

VARIETIES OF SECULARISM
IN A SECULAR AGE

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Editors' Introduction

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"What does it mean to say that we live in a secular age?" asks Charles Taylor in the first sentence of *A Secular Age*. This apparently simple question opens into a massive, provocative, and complex book, exceeding even the scale of Taylor's monumental *Sources of the Self*.¹ Given its scale, the stature of its author as one of the leading thinkers of our time, and the critical importance of the topic in contemporary thought and politics, *A Secular Age* demands serious engagement. Hence the book before you; in the essays collected here, leading scholars from a variety of fields and backgrounds offer their own accounts of Taylor's work. Each charts a different conversation in which *A Secular Age* intervenes. We hope that the result, though surely not a complete or exhaustive assessment, will suggest something of the complexity

¹ *A Secular Age* runs to 874 pages. *Sources of the Self* weighed in at a mere 593, including notes. Writing for The Immanent Frame, a Social Science Research Council blog on secularism, religion, and the public sphere, eminent sociologist Robert Bellah refers to *A Secular Age* as Taylor's "break-through book," calling it "one of the most important books to be written in my lifetime." See Robert Bellah, "Secularism of a New Kind," The Immanent Frame, 2007: www.ssrc.org/blogs/immanent_frame/2007/10/19/secularism-of-a-new-kind/.

of the question of secularity, the analytic density of Taylor's take on it, and the variety of discussions that *A Secular Age* opens up.

This collection benefited greatly from a conference in April 2008 at Yale University. At that event, most of the contributors presented earlier versions of these chapters for discussion. The culmination of the weekend conference was Taylor's response, which appears in revised form at the end of this volume. The book is not, however, a straightforward record of the Yale conference: papers have been revised; some that were not presented then have been added to the mix; and a few papers from the conference were unavailable for inclusion here. (The latter, regrettably, included contributions from Rajeev Bhargava, Courtney Bender, and Seyla Benhabib, all of whom made significant statements at the conference.)

A Secular Age is such a rich book that neither the conference nor this volume will be able to do it justice. But we would like to highlight a few of the challenges presented by the book. To some degree these lie not just with its content but with its form. *A Secular Age* is divided into five parts. Roughly, Parts I through IV are consecutively historical. Part I treats the early modern period, Part II the long eighteenth century, Part III the nineteenth, and Part IV the twentieth. Part V is clearly of a different order: a sustained treatment of the present condition, assessing both the problems with an exclusively nonreligious spiritual outlook and the problems besetting contemporary religiosity. But this is only a rough structuring; even the last part contains historical narratives, and the first four parts, though roughly historical, also contain some major analytic and theoretical sections (including the exposition of the idea of social imaginaries). The book does provide a liberal amount of signposting; nearly every chapter begins with a summary of what has gone before. But the historical narrative that runs through the book is not itself the structuring principle. Despite the chronological unfolding of the argument, the book is structured by its argument, and not by the consecutive narration of the past for its own sake. The fact that argument and chronology coincide more in the earlier chapters reflects in part the difference between looking at the way challenges were met in the past and the way we confront challenges in the present and still open future.

The interweaving of philosophical and historical understanding is undoubtedly crucial to Taylor's thought, and has been a conspicuous preoccupation of his long career. *A Secular Age* might even be taken as one long

demonstration that the kinds of spiritual questions considered in Part V are historically conditioned. More generally, it is often hard to understand a new configuration of ideas or culture without understanding what it was developed out of or against. It is an illusion to think of intellectual history as a process of discarding false beliefs in order to shift to true ones. People work out ways of thinking in response to particular and shifting problems in their previous ideas and their larger circumstances, creating along the way a particular configuration of understandings, possibilities, and limits. Grasping any one moment in such a process requires grasping at least something of the path that led to it.² Taylor has analyzed a secular age as it develops within and out of Latin Christianity. The path is a crucial part of the story.

The form of *A Secular Age* is obviously related to one of its main substantive points: that questions such as those of religion and ethics, though appearing to be pressed upon us by the bare facts of existence and the universe, nevertheless get their particular form and no small part of their urgency from contexts of which we are not fully aware—unspoken premises about the kind of society we live in, the way we imagine the goods we are striving for, the practical contexts in which the questions arise, and the ways we imagine ourselves as persons. To say this is not to diminish the importance of the questions. On the contrary: for Taylor, it is to show how deep they lie in our constitution as persons and in the history of our social worlds. Historical reflection as practiced by Taylor is not relativizing, because it locates the limits of our ability to relativize.

Formally, however, it is a challenge. *A Secular Age* is neither a conventional historical narrative nor a conventional philosophical argument, and a reader who expects either is likely to be disoriented. Compounding this challenge, *A Secular Age* is also—expressly—a personal book. Taylor here speaks of questions in which he has a powerful motivating interest. Attentive readers will notice, however, that the personal voice appears only occasionally; it is generally muted. Most of the book—especially the first four parts—seems designed to function without the personal voice. Taylor has spoken of his desire to write the bulk of the book in ways that would be noncontroversial, insert-

² See Taylor's excursus on historical explanation, SS, 199–207. Taylor's development of this view is informed particularly by Hans-Georg Gadamer; see *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed. (New York: Crossroad, 1989). Craig Calhoun takes up the subject in his review "Morality, Identity, and Historical Explanation: Charles Taylor on the Sources of the Self," *Sociological Theory* 9, 2 (1991): 232–263.

ing his own stance only when it is clear that other stances are possible given the surrounding description of affairs.³

These splits within the form and authorial stance of *A Secular Age* might help to explain why, as early reviews revealed, not everyone who reads the book immediately grasps its project. Although the book has received wide praise, several of its early reviewers seemed to have trouble describing the main themes, or sorting out the history from the argument. One notable example was a piece for the *New York Times Book Review* by intellectual historian John Patrick Diggins, who opened his review by conjuring up Taylor's "quarrel" with "secularism," defined as "the idea that as modernity, science and democracy have advanced, concern with God and spirituality has retreated to the margins of life."⁴ This description, however, sounds not so much like "secularism" as like sociological theories of "secularization." Eliding the difference between the two, Diggins took Taylor to task for his ostensible opposition to both. Yet his representation of Taylor's argument was doubly misleading. While Taylor has indeed written critically about contemporary "modes of secularism"—defending one version of secularism against others in a book chapter published in the late 1990s⁵—the normative analysis of "secularism" as a political and ideological project does not figure prominently within the pages of *A Secular Age*. Likewise, although Diggins foregrounds

³ As Taylor said in a conversation about *A Secular Age*, "What I tried to do in the book . . . is to lay out a picture of the scene in which we are all involved, a scene that people could agree on even if they are coming from different positions. . . . I think everyone who is really open and honest will acknowledge that this is our scene, or our common situation, and that it has these three features that I outline in my book: great variety, great movement, and a great potential to be deeply shaken by other positions. . . . But of course this scene is lived from different positions. And I think in a book like this one should do a variety of things, both describing general features that all can agree to, and being open and honest about one's own unique position, what I describe as full disclosure, or disclosing one's particular way of looking at things." See Ronald A. Kuipers, "The New Atheism and the Spiritual Landscape of the West: A Conversation with Charles Taylor," *The Other Journal*, June 12, 2008: www.theotherjournal.com/article.php?id=375.

⁴ John Patrick Diggins, "The Godless Delusion," *New York Times Book Review*, December 16, 2007, 15.

⁵ Charles Taylor, "Modes of Secularism," in Rajeiv Bhargava, ed., *Secularism and Its Critics* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 31–53. For a helpful introduction to basic analytical distinctions among "the secular" (as an epistemic category), "secularization" (as a conceptualization of historical processes), and "secularism" (as a worldview or political ideology), see José Casanova, "Secular, Secularizations, Secularisms," *The Immanent Frame*, 2007: www.ssrc.org/blogs/immanent_frame/2007/10/25/secular-secularizations-secularisms/.

Taylor's supposed quarrel with what is usually called "the secularization thesis," the bulk of Taylor's book is devoted not simply to criticizing the view that modernity inevitably marginalizes religion (although he does take issue with that once paradigmatic perspective), but rather to explaining how conditions of secularity have come to shape both contemporary belief and "unbelief" alike. It is this focus on the "background" conditions of belief or the "context of understanding" in which commitments are formed—articulated clearly in the book's opening pages—that sets *A Secular Age* apart from the vast body of sociological literature on secularization that precedes it.⁶ The whole point of departure of Taylor's innovative approach was entirely overlooked in Diggins's review.⁷

Some reviewers—Diggins among them—read the entire book as a personal polemic or a work of Christian apologetics, sometimes mistaking it for a brief against the secular or an argument for Catholicism.⁸ Writing in the fashionable literary journal *n+1*, Bruce Robbins asserted that "Taylor has joined [Talal] Asad as a central figure in a wave of so-called 'post-secular'

⁶ For a critical review of the study of secularization within sociology, see Philip S. Gorski and Ateş Altınordu, "After Secularization?" *Annual Review of Sociology* 34 (2008): 55–85. As José Casanova has written, the theory of secularization "may be the only theory which was able to attain a truly paradigmatic status within the modern social sciences." Given the theory's apparently definitive standing, it went relatively unchallenged for many years and was often simply assumed. "The consensus," Casanova writes, "was such that not only did the theory remain uncontested but apparently it was not even necessary to test it, since everybody took it for granted." José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 17. The classical (and now much contested) understanding of secularization notwithstanding, "there is no single or widely accepted definition of secularization" within sociology, and the multiple sociological understandings of secularization both draw on and depart from a diverse range of "presociological" variants, as Gorski and Altınordu emphasize ("After Secularization?," 57).

⁷ The misunderstandings and misleading intimations in Diggins's review of *A Secular Age* are so manifold that it would be difficult to know where to begin a systematic analysis of them. We attempt no such review of the review here. Discussing the review in a conversation with Ronald A. Kuipers, Taylor himself took issue with its author's slipshod reading. "It's obvious to me," he said, "that [Diggins] simply turned to page 25 and page 375 and then closed the book. And he happened to hit a sentence that was describing some position that wasn't mine, but he attributed it to me." See "Religious Belonging in an 'Age of Authenticity': A Conversation with Charles Taylor," *The Other Journal*, June 23, 2008: www.theotherjournal.com/article.php?id=376. For critical responses to Diggins's review at *The Immanent Frame*, written by Harvey Cox, Colin Jäger, James K. A. Smith, and Jimmy Casas Klausen, see www.ssrc.org/blogs/immanent_frame/2007/12/15/the-godless-delusion/.

⁸ Taylor's "main purpose," Diggins wrote, portraying the book as an apologetic attempt to "probe that God is still very much present in the world," was "to salvage religion from the corrosive effects of modern secularism" (Diggins, "The Godless Delusion").

thinking that is highly skeptical, to say the least, of democracy, liberalism, and the state, as well as of secularism."⁹ It is hard to know what to make of the assertion that Taylor, of all people, is skeptical of democracy in this context; and as we will see below, Taylor's book is more accurately seen as a brief *against* the idea that we have entered a "post-secular" age.¹⁰ *A Secular Age*, wrote Charles Larmore, citing the book's "shocking partiality" in his review for the *New Republic*, was "a book written by a Catholic for Catholics."¹¹ More than one reader wondered, along with Peter E. Gordon—whose long review for the *Journal of the History of Ideas* grappled admirably with book's complex historical argument—whether Taylor really did find it "inconceivable" that he might abandon his own faith.¹² A leading participant in a conference on Taylor's work at the New School doggedly and somewhat incredulously insisted that he did, flatly misreading an early passage on the optionality, revisability, and fragility of contemporary religious commitments, which Taylor sees as defining feature of a secular age. Taylor, he worried, had made an undeniably dogmatic confession of absolute and unreasonable faith.¹³ Yet more often than not, such critics simply missed the point. It is difficult to clearly

⁹ Bruce Robbins, "Disenchanted," n+1, August 4, 2009: www.nplusonemag.com/disenchanted.

¹⁰ See our discussion of the "post-secular" below, pp. 21–23. Robbins inaccurately characterizes many other arguments in the book as well, including the idea of the social imaginary, which he seems to take as an activity of fantasizing that could be consciously steered. Elsewhere in the review he writes that "*A Secular Age* also presents secularism as a disguised form of Christianity, hiding theological content behind apparently secular concepts. On this reading, the disenchantment of the world never really happened." While arguments of this type have been made many times—notably by Karl Lowith, Carl Becker, and many in the neo-Schmittian school—the secular in Taylor's narrative is not a mask over hidden theology. Taylor does often point to the spiritual motives that have led to unforeseen transformations in religious traditions and their alternatives; but these are real transformations, and Taylor does not regard the resulting displacement of religious traditions as illusory.

¹¹ Charles Larmore, "How Much Can We Stand?" *New Republic*, April 9, 2008: www.tnr.com/article/books/how-much-can-we-stand.

¹² Peter E. Gordon, "The Place of the Sacred in the Absence of God: Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 69, 4 (2008): 655.

¹³ In the passage in question, Taylor indicates that he wants to define and trace a change "which takes us from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others. I may find it inconceivable that I would abandon my faith, but there are others, including possibly some very close to me, whose way of living I cannot in all honesty just dismiss as depraved, or blind, or unworthy, who have no faith (at least not in God, or the transcendent). Belief in God is no longer axiomatic. There are alternatives. And this will also likely mean that at least 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" (SA, 3). For a brief overview of the New School conference, see José Casanova, "Secular Imaginaries: Introduction," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 21 (2008): 1–4.

identify any passage in *A Secular Age* that might support such claims of either outright dogmatism or apologetic intent. It would be more accurate to say that the book attempts to show how stances of skepticism and faith are interwoven and mutually "fragilized."

Some have assumed that Taylor would like to return to an earlier moment in the history of Christianity, though the book repeatedly stresses reasons why this would be undesirable even if it were possible.¹⁴ Taylor is less interested in Catholicism as a specific institutional or theological branch of Christianity opposed to Protestantism than in a series of developments in the Latin Christian tradition that have shaped both—and also helped inaugurate a secular age that opened new possibilities for reconnecting the spiritual and the material. Such reconstructions would probably involve renewal of embodied ritual, changed modes of marking time, different ways of pursuing healing (SA, 614). They might also involve overcoming the striking tensions around sexuality that have made this such a dominant issue in Christian anxieties about the secular in recent years.

It is not slighting this huge book to say that it won't be the last word. The book has its own openings to divergent interpretations. Despite its massive size—or perhaps in part because of it—it is a less completely crafted whole than Taylor's other books, taking a number of sidetracks and frequently doubling back on itself. Like the secular age it seeks to outline, it incorporates internal tensions and even apparent contradictions. On Taylor's account, "living within" a secular age often involves being pulled in one direction or another. Those attuned to religious belief and experience, as Taylor understands it, are pulled toward openings to transcendence, while others feel the pull of "the closure of immanence." But between these two poles, as Taylor is at pains to emphasize, are a great many people who have been "cross-

¹⁴ While Taylor therefore seeks repeatedly to turn aside charges of nostalgia and to plumb the new spiritual possibilities produced by a secular age, his particular conception of Christian faith is nonetheless significantly invested in substantial engagement with earlier historical periods. Links to earlier ages, he suggests, enable both a "deepening" of the religious life and a "loosening" from "too close an identification with this age." See "Religious Belonging in an Age of Authenticity." As William Connolly aptly wrote in an earlier essay, Taylor "is not easily definable as either a secularist or devotee of lost Christendom, a defender of modernity or one who seeks to return to an enchanted world . . . Each time a philosophical or theological faction seeks to etch a division in stone, Taylor surfaces to complicate the picture." See William E. Connolly, "Catholicism and Philosophy: A Non-theistic Appreciation," in *Charles Taylor*, ed. Ruth Abbey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 166.

pressured," pulled in both directions, caught up somewhere between an "open" and a "closed" perspective on the world, perhaps to different degrees in different milieus. In the midst of such pulls and pressures, with draws and demands from both sides, are individuals who are able to stand in the "open space where you can feel the winds pulling you, now to belief, now to unbelief," those rare figures who can "feel some of the force of each opposing position" (SA, 549). Taylor suggests that such individuals are actually quite exceptional, since for most people, most of the time, much is taken for granted and left unexamined. Yet it would not be an exaggeration to suggest that one of the great strengths of *A Secular Age* derives from Taylor's demonstrated willingness and ability to stand in the "open space" and guide his readers through the range of perspectives its vantage affords.¹⁵

Reading *A Secular Age*

Given the scale and complexity of *A Secular Age*, it might help readers of the present volume to restate a few of Taylor's main themes. The book begins with an important intervention—a new sense of what is meant by the historical shift to secularity, distinguished from two more familiar understandings of secularization. The first of these older models (which Taylor calls "secularity 1") is the retreat of religion from various public spaces: politics, science, art, the market. The second ("secularity 2") is more personal: the notion of declining religious belief and practice, often thought to be an inevitable consequence of modernity. With either of these two understandings of secularization in mind, people often tend to think of secularity simply as the absence of religion, not something in itself. Or they think of it mainly as a strong separation of church and state—creating again a zone of absence. These two conceptions of secularity are central to the standard sociological story of secularization and the standard public usage of the word "secular."

Taylor's book seeks to resituate the discussion and thus to recast the debate. Taylor doesn't dismiss either the decline or the compartmentalization of religion, but he suggests that the dominant discussion of each is rendered very misleading by reliance on what he calls "subtraction stories." These are

¹⁵ Taylor draws this understanding of the "open space" from his reading of William James. "James," he writes, "is our great philosopher of the cusp. He tells us more than anyone else about what it's like to stand in that open space and feel the winds pulling you, now here, now there" (VR, 59).

accounts in which authors trace the decline or compartmentalization of religion without seriously considering the transformations this entails—not just in religion but in everything else as well.¹⁶ Taylor touches on the familiar topoi of secularization theory: urbanization, the rise of science, industrialization, and so forth. He notes that these can't be quite so autonomously and uniformly effective as has sometimes been asserted or the decline of religious practice in Europe would be matched in the United States and elsewhere. But this is not really his topic.

A Secular Age does not attempt to offer a causal account of the spread of unbelief or the writing of laws limiting public expression of religion. Taylor's explorations of the history of thinking about God, religious institutions, the natural and social order, and the person will help those undertaking to offer such explanations, especially by demonstrating how intertwined different dimensions of historical transformation have been. But Taylor's argument centers on how the development of a secular age changed both belief and unbelief, both religious and nonreligious institutions, the way human beings understood both themselves and nature. He shows secularization as a process changing dominant senses of history and time, ideas about what is open and closed in the human future, and the cross-pressures people face in struggling to understand their circumstances and live their lives.

What is secular about "a secular age," then, is not merely the dwindling of religion, or even the functional separation of Church from state, science, and aesthetics. The most searching and original—but also unsettled and unsettling—parts of Taylor's book concern what he calls "secularity 3." By this he means "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." Secularity is not just a net reduction in religious belief or practice, therefore, but a change in the very conditions of belief. "Secularity in this sense," Taylor writes, "is a matter of the whole context of understanding in which our moral, spiritual or religious experience and search takes place" (SA, 3).

In contexts that are secular in this third sense, religiosity is more and more considered a question of personal belief rather than collective ritual or

¹⁶ Some of the most interesting parts of Taylor's book are lengthy discussions of the ways in which ideas of personhood and subjectivity, social relations and moral obligations, material well-being and economic pursuits have been changed by both (1) changes in the ways in which religion shapes each and (2) reductions in the extent to which religion shapes each.

practice. It has also become an "option," according to which people define themselves through one orientation or another, but in either case without the kind of inevitability that would reverberate indistinctly between subjective and outward manifestations. Taylor makes it clear that in many ways this shift to secularity makes religious belief more difficult to sustain—since "even for the staunchest believer," it has become "one human possibility among others" (SA, 3)—but he doesn't see only negatives on the balance sheet. Secularization has come about alongside changes that we cannot help but value, like a deeper notion of self and subjective agency and a more egalitarian social order. Moreover, though belief may be problematic in new ways, it is also possible for it to take on new meaning.

BELIEF AND FULLNESS

Taylor really means "belief." He doesn't want to see religion as just a number of engaging practices or quasi-ethnic customs, and he is critical of suggestions that the "essence of religion" lies in the answers it offers to the "question of meaning," which he sees as an approach that absolutizes "the modern predicament" (SA, 717–718). Religion, for Taylor, entails some sort of "transcendence," especially "the sense that there is some good higher than, beyond human flourishing" (20). Yet he also seeks to steer clear of some of the common complaints against a belief-centered account of religion.¹⁷ He does not mean belief in specific doctrines. Nor does he understand belief as an abstract intellectual commitment to the truth of a propositional statement. Rather, he devotes considerable effort to showing how that sort of narrowed "epistemological" approach is part of a package of cultural and intellectual changes that make religious belief difficult and "embattled," even while they make for advances in other domains, like science.¹⁸

The epistemological approach turns on a strong separation of the know-

¹⁷ Critiques of the equation of religion with belief have become numerous; one broad polemic is Rodney Needham, *Belief, Language, and Experience* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973). Similar critiques more pointedly developed in the context of religious studies include Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993) and, from a different angle, Taylor's own earlier work *Varieties of Religion Today*.

¹⁸ Think by contrast of a medieval proof of the existence of God. Aquinas, for example, does not undertake such a proof from a position of epistemic neutrality, in order to see whether he can produce an argument that will convince himself or others to believe. His project is, rather, the effort of someone with faith to try to understand better what he should believe and what it means to believe.

ing mind from culture, social relations, even body and perhaps "spirit"—that is, aspects of our mental activity not readily rendered in rational-propositional terms. Taylor joins with those who have argued for the importance of other forms and dimensions of understanding, of tacit knowledge, and of the embeddedness of each of us in language and culture. As he writes near the outset of *A Secular Age*, "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 unfocused background of this experience and search, its 'pre-ontology,' to use a Heideggerian term" (SA, 3). We are only able to engage in the kind of disembodied reason moderns value against a background of understandings we often don't recognize. Among these are some commitments that are deeper than others, more fundamentally shaping our thought and outlooks. Here Taylor builds on his argument from *Sources of the Self*, where he called these "hypergoods" (see especially 63–75). We are all committed to such higher goods, Taylor suggests, even those who claim not to be (reflecting their commitment to "objectivity" and perhaps "rationality" as principles more fundamental than some others). It is not only the religious who have some "beliefs" that go beyond the conclusions of—and indeed are orienting for—ordinary reason.

So one central move for Taylor is his attempt to change the way we think about belief. He starts out by evoking a subjective experience, what he calls "fullness." By this he means any experience of life and the world as imbued with meaning, beauty, and connection—whatever the source of the experience. Crucially, it is a subjective experience in which the fullness or satisfying intensity is understood to be objective—the way the world is, or at least can sometimes be—not merely a result of subjective attitude. Our subjective stances may afford us more or better access to fullness, but it is not merely an interior state. Indeed, it is a reflection of our individualistic, psychological orientation and also our rationalistic, epistemological criteria for knowledge that we try to grasp fullness entirely in terms of subjective states; we say we have moments of transcendent experience, thus, rather than moments when we experience the transcendent character of reality.

Fullness is not in itself a belief; it is the sense of something larger or more deeply meaningful about which we may have beliefs. Nor is the sense of fullness derived only from a perception of reality and meaning beyond this world

or only interpretable in religious terms. This sense of heightened meaning and connection is always possible within humanist and naturalist frames of reference: this is the way life should be.¹⁹ But to most moderns, this strong sense of the fullness of the world, of the wonder of it that goes beyond everyday concerns about health, material prosperity, politics, even justice, is available only occasionally. Some people may seem to have more consistent access to it, and this may be a source of their inspirational leadership, extraordinary commitments, or saintliness. But it is typically episodic, available only for moments, perhaps aided by ritual but sometimes just surprising us. And fullness is less available now than it used to be, when it seemed routinely the case that the material world was not all that there was.

Here there is an interesting twist to Taylor's argument, for he thinks this isn't all bad. A sense of fullness has become harder to achieve, but it can also be wonderful in new ways. If we can work through the various obstacles to having a sense of living amid transcendence, we can experience it in richer ways. Here Taylor's argument is loosely Hegelian (not surprisingly, since he is one of the greatest interpreters and analysts of Hegel). We start out with easy access to a sense of fullness, but don't know very well what we have. We grow in knowledge (or, as Rousseau would say, in arts and science), but in ways that cut us off from full relationships to nature, our own lives, other people, and God. Yet there is potential for returning to a sense of fullness informed by poetry and philosophy, Beethoven's late quartets, and even a deeper sense of what it means ecologically to care for the world or politically to really value other people.

IMMANENCE AND TRANSCENDENCE

Making the idea—and experience—of transcendence sensible is one of Taylor's central goals. As important as transcendence is to Taylor's account of

¹⁹ Taylor's treatment of "fullness" in *A Secular Age* has nonetheless been the subject of sustained debate, and many readers have assumed he meant to evoke a specifically religious form of experience. As he says in a recent interview, "I've used this as a generic term on the grounds that I think everybody has some sense of, and desire for, a fantastically realized life, a life realized to the full. But in talking with people and reading reviews of the book, I've found that I'm often totally misunderstood on this. They thought that fullness could only be applied to explicitly religious positions, while the whole point was that I was looking for a generic term that applied to all people, whether religious or non-religious. But fullness made people shudder, which might show that the search for a universally acceptable term might be mission impossible." See Kuipers, "The New Atheism and the Spiritual Landscape of the West." Taylor returns to the question of "fullness" in his afterword for this volume.

religion, however, most of his book is devoted to trying to understand "immanence," and in particular the historical establishment and intellectual contours of what he calls "the immanent frame." Here Taylor emphasizes the changes in the conditions of belief that he associates with secularity. The immanent frame, he suggests, is "not usually, or even mainly a set of beliefs which we entertain about our predicament," but rather "the sensed context in which we develop our beliefs" (SA, 549).

Reworking and substantially revising Weber's understanding of "disenchantment," Taylor suggests that "the spiritual shape of the present age" (SA, 539) can be characterized by the religious and secular possibilities the immanent frame allows and enables, including the possibility of unreflective unbelief introduced by the idea of a self-sufficient immanent order, a naturalist conception of the world made possible and reinforced by a range of other historical changes.²⁰ Yet religion and spirituality are not extinguished in this context, but have rather been refigured. We should not confuse disenchantment with the end of religion, therefore, as religious commitments and openings to "transcendence" remain possible from within the immanent frame, even as new forces push for "the closure of immanence." One way of reading much of *A Secular Age* is as leading up to Taylor's analysis of the contemporary dilemmas of the immanent frame, including the relative merits of the "closed" and "open" "spins," as he calls them: the ongoing problems of the body, particularly as manifest in sex and violence; the fate of the aspiration to transcendence; and the cross-pressuring of different perspectives.

Taylor sees the modern West as shaped deeply by the idea of a natural order that can be understood without reference to anything outside itself (unless perhaps human consciousness is understood this way, though as Taylor notes, it is often understood as one more natural phenomenon). Indeed, he suggests that this is "the great invention of the West" (SA, 15). It is constitutive of the frame within which one can set aside questions of divine creation, marking off a sharp boundary with the transcendent. The orderliness of the world is now impersonal, perhaps set in motion by a watchmaker God but working by means of its own laws.

A central historical phase in the movement toward this modern understanding of self and others in the world is the late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century period.

²⁰ "So the buffered identity of the disciplined individual moves in a constructed social space, where instrumental rationality is a key value, and time is pervasively secular. All of this makes up what I want to call 'the immanent frame'" (542).

teenth-century spread of providential deism. Taylor offers a brilliant account of how this paved the way for exclusive humanism, even though its protagonists did not understand themselves as leaving the realm of religion, and indeed understood themselves as solving problems within existing Christianity. A secular perspective grew within religion before it was taken up by the irreligious. This was already evident in Augustine, of course, but it took on new dimensions in the early modern era. Growing secularity meant at first a greater religious engagement with human relationships and other affairs of "this world." It responded to a new affirmation of the virtues of ordinary life, including not least the happiness and this-worldly nurturance of family life. It responded to a new sense of historical time, anchored partly in the self-consciousness of early moderns as inhabiting a new era in which older forms of religion might no longer suffice. But growing secularity also involved the understanding that "this world" moved according to an impersonal order of causes and effects within it. And this helped to underwrite the rise of modern science. Though at first this meant reading the word of God in nature rather than in ancient texts, it often became disengaged from religious connections to the idea of a larger, transcendent whole.

By the transcendent, Taylor generally means sources of meaning that lie beyond this world—at least as we can grasp it in either anthropocentric-humanistic or naturalistic terms. Taylor articulates three dimensions in which we go "beyond": a good higher than human flourishing (such as love in the sense of agape), a higher power (such as God), and extension of life (or even "our lives") beyond the "natural" scope between birth and death (SA, 20).

Taylor indicates that the God of Abraham who orients his faith is only one way to grasp this transcendent reality. He is open, thus, to the potentially equal value of grasping the transcendent in Hindu and Muslim terms (and he may mean to include Muslims when he makes reference to believing in the God of Abraham). In his afterword to this volume, likewise, he refers to his own deep sense of the power of Buddhism. He is also open to new theologies that transform the meaning of the term "God," including those that attempt to rid it of anthropocentric or patriarchal projections (though in fact theology as such doesn't figure very strongly among the many intellectual sources Taylor engages in *A Secular Age*). But Taylor's usage seems consistently focused on that which is beyond nature by virtue of the actual contemporary existence of some other or additional reality. Yet when we ask of the

world as it exists "Is that all there is?" we are also asking about the future. Indeed, part of what Taylor sees as limiting in the immanent frame is a tendency toward both deterministic and instrumental approaches to human life: we are led to accept too much of what exists as the fixed character of reality, then being left to adapt ourselves to it.

Limiting or not, the immanent frame is basic to both secularism and religion as we know them today. The historical transformations that eventuated in the establishment of the immanent frame, writes Taylor, "represent profound changes in our practical self-understanding, how we fit into our world (as buffered, disciplined, instrumental agents) and into society (as responsible individuals, constituting societies designed for mutual benefit)" (SA, 542). We cannot make sense of the decline of religious practice (where this has occurred), the compartmentalization of religion as private, or even declarations of doctrinaire atheism without reference to these changes. The very term "supernatural" expresses something of the larger point. The "natural" is the unmarked category, and there is a sharp division from that which is outside or above it, a division ironically promoted within Latin Christendom in order to mark "the autonomy of the supernatural" (542).

Reform

At the center of Taylor's account is an epic irony: that secularity in its modern Western sense is significantly a product of the long history of reform movements within Western Christianity. Initially, reform (starting before the usual dates of the Reformation and continuing among Catholics as well as Protestants after it) was a project of producing purer religion and demanding more widespread lay adherence to high (even monastic) standards of purity. The effort to "cleanse" Christianity of folk beliefs and practices was one part of this story. So was the rise of new morality governed by self-discipline but also ever-proliferating rules, the religious counterpart to the manners prized in the civilizing process. The reform effort also helped shape the rise of an understanding of an impersonal natural order in which God intervened less frequently (if ever) and which could be the object of a purely natural science. It shaped equally a transformation of the self to create individual subjects—"buffered selves"—able to take a distanced view of everything outside the mind. This meant not only ceasing to understand the self as "porous," such

that demons or God could enter it, but also gaining the ability to act instrumentally in relation to the external world and to one's own body. Reformers created a sharper division between the spiritual and the physical.

The possibility of a fully secular society is an unanticipated result of reformers' efforts to police the properly spiritual. They did so in order to "clean up" the inherited beliefs and practices of pre-Christian folk religion and focus believers' attention in a proper way on God. They sought to purge it of the magical and festive. Early modern clerical elites—notably in the era of the Reformation but on both Catholic and Protestant sides—sought to enforce among parishioners standards of piety and orthodoxy previously deemed important only for elites.²¹ In doing so, they came to define the phenomenon of belief in a new way that was sharp enough to make declarations of explicit unbelief—atheism—far more prominent than in earlier times (when people might have shown little interest in religion, dissented from specific teachings, or deviated from orthodox practices without asserting an epistemic denial of God). These early modern religious elites helped set in motion a continuing purification of thought that would eventually take an antireligious turn in the Enlightenment. But it started out with efforts to get people to be better Christians.

These efforts started well before the Protestant Reformation, which has no special place of privilege in *A Secular Age*. Indeed, rather than seeing the Reformation as the beginning of modernity, Taylor more often adverts to late medieval reforms, or even to more long-standing projects in the deep history of the religions associated with the so-called axial age.²² The secular as Taylor sees it is not a force that assaulted religion from without; it did not suddenly appear from modernity; it was not contrived by Enlightenment rationalists; and it did not entirely happen willy-nilly as the result of capitalism. Its history is at least partly—perhaps mostly—a history of spiritual motives.

The disciplinary revolution familiar to sociologists as part of a Weberian account of the rise of capitalism is also a central part of this story of religious transformation. "Training in a disciplined, sober, industrious life" helped to shape both the instrumental character of modern secular society and its pro-

²¹ Here Taylor draws upon Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York: Scribner's, 1971).

²² The idea of the axial age derives from Karl Jaspers; for a discussion, see Shmuel Eisenstadt, "The Axial Age: The Emergence of Transcendental Visions and the Rise of Clerics," *European Journal of Sociology* 23, 2 (1982): 294–314.

ductivity. But it also helped to produce the very sense that society and self could both be remade. It was thus an "experience on the part of élites of success in imposing the order they sought on themselves and society" (SA, 228). Moreover, the disciplinary revolution coincided with the civilizing process to create new kinds of sensitivities and values within secular culture.²³ If this became less violent, though, it also became oriented in new ways to a rule-governed approach to morality.

Only quite late in the process did people begin to think of themselves as standing outside Christianity or even "religion" altogether. In the world of Latin Christendom that is Taylor's focus, both modern religion and modern secularism bear the marks of this long process, which has made religion more personal, more mental, and more voluntary. Religious and antireligious people in modernity have more assumptions in common than they often realize. Taylor's secularity ₃ is meant to capture this often unrecognized common condition and to show that its genealogy lies largely in the spiritual dilemmas of Latin Christendom itself. By the time the reader arrives at Part V, in which Taylor takes up the rival validity claims and ethical stances—religious and antireligious—in the present, this surface rivalry has come to be seen as the latest instantiation of dilemmas long unresolved, in some ways antedating Christianity itself. *A Secular Age* displaces the commonsense opposition between the religious and the secular with a new understanding in which this opposition appears only as a late and retrospective misrecognition.

This is a powerful and striking thesis (though, again, not so striking as to strike all of Taylor's reviewers). But Taylor is not without company here. His central point bears some resemblances to the thesis of Marcel Gauchet, in *The Disenchantment of the World* (for which Taylor wrote an introduction to the English translation), but with equally important differences.²⁴ Gauchet similarly argues that modern secularism extends the long history of unresolved contradictions and tensions in religion, and like Taylor he argues that Christianity has played a unique role as "the religion of the end of religion."

²³ For "disciplinary revolution," see Philip Gorski, *The Disciplinary Revolution: Calvinism and the Rise of the State in Early Modern Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003). The "civilizing process" is a phrase made famous by Norbert Elias, on whom Taylor draws heavily. Originally published in 1939 in German, Elias's work is best known as *The Civilizing Process, Vol. I: The History of Manners* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969) and *Vol. II: State Formation and Civilization* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982).

²⁴ Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion*, trans. Oscar Burge (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

Taylor follows Gauchet in linking axial age religions to the problems in the social imaginary constitutive of state societies and in insisting on the social dimensions of religious questions. Some of the same episodes in the history of Christianity figure in important ways for each. But whereas Gauchet begins by positing an anthropological axiom—that humanity is defined by its power of negation, and paradoxically required religion to negate that power of negation—Taylor refuses to see the history of religion as one long detour from mankind's original nature. And whereas Gauchet sees the history as trending unmistakably toward a post-religious future, Taylor argues that this "spin" (to use his own term) underestimates the spiritual dilemmas that motivate it.

This overarching story of the spiritual sources of the secular involves a number of subthemes, including the narrowing of the once-expected gap between the spiritual demands of ordinary people and the religious virtuosi; the rise of projects for social discipline (famously chronicled by Elias); the disembedding of what Taylor calls "the buffered self"; the long process of the "excarnation" of Christianity and, by extension, of modern life; the "eclipse of all goals beyond human flourishing" (SA, 19); the way in which the affirmation of ordinary life led to the disappearance of the need for transformation; and the attenuation of modes of ritual time, ancestral time, and higher time and their displacement by a monochronic idea of secular time.

Taylor traces the growth not just of "secularity" in the abstract but even more of a secular culture with specific content. The rise of exclusive humanism, for example, involved the notion that human flourishing defines the comprehensive good toward which human beings should be oriented. It was thus secular and limited. But it was also the source of tremendous advances in care for fellow human beings. Taylor would challenge the limitation of the good to human flourishing but not reject the advances that humanism brought. Likewise, secular culture grew with thinking about society in terms of new social imaginaries like market, democracy, and public sphere. Each was shaped by humanism, but also by notions such as the equality of human individuals aggregated in one way or another in an impersonal order. The kind of simplistic opposition of religion to "secular humanism" drawn today by some religious leaders is thus very misleading, according to Taylor. Not only would it be unfortunate to jettison the goal of human flourishing; it would impoverish rather than improve religion to try to cleanse it of engagement in the secular world.

The rise of a secular age obviously transformed attention to the temporal, material world. But it also transformed the spiritual. It brought about what Taylor calls the "excarnation," the development of the notion that the spirit was radically other than and potentially contrary to the body. We see this in the epistemological attitude, "the exaltation of disengaged reason as the royal road to knowledge, even in human affairs" (SA, 746). It appeared also in theology, devotions, and morality. Rather than pursuing the "enfleshment of God" (739), Taylor sees the dominant versions of modern Christianity seeking distance from the flesh. This left a large field open—initially to innovations within a Christian frame and then to those with movement outside it. Starting with deism, thus, there was new attention to "the body, history, the place of individuals, contingency, and the emotions. That is, it integrated these as essential dimensions of our understanding of human life, but it excluded them altogether from our relation to God" (288). In this Taylor sees a distancing from core Christian teachings centered on the incarnation of God in man as well as from a vital dimension of human existence.

Modern Social Imaginaries

Another major theme of *A Secular Age*—and one central to Taylor's conception of the immanent frame, though not always adequately appreciated by critics of the book—is the "implicit, largely unfocussed background" of both religious and secular thought and experience. In one main section of the book, incorporating much of his short book called *Modern Social Imaginaries*, Taylor suggests that such basic organizing frameworks as democratic nations, free markets, religious denominations, and media publics share many tacit assumptions about the social world they make possible—including that society is in its essence an aggregation of individuals acting freely in their own interest. The social imaginary, as Taylor conceives it, "is not a set of ideas" but rather "what enables, through making sense of, the practices of a society" (MSI, 2). Distinguishing it from "theory," which is often formulated and possessed by only a few, he shows that the imaginary has widespread moral implications—informing and informed by what he calls a "modern moral order."²⁵ Only against the background assumption of what makes modern society moral do many of our norms and practices make sense.

²⁵ Taylor distinguishes the social imaginary from social theory along three dimensions. First, the

Taylor's exposition of the power of social imaginaries has made central use of examples in which ideas migrate from philosophical or legal contexts to popular practice. It has been criticized as a philosopher's account, one that does much better analyzing the writings of intellectual elites than analyzing broader popular culture or social structure (though it does have interesting and innovative things to say about each). Some have perceived Taylor's story of modern social imaginaries as a trickle-down narrative, in which the ideas of great thinkers gradually diffuse until they become so widespread as to be facts of social life. And he does claim that "it often happens that what start off as theories held by a few people come to infiltrate the social imaginary, first of elites, perhaps, and then of the whole society" (*MSI*, 24). Yet the criticism fails to fully capture the sophistication of Taylor's approach to the relationship between practice, agency, and understanding.

Taylor's rendering of social imaginaries centers on the role certain widely reproduced ways of thinking play in constituting larger ways of life. The history he relates is not simply one of the diffusion of consciously held ideas, but one in which some are able to articulate more effectively ideas that are already growing as parts of the background "pre-ontology" of an era. While Taylor focuses on philosophers, poets, and political theorists, he also discusses—much more in passing—the importance of such nontheoretical realms as fashion and sports events. These are practices that make sense only given a certain common background of understanding. This background of understanding is social, in the sense that it is reproduced in communication and interaction, and starting with language it is as much constitutive of persons as they are of it. But social imaginaries are social in a further sense. They are not merely social but about the nature of society. They project images of sociality that become part of the taken-for-granted background of modern forms of social life.

Taylor's three most frequently repeated examples of social imaginaries all turn in part on imagining social life in terms of large-scale coordination among "disembedded" individuals. Thus markets, democratic citizenship,

imaginary puts the focus on "the way ordinary people 'imagine' their social surroundings, and this is often not expressed in theoretical terms, but is carried in images, stories, and legends." Second, while theory "is often the possession of a small minority," the social imaginary is "shared by large groups of people, if not the whole society." And third, the social imaginary represents the "common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy" (*MSI*, 23).

and the public sphere each offer a vision of social order as produced by the individual actions of strangers. In this they both reflect and reproduce crucial aspects of modern social life: the central role of understanding persons as quasi-autonomous agents, the at least notional equivalence of actors, the predominance of horizontal rather than hierarchical relations, and so forth. From Taylor's point of view, what is important is not the articulation of these views or their systematization in philosophy but the way they enable practices that make sense only with such conceptions in the background: voting, for example, or wearing home team paraphernalia, or advertising. People can live practically in the social world of such practices without noticing the idea of the social they imply, but none of these endeavors make sense without some such view of the social being available and implicit.

Such an idea poses an obvious problem for historical analysis. What would be an appropriate method for locating social imaginaries conceived in this way? The object of analysis, so defined, obviously lies well outside the comfort zone of most historiography, and Taylor has had to find ways to suggest that a shift in the basic social imaginary can be inferred from a broad range of other developments.

At the same time, the idea of background—and more specifically of the "social imaginary" as a structuring element in the background—is one of the things that motivate Taylor's historical mode of analysis, not because it is a teleological history, but because of his sense that historical conditioning lies in our background understanding.

Historical Specificity

In Taylor's work, most important questions are too historical to be understood or answered in completely abstract terms. But a corollary of this view is that history is more than a set of contingencies that we can review with disinterest. Taylor's history is in this sense closer to what is usually called genealogy (despite his well-known hostility to Nietzsche and Foucault) than it is to professional historiography. (For further discussion of the problems of history and form, see the contributions in this volume by During, Sheehan, Butler, and Jager.)

This might also help to explain why Taylor, resisting a widespread trend, does not use the term "post-secular." That term has migrated from academic

contexts into the popular press and has now been embraced by such former secularists as Jürgen Habermas. In this context, the title of Taylor's book seems almost studious in its avoidance. It is not *A Post-Secular Age* but *A Secular Age*. Why?

There are no doubt many reasons, including Taylor's skepticism about other such labels for the present, including "postmodern." (Claims to have broken with the modern past, he emphasizes, are themselves very much a modern gesture. See, for example, *SA*, 716–717.) But far more important is that the "secular" in "post-secular" must be exactly that dual sense of the secular against which his book takes its point of departure. In order to believe that we are post-secular, one must have a narrow and inadequate conception of what it means to be secular. Habermas, for example, writes that "post-secular society" is that in which "religion maintains a public influence and relevance, while the secularistic certainty that religion will disappear worldwide in the course of modernisation is losing ground."²⁶ But this is to equate the secular with a "secularistic certainty" that was, by Habermas's own account, a mistake. This understanding of the post-secular neatly aligns with what Taylor, at the very beginning of *A Secular Age*, calls "secularity 1" and "secularity 2." The purpose of Taylor's book is to demonstrate that there is another, much more fundamental sense of the secular that is not captured by the classic sense of the secular as patterns of institutional separation and "secularistic certainty." Because this third sense of the secular comprehends precisely those forms of religiosity that are now most widely mobilized, resurgence of religion is not evidence of a new post-secular dispensation.

The idea of the post-secular is, however, much in vogue, and repeated often enough, it can persuade the unreflective that something in the world epoch has shifted. There is even a Centre for Postsecular Studies in London; but this group seems also to equate the secular with the most rigid secularist ideology. For them, "post-secular" just means such anodyne ideas (or alleged trends) as "a renewed interest in the spiritual life."²⁷ This conception of religiosity, in Taylor's terms, can be taken as showing just how far secularity 3 has spread.

Equally important, Taylor's attempt to hold a place for a respectable and

²⁶ "Notes on a Post-Secular Society," *Sign and Sight*, June 18, 2008: www.signandsight.com/features/1714.html.

²⁷ See www.jnani.org/postsecular/centre.htm; accessed June 20, 2009.

worthy religiosity is itself an expression of the secular condition of his title. As his afterword in this volume makes clear, he argues for an analysis in which the religious and the secular (or secularist), far from being in exclusive competition, coexist and are subject to both social and ethical cross-pressures. To speak of a global shift from one condition (secular) to another (post-secular) would be to miss this complex formation.

The mutual exposure of the religious and the secular is, moreover, not just an analytic observation but a rhetorical burden. More precisely, Taylor hopes by stressing the cross-pressures attending each position to induce modesty in both. Talk of the "post-secular," by comparison, suggests an unresolved mixture of triumphalism and melancholy.

The causes impelling modesty must be recognized as one of the major themes of *A Secular Age*, dominating Part V. This section of the book is devoted to a subtle exploration of what it means to say that religion, now considered as a matter of individual belief or faith or orientation, is optional—and now that the options are played out in overlapping milieus rather than in confessional societies. Taylor suggests that no matter how we might differently resolve the issues for ourselves, living in a pure immanence or orienting ourselves to some understanding of transcendent being, we still cannot escape the fact that we live with others who resolve it differently; and this fact has significance for the quality of our own convictions, no matter how securely we might think we hold them. The options, as he puts it, have been mutually "fragilized."

This is both an analytic point and a rhetorical posture. Taylor's concluding contribution to this volume should make it clear that the purpose of *A Secular Age* is not to vindicate Catholic theology—at least in its major current understandings—against "secularism." On the contrary, the major rhetorical burden of the book is to persuade us to understand this mutual fragilization more deeply, and thus to de-dramatize some of the conflicts that have been inflamed in so many ways around the world.

Of course, Taylor's effort to speak to our immediate human situation amid these challenges creates a rhetorical tension between his analytic tasks of trying to explain what has happened and is going on and his effort to reorient our less articulate perceptions. This is all the more complicated by the wide range of addressees for his argument. It is not presented simply to believers or unbelievers, nor to members of any one academic discipline alone.

SUBTRACTION STORIES

We return crucially to the reason that subtraction stories are so unsatisfactory. Many accounts of secularization treat the history of religion as the career of a mistake that can now be corrected. Taylor's polemic against "subtraction stories" is both specific to this ideology and more broadly methodological. With their implicit reference to a seemingly fixed and self-sufficient "nature," subtraction stories suggest a putatively original human condition to which we can now return (or a proper humanness to which we can aspire) once the detritus of religion is cleared away. They thus naturalize what they produce: a distinctively modern conception of social being.

Seeking to isolate one change as though it could happen without affecting the rest of social life, they distort our perception not just of what has changed but of what we imagine as continuous. The effect is multiplied when the accounts are overdetermined by what amount to ideological commitments. This is the case, for example, when people speak of religion as a prescientific attempt to explain the apparently irrational forces of the universe and the mysteries of mortal existence; or when religion is apprehended as supernaturalism, illegitimately grafted onto a self-explanatory naturalism; or when the disestablishment of state churches is thought to have left people free to determine their own religious fate without constraint, letting the marketplace of religion operate without artificial impediment. In each case, the allegedly original condition only makes sense given the history, and yet it is presented as an unexplained default rather than as a contingent achievement. People take religion to be a cognitive response to an otherwise inexplicable world only when they have very modern assumptions about epistemology and the incarnated character of religious questions. People take naturalism to be a self-sufficient stance—once it is cleared from religious supernaturalism—only when they overlook the Christian history that forced these stances into opposition, and when they overlook the very special social conditions of knowledge-making that make naturalism possible. People think of religious questions as irreducibly individual only once they have internalized the norms of modern market democracies.

Taylor's relentless criticism of subtraction stories is thus part of his attempt to show how secular modernity is both more sedimented and more creative than it takes itself to be. Secular societies are not just mankind minus

the religion. They are very specific kinds of societies, imaginable only as the outcomes of long histories. They produce not unillusioned individuals who see the facts of existence nakedly, but people constituted by a distinct set of ethical goods, temporal frameworks, and practical contexts. The secular is never just the absence of religion, or its privatization, or its waning. It is a cumulatively and dialectically achieved condition, and one of its dimensions is the manifestation of religion as an optional axis of mobilization and belief.

This emphasis on the secular as having a positive social, historical, and ethical shape—rather than as the default condition denoted by the negation of religion—links Taylor to another school of contemporary critical thought about secularism, largely developed under the influence of Talal Asad. Like Taylor, Asad argues that the secular is not the taken-for-granted opposite of religion but a set of conditions in which modern ideas of religion are constructed. Like Taylor, he argues that these conditions have long and complex genealogies in Christianity. And like him, he argues that being secular involves not just skepticism or disbelief but an ethical horizon that should be understood in its own right.²⁸

It is a striking fact about *A Secular Age* that this body of critical thought makes no explicit appearance. Asad is not mentioned; nor are many contemporary scholars who follow in important ways from his work, such as Saba Mahmood and Tomoko Masuzawa.²⁹ The same might be said also of the substantial body of critical thought in India in which many of the now widespread critiques of the secular were first articulated—by Ashis Nandy, Partha Chatterjee, Rajeev Bhargava, and many others. Taylor knows and has been in dialogue with both of these schools of thought. Indeed, his earlier essay on "modes of secularism" was published in Bhargava's landmark collection *Secularism and Its Critics*. Why, then, are they not more conspicuous as interlocutors?

²⁸ See Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); and David Scott and Charles Hirschkind, eds., *Powers of the Secular Modern: Talal Asad and His Interlocutors* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006). For Asad's initial response to *A Secular Age*, see "Secularism, Hegemony, and Fullness," *The Immanent Frame*, 2007: <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2007/11/17/secularism-hegemony-and-fullness/>. He addresses the book in greater detail in Talal Asad, "Thinking about Religion, Belief and Politics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies*, ed. Robert Orsi (forthcoming).

²⁹ Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

The answer to this must have to do in part with Taylor's desire to intervene in the self-understanding of Western Christendom. Most of the scholars named above have concentrated on the relation between the dominant secular frameworks of modernity and those religious communities that encountered the secular primarily through colonial domination: Hindus and Muslims in India, Muslims in much of the Arab world. The validity questions that occupy Part V of *A Secular Age* lie outside the scope of these schools. And the major arena of their own analysis—the postcolonial world—lies at least partly outside the scope set by Taylor for his own book.

The absence of any explicit engagement with these other critics of the secular would seem to mark one cost attending Taylor's restricted focus on Latin Christendom. Perhaps anticipating that the objection against this focus would be couched in terms of ethnocentrism, Taylor offers a justification at the beginning of his book. It is in part simply that he couldn't do justice to such a broad topic. This is reinforced by his emphasis on secularity as part of a historically specific story of "multiple modernities" which "find rather different expression, and develop under the pressure of different demands and aspirations in different civilizations" (SA, 21). One may of course object that this rationale is inadequate. But more importantly, it is an answer to only one sort of criticism. Many of Taylor's interlocutors have in fact raised the question of ethnocentrism or at least inadequate breadth of coverage, asking whether secular culture doesn't follow a different pattern elsewhere. As the quoted passage suggests, he can answer "Certainly." Taylor does have strong claims about Western uniqueness. For example, "The great invention of the West was that of an immanent order in Nature, whose working could be systematically understood and explained on its own terms, leaving open the question whether this whole order had a deeper significance, and whether, if it did, we should infer a transcendent Creator beyond it" (15). Such claims can be examined on the basis of other cases and historical narratives. But this isn't the strong question. It is perfectly reasonable for Taylor not to address all cases and versions of secularity. The real question is whether he thinks about the West in too limited a way.

After all, it is not the case that Latin Christendom got to be what it is *before* it came into contact with other parts of the world, or even before its contact with those other parts had become a colonial project. As many recent scholars have shown, the colonial governance of non-Christian peoples was

one of the central contexts in which Europeans developed their understandings of religion, the state, and themselves.³⁰ Not only that: the new ways of knowing that were developed to deal with religious difference—including our now commonsensical idea of "religion" itself—supplied the cognitive differentials that made colonialism sustainable. Missionary projects were not only a result of Western religious convictions, they were sources of transformed Western self-understandings. Colonial contact with African and New World pagans and the later subjugation of monotheistic civilizations required elaboration of new discourses about religion and belief that in turn transformed Christianity's own universalist language. It also required Europeans to identify themselves more and more with the technological progress and administrative apparatuses by which they distinguished themselves from inferiorized peoples—and which, not coincidentally, gave added meaning to what was secular about their own societies. The process by which Latin Christendom got to be secular was in large part the same as the process by which it got to be colonial. Thus it is analytically inadequate to frame the "internal" history of Latin Christendom as though this process were not internal to it. And it leaves the book oddly disengaged with the postcolonial conditions that have generated so much of the blowback against the secular. (For further discussion of this point, see the chapters in this volume by Casanova and Mahmood.)

There is, of course, much else to be said about secularity and secularism, and about the way in which struggles over religion and the secular have produced conflict around the world: the central role that colonialism has played both in shaping a certain understanding of what religion is and in spreading models of secular governance around the world; the uneven and bumpy assimilation of other religious traditions to the patterns that have emerged from Christian culture; the ongoing transformation of religiosity in the context of a now triumphally global mediatized democratic capitalism.

Other books will rightly take up other foci. Political secularism is, for example, far more varied than is often thought, ranging from American doctrines of separation of church and state within a deeply religious culture to French or Turkish versions of *laïcité* to efforts like that of the Indian state to

³⁰ Asad, *Formations of the Secular*; Timothy Fitzgerald, *Discourse on Civility and Barbarity: A Critical History of Religion and Related Categories* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

be equitably supportive of multiple religions. Each of these is under challenge from various directions. But grasping the contest deeply depends on going beyond a narrow emphasis on consciously held understandings and explicit institutional mechanisms. For political secularisms are all embedded in modern social imaginaries as well as in specific histories and organized against a background of generally inarticulate but powerfully constitutive understandings of people, the world, and what it means to speak of a higher good or transcendent reality. Taylor helps us see the importance of each.

The Plan of the Book

Finally, a word about the organization of this book. The authors collected here are among the most learned and creative scholars in the emerging debate over the nature of the secular, and we tried to give them free rein to respond to Taylor's book in whatever way they deemed important. Many have, in fact, written quite wide-ranging essays on original topics, some addressing Taylor more centrally than others. Rather than tediously summarizing each essay or inventing an artificial schema for them, we wish simply to note a few important clusters of emphasis and exchange. Some of these we have foregrounded by presenting the chapters in this sequence; others can easily be teased out.

The first three essays are by Robert Bellah, John Milbank, and Wendy Brown—a sociologist, a theologian, and a political theorist. Each of these essays places Taylor in relation to another intellectual tradition. Bellah usefully compares him to two other social theorists of the postwar period, Maruyama Masao and Jürgen Habermas. Milbank reads Taylor's critique of modernity in relation to long histories of Christian theology. And Brown compares Taylor's project to the historical materialism of Marx. Each writes with a mixture of polemic and appreciation; each writes as an exponent of a different intellectual tradition. Because these chapters articulate such different understandings of the contexts and conversations in which Taylor's book might be read, we think they serve well to open up the volume. Reading these three essays together gives a strong sense of the range of audiences and conversations addressed by *A Secular Age*. They also outline some alternative lines of analysis that Taylor did not pursue.

The next three essays are not primarily framed as responses to *A Secular*

Age, though each of them does have some commentary on the book. In these essays, the authors have taken Taylor's work mainly as an occasion or provocation to develop their own thought on dimensions of experience that are captured neither by secularist reductions nor by rhetorics of transcendence. Simon During, a scholar of literature and cultural studies, develops a powerful and original take on the mundane, "those forms of life and experience that are not available for our moral or political or religious or social aspirations and projects"; the mundane so conceived is a counterpressure against the spiritual hungers so emphasized by Taylor. During also works to situate the crisis of the secular in the peculiar historical moment of what he calls "endgame democratic state capitalism," in which serious alternatives have been delegitimized. William Connolly, a political philosopher, whose book *Why I Am Not a Secularist* was one of the seminal critiques of secularist ideology, similarly elaborates his own language for overcoming the antithesis of immanence and transcendence through a changed conception of nature and time, opening possibilities of "immanent naturalism" and "mundane transcendence." Stressing "an open temporal dimension exceeding human mastery," Connolly shows how an ethics of becoming must have in mind more than human flourishing as it is usually conceived, and indeed must not limit itself to the preoccupations of humanism. Akeel Bilgrami, whose work ranges from analytic philosophy to critical social theory, also engages Taylor sympathetically. Here he emphasizes how a reductive conception of nature and agency played into projects of disenchantment and colonial rule alike, but in so doing entrenched a false understanding of human agents as acting upon the world in accord with wishes and ends that are internal to the subject. In contrast, he argues that we are always called upon by the objects of our desires and actions. Our world is therefore inevitably to some degree enchanted, in this limited sense. All three of these chapters propose a deeper understanding of worldliness, beyond the various secularisms chronicled by Taylor, and without any programmatic opposition to religion.

The next group of three essays dwells on the problems of form and method. What kind of book is *A Secular Age*? What is its conception of history? Where might its narrative stand in need of correction? What challenges does it pose to the way we are accustomed to thinking about history? The first essay in this group is by Colin Jager, a literary critic. Reminding us that *A Secular Age* has "a story to tell"—and emphasizing that the book's "romantic

method" produces an account that must "undergone," rather than "simply paraphrased or glossed," in order for its force to be felt—Jäger identifies a "tonal ambivalence" in Taylor's work, springing from his phenomenological commitment to radical reflexivity. "Casting around for more capacious or generous ways to describe the distinct *feel* of the age," he suggests, Taylor has given us a "philosophic song," a complex and poetic narrative in which the tension between secularity and Christianity remains unresolved. The other two chapters in this cluster are by the historians Jon Butler and Jonathan Sheehan. This cluster represents a particularly vigorous debate, with considerable disagreements among the authors. To this debate can be added the opening pages of Simon During's chapter. And we have laid out our own view on the question of genre and historiography in this introduction. It will readily be seen that our own view differs in important ways from that of each of the contributors.

The final group of essays brings together the sociologists Nilüfer Göle and José Casanova and the anthropologist Saba Mahmood. Each of these contributors has written distinguished and pathbreaking work on the analysis of the secular in the present global conjuncture. Each assesses Taylor's book from the point of view of how well it allows us to analyze current developments. And each works in different ways to provincialize the Latin Christendom of Taylor's focus in relation to those other parts of the world with which it has always been engaged. In different ways, each expects the process of globalization and confrontation to continue to decenter the Euro-American understanding of secular modernity.

The concluding essay is an afterword by Charles Taylor. This is a modified version of the unscripted remarks Taylor made at the end of the Yale conference. Significantly revised, it still bears some of the marks of the earlier talk and critical exchanges of the conference. While the argument of *A Secular Age* is very difficult to summarize briefly, in this closing chapter Taylor gamely risks "the heresy of paraphrase" and offers a brief précis of his book's "master narrative of secularity."³¹ Revisiting the central concept of the "social imaginary," he also responds to those who have criticized the philosophical anthropology embedded in his conception of "fullness," elaborating on this

³¹ For "the heresy of paraphrase," see Cleanth Brooks, *The Well-Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1947). For further discussion, see Colin Jäger's chapter in this volume.

in greater detail here than in the original book. Building on this discussion, Taylor turns in the final pages to an explicit—and remarkably personal—account of his intentions in writing *A Secular Age*. "What we badly need," he writes, "is a conversation between a host of different positions, religious, nonreligious, antireligious, humanistic, antihumanistic, and so on, in which we eschew mutual caricature and try to understand what 'fullness' means for the other." Recalling his work with the Quebec commission on the practices of reasonable accommodation,³² and in light of tremendous diversity and potential for conflict, Taylor imagines those who engage in such conversations as standing "like firebreaks in a forest fire." In his life and work, Taylor has dedicated himself to multiplying those firebreaks. His afterword is both a fitting conclusion to this book and an explicit call for continued conversation.

³² Taylor served as the commission's cochair. See Gérard Bouchard and Charles Taylor, *Building the Future: A Time for Reconciliation*, Abridged Report, Government of Quebec, 2008: www.accommodements.qc.ca/index-en.html.