The Taylor Effect

The Taylor Effect:
Responding to a Secular Age

Edited by

Ian Leask with Eoin Cassidy, Alan Kearns,
Fainche Ryan and Mary Shanahan

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PREFACE

It is a pleasure for me, as President of the Mater Dei Institute of Education, to write the preface to this collection of papers on the work of Charles Taylor, distinguished Professor Emeritus of Political Science and Philosophy of McGill University in Montreal, respected practitioner of civic engagement, recipient of the Templeton Prize for his contribution to religious thought in 2007 and the Kyoto Prize, known as the "Japanese Nobel", in 2008.

In June 2009, Mater Dei Institute hosted an international conference on the work of Charles Taylor, with particular reference to his book *A Secular Age*. Fourteen scholars offered plenary papers over four days, most of which are now published in this collection. In addition, fifty other scholars presented papers in parallel sessions, many of which will become available through the online electronic journal of the Institute, *REA: A Journal of Religion, Education and the Arts*. The Institute also offered a Summer School for students on Taylor's book, at the time of the conference.

Mater Dei Institute is a College of Education in Dublin City University, specialising in the formation of teachers for second-level schools in Ireland in the areas of Religious Education and the Humanities. The Institute is made up of three schools: Theology, Education and the Humanities. Given the inter-disciplinary character of the curriculum in Mater Dei Institute, *A Secular Age* was an ideal text around which to gather students, staff and visiting scholars in conversation.

It is a rare enough phenomenon that an academic text, especially a text on philosophy and religion, should generate such widespread interest, public debate on the internet, and international discussion in both academia and *ecclesia*. It is even more rare when the text in question is over 875 pages long. Such is Taylor's *A Secular Age*, which is analysed and discussed in depth in the following pages.

It can be said that this book is a comprehensive account of the process and meaning of secularisation. It has been described by one reviewer in the following way: "Rather than clever and dramatic, the book is fine-grained, subtle, exhaustive and exhausting" (Peter Steinfels, *Commonweal*, 9th May 2009).

Taylor tells the story of secularisation by answering the question: How is it that in the year 1500 most people believed in God and that in the year

2000 most people find it difficult to believe in God? In his answer, Taylor maps out the changing conditions and circumstances surrounding the rise of widespread un-belief. He is quick to reject early on in the narrative that secularism is the result of public spaces being emptied of God, what he calls Secularism 1, or the result of the falling off of religious belief and practice, which he calls Secularism 2. Instead, the story of secularism is far more subtle and complicated.

The problem with subtraction theories is that they short-change the integrity of secularism and religion as well as the possibility of critical engagement between secularism and religion. Secularism, rather, is a process in which a number of significant shifts have take place over centuries: shifts from an enchanted universe to a disenchanted world; from *kairos* to *chronos;* from theism to a providential deism to an impersonal order; from transcendence to an immanent frame; from a hierarchical social order to a self-sufficient society; from a moral order with transcendent roots to an order of exclusive humanism.

Anthropology plays a key role in this unfolding narrative. As the author of a major volume on anthropology entitled *Sources of the Self* (1989)**,** Taylor appreciates better than most the centrality of anthropology to the modern project. In *A Secular Age*, Taylor traces what he calls the move from a pre-modern "porous self" to a modern "buffered self" as a one of the major sources of unbelief. Towards the end of the book he returns to the theme of anthropology, noting that it was the Catholic view of the human as "part angel and part beast" that led to Walker Percy's conversion, a perspective that stands out in contrast to the scientific view which sees the human as a "mere organism in an environment" (SA 731). And yet he notes that "our modern culture is restless at the barriers of the human sphere" (SA 726): through the search for meaning, the presence of empty-time, the denial of death, and the lack of human contact with nature.

A second significant theme is the debate about the difference between Europe and America in the context of secularism. Is America the exception to Taylor's phenomenology of the rise of secularism and its promotion of an exclusive humanism? Most Americans would describe themselves as religious humanists in contrast to the secular humanist of Europe. Taylor explains this difference between Americans and Europeans by noting that America did not have to overcome established ecclesiastical institutions in the way that Europe had. In the context of this debate it is opportune to have had a conference on Taylor in Ireland, since Ireland exists somewhere in-between the religiosity of America and the secularity of Europe. Ireland has much to learn from Taylor in understanding the

social transformations of the last twenty five-years, and especially in relation to the religious turmoil in Ireland in the light of the Ferns Report (2005), the Ryan Report (2008) and the Murphy Report (2009).

A third theme running through the book is the role that imagination plays in shaping the conditions of belief and unbelief. Taylor had previously written an important book on *Modern Social Imaginaries* (2004)**.** In that text, he described the social imaginary as "something much broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in a disengaged mode". Instead, the social imaginary is about "the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows". The social imaginary is a set of background understandings operative in the way society functions. Taylor singled out three particular areas of the social imaginary that are central to the emergence of secularity, namely the modern economy, the public square and the sovereignty of the people, each of which has no need of transcendence and as such is self-sufficient. In *A Secular Age* he takes up these themes again and articulates what has happened to the imagination in the modern era.

Taylor's *magnum opus* renders a singular service to the academy and religion by outlining in a very coherent and compelling manner the transitions that have taken place since the Enlightenment. His book raises as many questions as it answers. Allow me to ask three questions:

First, is Taylor's narrative a point of arrival or a point of departure? It is of course both. As a point of arrival it illuminates what has happened to religion over the course of centuries, and this is a real service and something of a wake-up call for theology, the churches, and religion. As a point of departure, it paves the way for further engagement between faith and late modernity, challenges the reader to explore the possibility of a re-enchanted immanence, and opens up a new space for dialogue about the role of religion in a post-secular society. Taylor is hopeful about the future of religion, partly because he believes the sources of secularisation are Christian in inspiration. However, it must be asked: what are we to make of secularism in non-Western societies untouched by Christianity?

Secondly, why is it that within such a comprehensive account about the conditions of belief and unbelief, Taylor has little to say about the biblical narrative? More particularly, what has become of the prophetic role of biblical religion in Taylor's discussion of belief and unbelief?

Thirdly, why is it that Taylor gives so little attention to the story of the Second Vatican Council? I believe that Taylor's narrative would have been enriched if he had paid more attention to the events of Vatican ll. This is especially true of the document from the council entitled *Gaudium*

et Spes (1965). That document outlines how the Catholic Church at Vatican ll embraced modernity, albeit in a qualified manner. There are interesting echoes of Taylor's account of the modern social imaginary within *Gaudium et Spes* and these have been brought out in a noteworthy way in the work of Australian theologian James Gerard Mc Evoy. Further, the Council had significant things to say about secularisation, atheism, unbelief, freedom and faith, as well as pointing the Church towards the importance of interreligious dialogue.

In spite of these questions and the many others that arise in this collection of papers, Taylor's book stands out as a landmark study of the conditions of belief and unbelief. Taylor provokes all to reflect on what he calls the "unthought" aspects of secularism and religion.

It is hoped that the publication of these proceedings will contribute to the many conversations already initiated by Taylor's work—in Yale University in 2008, Fordham University in 2009, the Catholic University of America, Washington DC, in 2009, in University College Dublin in 2010, and elsewhere.

In conclusion, I want to thank: the organising committee of the conference, chaired by Dr Eoin Cassidy; Ms Mary Shanahan who co-ordinated the preparations for, and activities of, the conference; Dr Ian Leask, who acted as the editor-in-chief of the proceedings; Dr Andrew Mc Grady, Director of the Institute, who supported the conference; and finally the Research and Finance Committees of the Institute for sponsoring the conference.

Dermot A. Lane
Dublin
May 2010

INTRODUCTION

This volume presents an original and diverse collection of essays addressing various aspects of Charles Taylor's magisterial *A Secular Age*. Ranging from close and critical readings of Taylor's formulations and suppositions, to comparative studies of Taylor and various "interlocutors", to applied approaches utilizing Taylor's concepts, to explorations launched from a Taylorian foundation, the thirteen chapters comprise a multifaceted exploration of Taylor's multifaceted achievement.

The volume has emerged from a highly successful international conference on *A Secular Age*, held at the Mater Dei Institute, Dublin, in June 2009, and its various chapters have been further honed and crafted as a result of the vigorous engagement that characterized those four days of debate and dialogue. Given the vast, synoptic sweep of Taylor's *magnum opus*, the contributors represent a suitably diverse range of interests, backgrounds and expertise—members of departments of philosophy, literature, philosophical theology, systematic theology, moral theology, education, and political science, whose interests stretch from Plato to Girard, *phronesis* to pedagogy, Deism to dogmatics, medical ethics to aesthetics…

To help orientate readers within this diverse spread, the collection has been divided into two, broad-ranging sections: "Analyses and Dialogues", in which particular areas of *A Secular Age* are examined and, in some cases, placed in "conversation" with other aspects of the philosophical and theological traditions; and "Applications and Explorations", in which Taylor's work becomes both the inspiration and foundation for further (and often critical) investigations across a swathe of different concerns.

In the first chapter of the first section, Ruth Abbey examines Taylor's attempts to articulate the contemporary conditions of religious belief and experience in westernized societies. These include: the quest for Religious Authenticity; the phenomenon of Cross Pressures and Fragilization; the Three Cornered Contest between Exclusive Humanism, the Immanent Counter-Enlightenment and Religion; the Ideal of Fullness; and the Immanent Frame. Scrutinizing each in turn, and posing some unanswered questions about both the meaning of each and the relationship of the questions to one another, Abbey concludes that Taylor's own framework

can be used to show that religious belief is not as marginal as many of his own remarks suggest.

Complementing Abbey's approach, Eoin Cassidy argues against a strict demarcation between "transcendence" and "immanence", in terms of the fate of religion in a secular age: for Cassidy, the distinction risks fuelling the suspicion that religion is an escapist or cowardly flight from the world. Moreover, Cassidy suggests, the distinction can too easily become a supposed "explanation" for the decline of religion, and can thus occlude the possibility of the "immanent frame" acting as a catalyst for religious renewal.

Stephen J. Costello provides a wide-ranging exploration of the notion of "fullness" and its relationship with fulfilment and flourishing. Making the issue of "conversion" the culmination of his piece, Costello suggests that Bernard Lonergan provides a more nuanced account, and is thus able to fill in certain gaps in Taylor's narrative; the result, he suggests, is a suitably "fuller" appreciation of the dynamics involved in moral, intellectual and religious conversions.

In a powerful example of Taylorian "self-interpretation", Joseph Dunne provides an exegesis that begins—appropriately—with his own life and times (viewed in terms of Taylor's philosophical anthropology), before going on to consider the links between Taylor's particular conception of "the ethical" and his valorisation of "lived experience". Finally, Dunne also explores more fully the tensions entailed in what Taylor calls our "ethical predicament", and the three cornered contest it produces between humanists, believers and defenders of the "immanent counter-Enlightenment".

Meanwhile, as regards the historical "ballast" beneath Taylor's understanding of contemporary society, Ian Leask takes issue with Taylor's depiction of Deism as the effective foundation of the "exclusive humanism" that (supposedly) characterizes modernity. By showing the importance of the influence of Spinoza's thought on Deism—an influence unacknowledged by Taylor himself—Leask seeks to challenge the correlation operative within *A Secular Age* and suggests that, once it is located in a more Spinozistic context, Deism is better understood as a kind of *anti*-humanism.

Finally, and exemplifying the "dialogical" approach of Taylor's own work, Mary Shanahan considers Taylor's analysis of the fragmentation of society and its lack of shared projects in the light of Plato's analysis of friendship. Drawing upon the *Phaedrus*, *The Ethics of Authenticity* and *A Catholic Modernity*, as well as *A Secular Age*, she argues that it is ethics,

or, more specifically, "ethical intersubjectivity", that provides the ultimate shared project.

Part Two, "Applications and Explorations", begins with Michael Conway's resolutely theological take on the theory and process of secularization, as expounded in the social and historical sciences. In the light of Taylor's specific contributions, Conway considers a variety of key issues—like autonomy of discipline, dependency of discourse, and legitimacy of statement—before outlining a critical and deep-seated inadequacy in so much current discussion of secularization. This inadequacy, in turn, is taken as an invitation to dialogue with the *logos* of theology.

Following Conway's theological exploration, Michael Paul Gallagher offers a non-specialist introduction to Taylor for those engaged in religious education. He explores five major dimensions of Taylor's thought, all of them touching on the culture that conditions faith today, examining in turn his key positions on modernity, secularisation, religion in general, Christianity in particular, and emerging languages of faith. A closing section of the paper imagines Taylor speaking directly to teachers of religion today.

Moving to issues of moral theology, Patrick Hannon offers reflections on some implications of Taylor's account of secularity for evolving relationships between religion (especially Catholicism) and society in Ireland. He argues that if the Christian churches are to play a constructive role in the shaping of modern Ireland, their efforts must be ecumenical, and responsive to a new pluralism of religious belief and practice, as well as to secularism itself. He suggests that a way ahead may be found in a joint exploration and pursuit of the common good of Irish society today.

Pádraig Hogan examines the possibilities for religious education as an "unforced pursuit", in the light of some key arguments in *A Secular Age*. Taking stock of the challenges posed by the complex relationship between the "massive unlearning" of modern society and more militant religious conviction that the same society engenders, Hogan explores the kinds of engagement that religious inheritances of learning might fruitfully be afforded in today's education.

Shifting the focus, Alan Kearns presents an examination of the way in which Taylor's work questions the use of codes and indirectly raises questions about the impact of codes on moral agency in contemporary professional practices. For Taylor, it seems, the ever-expanding plethora of professional codes of ethics implies a reduction in individual moral agency. For Kearns, however, a code of ethics does not necessarily

diminish professional agency, but, instead, can provide a structure of support and guidance for dealing with increasingly complex ethical issues.

Andrew O'Shea explores what Taylor calls the conflicts of modernity within the context of the new modern imaginary, and shows how the dilemmas that Taylor addresses in *A Secular Age* have their roots in an account of the pre-Axial sacred and the seemingly progressive stages that mark an internal critique of archaic violence. By explicating Taylor's analysis of the pre-Axial in the context of the two divergent accounts of religion that he deals with (in the works of Bataille and Girard), O'Shea highlights what he sees as the significance of the still resonant impulses toward violence, and shows how the theme of "dark origins" emerges as a defining motif in the debate concerning transcendence. O'Shea argues that a Christian hermeneutics can meet the challenge posed by violence and excess, a challenge that understands "sacrifice" as a central feature of human experience.

Finally, Fainche Ryan considers the implications of Taylor's observation that, today, "we need *phronesis* even more". Writing from an explicitly Thomistic perspective, Ryan addresses the need, not so much for *phronesis*, but for a recovery of the virtue of *prudentia*, or practical wisdom. She considers in detail, not just the virtue *in se*, but also how one can learn to "play the game of life well", how one can become good at the project of becoming a human being, and how a human might flourish, if the criteria of being human rests in creation after the image and likeness of God.

The sheer range of voices and issues gathered in the volume is obvious enough, from the above summary. Accordingly—and even if the extent of Taylor's provocation makes it inconceivable that further studies of his monumental text will not follow—the editors of this volume are confident that *The Taylor Effect* will not just represent one of the first major responses: its breadth and quality should ensure that it remains a central reference point in any future discussion of Taylor's work.

Acknowledgements

As already indicated, this volume emerged from a conference and summer school on *A Secular Age*, held at the Mater Dei Institute, Dublin, in June 2009. The editors should like to thank the various speakers and delegates at those events, as well as the academic and support staff involved, the Institute's Director, Dr Andrew Mc Grady, and its President, Dr Dermot Lane.

Bibliographical Note

Given its centrality and ubiquity in this volume, Taylor's *A Secular Age* has been rendered throughout as SA, with appropriate references following immediately. Its full details are:

Taylor, Charles, 2007. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press.

PART ONE:

ANALYSES AND DIALOGUES

A SECULAR AGE: THE MISSING QUESTION MARK

RUTH ABBEY

Introduction

A Secular Age represents the culmination of a decade or more of Charles Taylor's thinking about religion and its place in modernity in particular and in human life more generally. Earlier formulations of some of the ideas that make up this vast work appear in the Gifford Lectures which Taylor delivered in Edinburgh in April and May, 1999. Versions of some of its arguments have also been expressed in his short work from 1999, *A Catholic Modernity?*, in another short work, this time from 2002, *Varieties of Religion Today*, and in *Modern Social Imaginaries* published in 2004. There are also links with Taylor's 1989 book *Sources of the Self.* Indeed, as I understand Taylor's trajectory, the explicit manifestation of his religious views began tentatively in the closing pages of *Sources of the Self* where he talked about high standards needing strong sources and raised doubts about the capacity of a purely humanist outlook to go on powering the ethically demanding commitment to practical benevolence (Taylor 1989, 516-517). When posing these questions Taylor reveals his own hunch that "great as the power of naturalist sources might be, the potential of a certain theistic perspective is incomparably greater" (Taylor 1989, 518). And of course, having been a practicing Catholic all his life, we can assume with some confidence that Taylor must have been thinking about issues like these even before they began to surface in his writings.[1]

Yet although Taylor has clearly given a great deal of thought to these matters, I want to raise some questions about his depiction of what he calls Secularity 3. In particular I want to ask how secular the age we are said by Taylor to live in really is. This is what the missing question mark in this chapter's title refers to: just how secular is the age in which we are living? Posing this question is, however, designed, not to undermine, but to complement Taylor's overall analysis. Given that one of Taylor's larger aims in this work is to demonstrate the tenacity of religion in modern

western societies,[2] I advance a line of argument that he could have followed in adducing the conditions of contemporary religious belief and non-belief in such societies, but did not. In short, I propose that Taylor's own framework can be used to show that religious belief is not as marginal to the lives of most contemporary Westerners as many of his remarks suggest. From this point of view, an alternative title for his book could have been *What Secular Age*?[3]

A chapter of this length can, of course, deal only with a sliver of a work as formidable as *A Secular Age*. This chapter draws from those sections dealing with the conditions of contemporary religious belief and practice without engaging the historical material that constitutes such a large section of the book. My comments pertain, therefore, to material from the Introduction and from Chapter 13, "The Age of Authenticity", to the end.[4] I begin by discussing what Taylor means by Secularity 3, and consider the conceptual tools he employs to examine religious belief and non-belief in contemporary western societies. As part of this process, I underline the inclusive way in which Taylor defines religion. The chapter goes on to question how embattled an option religious belief really is in modern western societies, and draws from opinion poll data to show that most members of most western societies claim to adhere to some form of religion, at least in the way Taylor defines it. I conclude by arguing for the value of such data in rounding out Taylor's picture of life in a supposedly secular age. This sort of data supports Taylor's signature story about religion's endurance in the modern western world while at the same time checking his tendency to exaggerate the reach of what he calls exclusive humanism or closed immanence.

What is Secularity 3?

One of Taylor's central ambitions—and perhaps even his central ambition—in *A Secular Age* is to shed light on Secularity 3 as he calls it, or the current conditions of modern religious belief and experience in western societies. This is what, in Taylor's eyes, sets his approach apart from other analyses of secularity which see it as referring either to the evacuation of religion from the public and other social spheres—which is what he calls Secularity 1—or to the decline in the number of people expressing allegiance to traditional religious views and in particular Christianity—which he dubs Secularity 2. While Taylor's preferred approach to secularity cannot ignore completely either of these developments, what distinguishes it is its focus on experience, on what it is like to be a religious believer or non-believer in contemporary western

societies (SA 2-3; cf. 423).[5] In making his distinctive contribution, Taylor seeks to "shift the focus to the conditions of belief, experience and search …" (SA 4). At the work's outset he announces his intention to "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" (SA 5; cf. 8, 13-14).

As this indicates, he attributes great importance to the issue of how individuals living in a secular age experience religion (or its absence). Being religious or not is for him more than simply adhering to a particular belief system: rather, "there is a way in which our whole experience is inflected if we live in one or another spirituality" (SA 11). Readers familiar with Taylor's thought will recognize that this concern with what it is like to live as a believer or non-believer in contemporary western societies is an extension of his career-long concern with self-interpretations, with how individuals understand themselves. Self-interpretations are, for him, crucial components of human identity and, therefore, of social reality. As he says, "man [sic] is a self-interpreting animal… he is always partly constituted by self-interpretation" (Taylor 1985, 72). In "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man" Taylor insists that we "think of man as a self-interpreting animal. He is necessarily so, for there is no such thing as the structure of meanings for him independently of his interpretation of them" (ibid., 26; cf. 54).[6]

Before exploring in any detail how Taylor wrestles with what he calls Secularity 3, it is necessary to reflect on what he means by religion. Such an appreciation is also essential to my thesis that the secular age is not as secular as Taylor often suggests. This question of what Taylor means by religion is taken up by only a few of the many commentaries I have seen on *A Secular Age*,[7] yet it is an important and complicating component of his whole argument.

Taking a capacious approach to defining religion, Taylor counts any perspective or worldview that remains open to transcendence of the human, all too human, as religious. Thus he says that "a reading of 'religion' in terms of the distinction transcendent/immanent is going to serve our purposes here" (SA 15; cf. 16, 20, 544). His is not primarily an institutional or doctrinal approach: it is not really about practices or groups or institutions or bodies of belief. What counts for Taylor is whether an outlook has a transcendent axis and whether its sense of the transcendent informs its conception of human flourishing. Taylor thus defines religious faith in what he calls the strong sense "by a double criterion: the belief in transcendent reality, on one hand, and the connected aspiration to a transformation which goes beyond ordinary human flourishing on the

other" (SA 510). As I understand this working definition of religion, all belief in God is likely to qualify as religion—unless someone holds that God exists but that this has no bearing upon that person's conception of human flourishing or ideal of fullness. This is the sort of position Taylor finds in ancient Epicureanism which "admitted Gods, but denied them relevance to human life" (SA 19). But Taylor's capacious approach must allow that religion is more than simply theism—theism is but one form of religion. Any orientation toward the transcendent where the understanding of transcendence feeds back into a conception of human flourishing and fullness, counts as religion for the purposes of Taylor's analysis of the secular age. He offers Buddhism as an example of this—it has a transcendent axis that informs its conception of human flourishing, but it is not a traditional form of theism (SA 17).[8]

His inclusive and generous approach allows Taylor to avoid invidious distinctions and decisions about what does and does not qualify as religion. This is especially advantageous given the repeated emphasis in *A Secular Age* on the dazzling diversity of approaches and attitudes toward religion evident in the contemporary western world. He calls this the "nova effect"[9] and it is, in turn, connected to the quest for religious authenticity which is one of the hallmarks of a secular age. Casting a wide net in defining religion also allows agents to decide for themselves whether they have a religious orientation or not, which is compatible with his wider commitment to attention to self-interpretations. Taylor's generous approach to what counts as religion is also, more generally, a reflection of his flexible, open-minded and characteristically relaxed attitude towards matters of definition.

Taylor's ambition to shed light on what it is like to be a religious believer or non-believer in contemporary western societies is a massive task, and one of the striking things about *A Secular Age* is the way he comes at this complex question from a number of angles. It is as if he is trying out a series of formulations for capturing life in a secular age. As I understand it, Taylor advances five major entrées into this question about what is distinctive about the current conditions of modern religious belief and practice in western societies. These are:

1. the Phenomenon of Religious Authenticity;
2. the Experience of Cross Pressures and Fragilization;
3. the Three Cornered Contest between Exclusive Humanism, the Immanent Counter-Enlightenment and Theism;
4. the Ideal of Fullness; and
5. the Immanent Frame.

Only the latter two—the ideal of fullness and that of the immanent frame—are, to my knowledge, unique to *A Secular Age*. Versions of all of the other ideas have appeared in the earlier works mentioned above.[10] Even the ideal of fullness is best understood as a variation on Taylor's earlier arguments about the inescapability of strong evaluations, so of the ideas listed here, that of the immanent frame is the only conceptual innovation in *A Secular Age*.

When we boil down what Taylor means by living in a secular age, we find that the following things are central. From Item 3—the Three Cornered Contest between Exclusive Humanism, the Immanent Counter-Enlightenment and Theism—what is really crucial is the existence of exclusive humanism and the immanent counter-enlightenment, for both shut the transcendent window. From Item 4—the Ideal of Fullness—what is crucial is the evolution of conceptions of fullness that make no reference to anything beyond the human. From Item 5—the Immanent Frame—what is crucial is the possibility of closed immanence. Items 1 and 2—the rise of religious authenticity and the experience of cross pressures and fragilization—could, in principle, occur in societies where everyone was religious—in Taylor's loose and inclusive sense. The three things that I submit as being central to Taylor's analysis of life in a secular age are, moreover, three ways of depicting the same phenomenon—the possibility of a life led without reference or attention to the transcendent. This plays a constitutive role in what Taylor takes to be the conditions of belief in the secular age. As Taylor puts it, "secularity 3 came to be along with the possibility of exclusive humanism… the crucial transforming move in the process is the coming of exclusive humanism" (SA 19). One of the things that he finds to be unprecedented in the contemporary western world is that humans can now live without any personal connection or aspiration to religion or any form of transcendence. As he announces in the Introduction to *A Secular Age*:

> … the coming of modern secularity in my sense has been coterminous with the rise of a society in which for the first time in history a purely self-sufficient humanism came to be a widely available option ... a humanism accepting no final goals beyond human flourishing; nor any allegiance to anything else beyond this flourishing. Of no previous society was this true. (SA 18)

Shortly after he expresses the point thus: "a secular age is one in which the eclipse of all goals beyond human flourishing becomes conceivable… This is the crucial link between secularity and a self-sufficing humanism" (SA 19-20).[11]

Religious non-belief and denial or indifference to the transcendent realm in any form has thus become a viable option for people in modern western societies. It is possible and for some desirable to live a life with neither personal participation, nor interest, in religion nor any orientation toward the transcendent. (It is, of course, much harder for such individuals to escape religion altogether—take, for instance, the simple existence of Christian public holidays such as Christmas and Easter in western countries.) Although Taylor initially says that the possibility of living life without any personal connection or aspiration toward religion or any form of transcendence is an unprecedented phenomenon, he later qualifies this by explaining that what is novel is the spread of this doctrine, rather that its mere existence. He casts ancient Epicureanism as a form of exclusive humanism, but one which remained confined to an elite. Contemporary exclusive (or self-sufficient, self-sufficing or atheist—see, for example, SA 569) humanism is, by contrast, available to those at any level in western societies (SA 19).[12] However, as I will argue, just because it is widely available does not mean that it is widely adopted.

As its name suggests, exclusive humanism shows no interest in, and sometimes hostility toward, things or forces that claim to go beyond the human realm. But as Taylor's account of Luc Ferry's work shows, this does not doom its adherents to seeking fulfillment in the dull round of daily life nor to heralding consumerism as the highest human good. Exclusive humanists can be committed to improving human welfare, to ending poverty and violence or to any number of large-scale and ethically demanding projects. What defines exclusive humanism is that all this energy is expended for the good of one's fellow human beings only—no extra-human goal or purpose is sought or served (SA 677). Even moral outlooks that pay attention to questions of intergenerational justice would, as I understand it, fall into the exclusive humanist category, for although their concerns transcend the here and now to embrace imaginatively the welfare of those yet to be born, their purpose remains the promotion of strictly human flourishing. As Taylor's recognition of, and even admiration for these large-scale, and sometimes long-term projects indicates, even those whose life includes no transcendent dimension harbor ideas of fullness. Working for the betterment of one's fellow human beings is one non-transcendent ideal of fullness; the dignity conferred by a life lived in accordance with reason is another (SA 8-9, 694).[13]

Moreover, as the addition of the adjective "exclusive" implies, not all humanism is of this sort. Taylor makes room, albeit briefly, for a non-exclusive form of humanism, taking as his example the idea of deep

ecology—the belief that humans can experience a form of transcendence through communing with the natural world. From this perspective, nature's worth is intrinsic rather than instrumental and it represents an eminently valuable good above and beyond human life (SA 19).[14] Non-exclusive humanism thus offers transcendence *sans* traditional religion.[15] This also denies traditional religion any monopoly on transcendence, which is in keeping with Taylor's capacious approach to religion.[16]

I suggested previously that the ideal of fullness is best understood as a variation on Taylor's earlier arguments about the inescapability of strong evaluations. There Taylor held that individuals rank some of their desires, or the goods they desire, as qualitatively higher than others. Some of the goods in our lives are seen to be more worthy, valuable, meaningful or important than others. The fact of strong evaluation means that humans are not only simple weighers of preferences: instead, with some choices, we make qualitative distinctions among the things we value or seek.[17] So Taylor has long held that all humans live with some sense of higher and lower in their lives. In *A Secular Age* this comes to be expressed in terms of an ideal (or intimation) of fullness. In its Introduction, Taylor gives an account of fullness in terms that resonate powerfully with his older conception of strong evaluation. As he says,

> We all see our lives, and/or the space wherein we live our lives, as having a certain moral/spiritual shape. Somewhere, in some activity, or condition, lies a fullness, a richness; that is, in that place (activity or condition), life is fuller, richer, deeper, more worth while, more admirable, more what it should be… Perhaps this sense of fullness is something we just catch glimpses of from afar off; we have the powerful intuition of what fullness would be, were we to be in that condition, e.g., of peace or wholeness; or able to act on that level, of integrity or generosity or abandonment or self-forgetfulness. (SA 5; cf. 16, 677)[18]

The ideals of fullness followed by those who are religious will differ one from another but all will be informed in some way by their religious beliefs (SA 11). And as we have just seen, even those whose life includes no transcendent dimension have ideas about what makes their lives more fulfilling. Indeed, one of the things marking the secular age is that exclusive humanism has advanced a number of ideals of fullness that make no reference to the divine or transcendent. This is one of the achievements of modernity that renders it possible for people to live their whole life in a condition of closed immanence.

As this specification of "closed" immanence intimates, exclusive humanism is not synonymous with what Taylor means when he coins the

phrase "the immanent frame". He believes that all denizens of western society live within the immanent frame which offers a way of making sense of one's life without reference to God, the divine or the transcendent (SA 594). This argument relies heavily on Taylor's account in *Modern Social Imaginaries* of how three major arenas of modern life—the market economy, the public sphere and popular sovereignty—have come to be understood as self-constituting and self-regulating, as not relying on any conception of God, religion or transcendence for their legitimacy or smooth functioning. However, Taylor is at pains to point out that exclusive humanism is but one option within the immanent frame. It is possible to live within the immanent frame while remaining open to religion and the transcendent, to live within the immanent frame without closing the transcendent window, as Taylor sometimes puts it. The offer made by the immanent frame—that people can live their lives without reference to anything beyond the human all too human—is not too good to be refused. As Taylor declares in the first part of Chapter 15, entitled "The Immanent Frame", it "permits closure, without demanding it" (SA 544. Cf. 545; 556).[19] Indeed, his target throughout much of *A Secular Age* is those who portray the closing of the transcendent window as inevitable in western modernity (SA 548, 555-6; 579, 595). Modern westerners might have little or no choice but to live within the immanent frame, but this does not necessitate closing the transcendent window nor, by Taylor's definition, excluding religion.[20]

The Embattled Option?

Taylor works hard to point out that the immanent frame can be lived in a closed or open way and in so doing, makes his case for the enduring role of religion—as he loosely defines it—in a secular age. Yet despite this achievement, Taylor sometimes undermines his own goal of demonstrating religion's tenacity by exaggerating the threat to it in the secular age. On a number of occasions he overstates the power and presence of exclusive humanism, writing as if closed immanence were in the ascendancy in western societies. In the book's Introduction, for example, he explains that

> [t]he shift to secularity… consists, among other things, of a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and, indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace… belief is an option, and in some sense an embattled option in the Christian (or post-Christian) society… (SA 3)

Note here, however, the shift in his concerns, for his interest in this passage seems to be belief in God specifically rather than transcendence more generally. And this is not the only passage where Taylor deviates from his own larger, more capacious definition of religion. Consider the way he formulates the key question regarding Secularity 3: "why is it so hard to believe in God in (many milieux of) the modern West, while in 1500 it was virtually impossible not to?" (SA 539).[21] Yet as we have seen, religion as Taylor defines it is not co-extensive with belief in God. What he officially cares about in *A Secular Age* is religion rather than simply theism, and so the difficulty or decline of belief in God is only relevant if it is not in any way replaced by other transcendent perspectives. Diminishing faith in traditional forms of theism is only relevant if superseded by exclusive humanism or closed immanence. I am not suggesting that declining belief in traditional forms of theism or dwindling church attendance and affiliation are utterly irrelevant to understanding religious experience, nor without significance for churches themselves or social life more generally. But the move Taylor makes in adopting his capacious definition of religion and his focus on Secularity 3 combine to suggest that these things are not decisive in understanding a secular age. What is decisive is the dissemination of exclusive humanism or closed immanence.

Further evidence that Taylor sometimes undermines his own goal of showing religion's endurance in the modern western world by exaggerating the threat to religion appears in the book's Introduction. Early in *A Secular Age*, we read that

> … in certain milieux, it may be hard to sustain one's faith. There will be people who feel bound to give it up, even though they mourn its loss… There will be many others to whom faith never even seems an eligible possibility. There are certainly millions today of whom this is true. (SA 3)

Taylor later asserts that for "more and more people, unbelieving construals seem at first blush the only plausible ones" (SA 12). A page later he declares that "the presumption of unbelief has become dominant in more and more of these milieux; and has achieved hegemony in certain crucial ones, in the academic and intellectual life, for instance; whence it can more readily extend itself to others" (SA 13). Shortly after he announces that "unbelief has become for many the major default option" (SA 14). A few pages later we find that "the eclipse of all goals beyond human flourishing… falls within the range of an imaginable life for masses of people" (SA 19-20). The frequency and tenor of these remarks is significant, as is their location, for by placing them in the book's

Introduction, Taylor is setting the tone for what is to come. But such observations about the threats to religion in a secular age are not confined to the Introduction. Later in the book Taylor says that people who are confident that "the existence of God can be 'proven'… are perhaps less numerous today than their secularist opposite numbers, and certainly cannot approach the intellectual hegemony their opponents enjoy" (SA 551). In that same chapter we read that "the same kind of supposition is widespread today, now in favour of atheism, or materialism, relegating all forms of religion to an earlier era… so powerful is the sense created in certain milieux, that these old views just *can't* be options for us" (SA 590; emphasis original). Toward the book's end he speaks of "societies where the general equilibrium point is firmly within immanence, where many people even have trouble understanding how a sane person could believe in God …" (SA 770).[22]

Many of Taylor's claims about the difficulty of sustaining religious belief in a secular age are quasi-empirical ones. Yet what such formulations fail to capture is that "more and more" of those who see unbelieving construals as the only plausible ones are not *most*. Unbelief might have become the major default option for many people, but it has not become this for most. The masses of people who can now imagine a life of closed immanence are not the mass of people. Taylor provides no evidence for his declaration that those who deny the existence of God outnumber those who believe such existence can be proven, and nothing I have ever seen by way of empirical evidence bears this out. Nor does he supply any support for his secondary point about unbelievers exercising intellectual hegemony. In all these cases, he makes quasi-empirical claims without offering anything approaching empirical support for them.

Doing the Numbers

The "we" who are said by Taylor to live in a secular age are denizens of the western world—the populations of Europe, North America and westernized countries like Australia and New Zealand (SA 1, 435, 594). Elsewhere he refers to "our North Atlantic civilization" (SA 473); he also describes these societies as having their roots in "Latin Christendom" (SA 21). Taylor is correct to say that many people in these societies live a life with neither personal participation nor interest in religion. However, such people remain a minority in almost all of those societies. In the overwhelming majority of the countries of the "we" that supposedly live in a secular age, religious believers—if we use Taylor's inclusive definition of religion—are in the majority.

When it comes to the largest single constituent of the "we", the United States, those occupying positions of closed immanence are a tiny minority. The American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) conducted in 2008 reported that in response to open-ended questions about religious identification, less than 1% of the US population identify themselves as atheist and less than 1% identify themselves as agnostic. Compare this with the fact that just over 5% of the respondents fell into the "Don't Know/Refuse to Answer" category and we see what a tiny proportion of respondents this comprises.[23] The ARIS findings echo those of the 2008 Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, where those who describe themselves as either atheist or agnostic are 1.6% and 2.4% of the US adult population respectively (Pew 2008a, 2). To complicate matters, just over a fifth of the 1.6 who identify themselves as atheist in the Pew study express a belief in God or a universal spirit while more than half of the 2.4 who identify themselves as agnostic express such a belief (ibid.,8). This casts doubt upon the very meaning of terms like atheism and agnosticism—at least in the US. But for present purposes, what is noteworthy is that many of these respondents who call themselves atheists or agnostics do not seem to have closed the transcendent window. From within Taylor's parameters, they would seem to count as religious.

As Taylor himself acknowledges, the USA is not the whole of the Western world nor even a microcosm of it.[24] This makes it imperative to consider data for other westernized societies. The 2001 UK Census found 15.1% of people saying they had "no religion". The Australian Bureau of Statistics reports that in the 2001 census, 15.5% of the respondents said they had "no religion". In 2004, 19% of Canadians claimed "no religious affiliation" according to Statistics Canada. The New Zealand census of 2006 records that 34.7% of respondents claimed they had no religion, making New Zealand an outlier compared to its commonwealth cousins. However, declaring that one has "no religion" or "no religious affiliation" does not necessarily mean that one has "closed the transcendent window", to invoke Taylor's metaphor. Respondents to these surveys could be signaling their rejection of or distance from orthodox, traditional, institutionalized religion rather than repudiating any and all forms of transcendence in their lives. Yet it is this latter move that is, as we have seen, what is crucial for Taylor in depicting the secular age. So these figures from Australia, Canada, the UK and New Zealand probably inflate the number of people who actually live in a condition of closed immanence.[25] But even if they do not, these numbers still reveal that in all these countries, the majority of the population does not exist in this condition.

When it comes to Europe, José Casanova summarizes the situation thus:

> A majority of the European population in every European country, except the Czech Republic and East Germany, still affirms 'belief in God' and the proportion of those who declare themselves to be "not atheist or agnostic" is consistently even larger. Only in Eastern Germany do "atheists" constitute a majority of the population (51%). In every other European country, "atheists" remain below 20% of the population. (Casanova 2003, 19)[26]

It becomes hard to avoid the conclusion that the number of people adhering to what Taylor calls closed immanence is a minority across Europe. This is compounded by survey findings from 2005. Asked "Which of these statements comes closest to your beliefs?", only 18% of EU citizens chose "I don't believe there is any sort of spirit, God or life force."[27] A statement like this fits Taylor's description of closed immanence. However, what such an aggregating approach to Europe conceals is the considerable variation among its member countries. Ireland is, for example more like the US than it is like some of its European neighbours when it comes to levels of self-reported religious orientation. According to the European Values Survey, in 1999, a mere 3% of Irish respondents reported "no belief in God or any life spirit."[28] A study conducted in 2007-8 claims that 95% of Irish respondents believe in God.[29] But what the aggregating approach *does* capture is that the "millions" for whom Taylor says "faith never even seems an eligible possibility" are vastly outnumbered by the many more millions for whom it is—or at least the millions who keep the transcendent window open which is, as we have seen (and to repeat my refrain) what is crucial for Taylor in depicting the secular age.

Invoking opinion poll data like this cannot, of course, tell us all there is to know on the question of religion, especially in the loose, inclusive and existential sense in which Taylor defines it. However, four things merit consideration here. The first is that while such data can't tell us everything, they tell us something. Their significance is not negligible, especially for a perspective as broad and sweeping as Taylor's. Secondly, in *A Secular Age*, more so than in any of his earlier writings I can think of, Taylor is entering the terrain of sociology, and so appealing to large scale aggregate data is not out of place in this debate.[30] Thirdly, the use of such evidence strengthens Taylor's dominant narrative about the persistence of religious belief—loosely defined—in modern, westernized societies, even as it undercuts some his more alarmist remarks about the reach of

exclusive humanism. Finally, given Taylor's claim that what distinguishes his approach to secularity is the insights it affords into the experience of life in a secular age, data like these are a valuable complement to the evidence he does offer. Opinion poll data are not all there is, but nor should they be ignored. This is especially so given that much of the evidence Taylor does supply to support his claims about the nature of contemporary experience in *A Secular Age* is inadequate to this momentous task**.**

Evidence of Experience

Taylor's tendency to focus on written texts as evidence of experience, and, within that, to draw on fairly traditional and "high brow" literary and philosophical works, is familiar to readers of *Sources of the Self*. [31] It is also powerfully evident in *A Secular Age*. For non-transcendent sources of fullness, we find references to Kant and Nietzsche and allusions to Romanticism.[32] To illustrate his concept of fullness, Taylor cites the autobiography of Bede Griffiths (without explaining who he is) and declares: "let [this] one example… stand for many" (SA 5). He backs this point up with an allusion to the work of novelist Robert Musil. There is a brief reference to the transcendent sense of fullness experienced by Paul Claudel (SA 14). Indeed, literary references abound in *A Secular Age*—Taylor cites the poetry of Thomas Hardy and Matthew Arnold and invokes the novels of Albert Camus.[33] A heavy reliance on literary sources also characterizes the "Roots of Violence" discussion (SA 656-675; cf. 699-700). Taylor is no doubt correct that "literature is one of the prime loci of expression of these newly-discovered insights" (SA 732), and literature is, more generally, a rich source for the articulation and exploration of experiences of transcendence. I am not, therefore, denying the value of these sources as evidence of experience of Secularity 3. But their value is limited. Given Taylor's repeated ambition to explore the lived experience of a secular age, his preoccupation with literary and philosophical works presents a problem, for these are bound to represent the experience of a very limited stratum of society. Leaning heavily on these genres makes sense when your argument is dedicated to identifying the various sources of the self and the good in western culture, and to demonstrating the invigoration that can come from returning to the sources where these goods are articulated. However, when your ambition is to portray the lived experience of those in a secular age, a wider variety of types of evidence is required.

Other sorts of evidence are not entirely absent from *A Secular Age*.