to mention others), we see that this combination can have a profound effect on one's understanding of one's own religious identity. For starters, the quest for authenticity, when suffused throughout an entire culture, tends in the direction of increased plurality and proliferating available spiritual options, thus creating a social context that increases the effects of cultural cross-pressure. As a result, the cross-pressure one is more and more likely to feel today can also serve to "fragilize" one's spiritual orientation. At the same time, the value of authenticity works to prevent an increasing number of people from simply fleeing such fragilization for the refuge provided by the ready-made answers of an authoritative religious tradition.

Yet through all this pluralization and fragilization, Taylor maintains it is still possible and, what is more, desirable, for honest spiritual seekers to adopt or maintain specifically religious positions in a secular age. He even thinks it is possible for such a religious orientation to be more than simply fragilized and beleaguered by the winds of modern secularism. While religious options have indeed been fragilized, on Taylor's account this fragilization has spread to all the other positions on the modern axis as well, including non-religious ones. Those holding these latter positions are also cross-pressured, and because of this Taylor thinks that a modern religious position remains capable of speaking to those other fragilities. (SA, 303–304; see also Chapters 19 and 20)

Exiting The Spin Zone: The Effects of Cross-Pressure on Modernity's "Immanent Frame"

In order to unpack the idea of cross-pressure some more, I want to start with what seems like one of the least cross-pressured positions

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[13] See Taylor, "The Future of the Religious Past," in *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 245.

imaginable, the New Atheism of people like Richard Dawkins or the late Christopher Hitchens. The New Atheists readily buy into a robust version of the "subtraction story" that Taylor criticizes. This is the story that sees the rise of science and the demise of religion as twin features of a linear process called Progress or Enlightenment. Hitchens effectively encapsulates his commitment to this story in two brief sentences: "Religion has run out of justifications. Thanks to the telescope and the microscope, it no longer offers an explanation of anything important."[14] As these two sentences demonstrate, those like Hitchens who assume the obviousness of their spin on science and religion hold the view that science has replaced religion. Both enterprises, so the story goes, are involved in the same game, *explanation*, and science has emerged the victor. Science, in sum, shows us all there is to be seen and all we can ever see, and there is thus nothing left for religion to do.[15]

The New Atheists' polemic against religion provides a perfect example of what Taylor calls a "closed spin" on Western modernity's "immanent frame." Taylor uses the latter phrase to describe a key feature of the "social imaginary" that forms the tacit background of the modern Western outlook. As Taylor explains, a social imaginary is "that largely unstructured and inarticulate understanding of our whole situation, within which particular features of our world show up for us in the sense they have." (SA, 173)[16] Whether religious or secular, Taylor argues, the immanent frame now shapes how most people in the modern West understand their experience and existence. (SA, Chapter 4)[17] Within this frame, modern Westerners un-

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[14] Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2007), 282.

[15] Who today, pray, will play Wittgenstein to Dawkins's Sir James George Frazer? For Taylor's perhaps unwitting attempt to do so, see SA, 428. For Wittgenstein's vexed reaction to Frazer's reductionist interpretation of primitive religious rites, see his "Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*," in *Philosophical Occasions: 1912– 1951*, (ed.) James Klagge and Alfred Nordmann (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1993), Chapter 7.

[16] It is important to keep in mind that, for Taylor, a social imaginary is inarticulate, because it operates as the tacit backdrop in front of which our explicit articulations and beliefs have the meaning they do. It is impossible to bring this background to full, explicit articulation, for then it would no longer form the background, and the point is that some pre-theoretical imaginary always operates in the background.

[17] It is important to note that any particular social imaginary never remains static or monolithic, but changes over time, and sometimes quite profoundly. But like the planks on Neurath's boat, such change occurs in piecemeal fashion, and never all at once. And just as the boat must always remain at sea while the

derstand themselves as basically atomistic individuals, who subsequently enter into relations of mutual benefit and recognition (which Taylor calls the Modern Moral Order). These individual selves, moreover, are "buffered" as opposed to "porous," the outside world remains at an objective distance—disenchanted—and as such does not "get to" them the same way it did to premodern selves whose lives were lived as porous to a cosmos suffused with mystery, divinity, and transcendence. As background, the immanent frame also sets up, as we shall see, a strict separation between the immanent and the transcendent, the natural and the supernatural, the subjective and the objective, the material and the spiritual. While, as I have already stated, Taylor thinks that something like this social imaginary provides the implicit interpretive backdrop for everyone in our secular age, religious or otherwise, he also insists that it remains possible to interpret the immanent frame as either closed or open to transcendence. (SA, 550)

According to Taylor, the immanent frame "constitutes a 'natural' order, to be contrasted to a 'supernatural' one, an 'immanent' world, over against a possible 'transcendent' one." (SA, 542) For him, "[t]his hiving off of an independent, free-standing level, that of 'nature', which may or may not be in interaction with something further or beyond, is a crucial bit of modern theorizing." (SA, 14) As a result of this development, Taylor thinks that our age can accurately be understood as secular, insofar as both religious and non-religious people today in some sense live their lives within, or against the backdrop of, this immanent frame. Echoing the words of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Taylor elaborates on the notion of the immanent frame by describing it as a "picture," one that to some extent predetermines what we are able to see: "[W]e have here what Wittgenstein calls a 'picture', a background to our thinking, within whose terms it is carried on, but which is often largely unformulated, and to which we can frequently, just for this reason, imagine no alternative. As he once famously put it, 'a picture held us captive.'" (SA, 549)[18]

While Taylor thus holds that life within the immanent frame is common to all of us in the modern West, at least so long as we remain captive to this picture, it is important to keep in mind that on

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planks are replaced, so we never stop operating with an implicit social imaginary, even as it subtly shifts and changes. To map a profound historical change in a culture's social imaginary, then, requires the kind of detailed investigation of relatively large time periods such as the one Taylor attempts in *A Secular Age*.

[18] The citation is from Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, (ed.) G. E. M. Anscombe, Third Edition (New York: Macmillan, 1958), §115.

his account we may still take up different orientations within it: "Some of us want to live it as open to something beyond; some live it as closed. It is something which permits closure, without demanding it." (SA, 543–44) Taylor insists that both "takes" remain, not just possible, but plausible, arguing that "the actual experience of living within Western modernity tends to awaken protest, resistances of various kinds. In this fuller, experiential sense, 'living within' the frame doesn't simply tip you in one direction, but allows you to feel pulled two ways. A very common experience of living here is that of being cross-pressured between the open and closed perspectives." (SA, 555)

What Taylor objects to in science-boosters like Hitchens or Dawkins, then, is not their veneration of science *per se*, but rather the closed "spin" their subtraction story gives to the modern social imaginary's immanent frame. That is, they fail to understand their "closed" interpretation of the immanent frame as simply one of at least two possible takes, dishonestly baptizing their position with what Taylor describes as "the false aura of the obvious"—an aura he intends to dissipate. (SA, 551) By labeling such baptism "spin," Taylor means to criticize, not only the failure of these commentators to recognize the different spiritual takes that remain plausible or livable within this immanent frame, but also their failure to understand their own position as one such take.[19]

The problem with spin, whether on the part of the religious or the secular, is that it fails to understand closed or open takes as positions we reason *from*, preferring to understand them instead as certain, demonstrable conclusions that we have reasoned *to*. If we are intellectually honest, Taylor says, we will see that there is nothing in the immanent frame itself that rationally compels us to accept either a closed or an open reading. Should we be able to grasp our predicament "without ideological distortion," he says, we will see that "going one way or another requires what is often called a 'leap of faith.'" (SA, 550) According to him, either take anticipates or leaps ahead of the reasons one can muster in support of it, and is something in the nature of a hunch. He describes this stance with the phrase "anticipa-

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[19] On the important distinction between "spin" and "take" in Taylor, see the illuminating discussion in James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 93–97. I thank Jeffrey Metcalfe, a Trinity College Ph.D. student at the Toronto School of Theology, for bringing this distinction, and Smith's treatment of it, to my attention during the Fall 2015 seminar that I led on *A Secular Age* at the Institute for Christian Studies.

tory confidence," and suggests that, wherever we happen to stand, we never move to a point beyond all anticipation. Both the open and the closed stances "involve a step beyond available reasons into the realm of anticipatory confidence." (SA, 551)

So Taylor wants us both to avoid ideological spin and to recognize the inescapability of the anticipatory confidence with which we hold to any particular spiritual take or position within modernity's imma- nent frame. But what do we gain in so doing? As I have already stated, recognizing the inevitability of anticipatory confidence in- cludes recognizing the lack of rational *compulsion* behind any partic- ular position (which is not to say that these positions utterly lack supporting reasons either). Yet to recognize this lack of rational compulsion also involves entering a space in which, according to Taylor, we "can actually feel some of the force of the opposing posi- tion." In some ways, this can feel like a threatening space. As Taylor himself notes, our mere awareness of the existence of positions alien to our own, positions which may do no more than baffle us or meet with our ridicule, already "fragilizes" our own position; such aware- ness can make our sense of what is thinkable or unthinkable "uncer- tain and wavering." (SA, 556) Many believers today find themselves precisely in "that open space where you can feel the winds pulling you, now to belief, now to unbelief...." (SA, 549) Yet Taylor refuses to view this development simply as a lamentable state of affairs. So long as the fragilization gets spread around equally, it can even prove to be a good thing.[20]

Part of dissipating the false aura of the obvious that surrounds a closed spin on the immanent frame, then, involves getting those who hold this reading to recognize the fragility of their position. Taylor thinks that getting such people to recognize and take ownership of the anticipatory confidence that funds their position will help them see it as more than just a negative option; it is not simply composed of what remains once the illusions and inhibitions of religion and traditional authority fall away, but is instead a position that feeds from its own thick, indeed spiritual, intuitions of meaning and the

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[20] See Taylor, "A Catholic Modernity?" in *Dilemmas and Connections*, 169–72. Here Taylor argues that our secular age houses many developments, such as the increasing recognition of universal human rights, that Christians can affirm, developments, moreover, that would not have been possible without the break- up of Christendom, thereby enabling a gospel ethic to transcend its borders. Here is a form of fragilization that Taylor views as a positive and salutary development. On my reading, the chapter "Conversions" in *A Secular Age* is Taylor's attempt to speak to the fragility of materialism and exclusive humanism in a similarly salutary way.

good. "What has got screened out," Taylor tells us, "is the possibility that Western modernity might be sustained by its own original spiritual vision, that is, not one generated simply and inescapably out of the transition [from premodern Christendom]." (SA, 572) This spiritual vision includes such values as an individualist understanding of humans as disengaged, objectifying subjects; an instrumentalist understanding of human reason, which is reflected in our deep trust in the potential deliverances of science, technology, and capital; a "courageous" willingness to live without comforting yet childish "illusions"; the resolute readiness to see no higher purpose for human life than securing material comfort. Now, there could be features of this spiritual vision that many people today might wish to challenge, whether or not they are open to exploring a specifically religious alternative. Yet no such challenge can be mounted, argues Taylor, so long as we buy into the subtraction story, and consider the closed spin on the immanent frame as simply the only and obvious description of reality, shorn of the false projections of religious illusion. We will not be able to challenge the spiritual perspective informing the subtraction story, nor imagine alternatives to it, until we can see its spin for what it is. (SA, 565–66)

For his part, Taylor does recognize that, in questioning the "master narrative" that informs modern secularism, he himself speaks from out of an alternative master narrative. He admits that the operation of such master narratives is essential to our thinking: "We all wield them, including those who claim to repudiate them. We need to be lucid about what we are doing, and ready to debate the ones we're relying on. Attempting to repudiate them just obfuscates matters." (SA, 573) Taylor himself does not shrink from this demand to be lucid concerning the master narrative he himself wields, i.e., his ongoing identification with the tradition of Roman Catholic Christianity. Placing himself carefully in this tradition, he suggests that such an identification can still speak meaningfully to the fragilities of exclusive humanism's "closed" take on the immanent frame. For him, Christian spirituality opens upon a faith in a love or compassion that is unconditional, something we receive through grace, cannot generate by ourselves, and therefore continue to rely upon. He states this position quite clearly in his essay "A Catholic Modernity?"

> Now, it makes a whole lot of difference whether you think this kind of love is a possibility for us humans. I think it is, but only to the extent that we open ourselves to God, which means, in fact, overstepping the limits set in theory by exclusive humanisms. If one does believe that, then one has something very important to say to modern times, something that addresses the fragility of

what all of us, believers and unbelievers alike, most value in these times.[21]

Without seeking to avoid cross-pressure, and while remaining committed to following his own, authentic religious path, Taylor nevertheless continues to find meaning in a traditional religious source, a source that he thinks proves to be less rigid than the important qualifier "traditional" might lead one to believe. His attempt to articulate the continuing relevance of this source, while controversial, puts him at odds with both the authoritative representatives of his own tradition and the secularist advocates of the closed spin. Both camps, he maintains, lack the imagination to see what this rich religious tradition might yet become in an age of authenticity: "What Vatican rule makers and secularist ideologies unite in not being able to see is that there are more ways of being a Catholic Christian than either have yet imagined."[22] Christianity, for Taylor, might yet become that new thing that refuses both a rigid, code-fetishizing understanding of religious identity, as well as an exclusively materialist understanding of life within modernity's immanent frame. In the concluding section of this essay, I will explore the case that Taylor makes for this third option.

Continued Religious Belonging in an Age of Authenticity

There is a chapter in *A Secular Age* called "The Unquiet Frontiers of Modernity" in which Taylor concludes that "our modern culture is restless at the barriers of the human sphere." (SA, 726) What accounts for this restlessness, he explains, is a deep-seated worry about "the spectre of meaninglessness" that haunts the modern age. While he disagrees with those who believe that the essence of religion is simply to offer answers to the peculiarly modern preoccupation with meaning or the lack thereof, he does think it is an uncontestable fact that "the issue about meaning is a central preoccupation of our age, and its threatened lack fragilizes all the narratives of modernity by which we live." (SA, 718) At the unquiet frontiers of modernity, at the boundaries of the immanent frame, "the sense that there is something more presses in." Taylor continues: "Great numbers of people feel it: in moments of reflection about their life; in moments of relaxation in nature; in moments of bereavement and

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[21] Taylor, *Dilemmas and Connections*, 186.
[22] Taylor, "The Future of the Religious Past," 252; see also 241–45.

loss; and quite wildly and unpredictably. Our age is very far from settling in to a comfortable unbelief." (SA, 727)

Because Taylor thinks this vague dissatisfaction with a closed spin on the immanent frame is widespread, he remains firmly convinced that a continued commitment to a traditional religious perspective, in his case the Christian tradition of Roman Catholicism, can speak to this fragilization of the narrative of secular modernity. Yet what he seems to be recommending here is not so much a "rolling back" of modernity, so much as a "working through" the various dilemmas it presents, which includes the aforementioned spectre of meaninglessness, but also includes a history of egregious religious violence, especially when religious and political identities become alloyed.[23] While he remains convinced that a renewed religious voice can redress the various malaises of modernity he names, he does not underestimate the difficulties involved here. He recognizes that our modern world is ideologically fragmented, and that the ascendance of expressive individualism has a tendency to exacerbate that fragmentation. He also recognizes that "[t]here are strong incentives to remain within the bounds of the human domain, or at least not to bother exploring beyond it." (SA, 727) These incentives include, as I have already mentioned, the desire to defend modernity's liberation from an oftentimes violent and repressive religious past; but they also include the maintenance of positive spiritual values, such as human self-reliance and a high regard for what Taylor calls "ordinary human flourishing." (SA, 17–18)

Notwithstanding these incentives to modern exclusive humanism, Taylor continues to insist on the existence of concomitant incentives that encourage us to move away from this perspective. According to him, exclusive humanism "also carries great dangers, which remain

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[23] Here Taylor has in mind those religious identities formed during "the age of mobilization," the age immediately preceding the emerging "age of authenticity." This is a time when religious and national identities are nearly fused, whether in the "paleo-Durkheimian" dispensation of the divine right of Kings, when the political order was seen to embody a sacred cosmic hierarchy, or in the "neo-Durkheimian" dispensation of denominational affiliation under the umbrella of a larger civil religion. The age of mobilization names a time when people are more ready to give their identity up to a larger cause, to become a faceless part of a mass movement. Taylor makes a significant attempt to trace the historical sources that encouraged this social outlook. (See SA, Chapter 12) For a critique of the historical use of religion to forge political identity, or what Taylor calls "religiously defined political identity mobilization," see "The Future of the Religious Past," 232–84.

very underexplored in modern thought."[24] In saying this, I think Taylor shares Paul Ricoeur's critique of modern materialism. Under the label "modernity," Ricoeur describes this closed, materialist secularism as "the inordinate inflation of one interest at the expense of all others." For him, the one-dimensional person of modernity is an ideological phenomenon that serves "to make every social agent accept the autonomous, devouring, and cancerous functioning of the industrial system given over to growth without limit or end beyond itself." Ricoeur goes on to suggest that a consideration of these destructive ideological effects might "chill the zealots of modernity," and help us to see that this spiritual vision "is neither a fact nor our destiny," but henceforth, "an open question."[25] For Ricoeur, the cultural configuration of modernity so described is a species of vicious nihilism; it represents both the abandonment of meaning, and the forgetfulness of ancient wisdom.

While Taylor does not use such strong language in his critique of the dangers inherent in modern exclusive humanism, he still worries that "[t]he level of understanding of some of the great languages of transcendence is declining" and that "in this respect, massive un-learning is taking place." (SA, 727) The "massive unlearning" he alludes to here has I think to do with the fact that our culture is in the process of forgetting what it might mean to value goods "beyond life" or beyond "ordinary human flourishing." Taylor claims, for example, that in both Buddhism and Christianity, "the believer or devout person is called on to make a profound inner break with the goals of flourishing in their own case." A little further on, he explains that in the case of Christianity "[t]he call to renounce doesn't negate the value of flourishing; it is rather a call to centre everything on God, even if it be at the cost of forgoing this unsubstitutable good; and the fruit of this foregoing is that it become on one level the source of flourishing for others, and on another level, a collaboration with the restoration of a fuller flourishing by God. It is a mode of healing wounds and 'repairing the world'." (SA, 17)

Yet, for Taylor, acknowledging the transcendent calls for some-thing even more than being open to the idea that the act of renounc-ing ordinary life goods might serve a larger collective, or even global life. "What matters beyond life," he says, "doesn't matter because it sustains life; otherwise, it wouldn't be 'beyond life' in the meaning of the act." He continues in this vein, suggesting that this way of putting

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[24] Taylor, "A Catholic Modernity?," 172.
[25] Paul Ricoeur, "Manifestation and Proclamation," in *Figuring the Sacred*, (ed.) Mark I. Wallace, (tr.) David Pellauer (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 63.

the value of something that is beyond life "goes most against the grain of contemporary Western civilization." What he means to evoke here, he says, is what in the New Testament is called "eternal" or "abundant" life. To see the difference Taylor has in mind here, think of Nietzsche's critique of the "little pleasures" of the last human beings.[26] Nietzsche wishes to affirm an emphatic form of life that moves beyond the realm of daily material satisfaction. So does Taylor, although each takes this desire in quite a different direction. Taylor suggests that an exclusive affirmation of the goods of ordinary life assumes a stable identity, a fixed order of needs and desires. Valuing a good beyond life, on the other hand, is an act of radical de-centering, the assumption of a less stable identity open to self-transformation. "Renouncing—aiming beyond life—not only takes you away from but also brings you back to human flourishing. In Christian terms, if renunciation decenters you in relation with God, God's will is that humans flourish, and so you are taken back to an affirmation of this flourishing, which is biblically called *agape*."[27] It is this agapeistic stance, articulated in the paradoxical gospel logic that one must lose one's life in order to find it, that Taylor thinks is becoming increasingly invisible in our secular age. (SA, 431)

Yet simply because it is invisible does not mean it no longer exists or has ceased to operate. Taylor suggests that "a transformed variant of it has, in fact, been assumed by the secularist critic [of religion]."[28] For example modern rights culture, in spite of its attendant individualism, "has produced something quite remarkable: the attempt to call political power to book against a yardstick of fundamental human requirements, universally applied." Taylor agrees that Christendom had to fall in order for this universalization to take place: "...we have to agree that it was this process [the break up of Christendom] that made possible what we now recognize as a great advance in the practical penetration of the Gospel in human life." As these quotes suggest, Taylor is not simply buying what he hopes to be a winning ticket in the *modernity sucks* sweepstakes, for he concludes that certain modern trends promote and extend the Gospel's interest in emancipation: "This kind of freedom, so much the fruit of the Gospel,

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[26] "Beware! The time approaches when human beings no longer launch the arrow of their longing beyond the human, and the string of their bow will have forgotten how to whir!" Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, (ed.) Adrian Del Caro and Robert B. Pippin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 9–10.

[27] See Taylor, "A Catholic Modernity?," 173, 174.

[28] Ibid., 175.

we have only when nobody (that is, no particular outlook) is running the show."[29]

In a similar vein, Taylor also urges his reader "to notice how in the secularist affirmation of ordinary life, just as with the positing of universal and unconditional rights, an undeniable prolongation of the Gospel has been perplexingly linked with a denial of transcendence."[30] Taylor is here talking about an increasing sense, however imperfect, of worldwide solidarity—the fact that "[we] live in an extraordinary moral culture…in which suffering and death, through famine, flood, earthquake, pestilence, or war, can awaken worldwide movements of sympathy and practical solidarity."[31] Here too, says Taylor, a "breach with the culture of Christendom" was required in order for "the impulse of solidarity to transcend the frontier of Christendom itself."[32]

So what's the problem? Why is it important, both individually and as a culture, to retain a religious connection to sources beyond human life if modern exclusive humanism has successfully taken up and extended the gospel ethic of universal love and justice? Of course, for Taylor, things are never that simple. While recognizing and appreciating these modern gains, gains which he thinks ought to humble the Christian conscience, he also retains a sense of "unease." Christian conscience thus experiences a tensile mixture of humility and unease: "humility in realizing that the break with Christendom was necessary for the great extension of Gospel-inspired actions;…unease in the sense that the denial of transcendence places this action under threat."[33] How would the denial of transcendence place the secular extension of Gospel-inspired ethical action under threat? Insofar as such a denial encases us within modernity's immanent frame, insofar as it tends toward self-enclosure, self-satisfaction, and even selfishness, and so long as it encourages a complacent acceptance of the sufficiency of ordinary life goods and thus discourages self-renunciation and transformation, Taylor maintains that the modern moral order still houses a threat to the secular extension of Gospel-inspired action. Hence the unease.

Ultimately, then, Taylor remains uneasy about the closed spin to our immanent frame. He thus declares that "there has to be more to life than our current definitions of social and individual success

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[29] *Ibid.*, 171. See also SA, 637.
[30] Taylor, "A Catholic Modernity?" 177.
[31] *Ibid.*
[32] *Ibid.*, 178.
[33] *Ibid.*

define for us."[34] In previous eras, the understanding of transcendent good was linked to categorical religious identities. In an age of authenticity, says Taylor, a return to religious sources of insight need not be actuated by "a strong group or political identity or by a felt need to defend or recover a civilizational order against threatened dissolution."[35] When these motivations fall away, says Taylor, as they have in our age of authenticity, "the search occurs for its own sake." Taylor thinks this is a good thing. For the personal freedom that exists in an age that values authenticity can also have a Christian meaning. "It is…the freedom to come to God on one's own or, otherwise put, moved only by the Holy Spirit, whose barely audible voice will often be heard better when the loudspeakers of armed authority are silent."[36]

Perhaps it is best to see that Taylor remains ambivalent about modernity's prospects, rather than being firmly pro or con. He recognizes and appreciates various modern gains and advances, such as the culture of universal human rights and ever-increasing levels of social solidarity between strangers. At the same time, he remains concerned about the modern tendency to individualism and a self-satisfied, if not selfish, materialism. His appreciation for the modern good of authenticity is interesting in this regard, for it is one of the primary cultural forces that encourage such individualism. But Taylor does not see this result as an inevitable outcome of promoting this value. In struggling to describe a new form of religious comportment for our age of authenticity, he suggests that such a personal spiritual search, one in which I am trying to find a path—or even myself—by myself, need not end up in a position of self-enclosure. Such a personal search, he thinks, might still end up "with a strong sense of the transcendent, or of devotion to something beyond the self." In saying this, he recommends that we avoid the easy mistake of confusing this new place of religion in our personal life, the *framework* of authenticity, with the issue of what *specific* paths one might end up following. He even ventures a bold prediction. Even though the framework of authenticity has a strongly individualist component, this does not mean that the content one ends up discovering will be individuating. "Many people will find themselves joining extremely powerful religious communities, because that's where many people's sense of the spiritual will lead them."[37]

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[34] "The Future of the Religious Past," 255.
[35] *Ibid.*
[36] Taylor, "A Catholic Modernity?" 172.
[37] Taylor, "The Future of the Religious Past," 256.

But finally, in response to an age of authenticity that is significantly cross-pressured by a proliferation of spiritual positions, Taylor makes the normative claim that these religious communities, no matter how "powerful" they are, should no longer remain closed, strictly and jealously policing the boundaries that demarcate themselves from others. Yet the kind of personal spiritual seeking encouraged in an age of authenticity does not play well into the hands of those who would promote strong, categorical requirements for religious identity. An authentic spiritual search, says Taylor, "often finds itself in opposition to the use of religion to forge political identity. People may sense that the search for identity and 'our' religion may contradict the demands of a genuine deepening of piety." As an example of this trend, he points to the women's Mosque movement in Egypt, a movement that he says seeks "to resist the 'folklorization' of Islamic practice" and instead attempts "to discover the full, transformative meaning of its practices."[38]

At the end of the essay "The Future of the Religious Past" Taylor asks the following, rather loaded, question: "Are all regions of the world fated to head toward the predicament of Western Modernity, with a disenchanted world, a strong sense of a self-sufficient immanent order, and staunchly buffered identity?" While he does not exactly answer his own question, it is clear that he thinks other possibilities remain live options. He is, however, convinced of one thing: "We have been too long mesmerized by one master narrative of the history of one civilization." It is high time, he thinks, that we entertained the possibility of different, more edifying narratives, without thereby losing sight of the gains secured through the dominant master narrative he here has in mind. As this dominant narrative loosens its grip upon us, he suggests, we may find that "[t]he varieties of religious past that have a future may be much greater than we have been led to suspect."[39]

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[38] *Ibid.*, 284.
[39] *Ibid.*, 286.