



Leaving Christendom for Good
Church–World Dialogue in a Secular Age

James Gerard McEvoy

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Chapter Two

Religion in a Secular Age

The Explosion into the Present

Living in a world without God became possible for elites during the eighteenth century, yet this development should not be judged simply as a falling away of belief. Exclusive humanism could arise only against the background of new social and moral orders—impersonal orders that increasingly informed the lives of all citizens in the West. The remainder of Taylor's historical narrative can be stated succinctly and will be sketched in the following two sections of this chapter. Over the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth, the initial forms of exclusive humanism diversified, again primarily within the lives of elites. This diversification was impelled by the tensions within the modern moral order, and by responses to it. Taylor calls the initial diversification "the nova effect." From the mid-twentieth century, in a further development, the diversification extended to whole societies. Integral to this second process is a notion of authenticity that arose initially in the Romantic period but came to pervade western culture in the expressive individualism of the 1960s and onward. It is in this context—a secular age—that the church must proclaim the gospel today. The final section of this chapter will consider one view of the church's task in this age, while the following chapters will examine it at length.

THE NOVA EFFECT

The narrative of the initial diversification proceeds in three steps. First, some of the tensions of the modern order are teased out in order to outline some nineteenth-century widely felt dissatisfactions with the buffered, disengaged

sense of self that sustained the modern moral order. Second, we follow the way in which the rise of unbelief is strongly influenced by another dramatic shift—a shift in the cosmic imaginary. Finally, three further aspects of nineteenth-century life, which augmented the shift to a secular age, are examined, especially the influence of Romanticism.

The Malaises of Modernity

The institutions of the modern social imaginary—democratic government, the modern economy, and the public sphere—are so fundamental to our common life that we would hardly want to conceive of it without them. We regard these institutions as a great advance. As described above, they are sustained by an ethic of freedom and benevolence, and a buffered sense of self. Within the context of this modern order, the move to Deism allowed the possibility of an exclusive humanism. However, this emerging culture (orthodox Christian belief, Deism, and exclusive humanist elites, all finding a place within the modern moral order) was full of tensions. Taylor's argument is that these tensions spawned "an every widening variety of moral/spiritual options" during the nineteenth century.¹

How can these tensions be best described? Taylor shows that the buffered sense of self that sustains the modern order from this period onward possesses great strengths yet also suffers from severe limitations. On the positive side, citizens prize their capacity to order their world in a reasoned way, in light of the findings of science. They value "a sense of invulnerability" to the fears and anxieties that dominated the porous sense of self of the medieval world (*SA*, 300). Citizens can also live with a strong sense of their personal value, of pride in their achievements for having mastered life. However, the buffered sense of self also has limitations. The dominance of order and reason can be "lived as a limit, even a prison, making us blind or insensitive to whatever lies beyond this ordered human world" (*SA*, 302). Taylor points out that this sense of the fading of meaning during the nineteenth century was not merely the reaction of some orthodox Christians to either Deism or the emerging exclusive humanism. It was, rather, a much wider "sense of malaise at the disenchanting world, a sense of it as flat, empty" (*SA*, 302). Not that everybody felt it, but many did, and a far-wider circle than orthodox believers.

Faced with these tensions, Taylor's argument is that both believers and humanists alike lived "cross-pressured" lives—not everyone, of course, but many lived with the tension. Many rejected what they saw as the unacceptable face of Christianity and sought a spiritual life elsewhere. Others rejected the naïveté of the Deist worldview. Even more importantly, there is a strong cross-pressure within the buffered identity itself: there is "a deep embedding in this identity, and its relative invulnerability to anything beyond the human

world, while at the same time a sense that something may be occluded in the very closure which guarantees this safety" (SA, 303). Taylor argues that it was the cross-pressure between believing and humanist options as well as within the buffered identity itself that creates, in part, the dynamic of the "nova effect"—the varied explorations in search of a "third way." The cross-pressured character of life from the nineteenth century points up a very important facet of the conditions of belief in our own day: that we live within a plurality of approaches to the questions of belief and unbelief, and live in relationship to that plurality. The unproblematic belief of the medieval age is no longer possible. We necessarily adopt a reflective stance to the life of faith.

A primary source of the tensions within the modern moral order during the nineteenth century was negative reaction to the buffered identity itself. Believers and unbelievers alike reacted, and the varied reactions, in part, generated the nova effect. Taylor sees three themes pervading reactions to the buffered identity. The first concerns the ultimate meaning of life itself, or what Luc Ferry calls "the meaning of meaning" (SA, 308).² Whereas individuals readily valued particular goals and relationships, the over-arching values to which they were committed could fail to hold the significance that they once held. In Taylor's words, "a crucial feature of the malaise of immanence is the sense that all these answers are fragile or uncertain" (SA, 308). Another theme concerns a sense of emptiness when marking crucial moments of life like birth, death, and marriage; events which, in the medieval world for example, would have found their place in sacred history and been solemnized with rites of passage. A third theme concerns a sense of flatness experienced in ordinary life; an experience that is often identified with industrial and consumer society. Taylor calls these three themes the "malaises of immanence" because their arrival in the West accompanies the rise of an exclusive humanism and the eclipse of transcendence (SA, 309). Not that a return to transcendence would cure the malaise: some of the tensions in nineteenth-century life were driven by strong objections to both orthodox Christianity and Deism.

So, these three themes thread through reactions to the buffered identity in the nineteenth century. But how do the reactions play out in history? Taylor identifies three lines of objection, or what he calls "axes of resonance," to the buffered identity. Each axis had believing and unbelieving variants; that is, individuals who were orthodox Christians, Deists, and exclusive humanists responded to the limitations of the modern moral order along similar lines. Again, my account of these axes of resonance is schematic.

1) Taylor names his first axis of resonance the "Peggy Lee" axis after her famous song, "Is that all there is?" As suggested immediately above, many elites shared a sense of the emptying out of life's purposes. For some orthodox Christians, both Deism and exclusive humanism removed the sacred

Axes
of
resonance

from its central place. As a result, Christian life was reduced from an ongoing engagement with God's call to a reading of the pattern of the universe. From a very different perspective yet along the same axis, Kant, who was influenced by Deism, strongly rejected the philosophy connected with the buffered identity because it viewed human motivation primarily in terms of self-interest. For Kant, such a view of the human neglected entirely the place of self-transcendence in moral life. Others rejected the buffered identity because its focus on social and moral order resulted in moralism: an emphasis that enforced a preoccupation with moral codes. In a Christian reading, moralism entirely neglected the heart of the moral life—that is, the love of God (SA, 312).

Taylor associates a second “axis of resonance,” or of objection to the buffered identity, with Romanticism. Goethe, Schiller, and those they influenced rejected the buffered self because they saw a full human life, or “beauty,” as they put it, coming about through the fusion of reason with desire. Yet the buffered self and the impersonal order had separated these two aspects of human nature, so that reason would repress desire. This type of reaction against the buffered self had both believing (e.g., Pietism) and unbelieving variants. Another facet of the Romantic movement was its protest that the buffered self had divided humanity from the rest of nature. In this view, a full human life was possible only when humans connected up with nature as the great current of life running through all things.³ Summarizing these various divisions, Romantic thinkers saw, “the reasoning mind . . . divided from his own desiring nature, from the community, which thus threatened to disintegrate, and from the great current of life in nature” (SA, 315). They did not miss the horrible irony that in an effort to establish the modern impersonal order, humanity has destroyed much that is deep and valuable both in our own lives and in nature (SA, 317).

The thinkers whom Taylor includes in his third “axis of resonance” rejected the buffered identity because they saw it as too facile and optimistic. He groups several influential figures here. In his late eighteenth-century novella *Candide*, Voltaire parodied the naïveté of Deism with its view of reality as the “best of all possible worlds,” and in doing so rejected a religious worldview. Such naïveté failed to do justice to the suffering and deep struggles of human life. The late-nineteenth-century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche rejected the buffered self not only because it failed to acknowledge the tragic dimension of life, but because in doing so it neglected life's depth and grandeur. As Taylor puts this view: “there is depth because suffering can make plain to us some of the meaning of life which we couldn't appreciate before when it all seemed swimmingly benign” (SA, 318). A closely related line of thought rejected the view of happiness implicit in the modern moral order because it was “too flat, shallow, even demeaning” (SA, 320). Significant figures here are Tocqueville and, again, Nietzsche.

A New Cosmic Imaginary

Forms of exclusive humanism diversified during the nineteenth century, driven by dissatisfaction with the buffered identity—or such is Taylor’s argument outlined immediately above. Another aspect of the marked increase of unbelief during the latter half of that century is the way in which the physical world was imagined. Taylor moves on to show that the outlooks of nineteenth-century unbelievers were more deeply rooted in their sense of the surrounding world than were the outlooks of unbelievers of the previous century (*SA*, 323). To fathom the depth of this shift, he invokes an analogous notion to that of his social imaginary. His term “cosmic imaginary” attempts to make sense of:

the ways in which the surrounding world figures in our lives: the ways, for instance, that it figures in our religious images and practices, including explicit cosmological doctrines; in the stories we tell about other lands and other ages; in our ways of marking the seasons and the passage of time; in the place of “nature” in our moral and/or aesthetic sensibility; and in our attempts to develop a “scientific” cosmology, if any. (*SA*, 323)

The concluding lines of this quote indicate a further issue associated with the cosmic imaginary: the way that nature figures in our moral self-understanding. This also played a significant part in the nineteenth-century shift in the cosmic imaginary. I will clarify the connection below.

At many levels, the shift in cosmic imaginary identified by Taylor is uncontroversial. Scholars from a wide range of disciplines acknowledge that we have moved from a static, ordered, bounded world, commonly referred to as a “cosmos,” to one which is vast, infinite, and evolving, and known as a “universe.” The world of the cosmos was viewed in a variety of ways, including Platonic, Aristotelian, and Judeo-Christian ways. The vastness of the universe as understood in the nineteenth-century includes almost unimaginable dimensions of time and space. Taylor points out that what is unprecedented about this vastness is that there is no longer a clear and obvious sense that it is shaped and limited by an antecedent plan (*SA*, 325).

In depicting a shift in the cosmic imaginary, Taylor is aiming to articulate the background *sense* of things out of which people live. He is not referring to belief or unbelief. Rather, he claims that both believers and unbelievers come to live with a background sense of the vastness of time and space; a sense which, although it has deep roots in the seventeenth-century scientific revolution, is new to the nineteenth century.

Yet Taylor’s view of this shift is distinctive. The story is commonly told in terms of science prevailing over biblical cosmology, with Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* forming the climax of the narrative. In Taylor’s view, science did play a decisive role in the shift in the cosmic imagi-

nary but he does not grant it the causal status that it has in the common story (SA, 325). The usual explanation tells how one theory replaced another but Taylor sees a far broader and deeper change: the whole background sense of the physical world out of which people live. He points out that two things were needed before scientific discoveries could make an impact: "the availability of alternative frameworks, and the waning of the hold of the older cosmos ideas on the imagination" (SA, 328). I will turn briefly to each of these, beginning with the second.

Taylor shows that the waning of the older idea of a cosmos is an untidy history that cannot be accurately understood as a "face-off" between science and religion. As explained in the opening pages of chapter 1, the cosmos idea relies on two related features: first, a view of the world as enchanted, where spirits and forces find expression in objects and creatures; and second, a complex understanding of time, where secular events are interwoven with higher times. In a discussion of the scientific revolution, and in particular the work of Robert Boyle, Taylor shows that the new mechanistic theory fragilized faith not by refuting Platonic or Aristotelian conceptions of the physical world, but rather by undermining a sense of the world as enchanted. In Taylor's words, "God's power was no longer something you could feel or see in the old way; it now had to be discerned in the design of things, the way we see the purposes of the maker or user in some artificial contrivance, a machine" (SA, 329). Taylor points out that in this design-centered view, mystery was eliminated not only by scientists but also by Christian apologists, attempting to account for the benevolence of God. He concludes that if we trace the history of the older idea of cosmos waning, "the pure face-off between 'religion' and 'science' is a chimera, or rather, an ideological construct. In reality, there is a struggle between thinkers with complex, many-leveled agendas, which is why the real story seems so confused and untidy" (SA, 332).

In order to make an impact, scientific theories required another element: the availability of alternative frameworks. Taylor traces the development of these frameworks from the work of the late-seventeenth-century Deist, Thomas Burnet, and that of Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico writing in the early eighteenth century. Burnet and Vico broke with the fixed idea of the cosmos and trod a path toward evolutionary history. Yet even here, we cannot think of their contribution in terms of a clash between science and religion. They became key figures in the transformation of the cosmic imaginary because of the way that the universe figured in their moral and aesthetic imaginations (SA, 333). They developed three themes. First, they saw the natural world evoking a sense of deep time, which Burnet associated with the mountains of the earth—that is, they saw a "profound and moving truth in the construal of the world not as fixed but as evolving" (SA, 334). Second, their work provided a foundation for a sense of what later in the eighteenth centu-

ry would be called the “sublime,” that is, of the vastness of the universe “which is alien and strange, which dwarfs us, passes our understanding, and seems to take no heed of us” (SA, 334). And third, they developed an understanding of the dark genesis of humanity: that is, they saw humanity emerging out of a lower nature, which cannot be fully grasped by a rationalist account of human nature (SA, 334). It becomes clear when the roots of the cosmic imaginary are traced in this way that the shift in cosmic imaginary is not the by-product of scientific theories. Rather, as Taylor puts crisply, “a shift in our imaginary enabled us to come up with theories that we now accept” (SA, 335).

In a fascinating discussion over almost ten pages, Taylor traces the rise of the “sublime” from where he first locates it in the thought of Burnet, through to it becoming a central category in eighteenth-century aesthetics. It arises out of a new experience of wilderness in the eighteenth century. Taylor charts the notion of wilderness from it being seen as unformed and demonic within the old cosmos idea, to the sense of the alien and threatening vastness that it takes on during the eighteenth century. In its new register, “the idea is that being in touch with, being open to [wilderness] awakens or strengthens something in us which enables us to live proper lives, which perforce will be led almost entirely in ‘civilization’” (SA, 339). So, in this sense, wilderness does not provide a means of escape from civilization; rather, it “awakens a power in us of living better where we are” (SA, 339). How can we best account for these shifts in the experience of wilderness and the sublime? Taylor argues that this shift also must be understood as a response to the modern, buffered identity. As was pointed out above, a range of thinkers found the modern moral order too narrowing and flattening; too self-absorbed by intra-human goods. Taylor sees the development of this new meaning of wilderness—of alien and threatening vastness—as a response to the constrictions of the buffered identity. The wilderness or the sublime awakens us to what is ultimately important, whether that be the infinity of God, as Burnet understood it, or our moral vocation, as did Kant (SA, 339).

Besides the growing influence of the sublime, another facet of the transformation of the cosmic imaginary began with Vico’s notion of the dark genesis of humanity and developed during the course of the eighteenth century. This is the notion that humanity emerges out of a lower nature, which cannot be fully understood. Taylor sees eighteenth-century theories of language, particularly those of Herder and Rousseau, as a development of the idea of humanity’s dark genesis. For Herder and Rousseau, humans possess an expressive power, which rationalist, modern culture has buried. Only through the rediscovery of our expressive power—of our inner depths—can we discover who we really are. Herder envisages this process of rediscovery in terms of connecting up with “nature as a great current of sympathy running through all things” (SA, 344). This sense of connection with the univer-

sal current of life is developed further by the nineteenth-century American naturalist Thoreau, for whom our creativity depends not just on nature outside of us, but on “the wild and pre-human in us” (*SA*, 346).

In examining the transformation of the cosmic imaginary, Taylor has several goals in mind—perhaps three. Firstly, he shows that this shift cannot be understood primarily as a shift in scientific theory. Something far broader has shifted—the cosmic imaginary—and science finds the frameworks required for the theoretical shift within the transformed cosmic imaginary. Second, the transformation of the cosmic imaginary further influenced the moral imagination of the nineteenth century. Taylor limns the various facets of the self-understanding of nineteenth-century citizens in the following extended quotation:

2 We live in a nature of deep time and unfathomable spaces, from which we emerged. It is a universe which is in many ways strange and alien, and certainly unfathomable. This nourishes on the one hand a sense of kinship and filiation. We belong to the earth; it is our home. This sensibility is a powerful source of ecological consciousness. It also means that we are led to think of ourselves as having a deep nature. . . . On the other hand the unfathomable and the alien facets of this universe bring us up against the gigantic, the immeasurable, the inhuman, and this moves us in different ways. As the sublime it may fill us with awe, and while reminding us how little we are, paradoxically make us aware of our greatness. The paradigm expression of this double consciousness is Pascal's image of the reed: the human being in the universe has all the fragility of a mere reed, but its greatness lies in the fact that it is a thinking reed. But at the same time we can sense a kinship also with the inhuman, violent, disordered in the universe; and this can trouble us. (*SA*, 347)

In exploring the transformation of the cosmic imaginary, Taylor has a third goal in mind: to show that this understanding of humanity's place in nature saturates the West today. The significance of nature is widely felt: “the awe at wilderness; the sense of kinship and ecological concern with nature; the desire to renew oneself by leaving the city and visiting wilderness, or living in the country; all these are features of our world” (*SA*, 349). Yet the widely felt significance of nature finds expression in various modes, even conflicting ones; no one mode can contain it. For some it finds expression in a rich theology of creation understood in Christian terms; for some it leads to a deep commitment to ecological justice, with no theological resonances; for some it leads to various views of nature mysticism; and it leads some to an aggressive materialism, in an effort to possess the most beautiful or the most sublime. As Taylor notes, the salient feature of the modern cosmic imaginary is not that it has fostered any one of these responses, but that “it has opened a space in which people can wander between and around

all these options without having to land clearly and definitively in any one" (SA, 351).

The Expanding Universe of Unbelief

I have been following Taylor's narrative of the nineteenth century as a critical period in the rise of modern unbelief. We have seen that reactions against the buffered identity generated a dynamic that he calls the "nova effect," a diversification of believing and unbelieving stances within the lives of elites. Dissatisfied with the narrowness and flatness of life under the buffered identity, some sought to connect up with the deeper sources of nature. At the same time, elites came to imagine their place in the physical world anew, awed and energized by the vastness of time and space from which humanity has emerged. These two dimensions—reactions against the buffered identity and a new cosmic imaginary—influenced the lives of unbelieving elites in the nineteenth century. Three further aspects of life augmented the shift to a secular age at that time, both deepening the forms of unbelief and increasing the range of believing and unbelieving options. The three aspects that Taylor identifies are: a shift in the place and understanding of art in the Romantic period, the joint effect of science and the new cosmic imaginary in forming more solid forms of unbelief, and a revolt against exclusive humanism from within unbelief, for which Nietzsche is the central figure. Shortly I will sketch Taylor's narrative of the place held by these three aspects of nineteenth-century life in the rise of modern unbelief.

However, at this stage it's worth noting that when these rich veins of nineteenth-century self-understanding are viewed together, we are not very far from our secular age. These veins of self-understanding continue today. Taylor comments that, in this respect, we might be tempted to say that modern unbelief starts in the late nineteenth-century (SA, 369). Some shifts can be found earlier in embryonic form but in the Romantic age they come to a depth which shapes the culture.

At first glance, the claim that nineteenth-century notions of art altered the place of belief may seem too grandiose to take seriously. The music, art, and poetry of that period are often, in our day, regarded as the esoteric pursuit of a few. But Taylor shows how Romantic notions of art influenced identity and how this influence endures.⁴ Through the Romantic movement a shift occurred "from an understanding of art as mimesis to one that stresses creation" (SA, 352). In the field of poetry, for instance, poems previously relied on the traditionally defined order of things to convey their sense, whereas for the Romantic poets something additional was required: an original vision of reality. In a sense, the Romantic poets not only imitated nature but also created it (SA, 353). Taylor borrows Shelley's term to refer to Romantic poetry as a "subtler language," since in this new poetic art, "something is

defined and created as well as manifested" (SA 353). He traces a similar movement in Romantic painting. For Caspar David Friedrich, paintings not only reflect nature but aim to "say something for which no adequate terms exist and whose meaning has to be sought in his works rather than in a pre-existing lexicon of references" (SA, 354). And in the sphere of music, two shifts stand out. Firstly, in the Romantic period music is removed from the liturgical and social contexts in which it previously found its meaning; and second, the meaning that music expresses, which still has the capacity to move us deeply, has no single reference or object, in fact it can be understood in a variety of ways. For example, Beethoven's late string quartets have the capacity to move listeners so profoundly that they are regarded as the culmination of the string quartet repertoire. Yet when profoundly moved by the pathos yet transcendence of the Cavatina in Opus 130, we may not have a clear description of what it was that moved us. Nonetheless, as Taylor says when making the general point: "we feel that there must be an object, an adequate object; or else this would be deception, play-acting. But we don't necessarily have any (other) language for it. Certainly not an assertoric language" (SA, 356).

It is Taylor's argument, then, that during the Romantic period the languages of poetry, music, and painting enabled artists to "disclose very deep truths which in the nature of things can never be obvious, nor available to everyone" (SA, 356). A deep sense of mystery is at work here, one for which artists struggle to find adequate expression. Of course, this sense of mystery could and did find expression in the language of Christian faith. But it also found expression in humanist terms, so that the "mystery is now replaced within us. It is the mystery of anthropological depth" (SA, 356). Taylor points out that in artists' search to express hidden depths, the new cosmic imaginary had particular force. Poets, including Wordsworth and Hölderlin, and painters such as Friedrich, struggled to articulate the moral depths in nature: a struggle "to recover a kind of vision of something deeper, fuller, in the recognition that this cannot be easy, that it requires insight and creative power" (SA, 357).

In summary, Romantic languages of art opened up rich possibilities of expression for modern unbelief. They also provided new ways of expressing humanity's relationship to nature: ways that could express both religious commitment and a materialist stance. As his narrative proceeds, Taylor shows that from the mid-twentieth century these Romantic languages no longer remain the preserve of elites, but explode across popular culture in the West.

Alongside the influence of the Romantic languages of art on forms of unbelief, Taylor argues that the nineteenth-century developments of science, as they interacted with the modern cosmic imaginary, also contributed to the maturing of unbelief. As science developed in this period, especially with

Charles Darwin's study of evolution, the materialist view of the universe strengthened. Again, Taylor is not arguing that science disproved Christian faith but rather, "what began to look more plausible was the whole stance underlying the epistemology of materialism, over against that underlying the epistemology of Christian faith" (SA, 362). The worldview of science, framed in general laws, seemed in conflict with Christian faith, which focused on relationship to a personal God acting in history. For those who saw the deepest truths taking more general forms, "a personal God belongs to a less mature standpoint," the refuge of those unable to face reality (SA, 363).

Taylor adds that the new cosmic imaginary bolstered the impact of impersonal views of the universe. Struck by the vastness of the evolving universe, an account of reality in terms of impersonal laws seemed more adequate and more mature than the Christian alternative to many a convert to unbelief. The influence of the new cosmic imaginary on nineteenth-century unbelief further reinforces Taylor's argument that such unbelief was not the result of "scientific" proofs. Rather, "one whole package: science, plus a picture of our epistemic-moral predicament in which science represents a mature facing of hard reality, beats out another package: religion, plus a rival picture of our epistemic-moral predicament" (SA, 366). However, the factor that is most decisive in this conflict, in Taylor's view, is the reading of the moral predicament. The morality of science offered a more convincing story to unbelievers about moral and spiritual life.

Together, science and the new cosmic imaginary have had a powerful impact on unbelief from the nineteenth century to the present. Taylor argues that through science and the new cosmic imaginary, modes of unbelief have become both more solid and deeper. They have become more solid in that materialism has almost become the default position today. In a scientific, technological world, materialism seems common sense (SA, 366). And they have deepened in that, against the vast and purposeless expanse of the modern cosmic imaginary, modern materialists see themselves with a significant challenge: to shape the future through building the order of freedom and mutual benefit, even in the face of an indifferent universe (SA, 367). Taylor sees this stance bordering on the believer's sense of mystery—"that out of this immense, purposeless machine, life, and then feeling, imagination and thought emerge" (SA, 367).

A final aspect of nineteenth-century life that deepened forms of unbelief, and whose influence endures today, is the development of views of the human that "give a positive significance to the irrational, amoral even violent forces within us" (SA, 369). We have already seen that a sense of the dark genesis of humanity (that is, the sense that humanity emerges from a lower nature which can't be fully understood) was important in the rise of the new cosmic imaginary during the eighteenth century. Taylor sees this strand of thought taking a major turn in the late-nineteenth century, with Nietzsche as

this turn's most influential proponent. The idea here is that the irrational forces that emerge from our dark genesis cannot simply be eradicated from human life because they are also the source of creativity.

Taylor points out that this valorization of the irrational, and even of suffering and death, is a revolt against Enlightenment humanism, for which the overcoming of suffering and the preservation of life were central goals. Enlightenment humanism's commitment to furthering the goods of life has deep roots in western culture, including the early-modern movement that Taylor calls "the affirmation of ordinary life."⁵ In that early-modern spiritual outlook, humanity's first concern was seen to be the increase of life, the relief of suffering, and the fostering of prosperity (*SA*, 370). Because the late-nineteenth century valorization of the irrational resists Enlightenment humanism's deepest commitments, Taylor names this movement "the immanent counter-Enlightenment." It is a revolt within humanism, since it doesn't appeal to transcendent sources (as did the Catholic counter-Enlightenment), yet it seeks to overturn central Enlightenment values.

As already stated, Taylor sees Nietzsche as the seminal figure in this turn. For Nietzsche, violence, suffering, and death must be readily embraced, since failing to do so would deprive life of its real power and mean settling for mediocrity. So, Nietzsche takes a stance within the humanist sphere—the goods he affirms are intra-human; yet he is an anti-humanist in that he believes that the Enlightenment values of equality and benevolence stifle the Will to Power. In Taylor's words:

[Nietzsche's stance] remains within the modern affirmation of life in a sense. There is nothing higher than the movement of life itself (the Will to Power). But it chafes at the benevolence, the universalism, the harmony, the order. It wants to rehabilitate destruction and chaos, the infliction of suffering and exploitation, as part of the life to be affirmed. Life properly understood also affirms death and destruction. To pretend otherwise is to try to restrict it, tame it, hem it in, deprive it of its highest manifestation, what makes it something you can say "yes" to. (*SA*, 373)

From the second half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, Nietzsche's work has profoundly influenced a group of anti-humanist thinkers, the most prominent being Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. Taylor draws attention to the popularity of their work in order to highlight the influence of this strain of thought in the West. His point is that an anti-humanism endures today, "which rebels precisely against the unrelenting concern with life, the proscription of violence, the imposition of equality" (*SA*, 374).

In this part of his narrative, Taylor has been tracing the origins of modern unbelief in the nineteenth-century tensions between the modern moral order, the new cosmic imaginary, the development of Romantic languages of art,

Summary

science's relationship with the modern cosmic imaginary, and the rise of the immanent counter-Enlightenment. The tensions between these five factors generated the space for modern unbelief through what Taylor calls the "nova effect." As noted above, when these factors came together in the late-nineteenth century, the contours of our secular age were almost formed.⁶

A further shift occurred in the second half of the twentieth century, one in which the nova effect exploded into popular culture—became a "super-nova"! Here we arrive at Taylor's account of the conditions of belief today.

WHAT IS SECULARIZATION?

The 1960s marked a major shift in the place of religion in the West. During that fabled decade, the range of believing and unbelieving options previously held by elites opened up for whole societies. In the ensuing years, religious belief and practice have declined in many countries, and religion no longer has the public role that it once did. But how can this shift be best explained? This is the field of secularization theory, tilted intensively by sociologists and historians over the last half century. In grappling with this question, Taylor points out immediately that an explanation simply in terms of "diffusion" (i.e., that elite unbelief trickled down to the general population through education, the media, and other social channels) does not do justice to the historical narrative. The road from the nineteenth century to the late-twentieth "has been much more bumpy and indirect than a simple diffusion story can capture" (*SA*, 424). Another concept often used to explain secularization is the process of "differentiation"—a process by which social functions that belonged together in an earlier period separate and find their own institutional expression in a later one. The argument here is that the integrating role that the church played in the medieval synthesis has eroded in modernity under the pressure of differentiation: education, welfare, and health care have found institutional expression within the state, and religion has been marginalized. While recognizing elements of truth in this explanation, Taylor argues that it, too, is ultimately unsatisfactory. That the church no longer controls health care, for example, does not mean that the work of doctors cannot be shaped by faith. Or, as Taylor puts the more general point: "the fact that activity in a given sphere follows its own inherent rationality and doesn't permit of the older kind of faith-based norming doesn't mean that it cannot still be very much shaped by faith" (*SA*, 425). So, the concepts of diffusion and differentiation do not adequately account for the changing place of religion.

In Taylor's judgment, mainstream secularization theory also suffers from serious limitations.⁷ While in some ways he concurs with its basic insight that modernity tends to repress religion (*SA*, 429), Taylor argues that the assumptions of mainstream secularization theorists severely skew their judg-

ment about the causes of secularization. He argues that an “unthought” (Foucault’s term) has powerfully influenced their theories, governing their views of both the process of secularization and the place of religion today. The unthought that Taylor believes is at work is: the outlook that religion must decline either (a) because science has proved it to be false; or (b) technological progress has ensured its increasing irrelevance; or (c) because its adherence to authority denies the place of autonomy in modernity (*SA*, 428–29).

To bring this unthought to light, Taylor examines perhaps the most prominent of current mainstream secularization theories, that of Steve Bruce. He likens Bruce’s view to a three-story dwelling. On the ground floor we find the factual claim: religious belief and practice have declined and the churches’ public influence has diminished. The basement contains Bruce’s explanation for these changes: social fragmentation, the declining importance of community, and increasing rationalization (*SA*, 431). On the upper floor we find Bruce’s view of the predicament and future of belief and unbelief, which he sees in terms of a widespread indifference to religion. In Bruce’s words: “The fragmentation of the religious culture was, in time, to see the widespread, taken-for-granted and unexamined Christianity of the pre-Reformation period replaced by an equally widespread, taken-for-granted, and unexamined indifference to religion.”⁸

I have already noted that at the level of Bruce’s ground floor, there is much with which Taylor concurs: the declining rate of religious belief and practice, and the separation of church and state. When Taylor studies the contents of the basement, however, he finds that the sociological processes that Bruce identifies do not necessarily bring about a less religious world. Bruce himself recognizes exceptions “where religion finds and retains work to do other than relating individuals to the supernatural.”⁹ But here, Bruce assumes that religion cannot independently motivate people in the conditions of modernity; it can only motivate when linked to some other social function. Addressing this assumption, Taylor adopts the stance of other critics, who argue that theorists like Bruce assume that social processes, including fragmentation, of themselves undermine belief, or make it harder, “rather than seeing that the new structures indeed undermine old forms, but leave open the possibility of new forms which can flourish” (*SA*, 432).

It turns out that Bruce’s basement and upper floor are intimately linked. That is, his view of the future (being one of widespread indifference to religion) is intimately linked to his assumption that religion cannot independently motivate people in the conditions of modernity. This connection is no surprise to Taylor, for whom historical explanations are necessarily linked to some view of human motivation (*SA*, 433). But it does unearth the unthought or powerful enframing assumptions with which Bruce approaches the question of secularization. Taylor articulates these assumptions in two connected propositions: the disappearance thesis, and the epiphenomenal thesis. “The

first says that the independent motivation to religious belief and action (if, indeed, it hasn't always been epiphenomenal) tends to disappear in conditions of modernity. The second says that in conditions of modernity (if not always), religious belief and action can only be epiphenomenal, that is, functional to some distinct goals or purposes" (SA, 433).

It is evident from Taylor's long narrative of religion's place from the sixteenth century to the Second World War, that changing social forms allowed the possibility of new expressions of religious belief—new spiritualities, for example. Religious belief often found new expressions in changing social contexts. Why would Bruce assume that this is not possible today? Why couldn't post-1960s believers express their faith in new forms? In the rest of his discussion of the nature of secularization, Taylor offers a cultural account of the contemporary place of religion. Of course, Bruce may be right about a "widespread indifference" to religion characterizing the West's future, although Taylor thinks that this is deeply implausible. What is required, however, is an account of the changing place of the sacred rather than an assumption about indifference to religious belief. It's to such an account that Taylor turns.

The Age of Mobilization

For Taylor, religion's place today can be understood best as the last stage in a three-stage cultural shift. He introduces Weber-style ideal types to distinguish these stages; not that historical periods or societies can be neatly categorized. Rather he aims to show firstly that the changing place of religion can only be understood within the context of cultural shifts. And second, through this cultural account he aims to demonstrate the limitations of mainstream secularization theory. In each of these stages, forms of spirituality are enmeshed in social matrices.

He names the first ideal type the "ancien régime" matrix, situated in the eighteenth century. The social order at work here "is of a pre-modern kind, an order of hierarchical complementarity, which is grounded in the Divine Will, or the Law which holds since time out of mind, or the nature of things" (SA, 438). This order, considered in the previous chapter, held both for the larger society and at the local level: king, bishops, nobility, and local priests all had their place. As we have seen, collective ritual played a large part in this pre-modern world, even in lands strongly influenced by the Reformation, and it knitted substantial elements of folk religion together with orthodox Christian liturgical life. Yet in the eighteenth century, elites and the popular majority understood and lived the same rituals in rather different ways (SA, 440). Taylor summarizes this stage: "In this 'ancien régime' form, we have a close connection between church membership and being part of a national, but particularly a local community; this connection was cemented in part by

the coexistence of official orthodox ritual and prayer, on the one hand, with on the other, ritual forms concerned with defense, luck, warding off evil" (SA, 440).

However, the "ancien régime" matrix was disrupted. The individualizing tendency of the Reformation contributed to the disruption but elite reform made the greatest impact. Earlier in his historical narrative, Taylor emphasized the significance of the drive to Reform in the whole modern period: social elites became detached from, "even hostile to much of popular culture," and attempted to reform it (SA, 440). Since in the "ancien régime" matrix, belief was expressed in collective ritual, elite efforts at reform were profoundly destabilizing.

Several other factors furthered the dissolution of the "ancien régime" matrix, one being the church's response to the disruption. The Restoration church of nineteenth-century France responded to the Revolution and other attempts at reform from within the "ancien régime" matrix. It aimed at "the reconstitution of a total Christian society, seen as one of hierarchical complementarity" (SA, 442).¹⁰ Such attempts to re-establish Christendom generated resistance, especially among sections of the middle classes, a resistance which gradually spread downward. Other social factors contributed to the disintegration of the "ancien régime" matrix, including the intensification of class conflict, as well as the processes of urbanization and industrialization. These factors came together in individual lives:

The new city-dweller, no longer relating back to a living community, as some of the earlier temporary migrants had, would find himself with a void in his spiritual life, and would have to find a way of weaving new forms and community allegiances in the new situation. The "de-christianisation" of the urban working classes in the later nineteenth century had more to do with this than with an actual conversion to the new lay ideologies. (SA, 444)

However a transformation in social context, with the associated disruption of forms of spirituality, was not the whole story. The Restoration church adapted in crucial ways, firstly by promoting spirituality that appealed more deeply to the emotions, particularly the nineteenth-century devotion to the Sacred Heart. Yet an even more significant adaptation strongly influenced the life of the Catholic Church. Although, as stated above, its official stance toward the surrounding culture was from within the "ancien régime" model, in practice it began to subvert this stance. In Taylor's words, "The Catholic church was unavoidably in the business of mobilizing, by which I mean organizing and recruiting people into membership organizations with some definite purpose. But this means new forms of collective action, created by the participants themselves; and this has no proper place in the ancien régime model" (SA, 445). In effect, a new understanding of the relationship between religion and culture was emerging.

This new relationship is Taylor's second ideal type, the Age of Mobilization, which increasingly dominated the period from the beginning of the nineteenth century until the 1950s. The new model emerged in response to the shifting social and cosmic imaginaries between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. Taylor defines mobilization as:

A process whereby people are persuaded, pushed, dragooned, or bullied into new forms of society, church, association. This generally means that they are induced through the actions of governments, church hierarchies, and/or other elites, not only to adopt new structures, but also to some extent to alter their social imaginaries, and sense of legitimacy, as well as their sense of what is crucially important in their lives or society. (SA, 445)

In the Age of Mobilization, the action of governments, church leaders, and elites no longer took place against the unchanging background of the ancien régime. Social and ecclesial structures must now be mobilized into existence.

With advancing disenchantment and the rise of the modern moral order, God's relationship to both the cosmos and the polity was envisaged anew—a relationship now centered upon the notion of design. In the post-Newtonian scientific worldview, the cosmos could no longer express higher meanings in the way that it once had. Yet, there was still a strong sense that "the universe declares the glory of God . . . evident in its Design, its beauty, its regularity, but also in its having evidently been shaped to conduce to the welfare of His creatures" (SA, 446–47). An analogous change occurred in the conception of the polity. Again, the divine was not seen in the social order as it had been in the enchanted worldview; nonetheless, God was still present "to the extent that we build a society that plainly follows God's design" (SA, 447). Integral to this shift in the place of the sacred was the rise of the modern moral order, which begins with a conception of individuals, now not embedded in a hierarchical order, who "each, in pursuing his or her own purposes in life, act to benefit others mutually" (SA, 447). In Taylor's terms, this is the society of mutual benefit. The paradigm case of this new idea of order is clearly the United States, who saw themselves as "one people under God." In the old Europe, "the ride was bumpier and much more conflictual," as Taylor puts it (SA, 448). The old hierarchical worldview was repeatedly appealed to, especially in Catholic countries, yet at the same time a new relationship between church and culture was developing. Taylor calls this the "baroque" compromise (SA, 448).

In the Age of Mobilization, religious adherence was increasingly seen as voluntary: "forcing it had less and less legitimacy" (SA, 449). This strong valuing of freedom provided the basis for the development of denominations, which saw themselves not as divinely established churches, but as "something we have to create" in response to God's plan (SA, 450). Taylor argues that the rise of the denominational form allowed new faith initiatives to

emerge, particularly in the face of social change, migration, and class conflict. Yet although the denominational form opened the way to a diversity of institutional commitments, this diversity was not divisive in itself. Taylor puts it thus: "it is a feature of denominationalism that, just because one's own church does not include all the faithful, there is a sense of belonging to a wider, less structured whole which does. And this can find at least partial expression in the state. That is, the members of mutually recognizing denominations can form a people 'under God'" (SA, 454). This reading of denominationalism has strong American resonances, but Taylor shows that it is also true of Britain. In the Age of Mobilization, then, religion was certainly separate from the state, but there was also a sense in which a broader church, consisting of various denominations, could identify with the polity. This arrangement of denominational affiliation had the capacity to "sustain a high level of religious belief and practice" (SA, 455).

Taylor argues that in both the British and the American cases, the understanding of fulfilling God's design through denominational attachment in a broader national church was allied with a sense of building civilizational superiority. Citizens' common calling gave them a sense of superiority over "less developed" peoples. In this way, God's presence could both define and influence civilizational order. Yet in time, this sense of superiority became detached from a religious worldview.

Let me summarize the shift from the "ancien régime" to the Age of Mobilization. Taylor invokes two ideal types to map out a major transition in religion's place in the West between the eighteenth and the twentieth centuries. His illustrations mainly come from Britain, the United States, and France. He is keenly aware of the limitations of his explanation: the contrast in ideal types does not account for every difference in national itineraries, for example in Germany and Scandinavia (SA, 460). Yet the ideal types serve his two major purposes, which in a sense are positive and negative articulations of the one point. Firstly, the dynamics of the process strongly challenge mainstream secularization theory, which holds that modern social processes inevitably result in a decline of religious belief and practice. Taylor's account shows that in the United States, mobilization fostered vigorous new forms of church life, whereas in France it led many to leave Christianity. He concludes that, "mobility itself doesn't tell in one direction or the other" (SA, 461). Second, Taylor's model shows that while cultural change did destabilize older religious forms, the outcome was not necessarily a less religious society. In his words, "what follows depends heavily on what alternatives are available or can be invented out of the repertory of the populations concerned" (SA, 461). In the shift from the "ancien régime" to the Age of Mobilization, a hierarchically structured society in an enchanted world was no longer an option; yet for peoples and churches who could find expression

for their faith within the modern moral order, Christian faith could, and did, flourish.

In France, Britain, and the United States, in both Protestant and Catholic contexts, the forms of faith that successfully negotiated the process of mobilization wove together four strands of life: "spirituality, discipline, political identity, and an image of civilizational order" (SA, 472). By the middle of the twentieth century, however, a new age was dawning.

The Age of Authenticity

What, then, characterizes religion's place early in the twenty-first century? This is the final stage of Taylor's three-stage cultural shift: the context within which today churches proclaim the gospel. After tracking the conditions of belief since the sixteenth century, and considering the limitations of mainstream secularization theory, we have come to one last transition, which historians and sociologists almost invariably locate in the 1960s. The conditions of belief have again been profoundly transformed. Taylor's historical narrative is important because the final shift is fully appreciated only in light of the past, particularly in light of the notions of human agency at work therein.

Discussion of the cultural revolution of the '60s commonly focuses on such factors as galloping individualism, a decline of community, and the consumer revolution. These factors certainly engender a sense of loss, yet the shift cannot be evaluated in purely negative terms; very few of us would be willing to return permanently to the period before the 1950s, if indeed that were possible. More significantly, tallying up losses and gains in this fashion misses what Taylor believes is the very heart of the cultural transformation.

Taylor's primary contribution to debates about the contemporary place of religion is his insight that a further shift in self-understanding has transformed western culture. He sees the individualism of the modern moral order taking a new turn under the influence of late-eighteenth and nineteenth-century Romanticism. The expressivism of the Romantic age has become a mass phenomenon in ours; hence his naming the present the Age of Authenticity. Characterizing our age is the understanding:

That each one of us has his/her own way of realizing our humanity, and that it is important to find and live out 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)

We have already seen that this self-understanding found expression in the lives of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century elites, but since the '60s it has shaped the outlook of society in general.

Pivotal to grasping the significance of this transition is a recognition that the moral stakes have changed. Those who simply condemn the new culture as egotist, relativist, or consumerist or, equally, those who affirm its strengths as if they were unproblematic fail to appreciate the value shift at work. As Taylor puts it, both the knockers and the boosters see the turn “as a move within a stable perennial game. For the critics it involves the embracing of vices which were and are the main threats to virtue; for the boosters we have reversed age-old forms which were and are modes of oppression” (*SA*, 480). Ironically, both the straight boosters and the outright knockers collude in a very thin analysis of the cultural shift. But when the moral stakes change, some options from previous ages are no longer available, and new options of varying value open up.

So, what place does religion have within the culture of authenticity? In the world of the “ancien régime,” Taylor’s first ideal type, personal belief, church, and society were inextricably intertwined. In the Age of Mobilization, a choice of denomination connected believers to a broader sense of church, which in turn connected them to a polity with a role designed by God. Individual choice is valued in this second stage and coercion seems to contradict the nature of belief. In the Age of Authenticity, the value of freedom is taken a step further. The animating ideal of expressivism shapes religious belief and practice. Taylor puts it in these words:

The religious life or practice that I become part of must not only be my choice, but it must speak to me, it must make sense in terms of my spiritual development as I understand this. (*SA*, 486)

In the terms of this cultural shift, then, the focus is on individuals authentically living their spiritual journey, even in the case of the most pious believer. With such a strong emphasis on individual spiritual paths, however, the task of maintaining the frameworks of belief becomes increasingly difficult (*SA*, 486).

Today’s expressivist approach to belief reflects the perspective of Romanticism, which rejected the stripped-down reason of the buffered self as incapable of reaching the ultimate truths. For Friedrich Schleiermacher, an important theological figure in the Romantic movement, the “feeling of absolute dependence” on the infinite was more central to Christian faith than assent to an external formula. Taylor’s argument is that in our age, this shift has “penetrated in some general form deep into our culture” (*SA*, 489).

So we have moved through three dispensations: from the “ancien régime” to the Age of Mobilization, to the Age of Authenticity, with each dispensation revealing a different understanding of the relationship between the spiritual and the social. Taylor does not claim that any of these ideal types provides the total description of the present age, but that we have moved

through them and that the last one has increasingly shaped our age (SA, 487). That the Age of Authenticity does not provide the total description of religion's place in the present is evident in the way that diverse groups such as the Christian Right and the leadership of the Roman Catholic Church in the United States envisage the relationship between faith and nation. Taylor believes that there is a struggle going on between the latter two dispensations (SA, 488).

Yet the expressivist culture is not unproblematic for Christian faith; or at least it presents Christian faith with some strong challenges. In the final section of this chapter I will embark on an initial consideration of the church's stance toward this culture. In my judgment the cultural shift has opened up the possibility of a richer expression of Christian faith—a judgment that will require further discussion. Nonetheless Taylor sees some strong challenges to belief in this age, of which I will list three. First, the expressivist spiritual outlook is inherently pluralistic. Doctrinal definitions cannot contain this pluralism: it is only limited by what is permissible within the modern moral order (SA, 489). Second, as previously mentioned, in the expressivist outlook there is no intrinsic relationship between spirituality and society, so maintaining frameworks of belief will be far more difficult than in previous eras. Yet, as Taylor notes and Casanova convincingly demonstrates, this does not mean that religion has been relegated to the private sphere.¹¹ Third, the expressivist age has also undermined the inherent link between Christian faith and civilizational order (SA, 492). In sketching Taylor's Age of Mobilization above I noted that in that period, the sense of fulfilling God's design through denominational attachment was allied to a strong sense of contributing to a civilizational order. Taylor argues that this connection was progressively weakened in the lives of elites during the nineteenth century and that since the 1960s, it has been further weakened (SA, 492–94).

EVANGELICAL CATHOLICISM?

If the church is to proclaim the gospel effectively, a coherent and insightful view of the contemporary place of religion is essential; so I have claimed in the previous chapter. Misunderstanding contemporary culture and engaging with it from the perspective of misrecognition thwarts the gospel's capacity to transform the lives of its hearers. Not that those who proclaim the gospel are entirely responsible for its effectiveness: God's grace and reflective, open-hearted hearers are also essential. Nonetheless, if the gospel is not proclaimed in terms that addressees can recognize as largely true of themselves and their world, there is little reason for them to take it seriously.¹² Effective proclamation must begin from where people understand themselves and this requires an insightful and coherent view of contemporary culture.

Taylor's narrative reveals both the strengths and limits of our secular age. It also elucidates the great cost to the church of misjudging cultural transitions. To revisit just one example: the Catholic Church in nineteenth-century France reacted officially to its changing circumstances by attempting to re-establish Christendom, wanting a pivotal role for the church hierarchy in the social structure. At the same time and unofficially, the church was subverting this stance by engaging in the process of mobilization and thus creating new forms of collective action for believers. A multi-faceted effort of this sort might seem a smart response to a difficult situation, were it not for the profoundly negative consequences. Taylor reviews the results: "This kind of attempt to re-establish Christendom everywhere generated counter-efforts, which took the form of secularist liberal or radical movements, and often found their inspiration in the French Revolution. The result was a deep rift, and important levels of dissidence in the middle classes. Moreover, this dissidence often spread downward to lower or working classes, particularly the latter" (SA, 442). Ironically, the church's misunderstanding of the shifting culture at this time wrought the very response that it was attempting to subvert.¹³ When charged with the task of proclaiming the gospel, judging the culture aright is far more than a tactical issue.

A recent diagnosis of the church's situation highlights the significance of Taylor's account of the contemporary conditions of belief. In *The Future Church*, North American journalist John Allen identifies ten trends that he believes will have the greatest impact on the Roman Catholic Church's future.¹⁴ At the time of the book's publication, Allen wrote for the *National Catholic Reporter*, considered a liberal Catholic paper, yet as we will see, his prognosis moves beyond the polarized analysis presently afflicting the church. For this reason it is especially worth considering. He sees his book as a work of "descriptive journalism" rather than theology.¹⁵ Of his ten trends, many concern the church's interaction with broad social movements: globalization, the environmental movement, the development of biotechnology, and changes in world demography, to name several.

One of Allen's trends deals explicitly with the way in which the church presents itself in the world—the way it proclaims the gospel. Allen calls this trend "Evangelical Catholicism" although it might be better named "identity Catholicism." It has three defining features: "[1] a clear embrace of traditional Catholic thought, speech, and practice . . . [2] eagerness to proclaim one's Catholic identity to the world, emphasizing its implications for culture, society, and politics . . . [and 3] faith is seen as a matter of personal choice rather than cultural inheritance."¹⁶ To this point, Allen's description of Evangelical Catholicism has much in common with the perspective I am advocating. However, Allen moves on to locate the roots of Evangelical Catholicism in "a conscious and carefully crafted strategy to resist the perceived evils of secularization."¹⁷ Here secularization is defined as, "a general weakening of

traditional religious faith, affiliation and practice, along with a strong distinction between church and state."¹⁸

Allen recognizes that secularization cannot be adequately understood as simply the decline of religious belief and practice. Many people believe in God yet have no religious affiliation—"believing without belonging" in British sociologist Grace Davie's memorable phrase. Others don't practice a faith yet want religion to endure somehow—"vicarious religion" in another of Davie's apt names. Nonetheless, Evangelical Catholicism views secularization in strongly negative terms: "At senior levels of the Catholic Church today [2009] there's a growing perception that a tipping point has been reached, and that Western secularization is crossing the line from indifference to outright hostility toward religion."¹⁹

Allen has captured a very common pattern of thought in the contemporary church. Evangelical Catholicism responds to what it sees as an increasing indifference to religion by holding firmly to and strongly emphasizing traditional Catholic thought, speech, and practice. While this response might seem to embody a Catholic take on the present, it is determined by a judgment about contemporary culture. Evangelical Catholicism holds that *because* religion is in decline in the West—and the wider culture is at best indifferent and at worst utterly hostile to religion—faithful Catholics must return to expressions of Catholic identity that belong to a more well-defined era. Liberal Catholicism shares aspects of this stance, evaluating the cultural shift similarly but making the judgment that in response the church must update so as to regain popular interest.²⁰

Taylor's narrative reveals a much richer picture of the cultural shift, with very different implications for proclamation. Not that his narrative promotes a dilution of the Catholic tradition; at several points Taylor says that such a dilution is a major error. However, if both the strengths and limits of the cultural shift are held in view, the church's task of proclamation is seen quite differently. Let me revisit three characteristics of spiritual life in the Age of Authenticity. First, and most significantly: central to the transformed place of religion in the expressivist age is a vision of the good—that a person's faith expresses their deepest self-understanding. Repeating Taylor's words: in the expressivist age my spiritual practice "must speak to me, it must make sense of my spiritual development as I understand this" (*SA*, 486). Sociologist of religion Wade Clark Roof, reflecting on surveys, interviews, and field observations, shares Taylor's judgment, noting that in this age people are "looking for a more direct experience of the sacred, for greater immediacy, spontaneity, and spiritual depth."²¹ Such a view of the spiritual should be profoundly at home in the Catholic tradition. Saint Augustine's most famous line, which he addressed to God "you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you," teaches us that Christian faith is ultimately about the believer's union with God.²² One of Augustine's important contributions to

the Christian understanding of faith is his conviction that the surest path to God leads within. Not only is God to be found in the created world, were God is undoubtedly present, but also in the foundations of the human person—in the dynamics of human knowing.²³ For this reason, Augustine sees that God is to be found particularly when we are present to ourselves: in the intimacy of self-presence. In Augustine's words, "But you were more inward than my most inward part and higher than the highest element within me."²⁴ Augustine's understanding of the journey to God in the intimacy of self-presence shares the expressivist understanding that a person's faith takes them within and makes sense of their inner world. A set of beliefs imposed by an external authority that fails to make sense of the believer's inner world cannot be called faith in Augustine's understanding of the term.

A second characteristic of spiritual life in the Age of Authenticity is the immense challenge that it presents to the churches. The strong connection between social identity and religious commitment that held in the Age of Mobilization no longer holds. Hence, the decline in levels of religious practice, and the emergence of the features that Davie names—"believing without belonging" and "vicarious religion" as well as the tendency to think of religious commitment as something that an individual assembles, or "bricolage" as this tendency is often named.²⁵ How, then, should the Catholic Church respond to these aspects of the new spiritual landscape as it proclaims the gospel? I have already suggested that condemnation, distance, and the formulaic repetition of doctrines will do more harm than good; such a response would not adequately engage the hearts of those who search. The real tragedy of the church adopting a subtraction view of secularization is that its consequent efforts at proclamation subvert the very response desired. Taylor suggests that in our new predicament, people can be led to deeper engagement in Christian faith through "various forms of spiritual practice to which each is drawn in his/her own spiritual life. These may involve meditation, or some charitable work, or a study group, or a pilgrimage, or some special form of prayer, or a host of such things" (*SA*, 515). What is required is a living, vibrant community of faith, prepared to engage with the neighbor.

A third characteristic of spiritual life in the Age of Authenticity reflects more on the past than the present, perhaps, but has important implications for an evaluation of contemporary spiritual life. Taylor's narrative of the journey from the sixteenth century to the twenty-first shows that one of the strongest forces constantly influencing the place of the sacred was the church itself, and what Taylor calls "the drive to Reform." The church's effort to proclaim the gospel at a broad social level has been a major factor in establishing the disenchanting age. Since the medieval era, the church has been fostering a more individual, personally committed, Christocentric spirituality. Taylor's argument is that the turn to the personal in this expressivist age is intrinsically related to the drive to Reform. In his words, there is "a long-term vector in

Latin Christendom, moving steadily over a half millennium towards more personal, committed forms of religious devotion and practice. The spirituality of quest that we see today could be understood as the form that this movement takes in an Age of Authenticity" (SA, 532). So, when church leaders condemn the expressivist culture as godless, they not only alienate potential believers, they also place themselves in a profoundly conflicted position.

In concluding this chapter, it is also worth noting the difference between Taylor's narrative of the journey to our secular age and an influential account that emphasizes a shift in philosophical and theological outlook. John Milbank locates the roots of our secular age in the rise of nominalism and the voluntarist theology of Duns Scotus and others in the medieval period.²⁶ There is much here with which Taylor concurs, acknowledging that "nominalism contributed to the development of a clear distinction between nature and supernature, immanent order and transcendent reality, which . . . has been an essential intellectual background of modern secularity" (SA, 773). The resulting instrumentalist stance contributed to the rise of the scientific, mechanized worldview. So, Milbank identifies important elements of the development of secularity, but in Taylor's view Milbank's account doesn't depict the main story of secularity. Taylor calls Milbank's account the Intellectual Deviation (ID) story, and since his own account focuses on Reform, he names it the Reform Master Narrative (RMN).²⁷ Taylor argues that although the ID story identifies a significant theoretical shift that contributed to secularity, it cannot explain how the deviation shaped western culture broadly. As we have seen, the cultural shift only occurred through the changing social imaginary, and through the process of Reform fashioning a new place for the sacred. Taylor also points out that the intellectual deviation was a move within Christian theology and of itself does not provide reasons for turning against Christianity. Again, these reasons can only be arrived at through the long journey of Reform.

The relationship between the church and secular culture emerging from Milbank's view of the genesis of secularity is one of strong contrast. To describe this relationship, Milbank turns to Augustine's contrast between the *civitas terrena* and the heavenly city. He interprets Augustine's *civitas terrena* as meaning "the vestigial remains of an entire pagan mode of practice. . . . The ends sought by the *civitas terrena* are not merely limited, finite goods . . . they are unconditionally bad ends."²⁸ Yet (as I will discuss more fully in chapter 6) Augustine scholar Robert Markus argues that Milbank misunderstands this critical point in Augustine. In Markus's words, "If *civitas terrena* in Milbank's statement refers to the community of the proud and selfish, it tells us nothing about the realm of social and political activity; if it stands for the earthly City in its wider sense, it is simply untrue."²⁹ My interest here, however, is not primarily in contesting Milbank's interpretation

of Augustine, although that's important, but in showing that his understanding of the rise of secularity as a "deviation" results in a view of our secular age that does not do justice to the drive toward more personal, committed spiritual forms, as portrayed by Taylor. And consequently, he envisages the church over-against rather than engaged with the secular age.

So, the church's reading of late-modernity and its stance toward this culture are critical elements of the effective proclamation of the gospel. I have suggested that the church's stance must be one of deep engagement with the religious longings of our secular age. Of course, conceiving the church-world relationship in this way is not new. Vatican II's "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World" articulated such an understanding, where the church is seen in dialogue with the world. In the next chapter, I will examine what the bishops meant by dialogue by tracing the development of the document, and in the following chapters will work toward a theology of dialogue.

NOTES

1. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 299. Subsequent references to *A Secular Age* (SA) will be placed in parentheses in the text.

2. See Luc Ferry, *Man Made God: The Meaning of Life*, trans. David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2002).

3. See also Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1989), chs. 20 and 21.

4. Taylor also explores the influence of Romanticism on identity in *Sources of the Self*, chs. 20–23.

5. See also Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 211–33.

6. Having established the framework of the nova effect, Taylor traces the trajectories that it took in Britain and France from the end of the nineteenth century until after World War II. The trajectories differed in the different cultures, but the same forces were at work. I will not follow them in detail here, but in each context a reaction against the moralism of the modern moral order opened new spaces for unbelief, which in different ways drew on the language and worldview of post-Romanticism. The trauma of the First World War was a particular challenge for the modern moral order, shaking the sense that nations carried of being civilized in that they protected their citizens from violence. As Taylor puts it: "the massive slaughter turned out to be a greater negation of civilized life than any foe threatened" (SA, 407).

7. Following Hugh McLeod, Taylor distinguishes between "mainstream" or "orthodox" views of secularization theory and "revisionist" views (*A Secular Age*, 429). See Hugh McLeod, "Introduction," in *European Religion in the Age of Great Cities: 1830–1930*, ed. Hugh McLeod (New York: Routledge, 1995).

8. Steve Bruce, *Religion in Modern Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1995), 4. Cited in SA, 434. See also Steve Bruce, *God is Dead: Secularization in the West* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002). See too his most recent work on the topic: Steve Bruce, *Secularization: In Defence of an Unfashionable Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2011).

9. Roy Wallis and Steve Bruce, "Secularization: The Orthodox Model," in *Religion and Modernization* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1992), 17. Cited in SA, 432. See also Bruce, *Religion in Modern Britain*, 62.

10. Later in *A Secular Age* Taylor examines at greater length the reaction of the Catholic Church in France to mobilization. He shows that this reaction was a triumph of mobilization, in spite of the church's expressed stance. See *A Secular Age*, 462–66.

11. See Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*.
12. To dispel any ambiguity: I am not arguing that the church must adjust the content of the gospel to ensure its acceptability in late-modern culture. Nor am I arguing, in Lieven Boeve's terms, that there should be "continuity" between the gospel message and the worldview of the receiving culture.
13. In his account of one of the most debated issues in secularization theory, the "American exception" (the fact that in European societies there has been a long-term decline in religious practice whereas that pattern is not found in the United States), Taylor argues that one crucial factor accounting for the exception is that in the United States, since the beginning of the colony, churches found themselves entirely within the Age of Mobilization mold, whereas in Europe the move out of the "ancien régime" provoked a great deal of resistance. In Taylor's words: "This means that in varying degrees some of the dynamic arising from ancien régime (AR) structures will take place in all the Old World societies. One of these is the reaction against a state church in the context of an inegalitarian society, where the temptation to align established religion with power and privilege is almost irresistible. This cannot fail to produce anti-clerical reactions, which can easily turn, given the availability of exclusive humanist options since the eighteenth century, into militant unbelief; which is then available to canalize the full force of popular discontent with established clergy. We see this dynamic played out in France and Spain, even to some extent in Prussia." *A Secular Age*, 525–26.
14. John L. Allen, Jr., *The Future Church: How Ten Trends are Revolutionising the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday, 2009).
15. Allen, *The Future Church*, 432.
16. Allen, *The Future Church*, 56.
17. Allen, *The Future Church*, 58.
18. Allen, *The Future Church*, 59.
19. Allen, *The Future Church*, 64.
20. Besides *The Future Church*, another insightful study of contemporary Roman Catholicism is William L. Portier, "Here Come the Evangelical Catholics," *Communio* 31 (Spring 2004): 35–66. This article is also valuable because it avoids the polarized language of much contemporary Roman Catholicism. Portier sees Evangelical Catholicism as a response to the dissent of the American Catholic subculture, which characterized Catholic life between WWI and Vatican II. His portrait of this subculture has many of the features of Taylor's Age of Mobilization. Like Allen, Portier also sees Evangelical Catholicism as a response to decline, a response which sees the rebuilding of Catholic identity "in a post-subculture situation" (55) as the central issue. Hence, Portier's focus on doctrine and authority: "in a voluntarist culture, where the Church needs to be more clearly the Church, Catholic theology must begin from the Church's holiness" (64).
21. Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1999), 222. Cited in *A Secular Age*, 506.
22. Augustine, *Confessions*, I, i (1).
23. My discussion of Augustinian inwardness is indebted to Taylor's analysis in *Sources of the Self*, 127–42. For an overview of Augustine's theology of faith, see Avery Dulles, *The Assurance of Things Hoped For: A Theology of Christian Faith* (New York: Oxford University, 1994), 25–27; see also Etienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine*, trans. L. E. M. Lynch (London: Victor Gollancz, 1961).
24. Augustine, *Confessions*, III, vii (11).
25. For a fuller discussion of these aspects of contemporary spiritual life, see *A Secular Age*, 518–22.
26. The primary work here is John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*.
27. See also Casanova's support for Taylor's argument about Intellectual Deviation in José Casanova, "A Secular Age: Dawn or Twilight?" in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*.
28. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 410–11.
29. Markus, *Christianity and the Secular*, 46–47.