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THE SOURCES OF SECULARITY
The Making of Charles Taylor’s Theory of Secularization

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Résumé

Les universitaires de partout dans le monde s'intéressent de plus en plus aux phénomènes religieux contemporains. Même si le concept même de « religion » est sujet à débat, plusieurs travaux académiques se sont arrêtés à la relation entre la religion et la modernité telle que comprise au travers de la théorie de la sécularisation. Le philosophe canadien Charles Taylor a démontré un vif intérêt pour cette question et a étudié en profondeur toutes les différentes facettes du concept académique de la sécularisation. Tout au long de sa carrière, il s’est penché sur ce sujet, processus qui a culminé en 2007 avec la parution de A Secular Age paru chez Harvard University Press. Alors que les études en sciences humaines sur la sécularisation ont eu tendance à adopter, d’une part, la perspective de la fin des religions et, de l’autre, le modèle d’économies religieuses, Taylor, de son côté, a patiemment construit un modèle phénoménologique sophistiqué afin de mieux comprendre le rôle de la religion en Occident et internationalement. Le but de ma thèse est de présenter les éléments majeurs de la philosophie de Charles Taylor pour dévoiler l’importance de sa critique soutenue de l’épistémologie moderne dans sa théorie de la sécularisation. Les lecteurs / lectrices de Taylor sont en train de découvrir ses idées sur le séculier grâce à son nouveau livre, mais ce projet se base sur la relecture de son œuvre élaborée au fil des 50 dernières années, afin de situer sa théorie de la sécularisation dans le contexte de sa pensée philosophique jusqu’à la parution de A Secular Age.
Abstract

The continued presence and power of religion in modern times has increasingly caught the attention of scholars worldwide. While the term itself is open for debate, much of the scholarly literature on the subject examines the relationship between religion and modernity under the guise of secularization theory. The Canadian philosopher, Charles Taylor, has shown a keen interest in understanding what is meant by the wide diversity of ideas that get bundled up in academic discussions of secularization. Throughout his academic career Taylor has addressed these and related concerns, culminating in the 2007 publication of his book *A Secular Age* by Harvard University Press. While social scientific approaches to secularization have tacked back and forth between classical end of religion approaches and religious economies models, Taylor has been patiently constructing a sophisticated phenomenological model that has created new insights into the role of religion in North Atlantic societies as well as around the world. The goals of this thesis are to introduce my readers to key components of Charles Taylor's philosophy in order to expose the central role played by the sustained critique of modern epistemology in his theory of secularization. While many are just now discovering Taylor's ideas on the secular with the publication of his new book, this thesis will be based on a retrieval of the sources of Taylor's 50+ year corpus in order to situate his theory of secularization into the context of his overall philosophical project leading up to the publication of *A Secular Age*. 
Preface

The philosophy of Charles Taylor has introduced me to a wide range of thinkers and ideas, and for that I am, like so many others, in his debt. And a fortunate thing it is that Taylor’s good nature shines through his philosophical work; it is perhaps the only thing that keeps serious readers of Taylor from going mad due to the randomness of his style! Some day someone will write a Master’s thesis on the deeper Freudian meaning of announcing a list of three important facets at the beginning of a paragraph only to tack on a fourth, as if by accident, somewhere later on in the text.

For a philosopher who claims not to be offering causal stories, he has most certainly offered more than his fair share. Taylor’s detractors find this philosophical mode of his to be disingenuous and question begging. For me, Taylor is the Colombo of philosophers, seemingly absent minded until one realizes that the style is an important part of the enquiry: a genuinely dialogical mode of philosophizing...not wanting to “finish off” an idea before inviting readers in to have a whack at the mystery themselves. Taylor’s philosophy reads like a long series of digressions held together by what many of his peers consider to be the most original and insightful philosophical ideas of our time; but I am starting to think that the philosophy is actually in the digressions. In my mind there can be no doubt that while the stories Taylor wants to tell are most certainly motivated by his theism, his questions are born from a genuine desire to get to the bottom of things, come what may. Taylor is the great philosopher of “letting the chips fall where they may”, and this is more than can be said for a vast many philosophers dead or alive.

If successful this thesis will be a useful guide to those interested in what lies beneath Charles Taylor’s obvious fascination and unique take on the state and fate of religion in the modern world. This thesis brings together research into secularization theory and the philosophy of Charles Taylor. Most secularization theorists, as sociologists, either do not know of Taylor’s work or do not consider it empirically situated enough for inclusion in their theories. I agree with David Martin that Taylor writes to fill a gap Martin has long noticed: “the gap between accounts of
secularization seen from the philosophical viewpoint and standard sociological accounts and sees Taylor’s work as bridging that gap. From my perspective, if the gap cannot be bridged with Taylor’s ideas on secularity, then we should all get used to living on our side of the canyon because it will be a long time before we have as prime an intellectual opportunity for true interdisciplinary work. Taylor unearths dozens of themes that will require as many books to do them justice. This is all the more amazing when one realizes that many were predicting the disappearance of moral philosophy just a few short years ago.

My only regret is that I am not a genuine academic. I wish I could take up some of these themes, but will have to leave that for those with a much sharper mind than my own. However, I wish these future readers of Charles Taylor well, and I can only hope that in some small way this paper helps these searchers uncover a reference, an idea, or some other aspect of Taylor’s ideas on secularity that they might not have otherwise.

I want to dedicate this thesis to Professor François Nault for his patient directorship and the many stimulating conversations regarding the fate of religion in modernity and the philosophy of Charles Taylor. I would also like to thank my readers, Professor Guy Jobin and Professor Emeritus Father Jean Richard for their patient evaluations and suggested improvements. I am indebted to the entire faculty of the Faculté de théologie et sciences religieuses at Laval University. Theological reflection is alive and well at Laval due to this wonderful group of scholars. I would also like to thank my brother and friend, Gilles Marcouiller, who fortunately for me shares my disdain for both solitary reading and solitary drinking. Hopefully there were always enough Scotch and Cuban cigars to make my endless Taylor digressions worth listening to. Finally, but most importantly, I must also dedicate this work to my wife, Gina, and my family without whose love and support this thesis would never have been completed. I owe them all “big time”. Nick and Maddy, if you ever read this, I hope that someday you realize that all those hours you saw me hunched over the laptop were really for you.
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Introduction

This thesis is about the development of Charles Taylor’s theory of secularization. It is an attempt to “situate” Taylor in the larger academic debate concerning secularization. This is a bit problematic since, until the September 2007 release of his much awaited book entitled *A Secular Age*, nowhere has Taylor set out to propose an entire theory of secularization. Even with this work, Taylor does not claim to be offering a full account. Charles Taylor is a philosopher who has persistently defied classification for over 50 years. He has contributed as much as anyone to the development of communitarian thought without being a communitarian; has engaged the various occupations of the modern philosophical endeavour such as moral philosophy, political philosophy, hermeneutics, philosophy of science, and post-modern philosophy without claiming any particular school as his own; and has potentially done more than any philosopher alive to bring together British and American analytical thought and continental phenomenology while living in both world.

Having contributed as much if not more than anyone to our contemporary thinking on secularization, he does not offer his ideas up as any type of complete theory of secularization. However, it is my contention that Taylor’s philosophical work does contain a sustained attention to secularization that is primary and pivotal to Taylor’s entire philosophical project. With the release of *A Secular Age*, many will read this work and experience Taylor’s ideas concerning the secular much like viewing a completed house after the construction crews have left. One of the motivating factors behind this thesis is to attempt to show the reader what the house looked like at various points during the construction; while the scaffolding was still installed and the blueprints were still being edited. Even though Taylor is known for his laser-like focus on certain philosophical problems, like all intellectuals, Taylor’s ideas have changed over time and I would like to show something of this evolution as well as something of the reception of his ideas as brought forth over the years.
The focus of chapter one will be to situate Taylor's ideas about secularization in the larger debate about secularization theory. This is a significant endeavour for at least two important reasons: 1) because secularization plays such a critical role in Taylor's philosophical project overall; one cannot understand Taylor without spending time with his ideas about secularization, and 2) because, for Taylor, almost all definitions of secularization assume certain premises which end up deifying the early framers of the dogma in ways that do not allow us to struggle free from their theories which suffered from fatal errors right from the start; one cannot understand Taylor without spending time with those secularization theories which are the object of Taylor's concerns. The overview provided in chapter one will put Taylor in the context of the modern debate over secularization, but begs questions about the intellectual motivations for Taylor's unique approach. Chapter two takes up these questions by working through the highlights of Taylor ideas about secularization in modernity. We will learn that Taylor expects religion to remain as a pernicious question in modern pluralistic societies and rather than side-stepped, needs to be taken up as a subject for continued academic work. We will look into the various intellectual tools Taylor uses to try to retrieve the conditions of belief and unbelief in modern secularity. This chapter will also give the reader a sense of the larger academic debate over religion in which Taylor's ideas have developed through many years of thinking and writing on the subject. Chapter three explores the central role of Taylor's stance against the assumptions of modern epistemology in order to show how this over-arching concern of Taylor's has provided the horizon against which his ideas on secularization have taken shape and stand out from others.

**Methodological Issues**

All mentions to "the philosophy of Charles Taylor" are references to his philosophical production (books, articles, interviews, etc.) as originally collected by William Hughes and currently catalogued by Ruth Abbey.¹ This thesis purposely refrains from too frequent reference to Taylor's latest work *A Secular Age* as well as *Sources of the Self*.² The large majority of the commentary on

¹ [http://www.nd.edu/~rabbeyl/](http://www.nd.edu/~rabbeyl/)
² Hereafter referred to as *Sources*. 2
Taylor’s work as it relates to secularity refers to the contents of these two books. While mentioning these works when necessary, I have purposefully stayed away from them, in order to focus on the lesser known materials. This might seem counter-intuitive, given the subject of this thesis. However, I have chosen this approach since my assumption is that what happened following the publication of Sources will happen again with the publication of A Secular Age: readers will spend most of their time debating the major text without spending sufficient time in the development of Taylor’s ideas prior to A Secular Age. This development is best seen by a careful study of the many journal articles, smaller books, lectures, interviews, etc. in which Taylor is working out his ideas leading up to the “big book”. For me A Secular Age is the tip of the iceberg for Taylor’s secularization theory, and so this thesis is focused on what is below the water.

This thesis assumes a basic knowledge of Taylor’s philosophical corpus. I will not review the basic framework of his moral philosophy because, 1) most of what has been written on Taylor already does precisely this, and 2) the need to keep this thesis focused on secularization and epistemology and thus assume that my readers have a basic background in Taylor’s linguistically constituted moral realism as argued for in Sources.

I am using Charles Taylor’s own idea of retrieval to get at the moral sources of the making of his secularization theory. For more than fifty years, Taylor has been involved in the process of broadening our range of legitimate moral descriptions. He has done this through the consistent application of a historical method which he refers to as “retrieval”. This methodology is controversial, routed as it is in a set of positive and negative assumptions concerning epistemology. Taylor thinks that there are richer background languages available to humans through which they “set the basis and point of the moral obligations we acknowledge”. For Taylor there is a background picture to our contemporary spiritual nature and predicament that has been “hived off” from current academic agendas, due to a fatal epistemological mistake which causes most contemporary theory to mistrust all ontological accounts. If this is indeed the case, it

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might explain why secularization theory appears to have gotten it so wrong in the past century. Secularization theory hypothesized the disappearance of religion in modernity and this was generally accepted dogma across academic fields and perspectives for at least the 20th century if not before and since. Currently almost no one accepts this hypothesis in such an unproblematic way. So how could theory have been so wrong? My interest here is to follow Taylor’s retrieval to see what is important to his ideas about secularization in order to see if they would not perhaps “round out” current thinking about secularization.

Some might complain that I have not been sufficiently critical in this thesis. My goal here is rather to use Taylor on Taylor to show what I find to be the most important part of his intellectual framework through which secularity can be understood. There are many criticisms to make and I do consider some of them throughout the thesis. However, my goal was not to allow my readers to “re-live” the debates between Taylor and his detractors. My point here is merely to recognize that the goal of this thesis was to make more explicit Taylor’s ideas on secularization. While this could most certainly be done by using the materials from those who oppose Taylor’s philosophy, I contend that it can also be usefully done by “retrieving” what appear to be the salient sources to the highest aspirations of Taylor’s arguments.

The problem with studying Taylor is that there is too much of everything. Taylor does not write in any sort of organized fashion, but instead splashes broad strokes alongside minute details in the narrative style which many find hard to follow. In a sense almost everything Taylor has written is about secularization, and as such I am trying to stick with only the main points that seem to be of major importance to him in the story he wants to tell about modern secularity. There is a significant amount of footnotes and bibliographic references included so that the person who wants to go further may follow the trails that lead from the obvious work on secularization to the connected but perhaps less obvious parts of Taylor’s philosophy.

I purposefully write in an accessible and somewhat narrative style myself. It just seems antithetical to the spirit of Taylor’s work to approach his writings with an overly theoretical
style...even though the temptation is hard to resist. As such I will leave it for others to constrict Taylor’s work into the theoretical grids more common to contemporary philosophical and theological writing.

Taylor’s work focuses very narrowly on Western religion and secularity. Although I agree with his commentators that see this as a significant limitation in Taylor’s philosophical work, I follow him in this methodology for reasons already made clear above.

The words “secularization”, “secularization theory” and “secularity” appear throughout. I use the term “secularization” to refer to the bulk of modern attempts to explain what appeared to be the atrophying of religion in modernity. These attempts at explanation have been referred to since the 1960’s as “secularization theory”. Taylor prefers the word secularity, as it is a word that allows him to pull together the conditions and belief and unbelief in order to shed light on how humans have lived this transition to the secular in the modern cultures of the West. I try to follow the distinction made by José Casanova:

**Secularity:** “The secular” as a central modern category—theologico-philosophical, legal-political, and cultural-anthropological—to construct, codify, grasp and experience a realm or reality differentiated from “the religious.” Here we may recapitulate all the debates over the “legitimacy” and “autonomy” of this modern reality, from the Loewith/Blumenberg debate to more contemporary debates between Taylor, Asad and Milbank. Phenomenologically one can explore the different types of “secularities” as they are codified, institutionalized, and experienced in various modern contexts and the parallel and correlated transformations of modern “religiosities” and “spiritualities.”

**Secularization:** “Secularization” refers usually to supposedly actual empirical-historical patterns of transformation and differentiation of “the religious” (ecclesiastical institutions and churches) and “the secular” (state, economy, science, art, entertainment, health and welfare, etc.) institutional spheres from early modern to contemporary societies. Within the social sciences, and particularly within sociology, a general theory of secularization was
developed that conceptualized these at first modern European, later increasingly globalized historical transformations, as part and parcel of a general teleological and progressive human and societal development from the primitive “sacred” to the modern “secular.” The thesis of “the decline” and “the privatization” of religion in the modern world became central components of the theory of secularization. Both the decline and the privatization theses have undergone numerous critiques and revisions in the last fifteen years. But the core of the theory—the understanding of secularization as a single process of differentiation of the various institutional spheres or sub-systems of modern societies, understood as the paradigmatic and defining characteristic of processes of modernization—remains relatively uncontested in the social sciences, particularly within European sociology.  

However, Taylor also at times uses the words interchangeably as do I.

The words “religion”, “religious”, “belief” and “unbelief” appear throughout as well. I follow Taylor in his definitions and use of the terms, since this fits my purposes well. However, I acknowledge that these words are also signs for very different baggage than what has been assumed here for the purposes of this paper. I sometimes refer to “Taylor’s ideas on religion and secularization” as a way to sum up the fact that often Taylor discusses secularization against the backdrop of the classical and contemporary theories of religion.

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Chapter One: Secularization Theory

"Yet for all its [secularization theory] diverse and sometimes mutually opposed meanings, we cannot seem to leave it alone. As to a dental cavity, we keep coming back to it, probing it, hoping it will clear up or go away."¹

1. Introduction

As mentioned previously, Charles Taylor is perhaps not the first name that comes to mind when discussing secularization theory, but it should come as no surprise that Taylor's philosophy, which has focused on understanding modernity, includes a long train of reflection on secularization from the perspectives of political and moral philosophy. While this was no secret to Taylor's readers and interlocutors across the 60s, 70s, and 80s, it became more common knowledge upon the delivery of Taylor's 1999 Gifford lectures in which he plumbed what it might mean to call our age secular. The lectures raised questions which Taylor explored further in his 2002 book entitled *Varieties of Religion Today*. Taylor has since published *Modern Social Imaginaries* (2004) which takes up themes related to secularization as well. He pulls together his many years of reflection on the topic in his latest work *A Secular Age* in 2007.

In a very real sense Taylor has been pondering this subject for his entire life. Born in 1931, he witnessed the dramatic changes in the religious landscape of his native province Québec from the late 1950s to the present; a rapid secularization referred to as the "revolution tranquille". Taylor's educational background² was another breeding ground for his approaches to this subject. Taylor

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² Charles Taylor was educated at McGill University (B.A. in History in 1952). He continued his studies at the University of Oxford, first as a Rhodes Scholar at Balliol College, (B.A. in Philosophy, Politics and Economics in 1955, and then as a post-graduate, M.A. in 1960, D.Phil. in 1961), under the supervision of Isaiah Berlin and G.E.M. Anscombe. He succeeded John Plamenatz as Chichele Professor of Social and Political Theory at the University of
offers a unique perspective on secularization rooted in his knowledge of both Franco-European as well as Anglo-European and North American texts.\(^3\) Taylor has in essence read the contemporary “secularization debate” going on for the past 40 years\(^4\), summarized the various positions into two representative theories and has then staked his claim on a third way toward an epistemic gain which accounts for the weaknesses he detects in the other two camps. This is no departure from Taylor’s basic philosophic model.

Most recently Charles Taylor has been in the Canadian news due to his appointment as joint-chair of the 2007 parliamentary commission tasked with leading a public exploration and analysis into the political, cultural and religious issues related to immigration into Québec. The work of the commission was subtitled: Dialogue Makes a Difference, a theme quite familiar to Charles Taylor. The “Consultation Commission on Accommodation Practices Related to Cultural Differences” commission was mandated by Premier Jean Charest to formulate recommendations to the government to ensure that accommodation practices (basically how public institutions should deal with the particular demands of immigrants) conform to the values of Québec as a pluralistic, democratic and egalitarian society. Taylor, among others, has seen the whole debate on “reasonable accommodations” to be about a more basic problem concerning the socio-cultural integration model established following the quiet revolution mentioned earlier. A secular state was established at that time but the founding ideas appear to be in need of an overhaul, or at minimum a clarification, in light of the changing cultural landscape of contemporary Québec. This calls for a review of inter-culturalism, immigration, secularism and the very thorny theme of Québec identity; all themes quite apropos for someone with Taylor’s background. The commission finished its work in 2008, 15 months after starting, and the report is available online from the Québec government. Particularly interesting is the section on secularism and the recommendation

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\(^3\) Oxford and Fellow of All Souls College and was for many years Professor of Political Science and Philosophy at McGill University in Montreal, Canada, where he is now professor emeritus.

\(^4\) Taylor has made a career out of bridging the worlds that he refers to as “Anglo-Saxon” and “Continental”.

\(^4\) Obviously I am referring to contemporary secularization theory, as opposed to the entire development of thinking about modern secularity that extends back hundreds of years.
to not take the same tack as France on the issue of the supposed "neutrality" of the State when it comes to religion.

Taylor wrote the foreword to Oscar Burge's English Translation of Marcel Gauchet's *Le désenchantement du monde* entitled: *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion*. In it he summarizes the secularization theories in the following manner: "One makes the decline in personal belief the motor, and explains the secularization of the public space as a consequence of it; the other reverses the relation, and sees the changing place of religion in social life as the crucial factor, and the retreat of individual belief as flowing from it".\(^5\) He then goes on to refocus the usual debate on the spiritual and moral force of secularization so often overlooked by social science descriptions. Taylor offers an alternative account in which “secularization is not so much a process that has developed on neutral epistemic or institutional grounds, but rather on moral and spiritual grounds".\(^6\)

Charles Taylor also wrote the introduction to David Martin's 2005 *On Secularization* which shows Taylor’s approval of letting “history, culture, different theologies and ecclesial structures back into the subject [secularization]...[which makes] it possible to face some of the awkward facts on the ground that mainstream sociology too effortlessly ignored”. Taylor chides both the secular and Christian triumphalism that has clouded the secularization debate from its beginnings. David Martin thinks that Taylor’s work is important for secularization theory since it fills a gap Martin has long noticed: “the gap between accounts of secularization seen from the philosophical viewpoint and standard sociological accounts” and he sees Taylor’s work as bridging that gap.\(^7\)

“Secularization theory” as designative of a theory is most commonly used in Anglo-Saxon academic literature in reference to the collected attempt to understand the evolution of the


relationship between the disappearance of traditional forms of religion and a complex web of beliefs about the nature of knowing. There is a long tradition in modernity of reflecting upon the role of religion in societies of which secularization was a part. This can be referred to as "classical secularization theory" and was largely the work of 17th and 18th century philosophers giving way to 19th and 20th century anthropologists and sociologists. The questions explored under the banner of "secularization theory" disappeared in academic circles for a good part of the 20th century only to reappear in the late 1950's to the present, in what we might refer to as contemporary "secularization theory". Taylor's work dances back and forth between both the classic and contemporary debates. While multiform, this attempt to understand religion in society centres on questions concerning the viability of religious forms of knowledge in light of "the new science" inaugurated by Enlightenment figures such as Francis Bacon, Isaac Newton, and Johannes Keppler and "the new philosophy" inaugurated by their philosophical Enlightenment counterparts such as René Descartes, John Locke and Pierre Bayle.

Enlightenment explorations gave way across the past three centuries to what has now become modern epistemological certainty; and this rational and scientific certainty is deeply embedded in modern western (North Atlantic) culture's view of what it is to verify knowledge of something. Charles Taylor's 50-year philosophical project has tried to draw Anglo-Saxon philosophy's attention to the limits of this scientific certainty, by questioning the foundations of this western epistemological tradition. For Taylor modern western views on the relationship between physical science and human science are confused by modernity's epistemological assumptions; evidenced by a sort of transmutation of the "scientific model" on the "human model".

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8 I realize how general my point is here, and as thus, not reflective of the diversity of the historical development of secularization theory (also known as theory of religion, theory of modernity, philosophy of religion, etc.), particularly the important development of these theories outside the Anglo-Saxon world.

9 This point comes from observations made by Professor Alan Charles Kors, University of Pennsylvania, in his lecture series entitled: The Birth of the Modern Mind: The Intellectual History of the 17th and 18th Centuries. I am also following the sociologist Peter Berger in his book "The Desecularization of the World", where he makes the comment that "although the term 'secularization theory' refers to works from the 1950's and 1960's, the key idea of the theory can indeed be traced to the Enlightenment".

10 This and related questions are extensively taken up in Philosophical Papers II: Philosophy and The Human Sciences, a collection of Charles Taylor's essays, published by Cambridge University Press, in 1985. I am thinking particularly of Chapter One: Interpretation and the Sciences of Man, 15.
Taylor believes that this confusion can be seen as in that area of academic enquiry that has come to be known as “Secularization Theory”. Let us begin by looking deeper into secularization theory.

2. Contemporary Secularization Theory in Recent Literature

Sigmund Freud, in a trenchant little work entitled *The Future of an Illusion*, quotes from Heine’s poem “Deutschland”:

Den Himmel überlassen wir  
Den Engeln und den Spatzen.  

(We leave heaven to the angels and the sparrows.)

Freud echoed the general sentiment of what has come to be associated with the “secularization thesis”, or that western intellectual anticipation of the death of religion, wiped from the slate of enlightened humanity by the inevitable solvent that was modern instrumental rationality. The 20th century’s preeminent anthropologists, sociologists and psychologists “unanimously expressed confidence that their children, or surely their grandchildren, would live to see the dawn of a new era in which, to paraphrase Freud, the infantile illusions of religion would be outgrown”. This set

12 Some secularization theorists would take exception with definitions of secularization that put religious decline at the core of the process of secularization. The best example would probably be Philip S. Gorski who identifies differentiation as the theoretical core of secularization theory. He finds that only a few of the theories of secularization posit religious decline as the historical meta-trend. However, I think that Gorski is conflating secularization theory with the actual historical process of secularization. Secularization theory is largely the attempt to understand religious change from the vantage point of academic sociology. It is important to remember that these attempts came after a few centuries of what most writers who took note of the growing secularism understood to be religious decline in Europe. I agree that differentiation is how religious decline can be most usefully understood in causal terms, but it is important to remember that this only came about as an attempt to understand why the institution of the church was losing its power in Europe. Secularization theory’s first moments in the hands of Hobbes, Spinoza, Kant, Comte, Marx, Feuerbach, Freud, Durkheim and Weber were about, as Feuerbach put it: “...that Christianity has in fact long vanished not only from the reason but from the life of mankind, that it is nothing more than a fixed idea.” (*Philosophie und Christentum*, 1839). Philip S. Gorski, “Historicizing the Secularization Debate: Church, State, and Society in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe, Ca. 1300 - 1700,” *American Sociological Review* 65 (2000): 138-67. For more on differentiation Mark Chaves offers a helpful update in what he calls a “new differentiation theory”. Mark Chaves, “Secularization as Declining Religious Authority,” *Social Forces* 72.3 (1994). David Martin discusses differentiation as well. Martin, *On Secularization: Towards a Revised General Theory*.
of assumptions about the relationship(s) between religion and modernity were confident in at least two essential points: that modernity was a unitary process (singular modernity) signal characterised by the advance of the scientific view of reality; and that as science necessarily advanced, religion, described as a superstitious view of reality, would inevitably retreat. From this perspective, secularization theory would be about how religion’s dying breaths were taken. However as the 20th century drew to a close, an increasing number of voices started to question the hypotheses around which secularization theory had been built.

Grace Davie, in Religion in Modern Europe: A Memory Mutates, writes that the process known as secularization is: “notably the assumption that secularization is a necessary part of modernization and that as the world modernized it would – all other things being equal – be likely to secularize. An alternative suggestion is increasingly gaining ground: the possibility that secularization is not a universal process, but belongs instead to a relatively short and particular period of European history which still assumed (amongst other things) that whatever characterized Europe’s religious life today would characterize everyone else’s tomorrow.”14 As Garry Wills put it in his 1990 Under God: Religion and American Politics: “The learned have their superstitions, prominent among them a belief that superstition is evaporating.”15 Peter Berger, one of the most prominent voices in the academic sociological conceptualization of secularity’s processes, has said that today the world “is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever”.16 And so we find ourselves in 2008, with the fate of religion continuing to be on the academic agenda. Charles Taylor’s philosophy contains a wide range of resources of thinking about secularization. Before addressing this, I would like to present some background to the development of contemporary secularization theory.

Secularization theory is a bundle of explanatory ideas, theories and attempts at paradigm building that represent a modern/late modern attempt to grasp and wrestle into theoretical position the observed changes in the role religion plays in modern life. It should come as no surprise that secularization theory comes in as many flavours as there are theorists to serve it up. There is no “one” secularization theory. “Compte, Durkheim, Weber, Berger, Luckmann, Parsons, Wilson, Bruce, Casanova and many others could all be meaningfully described as “secularization theorists” (as, indeed, could any theorist who deals with the dynamics of social differentiation).”

The literature that makes up the core of secularization theory is wide and the literature that attempts to organize and categorize secularization theory literature is ever widening. James Beckford summarizes the situation well when he says: “These various attempts to map the concept of secularization show two things. The first is that there is very little agreement about the term’s meaning and even less agreement about how it should be used in social scientific research. The second is that it is no less difficult to re-arrange the different meanings and usages of ‘secularisation’ into a small number of basic categories or dimensions. In my view, this difficulty stems from the questionable assumption that secularisation, like religion, is a complex but unitary phenomenon that simply requires conceptual explication or better specification as a measurable reality.”

For the purposes of this thesis I have opted for an approach to making sense of the competing secularization theories that concentrates on “identifying the different and/or competing logics that are at work in this field”. There are many conceptual maps of secularization available (Shiner) 1967; (Glasner) 1977; (Fenn) 1978; (Dobbelaree) 1981, 1987; (Hadden) 1987; (Wilson) 1985, 1992; (Tschannen) 1991, 1992; (Warner) 1993; (Willaime) 1995; (Bruce) 2002; (Norris and Inglehart) 2004; (Martin) 1965, 1978, 2005). A re-mapping does not make much sense since so many fine cartographic contributions already exist. However, rather than searching for hidden

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17 Gorski, "Historicizing the Secularization Debate: Church, State, and Society in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe, Ca. 1300 - 1700.", 139.
19 Ibid, 2.
things that the various theories might have in common, the approach here is to identify their separate rationales and modalities. The following clusters emerge, and I will review them in order to provide a conceptual framework to the social-scientific understandings of secularization to which Taylor refers. The clusters I’m interested are: 1. Differentiation, 2. Rationalization, 3. Modernization, 4. Metamorphoses. This is important to understand as background to what I will later show are Taylor’s unique contributions to these theories, in chapters two and three.

3. Primary Concepts in Secularization Theory

The bulk of secularization theory literature is social scientific literature. It is important to remember that this is only one lens through which religion and/or society can be viewed, and we have no guarantee that it offers us the most penetrating vision. It occurs to me that reflection and research into secularization from only a social scientific perspective is potentially limiting for two main reasons: 1) Secularization theories are cultural products themselves as much “orienting posture toward the role of faith and religious institutions in the modern world” as they are theory. 2) There are too many other important perspectives that are omitted. Philosophers, theologians, historians, artists, and leaders of cultural institutions both religious and secular have as much of a stake as anyone in the secularization debate and I see no reason to leave their voice aside. One has only to think of the importance of the work of Charles Taylor, Jürgen Habermas, Jacques Derrida, Mircea Eliade, Clifford Geertz, René Girard, Jean-François Lyotard, Richard Rorty, Gianni Vattimo, Marcel Gauchet, Michel Foucault, John Milbank, David Tracy, Paul Ricoeur, Leszek Kolakowski, George Lindbeck and the many more who have written on secularization from a wide variety of instructive perspectives and should be helpfully included in the secularization debate. This being said, I need to point out what I consider to be a exemplary

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20 I am borrowing and modifying this framework from James Beckford.
22 I am aware of the debate of whether history is to be classed as a social science or not. In the United States history is classed in the humanities by the National Endowment for the Humanities and as a social science by the National Research Council.
23 For an interesting discussion on the dominant ‘images of man’ in the social sciences please see: William L. Kolb and Talcott Parsons, "Images of Man and the Sociology of Religion," Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion 1.1
contribution on secularization theory by one of its important contributors, David Martin, in his recent book entitled, *On Secularization: Towards a Revised General Theory*, which brings together philosophy, theology and sociology in a fruitful effort to mine secularization theory. It should not surprise us that Charles Taylor quotes Martin more than anyone in his writings on secularization.

In sorting through the wide body of literature on secularization, I have found it helpful to keep in mind the distinction between authors who make original contributions to the theorization of secularization and those who re-organize those contributions in original ways. In my view the original contributions are few and far between and would include authors like Compte, Weber, Durkheim, Derrida, Ricœur, Habermas, Taylor, Berger, Stark, Hervieu-Léger and perhaps Norris and Inglehart’s recent contribution in *Sacred and Secular*. My goal here is to get to the generative thinkers, not just the re-mappers, in order to see what is different about Taylor’s ideas on secularization. Given the many generative concepts, this is not easy to do. (Institutional differentiation, Luckmann 1967; autonomization, Berger 1967; rationalization, Berger 1967, Wilson 1982; societalization, Wilson 1976; disenchantment, Weber 1920, Berger 1967; privatization, Berger 1967, Luckmann 1967; generalization, Bellah 1967, Parsons 1967; pluralization, Martin 1978; relativization, Berger 1967; this-worldliness, Luckmann 1990; individualization, Bellah et al. 1985; bricolage, Luckmann 1979; unbelief, Berger 1967; decline of church religiosity, Martin 1978.)\(^{24}\) To these I would add: *exit from religion*, Gauchet 1985; *religious bricolage*, Danièle Hervieu-Léger; and *existential security*, Norris and Inglehart 2005. Realizing the array of claims staked out as “generative ideas” one can perhaps better appreciate Beckford’s structure which I will privilege as a framework for this chapter.

For Charles Taylor the primary concepts which follow are institutional accounts of secularization and are about what he considers to be secularization in the narrow sense. He finds this institutional account inadequate. The institutional changes in the configuration of religion in society have certainly brought about changes but there is more to say. Taylor explains:

"Industrialization, urbanization, concentration, the rise of technological society, what one could call ‘secularization’ in a narrow sense – i.e., not the whole change of outlook which we’re trying to explain, but the shift which has taken so many facets of social life out of the purview of church institutions over the last centuries: all these have transformed our lives. They could not but change the way we see things. But what is questionable is the thesis that they are sufficient conditions of the loss of religious belief. Whether they have this result has to depend on what else is happening in the culture: the meaning of religious belief, the nature of the possible alternatives to it, the strains to which it is subject. The simple correlation behind the institutional account is perhaps already being refuted as these social changes are spreading beyond the West and producing different consequences elsewhere."  

Let’s survey the key building blocks of the institutional theories and then move on to see what Taylor’s broader concept of secularization might be.

**a. Differentiation**  

The early theories of social change were of the functionalist type. “Secularization refers to an historical and socio-cultural process which sociology legitimately studies under the rubrics of differentiation, transposition of function, and also the conflict of norms within the religious

26 For a more nuanced treatment of differentiation (both structural and social) see: Steve Bruce, God Is Dead : Secularization in the West, Religion in the Modern World (Oxford, UK ; Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 2002).
institutions and also between those institutions and others in the social system."\(^{27}\) These theories were concerned with entire social systems and as R. Stephen Warner says, "conceived religion, like politics, to be a property of the whole society."\(^{28}\) Differentiation was also at the root of Emile Durkheim’s ‘division of labour’, and as such became an important tool in modern sociology’s attempt to understand the processes of modernity. The modern process of social differentiation functions as both a cause and a description of how “[r]eligion in advanced industrial societies is believed to have lost or abandoned its former function of supplying a sense of ultimate values and legitimacy for the entire social system.”\(^{29}\) As José Casanova points out, since medieval European cultures saw society as divided into two, the religious and the secular, “then everything within the *saeculum* remained an undifferentiated whole as long as it was viewed from the outside, from the perspective of the religious”.\(^{30}\) Modernization involved among other things, the differentiation or the splintering into separate spheres that which used to be considered as part of these undifferentiated wholes. “Only the end of this dichotomous\(^{31}\) way of thinking permitted the secular realm to establish new perspectives from which it could view itself differentiatedly. The fall of the religious walls opened up a whole new space for processes of internal differentiation of the various secular spheres”…that they might follow what Weber called their “internal and lawful autonomy”.\(^{32}\) Casanova goes on to explain that Weber’s theory of differentiation (*Religious Rejections of the World and Their Directions*) is actually a theory of secularization since it interprets modernization as the clash between the new secular spheres coming into their own, in the face of the “charismatic religious ethic of brotherliness or with the organic social ethics of the church”.\(^{33}\)

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29 Beckford, *Social Theory and Religion*, 45.
31 José Casanova theorizes a tripartite division by adding the historically important dimension of *Communio Sanctorum*, or the eternal age of God. Accordingly it would be more accurate to talk of a “double dualist system of classification” in reference to pre-modern Western European Christendom. See Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*.
33 *Ibid*, 20
The net result of the early differentiation was secularization, understood to be that the church (in Europe this was the Roman Catholic Church) became just one more institution among others, thus losing its privileged social position that it had enjoyed in pre-modernity. For Steve Bruce “The consequence of differentiation and societalization is that the plausibility of any single overarching moral and religious system declined, to be displaced by competing conceptions that, while they may have had much to say to privatized, individual experience, could have little connection to the performance of social rules or the operation of social systems." Taylor would argue that Bruce’s use of differentiation understands belief to be individual and should be separated from religion which is social. We will see later how this view is problematized by Taylor’s hermeneutical view of the linguistically constituted individual, which situates the individual in a social web of meaning. One of the early contemporary articles on secularization, Larry Shiner’s 1967 The Concept of Secularization in Empirical Research, already contained a section on differentiation along with discussion of its use by Parsons and Bellah. But even further back than that, according to Karel Dobbelaere, terms such as generalization and differentiation were conceptual forerunners to what came to be known as theories of secularization. Thus, for Dobbelaere, differentiation is simultaneously a necessary descriptor of secularization and a cause of much confusion since most theorists have not sorted secularization out into the functional categories of macro, meso and micro and confusion can be avoided by the understanding that differentiation is a descriptor functioning at the macro or societal level.

Despite all the different uses of differentiation in the various secularization theories, many have noticed the central explanatory role that differentiation has played in any 20th century theory of secularization. Gorski considers it to be the core of secularization theory. “What the various theories have in common is what might be called the differentiation thesis: They all argue that religious and nonreligious institutions have become increasingly differentiated over time, at least

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34 Bruce, God Is Dead : Secularization in the West, 13.
37 Ibid
in the modern West.” “Although there are minor differences in the details in emphasis and detail, most theories of secularization tell an essentially similar story: The original unity between church and state in classical societies gives rise to a loose symbiosis during the Middle Ages and then to separation and subjugation of the church in the modern era (Bellah 1970, Berger 1967; Bruce 1996; Casanova 1994; Compte [1830 – 1842] 1969; Durkheim [1893] 1984, [1912] 1995; Gauchet 1997; Lechner 1991; Luckmann 1963; Parsons 1977a; Spencer 1892; Weber [1920] 1946; Wilson 1966, 1982).”

Gorski goes on to say that the theories differ as to what effects differentiation had on the relationship(s) between the religious and the nonreligious spheres, and sorts the effects into four categories: 1) Disappearance, 2) Decline, 3) Privatization, and 4) Transformation. So central to secularization theory is differentiation, that secularization theory’s continued supporters such as Dobbeldaeere, Lechner and Wilson argue from the standpoint that secularization is essentially synonymous with differentiation. “Secularization is situated on the societal level and should be seen as resulting from the processes of functional differentiation and the autonomization of the societal subsystems. Consequently, we state forcefully, with Wilson, that secularization “maintains no more that that religion ceases to be significant in the working of the social system”.

Others have questioned the centrality of differentiation to an understanding of secularization. For William Swatos if secularization theory can be summed up as institutional differentiation alone then there would not have been as much excitement (meaning academic work) about the concept. Although no one (secularization theorists) would argue that differentiation is a myth, some believe that the explanatory power of concepts like differentiation has waned. This is partially the result of late-modern critiques of macro-level theorization, academic suspicions about unitary definitions of modernity and empirical research which leaves aside questions of institutional religion in order to examine public survey evidence on religious participation, values,

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38 Gorski, "Historicizing the Secularization Debate: Church, State, and Society in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe, Ca. 1300 - 1700,", 140.
and beliefs at the micro level.41 Another example is Mark Chaves’ work which, according to Beckford, has served to “de-pathologize the effects of societal differentiation on religion”.42 Chaves questioned the causal link between differentiation and secularization suggesting that this link has been over determined in the past and that new configurations of religion at other societal levels had been overlooked.43 Religion as identity creation, moral guidance/wisdom and individual meaning has added dimensions to questions of secularization that are increasingly difficult to conceptualize as institutional differentiation. It is precisely these conceptions of religion and society that welcome the addition that Taylor’s philosophy brings to secularization theory.

Take the general factor “differentiation” as an example for a Tayloren critique. For Taylor the story of differentiation is helpful in describing secularization if what is meant by secularity is that religion retreats from public life, or that in a somewhat related move, people are turning away from God and not going to their houses of worship anymore. But is this all there is to say and is this the most important thing to say? Differentiation explains to us why we live in a world in which there is now a new sphere that does not allow for the older kind of “faith-based norming”, but on what basis would we think that this sphere is automatically and absolutely faithless? Taylor gives the example of the modern doctor who will not usually prescribe touching a relic for healing but might very well see her vocation as grounded in faith”.44 Understandings of religion based on modern epistemologically driven theories can find “religion”, find lacks of “religion” and identify “religions changes” but cannot say much about how any of this is to be interpreted. The problem here for Taylor is one of clarity; we need to distinguish between “a religiously saturated society and one which is differentiated but still religiously shaped”. “Differentiation as non-saturation is very different from ‘differentiation’ as a component of ‘secularization’.”45 Taylor would agree that differentiation, rationalization and modernization and the corresponding pluralism has brought about spheres of life both private and public which are no longer religiously saturated as they were

42 Beckford, Social Theory and Religion, 47.
43 Ibid, 46.
44 Ibid, 425.
before; but he also maintains that we cannot make the causal leap from these facts to reified scientific concepts (differentiation, rationalization, etc.) that can then be used to predict religious decline, or secularization, where ever we find these general factors at work. There are too many exceptions for theories based on unitary understandings of modernity (as goes the West, so goes the rest) to hold to them any longer. “In our day, the problem needs to be posed from a new angle: Is there a single phenomenon here, or do we need to speak of ‘multiple modernities’, the plural reflecting the fact that other non-Western cultures have modernized in their own way and cannot properly be understood if we try to grasp them in a general theory that was designed originally with the Western case in mind?”46 This is not to mention the many exceptions found in Western cultures as well: religiosity in the U.S., evangelical church growth in South and Central America, global Pentecostalism, Islam, etc. Since differentiation was borne along by a corollary process known as rationalization, we should turn to it next.

b. Rationalization

Tschannen hypothesized three central variables to the secularization paradigm: differentiation, rationalization and this-worldliness.47 Like differentiation, much of secularization theory has conceived of rationalization on the macro or societal level. Simply put, if different parts of society (law, education, economy, family, etc.) gained autonomy from the sphere of religion and religion itself was becoming increasingly segmented, then the internal logic of such differentiation was rationalization. Beckford describes the process of rationalization as “the methodical pursuit of efficient relations between means and ends...which corrodes and erodes religious faith by calling into question beliefs and practices that are revered as values in themselves or as part of ways of life that are justified and warranted by sacred tradition.”48 In Steve Bruce’s diagram of the secularization paradigm, the “rationalization column” outlines (following Weber and Berger) the

move from monotheism\textsuperscript{49} to rationality to science to technology to technological consciousness. Bruce is tracing the rise of individual rationality as a secularizing force. Grace Davie surveys Bruce’s idea here as follows: “Bruce expresses these essential connections, the basis of his argument, as follows: ‘[I]ndividualism threatened the communal basis of religious belief and behaviour, while rationality removed many of the purposes of religion and rendered many of its beliefs implausible.’\textsuperscript{50} The two, individualism and rationality, go together and epitomize the nature of modern cultural understanding.”\textsuperscript{51} For Weber and Bruce, Protestantism created new rational forms of Christian activity which had profound effects on religious and secular life.\textsuperscript{52} Rationalization is most often understood to be related to individualism, institutionalization and bureaucracy which combine to create an “iron cage” in which modern man is trapped.\textsuperscript{53} “Men have become more rational, and their thinking may have become more matter-of-fact, as Veblen expressed it, but perhaps even more important is their sustained involvement in rational organizations, which impose rational behaviour upon them”\textsuperscript{54} The net effect of rationalization is that as people become more rational they become less religious, as evidenced by their waning participation in religious practice, lack of submission to religious authority and subsequent religious decline. Simultaneously, when religion is not sustained at the macro-level then belief drops off since as Bruce puts it, there is a causal relationship between “the social importance of religion, the number of people who take it seriously, and how seriously anyone takes it.”\textsuperscript{55}

The rationalization component to secularization theory (often bundled with differentiation as part of the process of modernization) is perhaps the most visible part of secularization theory. By this I mean that if someone has read anything of the secularization “debate” in Anglo-academic

\textsuperscript{49} For the best treatment I know of on this process see : Marcel Gauchet, \textit{Le Désenchantement Du Monde : Une Histoire Politique De La Religion} ([Paris]: Gallimard, 1985).


\textsuperscript{53} \textit{Ibid.}


\textsuperscript{55} Bruce, \textit{God Is Dead : Secularization in the West}, 3.
literature, they will have read that among the many definitions of secularization since the 18\textsuperscript{th} century, secularization was most often understood to be somehow related to the changing nature of the relationship between "the church" and its social standing, or as Mark Chaves would have it, its public authority. Thinkers who queried the phenomenon (i.e. Locke, Hume, Kant) couched their answers to the \textit{why} question in a complex of remarkably similar findings that invoked juxtapositions between "the natural" and "the supernatural", "the religious" and "the secular", "the sacred and "the profane", and "the superstitious" and "rational". And so the very influential revolutionary myth (or social imaginary) of Western Europe was in part the story of the wrestling of a rational intellectual philosophy into place in the face of the religio-political power brokers who peddled superstition as an opiate to the masses. Secularization theory's historical progenitors are to be found in this lineage.

Perhaps this is why the critics of secularization theory, like Berger, now tell a new revolutionary story; the tale of how the assumptions of the Western enlightened science only made it seem that religion was to evaporate; only now, as Berger puts it somewhere else, even the rationalisers have been rationalised. Bruce\textsuperscript{56} takes the strongest exception to this in his \textit{God is Dead}, which the title foreshadows in no uncertain terms. He criticizes the critiques of secularization theory that read "inevitability" and "universality" into the relationship between the development of the theories and their essentially atheistic lineage. "The secularization paradigm does not imply that the changes it describes and explains are inevitable." ... "As far as I know, Berger, Wilson, Martin, Dobbelaere and Wallis have never cited Comte, Freud, or Huxley as intellectual progenitors, but it is still common for critics to denigrate the secularizationists for the humanist arrogance of supposing that religion has declined because people have come to be more sophisticated, clever, mature or well informed."\textsuperscript{57}

\textsuperscript{56} Frank Lechner's article can be read as an exception to the desecularization hypothesis. Frank J. Lechner, "The Case against Secularization: A Rebuttal," \textit{Social Forces} 69.4 (1991). Although it might be a stretch, I think that the Norris and Inglehart book can be understood as the same sort of reaction to the de or anti-secularization idea that basically critiques secularization theory on the basis of its overconfidence concerning the death of God, but unlike other attempts, they add a unique dimension of empirical demonstration that religion only survives in cultures/times of existential insecurity. Norris and Inglehart, \textit{Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide}.

\textsuperscript{57} Bruce, \textit{God Is Dead: Secularization in the West}, 38.
Since delving into the sociology of religion would take us too far afield from the topic of this thesis, it would be futile for me to try to mediate these positions; however, Bruce does not seem quite right on this point to me. Even though Berger perhaps never cites Compte directly, this does not mean that there is no intellectual lineage to be discerned between the late 20th century secularization theorists like Berger and the formative secularism of an Auguste Compte, who most certainly had an effect on the western intellectual tradition of which we all are descended, like it or not. For Taylor, Bruce’s ideas could benefit from a hermeneutical approach; one which could draw the contours of the social imaginary at work behind theory. This is precisely what Taylor’s work shows, as we will see in chapters two and three.

If Bruce is right, then Taylor is reading “inevitability” into secularization theory. However, many continue to understand the fatal mistake in the enlightenment’s polarization of religion and science and the uncritical growth of the idea of rationality as an inevitable secularizing force. Some have done this by questioning the meta-narrative of the conflict between science and religion and by hypothesizing a median position between the two extremes of biblical literalism and scientific materialism.58 Others want to see science as a secular religion.59 Late-modern critiques, like those from Habermas and the Frankfort school, argue that science is laden with economic and class interests. Michel Foucault lays bare the power structures that seek domination through science.60 Others, like Charles Taylor, want to overcome the epistemological assumptions of an acultural view of modern science.61 One can perhaps already begin to see why turning to the philosophy of Charles Taylor, with its hermeneutical approach to the questions of secularization, assists in mediating these debates by retrieving and showing the links between the societal configuration of religion and the moral sources within which people lived to bring about the changes that occurred.

60 Barbour, Religion and Science: Historical and Contemporary Issues.
61 Taylor, Philosophy and the Human Sciences.
Feeling the effects of these developments David Martin in his recent book *On Secularization* writes:

"First, as concerns the approach of the human sciences there has been a signal advance from the idea that we dispense authoritative packages of knowledge, either concerning brute empirical fact or the supposed dynamics of history, to the idea that we enter a conversation with others on the basis of certain criteria of logic, evidence, coherence and comparison. ... These shifts have made it more possible to pursue the sociology of religion in a spirit of sympathetic understanding rather than see faith as an alienated delusion destined to disappear in the process of rationalization and the dialectics of history."  

**c. Modernization**

Moving on to Beckford’s third cluster we come to modernization which “emerges from the mixture of differentiation and rationalization with pluralisation”. It is essentially impossible to talk about secularization without talking about modernization and vice versa. This is once again a macro-level theme with origins in the period of Durkheim and Weber, and as Peter Berger says, "...most sociologists looking at this phenomenon have shared the view that secularization is the direct result of modernization. Put simply, the idea has been that the relation between religion and modernity is inverse – the more of the former, the less of the latter. Different reasons have been put forward for this relation. Most often it was ascribed to the ascendancy of modern scientific thinking, making the world more rationally comprehensible and manageable, and thus, supposedly, leaving less and less space for the supernatural. This interpretation was eloquently expressed in Weber’s phrase of ‘the disenchantment of the world’.”

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63 Beckford, *Social Theory and Religion*, 49.
One of the major characteristics of modernization is pluralisation, or the increasing diversity of religions and religious perspectives that modern life brought to people’s consciousness, to their civic lives and to their families. Peter Berger has contributed as much as anyone to the sociological literature about modernization and secularization, and in his major work on the subject, *The Sacred Canopy*, Berger constructs the link between modernization and pluralism. While the later Berger has reconsidered the link between some elements of modernization and secularization, pluralism had remained and grown stronger in his view. “If I look back on my earlier work, I would say that I was wrong about secularization, but right about pluralism. I misunderstood the relation between the two: the latter does not necessarily lead to the former (vide the American case). What pluralism does (and there I was right) is to undermine all taken-for-granted certainties, in religion as in all other spheres of life.” So, in modernity, social institutions that previously relied on centralized power structures, consensus and tradition for their maintenance have broken apart, which has, to follow Berger’s metaphor, rent holes in the sacred canopy. Consensus gave way to pluralism and the modern social imaginary could no longer imagine a world in which social institutions hold us as individuals, apart from our voluntary consent, or how religion could function publicly in any authoritative way. There is a decided individualization that is going on here. As the religious dimension is relativized and thus privatized, descriptions of secularization that rely on the macro-level changes in societal evolution also give way to definitions of religion that involve the individual’s economic and rational choices; the real power play beneath social change. In fact, beginning in 1960s and 70s, a significant critique to secularization theory appeared and a new paradigm in secularization theorization emerged. Instead of focusing on large-scale institutional religious change (Eurocentric theories) which explains secularization from the demand side of religion, why not flip the microscope and look for secularization’s causes from the supply side of religion (Americentric theories).

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The changes in Berger’s approach serves as evidence of the growth of what some refer to as the “new paradigm” in the sociology of religion. When focus is placed on the demand side of religion, like it was in the modern sociology of religion, then things like institutional differentiation, rationalization and modernization are important concepts used to get at the societal level transformations that have occurred. However, one of the largest critiques of “old paradigm” secularization theory comes from theorists who shift the focus to the “supply-side” of religion. In modernity religion can actually grow and the supposed inverse relationship between religion and modernity is unlinked. The anomalism of American religion (American exceptionalism) required to understand religion in the modern world becomes a European anomalism (European exceptionalism) deeply ingrained in secularization theory that needs to be rooted out in order to understand religion in the modern world. Since the role of modernization in secularization theory is connected to the “old” versus “new” paradigm debate, I will spend some time on it here.

With the onset of a “new” paradigm, writing on secularization can be sorted into two broad categories, most often labelled “old paradigm” and “new paradigm”, which I would prefer to label as “Eurocentric” and “Americentric”. The Eurocentric paradigm, called “old” for largely chronological reasons, is still very much in play. This grouping of theories contains the original secularization theorists (Henri de Saint-Simon, Auguste Compte, Herbert Spencer, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, Ernst Troeltsch, etc.) who theorized the relationship between religion and modernity based on the experience of European cultures. Intricately linked to the development of western social science, ideas of secularization were built on a view that saw religion as a cultural

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69 Taylor writes about the difference between a “neo-Durkehlman” and a “paleo-Durkehlman” effect. The latter is the Baroque hierarchical identification of religion and state through Catholic Europe. The former alludes to the cases found where confession and national group identify is fused and thus sedimented into a type of civil religion that can stave off an expected decline in religious belief and practice. Charles Taylor, Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), 78.
70 For more on the exceptionalisms see Grace Davie’s chapter in Berger, "The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics." See also: Davie, Religion in Modern Europe: A Memory Mutates.
71 I find that Philip Gorski’s images of “ascent” and “descent” are helpful in conceptualizing the differences between the old and new paradigms. Gorski, "Historicizing the Secularization Debate: Church, State, and Society in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe, Ca. 1300 - 1700."
component, like politics or education. This institutional view of religion would lose its explanatory force when applied to American religion but it took close to a century for social scientists to make this discovery; and this largely due to the Euro-centric origins to the sociology of religion and secularization theory as well as religion’s disappearance from the range of concerns taken up by 20th century Anglo-American social science. From the perspective of economics, which had become increasingly influential in the Anglo-American social sciences in general, and from the perspective of new readings of history, the “decline of religion” theories were empirically called into account. Finke and Stark’s *The Churching of America 1776–2005* is a good example of this sort of new look at American religious history and coming up with an alternate account rather than what some refer to as “the golden age” theory.72 Basically, his theory states that if secularization is the decline of religion then that means that religion was at some historical point greater than the present. *The Churching of America* shows that at least in the case of the U.S., churches have grown, not shrunk, as players in what the authors call the “religious economy”. For the new paradigm theorists, why think that demand for religion fluctuates indexed to macro-level societal movements and cultural institutions? Why not think that supply of religion is what varies, and so the differences in levels of religion noted are better explained by quantifiable economic, political, and individual-level factors? In short the new paradigm states that “different levels of religious behaviour in different countries is the result of different “supplies” of religious services. In countries where there are established or quasi-established churches, monopolies in other words, the supply of services will be low and the demand will be unmet. In countries were there is a free competition among religious firms, the supply of religious services will increase and the demand will be (to some extent) met and the level of religious behaviours will be higher than in monopolistic situations.” Some new paradigm theorists insist that this explanation is so far superior to the old paradigm explanations that the old paradigm has been effectively buried (i.e. *Secularization R.I.P.*).73

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As might be expected by now, not everyone is exuberantly welcoming this new paradigm in the sociology of religion and its ramifications for the “inherited model” of secularization. For Mark Chaves those who participate in the “currently fashionable claims suggesting that secularization theory has been decisively falsified (Hadden 1987; Hout & Greeley 1987; Stark & Iannaccone 1992) throw the baby out with the bathwater”. Some critique the “rational choice theory” that lies behind the new paradigm in terms of the limits of its econometric epistemology, its use of “choice” in explaining the religious dimension of the human and its definition of rationality. Some argue that new paradigm approaches are invalidated by the fact that society is not secular. Others argue that some rational choice models de-contextualize religious behaviour by extracting it from its social and cultural setting. In the context of this section on modernization (and pluralisation) one of the more interesting critiques comes from Chaves and Gorski who conclude that: “The claim that religious pluralism and religious participation are generally and positively associated with one another – the core empirical hypothesis of the market approach to the study of religion – is not supported, and attempts to discredit countervailing evidence on methodological grounds must be rejected. A positive relationship between religious pluralism and religious participation can be found only in limited number of contexts, while the concepts themselves translate poorly to non-modern settings.” Others argue that both old and new paradigms overestimate the impact of social structure and economics on religiosity while failing to notice that it is “the role of religion in the public sphere and in the socialization process which largely determines the fate of religiosity”. And recently Norris and Inglehart have given us an extension

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to the new paradigm that they expect to correct certain deficiencies noticed in the empirical findings of the rational choice approach to secularization. I think that Norris and Inglehart sum up the current status of secularization theory when they say: “Traditional secularization theory is now widely challenged, but no single theoretical framework has yet won general acceptance to replace it.”

4. Taylor on Secularization Theory

There is little doubt that we can talk about religious change in modernity in terms of differentiation, rationalization and modernization. For Taylor all this and more is true. However, Taylor has spent considerable effort trying to point out that these sorts of explanatory approaches do not say all that there is to say about the matter. And in fact we can’t even be sure, due to epistemological problems nested deep in our social scientific methods that these categories used to describe and explain the process of secularization, actually get us to the core of what is going on. An important domain of knowledge has been left out: the pre-theoretical, particularistic and common-sense explanations that people use to describe their religious experience. By leaving

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81 Norris and Inglehart, Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide, 11.
82 In 1967 Taylor wrote about the older forms of the sacred and their dissolution in the capitalist-technological society and of “the way in which the development of this society has dried up the springs by which the presence of the sacred in human life was periodically renewed”. Charles Taylor, "From Marxism to the Dialogue Society," From Culture to Revolution, eds. Terry Eagleton and Brian Wicker (London and Sydney: Sheed and Ward, 1967), 162. One can even find Taylor using the categories used by secularization theory in his analysis of religion in his home province of Quebec in articles like “Entrevue avec Charles Taylor” where he responds to a question about the place of religion in public space today: “…le monde moderne s’est lancé dans un processus qui veut répondre à des critères d’efficacité et que les sociologies de la secularization appelant différenciation – différenciation des sphères de l’éducation, de la santé, etc.” Charles Taylor, "Entrevue Avec Charles Taylor," Carrefour XXI.1 (1999), 8. It is important to grasp that for Taylor it is not that secularization theory is wrong, but as he says about theories of modernity in general it is more that “their sympathies are too narrow. They find their way through the dilemmas of modernity [or in our case religion] by invalidating some of the crucial goods in contest.” Taylor, Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity, 502-03.
83 This idea that the language of social explanation should include the understanding of the agents themselves to count as a full explanation is a significant theme throughout Taylor’s work and in philosophy in general. Although not treated fully in this thesis one can get an excellent overview in Charles Taylor, "Understanding and Explanation in the Geisteswissenschaften," Wittgenstein, to Follow a Rule, eds. Steven H. Holtzman and Christopher M. Leich (London; Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981).
these out, social scientific theories of religion are “induced by their discipline to seek explanations by general factors.”

As Taylor has recently written: “The basic insight underlying the ‘orthodox’ modes of theory in this domain [secularization theory] is that modernity (in some sense) tends to repress or reduce ‘religion’ (in some sense). I have no quarrel with this; there is a sense in which I concur.” But Taylor is convinced that the debate is bedevilled by what he calls an “unthought”, “the unthought of secularization. For Taylor the current range of theories do not get to the level of exposing this unthought but this is precisely the task to which Taylor applies the philosophical tools for which he is known. The unthought in secularization theory is an old foe to Taylor: “...the stumbling block of neutral social science” and the way in which “...one’s own framework of beliefs and values can constrict one’s theoretical imagination”. Taylor has argued, and continues to argue, for a view of secularization based on a more phenomenologically layered and hermeneutically aware theory; a social theory as practice. In other words Taylor is after the sorts of things he thinks social science explanations leave out. In effect Taylor resituates the secularization debate away from the arena of social scientific reductions alone, in order to be able to bring the debate onto his philosophical anthropology “home field”, which has the effect of allowing him to design a secularization theory centred on the conditions of belief in modernity.

In a preface Taylor wrote to the lectures he delivered in 1981 for the B.N. Ganguli Memorial Lectures entitled “Social Theory as Practice”, Taylor crystallizes his views on our subject at hand in three propositions. First, he says that Dilthey was right in that there is an important difference between the natural sciences and the sciences of man. Secondly, there is a powerful tendency is

85 Taylor, A Secular Age, 429.
86 Ibid, 428.
87 In Sources Taylor has laid out his view: “The bad model of practical reasoning, rooted in the epistemological tradition, constantly nudges us towards a mistrust of transition arguments. It wants us to look for ‘criteria’ to decide the issue, i.e., some considerations which could be established even outside the perspectives in dispute and which would nevertheless be decisive. But there cannot be such considerations. My perspective is defined by the moral intuitions I have, by what I am morally moved by. If I abstract from this, I become incapable of understanding any moral argument at all.” Taylor, Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity, 73.
modern technological civilizations to assimilate human to natural science "and thus in a way to assimilate man to things, sometimes to even understand ourselves on the model of machines". 88 And finally, that this tendency is "dangerous and destructive" since humans live by their self-interpretations; so it is important "to get ourselves right" or at least not to be too far off the mark. Taylor goes on in the lectures to spell out how the self-interpretation based on natural science explanations of the human lack what he calls "self-awareness" to a striking degree. For Taylor social science is the never ending struggle for the appropriate language; a language that clears away misconceptions and allows us to "fight free of those falsely universal models, which are really the fruit of other sciences, other cultures, other polities". Taylor calls his efforts "neo-Dilthean". 89

As Nicolas Smith has pointed out, the German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey was one of the first to argue that the social sciences possess a logic quite different from that of the natural sciences arising from the fact that social sciences have to interpret or reach an "understanding" of their subject-matter. In the philosophy of social science this is sometime called the Verstehen school. Dilthey's notion of "reaching an understanding" was later modified by Heidegger and Gadamer, both important philosophers for Taylor's idea of the role of hermeneutics in the sciences. Smith claims that "Taylor has been the most eloquent and influential advocate of the hermeneutic model of social science in the English-speaking world". 90 Taylor's preference for a hermeneutic social science is central to his philosophical anthropology.

It was important to take the time necessary to survey some of the main tenants of contemporary secularization theory since Taylor positions himself vis-à-vis this academic search to theorize secularization. The contention of this thesis is that Taylor comes at secularization in a novel and theoretically fruitful way. He does so by re-introducing perspectives not often considered by social-scientific attempts to explain religious phenomena (chapter two), motivated as he is by his

88 Charles Taylor, Social Theory as Practice (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983), v.
89 Taylor, Social Theory as Practice, vi.
belief that much modern theorizing abstracts from practice to such a degree as to cripple our theories of the phenomena we seek to understand (chapter three). Taylor’s long standing confrontation with social theory comes through here and we should consider this before moving on. For Taylor a lot of contemporary secularization theory is wrong, but it is important to understand what Taylor might mean when he calls a social theory “wrong”.

5. Social Theory as Practice

In “Social Theory as Practice”, Taylor pulls together arguments he had been making for some 50 years concerning the problem he sees in the popular view that the natural sciences can provide a paradigm for knowledge building in the social sciences. Taylor has pointed out in various ways that this conflation is less argued for and demonstrated than assumed. Taylor warns of the “...constant temptation to take natural science theory as a model for social theory: that is, to see theory as offering an account of underlying processes and mechanisms of society...”. Due to the success of the reigning naturalistic scientific paradigm, it is an easy conflation to make. The success of natural scientific research has enshrined the methods of these sciences along with the disastrous result of stopping further enquiry into their own presuppositions. The wide-spread acceptance of the story of natural science as the final authority on the discovery and explanation of natural phenomena has grown to include everything since everything is derivative of natural processes. Taylor takes exception to this story at the point in which it includes humans and all human activity. Since secularization theory is social scientific theory, it is worth examining further how these social theories claim to know what they know about religion and its fate in modernity.

For Taylor, social theory, based on its methods of social scientific understanding, can never really provide the sort of explanation it claims to offer: an underlying account. Social theory is not

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91 Taylor is discussing political theory but I am adapting his argument to secularization theory. This is a fair adaptation since secularization theory is a “social theory”, which is really what this part of Taylor’s philosophy is about.

neutral observation. Social theory can alter self-descriptions (i.e. the difference between the Protestant Reformation viewed as a divinely inspired act versus a product of European Enlightenment socio-political conditions) and since our self-descriptions are constitutive of our practices Taylor says that in this way social theory can affect practice. Social scientific understandings (theory) claim to challenge, replace or extend the common-sense understanding that humans live with before the application of theory. But according to Taylor, while they can do this to a degree, there is always a “remainder”, a residual pre-theoretical understanding that does not give itself up to the abstractions of theory. There is pre-theoretical understanding that is shared among members of a society that is founded on member’s descriptions of self and others that are sedimented into that society’s institutions and practices. This pre-theoretical common-sense view can be displaced by theory but cannot be entirely replaced by such theory. As such, social theories do not ever really tell us everything that is going on. Unlike the natural sciences, the theory is not about what Taylor calls “independent objects” but is “one that is partly constituted by self-understanding”. The common-sense view which social theory displaces is simultaneously constitutive of the practices of the society under study as well as the theories used to shape the study. Social theory transforms practice while it attempts to explain it. Natural science theory does the same thing, but the difference, as Taylor points out, is that “...the practice it transforms is not what the theory is about. It is in this sense external to the theory”. So scientific theory about rocks can transform the way humans interact with rocks, but the theory will never alter nor be altered by the rock’s self-understandings. However, in a theory that seeks to describe human activity (social theory) like secularization theory, the practice is the object of the theory and these practices carry the meanings they do because these meanings have been ascribed to them by humans. As such, secularization theory transforms its own object and so the problem of how to validate this type of self-referential theory arises. 

If social theory is no longer “neutral”, i.e. matching up human action to pre-determined factual explanatory categories, then what do we mean when we say a social theory is right or wrong? In

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93 We are obviously into the domain of hermeneutics, but I want to save this part of Taylor’s philosophy for later exposition in chapter two and three.
what is Taylor’s claim that much of secularization theory is wrong based? Taylor tackles the problem of validation by offering the idea that social theories can be validated because they can be tested in practice. 94 “What makes a theory right is that it brings practice out in the clear; that its adoption makes possible what is in some sense a more effective practice”. 95 Social theories can serve more than descriptive purposes; they can also shape self-understandings. An easy example would be to imagine the way in which atomist political theories have led moderns to think of themselves as individuals with corresponding rights attached to their “selves”. Social theories are actually used by moderns to make sense and orient themselves in the world in which they live. Taylor coins the phrase “self-defining theory” to describe his idea that social theory has an important use in defining common understandings, in contrast to the explanatory uses that we have grown accustomed to in our “theory-drenched” age. What is wrong about secularization theory to Taylor, like many other social theories of our age, is that they have failed to realize the genuine nature of the subject that they seek to understand. Social theory does not just expose causal explanations; it also shapes and changes its subject: homo religiosus.

Of course, the objection easily raised about defining validation in terms of self-definition, is that all Taylor has done is to allow for social scientific explanations of people’s self-definitions, which in no way establishes any “truth” of fact. All this shows what we already know, that people have different opinions; opinions based on ideological takes on what they consider to be reality. In fact, this is why we need the rigour of procedure that comes from the natural sciences, in order to validate by correspondence between people’s self-definitions and known facts, so that the true nature of religion’s role in society can come to light. 96 To this Taylor responds:

“Theories as self-definitions cannot just be seen as reflections of interest, because they make a certain kind of claim. They claim to offer a perspicuous account of the good or norm which is the point of a certain practice. Rousseau’s republican theory

94 This is what Taylor means when he refers to “facts of experience” later on in A Secular Age.
95 Taylor, “Social Theory as Practice,”, 104.
96 For an example how this sort of critique can be made as it relates to the study of religion see the work of Daniel Dennett. More generally on the relationship between evolutionary theory and the social scientific study of religion see: Donald Wiebe, “Implications of The "Modes of Religiosity Theory” For the Scientific Study of Religion,” Method & Theory in the Study of Religion 16 (2004).
of the general will offers a certain conception of the shared good informing the
data of republican self-rule. The atomist theories define conceptions of
rationality and efficacy. If I accept an orientation towards my political society as
rightfully the guardian of the correct order of value, then I define a certain notion of
guardianship, which I see as the point of certain laws, ceremonies, structures.

Now this is the kind of claim that can be right or wrong, and that in principle at
least, we can validate or disconfirm. It is something we can test in practice. This is
so, because since theories enable practice to take a certain shape, a theory which
badly misidentifies the goods we can seek in a certain domain will ground a
practice which will fail to realize these goods. The practices informed by wrong
theories will be in an important way self-defeating. 97

Early secularization theorists started off with an unshaken faith in the methods of their science and
could therefore offer the disappearance of religion as valid theory. Taylor wants to show how this
theory, as social theory, would have benefited from a more hermeneutically informed judgement.
When religious practice did not disappear, secularization theorists amended their theories to
explain instead “changes in religion”. For Taylor, even these newer theories are for the most part
fundamentally flawed, since they still cannot take into account the way in which human’s religious
self-definitions are part of the explanandum sought by social scientific theories of religion.

6. The Need to Explain People Living Their Lives

Not everyone buys the place Taylor gives to “self-definitions” in theory. Ronald Beiner, professor
of political philosophy, in his article, “Hermeneutical Generosity and Social Criticism”, says that:
“It strikes me that what governs Taylor’s work as a whole is the ‘historicist’ presumption that if
we make a sufficiently generous effort to understand why modern selves have come to be what
they are and why modern moral aspirations have evolved in the direction that they have, these

97 Taylor, "Social Theory as Practice,", 109.
moral aspirations, and the selves that they constitute, will show themselves as a perfectly reasonable and worthy of aspiration."98

Taylor’s project has worked to point out the alliances between the political philosophy of liberalism and the epistemology he wants to expose. While the Beiner-Taylor debate mentioned earlier is a manifestation of the larger question of the difference between proceduralism and contextualism. Proceduralists try to establish that the basic structures and procedures of a moral argument are what validate normative moral discourse and judgement. Beiner follows Jürgen Habermas in believing that one of philosophy’s role is to filter out the linguistically embedded self-understandings of human’s and their languages in order to establish a language through which consensus can be obtained. A universal communicative ethic can be hoped for that lifts dialogue, communication, and ethics out of the limits of the contextual. Taylor, like Alasdair MacIntyre, would argue instead that all human reasoning takes place within the context of some bounded community of practice. Consensus in this view is located in the shared understandings and commitments that exist in the traditions which are prior to any discussion of moral universals.99

The point Taylor has consistently made throughout his philosophical project is that liberalism’s proceduralism is powered by a faulty epistemology. People’s religious self-descriptions and theological constructions cannot be ruled out of play by a secular social theory required for the construction of political theory of the proceduralist type.100

Taylor is constantly criticized on this point, for being holding to an overly particularistic approach that values “historicist understanding” at the expense of “transhistorical judgement”, or “evaluation” at the expense of “norms”, or as Ronald Beiner (using William Galston’s words) says, “deep description” and the expense of “wide justification”. (Beiner, 153) Beiner’s criticism

100 John Milbank has pointed out this same problem in Theology & Social Theory. I will discuss Milbank in a later section of this thesis.
of Taylor on this point shows how other such criticisms of Taylor’s work and as such bears belabouring:

“Charles Taylor’s main endeavour as a theorist, it seems to me, is to try to do the utmost interpretive justice to the aspirations of people in modern society both to express their individuality and to satisfy their longings for community. (In this sense, he is a communitarian and a liberal.) My own conception of theory, by contrast, is, I think, less geared to understanding and more geared to criticism: according to my conception, the main duty of the theorist is to expose both the excessive individualism of modern life and the sometimes excessive demands of communal belonging. (Therefore I think of myself as antiliberal and anticommunitarian!)...where Taylor’s theoretical approach inclines him toward a rhetoric of understanding, whereas mine inclines me toward a rhetoric of criticism.”\textsuperscript{101}

So for Beiner, the constant to seek in all of this is a formal one: the ability to ask questions of a certain analytical, critical and non “historicist” shape. Beiner prefers these questions, because he assumes \textit{a priori} that contemporary normative political theory needs the answers questions asked in this form will produce. However, it might be helpful to think that Taylor is not talking about what sorts of questions people should be properly permitted to ask; he has another sort of question asking in mind....namely the questions whose answers people really use for the creation of their self-understandings. In \textit{Sources} in a small chapter entitled “Digression on Historical Explanation”, Taylor explains his sorts of questions. He calls the sorts of questions Beiner alludes to “...a question about diachronic causation. We want to know what were the precipitating conditions, and this leads us to some statement of the features peculiar to Western civilization in the modern period which made it the case that this particular cultural shift occurred here.” Taylor explains that he is after a different sort of question,

“...a second, less ambitious question. It is an interpretive one. Answering it involves giving an account of the new identity which makes clear what its appeal was. What

\textsuperscript{101} \textit{Ibid}, 157.
drew people to it? Indeed, what draws them today? What gave it is spiritual power? We articulate the visions of good involved in it. What this question asks for in an interpretation of the identity what can be called the ‘idées-forces’ it contains.”

Taylor says elsewhere:

“I believe that what we are, as human agents, is profoundly interpretation-dependent, that human beings in different cultures can be radically diverse, in keeping with their fundamentally different self-understandings. But I think that a constant is to be found in the shape of the questions that all cultures must address. Naturally, it is at best centuries premature to proffer anything like structured theory of...what belongs to human agency as such, in all times, and places, and what is shaped differently in different cultures. But it is also undeniable that we inescapably make hazy, provisional assumptions about those timeless features of human agency that hold across cultures whenever we try to define the historically specific sense of a given age, like our own.”

Taylor grants that his “constant as question” is usually too “hazy” for the immediate production of normative theory, but the force of his argument is that what people actually think, what their best available accounts are, must be taken into account for any theory that claims to make any sense out of the world in which humans live. Taylor summarizes this principle in the following way:

“Theories like behaviourism or certain strands of contemporary computer-struck cognitive psychology, which declare “phenomenology” irrelevant on principle, are based on a crucial mistake. They are “changing the subject”, in Donald Davidson’s apt expression. What we need to explain is people living their lives; the terms in which they cannot avoid living them cannot be removed from the explanandum, unless we can propose other terms in which they could live them more clairvoyantly. [emphasis mine] We cannot just leap outside of these

102 Taylor, Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity, 203.
terms altogether, on the grounds that their logic doesn't fit some model of "science" and that we know a priori that human beings must be explicable in this "science". This begs the question. How can we ever know that humans can be explained by any scientific theory until we actually explain how they live their lives in its terms?

This establishes what it means to 'make sense' of our lives, in the meaning of my statement above. The terms we select have to make sense across the whole range of both explanatory and life uses. The terms indispensable for the latter part of the story that makes best sense of us, unless and until we can replace them with more clairvoyant substitutes. The result of this search for clairvoyance yields the best account we can give at any given time, and no epistemological or metaphysical considerations of a more general kind about science or nature can justify setting this aside. The best account in the above sense is trumps. Let me call this the BA principle.\textsuperscript{104}

For Taylor there is no such thing as criticism outside of some perspective given in some community. "We cannot just legislate the goods people are actually seeking and finding as goods out of court. What could the highest good be if we did this? On what basis could we establish a highest good [like the assumption of critical theory] that had this property? A theory of justice must begin with the kinds of goods and kinds of common practices organized around these goods that people actually have in a given society. Ethical theory has to comprehend given practice; it cannot just abstract from it."\textsuperscript{105}

But why the strong attraction to abstract from given practice? The moral source Taylor finds in the background to modern ethical theories is based on what he calls "single-term moralities". In "Iris Murdoch and Moral Philosophy" Taylor shows how he thinks single-term moralities gain their


credibility from the restrictions brought about by certain motives; one moral and the other epistemological. The moral one is on display in utilitarian ethics in which “it seems obvious that our major concern must be our dealings with others, in justice and benevolence; and these dealings must be on a level of equality. One can emphasize more justice (Kantians) or benevolence (Utilitarians), but there is a shared perspective which is inimical to the ancient primacy of ethics...” The epistemological one involves a narrowing due to the demands of disengaged reason. “Disengaged reason means that we cease to rely on our engaged sense, our familiarity with some domain, and take a reflexive turn. We put our trust in a method, a procedure of operation. The sense of freedom and power which goes with this is part of the motivation.” “At last fuzzy intuitions of common sense can be reduced to clarity”. These two motivations (moral and epistemological) combine to make credible the view that there is a “homogenous and calculable domain of moral consideration” and that ethics can be delivered as a set of obligations. And this just seems right to modern thought for several reasons: 1) the exaltation of justice-benevolence over “the good life” simplifies the domain of the moral; 2) “because the calculability fits with the dominant models of disengaged reason;” 3) because single-term moralities seem more clear-cut when adjudicating questions of fairness between people with different demands; 4) out of respect for people’s freedom which is a central good to Western culture; 5) the belief that the political society must create the morally neutral public space in which everyone can develop on his or her own; and finally, 6) the strong tendency to shy away from sorting out “moralities” that comes from the “confused inarticulacy of modern naturalism.”

But Taylor then goes on to say that although he understands the popular availability of these ideas, there are reasons to question their solidity. For one, ethics involves more than what we are obligated to do. “The sense that such and such an action we are obligated by justice to perform


107 Taylor has continuously demonstrated his “impatience at the constricting modes of thought that dominate academic moral philosophy”, and the way he fights these modes of thought is to articulate the moral motivation underlying them, “even in the teeth of their originator’s disavowals”. To see Taylor at work on this in a detailed way see: Charles Taylor, "A Most Peculiar Institution," World, Mind, and Ethics: Essays on the Ethical Philosophy of Bernard Williams, eds. J. E. J. Altham and Ross Harrison (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
cannot be separated from a sense that being just is a good way to be. If we had the first without any hint of the second, we would be dealing with a compulsion, like the neurotic necessity to wash one’s hands or to remove stones from the road. A moral obligation comes across as moral because it is part of a broader sense which includes goodness, perhaps the nobility or admirability of being someone who lives up to it.\footnote{Taylor, "Iris Murdoch and Moral Philosophy," 10 - 11.} Another reason for the abstraction comes from the displacement of the locus of the constitutive goods onto the human being itself. ("In Kant, the sense of the dignity of human life, as rational agency soaring above everything else in the universe, is an example of the identification of a constitutive good in a humanist ethic"). The nobility of rational freedom, and the sense of the dignity and value of human life is a powerful contemporary ethic and is seen as emanating from within the human. And finally, single-term moralities do not get the role of life goods in moral understanding and their ability to move humans. "The foreshortened single-term morality misses not only life goods but constitutive goods. It neglects not just the unarticulated know-how but misses a lot of what we need to articulate in order to know what to do.\footnote{Ibid, 14.} Taylor says elsewhere that ethical theories owe “us an account of what it is that actually moves human beings to acknowledge certain pre-eminent demands which we usually characterize as moral."\footnote{Charles Taylor, "Uncompromising Realist," Times Literary Supplement (1986): , 982.} 

7. Conclusion

Charles Taylor’s philosophical anthropology has ranged far and wide, and he is trying to bring what he has gleaned from his investigation into the making of the modern identity to bear upon how we think about secularity. While criticizing social scientific approaches for the epistemological problem he sees buried in them, he none the less agrees with much of what they purport to point out. What Taylor is really proposing is simply that run of the mill secularization theory is boring. It just does not tell us enough about what is really interesting about the secularity we have lived and are living. Taylor does not follow social theory and ask questions like “what are the factors which explain the changing role of religion in modern society?” Taylor’s question
is “What does it mean to say that we live in a secular age?” The question raises the issue of meaning (mean), of language (say), of living (live), of history (age) and of secularity. I even find Taylor’s preference for the word secularity an interesting and pregnant choice of words. He seems happy to leave the word secularization to the theorists, while he leads us into an exploration of what belief and unbelief are like, and how the conditions of both have changed in the experience of humans becoming modern. If we were to class Taylor among secularization theorists we would have to put him into the category that Beckford has called “metamorphoses”.

**Metamorphoses**

Taylor thinks that mainline secularization theory is inadequate in capturing the essential elements of modern secularity. We saw earlier how secularization theory has struggled to explain changes in the religious structures of society. We talked about how a newer paradigm has tried to improve on the assumptions of an older paradigm now being falsified. But perhaps the major mistake of the old paradigm was not in its understanding of secularization as religious decline, since religion has indeed declined in most western nations, but in its failure to notice that this decline is better understood as “religious change”. As people disconnect from traditional forms of religion, they reconnect to new forms of religion. In this way the decline is described as a displacement of religious forms in general and religious practice in particular. “What is really happening, according to a wide variety of scholars, is that religion is being assembled, packaged and experienced in new forms, some of which bear little resemblance to previously taken-for-granted expressions of religion.”

The important core of the metamorphoses theories comes from Europe where the old secularization paradigm would still seem to have some explanatory power. Grace Davie wonders in her chapter in Berger’s *The Desecularization of the World*, “Might it not be the case that Europeans are not so much less religious than citizens in other parts of the world as differently religious?” Davie, following James O’Connell among others, in looking at the 1981 and 1990 findings of the European Values System Study Group, says that while the more orthodox and

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112 Beckford, *Social Theory and Religion*, 52.
institutional indicators point to secularization, the less institutional and traditional indicators reveal a "considerable persistence of some aspects of religious life". This refers to what Grace Davie has called elsewhere "believing without belonging". From this point of view many of the claims of religious decline in old paradigm secularization theory can be accepted, because even though people no longer participate in traditional forms of religion (belonging) they maintain religious beliefs and an increasing array of new practices (believing).

Obviously the conceptualization of religion is at play here. Davie develops an idea of "vicarious religion" in Western Europe in which she seeks to explain the role traditional churches continue to play "on behalf" of nominal Christians. Beckford mentions a number of difficulties with the metamorphoses theories like Davie’s. I will mention them briefly. First would be the secularizationist’s rejoinder concerning the empirical link made between believing, belonging and secularization. Secondly, there are definitional problems as to what counts as “church” and what counts as “non-religious voluntary association” which is important for Davie’s thesis. And finally, this does not sufficiently factor in the growth in “belonging” occurring among conservative, Pentecostal, and evangelical denominations.

The work of Danièle Hervieu-Léger can be seen as a second major strand of the metamorphoses of religion idea; and rightly so. Hervieu-Léger has delivered a thorough assessment of European religion in modernity based on the idea that what secularization theory took as religious decline was actually a restructuring, which has had a net result of a continued religious life of bricolage in which people put their spirituality together autonomously. Her work has become of central importance to French sociologists and theologians in their search for new ways to say "secularization" without actually saying it. “Echoing Peter Berger’s phenomenology of religion as the collective attempt to ward off the threat of chaos, Hervieu-Léger claims that individuals have

115 Beckford, Social Theory and Religion, 54.
116 Ibid, 55.
nowadays acquired ‘a colossal measure of freedom’ as a result of the collapse of collective codes of meaning and morality. The ideal-typical figures who embody this autonomous response to modern freedom are the pilgrim and the convert.”117 This idea of people putting their religious life together piecemeal might be thought of as the irrational choice theory. There does seem to be a lot of evidence for the bricolage idea especially among the young. Jagodzinski says that in “postmodern societies, however, religion can focus on its main problem, the meaning question of the human existence because the basic materialistic needs are largely satisfied and compensation in this respect is no longer required.”118 This is the context of which Hervieu-Léger writes, and this interpretation of secularization serves to demonstrate how far afield current theorizing has ranged. French sociology of religion and religious sciences writers tend to be more acutely aware of the linguistic, hermeneutic and identity-formation related issues lurking beneath the Anglo-Saxon secularization debate. Charles Taylor, whose philosophy bridges both worlds, has insights drawn from his knowledge of both worlds and the fruitful overlay of one upon the other.

Like the metamorphosis theorists, Taylor embraces and reinterprets the empirical findings most often used to support the conventional hypothesis of secularization as decline in religious participation. Taylor’s ideas accept, in fact depend on, one part of the conventional decline theories: the evidence that in Western European countries no longer belong or participate in the churches. Religious decline is true for Taylor, but he thinks that this tells us nothing about people’s existential relationship to belief and unbelief. For Taylor these sorts of sociological findings suffer from precisely the limitations that he has laboured to point out are endemic to social scientific methods in general: secularization theory has focused on church attendance since it is one of the key factors of religious life most amenable to counting, but this says nothing about the variety of religious and denominational understandings of things like “participation”, “belonging” and “attendance”. It also tells us nothing about the link between religious participation and identity formation which is what really interests Taylor to begin with. The interesting phenomena to explore exist in that space described by Grace Davie in which “An

117 Ibid, 56.
evident fall both in religious practice and in religious knowledge in the postwar period does not lead to a parallel loss in religious sensitivity (the data quite clearly suggest otherwise) or to the widespread adoption of secular alternatives.”¹¹⁹ For Taylor the changing contours of the religious landscape only points to the restructuring that has gone on since at least the 17th century, and that such restructuring only came to be understood as the triumph of a public secularism due to a certain epistemological stance at the heart of secularization ideas. The misplaced faith in this epistemology diverted too much attention from where the real action was for Taylor: in the changes going on in people’s understandings of religion and the new modes being forged to express their religious sentiments and commitments apart from the sanctioned offices of the church, or in other words the conditions of belief.

Like other metamorphosis theorists, Taylor thinks that secularization theory has been held hostage to a formalism which did not allow it the interpretive freedom to see that religious forces were never mainly or perhaps even primarily under the control of the official institutions of religion anyway. In essence the metamorphosis idea attempts to apply the lessons learned in the social sciences in this regard: mistaking the causal directions of power within public institutions. Socio-historical investigations have shown, as Beckford reminds us, that “the boundary between ‘official’ and ‘informal’ or ‘unofficial’ expressions of religion is not given in the nature of things or fixed once-and-for-all: its locations is the result of centuries of struggle between religious leaders, secular elites and popular interests”.¹²⁰ This is the reason for Taylor’s historical retrieval of secularization began in Sources of the Self and now completed in A Secular Age, in which he traces the trajectory of religious metamorphosis by evaluating the interaction between the stories people actually used to forge their identifies vis-à-vis religion and theories used over time to describe the effects of these changes.

Taylor maintains that, in ethics and in human affairs, the best measure of reality is what enables us to make the most coherent sense of our lives, and of the actions and feelings of ourselves and

¹²⁰ Beckford, Social Theory and Religion, 58.
others. One of the key elements that people use for the construction of the sense of their lives, what Taylor would call a horizon, is religion. Religion does not hold together in the way it used to, so there is reason to talk about secularization. Taylor has tried to understand how this works, and as part of his search has asked the question of what it might mean to call this age secular. Rather than abstracting from the lived experience of the last few centuries to understand religion and secularization, Taylor invites his readers to entertain his theory which he considers to be constructed from the best account self-descriptions that are to be found in the conditions of people’s beliefs. Taylor’s is a theory from the inside of belief and non-belief, and it will be up to us to decide if his theory succeeds in its own terms: does it provide a more clairvoyant view of secularity as we know it.
Chapter Two: Charles Taylor and What It Might Mean to Call This Age Secular

"[Secularization] is a term which is much used to describe modern society; and it is sometimes even offered as partial explanation for features of this society. But it is more a locus of questions than a source of explanation."

Having situated Taylor in the context of the larger social-scientific theories of secularization, we can now turn and begin to explore in this chapter and the next what I consider to be the core of Taylor's secularization theory, his 50-year attempt to expose the frailty of most social-scientific theories of the human. Charles Taylor is interested in secularization theory because he wants to help widen its field of vision, blinkered as it is by the epistemological assumptions buried in social-scientific attempts to explain human phenomena such as religion. In this chapter we will explore Taylor's answers to the question of what it might mean to say that we live in a secular age. Then in chapter three we will see why Taylor comes to his understanding of secularity by focusing on what I consider to be the core of his secularization theory: his anti-epistemological stance.

1. Secularity: Between Transcendence and Immanence

According to Taylor, once one has given up on social theory's pretention to uncover a definition of religion that is universally applicable, one garners the freedom to dig for moral sources in the particulars of human life, language, and history. In the historical language of people, religion expresses itself in terms of "belief". As such Taylor spends time trying to understand what modern belief and unbelief are existentially for people. He finds a certain vacillation, an uncertainty and inability to come to any 100% clear conclusions within modern belief and unbelief. Secularity is to be understood at this nexus, and a complete theory of secularization needs to be able to

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1 Taylor, Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity, 309.
somehow include an attempt to explain this malaise. Humans are stuck between worldviews that Taylor labels the “transformation” and the “immanence” perspectives. Taylor wants to see these two perspectives as opposite poles, the immanent pole being the view from naturalism and the transformation pole being the view from some form of theism...the belief in transcendence of brute naturalism. While the poles tend to define the arguments, most people find themselves tacking back and forth, and it is this condition that Taylor wants to call secularity. Another term Taylor has coined to describe this condition of modernity is the Nova Effect: “...the multiplication of more and more spiritual and anti-spiritual positions. This multiplicity further fragilizes any of the positions it contains. There is no longer any clear, unambiguous way of drawing the main issue.”

In Varieties of Religion Today Taylor sets out, following James, what the experience of religion feels like when God is no longer in everything, but instead individual choices are everywhere. For Taylor, James captured as well as anyone the feeling on the ‘cusp’; the fact that you can no longer sit on the fence. “The attraction of theism can be lived as a temptation, or as a promise, but not easily as both at once...” The faith of believers is “fragilized” not just because we now live side-by-side with unbelievers, but because in a certain sense we now live side-by-side as well with unbelief.

“They have to go one way but they never fully shake off the call of the other. So the faith of believers is fragilized, not just by the fact that other people, equally intelligent, often equally good and dedicated, disagree with them, but also by the fact that they can still see themselves as reflected in the other perspective, that is, as drawn by a too-indulgent view of things. For what believer doesn’t have the sense that her view of God is too simple, too anthropocentric, too indulgent?”

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2 Taylor, A Secular Age, 431.
3 Mark A. Wrathall, Religion after Metaphysics (Cambridge, U.K.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 66. Taylor also gave a series of lectures entitled: History, Secularity and the Nova Effect for the Winter 2001 Laing Lectures at Regent College, British Columbia in which he works out an early draft of this idea that eventually made its way into final format in A Secular Age.
5 Ibid, 57.
Secularization theory is trapped in the struggle between transformation and immanence as well, and in *A Secular Age* Taylor maps it out a bit for us. He likens mainstream secularization theory to a three-storey house. The ground floor represents the claim that religious belief and practice have declined, to which Taylor nods his agreement to the thesis. The basement of the house is inhabited by the various social scientific explanatory factors like those reviewed in chapter one, all theories that claim to explain the changes represented by the ground floor. But Taylor says that there is more to the structure, there is another floor above the ground floor, and it is on this second-storey were we can find the stories about lived religion today. Taylor thinks that much of the confusion surrounding secularization theory can be explained by how much of the house we are concerned with. If we are only talking about the ground floor then Taylor agrees with many of the secularization theorists. However, if we move into the basement or the floor above, then the problems outlined above begin to appear. Taylor thinks that this is due to the unperceived fact that the basement and second storey are in fact linked: “that the explanation one gives for the decline registered by ‘secularization’ relate closely to one’s picture of the place of religion today”\(^6\). To give a specific example: If one assumes a basement materialist account in which religion is always “superstructure”, its forms always to be explained by universal economic processes, then there will be no credence given to the religious aspirations found on the second floor, since these “self-understandings” are no longer needed to explain something in terms of itself that we have already explained in terms of something else, which is assumed to be even better. “Thus one very important focus of disagreement, even among those who are together on the ground floor, arises from their respective pictures of the upper storey, which must also set them at odds in the historically explanatory basement.”\(^7\) Once again the issue of the modern epistemology (and its occlusion of the realm of the practical self-understandings of people) is shown to be central to secularization for Taylor.

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\(^7\) Ibid, 433.
a. Conditions of Belief and Unbelief

What is lived secularity like? Another way Taylor has looked for answers to the question has been through his investigations into the conditions of belief and unbelief. For many years Taylor has been trying to construct a view of secularity somewhere between the best of sociology (which he sees in the work of writers like Martin and Cassanova) and the best of philosophy (which he sees in the work of writers like Gadamer). Taylor is developing a third sense of secularization (secularization three he calls it in *A Secular Age*) in comparison to the other two: secularity in terms of God’s disappearance from public space and secularity in terms of the falling off of religious belief and practice. Taylor favours ideas about secularity centred on the “conditions of belief” because, as we will see in this thesis, he thinks it gets us around the epistemological mistakes that are embedded in classical theories of religion and secularization and still distortive of much theorization of contemporary secularity. The theories he opposes lack an adequate explanation of why in fact people abandon their faith; it lacks a second storey. As such Taylor is not interested in looking at belief and unbelief as rival theories, but says: “Rather what I want to do is focus attention on the different kinds of lived experience involved in understanding your life in one way or the other, on what it’s like to live as a believer or an unbeliever”. Both believing and unbelieving can be understood in the terms in which they are most often described: a reaching for some sort of fullness not presently obtained.

Taylor, using concepts we became familiar with in *Sources* in which morality is viewed as a space in which we orient ourselves, outlining the moral space we inhabit as moving up a positive slope towards fullness, though not without work, due to the conflicting conditions in which we find ourselves coming to belief (identification of fullness). Of course, there is also a moving down the slope, in which the confusion wins out and we lose our bearings in relation to the sense of fullness (modes of exile from fullness). Taylor then also identifies a third space...a “stabilized middle condition” in which “we have found a way to escape the forms of negation, exile, emptiness, without having reached fullness.” This equilibrium is found in the pursuits of human authenticity

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8 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 4-5.
(job, marriage, children, etc.) and must remain somehow connected to the greater sense of fullness sought. "This place can’t be renounced, or totally despaired of, without the equilibrium of the middle condition being undermined". For believers this image of place implies that fullness lies beyond this life, and the meanings ascribed to life are indexed to whatever this "beyond" might be for people. For unbelievers the image of place captures the reality that fullness is to be found within this life or within meanings we ascribe to this life from within this life. i.e. "he lived a worthy life", "she made a difference with her life". Taylor acknowledges a wide variety of modes through which people inhabit the moral space of secularity, but he also tries to ascertain certain "recurring themes" in this same section of *A Secular Age*.

Taylor sees these themes as:

1) There are believers who sense that fullness comes to them from without.
2) There is the unbeliever who senses that the power to reach fullness comes only from within.
   2a) There is a Kantian variant of 2 which locates fullness in the power we have as rational agents to make the laws by which we live.
   2b) There is a Feuerbachian variant of 2 in which our primitive reflex to project fullness outside of us needs to be retrained so that it can then be discovered within.
   2c) There is a Freudian or Darwinian variant to 2 in which fullness lies in the heroic action of facing up to the alienating power of reason.
   2d) And finally, there is the unbeliever who sees the sources of fullness in non-transcendent nature
3) There are also the post-modern type of understandings which simultaneously attack the atomist claims of self-sufficient reason and the reception of transformation from beyond. For Taylor this family of views stands outside of the structure he has erected so these are views not in the house at all, but somewhere floating around in the social imaginary, but that, as Taylor has shown in *Sources*, draw on 1 and 2 in significant ways.

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b. The Lived Experience of Belief and Unbelief

In *Varieties, Social Imaginaries* and in *A Secular Age*, Taylor also wants to paint a picture of the modern conditions of belief in which "we cannot help but be aware that there are a number of different construals, views which are intelligent, reasonably undeluded people of good will, can and do disagree on. We cannot help looking over our shoulder from time to time, looking sideways, living our faith also in a condition of doubt and uncertainty."\(^{10}\) What Taylor calls "the immediate experience of power" or "immediate reality" has been largely eroded by secularization. "We have changed not just from a condition where most people lived 'naively' in a construal (part Christian, part related to 'spirits' of pagan origin) as simple reality, to one in which almost no one is capable of this, but all see their options as one among many."\(^{11}\) In the new social imaginary we can play an "engaged" role in which we live within the believing or unbelieving positions we occupy but only while simultaneously playing a "disengaged" role, able to stand outside of ourselves in order to evaluate our stance in the moral space. This is secularity when viewed from the perspective of lived experience.

2. Deism and Changing Conditions of Belief

Taylor wants to examine a third set of ideas that propose that living in a secular age means a radical shift in the options (horizons) available for both the believer and the non believer. Faith and its opposite are now one among several real alternatives and the grounds upon which these decisions are made has been altered forever. As Taylor has said: "It is impossible in our days to be a Christian, atheist, or anything else, without a degree of doubt. Our situation is characterised by this instability, much more than by the idea that secularism has swept away religion."\(^{12}\) Recently Taylor has restated his view again: "The shift to secularity in this sense consists, among other things, of a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic,

\(^{10}\) *Ibid.* 11.
to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace.\textsuperscript{13} This is what needs to be explained according to Taylor and so he has pursued a work in retrieval of how people experience secularity as opposed to a theoretical project aimed at uncovering external forces that explain the religious decline. For Taylor "...the obstacles to belief in Western modernity are primarily moral and spiritual, rather than epistemic."\textsuperscript{14}

"Secularity in this sense is a matter of the whole context of understanding in which our moral, spiritual or religious experience and search takes place. By ‘context of understanding’ here, I mean both matters that will probably have been explicitly formulated by almost everyone, such as the plurality of options, and some which form the implicit, largely unfocussed background on this experience and search, its ‘pre-ontology’, to use a Heideggerian term."\textsuperscript{15}

Taylor has emphatically stated that he believes that it is rigorously impossible to understand anything in the domain of religion by use of social scientific approaches rooted in the physical sciences and that aspire to a "general theory of everything", looking for certain particles or fundamental forces beneath religious phenomena.\textsuperscript{16} Social scientific approaches miss something or filter something out. For one, they disallow any sort of independent reality to goods that are shared among people even though this is how religious goods appear in the language used to describe them. Taylor’s “focus is on the questions: does the notion of ‘individual interest’ or individual well-being exhaust all that is normatively relevant? That is, can all the ‘good’ for society be factored into ‘good’ for someone, or is there some part that is irreducibly social?”\textsuperscript{17} Taylor prefers accounts focused on the experience and the self-understandings of lived secularity as a response to what he sees as incomplete in the stories told by current social theory.

\textsuperscript{13} Taylor, \textit{A Secular Age}, 3.
\textsuperscript{14} Taylor, "Iris Murdoch and Moral Philosophy," 24.
\textsuperscript{15} Taylor, \textit{A Secular Age}, 3.
\textsuperscript{16} Taylor, "Entrevue Avec Charles Taylor," 17.
\textsuperscript{17} Geoffrey Brennan and Cliff Walsh, \textit{Rationality, Individualism, and Public Policy} (Canberra, Australia: Centre for Research on Federal Financial Relations Distributed by ANUTECH, 1990), xi.
The objection that immediately arises for the standard social scientist of religion is that Taylor is "breaking the rules" by including in his account of secularization elements that have been de facto removed from social scientific explanations of human action but it is precisely this exclusion that Taylor questions. It is important to ask just what Taylor means by "incomplete"...what gets left out of "theories of religion" in general and "secularization theories" in particular? Taylor's philosophy offers up several answers for our examination but I would like to present the one that I find to be crucial for his argument; for Taylor secularization theory has not taken into sufficient account the theological and social practices influenced by new conceptions of God and the world contained in Deism. Taylor relishes the telling of the story of how contemporary secularism finds its moral sources in a theological and Christian social imaginary. Too many secularization theories leave out this part of the story. We will see why a bit later in this chapter. Suffice it to say that for Taylor, the power of the moral sources at work in shaping religious beliefs, experiences, practices and institutions gets occluded and so secularization theory can hypothesize differentiation as a causal force in secularization and leave out, for example, the essential role Deism played in the creation of the moral order that made the new fractured configurations of religious and social life seem plausible.

But how did this inability to live "belief or unbelief" unproblematically move onto the horizon of meaning for people? From what sources did it gain its power in reshaping the social imaginary of moderns? Taylor answers questions like this by turning to what he understands to be the results of his methodology of historical retrieval and his search turns up a rival cosmology and anthropology; one that opens up the secularizing options for belief and unbelief. The rival cosmology and anthropology of modern scientific naturalism did not dissolve religion only to find the secular human within (a subtraction), but instead effected a replacement of one moral worldview with another; the older one being rooted in the impossibility of a cosmos and anthropos without God or gods and the replacement one being rooted in a cosmos and anthropos which rendered the older view impossible to believe without recourse to a defence of the view against the scientific epistemology and its powerful grasp on the social imaginary of moderns. Taylor’s attempt to provide an alternative account of secularity has been focused on Deism as a pivotal
transition to the modern conditions of belief and unbelief. It might come as a surprise to some that
the shift to secularity was effected by theology but this is exactly the story that Taylor wants to
tell. In fact, it is the role of the power of theology and the self-understandings contained in a
culture still held within these theological understandings (in this case of the Western “Judeo-
Christian” social imaginary) that Taylor thinks that theory based on the mistakes of modern
epistemology occludes for us. We will now turn to this part of Taylor’s account since it is of
central importance to his alternative account of secularity, but also because it provides us an
example of Taylor’s secularization theory at work.

a. The Fractured Horizons of Belief

In Sources, Taylor writes concerning the importance of understanding the motives of Deism that
“[i]t promises, or threatens, to give us the key to the whole modern development we gesture at
with the word ‘secularization’.”18 Taylor claims in Sources to not be offering a “causal story”19 of
modernity but it is fairly obvious that there is little doubt in Taylor’s mind that it was Deism that
“appears as the first step on the road which next led to the unbelieving Enlightenment of figures
Helvétius, Benthan, Holbach, and Condorcet. And beyond them the road seems to lead to modern
secular culture.” Taylor spends roughly 30% of Sources (Parts III and IV) retrieving the moral
sources of Deism in order to show how these shifts in theological ideas were generative to the
modern moral order. Again in A Secular Age Taylor commits Part II of the book to Deism. He
writes: “Let us return to the mainline of our story: how did an exclusive humanism become a live
option for large numbers of people, first among élites, and then more generally? The genesis
comes about through an intermediate stage, which is often referred to as ‘Deism’.”20 Taylor wants
to show that the modern epistemology at the root of naturalist accounts was as inspired by

18 Taylor, Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity, 309.
19 Taylor says in Sources that his historical method should be seen as distinct from historical explanation and yet
relevant to it. Taylor turns away from offering “a very clear and plausible diachronic-causal story” and instead offers
what he calls an “interpretive” and “less ambitious” line of questioning designed to give “an account of the new
identity which makes clear what its appeal was”. Taylor, Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity,
203.
20 Taylor, A Secular Age, 221.
theological ideas (Deism) as it was any supersession by theories of science. This is Marcel Gauchet’s thesis in *Le Désenchantement du Monde*, that “the secular age can be understood only to a limited degree as a linear unfolding of a previously existing potential, and that it is much more important to understand the unpredictable and unwanted byproducts of religious thought and practice that later arose”.  

21 “What this means for the explanation of secularization is that the issue shifts from the removal of blinkers to the question how these new sources became available. This is the cultural shift which we have to understand. Secularization doesn’t just arise because people get a lot more educated, and science progresses. This has some effect, but it isn’t decisive. What matters is that masses of people can sense moral sources of a quite different kind, ones that do not necessarily suppose a God.”  

22 Deism is the key component for Taylor in understanding how the new sources for the changing configuration of religion came into being. This is significant for my purposes since this allows for a questioning of secularity that can take seriously the intellectual-theological ideas that were components of the social imaginary within which secularization theory was created.

Deism for Taylor includes at least three important facets which Taylor wants to interpret as powerful shapers of the transition in the social imaginary. One is cosmological and involves the transition away from the world as under the power of the God or gods and as ultimate mystery to the world as designed by a clock-maker type deity now seen as ultimate rationality. In another facet God’s presence in the world is now mediated to the human through an impersonal order and theology and religious practice can now gather in “the worldly” as the realm of the spiritual. In this view God relates to his creation through the order programmed into the universe; discoverable using the rational tools with which humans have been equipped.  

23 The theology of Deism paved

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23 Bacon is a paradigmatic figure for understanding Deism. He writes, “For he [Solomon] sayeth expressly, the Glory of God is to conceal a thing, but the Glory of a King is to find it out [Proverbs xxv, 2]: as if according to that innocent and affectionate play of Children, the Divine Majesty took delight to hide his works, to the end to have them found out; and as if Kings could not obtain greater Honour, than to be God's play-fellows in that game; specially considering the great command they have of wits and means, whereby the investigation of all things may be perfected.” Francis Bacon, *Advancement of Learning* (1605), Book I.
the way for the later secular outlook “in conjunction with the ‘drive towards reform’, or as Taylor also calls it, the ‘compulsion to development’…” “The strong value accorded by deism to self-reshaping through instrumental reason for the sake of preserving the divine plan was therefore not just an abstract ideal: it was imposed by new regimes of self-discipline and productive work.”24 And finally, there is rearward theology of “progress”. Deistic ideas were influenced by the popular theories in which human society had contained a pure form of natural religion that had been slowly corrupted by successive layers of symbolic overlay; and so the move forward involved a rearguard action of recovering this buried and corrupted humanism now rendered possible by the use of the new dispassionate rationality. The beneficence and philanthropy of God once located in revelation mediated by the church can now be replaced by an anthropocentric philanthropy in which the pursuit of human fulfillment and happiness in this world is what garners favour with God. One can think of the Protestant Reformation as moral source to the deistic social imaginary and Taylor makes much of this connection in his writings.

I wish I had time to go into much more detail about Taylor’s layered account of Deism in Sources’ chapters like “Rationalized Christianity”, “Moral Sentiments” and “The Providential Order” with their story of the march to the modern moral order starting with a Deism of the Lockean variant, through Shaftesbury’s and to Hutcheson’s Deism that completes the revolution of the social imaginary opening up new ways to conceive of God, self and the world. The older cosmology-anthropology of “nature as order” with its reliance on the “ontic-logos” and a hierarchical notion of reason gives way to the modern “nature as source” in which the logos is the creation itself and its corresponding conception of providential design. The main point to retain is the simple yet important idea that for Taylor these moral sources are constitutive to the very ideas that now prompt us to either attempt to retrieve these sources or turn away from the act of retrieval in exchange for some preferred epistemology. This means that a Tayloren theory of secularization begins by problematizing both words in its name: “theory” and “secularization”. For Taylor secularization theories rooted in the social sciences offer an acultural explanation of religious change. This is akin to describing a car to someone who has never seen one by description of the

24 Smith, Charles Taylor: Meaning, Morals, and Modernity, 212.
principles of motion, as compared to inviting him or her for a drive. Taylor claims to not be able to offer an explanation of the scope that these theories of secularization lay claim to. Instead his theory of secularization is based on his hunch that “something more can be said about what the change we call by this name has amounted to. This can be seen as an effort to clarify the explanandum for any adequate theory of secularization.”

Taylor’s work on the moral sources of secularity sheds light onto two important concepts at the heart of secularization theory, both classical and contemporary, to which I will return a bit later in the paper. They are 1) a descriptive function that presupposes a loss of religion and 2) a vocative function that powers the descriptive and explanatory efforts that are ameliorative. In most secularization theory, these dimensions are assumed not explicitly discussed. What is unique of Taylor’s theory is the degree to which he digs into the foundations that undergird the entire project; the explanations of our need for explanations. Taylor accepts a loss of religion as well as the idea that the whole effort to explain religion is in order to improve humanity. The real difference comes as Taylor takes the time to get a sense of the power of the moral sources at work and not assuming that a better explanation-description comes about by ruling out the self-descriptive accounts of these sources by theoretical fiat. Taylor thinks that his type of philosophical inquiry is structured as a dialogue working towards an epistemic gain, in which all concepts are to be argued for.

This, in fact, displaces the location of the epistemological problem under which secularization theory labours under. In other words Taylor wants to trade out the epistemology of “secularization as the gradual removal of the blinkers that narrowed our forefather’s vision” for “secularization as shifts in the certainty or problematicity of God as relative to our sense of moral sources”. In the traditional secularization theory matrix, the epistemology that is seen to be the problem in the older naïve views of religious presence in society is gagged and thought dead; one thinks that one has escaped the epistemology that constituted the secularization. In the Taylorean secularization

26 Chapter Two, section 2, c.
theory matrix, the epistemology at work is a necessary part of the inquiry into secularization; one thinks the escape from epistemology impossible. In the latter, attention can now be paid to what actually constituted the epistemology. Following the latter model Taylor finds out that the sources our forbearers could envisage made the view from unbelief incredible. Since then new possibilities have been opened up in terms of available moral sources for human knowing and action. Deism among many other possibilities opens up, and in some very real ways “creates”, the disengaged subject which Taylor says “stands in a place already hollowed out for God; he takes a stance to the world which befits an image of the Deity. The belief in interlocking nature follows the affirmation of ordinary life, a central Judaeo-Christian idea, and extends the centrally Christian notion that God’s goodness consists in his stooping to seek the benefit of humans.”

The classical theories of religion and secularization like those of Darwin, Freud, Marx, Durkheim and Weber all suffer from widely accepted notions (acting as moral source to their investigations) that religion was somehow defeated by modernity. Classical theories of religion and secularization set out to figure out what the mechanisms of modernity might be that could have caused this reversal of religion. Contemporary theories of religion and secularization set out to figure out what the mechanisms of religion might be that caused this reversal of modernity by religion; in other words, religion’s continued presence in society. I think that Taylor’s theorizing can be said to take the findings of these modes and question the epistemological foundations of both, in order to attempt to learn how the moral sources active all along the march to modernity won out in the ways that they most obviously have. If the world is more or less secular than it was before, it is most certainly because some stories won out over others and so Taylor goes about telling a story about the making of these stories. He resists all attempts to tie up secularization with the nifty bow and declare religion either dead or alive based on past performance of humans and their religions. Past performance is, in the case of secularization, a misleading indicator of future performance. One must not assume this type of causal link. Better off with interpretive theories and help theorists avoid the temptation of telling the all-too-easy subtraction story of modernity in which secularization acts as a solvent that when applied to human belief systems wipes away their

religions. Of course the question begged here has to do with what sort of belief system is required to accept this subtraction story. Subtraction stories for Taylor are acultural attempts to find inevitable processes of human action through the reductive techniques of naturalistic science. Let us look at what he opposes in these stories and the acultural view upon which they are built as it relates to secularization theory.

b. The Subtraction Story

New configurations of society do not come about through the announcement of positively framed predictions of how well things have gone in the past. Religious change, like all social change, never results from speeches like: “Hey people, since everything is sort of going along so well, let’s just decide to stop attending our houses of worship as well as give up on this whole thing about believing in a supernatural deity while we are at it.” It is quite the opposite. It takes a radical story to instigate social changes and history is replete with examples. The part we often forget is that radical stories are, as their name implies, both radical and stories. The French Revolution required a radical story about the clergy and the monarchy whose hands grasped tightly the chains that oppressed the freedom, fraternity and equality of the common man. In the same way the secularization story is rooted in a radical story of a latent rational light buried deep beneath the superstitions of traditional religion foisted upon man just waiting for the day when religion is thrown off allowing the inner light of rational and independent choice to burst forth, free at last. The mythic core of these stories is powered by the subtraction they make; take away the blinders and presto...the radically free subject is there.

The problem with secularization theory for Taylor is that it is largely based on a subtraction story. This is a term of art and a concept Taylor has used throughout much of his work. The logic of a subtraction account of secularity would have it that: Once we slough off our concern with serving God, or attending to any other transcendent reality, what we are left with is human good and that is what modern societies are concerned with. But for Taylor, this radically under-describes modern humanism and the moral and spiritual vision to which it claims allegiance. In the subtraction story
of modernity, for example, moderns behave as individuals not because they have come under the spell of a popular new way of perceiving themselves but because that is just what humans naturally do once the fetters of things like oppressive forms of religion, taboos and communal obligations no longer hold them in their superstitious grasps. Taylor has argued throughout his career that this view is false and it hides from moderns what is instead the obvious case: that modernity is chocked full of new moral self-understandings that cannot be simply defined by the negation of what preceded them. An important subtraction story is at work in the modern tale of secularization. Taylor outlines it like this:

"We see here the outlines of one version of an account of modern secularity, which in its general form is widely and deeply implanted in modern humanist culture. It tends to have four connected facets, of which the first three are (a) the "death of God" thesis that one can no longer honestly, lucidly, sincerely believe in God; (b) some "subtraction" story of the rise of modern humanism; and (c) a view on the original reasons for religious belief, and on their place in perennial human motivations, which grounds the subtraction story. These views vary all the way from nineteenth-century theories about primitives' fears of the unknown, or desire to control the elements, to speculations like Freud's, linking religion to neurosis. On many of these accounts, religion simply becomes unnecessary when technology gets to a certain level: we don't need God any more, because we know how to get it ourselves. These theories are generally wildly and implausibly reductive."28

It is important to grasp in what way Taylor thinks views based on subtraction are false. They are false in the sense that they are not articulate about their assumptions and so they end up occluding important parts of the story about how religion works for people. And so while something like the "death of God" can be erroneous on the theoretical level, Taylor can still find within the false view important self-descriptions upon which people are actively building their lives. "The 'death of God' is not just an erroneous account of secularity on a theoretical level; it is also a way we may be tempted to interpret, and hence experience, the modern condition. It is not the explanans I am

28 Wrathall, Religion after Metaphysics, 62.
looking for, but it is a crucial part of the explanandum. In this role, I am very far from wanting to deny it."29 Taylor wants to draw out into view that subtraction stories explain secularity by assuming a certain anthropology; that humans are what they are now because they were able to liberate themselves from earlier "confining horizons, or illusions, or limitations in knowledge" and once freed were able to finally see their true natures as rational independent individuals.30 "What happened here was not that a moral outlook bowed to brute facts. Rather it gave way to another moral outlook; another model of what was higher triumphed. And much was going for this model: images of power, of untrammeled agency, of spiritual self-possession (the "buffered self")."31 32

In Sources Taylor explains the attraction of this new moral outlook with its anthropology of: 1) the buffered self, 2) secular time and 3) the power to order our lives on our own terms. In older societies unbelief in God was impossible because of a theistic cosmology, the belief that society was an extension of the divine order of things and the understandings people had of themselves as living in an enchanted world.33 34 The buffered self, another term of art, describes the condition in which people no longer saw themselves and their world as open to something beyond, something outside.35 The spiritual life was now up to us in important new ways. This new understanding of human agency relied upon a new view of time.36 Traditional societies did not see time as a linear flowing arrow upon which the events of their lives were arranged. Instead time was more often viewed as cyclical, in which higher time and lower time could be cordoned off either by the flow of nature or the metering of the significance inferred upon certain times by the community. "It

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29 Ibid., 62.
30 Taylor, A Secular Age, 22.
31 Taylor's "buffered self", introduced to many through Sources, is updated in Chapter 15 of his latest book A Secular Age.
32 Wrathall, Religion after Metaphysics, 55.
34 Taylor, A Secular Age, 27.
35 For Taylor the boundary around the mind was constitutionally porous in older "traditional" societies. Abbey, Charles Taylor, 204.
36 Taylor's early mentions of secularization included the notion of a changed view of time and the difference between "higher" or "sacred time" and "ordinary" or "secular" time. See: Charles Taylor, Philosophical Arguments, 1st Harvard University Press pbk. ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 269. For the background to Taylor's idea of time in Walter Benjamin see: Ian Fraser, "Charles Taylor on Transcendence," Philosophy & Social Criticism 29.3 (2003).
seems to have been the universal norm to see the important metatopical spaces and agencies as constituted in some mode of higher time. States and churches were seen to exist almost necessarily in more than one time dimension... Modern secularization involves the rejection of higher times and the positing of time as purely profane. Time is no longer the loci for the sacred and so there is no living beyond the flux of human time and so we can now only "think of society in terms of vertical time slices, holding together myriad happenings, related and unrelated." And finally, people are attracted to the new social imaginary of secularity because along with the disenchantedment of the buffered self and the homogenization of time, a third major ingredient of secularity has been a new conception of order. No longer founded in enchanted time and space, individuals are now free to found themselves and their societies upon a mutually interlocking scheme designed to allow individuals to pursue their own fulfillmect, which will have the beneficial outcome of benefiting others through the exchange of goods and services. This is the move to "economic man" mentioned by Taylor in some of his earlier work. The social order no longer required a God for its maintenance; it could now be rationally conceived and participated in. In Sources, Modern Social Imaginaries and A Secular Age, Taylor tells the story of this new instrumental stance to the world and the new exclusive humanism that it brought into being.

c. Acultural versus Cultural Theories of Secularization

Social theories that are acultural are incomplete for Taylor. Acultural theories always end up "par réduire les différences de religion à leurs côtés les plus intéressants. ... Donc, il faut des lectures du particulier, idiographiques, et pas seulement en religion mais en général. Et il faut articuler les

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37 Taylor, Modern Social Imaginaries, 98.
38 Ibid, 99.
39 The confusion can be seen in the United States in that the idea of a moral order that has been handed down from the Founders still exists in what many call the American civil religion. However, what has changed is the way in which this order can no longer be publicly supported by appeals to God's providential order, but as Taylor says, must be "grounded in nature alone, or in some concept of civilization, or even in supposedly unchallengeable a priori principles, often inspired by Kant." Taylor, Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited, 69-70.
lectures, les conceptions et les idées, et faire de la polémique négative."\textsuperscript{40} Secularization theory leaves out the cultural frameworks in which religion takes on the meanings that it has for people.

By definition secularization theories presuppose a certain historical perspective; one in which religion was somehow stronger, more pervasive, more believed and believable, etc., in the past than today. The slope to secularization theory is necessarily downward. A theory that hypothesized religious growth in a society would not be a theory of secularization, but instead a theory about whatever secularization’s opposite might be. By vocation secularization theories presuppose a certain upward perspective on the future, one might say “calling”. By this I mean that theories of secularization, as academic theories, are undertaken in order to add to accumulated human knowledge in hopes of a resultant ameliorated human condition that is in the most direct way possible related to the accuracy of the research and theory making. Because of these twin issues, contemporary secularization theory has more or less had to declare itself “out of business” and has refiled for academic pursuance as theories of religious change. This has been an improvement since with a theory of religious change, religion can move in any direction and still be “covered” by theory. Religion can expand or retract while remaining in the scope of theories of religious change. Theorists conduct research and report on what they find; there are no longer any predictions made (evaluations) as to religion’s future directions. However, the same cannot be said about the vocational role played by theories of religious change. Even theories that have long since dropped any claim to the prediction of religion’s direction are nonetheless committed to the epistemological frameworks in which the theory dwells. Taylor argues that the epistemological framework of most contemporary social theories of religion (even the chastened theories of religious change) are committed to a naturalist, reductive and atomistic methodology precisely because they believe that these techniques are the surest route to the true knowledge needed to improve the human race. This is true of theories in the natural sciences and so one can extrapolate to the even greater importance of this idea in the sciences of man. Even the most evil scientific experiment imagined is born along by the overall direction of the scientific improvement of mankind in which the techniques were developed. If this were not the case, one would not even be

\textsuperscript{40} Taylor, "Entrevue Avec Charles Taylor," 17.
able to recognize the "misuse" of the science as abhorrent. But in order to have theory that can explain what a theory of an ameliorated human condition might be for those same humans, something beyond theory is evoked. For Taylor this background of meaning which is pre-theoretical is found by sifting through the understandings that humans have about their lives as shaped by practical experience and the language they use to articulate this experience. Nicolas Smith discussed the importance of the pre-theoretical in Taylor's view of social science and states that:

"But what is the relevance of this kind of interpretive activity for science? How should the social scientist situate herself vis-à-vis the pre-theoretical stance of the self-interpreting agent? In Taylor's view, the goal of science is to bring about an advance in the understanding generated spontaneously with the practice itself. The social scientist qua interpreter makes the grade by improving upon the 'readings of meanings' embedded in the self-defining vocabulary under investigation. Now one of the main motivations behind naturalism, in Taylor's view, is the idea that no such advances are really demonstrable."41

So it is important for Taylor's project here that he is able to show that there is some validity in interpretation, and this is why Taylor's arguments turn on distinguishing between acultural theories and cultural theories of modernity and science.

When one thinks about what has changed between ancient societies and modern societies in terms of religion, one can think of this change in one of two ways: one "cultural" and the other "acultural". In a chapter entitled "Modernity and Difference" in the book Without Guarantees, Taylor detects two different modes at work in our contemporary understanding of "modernization" (one of the very important factors we have seen in scientific theories of secularization). The cultural way to interpret this change is to characterize these transformations in terms of the rise of a new culture. The differences between traditional societies and modern societies is a cultural one: the contemporary Atlantic world of Western modernity is one type of

41 Smith, Charles Taylor: Meaning, Morals, and Modernity, 123.
modernity within which religious change plays itself out based upon a culture-specific set of roles very different from religion in other types of modernity (other religion-culture combinations). But there is another way to look at it, which Taylor thinks of as the dominant one and the one he resists. This would be the acultural theory and would describe these same transformations in terms of a “culture-neutral operation”. By this Taylor means an operation not defined in terms of the specific religion-culture bundle, but is seen as an operation of a type that any traditional society could undergo. Secularization theory is of the acultural variant. Secularization is accounted for in terms of social and intellectual changes that are the result of things like differentiation, individualization, rationalization, etc. Secularization is seen as a set of transformations which all cultures can go through or in many cases...must go through. As Taylor explains:

“These changes are not defined by their end point in a specific constellation of understandings of, say, person, society, good; they are rather described as a type of transformation to which any culture could in principle serve as ‘input’. For instance, any culture could suffer the impact of growing scientific consciousness; any religion could undergo ‘secularization’; any set of ultimate ends could be challenged by a growth of instrumental thinking; any metaphysic could be dislocated by the split between fact and value.”42

Taylor is trying to develop theories of secularity in which secularization is not a by-product of neutral processes such as modernization, differentiation, individualization, etc. The by-product theories are acultural and “tend to describe the transition to modernity in terms of a loss of traditional beliefs and allegiances” spurred along by institutional changes that acted to bring about the “dissipation of certain unsupported religious and metaphysical beliefs”. “As they lose their traditional illusions, they will come together on the ‘rationally grounded’ outlook that has resisted

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the challenge of change. The march to modernity will end up making all cultures look the same. This means, of course, that we expect they will end up looking like us." 43

Suffice it to say for now that Taylor wants us to agree with him that secularity cannot be explained without remainder through stories of what was lost or what disappeared. Theories based on these assumptions end up hiding from view the power of the many positive stories that were told about the nature of the human and society. Taylor is not full out rejecting any correlation between secularity and the receding of religion, but he thinks that the real story to tell is one of the new conception of radical human autonomy, the new social imaginary, and how it came to be wrestled into place. This is why getting clear on the epistemology that fueled modernity is so core to Taylor’s entire philosophical project; but I’ll have to wait until chapter three to continue that part of the story. For now let us continue to try to understand what secularity involves for Taylor.

3. The Deistic Space for Religion in Public Life

So one can also wonder, as does Taylor, what happened as people tried to assemble a political society based on the new social imaginary based on the Deistic account. For Taylor modern secularism is best understood as an offshoot of the deistic theology and corresponding social imaginary. This is a significantly different story than the “radical story” of the rising out of religion’s darkness (like the grande noirceur stories in Québec) by the enlightenment offered by science. For Taylor the retrieval of the deistic moral sources to the political development of secularization helps fill in the holes of the story of the evolution to modern secularity. In a chapter entitled “Modes of Secularism” he locates the genesis of modern western secularism in the European wars of religion; or as he says, “the search in battle-fatigue and horror for a way out of them”. 44 The growing voice of reason at the time was calling for the establishment of a ground of coexistence for Christians of different confessional persuasions. Historians concur that a significant chapter of the growth of the modern state was written during this period, precisely in

43 Ibid, 366.
order to provide “Rules of peace, even with heretics, and of obedience to legitimate authority, even where schismatic, [in order to] put them beyond revocation in the name of one or other version of orthodoxy.” Taylor says that there were two ways that this could be done, and that these “two approaches turn out to be ancestral to rather different understandings of secularism today”. The two approaches Taylor calls: 1) The common ground strategy, in which “the aim was to establish a certain ethic of peaceful coexistence and political order, a set of grounds for obedience, which while still theistic, even Christian, was based on those doctrines which were common to all Christian sects, or even to all theists.” Taylor ascribes this version to Pufendorf, Lock, and Leibniz, in which this public philosophy “lead to a downplaying of confessional dogma in favour of common beliefs; and pushed further, beyond the bounds of Christianity, this could end in Deism”. This version “involves appealing to these different commitments, and arguing for a convergence between them on certain fundamentals.” 2) The independent political ethic, in which people were to “abstract from their religious beliefs altogether”, in order to “look for certain features of the human condition which allow us to deduce certain exceptionless norms, including those of peace and political obedience.” This is the vision of Grotius and Hobbes. This version “asks us to abstract from these deeper or higher beliefs altogether for purposes of a political morality, grounded independently in a protected area, immune from all these warring beliefs.”

Taylor says that each model has it weaknesses. “A clear problem with the common ground approach in what with the widening band of religious and metaphysical commitments in society, the ground originally defined as common becomes that of one party among others.” We can refer to this as the problem of modern societal pluralism. This problem is often what leads us to consider the other approach, or in other words, since we cannot see how version one can solve the problem of modern pluralism; we turn to version two as solution. But version two has problems of its own. “The very diversification that has undercut the common ground approach also challenges the independent ethic. A cultural dissensus ensues of the following form: “what an unbelieving ‘secularist’ sees as necessary policing of the boundary of a common independent public sphere, will often be perceived by the religious as a gratuitous extrusion of religion in the

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name of a rival metaphysical belief. What to one side is a more strict consistent application of the principles of neutrality is seen by the other side as partisanship. 46

4. Deism’s Stepchildren: Contemporary Modes of Secularism

At this point one might argue that Taylor’s historicism is an entertaining tale, but what about the usefulness of Taylor’s retrieval of the moral sources of secularization in the context of today? Can any real connections be made between this story and the contemporary reality imposed on cultures by secularization? It is important to show at this point to what degree Taylor sees a link between the retrieval of the moral sources of something like the deistically inspired transition described above, and how this knowledge (or theory based on understanding practice) can help guide the creation of political philosophy today. We can see this in many places in Taylor if we shift to his political philosophy, but in order to not range too far from my subject I will just overview one such “application” for Taylor; to demonstrate how Taylor makes the transition from retrieving the moral sources of secularization – to a more robust understanding of secularity – to an application of these ideas to decisions facing contemporary “secularized” cultures. 47

Beyond the common ground strategy and the independent ethic there appears to be another way available for the construction of religion in the public space; or perhaps we should say for the construction of religious identities that can be brought (or allowed) into the public space. It is what Taylor in 1998 called an option “best described by the term overlapping consensus made famous by Rawls”. 48 Taylor has some difficulties with Rawl’s version of an overlapping consensus, mainly related on how to conceive of the process by which we get to the overlapping consensus view, but Taylor finds much with which he agrees. Conceptually the overlapping consensus begins with the admission, following Marcel Gauchet, who Taylor quotes in *Modern Social*
imaginaries, that the modern social imaginary, which is here to stay, signals the “end of a certain kind of presence of religion or the divine in public space”.[49] For Taylor this does not mean all presence. Taylor writes: “Well, plainly, as my use of the term secular implies, the long march must have contributed to a displacement of religion from the public sphere. It has helped to remove God from public space. Or so it might seem. But this is not quite true. It has certainly removed one mode in which God was formerly present, as part of a story of action-transcendent grounding of society in higher time.” “But this doesn’t mean that God must be altogether absent from public space”. “It is not necessarily the end of religion in public life”... “However, it is undoubtedly a decisive stage in the development of our modern predicament, in which belief and unbelief can coexist as alternatives.”[50] Taylor thinks that such coexistence is possible if we overcome the limits of the two “older” versions of secularism. He writes:

“The problem with the historical common ground approach is that it assumes that everyone shares some religious grounds for the norms regulating the public sphere, even if these are rather general: non-denominational Christianity, or only Biblical theism, or perhaps only some mode of post-Enlightenment Deism. But even this latter is asking too much of today’s diversified societies. The only thing we can hope to share is a purely political ethic, not its embedding in some religious view. There the independent ethic seems to fill the bill, because it offers as common ground just such a political ethic, e.g. a doctrine of human rights, of popular sovereignty, of freedom and equality. But its problem is that it too demands not only the sharing of the ethic but also its foundation – in this case, one supposedly independent of religion. The property of the overlapping consensus view is just that it lifts the requirement of a commonly held foundation. It aims only at universal acceptance of certain political principles (this is hard enough to attain). But it recognizes from the outset that there cannot be a universally agreed basis for these, independent or religious. The overlapping consensus approach recognizes that this common ethic will not suffice to itself; that everyone who adheres to it will have

[50] Ibid, 185-87.
some broader and deeper understanding of the good in which it is embedded. It aims to respect the diversity of such understandings, while building consensus on the ethic. Now I believe that this model, unlike the independent ethic, and unlike the earlier, specifically Christian versions of the common ground approach, can be usefully followed – we should better say, reinvented – almost anywhere.  

In Modern Social Imaginaries he summarizes it this way:

“This is the new space for God in the secular world. Just as in personal life, the dissolution of the enchanted world can be compensated by devotion, a strong sense of the involvement of God in my life, so in the public world, the disappearance of an ontic dependence on something higher can be replaced by a strong presence of God in our political identity. In both individual and social life, the sacred is no longer encountered as an object among other objects, in a special place, time, or person. But God’s will can still be very present to us in the design of things, in cosmos, state, and personal life. God can seem the inescapable source for our power to impart order to our lives, both individually and socially. **It was this shift from the enchanted to the identity form of presence that set the stage for the secularity of the contemporary world, in which God or religion is not precisely absent from public space, but is central to the personal identities of individuals or groups, and hence always a possible defining constituent of political identities.** The wise decision may be to distinguish our political identity from any particular confessional allegiance, but this principle of separation has constantly to be interpreted afresh in its application, wherever religion is important in the lives of substantial bodies of citizens – which mean virtually everywhere.”

Taylor’s third position resists the subtraction thesis mentioned earlier, and so we are not forced between a view of religion based on a story of the radical disappearance of religion and a story of

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51 Taylor, "Modes of Secularism," 37.  
52 Ibid, 193.
its radical re-appearance. Taylor is basically telling the metamorphoses story that religion, though changed, has remained in very important ways and in certain instances has grown much stronger and more prevalent. In other words, what looks like “l’explosion du religieux” on the contemporary scene is better explained as the miscalculation of a certain brand of modern western secularity that appeared for a brief period of time due to particular historical circumstances. The only explosion heard was the death of God bubble popping in the heads of western academicians who, for a moment, thought they had theorized religion away. It is in actuality probably better to speak of a “chastened view” of such theories. It is important to remember that while churches did lose adherents, the religious remained and even grew. But there was no explosion, because the religious never went away.\footnote{Religious explosion doesn’t seem quite right to me. If used to refer to the academic study of religion then this idea that interest in religion has exploded is a defensible idea. However, is used to describe religious belief and practice around the world, I think the idea suffers from the subtraction and acultural dilemmas described in my text. The “explosion” myth is based on a “golden-age of religion” view that is largely rejected by the sociology of religion today.}

Perhaps one of the more interesting twists in contemporary debates in sociology and history of religion circles is the debunking of such acultural theories of secularization. Crudely put, religion did not dissolve as it was supposed to, and it appears harder to subtract than modern theory across the past century in particular was able to guess. It is worth noting Peter Berger’s comment on this issue, of particular significance since he was one of the main proponents of secularization theory for the Anglo-Saxon world for over 30 years.\footnote{John Milbank, in \textit{Theology \& Social Theory} situates Peter Berger is a list that includes Geertz, Luckmann, Bellah and Luhmann as academics involved in “policing the divine” by their theories which continue a sociological and anthropological structural envelopment of religion designed to keep it “rigorously behind the bounds of the possibility of empirical understanding”. For Milbank all twentieth-century sociology of religion can be exposed as a secular policing of the sublime. John Milbank, \textit{Theology and Social Theory : Beyond Secular Reason} (Cambridge, Mass., USA: B. Blackwell, 1991), 106.} In a recent book, \textit{The Desecularization of the World}, Peter Berger talks about an experience he had that altered his acultural view of secularization. He had received the first volume of a massive project called the “The Fundamentalism Project” for review. He was wondering for what possible reason would the MacArthur Foundation shell out the multiple millions of dollars required to fund such a project. He says that:

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"The concern that must have led to this Project was based on an upside-down perception of the world, according to which "fundamentalism" (which, when all is said and done, usually refers to any sort of passionate religious movement) is a rare, hard-to-explain thing. But a look either at history or at the contemporary world reveals that what is rare is not the phenomenon itself but knowledge of it. The difficult-to-understand phenomenon is not Iranian mullahs but American university professors – it might be worth a multi-million dollar project to try to explain that! My point is that the assumption that we live in a secularized world is false. The world today, with some exceptions to which I will come presently, is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever. This means that a whole body of literature by historians and social scientists loosely labeled "secularization theory" is essentially mistaken. In my early work I contributed to this literature. I was in good company – most sociologists of religion had similar views, and we had good reasons for holding them. Some of the writings we produced still stand up. (As I like to tell my students, one advantage of being a social scientist, as against being, say, a philosopher or a theologian, is that you can have as much fun when your theories are falsified as when they are verified.)

The subtraction and the acultural theories were wrong for Taylor, because: 1) they failed to recognize their own implicit moral views, and 2) because this failure appears to be due to theoretical limitations in taking into account how humans actually understand themselves across various times and cultures.

Nigel Desouza properly states that, "the object of Taylor’s theory, it can be argued, is relatively straightforward: to understand how human beings actually make sense of their lives". The senses people come to are not just theories; we can theorize them because they are realities actually being

lived. In other words, for people to live together, in any form of community - to share any single or any set of universals - to conduct any meaningful conversation on the nature of the globalized world we all live and participate in - requires us to understand how these same people actually make sense of their lives. Living together requires understanding. For Charles Taylor this understanding, at this point in human history, amounts to a study of moral phenomenology. Through Taylor’s particular work in moral phenomenology (one thinks primarily of *Sources of the Self*) he leads us to the conclusion that the “inescapable structural requirements of human agency” are that every human being exists in a space of questions about what it is good to be and what it is good to do.\(^5^6\) To answer these questions humans are forced to distinguish between better and worse, lower and higher, more noble and less noble, and indeed the local and the global. This requires what Taylor’s calls “strong evaluation”. These strong evaluations are what make up who we are, what gives a person his or her sense of self, in short they are what fashion our identity.

His method is indeed historical retrieval that aims for understanding, because he believes that the sources to moral and ethical ideas need constantly to be rescued (the re-interpretation referred to earlier) from occlusion. Our look into Taylor’s theory of secularization in this thesis is just one example of how such occlusion can function. Taylor thinks that we (modern western liberal cultures) have a hard time thinking about issues like the religious because much modern moral and political thought is inarticulate concerning the goods involved with coming to some understanding and decision about the host of issues that swirl around these concepts. For Taylor we are inarticulate about the goods inherent in modern views, because we have what he refers to as an acultural theory; or more precisely a theory of secularization that has construed it as the inevitable progress of instrumental scientific reason which has the effect of evaporating belief and thus commitments to things like religion, tradition and authoritarian social matrixes. The problem Taylor has with an acultural theory of secularization is with its view of itself; it finds its credibility to be based in its own neutrality (understood from the perspective of instrumental scientific reason). But as Taylor wants to point out, it is not neutral. It proposes a view as morally charged

as the views it replaces. This would be a moral conceptualization of secularity that has it “winning out” over others, and as such can also “lose out”.

It is important to grasp that for Taylor the two existing models of secularization outlined in this section are insufficient because they are both under the strain that modern western pluralism has brought about. “Existing common grounds were no longer really accessible to people whose moral and spiritual backgrounds were in non-Western civilizations. While at the same time, the post-Enlightenment independent ethic risked being understood as just one spiritual family among many striving for ‘establishment’ at the expense of others.”

Taylor maps out what his third option would look like, and I will list some of the components for you here:

- AS WITH the independent ethic, the ground of convergence will be a set of politico-ethical principles and goods. These will typically include:
  - A charter of rights, attached first to individuals and in some cases to communities
  - A democratic political ethic entrenching popular sovereignty as the basis of legitimacy, and valuing political freedom, in Tocqueville’s sense.
  - A positively valued individual negative freedom
  - And sometimes a positively enjoining society to help provide some of the conditions for full individual self-development and self-expression.

- BUT, this political ethic will not exhaust the common identity by which people are bound together. This will also include some particularist elements such as:
  - History
  - Language
  - Culture
  - And in some cases religion

- AND SO, unlike the earlier independent ethic, it will be understood that this ground of convergence does not stand on its own. It is essential to the overlapping consensus that

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it be generally understood that there is more than one set of valid reasons for signing on to it.

BECAUSE, the whole point of the superiority of the overlapping consensus is just that it does not prescribe any underlying justification. These are left up to the different spiritual families whose members make up the society. The slogan should rather be: Let the people subscribe for whatever reasons they find compelling, only let them subscribe.58

“What the convergence is around is the moral imperative to respect the integrity and freedom of human beings; however the underlying reasons for this may vary.”59 Taylor warns that an inevitable result of overlapping consensus will be dissensus. These differences are going to have to be adjudicated using persuasion and negotiated compromise. This is precisely why the articulation of moral sources is so important to Taylor. Have you ever argued with someone who thought they knew what you meant, but refused to take the time to understand what you really mean, and explore the reasons why both of you hold the views that you do? Clearing the presuppositional air is beneficial for normal human communication. This sort of healthy debate is precisely what is needed and this in increasing ways for contemporary society. “Not that debate and intellectual confrontation should ever cease. It is open to me to try to convince a Buddhist, a Muslim, or an unbeliever, that they could see their Buddhism, Islam, humanism differently, and thus accept different consequences. They should be ready to return the favour. This kind of debate is even essential to a healthy society under diversity, and is both sign and support of real mutual respect among people of different fundamental commitments.”60 Taylor sees at least two dangers to this sort of mutual respect; one internal (inter-subjective) and one external (inter-cultural). The internal danger is to be found in “the kind of pale ‘ecumenicism’ where each feels constrained from speaking about the other’s views is actually a way of preserving, under the mothballs of respectful silence, all the old misconceptions and contempt.”61 The external danger is summed up

58 Ibid, 50.
59 Ibid, 49.
60 Ibid, 50.
61 Ibid, 50.
by Taylor in the final paragraph of *Modern Social Imaginaries*. “With the realization that these differences matter comes the humbling insight that there is a lot that we don’t understand, that we lack even the adequate language to describe these differences. Negatively, it is very important to set about “provincializing Europe,” in Dipesh Chakrabarty’s pithy phrase. This means that we finally get over seeing modernity as a single process of which Europe is the paradigm, and that we understand the European model as the first, certainly, as the object of some creative imitation, naturally, but as, at the end of the day, one model among many, a province of the multiform world we hope (a little against hope) will emerge in order and peace. Then the real positive work, of building mutual understanding can begin.”

The key to the success of the overlapping consensus view lies with societies’ ability to allow for and understand in what ways personal identities of individuals and groups come into being. With Taylor’s transition from sociological to hermeneutic approaches for understanding human knowledge and behaviour, new questions arise. If religion is not to disappear, and we are to acknowledge that religion can be constitutive to the process of human identity creation, and we are willing to allow that humans will most likely extend their most deeply felt identity shapers to the public arena (the political), then not only is religion not gone from the contemporary scene, but it is perhaps the single most important “public” issue of our times. Secularization theory is no longer just a bundle of theory about the evaporation of religion in modern cultures, but must be expanded to include the experiences of lived religion in our times. This is precisely what Taylor seeks to do.

The grand theories of universal religious change are shown to be based on a shaky epistemology, and a search to get at what Taylor has recently called the “whole context of understanding in which our moral, spiritual or religious experience and search takes place” is made possible. Taylor is quick to point out that this context of understanding not only includes the standard views from secularization theory, but must also include matters “which form the implicit, largely

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unfocused background of this experience and search, its ‘pre-ontology’, to use a Heideggerian term". As usual, Taylor is after the backgrounds against which humans live their lives and the terms in which they cannot help but live them. By retrieving these self-explanations, Taylor then reconstructs what it means to call this age secular (chapter two) as well as questions the epistemological foundations of what many academics mean when they say “secularization” (chapter three).

Taylor is arguing that the pluralism of modern secularity contains an opportunity for human flourishing and living together only if one understands the true nature (moral sources) of this culture of modern secularity. However, Taylor also warns that it is hard for “Westerners” to even see the opportunity. Our political ideas are clouded by the epistemology which they assume. He has pointed out in his article “Conditions of an Unforced Consensus on Human Rights” that “an obstacle in the path to this mutual understanding comes from the inability of many Westerners to see their culture as one among many.” In the text Taylor uses the example of “human rights” to make this point. “To an extent, Westerners see their human rights doctrine as arising simply out of the falling away of previous countervailing ideas – such as the punishment scenarios of the ancient régime – that have now been discredited to leave the field free for the preoccupations with human life, freedom, the avoidance of suffering”. [the subtraction story] “Only if we in the West can recapture a more adequate view of our own history, can we learn to understand better the spiritual ideas that have been interwoven in our development and hence be prepared to understand sympathetically the spiritual paths of others toward the converging goal. Contrary to what many people think, world convergence will not come through a loss or denial of traditions all around, but rather by creative reimmersions of different groups, each in their own spiritual heritage65, travelling different routes to the same goal.”66

64 Taylor, A Secular Age, 3.
5. Conclusion

For Taylor a secularization theory (acultural) based on procedural understandings of the human lead in the wrong direction and paints a portrait of the world somewhat akin to painting by number. For such theory, one has to just follow the procedure, the formula, and any level-headed rational person can understand that as secularism advances, religious belief is pushed aside or is “subtracted” or “dissolved”. Taylor presents us with a secularization theory which is cultural, based on a moral phenomenology of the human, more like a work of modern art than paint by number, which calls for an understanding of the sense available to people as they live their lives as a crucial component to not suppress, occlude, or forget in the making of theory about humans and how they live their lives. I have tried to show how Taylor’s view retrieves moral sources to contemporary secularity in the theological (Deism), as well as how this retrieval can have practical implications in the design of philosophy of religion and politics today.

As I have alluded to earlier, Taylor is after a way of conceiving how diverse people can live together, without having to set aside their particular differences and beliefs. It is no secret that Taylor thinks that much of modern philosophy suffers from an “absence of alternative models of how people can bond together in difference without abstracting from their differences”. Between utilitarian-liberal ideas of the good which have “dictated without discussion a premature unity”, and postmodern ideas of the good which sees “all unity as arbitrarily imposed”, Taylor sees his work as lining up with a “narrow band of thinkers who are even able to discuss the issue”. These thinkers are calling for philosophy that does not try to solve the problem of plurality by denying it, but accept the overwhelming nature of the diversity of goods and their seeming incommensurability. Taylor believes that the resources available for arbitration among goods are “greater than they are normally supposed to be in moral philosophy, and they lie partly in our sense of our lives as a whole; the lives we are leading.” “Real ethical life is inescapably led between the one and the many. We cannot do away either with the diversity of goods (or at least

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67 Taylor, Philosophical Arguments, 8.
so I would argue against modern moral theory) or with the aspiration to oneness implicit in our leading our lives. 68

It might be important to state in closing that Taylor is not relegating to the trash heap the entire project of a difference blind, procedural model of the associative bond common to liberalism; as he points out in Sources and in Malaise of Modernity he is as much of a booster as a knocker of the project. He is however following an alternative model, once he attributes to a common thread he finds in Johann Gottfried von Herder and Emile Durkheim. Taylor summarizes this thread in an article entitled "The Dynamics of Democratic Exclusion" 69 where he writes, "The crucial idea is that people can bond not in spite of their differences but because of them. They can sense that the differences between them enrich each party, that their lives are narrower and less full alone than they are in association with one another. In this sense, difference defines a complementarity." 70 71 Taylor is in effect pleading not to abolish liberalism, but trying to verify its epistemological root structure, in order to offer a "somewhat more complex and many-stranded version of liberalism"; one needed, according to Taylor, to stand in the contemporary winds of political and moral philosophy. One that, Taylor hopes, will create the understanding people will need to live together. Taylor ends his article for Transit in a way that crystallizes the concerns that I have tried to bring to light in this paper. "The struggles to redefine our political life in order to counteract the dangers and temptations of democratic exclusion will only intensify in the next century. There are no easy solutions, no universal formulas for success in this struggle. But at least we can try to avoid falling into the shadow or illusory ways of thinking. This means, first, that we must understand the drive to exclusion (as well as the vocation of inclusion) that democratic politics contains: and second, that we must fight free of some of the powerful philosophical illusions of

69 This article appears in German in the Winter 1997 issue of Transit, published by the Institute of Human Sciences in Vienna. I'm using the English translation from the Transit website. http://www.iwm.at/.
71 Taylor, Philosophical Arguments, 8.
Those powerful philosophical illusions are in part the epistemology that Taylor wants to overcome.
Chapter Three: Secularization and Epistemology

"Expliquer plus, c'est comprendre mieux".1

1. Buried Assumptions

In 2001, a few months after the events that have been globally referred to as “9-11”, two of Taylor’s commentators, Arto Laitinen and Harmut Rosa, asked him this question in an interview he granted them.

“Commonly, your work is closely associated with philosophical and political communitarianism. Communitarians care for particularistic traditions, religions, and strong evaluations, which cannot be checked by, or subjected to, deontological moral judgements. Now, if one was really ill-willed, one could perhaps claim that the Taliban and other radical Islamists are clearly communitarians – they seem to act on their strongest evaluations, i.e. very deeply-rooted ethical convictions, and they are worried about eroding traditions and communities which they seek to protect. Thus, are conflicts like the one between the Taliban and the US not an inevitable consequence of communitarian commitments?”2

Taylor responded with the following:

“These conflicts are very likely consequences of very strong commitments that people have to their traditions, unless those traditions are reinterpreted in order to make it possible to live with other people. In your question “communitarian” is operating as a word for a certain moral take on these issues but I do not see this as an interesting issue to have a moral take on. What take do we have on the fact that

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1 A well known maxim belonging to Paul Ricoeur often translated as “To explain more is to understand better”. Ricoeur’s ideas of hermeneutic narrativity can be found in works like Time and Narrative, 3 vols, 1983-1985 and Ideology and Utopia, 1986.

human beings are deeply embedded in traditions? It is like asking me to have a moral take on the fact that the moon is going around the earth. Granted that people are deeply embedded in traditions we have the issue of how we work that out. Do we find starting from our different traditions ways of living with each other? Can we find in Islam the resources for not having a totally destructive attitude towards everybody else outside of Islam? The answer is yes. So I am very much in favour of people finding ways of living in a human and morally justified way with each other. Where there is an opposition here is that I think that what people very often call the liberal take on this – and I do not really like to concede that word to them – which imagines that we can leap outside of our traditions is so unrealistic that it does not really help to frame the problem. So we are left with the issue that since we are embedded in traditions, can we find a way of understanding them in such a way that we can live together? That’s really the name of the game today: how can we help people from the other side, or is it even possible for us to help? I think we can at least refrain from hindering.”

Taylor’s response reveals what Taylor takes to be an occluded assumption in Laitinen and Rosa’s question: namely that the theoretical problem with communitarianism is that it amounts to choosing to let such things as tradition and religion hamper, restrict or take away the individual’s choice by allowing tradition and/or religion precedence over an individual’s rational and free judgment. Taylor answers the question with a rhetorical question in order to: 1) ferret out what he takes to be the inarticulate assumption buried in the question and 2) to point out the mistaken assumption of the Laitenen/Rosa question, which is that their question presupposes a moral take on the world that comes from the epistemological heritage of Enlightenment. Taylor, as always, wants to show that there is no coming to knowledge, to a position, to a vantage point, to a theory, etc... a part from a community and its language, which necessarily involves some form of

3 Ibid, 169.
tradition. For Taylor, since we are all “condemned to meaning”, there is little point to arguing from the vantage point of a supposed neutrality. This is simply not available. In this way Taylor’s answer presupposes his desire to see the epistemological heritage of Enlightenment overcome.

I am using the cross-purposes in this question and answer to illustrate how epistemological notions function as background assumptions in contemporary culture in ways that Taylor has tried to point out. Taylor’s ideas on secularization are best understood from the vantage point of his anti-epistemological stance. In fact, I would go so far as to say that his anti-epistemological stance is the central motivating factor in his theory of secularization. Going out on a limb, one might even attempt to make the point that Taylor’s philosophy is, in and of itself, a theory of secularization. The goal of this chapter is to explain what, for Taylor, is the epistemological tradition, what its limits are, and what exactly he wants overcome in it.

As mentioned earlier, for Taylor, any form of living together first requires understanding. Understanding for Taylor involves taking seriously people’s self-explanations and the background against which they make the evaluations they do. From the start Taylor’s philosophy has been inspired by pointing out the limitations of the assumed naturalism that he detects behind modern epistemology; the twin assumptions that man can be seen as part of nature, and that the nature of which man is part is to be best understood according to the canons which emerged in the seventeenth century revolution in natural science. This is the move that has earned him labels such as “Hegelian and Christian”, “Neo-Aristotelian”, philosopher of an “impossible historicism”, or worse from Quentin Skinner who calls all of this from Taylor “whistling in the

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4 This is a reference to one of Taylor’s most admired sources, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who coined this phrase in *La phénoménologie de la perception*.
5 Taylor, Philosophy and the Human Sciences.
dark. Taylor himself admits to a monomaniacal approach, and Isaiah Berlin labelled him a “hedgehog”, the sort of thinker who curls himself up around one big idea. Daniel Weinstock has said that the underlying intention to Taylor’s work has been the opposition to the reductive impulse so prevalent in the human sciences since the seventeenth century. Taylor argues for a view of the human (an anthropology) which is both engaged and embodied.

Taylor is developing all along a philosophical anthropology. For Taylor, lack of clarity on the epistemological issue clouds modern attempts to understand the embedding of humans in language. “It is not hard to see how someone obsessed with the epistemological issue would become concerned with this one too [language]. They are closely interwoven.” The instrumentality of language in the theory of knowledge espoused by Hobbes, Locke, and Condillac was criticized by the proponents of Romantic theory. For those Taylor includes in his

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9 Taylor says, in the Introduction to Philosophical Papers I, “Despite the appearance of variety in the papers published in this collection, they are the work of a monomaniac; or perhaps better, what Isaiah Berlin has called a hedgehog. If not a single idea, then at least a single rather tightly related agenda underlines all of them. If one had to find a name where this agenda falls in the geography of philosophical domains, the term “philosophical anthropology” would perhaps be best, although this term seems to make English-speaking philosophers uneasy.

I started on it with a polemical concern. I wanted to argue against the understanding of human life and action implicit in an influential family of theories in the sciences of man. The common feature of this family is the ambition to model the study of man on the natural sciences. Theories of this kind seem to me to be terribly implausible. They lead to very bad science; either they end up in wordy elaborations of the obvious, or they fail altogether to address the interesting questions, or their practitioners end up squandering their talents and ingenuity in the attempt to show that they can after all recapture the insights of ordinary life in their manifestly reductive explanatory languages.” (page 1) [emphasis mine]

10 “The Hedgehog and the Fox” is the title of an essay by Isaiah Berlin about Tolstoy’s theory of history. Berlin develops an older idea from the Greek poet Archilochus: (The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing.) Hedgehogs are those who view the world through the lens of a single over-arching idea (examples given include Dante, Plato, Lucretius, Pascal, Hegel, Dostoievsky, Nietzsche, Ibsen, and Proust).

11 Fergus Kerr explains the development of Taylor philosophical anthropology: “By philosophical anthropology (a phrase that was made little headway since the 1960s) Taylor means ‘the study of the basic categories in which man and his behavior is to be described and explained.’ Taylor immediately reminds us that, ‘there is a type of ethical reflection, exemplified for instance in the work of Aristotle, which attempts to discover what men should do and how they should behave by a study of human nature and its fundamental goals.’ He clearly wants to defend this ‘humanism,’ as he calls it, in an intellectual environment in which he sees it as under threat. The underlying premise of his reflection – a reflection, he insists, “which is by no means confined to philosophers” – is ‘that there is a form of life which is higher or more properly human than others, and that the dim intuition of the ordinary man to this effect can be vindicated in its substance or else corrected if its content by a deeper understanding of human nature.’ Fergus Kerr, "The Self and the Good: Taylor’s Moral Ontology," Charles Taylor, ed. Ruth Abbey, Contemporary Philosophy in Focus (Cambridge, UK New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 86.

12 Taylor, Philosophical Arguments, ix.
classification as “Romantics” (Hamann, Herder, Heidegger) language is not some mechanistic feature of agency, like a part of a machine, but constitutive to humanness in general. For Taylor humans are self-interpretive animals, and Taylor is very much a proponent of the Romantic view. Taylor finds a worthy critique in the Romantic reaction to the instrumental reason and rationality based on the powerful assumptions routed in 18th and 19th century’s confidence in science. This is crucial to our understandings of Taylor’s secularization theory. The confidence in the disappearance of religion in modernity is rooted in the assumptions that are foundational to modern science itself. Once the foundational epistemology is jettisoned along with it goes the “death of God” hypotheses.

We’ll begin with an exploration of Taylor’s anti-epistemological stance, before trying to understand how important this part of Taylor’s philosophy is to his ideas about secularization.

2. Early Sources of Taylor’s Anti-Epistemology

When Taylor published Philosophical Arguments in 1995, in the preface he reflects back on the “themes that have been bothering me for decades.” The first chapter, entitled Overcoming Epistemology, is the “oldest theme” and is a “…Hydra whose serpentine heads wreak havoc throughout the intellectual culture of modernity – in science, in criticism, in ethics, in political thinking, almost anywhere you look.” Taylor has pursued his ideas on and against epistemology for many years, and there is far too much literature to include in this overview. However, it is instructive to look at Taylor’s early writings (1957 – 1967), often ignored by his commentators, in order to see how Taylor sharpens his early philosophical ideas against the epistemology whetstone. Looking back at Taylor’s work one can see the unitary vision behind his work right from the start. We can follow Taylor and refer to his vision as the attempt to develop a philosophical anthropology in the philosophical climate which has discredited the search for

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14 Taylor, Philosophical Arguments, vii.
anything "human" apart from nature. Taylor does this in the late 50s and 60s on various fronts, mainly in philosophy, political philosophy, politics, and religion.

In some of Taylor’s first published writings we find him already questioning what looked to him like the assumptions buried below the surface of a certain modern epistemological confidence rooted in a view of knowing based on science; that it was possible and necessary to abstract from the living of our lives in order to demonstrate the natural explanations of all human knowing and doing. Pointing to the “inarticulate major premises” of the disengaged view so prevalent in modern philosophy in an article for the *Universities and Left Review* back in 1957, Taylor writes:

“The dilemma can be kept in the background if we forget that the world to be described must also include the subject of this world – man. If we hold the moral subject apart from the world, then we can say that the facts are neutral, and still talk of moral choices. Descartes for instance, could have his non-teleological universe cheaply because the ‘soul’ i.e. the moral subject, was not part of it. But this view is generally considered untenable nowadays. The world may appear ‘neutral’ until we realize that moral choices and actions are events in the world. Then we must decide – either we opt for a world that is not completely describable in terms purged of value-content, or we choose to reject the word ‘moral’ except as a classifying term in sociology.”

Writing about Karl Popper’s 1944 *The Poverty of Historicism* Taylor points out that “we cannot do justice to Professor Popper until we can unravel the constellation of presuppositions which make such an extraordinary series of inferences seem plausible”. Taylor then goes on to argue against Popper’s idea of a neutral technology, and in a telling passage writes that “[t]he liberal faith in a neutral science of society usually and easily goes along with the belief that human nature is basically unchanging, that these troublesome concepts can therefore be fixed in some established doctrine about human needs and aims.” And later on in the article:

“Popper is giving a statement of a widely held view, or rather a methodology which presupposes this view. It is the view of liberal non-interventionism, the apology for an utterly negative view of freedom. It is important that this view can appear to so many as being objective, neutral, as though a plea for neutrality on the issues that seem vital to others, puts one somehow above the struggle. But the idea is deep-rooted as a moral and political attitude, as a metaphysic, as an interpretation of traditional political philosophy, particularly those brands loosely called "historicist."17

Taylor found resources in phenomenology18 that allowed him to locate the problems he sensed in the modern epistemological construal. Taylor wants to lay bare the inner/outer dualism of all epistemologies, including the recent views that propose to have escaped the problem of epistemology (Donald Davidson, Richard Rorty), and he does so by drawing on "Heidegger's phenomenology of being-in-the-world, Merleau-Ponty's account of our bodily being-devoted-to-the-world (être au monde), and Samuel Todes's detailed description of how our body's structure and its capacity for self-movement structures the everyday world."19 Taylor discusses his view of Merleau-Ponty's concept of the "pre-objective" world already in 1958 and evaluates Merleau-Ponty's philosophical anthropology.20 Taylor takes up Merleau-Ponty's attempt to find "a new scientific language which will embody the ordinary language ontology of persons."21 Taylor recognized early that the nature of linguistic philosophy and the attention paid to hermeneutic questions by continental philosophy was lost upon the Anglo-Saxon philosophy, caught up as they were in analytic philosophy and linguistic analysis. In a review of a conference held in 1964 to

17 Ibid, 78.
21 Charles Taylor, "Ontology," The Journal of the Royal Institute of Philosophy XXXIV.129 (1959), 139.
explain both worlds to each other Taylor writes that the misunderstanding of the “Oxonians” seemed to be located in the fact that the Continental questioners wished to discuss matters not often discussed in Oxford and thought to be a waste of time. Taylor notes in the review that the Continentals wanted an answer to the question: “what role does ordinary language play in your work and why?” The Continentals left without an answer, and it is perhaps not too far afield to think that 50+ years since then Taylor has continued to press his Anglo-Saxon colleagues with this same sort of question, which he sees as part of getting clear on the epistemological problem.

Taylor shows his cards as well in a 1968 review of Paul Ricoeur’s *History and Truth* when he writes: “Ricoeur has in a sense already formulated the criticisms of the Hegelian enterprise that abound in the liberal, atomistic atmosphere, heavily tinged with positivism, which we breathe in the Anglo-Saxon world. His criticisms are the more penetrating in that he understands why the enterprise is worth undertaking, and why therefore it is undertaken in the first place, instead of looking on whole chapters of human thought as an inexplicable aberration.” Along these same lines it is important to note that Taylor’s work on Hegel was very formative to his views on modern epistemology. Taylor’s work on Hegel (*Hegel 1975, Hegel and Modern Society 1979*) demonstrated that for Taylor we are indebted to Hegel for having really transcended and found a way around the modern European epistemological tradition. And just to show you that Taylor is still at it, in a 2008 interview with the magazine Prospect (February 2008, Issue 143) Taylor was asked how people with religious commitments of some kind stop themselves from believing anything for which there is no empirical evidence: fairies, for example or goblins? Taylor responds with:

“What do you mean by empirical evidence? What always astonishes me when I hear people talk like you is that the term "empirical evidence" seems to you to have as obvious an extension as the term "glass." I challenge that. For Hume there is no empirical evidence for the reality of God. That can only work out if you have a highly improbable and constructive notion of empirical evidence; as one writer

once put it, this appallingly contemplative view of the world. What if the real point of us, as Aristotle thought, as Merleau-Ponty thought, is that we are embodied minds, that things impact us? Then it's a very different notion from empiricism. What if we're also beings with an understanding of a moral world and the deeper significance of things?"

Early on Taylor trained his anti-epistemological methods on exposing the philosophical problems he found in behaviourist psychology. His main work on this subject is found in his 1964 book *The Explanation of Behaviour.* Although Merleau-Ponty is the only major philosopher mentioned in the book (three times), the book signalled Taylor's interest and grasp of the issues of moral philosophy. Elizabeth Anscombe said that the first part of the book, "the philosophical part", showed Taylor's grasp of "the contemporary philosophical situation and its historical roots". In this book Taylor lays down what was to guide his philosophy down to the present: that the best account of human behaviour can be found in teleological explanations by purpose, and that the great modern attempt to describe human behaviour stripped of all teleology can not only be shown to be inadequate as an explanation of purposive behaviour, but can also shown to itself be powered by a moral view. We know that the full flowering of this part of Taylor's work had to

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26 Taylor started his trek defending explanations of behavior from the materialistic assumptions of his contemporary philosophers a long time ago; see: Charles Taylor, "Mind-Body Identity, a Side Issue?", *The Philosophical Review* 76.2 (1967).
wait until 1989 with *Sources of the Self*, but I am pointing out how already in the late 50’s and early 60’s Taylor was beginning to build his arguments against the views that human behaviour can be explained entirely on mechanistic (naturalistic) principles.

A well articulated humanism is what attracted Taylor’s attention during these years and we find him arguing his philosophical anthropology on many fronts. One such engagement had to do with political philosophy, very much on the university agenda in the 1950s and 1960s. Socialism and Marxism were topics of much debate to which Taylor joined his voice. It is perhaps instructive that Taylor’s first article for the Universities and Left Review was entitled “Can Political Philosophy Be Neutral”. In the article Taylor confronts Linguistic Analysis and argues that its moral and political philosophy is anything but neutral. This is an early glimpse of what was to become Taylor’s signature philosophical mode of questioning; what Taylor later describes as his opposition to inarticulacy. As Stephen Mulhall points out: Taylor’s writings are “...intended to show that those whose work he criticises have an unduly narrow or decontextualized, an insufficiently articulated, conception of their own enterprise. They fail to appreciate the deeper presuppositions and consequences of their own specific political principles, the full complexity of the vision of society to which they cleave (as well as those to which they appear implacably opposed).”29 Taylor thought that the polemics between Social-Democratic and Communist ideals, along with the debates between liberals and Marxists, contained far too many inarticulate assumptions on all side, and wrote across the 1960’s to address this problem. For Taylor, Marxism, can be seen as an answer to questions raised by the anti-humanistic results of the growth of the rational control over nature born from European philosophical and technological achievements: a fertile ground for political philosophy.30 Taylor thought that the Marxist notions of “a plurality of ways of looking at the world, its essential doctrines concerning historicism and holism, its reliance on teleological explanation, its conception of the social nature of man, and its view of the relation


of fact and value” were too little understood and discussed among Anglo-Saxon philosophers of
the “empiricist cast of thought which has been dominant in recent decades.” In articles such as
“Marxism and Humanism”, “From Marxism to the Dialogue Society”, “The Ambiguities of
Marxist Doctrine”, “Marcuse’s Authoritarian Utopia”, “The Agony of Economic Man”,
“Socialism and Weltanschauung”, “Is Marxism Alive and Well?”, etc., Taylor retrieves the moral
sources of the various political philosophies he surveys; working to draw attention to important
but often occluded components of the various ideals under discussion.

I have purposefully surveyed Taylor’s earliest work so that readers can get a sense of how long
Taylor has been working on these issues, as well as to point out how little his basic methodology
has changed. Most commentary of Taylor starts off with Taylor’s best known work to date,
Sources of the Self, published in 1989, where it is much easier to see his methods at work. With
the publication of A Secular Age, my guess is that many looking into Taylor’s theory of
secularization will begin with this 2007 book. This is unfortunate. In my view, to get a full-orbed
view of Taylor on secularization one must take the time to go back through his earliest articles and
books as well as the secondary bibliography of his encounters with his interlocutors over the
years. It is very informative to see how Taylor crafts his anti-epistemological stance in the 50’s
through the 60’s, before the full explanation and defence in Philosophical Papers I & II32 and
Philosophical Arguments in 1985 and 1995 respectively, and before the exposition of its
application in Sources of the Self in 1989. One can fully see how, just like in work aimed at
exposing the buried assumptions in behaviourism, cognitive psychology, epistemology, and
certain political philosophies, Taylor’s work on secularization is designed to lay bare the guiding
moral sources to the various understandings of secularization; to show their lineage, and to probe
their highest ideals in order to see what might come up wanting. I’ll leave aside Taylor’s later
development of his anti-epistemological stance since it is much better covered in the literature and
well instantiated by Taylor himself in his later books and articles. Better to dig deeper into just

31 Taylor, ”Marxism and Empiricism.”, 246.
32 Philosophical Papers I & II collect Taylor’s work published during the 70’s and 80’s, with one article from 1967,
10 from the 70’s and 11 from the 80’s.
what Taylor sees as his project of overcoming epistemology and then to show in what ways this informs his views on secularization.

3. **Taylor's View of Modern Epistemology**

Let’s start by defining Taylor’s use of the term “epistemology”. He is not using the term in the wide philosophical meaning of word: that part of philosophy concerned with questions of knowledge, truth, and certainty, but is instead using it to describe an approach to human knowledge that issues from Descartes. When Taylor speaks of overcoming epistemology he is calling for going beyond a view that he sees as foundational and actual to the philosophical anthropologies generated across the past two centuries; a going beyond of the “meditational view of knowledge to an understanding of knowledge as produced by engaged, embodied agents”.

Taylor’s ideas depend upon a certain historical narrative. The opening sentence of the second rule in *Règles pour la Direction de l’Esprit en la recherche de la Vérité* by René Descartes reads: “Toute science est une connaissance certaine et évidente”. Taylor says that while there is nothing new in the concept “that the sage has to turn away from merely current opinion, and make a more rigorous examination that leads him to science”, what is new is the “reflexive nature of this turn”. Accustomed to this assimilation of knowledge to certainty and to this localization of certainty in the mind; we as moderns find it hard to get a proper view on how radical of an epistemological transformation this was for western culture. With Greek and Christian philosophy, the order of ideas was external to mankind and known through a participation in these ideas, through participation in the “eidos” and through participation in revelation respectively.

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33 Abbey, Charles Taylor, 5.
34 All science is a certain and evident knowledge. (Translation mine.)
35 Taylor, Philosophical Arguments, 4.
36 Ibid, 4.
But Descartes signals what was to become foundational for the development of modern western ideas of science and knowledge; or “modern representational epistemology”.

“The seeker after science is not directed away from shifting and uncertain opinion toward the order of the unchanging, as with Plato, but rather within, to the contents of his own mind. These have to be carefully distinguished both from external reality and from their illusory localizations in the body, so that then the correct issue of science, that is, of certainty can be posed – the issue of the correspondence of idea to reality...”

Taylor sees this whole way of thinking and establishing certainty, as still very much at the bottom of contemporary patterns of thought. “In certain circles it would seem that an almost boundless confidence is placed in the defining of formal relations [italics mine] as a way of achieving clarity and certainty about our thinking, be it in the (mis)application of rational choice theory to ethical problems or in the great popularity of computer models of the mind.”

What is crucial to not miss here is that, for Taylor, this epistemological model functions as a moral theory or a moral ideal. The key notion at work in contemporary culture that comes to us from the epistemological tradition of Descartes, is our notion that our understanding of the world is grounded in our getting clear on the representations of this world that appear in our minds.

Such clarity of mind allows for the progressive focus on method and procedure. If something is not to be known in its essence; in its connection to its ontic idea or to its divine source; but instead is to be known in the mind, the question of what procedures to follow become all important. In fact, the history of Enlightenment science in a very real sense is the history of the triumph of procedure. This is what is meant by the “definition of formal relations” as a way of achieving certainty. If the proper procedure is followed, then the proper result can be obtained. Whatever problems appear in the result must come from some improper procedure. It comes as no historical surprise that these philosophical and epistemological transformations went hand-in-hand with the parallel changes in political philosophy known as consequentialism, utilitarianism, and procedural liberalism. One cannot help but notice the congruence between mechanistic science and

37 Ibid, 5.
38 Ibid, 5.
39 Ibid, 4.
definitions that would be considered as clear, instrumentally precise, independently verified, and thus - “true”.40

However, for the duration of this story of the rise of modern western epistemology, there is also the story of its sceptics. Taylor’s philosophical project is in much debt to these historic doubters (Hegel, Heidegger, Husserl, and Merleau-Ponty). Since the requirements of self-reflective clarity are impossible to fulfil both for individuals and for theory, a growing scepticism becomes the norm. The questions posed to the epistemological tradition are seen by Taylor as three fold. He goes into some detail on this in his essay “Overcoming Epistemology” in Philosophical Arguments. The first is the idea of Taylor’s disengaged individual, who can, by proper use of his mind, take a step back from the objects that surround him, in order to get clear on those objects. This is the view that under girds modern notions of neutrality; that proper technique (procedure) allows us a vantage point disengaged from the world which then has the advantage of a more critical, more neutral and thus less prone to bias (if not immune altogether) perspective. The second is Taylor’s idea of the punctual self, which is a result of the disengaged view. The punctual self is the view that allows moderns to instrumentally rearrange the world so that it better suits their purposes. “The subject calculates whatever is necessary in order to secure its own personal welfare.”41 The third is what Taylor refers to as the “social consequence of the first two: an atomistic construal of society as constituted by or ultimately to be explained in terms of, individual purposes”.42 These three point to the problem of epistemology for Taylor: the distorted anthropological beliefs at the heart of the epistemological construal; and show what according to Taylor needs to be overcome. He goes further in the same essay, to lay out his propositions for this overcoming.

40 Chapter Three in Philosophical Papers: Philosophy and The Human Sciences, (Cambridge University Press. 1985. pp. 91) entitled “Social Theory as Practice” is a good place to read Taylor’s views on this issue.
42 Taylor, Philosophical Arguments, 7.
To overcome the problem of the disengaged subject, Taylor proposes that we “conceive reason differently”.43 He is not calling for an overthrow of enlightened subjective rationality, but a conception of reason that would include “a new department, whose excellence consists in our being able to articulate the background of our lives perspicuously”. Taylor does not mind using the world “disclosure” for what he has in mind here, referring to Heidegger. To overcome the problem of the punctual self, Taylor calls for a “rejection of moralities based on instrumental reason”. Taylor is in search here of thicker descriptions of the moral sources and the moral life that humans live. To overcome the problem of atomism, Taylor calls upon us to reject “reductive causal theories” and “theories that cannot accommodate inter-subjective meaning”.44

Epistemology for Taylor is the view that our understanding of the world is grounded in the representations of that world that appear in our minds.45 But this is all wrong according to Taylor.

“What you get underlying our representations of the world – the kinds of things we formulate, for instance, in declarative sentences – is not further representation but rather a certain grasp of the world that we have as agents in it. This shows the whole epistemological construal of knowledge to be mistaken. It doesn’t just consist of inner pictures of outer reality, but grounds in something quite other. … the notion that our understanding of the world is grounded in our dealings with it is equivalent to the thesis that this understanding is not ultimately based on representations at all, in the sense of depictions that are separately identifiable from what they are of”.46

Understanding is thus altered in Taylor’s anti-epistemological model. It plays a constitutive role, as compared to a merely formal explanatory role, in the way we understand ourselves (what is a

43 Ibid., 15.
44 Ibid., 15-17.
45 Taylor provides some extensive detail on how he thinks Descartes contributes to this problem, often referred to as “mind-body dualism”, in Sources of the Self, Chapter Eight, entitled “Descartes Disengaged Reason”. (Harvard University Press. 1989. pp. 143)
46 Taylor, Philosophical Arguments, 12.
human) and what these self-understandings tell us about the nature of human knowledge and action. While it is clear to Taylor that the contemporary form of these problems requires theory that gives way to normative action, he has gotten quite a reputation as calling for a thorough understanding (a retrieval and an articulation) of the sources of our contemporary situation. This understanding, this “conceiving reason differently”, is what Taylor sees himself going to the pains of doing with his historical investigation into the sources of the ideas that modern western culture now takes for granted.

4. Epistemology and Secularization

We can now enquire into the relationship between Taylor’s views on modern epistemology and secularization. For Taylor, secularization theory suffers from the genetic myopia of modern epistemology. As such I want to maintain (like David Martin) that Taylor’s ideas about secularity are a welcome addition to secularization theory. In what follows I want to focus on three of the related reasons why I consider this to be so: hermeneutics, moral frameworks, and irreducibly social goods.

a. Hermeneutics

For Taylor the space within which humans exist as humans is “moral”, and as such it follows that language plays a different role than previously understood. When “reality” is no longer associated with images projected in minds, then the constitutive nature of language becomes a guiding principle for all investigations into “the real”. The first reason why secularization theory can learn from Taylor’s ideas is because a hermeneutically inspired view of the human returns fundamental questions to the agenda of social theory which gives us better descriptions of religion in society. If one accepts Taylor’s anti-epistemological ideas and the descriptions we seek with our theories are no longer anchored in mental representations of phenomena alone, then theory, in search of better

descriptions, moves back towards the only available matrix for human knowing: language. A full exposure of the link between Taylor's philosophy of language and his beef with modern representational epistemology would take us too far afield, but I want to say enough about this to make the first point here: that an epistemologically chastened anthropology opens up new vistas for looking at the state and fate of religion in society.

Against what for Taylor is both a leading idea and a fundamental prejudice of modern thought and culture (epistemology), Taylor's philosophy of language and hermeneutics leads him to claim that humans are "self-interpreting animals". "If human beings are 'self-interpreting animals', then that has consequences for all those sciences which have human beings as their subject. In that case, the human sciences (the classical intellectual, social and cultural sciences) can no longer favour solely an externalized view of people, but must be concerned to develop an internalistic, hermeneutic perspective if they want to do justice to their epistemological subjects, namely human beings. For only an internalistic, hermeneutical view can do justice to the relationships of 'self-interpreting animals' to themselves and the world". In a chapter entitled "Self-Interpreting Animals" Taylor argues that the structure of human feeling is such that when we experience a given emotion we are in fact experiencing humanness as being of a certain kind or having a certain property. Experiencing an emotion includes the awareness of our situation as fearful, shameful, humiliating, degrading, wonderful, etc. For Taylor these adjectives define what Taylor calls in "import". By "import" Taylor is referring to the way in which something can be of importance to the "desires or purposes or aspirations or feelings of a subject". For humans, experiencing a given emotion necessarily involves experiencing our situation as bearing a certain import. Explanations of the import that basically end at "that is the way he or she feels" do not adequately describe the import, because the import is the basis (grounds) for the feeling, not just the description of it. This is why "saying what an emotion is like involves making explicit the sense of the situation it incorporates". This is obviously what does not make sense in the modern construal of objectivity. If emotions have the logical structure for which Taylor is arguing, then the account of

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49 Taylor, Human Agency and Language, 48.
50 Ibid, 49.
human behaviour as “objects among objects” runs aground. Imports for Taylor are “experience-dependent properties”, since they “characterize things in their relevance to our desires and purposes, or in their role in our emotional life. If we now claim that reference to an import is essential to making clear what is involved in certain emotions, and if in turn we have recourse to these emotions in order to explain the behaviour they motivate, then the ideal of an objective account will have been breached.” Purely objective explanations of human emotions are overcome. But what does this have to do with hermeneutics? Taylor’s full set of claims here are: 1) that some of our emotions involve import-ascriptions, 2) that some of these imports are subject-referring, 3) that our subject-referring feelings are the basis of our understanding of what it is to be human, 4) that these feelings are constituted by the articulation we come to accept of them, and 5) that these articulations, which we can think of as interpretations, require language. The human sciences have to become hermeneutical sciences “in which the subjective meanings and significances of individuals have to stand at the centre of conceptual and theoretical efforts”.

As Nicholas Smith has efficiently pointed out, Taylor’s philosophy of language is directly inspired by Merleau-Ponty following Edmund Husserl. Merleau-Ponty’s method of ‘phenomenological reduction’ (getting to a description of experience as it is prior to reflection upon the action) yields a fundamental principle of human knowing: its intentionality. “The intentionality thesis is often formulated as the idea that consciousness is always consciousness of something...it is essentially ‘directed towards’ something...we might call it “intentionality-as-significance”.” In the phenomenological scheme, perception is about ‘coming to grips’ with the environment in which one finds oneself, and as such human perception is about behaviour. We come to grips with our environment through the process of “articulation”, the process for Taylor whereby “...the

51 Ibid, 76.
53 Some have seen the influence of Iris Murdoch on Taylor in their shared ideas about the “value-laden character of human consciousness”. Maria Antonaccio, “The Virtue of Metaphysics: A Review of Iris Murdoch’s Philosophical Writings,” Journal of Religious Ethics 29.2 (2001); 314.
54 Smith, Charles Taylor: Meaning, Morals, and Modernity, 26-27.
55 It is important to remember that for Taylor articulation involves “more than formulation in what might be recognized as theoretical terms, in some philosophical or theological doctrine. Our sense of both life and constitutive goods is fleshed out, and passed on, in a whole range of media: stories, legends, portraits of exemplary figures and
aspects of our moral world are identified, clarified, and made accessible and potent for us. A phenomenological grasp of our moral conduct, then, exposes the structure of strong evaluations whereby we make 'qualitative distinctions' and orient ourselves to a good or goods. To articulate a framework is to identify the moral goods that make sense of such conduct.\textsuperscript{56} This is why Taylor can claim that "...[t]o study persons is to study beings who only exist in, or are partly constituted by, a certain language".\textsuperscript{57} Being human involves orienting ourselves in moral space, and we do this through language. Language pre-supposes morality. Taylor explains:

"Underlying both emotions and relations is another crucial feature of the linguistic dimension: it makes possible value in the strong sense. Pre-linguistic animals treat something as desirable or repugnant, by going after it or avoiding it. But only language beings can identify things as worthy of desire or aversion. For such identifications raise issues of intrinsic rightness. They involve a characterization of things which is not reducible simply to the way we treat them as objects of desire or aversion. They involve a recognition beyond that: they ought to be treated in one way or another".\textsuperscript{58}

A hermeneutic understanding of the perception of language beings helps us to understand why religion is not fully understood when it is examined as a set of symbols, as psychological reflex, rational choice, or existential comportment alone. The reduction that allows social theory to assume that it has found the underlying mechanism(s) that explains the religious in the human by explanations of religion in society, or vice-versa, come up short in the hermeneutical view. The language which humans use to describe the backgrounds against which they unavoidably create their identities cannot be turned into an object. As such the goal of a rational understanding of religion cannot be an attempt to get underneath the self-descriptions to see "what really makes

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\item their actions and passions, as well as in artistic works, music, dance, ritual, modes of worship, and so on."\textsuperscript{56}Taylor, "Leading a Life.", 179.
\item Taylor, Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity, 35.
\item Taylor, Philosophical Arguments, 106.
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religion work”, but instead has to be some sort of “getting inside” of religion. I think we can use Tayloren philosophical moves like the ideas of “moral frameworks” in specific and “hermeneutics” in the general to allow a retrieval of the human articulations of the backgrounds as they are perceived. If the position of the “disengaged reasoner” is modern myth, then the stance of the engaged perceiver is opened. Human religious ideas and emotions are perceptions about something(s), and we should find out what that is. When you really think about it, the whole idea of abstracting from religious faith and practice as a prerequisite for its understanding, makes about as much sense of abstracting from scientific faith and practice as prerequisite for its understanding; doubting the existence of the black hole as foundational to the exploration of their possible existence. This makes for a great story, but is obviously far from the way human intentionality works, as Taylor has tried to point out. Questions concerning the nature of lived religion in history and today, conditions of belief and unbelief, the relationship between language and religion, religion and the public space, and much more can be explored by taking seriously moral sources of the religious languages that swirl about us today. As we saw in chapter two this leads Taylor in the direction of retrieving the moral sources of Deism. We saw how Taylor’s secularization theory involves a retrieval that uncovers sources to the lived condition of the shifts to modern secularity resulting in the “nova effect” and the problematized conditions of belief and unbelief.

b. Moral Frameworks

A secularization theory that takes Taylor’s ideas into consideration will be allowed to consider making a strong connection between human knowledge and morality. Within absolute naturalism this link is rejected. Taylor does not refute naturalism per se, but instead tries to explain how its appeal has powerfully shaped the modern social imaginary; what this view has opened up and what it has closed off. Taylor calls the view from naturalism a “Closed World System” (CWS) as a way of trying “…to articulate some of the worlds from within which the

59 For Taylor’s philosophical attacks on naturalism see his essays collected in: Taylor, Philosophy and the Human Sciences.
believing option seems strange and unjustifiable."\textsuperscript{60} The problems Taylor wants to discern in epistemology, the ones that create a CWS, are found when one considers the social imaginary created by the epistemological assumptions; "that is, an underlying picture which is only partly consciously entertained, but which controls the way people think, argue, infer, and make sense of things".\textsuperscript{61} Taylor describes the epistemological mindset which closes off the link between human action and morality:

"...this structure operates with a picture of knowing agents as individuals, who build up their understanding of the world though combining and relating, in more and more comprehensive theories, the information which they take in, and which is couched in inner representations, be these conceived as mental pictures (in the earlier variants), or as something like sentences held true in the more contemporary versions.

Characteristic of this picture is a series of priority relations. Knowledge of the self and states comes before knowledge of external reality and of others. The knowledge of reality as neutral fact comes before our attributing to it various "values" and relevances. And, of course, knowledge of the things of "this world", of the natural order, precedes any theoretical invocation of forces and realities transcendent to it.

The epistemological picture, combining as it does very often with some understanding of modern science, operates frequently as a CWS. The priority relations tell us not only what is learned before what, but also what can be inferred on the basis of what. There are foundational relations. I know the world through my representations. I must grasp the world as fact before I can posit values. I must accede to the transcendent, if at all, by inference from the natural."\textsuperscript{62}

\textsuperscript{60} Wrathall, \textit{Religion after Metaphysics}, 48.

\textsuperscript{61} \textit{Ibid}, 49.

\textsuperscript{62} \textit{Ibid}, 49-50.
The whole debate about epistemology is “bound up with very influential and often not fully articulated notions about science and about the nature of human agency. Through these it connects with certain central moral and spiritual ideals of the modern age.”63 In the 1977 essay “What is Human Agency” Taylor introduced a key component to his philosophical anthropology, namely that the sense of self that we have is constituted by moral concerns. Human agency requires this evaluative aspect (human beings are strong and weak evaluators) in order to be recognized as properly “human”. In Sources Taylor spends a good deal of time arguing for the necessity of a connection between our sense of the good and our sense of the self. Nicholas H. Smith has said that Taylor’s idea that the self has an intrinsic moral dimension can be treated as a key element of Taylor’s theory of subjectivity. “It can also be considered as the gateway through which his thinking moves from philosophical psychology and the philosophy of language to ethics”.64 Humans orient themselves in a space of moral distinctions, which Taylor calls “frameworks of meaning” and so moral and ethical issues are deeply rooted in our identities; they are more than just a mental assent we make to a rule out of a rational calculation of interest.

“I want to defend the strong thesis that doing without frameworks is utterly impossible for us; otherwise put, that the horizons within which we live our lives and which make sense of them have to include these strong qualitative discriminations. Moreover, this is not just as a contingently true psychology fact about human beings...Rather the claim is that living within such strongly qualified horizons is constitutive of human agency, that stepping outside these limits would be tantamount to stepping outside what we would recognize as integral, that is, undamaged human personhood.”65

For this reason secularization theory can never be only about “facts” collected from social surveys that catalogue data about church attendance nor only about predicted patterns of society indexed to universal theories of modernity. To understand religion in a given society, one must start with an anthropology that has broken free from the representational conception of knowledge that for

63 Taylor, Philosophical Arguments, 3.
64 Smith, Charles Taylor: Meaning, Morals, and Modernity, 87.
65 (Taylor Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity, 27
Taylor has plagued epistemology since Descartes. While it is useful to know the sorts of things secularization theory finds out, i.e. that modernization seems to explain why fewer people attend church in France, it is even more important to develop a secularization theory that includes explanations of the functioning of the background moral and spiritual ideals to which people in France and other countries have responded that make not going to church seem like the appropriate option to choose for their search, while convincing some others in France to reconstitute their spiritual identities in other directions.

Taylor is not alone in noticing what he has referred to as the “interpenetration of the scientific and the moral”. There are the classic critiques of epistemology from Hegel, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Wittgenstein to which Taylor is indebted. Taylor finds in these thinkers a critique of the wider conception of epistemology, not just foundationalism, but an awareness of the problems in the moral and spiritual registers within modern epistemological formulas. According to Taylor these four overturned epistemology by offering a new construal of knowledge based on the type of transcendental argumentation introduced by Kant. “We argue the inadequacy of the epistemological construal, and the necessity of a new conception, from what we show to be the indispensable conditions of there being anything like experience or awareness of the world in the first place.” Taylor is relying on his background in the phenomenology of perceptual experience to show that the reason epistemology is incomplete is because it fails to take into account the

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66 Taylor’s critique of epistemology goes further than just an anti-foundationalism. Certainly overcoming epistemology involves abandoning foundationalism, but it also involves focusing “not so much on foundationalism as on the understanding of knowledge that made it possible”. This understanding is the idea that knowledge is to be seen as correct representation of an independent reality; an inner depiction of an outer reality. Taylor, Philosophical Arguments, 3.

67 Ibid, 8.

68 In particular Taylor finds important arguments in Hegel’s “sensible certainty” in Phenomenology of Spirit as well as Wittgenstein’s “ostensive definitions” in Philosophical Investigations (Taylor, Philosophical Arguments, 13.)

69 For the most complete exposition of Taylor’s understanding of foundationalism see: Charles Taylor, “What’s Wrong with Foundationalism?: Knowledge, Agency and World,” Heidegger, Coping and Cognitive Science : Essays in Honor of Hubert L. Dreyfus, eds. Hubert L. Dreyfus, Mark A. Wrathall and J. E. Malpas (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000). Taylor wants an anti-foundationalism which rules out “a representational or meditational picture of our grasp of the world” based on what he refers to as a “multimedia grasp” of things. This “plurality of media” includes formulated thoughts, things never even raised in a question, understandings implicit in various abilities to cope, etc, things that can never be separated from our experience of the world.

70 Taylor, Philosophical Arguments, 9.
transcendental conditions of objective knowledge. For Taylor there is no doubt that humans are beings who by their very nature have a capacity for generating objective representations of themselves and their world. However, "...this mode of knowing can only arise against a 'background' of concerns that cannot itself be the object of such knowledge". Smith goes on to show in his essay that for Taylor the mistake of epistemology in this light is "to suppose that the background is merely a causal antecedent of our cognitions. If that were the case, then the background would itself be as amenable to cognitive representation as any object within it. The problem with this construction, however, is that it confuses a transcendental condition of knowledge with a causal-empirical one; or rather, it fails to acknowledge that there is an issue about transcendental conditions for epistemology to address as well an issue about the mechanisms of representation". Human knowledge claims are unintelligible apart from the transcendental condition provided by the "background", which itself, cannot be objectified (or represented) without remainder, "...since any objective knowledge claimed of it, to be intelligible at all, must itself have a "background" presupposition – precisely what complete objectification would annul". For Taylor, as with Gadamer and Heidegger among others, "finitude" is an inescapable structure of human knowledge, "a point we need reminding of in view of widely held presumptions about the in-principle limitlessness of objective enquiry, which in turn reflect a blindness to the transcendental issue of intelligibility".

Secularization theory, as social theory, came about precisely to get behind this "interpenetration", in the hopes of basing theory on the neutral epistemic grounds that theories of science claim to provide. However, Taylor's critique of this epistemology can be used to give theorists pause. If indeed social scientific approaches to understanding religion are not merely neutral theories, then they must be something else. Taylor proposes that once we have rejected atomistic theories, reductive causal theories, and theories that cannot accommodate intersubjective meaning, then "[s]ocial science is seen as being closer to historiography of a certain kind". This seems fruitful

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72 Ibid, 34-35.
73 Taylor, Philosophical Arguments, 15.
as an approach to social theory, since theorists of all kind have no choice but to not only “explain” religion, but to also “explain” theories of religion, which necessarily moves social theory in the direction of a historicist stance vis-à-vis itself and its assumptions both historic and contemporary.

We have seen that Charles Taylor’s secularization theory proposes a hermeneutical view of human action and a thick description of the constitutive link between human language and human morality. We can now turn to the third element of Taylor’s ideas that I am claiming can be used to improve contemporary ideas about secularization: the irreducibility of social goods.

### c. Irreducibly Social Goods

The third reason that Taylor’s philosophy can be usefully deployed to improve secularization theory has to do with the way in which language is not just for “me” alone but for “we” together. If humans are language beings whose identities exist in moral space (or create it) we must also consider the social ramifications of this hermeneutical anthropology. For Taylor this string of ideas seriously undermines the epistemological understanding prevalent in large amounts of social scientific thinking about secularization. “The new theory of language that arises at the end of the eighteenth century, most notably in the work of Herder and Humboldt, not only gives a new account of how language is essential to human thought, but also places the capacity to speak not simply in the individual but primarily in the speech community. This totally upsets the outlook of the mainstream epistemological tradition.”74 Speech animals are necessarily political animals. As Thomas Gil has pointed out: “With his definition of the human being as a ‘self-interpreting’ animal Taylor takes Aristotle’s first definition into account [humans are beings capable of speech]. Aristotle’s second definition [and also political] comes completely into play in Taylor’s critique of ‘atomistic’ liberalism. For the starting point of Taylor’s critique of ‘atomism’ is the insight that human beings cannot become human without social communities into which they are born and in

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which they learn language, action and thought in practice”. If we take Taylor’s ideas concerning language seriously we realize that reductive social theories won’t do as explanations of phenomenon such as religion in society. It is worth taking the time to understand what it is about language that makes this so.

For Taylor there is a very deep intrication in the intellectual and cultural history of the West on two important points: atomism versus the social perspective on the one hand; and denying versus acknowledging the dimension of meaning on the other. Taylor picks up on the Saussurian distinction between ‘langue’ and ‘parole’ to explain these problems; (langue) is the code that humans draw on constantly in each particular act of speech (parole). Taylor points out that if each act of parole can be collapsed into the individual (methodological individualism), langue as the normative practice of community collapses with it. The two dimensions resist being collapsed into one, but this is exactly what an atomistic understanding of language attempts to do. As Taylor has it: “Once you collapse the dimension of meaning, ignore the independent role of langue, once there are no more meaning events, but all are plain, then it just seems unproblematic on generally agreed naturalist grounds to conclude to atomism in politics [or religion] as was once the norm in physics.” Taylor rejects those atomistic theories of language that account for all parole as the speech acts of individuals alone, in favour of theories that are built upon “the independent place of the dimension of langue”. This means accepting something into one’s “social ontology which cannot be decomposed into individual occurrences”. Taylor extends this feature of language to the goods that humans share, or have together.

77 Ibid, 52.
78 Ibid, 53.
Of course, there are many who find problems with Taylor’s understanding of “goods” and their existence in a moral space created by language. For example, Robert E. Goodin has argued contra Taylor that goods can be social in two senses: first, goods are social because they are used by a group of people collectively, and secondly, goods are social because they are of value to a group of people collectively. Goodin distinguishes between a good that is irreducibly social and the “goodness of the good” as being irreducibly social. It is the latter claim that is problematic. Goodin resists Taylor’s arguments which attempt to derive the “irreducibly social nature of goods from the inherently social nature of meaning”. Goodin wants to maintain that even though Taylor is right in that the social goods themselves are not decomposable, the value of those goods is decomposable “into the value derived from them by the individuals constituting the collectivity”. Goodin wants to show that it is the individual who is the evaluation centre, and as such the only available seat of meaning. For Goodin, Taylor’s claim that behind every “parole” there in necessarily a “langue” effectively means that there is some other centre of evaluation external to the individual. Even though Taylor denies this, Goodin finds Taylor’s idea that the non-decomposability of ‘common understandings’ turns on the proposition that we have formed a “we who understand together” to be an indication that Taylor’s idea of social goods really do disappear into the Hegelian mists. “Presumably Taylor’s argument would be that there is something intrinsically good about life in society, given the nature of humanity itself. ... Even if the natural good for humanity is essentially intrinsically unavoidably social, the point remains that its goodness derives from that natural fact, rather than from any social fact.”

Of course, Taylor finds arguments like Goodin’s to be a mere restatement of the naturalist arguments based in the epistemology Taylor is trying to resist. For Taylor, Goodin has not taken into sufficient account what a hermeneutic critique offers; thus failing to understand the relationship between language and human knowledge making. Of course, once the goods that humans claim have been dissected, as Goodin does, into the goods themselves (the facts) and the values related to these goods (values) the occlusion Taylor fights against is accomplished. For

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79 For a much more elaborate explanation of how arguments against Taylor’s irreducibly social goods work see the three critiques in: Brennan and Walsh, Rationality, Individualism, and Public Policy.
80 Brennan and Walsh, Rationality, Individualism, and Public Policy, 65.
Goodin the value terms humans impose on goods are mere projections; while for Taylor there is nothing “mere” about scientific notions of the human because, humans are “interpretation all the way down”.

Although I do not have the space to deal fully with Taylor’s philosophy of language, there are a few more aspects central to his ideas that help to explain his theory of language. Another important part of Taylor’s ideas was introduced with his 1980 essay entitled “Theories of Meaning”. First of all, it is through language that humans bring to explicit awareness what, prior to language, there could only be an implicit sense of. Finding the words to express something we want to say allows human interlocutors to focus properly on the matter in question. Secondly, this matter that is now articulated through language is now out in the open between the humans in discussion. For Taylor once a matter has been expressed in language is can no longer be just a matter for the speaker alone, nor the hearer alone, but is necessarily a matter for both; something that exists for them together. This is an important point for Taylor, and is in essence the nub of the relationship between language and epistemology. He writes:

“But the crucial and highly obtrusive fact about language, and human symbolic communication in general, is that it serves to found public space, this is, to place certain matters before us. This blindness to the public is of course (in part anyway) another consequence of the epistemological tradition, which privileges a reconstruction of knowledge as a property of the critical individual. It makes us take a monological observer’s standpoint not just as a norm, but somehow as the way things really are with the subject. And this is catastrophically wrong.”\(^{81}\)

Another way of saying this for Taylor is that language is what “found public space”. Public space is an imaginary, but we often do not take the time to reflect what the tag “public space” actually refers to. When we speak we create a dialogical context, a space that is public, that we call the space that exists between people. If language articulates what humans have to say, and it founds public space, then thirdly, it is also the medium through which “characteristically human

\(^{81}\) Taylor, *Human Agency and Language*, 259.
concerns” impinge on us. This is the “background of meaning” which Taylor discusses throughout *Sources* and in *Ethics of Authenticity*\(^{82}\) among other places. Taylor explains that:

“I can define my identity only against a background of things that matter. But to bracket out history, nature, society, the demands of solidarity, everything but what I find in myself, would be to eliminate all candidates for what matters. Only if I exist in a world in which history, or the demands of nature, or the needs of my fellow human beings, or the duties of citizenship, or the call of God, or something else of this order *matters* crucially, can I define an identity for myself that is not trivial. Authenticity is not the enemy of demands that emanate from beyond the self; it supposes such demands.\(^{83}\)

By “human concerns” or “things that matter” Taylor is referring to feelings-emotions-thoughts which a non-linguistic animal cannot create through the sounds it makes. The difference expressed here would be, for example, the difference between anger (which all animals seem to express), and indignation which is only available in the register of language used by humans, since indignation presupposes some form of discrimination of right and wrong.\(^{84}\) Elsewhere Taylor has exposed his view that the dialogical character of life is an inescapable feature of human life and the nexus of human identity formation.\(^{85}\) Once again it is obvious that for Taylor “...language does not only serve to depict ourselves and the world, it also helps constitute our lives. Certain ways of being, of feeling, of relating to each other are only possible given certain linguistic resources...[T]he meanings and illocutionary forces activated in any speech act are only what they are against the background of a whole language and way of life.”\(^{86}\) Mark Redhead explores this at length in his book.\(^{87}\)

\(^{82}\) Published under the title *The Malaise of Modernity* in Canada.
\(^{84}\) Taylor, *Human Agency and Language*, 260-61.
\(^{86}\) Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments* 10, as quoted in Redhead 2002 p. 150.
Taylor’s conception of language is drawn from his attraction to the Romantic critique of modernity and the expressivity that founds human identity in language instead of disengaged rationality. It would be hard to overestimate how important this part of Taylor’s philosophy is for the construction of his entire project. Bernard Gagnon has pointed out that though Taylor’s philosophy is rooted in phenomenology and transcendentalism he relies on his philosophy of language to complete the lack of cohesion in a moral theory built on only the prior two.

"Le rapport entre le moi et le monde ne peut pas être conçu prioritairement sous l’angle d’un sujet, c’est-à-dire d’une conscience morale autonome qui, selon la version phénoménologique, reçoit librement les choses dans sa conscience, ou, selon la version transcendante, se donne librement les choses par la conscience. … Pour l’instant, l’éthique taylorienne doit s’en tenir à un principe de conviction concernant le fondement ontologique de la théorie. La thèse de l’existence de réalités morales significatives ne reçoit aucune autre justification que la croyance en l’existence de telle réalité ou, encore, l’intuition de celles-ci. Mais ni cette intuition ni cette conviction n’ont conduit la théorie vers la démonstration explicite de ces réalités. L’étude taylorienne du langage, troisième de dernier moment de la construction de la théorie morale, doit combler cette absence de cohésion dans notre rapport entre le moi et le monde. Le langage, ou plus généralement, pour Taylor, le pouvoir expressif des êtres humains, devient le mode d’affirmation pour nous des réalités morales transcendantes."

Meaning does not only or even primarily reside in facts about individuals that humans get certain on using increasing levels of theoretical abstraction, technique, and brute data. The problem with this view of meaning for Taylor is that “[s]ocial practices and institutions which are partly constituted by certain ways of talking about them are not so identifiable. We have to understand the language, the underlying meanings, which constitute them.” Meaning can also and often does reside in this “space” between humans, and Taylor refers to this as “inter-subjective meaning.”

88 Gagnon, La Philosophie Moral Et Politique De Charles Taylor, 88.
89 Taylor, Philosophy and the Human Sciences, 38.
throughout his philosophy. In order to even take notice of intersubjective meanings one has to drop the epistemological assumptions that social reality is made up of brute data. The problem then for much of secularization theory, as a social theory, is that it has been almost entirely built upon the collection of brute data and the assumptions that go into the construction of social scientific theories of the human, religion, and society. A bit further in the essay Taylor shows how inter-subjective meanings can also be “common meanings”, or the common language and understanding that language allows people to come to between themselves; the creation of a common reference point or shared world view. Common meanings and inter-subjective meanings “fall through the net of mainstream social science”. “What the ontology of mainstream social science lacks is the notion of meaning as not simply for an individual subject; of a subject who can be a ‘we’ as well as an ‘I’. The exclusion of this possibility, of the communal, comes once again from the baleful influence of the epistemological tradition from which all knowledge has to be reconstructed from the impressions imprinted on the individual subject”. 90

Taylor calls for “...a study of our civilization in terms of its inter-subjective and common meanings”, which he finds currently ruled out by the epistemology he resists. Such a study would involve very different perspectives on religion. Taylor’s approach is to get at religion through what it is for the people who position themselves inside and outside of it; retrieving what faith or belief is and isn’t, not by measuring residual trace factors that we can gather together under theories like “modernization” but instead by coming to grips with what living with the religious options opened and closed off to us today is like. It is precisely changes in these inter-subjective and common meanings (born along by religious practices and rituals) which no longer hold us in the ways they did in the past. To understand religious change is to understand these meanings, or at least this should be part of the search according to Taylor. We see an example91 of this as Taylor discusses “together-goods”, or goods that have as their constitutive definition that they be lived and enjoyed together. This would include many of the goods that come into being between

90 Ibid, 40.
people as they share a common belief. Taylor seems to be asking the question of whether faith itself is one such together-good as it is lived by people who consider themselves religious? This is an example of what some have seen as the theological dimension to Taylor's work.

5. Epistemology, Philosophical Anthropology and Theology

As mentioned previously Taylor is working out his philosophical anthropology. The epistemological problems he is concerned with hang like great clouds over a proper understanding of the human. As it relates to secularity, Taylor's project has been about peeling back the layers of social sciences' mistakes of theory in order to retrieve the transcendental conditions of human religious life. This is what makes Taylor's anthropology so theological. Once the illegitimate neutrality embedded in social scientific understandings of religion is exposed, one can examine anew human religion making for insights into secularity quite apart from the norms of modern social theory. If this sounds a lot like the theological project of John Milbank, it is because it is. To Taylor's philosophical anthropology Milbank has attempted a theological anthropology that has gained a following under the heading of "Radical Orthodoxy". Both projects are radical critiques of modernity's scientism and proceduralism; twin forces powering modern social theory's attempts to understand religion as a rational sphere of human activity. While working in different fields, both authors have attempted to provide a new story of the making of the modern identity which includes at its heart the exposition of the failure of the modern epistemology of science with its claim to neutrality. Both Taylor and Milbank stand out and draw the criticisms they do through their attempts at providing a meta-narrative of western philosophy's abandonment of meta-narratives. Both have provided important descriptions of modern philosophy's trajectory and the mistakes they think were made as philosophers and theologians attempted to come to grips with a scientific view of the world. There are many significant commonalities and both thinkers can be

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mined for their contributions to a reframing of late modern theism, religious identify formation, and secularization.93

For Taylor the value of Milbank’s work comes in his provision of a narrative of the changing of the subject that went on in the long march towards the contemporary human epistemic predicament. This is the predicament that Taylor has described (locating the heart of it in Deism as we saw earlier) as “Human beings, forming societies under the normative provisions of the Modern Moral Order, and fulfilling their purposes by using what Nature provides, through the aid of accurate knowledge of this Nature, and the contrivances which we will later call Technology. Moreover, these agents acquire knowledge by exploring impersonal orders with the aid of disengaged reason. This now defines the human epistemic predicament.”94 Taylor finds important the studies that “show how the subject was changed through a series of steps involving late Scholasticism, Duns Scotus, nominalism, “possibilism”, Occam, Cajetan and Suarez, Descartes, where each stage appeared to be addressing the same issues as the predecessors it criticized, while in fact the whole framework slid away and came to be replaced by another.”95 Taylor thinks his attempts to come to grips with the changes in social practice and the social imaginary that contributed to the shift in horizon towards modern secularity compliments Milbank’s. In fact the epilogue of A Secular Age Taylor situates his story of Western “secularization” alongside what he refers to as “other historical accounts”. He identifies these accounts as belonging to Francis Oakley, John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, Graham Ward and Rémi Brague. He mentions having a great deal of sympathy with this scholarship which “links the critique of mediaeval “realism” (as with Aquinas), and the rise of nominalism, possibilism, and a more voluntarist theology in Scotus, Occam, and others with the thrust towards a secular world”. He also appreciates the link being made “between nominalism and the rise of mechanistic science, as also the growing force of the new instrumental stance of human agency”. These forces combined to

94 Taylor, A Secular Age, 294.
95 Ibid, 295.
help generate “the powerful modern ontic dualism: Mind over against a mechanistic, meaning-shorn universe, without internal purposes such as the older cosmos had”. The endnote here signals to Taylor’s readers that he finds Radical Orthodoxy’s writings to be an exploration at “a very high level”.\footnote{96}

Taylor appreciates Milbank’s narrative because it fills in the theological dimension of the connections\footnote{97} that Taylor has continuously made between science, mechanism and the instrumental stance that make up the disenchantment that Taylor defines as “the decline and withering of beliefs and practices that call on spirits and moral forces”.\footnote{98} This is the context in which secularity arises, and Milbank exposes the theological motives of the anti-realism that, as Taylor points out, “helped to empty this cosmos of Ideas and Forms” and “helped to destroy the mediaeval-Christian cosmos”.\footnote{99} In Theology & Social Theory Milbank shows that the ‘secular’ is not a sociologically delimited domain but is instead a ‘time’; an eschaton stretched out between a divine origin and final consummation. Taylor makes this same point in Sources. Both authors tell the story of how the secular as a domain came to be instituted and came to have the place it does in the social imaginary of modernity. For both, secularization is not usefully understood from the vantage point of social theory but must be retrieved as the practices of human believing or theology. Milbank wants to point out “that ‘scientific’ social theories are themselves theologies or anti-theologies in disguise”.\footnote{100} He does this in Theology & Social Theory by tracing the genesis of the main forms of secular reason (liberalism, positivism, dialectics, nihilism) in order to show that “secular social theory only applies to secular society, which it helps to sustain” and that “secular discourse does not just ‘borrow’ inherently inappropriate modes of expression from religion as the

\footnote{96} The endnote reads: “These connections have been explored at a very high level in the work of John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock, often spoken of as proponents of “Radical Orthodoxy”. See, for instance, John Milbank, Theology & Social Theory, 2nd edition (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005); Catherine Pickstock, After Writing (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998); John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock, Truth in Aquinas (London: Routledge, 2001); John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward, eds., Radical Orthodoxy (London: Routledge, 1999).”

\footnote{97} Taylor in comparing his work to Milbank’s writes: “We can see that it fits in a way with mine, but that it develops things which I have barely mentioned, and also leaves out the things which I have spent the most time on.” Taylor, A Secular Age, 774.

\footnote{98} Taylor, A Secular Age, 773.

\footnote{99} Ibid, 773.

\footnote{100} Milbank, Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason, 3.
only discourse to hand (this is Hans Blumenberg’s interpretation) but is actually constituted in its secularity by ‘heresy’ in relation to orthodox Christianity, or else a rejection of Christianity that is more ‘neo-pagan’ than simply anti-religious.” Taylor admittedly works in this same register in Sources and A Secular Age, but this basic framework can be seen from the very beginnings of his writing. In Social Theory as Practice (1983) Taylor explicates the claim that the objectifying ideal of the detached instrumental reasoner so central to the modern free subject is really just a novel variant of the very old aspiration to spiritual freedom. Of course the modern ideal has come to understand itself as based in a thorough non-religious naturalism, but its motivating force is “akin to the traditional drive to spiritual purity”. What Taylor has gestured at Milbank completes by pointing out that the similarities in the social imaginaries Taylor describes are much more directly explained when one realizes that secularization theory like all social theories is itself theology in disguise.

However, Taylor finds at least one area with which his work does not fit into that of Milbank which Taylor labels the “Intellectual Deviation” (ID) story. Milbank’s critique of social theory (and thus secularization theory) does not suffice as the main story behind secularity for Taylor. It leaves out what Taylor calls the “Reform Master Narrative” (RMN). Reform is the theological and cultural idea that all of the faithful had to participate in Christianity with the same level of devotion. Reform not only disenchants but it also re-orders human life and society. Taylor thinks that to understand secularity you need both ID and RMN; “exploring different sides of the same mountain, or the same winding river of history”. Taylor elucidates the weakness he detects in ID: by itself is not enough to explain secularization because, first of all, ID deals mainly with intellectual changes among the elite and so the story of secularity (1, 2, or 3) as mass phenomenon is left under explored. Secondly, ID was a move within Christian doctrine, but unlike RMN is does not explain the motives for the anti-Christian reversal of modernity. Thirdly, mechanistic science didn’t provide the fuel for the turning against Christianity in anger until after Darwin when the Deistic picture of the universe collapses. And finally, although Radical Orthodoxy is right in its calls for a Platonic understanding of what we were made for, Taylor doesn’t think that this non

101 Taylor, Social Theory as Practice, 65.
Deistic vision of God can compete once the ontological genie is out of the bottle. Reform is what powers secularization for Taylor, but as he says in the last line of *A Secular Age*: “Thus we need both ID and RMN to explain religion today”.

While Taylor and Milbank can widely agree on the problem of the subtraction story of modernity and argue for a cultural understanding of secularization, the main difference between the two is precisely the direction of their theories of secularization. Their purposes are different. Milbank wants to make sure that what has been lost in modernity is not overlooked. Taylor wants to make sure that what has been gained in modernity is not hidden from view by inaccurate ideas of what has been lost. Milbank thinks that the way to overcome epistemology is by having theology reclaim its central role in providing a master discourse, one which shows how secular philosophy is nothing more than an offshoot of Christian theology. In *Theology and Social Theory* the virtue of nonviolent Christian practice is rescued from modern secular attempts to interpret this Christian ideal as violence, and instead becomes the hermeneutic which powers an appropriate social theory. Milbank’s “theological sociology” is rooted in the claim that modern social theories, like secularization theories, unconsciously reproduce the theological structures of understanding from which they seek to wrestle free. Milbank effects a move akin to the historical retrieval called for by Taylor, when he attempts to demonstrate that “theology’s own ‘socio-logos’ is both historically prior to, and epistemically more basic than, that of social science; and to the extent that sociologists neglect or forget this greater primordiality of the theological, they labour under illusion about the capacities of their own project”. Taylor thinks the value of overcoming epistemology is in the corrective it provides for our understanding of modernity so we don’t mistake or overlook its real gains. Taylor’s interest in secularization theory is ultimately political, and he wants us to clear away the confusion of much of the secularization ideas in order to re-situate, not theology, but the process of wrestling towards epistemic gain in anything related to human knowledge production. Milbank’s is a recovery of theology as the tool which lays bare the real motives of secularization theory. Taylor’s is a recovery of humans self-descriptions which

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102 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 774-76.
103 Ibid, 776.
allows to get clear on what really powered and still powers people’s belief and unbelief; the sorts of things the theories of secularization tried to understand using the social scientific methods at hand. Taylor would agree with Cornell West’s assessment of Milbank:

“Hauerwas’ radical imperative of world-denial motivates Milbank’s popular Christian orthodoxy that pits the culprits of commodification and secularism against Christian socialism. His sophisticated wholesale attack on secular liberalism and modern capitalism is a fresh reminder of just how marginal prophetic Christianity has become in the age of the American empire. But, like Hauerwas, he fails to appreciate the moral progress, political breakthroughs, and spiritual freedoms forged by the heroic efforts of modern citizens of religious and secular traditions. It is just as dangerous to overlook the gains of modernity procured by prophetic religious and progressive secular citizens as it is to overlook the blindness of Constantinian Christians and imperial secularists.”105 (emphasis mine)

Both Taylor and Milbank, following Bourdieau, are after respectively a philosophical anthropology and a theology in which, as Milbank puts it, “the whole notion of a ‘social’ explanation of religion simply disintegrates”. Taylor is not thinking explicitly about theology, he is developing his philosophical anthropology, but the two projects come together on this critique of the proceduralism and universalism upon which social theory of religion is based. Taylor wants theology to be retrieved, but not for the same purpose as Milbank. Taylor would not want to re-instate theology as the Queen of the sciences, but would not want it occluded by false notions of science either. However, Milbank goes farther. Milbank explains: “It is not that religions should not be reduced to social influences – Weber agrees about this, all too strongly. It is rather that there is nothing ‘social’ which it could be reduced to. For ‘the social’ for Weber means first of all the idea that there is a fixed, a priori boundary between the religious/substantively-evaluative as against the economic, and secondly, that there is another a priori division between forms of

‘asocial’ authority based on pure violence/charisma, in contrast to social authority which is the mere inertia of repetition. As these boundaries are not ahistorical absolutes, there is nowhere in reality that Weberian ‘society’ can truly find a home. It follows a fortiori, that religion never rests, not even to a degree, on any ‘social’ basis.”\textsuperscript{106} Milbank’s social theory as theology is too radical for Taylor, which is how we should interpret his comments at the end of \textit{A Secular Age} about the need to complete Milbank’s work (ID) with the sort of work that Taylor has produced while trying to understand modern secularity.

Much more could be said about comparisons between Taylor and Milbank, especially from the perspective advanced by Taylor himself that would understand Milbank’s work as the theological corollary to Taylor’s philosophical anthropology. Both come to grips with secularization, though in different modes and from different directions. We must now turn back to Taylor.

In the third part of \textit{Social Theory as Practice}, entitled “The Concept of a Person” Taylor sums up his ideas about social theory as the “tracing of the conflict between two philosophies of social science”\textsuperscript{107} Not only does these competing ideas polarize the sciences of man they also “inspire rival pictures of morality and human life”. One philosophy is rooted in the seventeenth-century’s epistemologically grounded notion of the human subject as a being capable of making internal representations of things. The second philosophy, by contrast, “focuses on the nature of agency” and the fact that things matter to them; and this is to “attribute purposes, desires, aversions to them in a strong, original senses”. Taylor and Milbank have pursued the later philosophical category and the questions that this opens up. This is what brings them to hermeneutics.

Theory about humans, that takes into account the double hermeneutic\textsuperscript{108} at work, the moral frameworks from which meaning is derived, and the irreducibility of social goods, are no longer theories of the social that mirror representations of reality’s invariable features. Theories that take

\textsuperscript{106} Milbank, \textit{Theology and Social Theory : Beyond Secular Reason}, 92.
\textsuperscript{107} Taylor, \textit{Social Theory as Practice}, 48-67.
\textsuperscript{108} The human sciences are held to be “doubly hermeneutic” because do not just attempt to provide interpretation; they also attempt to provide interpretations of the interpretation.
at least the three features mentioned into account have become hermeneutical theories. But what is really being claimed by the sort of theory that Taylor proposes; theory that is hermeneutical?

6. Conclusion

The Interpretive Turn

Why make such a big deal about differences between the natural and the human sciences it might be asked? Isn’t Taylor overstating the problem, and does clearing up the problem of epistemology (at the heart of Taylor’s theory of secularization) really help us “struggle free” from under the false conceptions of religion and secularization based on the empirical and data-based approaches of social theory? In answering questions like this it is important to put Taylor into the context of larger patterns of philosophy spanning the past centuries. In the modern period philosophers turned away from metaphysical questions to take up investigations into the possibility and nature of human knowing in general. This is what has been historically called the epistemological turn and was largely an affair that spanned the 17th through to the 20th centuries. It is the assumptions of this turn that Taylor refers to as “epistemology” tout cru. This was followed by what might be called the “linguistic turn”; or the philosophical shift from the analysis of the mind to the analysis of language. This linguistic turn, largely a movement of the 20th century, moved in the direction of pragmatism in Anglo-American philosophy and in the direction of the development of a philosophical hermeneutics in the Continental tradition.109 However, at the same time during the 20th century philosophers have called into question the foundations of knowledge and the knowing subject that were basic to both the epistemological and the linguistic turn. This deeper questioning of language and meaning has been described as the “interpretive turn”, and it is here where the philosophy of Charles Taylor is to be situated. One of the things problematized by the interpretive turn is interpretation itself, and so it has been pointed out that “[t]he more philosophy and the interpretive disciplines proclaim the importance of interpretation in all of inquiry, the less there is

109 For this historiography of the interpretive turn I am indebted to a book entitled The Interpretive Turn, penned by the editors of the book: James F. Bohman, David R. Hiley, and Richard Shusterman.
agreement about what it is, what interpretive practices presuppose, and how to judge interpretive successes and failures. This is the issue of validity to which we referred earlier in this paper.

Does the disjuncture between natural and human science really matter? Modern epistemology drew a fundamental distinction between explanation and interpretation, in which scientific theorizing became the dominant mode of explanation through the methods developed within and associated to the natural sciences (hard). Interpretive practices were increasingly relegated to the human sciences (soft). The stage was set for the human sciences to pursue validation through adoption of the methods located within the logic of a reduction of all lines of enquiry to the ontology and methods of physics. So it was the modern epistemology itself that drew the distinctions that allowed for what Taylor thinks of as a later conflation of human and natural sciences. It is important to remember that modern epistemology has chastened itself to some degree from within the paradigm of the natural sciences. Post-empiricist philosophers of science like Thomas Kuhn (Structure of Scientific Revolutions) have led a critique from within the philosophy of the natural sciences against the positivist claims upon which “the supposed neutrality of observation, the “givenness” of experience, the independence of empirical data from theoretical frameworks, the ideal of a univocal language, and belief in rational progress of science” were based. This rejection of a positivist philosophy of science made the reasons for drawing the sharp explanatory-interpretive distinctions go away.

From within the human sciences the critiques of the epistemological and the linguistic turns have been fuelled by the hermeneutical traditions which Taylor has spent a career bringing to our attention. One of the first issues taken up in this critique had to do with how to understand the relationship between the natural and the human sciences, and we saw how Taylor’s early anti-

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110 Hiley, Bohman and Shusterman, The Interpretive Turn : Philosophy, Science, Culture, 1.
112 Hiley, Bohman and Shusterman, The Interpretive Turn : Philosophy, Science, Culture, 3.
epistemological writings were aimed at this problem.\textsuperscript{113} From some, like Richard Rorty, the whole dualistic affair should just be dropped, and the unity of (or nonduality) of science can be maintained. The appearance of a radical difference between the two kinds of science was based on the canons of logical positivism, which once dropped, allows us to “awaken from our positivist slumbers...to realize that none of these features hold of natural science either. The two turn out to be methodologically at one, not for the positivist reason that there is no rational place for hermeneutics; but for the radically opposed reason that all sciences are equally hermeneutic”.\textsuperscript{114} But Taylor calls this “a pleasing fancy”, and argues instead for a fundamental distinction between the natural and human sciences. In “Understanding in Human Science” Taylor draws the distinction by pointing out “what is wrong with logical empiricism, and the deductive-nomological model, showing how a critique of this model requires us to accept a place for understanding in natural science, then trying to show how the “understanding” which since Dilthey has been claimed as central to the sciences of man is different from this...”\textsuperscript{115} “Taylor’s and Dreyfus’s refusal to abandon the distinction is motivated by their desire to retain both a realist account of the natural sciences and essentialist claims about human beings. While holding that the natural sciences constitute a social practice like any other and that the history of this practice is one of Kuhnian conceptual revolutions, Taylor and Dreyfus insist that it is nonetheless the social practice whose goal it is to gain access to subject-independent reality – to decontextualize beliefs from the web of purposes and practices, to “un-world” them, in the Heideggerian idiom.”\textsuperscript{116} It is Taylor’s desire to maintain the essentialist view of human agency that guides the distinctions he draws between the natural and the human sciences.

So how do you know if an interpretation is successful? This is the critical factor of Taylor’s thought for this whole presentation of what is motivational for Taylor’s ideas on secularization. A hermeneutical anthropology reveals a human agency made up of self-interpretation, and this

\textsuperscript{113} For the best overview of this see the debate between Dreyfus, Rorty, and Taylor in: Charles Taylor, “Understanding in Human Science,” The Review of Metaphysics XXXIV, No.1.133 (1980).
\textsuperscript{114} Taylor, “Understanding in Human Science,” 26.
\textsuperscript{115} Ibid, 26.
\textsuperscript{116} Riley, Bohman and Shusterman, The Interpretive Turn : Philosophy, Science, Culture, 4-5.
would be lost if the sciences of man succumbed to the reductions of the natural sciences. As self-interpreting beings, the meanings of human action are always meanings "for" an agent. As such the goal of the human sciences for Taylor is not to achieve objectivity but to grasp what these meanings are for agents. And since for Taylor human agency is constituted by the sense of the self we have constituted in and by the moral universe created by language, then it follows that this positions "dialogue at the centre of human life and that a science of human beings must strive for an ideal of expanded intersubjectivity between agents who interpret themselves and others." Nicola Smith points out that while Taylor has been criticized for promoting what some consider to be a form of epistemological scepticism, that these criticisms fail to recognize that Taylor is arguing that the "rationality of an particular interpretation will be decidable in terms of its superiority relative to the pre-theoretical understanding of the agents, or relative to the prevailing interpretive paradigm of science". Instead of scepticism there is the very real possibility of epistemic gain as one interpretations wins out over another in terms of its adequacy in making sense out of phenomenon or bringing something hidden more clearly into view for people. As Smith goes on to point out for Taylor we should be sceptical of attempts to establish formal rules for determining validity in social science, but not necessarily be sceptical of validity in itself.

By setting aside the reductionism inherent to the natural sciences (explanations of "the 'higher' activities of our psychic and social lives in terms of the lower order sciences; in the first instance, biological sciences, and then later even in terms of physics and chemistry"), one can rediscover the social practices which for Taylor are the "real-life disputes of which these often rather bloodless philosophical debates are echoes". Taylor continuously reminds us that throughout most of human history ethics have been grounded in an articulation of the thick languages of religious and metaphysical belief. For theory which claims outright that these articulations are false, misguided, unenlightened, etc, Taylor wants to know what kind of falsity this is? "Is this grounding a mistake? Or a historically understandable limitation in the imagination of past

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117 Ibid, 6-7.
118 Smith, Charles Taylor: Meaning, Morals, and Modernity, 125.
generations? If so, what kind of mistake was it?” But Taylor does not think the naturalist answer is sufficient. These past articulations were not just “gratuitous languages”, but instead “made sense to people because they seemed to articulate their sense of the higher”. “In other words, [these articulations] offer further specifications of the concept that is in play here, the one that we can apply rightly or wrongly, and that we therefore cannot see as a simple projection.”¹²⁰ One can think again of the example given in chapter two of Deism.

Secularization theory for Taylor is not primarily to establish objective facts about religion in society, but to grasp what the meanings of human religious action really mean for agents. And so hermeneutics takes theory into an understanding of human practice; and Taylor has worked hard to establish the philosophical centrality of practice. This is Taylor’s point when he says that theory is a practice. In the introduction to The Interpretive Turn, the authors points out four reasons why interpretation always implies the practical:

“First, there is the intentional aspect of interpretation already noted. It is always directed at or applied to some intentional object. (That this could be argued of all thought, even theory, is a consequence both hermeneutics and pragmatism will readily accept.) Second, it applies a particular perspective to what it interprets, a perspective that shapes in large part the interpretandum. Third, interpretation is always context bound...the specific situation is what determines the very form and direction interpretation will take. ... [And finally] Gadamer claims that interpretive understanding is always already application, since the situation that prestructures interpretation always calls for an application, always demands some response from us in the pursuit of the purposes through which we encounter the situation”.¹²¹

It will not be obvious to contemporary secularization theory that the hermeneutical approaches born from the interpretive turn might be fruitful for understanding religion. As we have seen this has to do with limitations in the various approaches to scientific understanding. A secularization

¹²⁰ Ibid, 317.
¹²¹ Hiley, Bohman and Shusterman, The Interpretive Turn: Philosophy, Science, Culture, 12.
theory that takes Taylor's propositions seriously will allow for human's best accounts of their own actions; with the belief that this gets us closer to the truth in both practical life and in critical theories that try to explain what this practical life we live is about. What is left to be done according to Taylor is to articulate these best accounts, and through these articulations, by a series of self-correcting moves, the process of human knowledge building can "overcome epistemology"; replacing the false certainty with a struggle towards epistemic gain. As Craig Calhoun has it: "In the name of objectivity, much modern science takes such a narrow view of subjectivity that it ceases to appear significant except as a shorthand for various illusions of practical consciousness. Taylor claims that practical consciousness is a truer guide, though it is typically inarticulate." As Thomas Kuhn has pointed out, paradigmatic shifts between theoretical frameworks do not occur when one theory is falsified, but instead when one theoretical alternative is shown to be better. Theoretical alternatives are argued (articulated) into place through practical reason: for Taylor this is a reasoning in transitions that aims to establish not that some position is correct absolutely, but rather that some position is superior to some other.

Taylor's desire to see epistemology "overcome" can be a bit misleading, for he is really involved in an articulation and rehabilitation of the highest aspirations of modern epistemology in order to see its full influence and role in the making of modern identity. Having said that, there can be no doubt that Taylor shows that once the modern construal of self is fully articulated, the ideas presented as foundational to modern selfhood are shown to be powered by something other than their "truth of fact", but instead by the powerful moral story that moderns have needed to tell themselves about themselves. Taylor's theory of secularization is heavily dependent upon his anti-epistemological stance. The cumulative effect of Taylor's ideas, even for those who oppose them, create a serious challenge to the epistemological assumptions of secularization theory. Theorists will have to argue around Taylor's ideas, and show themselves free of the grip of epistemology before moving forward.

Conclusion

"But the point about identity-formation is that it is not an individual matter. It is a Cartesian-derived error to believe that man can define himself without reference to anything outside. Men decide who they are in terms of their relation to outside reality, and more particularly in terms of that outside reality to which they are related in the very basic way adumbrated above, that form which one has received and to which one gives in return. It is not hard to recognize here the basic relationship which has gone under the name religion in its various forms..."

Havey Cox wrote that religion is often the most accurate barometer of societal change available.\(^1\) He went on to explain that this was because humans live according to meaning without which life would not make sense. One does not have to be a phenomenologist and agree with Merleau-Ponty that we are condemned to meaning to understand Cox’s basic point. The meaning of religion in modernity has been the quest of so many for centuries now. We have surveyed the late modern social scientific approaches that have been hard at work in providing an explanatory framework form which academics could theorize changes in religion’s place is the societal structure. We have looked at Charles Taylor’s idea of the limitations to this explanatory framework and the improvements he suggests as a way forward in our understandings of the conditions of secularity in modernity.

The overarching goal of this thesis was to introduce my readers to key components of the philosophy of Charles Taylor’s in order to expose the central role played by the sustained critique of modern epistemology in Charles Taylor’s theory of secularization. As we have seen from the

\(^{1}\) Taylor, "From Marxism to the Dialogue Society," 160.
start, it is a bit misleading to speak of Charles Taylor’s theory of secularization, since it is probably more accurate to say that he has resisted delivering one. However, for over 50 years now Taylor has been writing about religion and secularity in an amazing variety of formats. Taylor has never hid from the fact that he finds a lot of modern and contemporary theorizing of religion and secularization lacking, and Taylor very much sees his own philosophical project as working to fill in the gaps that he observes.

Charles Taylor is a contemporary philosopher who does not think that removing or reducing religious questions in order to fit the form of naturalistic explanandum allows philosophy to escape the hold of modern epistemology; instead it has ended up blinding many academic disciplines to the degree to which the current epistemologies are still held in its grasp. The naturalistic assumptions of science are still at work in a contemporary epistemology of social scientific approaches that strains everything it studies through a reductive screen in the belief that the underlying features of human nature can be caught, and finally understood. Against the naturalism in social scientific explanations of secularization Taylor has argued “that Western modernity, including its secularity, is the fruit of new inventions, newly constructed self-understandings and related practices, and can’t be explained in terms of perennial features of human life.”

Secularization is such an important focus of Taylor’s that one could defend the view that Taylor’s entire philosophical project is one very complex theory of secularization. Many have interpreted this part of Taylor’s philosophy as being motivated by his theism. Some have welcomed this, and others have registered their disapproval. From my perspective, it could very well be that both sides might have it wrong. If one could get a hold of the tip of everything religious in Taylor’s philosophy, and pull it out like a thread, I maintain that Taylor’s philosophy does not unravel. His philosophy of language, his philosophy of science, his hermeneutics, his philosophical anthropology, his teleological explanations, transcendental arguments, and even his moral

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3 Taylor, A Secular Age, 22.
ontology⁴, do not come apart if Taylor’s references to “religion” are ruled out of court. I think that Bernard Gagnon has it right when he writes that Taylor’s humanism cannot be reduced to his personal religious faith, but instead to his philosophical considerations concerning human existence.⁵ Taylor is fascinated by religion for the simple reason that he considers it essential to the project of moral philosophy. Taylor’s struggle with modern epistemology should not be understood as a deconstruction, but an attempt to salvage what is best in it. Taylor’s opposition to naturalism in the sciences isn’t a witch hunt; Taylor “gives natural science free reign to construct whatever languages seem appropriate to its pursuits. What he objects to, however, is our tendency to treat scientific languages as if they were appropriate for describing all dimensions of human life.”⁶ Of course this has not convinced a whole host of his interlocutors.

1. **Taylor’s Detractors**

It comes as no surprise to anyone, including Taylor, that his idea here is contested.⁷ It is contested by those who reject the failure of the modern epistemology. This position, when applied to secularization theory, would be held by those theorists who claim that if secularization theory has been wrong in the past that it is because: 1) we need better theory to correct the inadequacies of theory; 2) in a related way, we need to wait for science to uncover more of the underlying causes of religion, data which can then be used to improve theory; and 3) so what looks like religion’s presence in modernity is most likely not a return and continuation of religion but the last attempt of the anti-rationalists to salvage the boat that we all know is sinking (the position of Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Daniel Dennett). Taylor’s ideas are also contested by those who would accept the anti-epistemological paradigm, but think that Taylor does not go far enough in his critique. This would be the range of thinkers, like Foucault and Rorty who think that both

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⁴ For more on this level of critique of Taylor by Quentin Skinner see: Quentin Skinner, “Who Are ‘We’? Ambiguities of the Modern Self,” Inquiry 34.2 (1991); as well as, Tully and Weinstock, Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism: The Philosophy of Charles Taylor in Question.

⁵ Gagnon, *La Philosophie Moral Et Politique De Charles Taylor*, 16.


⁷ This is what Hubert L. Dreyfus has identified as Taylor’s “pluralist robust realism” and for a detailed look into its contours see: Dreyfus, “Taylor’s (Anti-) Epistemology.”
the foundationalist AND the wider-net view espoused by Taylor should be dropped since, as Rorty puts it,

“Taylor and I both pride ourselves on having escaped from the collapsed circus tent of epistemology – those acres of canvas under which many of our colleagues are still thrashing aimlessly about. But each of us thinks that the other is still, so to speak, stumbling about among the tangled guy-ropes, rather than having escaped altogether. Taylor thinks that once one gets out from under epistemology one comes to an ‘uncompromising realism’. I think one comes to a position in which the only version of ‘realism’ one has left is the trivial, uninteresting and common-sensical one which says that all true beliefs are true because things are as they are.”

Others, following Clifford Geertz, find that Taylor’s brand of anti-epistemology is based on a caricature of naturalism and the natural sciences which is frozen in time, and does not take into account the changes that have come about in these sciences. Habermas, according to Taylor, has developed a position somewhere between those who think Taylor’s critique goes too far and those who think it does not go far enough. “Against the neo-Nietzscheans, he [Habermas] would strongly defend the tradition of critical reason, but he has his own grounds for distrust of the Heideggerian disclosure and wants instead to hold on to a formal understanding of reason and, in consequence, a procedural ethic, although purged of the monological errors of earlier variants”.

Many find the link between human action and morality made by Taylor to be a throwback to the assumptions of religion. Taylor’s idea that there is a moral ontology grounded in human’s natural moral reactions which is occluded under a “great epistemological cloud”, is often seen as

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8 Tully and Weinstock, Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism: The Philosophy of Charles Taylor in Question, 29.
9 Taylor’s beef isn’t with the natural sciences, but is instead with the cultural power that the social sciences have gathered to themselves through what for Taylor is the illegitimate piggy-backing of the successes of the natural sciences over the last few centuries. One gets a sense of this when you read Taylor’s participation in the Mind and Life conferences, a week long exchange between the Dalai Lama and well known representatives from Western science and humanism. See: mtsho Bstan *dzin rgya, Francisco J. Varela, B. Alan Wallace and Jinpa Thupten, Sleeping, Dreaming, and Dying: An Exploration of Consciousness with the Dalai Lama, Foreword by H.H. The Fourteenth Dalai Lama, trans. B. Alan Wallace and Thupten Jinpa, ed. Francisco J. Varela (Boston: Wisdom, 1997).
10 Geertz, “The Strange Estrangement: Taylor and the Natural Sciences.”
11 Taylor, Philosophical Arguments, 17.
derivative from Taylor’s personal commitments as a Christian, and thus inadmissible. Quentin Skinner takes Taylor to task for what he sees to be the theistic intents behind Taylor’s historical account of modern subjectivity in Sources. Skinner writes as an historian and finds Taylor’s support for the continued validity of the Christian God as worthy of human hopes to be terribly misplaced. Skinner prefers a Humean approach which finds “no reason whatever to suppose that human life in its full significance cannot be appreciated in the absence of God.”

Skinner goes on to write that the death of God leaves us with the freedom and perhaps even the duty to “affirm the value of our humanity more fully than ever before”. Taylor responds to the essay by asking Skinner what kind of affirmation of humanity can be produced by believers and non believers. Taylor writes: “In my view, this is the question: how much can you affirm? Just talking of ‘opportunity’ or ‘duty’ is beside the point. As though you could just turn it on. And as though once you had, the resulting commitment would be no cause for fear. This is perhaps the ultimate ‘liberal complacency’.”

The most thorough attempt to rescue Taylor from the “hidden God” accusations belongs to Bernard Gagnon, who writes that “l’humanisme taylorien ne se déduit pas de sa foi religieuse, mais de ses considérations philosophiques sur l’existence humaine.”

According to other thinkers it is Taylor’s moral realism which is suspect. In particular Taylor’s attempts at disclosing the background meanings and practices within which knowledge emerges, the “more Heideggerian side of Taylor’s project”, do not pass muster among several of his interlocutors. He is accused of disguising moral injunctions as epistemological arguments. Michael Shapiro writes that “it is surprising how often Taylor lets his moralizing code overmaster his analytic one. Although he tries to conceive of his moral notion of the human subject as a “philosophical anthropology”, it is difficult to construe his claim that humans have an innate sense of a “higher good”, which takes the form of Christian self-denial in many of his examples, as anything but a bald attempt to establish a synthetic, ethical a priori that will vindicate his more

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14 Tully and Weinstock, Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism: The Philosophy of Charles Taylor in Question, 226.

15 Gagnon, La Philosophie Moral Et Politique De Charles Taylor, 16.
Shapiro points to a passage in Foucault on Freedom and Truth where Taylor is taking issue with Foucault's falling into the Nietzschean trap of ignoring the reality of the moral dimension of human nature.

"It seems clear to me that there is a reality here. We have become certain things in Western Civilization. Our humanitarianism, our notions of freedom – both personal independence and collective self-rule – have helped to define a political identity we share; one which is deeply rooted in our more basic seemingly infra-political understanding of what it is to be an individual, of the person as a being with "inner" depth – all these features which seem to us to be rock-bottom, almost biological properties of human beings".17

For Taylor Foucault's denial of the increasing truth of the subject leaves Foucault with a Nietzschean neutrality unable to differentiate between good and evil. But Shapiro rescues Foucault from Taylor's claim by pointing out that Foucault's Nietzschean form of genealogical analysis of the subject in not "neutral" but is instead a different interpretation of the relationship between value and discourse. Foucault does not need Taylor's historical investigations in which Taylor tracks how the truths humans find meaningful have been constructed. Shapiro writes to review both volumes of Taylor's collected philosophical papers and notices the hedgehog at work; "the text organizes itself around one dominant code: a quasi-ontological, quasi-moral, and quasi-epistemological defence of Taylor's notion of the subject and the conception of human agency he derives from it."18 Shapiro points out that English language philosophers like Wittgenstein, American pragmatists like William James and the contemporary continental tradition influenced by Nietzsche and Heidegger's attacks on metaphysics all challenge Taylor's idea of moral subjectivity. Taylor knows this, but his "failure to problematize his own philosophical discourse aids and abets the moralizing posture that directs the concerns in each essay".19

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19 Ibid, 313
makes the same point when he writes that that like Taylor “Nietzsche views cultural horizons as indispensable to human life. Yet, in contrast to Taylor, a Nietzschean horizon does not denote an unchallengeable moral ontology.” 20 William Connolly in an essay entitled *Taylor, Foucault, and Otherness* pursues a similar argument and writes to point out that Taylor’s perspective would close questions that Foucault’s philosophy serves to open up. 21

2. Taylor’s Defence

The easy objection to Taylor on secularization runs something like the following: “The epistemological bogeymen Taylor resists have long since been beat out of the bushes. The charges Taylor levels against social scientific understandings of religion and secularization might apply to early secularization theorists, but this does not stand for the sophisticated contemporary theories. But Taylor’s point is that it is not easy to escape the influence of modern epistemology if one considers how scientific knowledge exists in a symbiosis with changing social imaginaries. Indeed, the very desire to see oneself as an escapee has a long and tortured moral history in itself. It presupposes a certain anthropology of the human that must be explained, not assumed, according to Taylor. The early framers of the dogmatic version of secularization (secularization as the disappearance of religion and-or belief) still influence today. And so for Taylor a theory of secularization is necessarily an anthropological theory. In short form, Taylor’s construction of why in the West this is so seems to run like this: 1) All anthropological theories are hermeneutical theories since they have as subject the human; 2) All theories that have as their subject the human cannot but include these same human’s best self-descriptions; 3) these self-descriptions now included in the explanandum pre-suppose various moral ontologies; 4) these moral ontologies involve evaluative issues of religion, or belief and unbelief; 5) these religious issues for people are not sufficiently explained in the form of “religion is evaporated by modernity” since this has not happened, nor in the form of “belief drops away in modernity” since this does not capture the “why” questions, and so Taylor proposes a third way to think about secularity: retrieving the

conditions of belief that obtain in the modern West; 6) and this shifts the debate about religion in society onto the playing field of the development of a hermeneutical anthropology...Taylor’s home court. This is grossly oversimplified, but can be validated by looking at the shape of the arguments outlined in “Contents” on page vii of Taylor’s new book *A Secular Age* which is an extended answer to the question: “What does it mean to say that we live in a secular age?”

Taylor is practicing what he preaches. In an interview he admits to the fact that for the first 20 years of his intellectual life his tangle with modern epistemology was undertaken from the negative. This would have been the 1960’s and the 1970’s. During that period he vigorously attacked behaviourism, naturalism in the theories of man, political atomism, and non-situated materialistic views of the self to name just a few. Taylor says that for the following twenty years, so during the 1980’s and 1990’s, he changed to a positive approach. The publication of *Source of the Self* (1989) finds Taylor no longer pitting his engaged theories of the human against “the view from nowhere” in order to argue for the epistemological acceptability of interpretive understandings of history and the human. Instead he decides to take up his own proposition and actually attempt to do the interpretive work he spent twenty years prior calling for. It is Taylor who believes that human understanding changes as some stories loose out to those more powerful stories that win out. And so since then Taylor has been trying to tell the most powerful stories he can muster about the moral sources of the making of the modern. His ideas about secularization are told in this mode as well, and this is why Taylor’s secularization theory is not really a theory as much as it is a story that he tells in various ways, using various actors, but always in order to retrieve what religion was and is for believers and nonbelievers. Taylor has in effect pitted his entire philosophical career on the truth of the hermeneutic and interpretive approaches to reality that he has said all along he believes. All this is much more than theory for him. As Taylor says in an interview:

> “La raison qui a fait que j’ai un peu changé le cap, c’est que je voyais que la polémique négative n’aboutissait jamais parce que les gens ont besoin d’un autre modèle de raison avant d’abandonner celui qu’ils ont, et dont ils ne sont pas vraiment conscients, parce que c’est tellement ancré, ça va tellement de soi : c’est
3. **Finale**

It is perhaps ironic that the social sciences were born from the desire to provide more scientific explanations of things like religion. In a very real sense “secularization” was the “polio vaccine” of the social sciences. In the same way that scientific research into human disease could claim improvements for human kind on an unparalleled scale, what would stop scientific research into humans’ religious impulses from the same sort of victories? These sciences of the human were positioning their validity in a language that offered a “neutral” vantage point from which to finally understand the religious reflex of humans. In other words, early social science seemed to have been effective in getting to the heart of the matter of religion using the new scientific techniques (like the social survey for example). Sociological descriptions of the religious replaced philosophical ones considered overly beholden to metaphysics, and gradually “religion” was sidelined in the agenda of western academic curricula. Across a large part of the 20th century research into religion was increasingly relegated to anthropology (for the fact part) and theology (for the value part). This is partly what made Taylor’s retrieval of the conditions of belief as pertinent to the study of secularization so different at the time it appeared in the 1960s. But recently in the sciences of religion (sociology), philosophy, and history religion is back on the agenda. Taylor has most certainly had some role to play in this reality.

There is a remark attributed to Sir Thomas Beecham, founder of the London Philharmonic Orchestra who allegedly asserted that “there are two golden rules for an orchestra: start together and finish together. The public doesn’t give a damn what goes on in between.”23 Religion has gone from being central to modern academic sociology’s founding, to then receding from the

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normative functionalist paradigm of academic interest by mid-20th century, to a return with the phenomenological approaches, to the present in which the social scientific study of religion in North America and Western Europe is “more expansive, more contentious, and perhaps more interesting than it ever was”. The hope of this thesis is that in some small way readers will be convinced that the philosophy of Charles Taylor, with its central critique of the modern epistemology, will be part of making the study of religion and society “more interesting that it ever was”.

“In short, the majority of men “without religion” still hold to pseudo religions and degenerated mythologies. There is nothing surprising in this, for, as we saw, profane man is the descendant of homo religiosus and he cannot wipe out his own history – this is, the behaviour of his religious ancestors which has made him what he is today. ... A purely rational man is an abstraction; he is never found in real life.”

(Eliade, 209)

24 Ibid, 493.
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