

Tragedies of the Secular Age

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The most profound question to be asked of a civilization is in what form it experiences its tragedies.

György Lukács

What is at stake in the secular age? In *A Secular Age* Charles Taylor provides us with an answer to this question that is compelling in several respects. The secular age does not stamp out belief as a source of meaning, morality, fullness and selfhood; rather, the crucial changes affect the *conditions* of belief. As the conditions of belief have changed to allow those living in western modernity to choose among several paths, the differentiation and privatization of religion and the decline of religious belief and practice became a historical option. Read against the rigid determinism of several philosophers, sociologists and scientists that have written on religion and secularism, Taylor's account is a breath of fresh air. He provides us an opportunity to see that what is stake is not exhausted by commonly perceived conflicts such as science vs. religion, or liberation vs. subjugation, or immaturity vs. coming-of-age. He shows that these are in fact spurious distinctions, and that the true issue is more complicated or far easier, depending on how we look at it.

Once we begin to frame the stakes the right way and recognize the complexities of what it means to live in a secular age, we'll be able to reconcile and set aside the conflicts the secular-liberal order currently appears fraught with. This gloss on Taylor provides us with two of the key concepts he employs: recognition and reconciliation. The present age is wanting of both, but provides conditions that make both possible.

Here we should start being a bit suspicious. Not only because Taylor seems to bring in through the back door a universal value—reconciliation—but especially because of the

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triumphalist overtones of his conclusion. How is it that Taylor can come to the conclusion that our current predicament bears all the seeds of harmonious order?

In 1896 Thomas Mann, aged 21, wrote a short story that, as some commentators put it, already contained all the major themes of his more mature works written and published later in his lifetime.¹ In this story, translated under the title “Disillusionment,”² the first-person narrator gives an account of an encounter with an “extraordinary man” on Piazza di San Marco in Venice in the shadow of the basilica following a concert given by a military band. Thus, the reader is presented with a festive public space in which expressions of state power and religious splendor coexist. In its midst, the man with melancholy eyes who has a habit of pacing back and forth on the piazza. “[F]rom time to time he would look searchingly about him, then stare upon the ground, mutter a few words to himself, give his head a shake and fall to smiling again.” This extraordinary man strikes up what the narrator calls a conversation but what reads more like a monologue bursting forth with some urgency: “Do you know, my dear sir, what disillusionment is?”

The man retells his life as a series of profound disappointments. At a young age he witnessed his parents’s house burn down. The excitement at the sight of the destructive flames quickly gave way to disappointment: “This is what it is like to have the house on fire. Is this all there is to it?” This sense that his experiences do not live up to his imagination haunts him throughout his life. The vocabulary of his imagination is infinitely richer than “the poverty and limitations of life.” He reverses the idea of the ineffability of experience that he ascribes to some “ecstatic poets.” Thus, gazing out onto the vast sea for the first time, he was troubled by the horizon which limited the “fullness of the infinite” he sought. The influence of Nietzsche on the young author is unmistakable here. Repeatedly the peculiar man echoes the nagging question that poisons his every experience, whether joyful or lethal: “Is that all?” The reader, along with the narrator, is left perplexed when the man, having finished his story, gets up and leaves, bearing his plight like a tragic hero.

Decades later, at the end of the eventful 1960s, a successful songwriter duo was inspired by this story to pen a song for the popular singer Peggy Lee. Part spoken word, part song, “Is That All There Is?” became a successful hit in 1969. The story told in the song is almost identical with that told by Mann’s tragic figure. Speaking in the first person, Peggy Lee tells how experiences of seeing a fire, going to the circus and having her heart broken were all tinged with the unabating sense of deficiency. To lighten the mood, however, the

¹Hans Rudolf Vaget, *Thomas Mann: Kommentar zu sämtlichen Erzählungen* (Munich: Winkler, 1984), 65.

²Thomas Mann, *Stories of Three Decades*, trans. H. T. Lowe-Porter (New York: Knopf, 1945), 23–27.

spoken part is followed by a chorus:

If that's all there is, my friends,
Then let's keep dancing.
Let's break out the booze and have a ball
If that's all there is.

Thus the pop singer's rendition provides a means of sublimating the sense of lack—a de-nouement absent in Mann's story, which accounts for the bewildered sense one gets reading it.

In two chapters of *A Secular Age*, Taylor makes reference to Peggy Lee's hit. First, in chapter 8 as an illustration of the foremost malaise of modernity from the eighteenth century onward, also circumscribed by terms like emptiness, flatness or alienation.³ Later, in the chapter entitled "Religion Today," Taylor attributes the propensity for individuals to shop in the "spiritual marketplace" to a felt lack. Again, he illustrates this with reference to Lee (507 f.).

Of course it would be unfair to use a single cultural reference Taylor uses to flesh out his concepts to make broad judgments about his project. Yet I think that the contrast between Thomas Mann's short story and Peggy Lee's hit song conveys a sense of crucial issues with Taylor's account. One way to put it is that the sense for the tragic is missing. The book does not ask troubling questions about western modernity, but assumes that its contradictions can be set aside, that they can be resolved, reconciled, or discharged like excess steam through a relief valve.

Put differently, Taylor sees too little at stake in western modernity. He takes the promise of a space for untrammelled creation and expression at face value. But if we look at some experiences of western modernity that Taylor looks past in his account, we need to challenge his assertion that ours is a vertical, direct-access society. In fact, by inspecting these repressed aspects, we can find that the spaces of modernity do not provide unmediated access but are in fact heavily policed. They depend on a power that Taylor does not admit.

The Happiness of Consciousness in Taylor's Hegel

The centrality of G. W. F. Hegel for Taylor's enterprise in *A Secular Age* is undeniable. It starts at the most superficial level: The dust cover of Taylor's book features a photograph

³Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), 311. Further references to Taylor's tome appear in parentheses in the text.

of the Brooklyn Bridge, symbolizing its project of reconciliation, but also indirectly evoking the Swabian philosopher through his student, the mastermind behind the Brooklyn Bridge, J. A. Roebling.⁴

Earlier in his career, Taylor wrote two books on Hegel that made his name as a philosopher.⁵ Taylor's intensive study of Hegel left an imprint on the substance of *A Secular Age*, not just its form. Taylor concludes his six-hundred-page study of 1975 by asking, in Benedetto Croce's words, what is alive and what is dead in Hegel. He situates Hegel historically as participating in the Romantic backlash against post-Enlightenment construals of civility and identity. This is of course a topic of some importance in *A Secular Age* as well.

Hegel's synthesis cannot command adherents today not only because it is built in part on the expressivist reaction to the modern identity which contemporary civilization has tended to entrench more and more, but because it is built on an earlier and outmoded form of this reaction. It belongs to the opposition while claiming to give us a vision of reason triumphant; and it belongs moreover to a stage of this opposition which no longer appears viable.⁶

That gives a sense of what Taylor in 1975 considers "dead": Hegel's metaphysics, his logico-ontological conception of the world as self-positing spirit, and the centrality of the subject-object dialectic. In short, what Hegel thought gave the world and his system an overall coherence Taylor finds lacking.⁷ These aspects of Hegelian thought were also the basis of Marx's "Promethean expressivism."⁸ The foremost "living" extract from Hegel's system is "a vision of embodied subjectivity."⁹ In *A Secular Age* we learn why Taylor finds this aspect of Hegel's philosophy particularly appealing. He states that, as a Christian, he derives the importance of incarnation from God's becoming flesh in Jesus: "A religion of Incarnation cannot simply sideline the body" (640).

What in *A Secular Age* is animated by Hegel? Leaving aside the many instances where Taylor overtly mentions Hegel with Rousseau and Marx as a representative of Romantic-expressivist thinkers of disalienation (pointing to what is dead rather than what's living in Hegel) or critiques his views on war and conflict,¹⁰ there are at least three implicit

⁴Iris Roebling, "Hegels Geist über dem East River: Die Geschichte des Johann August Roebling," *Die Zeit* (Oct. 30, 2003): 92.

⁵*Hegel* (1975) and *Hegel and Modern Society* (1979). The latter is a condensation of the former. In Taylor's 1964 book, *The Explanation of Behavior*, Hegel does not appear in the index.

⁶Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 545 sq.

⁷This evaluation was consistent with the critique, spearheaded by Karl Popper and Isaiah Berlin, of Hegel's "determinism."

⁸Taylor, *Hegel*, see n. 6, 559.

⁹*Ibid.*, 571. The same conclusion is repeated in Charles Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

¹⁰On "the myth that Hegel glorified war," see Jon Stewart, ed., *The Hegel Myths and Legends* (Evanston, Ill.: North-

debts to Hegel in Taylor's method. First, Taylor adopts the premise of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* that knowledge accrues through a process or, more precisely, that knowledge is a process of progressive unfolding. Hence the stress on narrative and phenomenological grounding throughout the book—and hence also its length. Second, Taylor *does* adopt some of Hegel's metaphysics, as well, evident in his critique of epistemology (exercised in chapter 15), and like Hegel, he is critical of seeing experience “as an entity distinct from object or agent” (730).¹¹ Third, in Taylor's “story,” there is a reliance on binary oppositions (immanence vs. transcendence, vertical vs. horizontal, porous vs. buffered, internal vs. external, secular vs. religious, idealistic vs. materialistic, recognition vs. misrecognition, etc.) and, often, their resolution in a third, higher term. This has obvious similarities with Hegel's dialectical method.

I want to argue that Taylor's indebtedness to Hegel extends beyond such matters of form and method and runs far wider and deeper. Taylor, like Hegel, supports the thesis that religion (or at least the “world religions”) played a crucial part in the genealogy of modernity and modern subjectivity. Because of this common endeavor, there are notable parallels in their accounts. Thus, I'm convinced that it is fruitful to inspect Taylor's yield from Hegel and, more importantly, what he leaves behind in the quarry.

In chapter 2, Taylor begins zigzagging through the history of western civilization, recounting how the very notion of civility emerged as a mode of life among élites and subsequently became anchored in everyday life. This process is reflected in the spread of neo-Stoic doctrines and austere reform theologies that had an elective affinity with them. Elites throughout Europe were concerned with reducing violence and conflict and establishing a firm political order, and their project dovetailed neatly with these doctrines. The Christian-Stoic effort to remake society is pivotal in Taylor's genealogy of modernity, because it catalyzed the “great disembedding”: the possibility to imagine one's subjectivity as self-sufficient, not dependent on anyone or anything outside of it. To Christian Stoicism we owe the “primacy of the individual in modern Western culture” (157). The constitution of subjects qua individuals recasts all ties: to one's family, to society, to God. The “disengaged” or “detached” subject is now in a position to question the demands of the moral order and become a skeptic. This is an important step in the emergence of secularity 3.

In this paradoxical progression—the disciplinarian order of the Stoic élites provides a framework for radical skepticism—we can clearly discern a figure from Hegel's writings. In his *Phenomenology of Spirit* Hegel discusses a stage in self-consciousness that proceeds

western University Press, 1996), part 3.

¹¹Taylor is no longer invested in critiquing Hegel's determinism, and instead (together with John Milbank and others) finds nominalism (i. e., the view that all there is is contingency) problematic (see Epilogue).

from stoicism to skepticism to the *unhappy consciousness*. The stoic seeks freedom by negating herself and submitting to the demands of the community. This self-denial, however, renders freedom unattainable, because the demands on the self are always perceived as external to one's subjectivity and hence unalterable. The skeptic thus rejects these external demands, but the result is the same: the good remains unattainable because it is held in simple opposition to nature and society.

My main point is that Taylor brackets this aspect of Hegel's account of the development of modern subjectivity in his narrative of modernity. This is not a minor academic point. Several influential commentators on Hegel have identified the "unhappy consciousness" as the fundamental issue of Hegel's magnum opus.¹² How one reads this part of Hegel's oeuvre is necessarily linked with how one evaluates the conditions and possibility of freedom in modernity.

To develop my point, a brief excursus is necessary. Hegel devoted a significant part of his writings to the question of tragedy. He understands the essence of tragedy in terms of *separation*.¹³ For instance, because the ethical life is dirempt from life in the state, and because it is impossible to serve two masters, some stories are tragic stories—they are governed by forces and contradictions that are beyond the control of the individual.

Some have criticized Hegel for not grasping the weight of the tragic, because in Hegel's system the general tendency is for contradictions to be resolved or, more precisely, *aufgehoben* ("sublated"). Writes one literary scholar,

for Hegel, unfortunately, the aim of tragedy is ultimately to establish the dominance of Absolute Mind. The pain of nonidentity, the conflict of the subject-object polarity, should finally dissolve in a recognition of and a reconciliation with Absolute Mind. ... Thus Hegel's view of tragedy, as his view of absolute reality, culminates in the non-tragic, in affirmation and identity, in a reconciliation with "eternal justice."¹⁴

In short, according to this reading, Hegel assumes that every diremption is necessarily and promptly followed by redemption. The tragic is short-lived and always yields to a happy end. To this concern, Jean Wahl responds:

Et sans doute peut-on faire observer que l'œuvre de Hegel a été de triompher du romantisme, de rationaliser le dogme, et en même temps de faire pour ainsi dire disparaître

¹²Jean Wahl, *Le Malheur de la conscience dans la philosophie de Hegel*, 2nd ed. (Paris: P.U.F., 1951); Jean Hyppolite, *Genesis and Structure of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Samuel Cherniak and John Heckman (1946; repr., Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1974).

¹³For a succinct statement of Hegel on tragedy, see Robert W. Corrigan, ed., *Tragedy: Vision and Form*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper, 1981), 331–342. I also found helpful Merold Westphal, "Hegel, Tillich, and the Secular," *The Journal of Religion* 52, no. 3 (1972): 223–239; Walter Kaufmann, *Tragedy and Philosophy* (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1968), 200–212.

¹⁴Maire Jaanus, *Literature and Negation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 249 sq.

dans l'ensemble intemporel où s'unissent finalement rationalité et réalité, les dissonances, et le tragique même du monde concret. Il n'en est pas moins vrai qu'il y a au fond de sa philosophie un élément tragique, romantique, religieux ...¹⁵

It is precisely in the figure of the unhappy consciousness that this tragic element of Hegel's thought is embodied. As a figure, it models the forms in which modern subjects experience the "pain of nonidentity." This pain is acute because the unhappy consciousness is the fragile alloy of servile and magisterial consciousness perennially unable to actualize its ideal. Its unhappiness stems from a yearning for the divine (*Andacht*) and repeatedly frustrated attempts to unite with it.¹⁶ "The hope of becoming one with it must remain a hope, i. e. without fulfillment and present fruition, for between the hope and its fulfillment there stands precisely the absolute contingency or inflexible indifference which lies in the very assumption of definite form, which was the ground of hope."¹⁷ Ultimately the unhappy consciousness surrenders to a mediator (e. g., the church) in an attempt to unite with the divine.¹⁸ While this "*in principle*" provides solace, *in principle* provides satisfaction, enjoyment, etc., it is not true fulfillment: "[I]ts enjoyment remains pain, and the overcoming of these in a positive sense remains a *beyond*."¹⁹

It is true that Hegel's system sees the unhappy consciousness as a stage in the development of spirit that lays the groundwork for reason and a grasp on the concrete universal. As Taylor puts it, "unhappy consciousness is an essential step on man's road to universal rationality."²⁰ Wahl's interpretation, however, is different. In his reading of Hegel, the unhappy consciousness is the leitmotif, and the concrete universal is a receding horizon. The unhappiness of consciousness may be a stage, but it is a stage with considerable obstinacy.

Getting back to Taylor's account: In his rendering of "modern social imaginaries" (chapter 4), he is in direct conversation with Hegel's account of the development of subjectivity. The modern moral order, he writes (209),

allows us to imagine society "horizontally," unrelated to any "high points," where the ordinary sequence of events touches higher time, and therefore without recognizing any privileged persons or agencies—such as kings or priests—who stand and mediate at such alleged points. This horizontality is precisely what is implied in the direct access society, where each member is "immediate to the whole."

¹⁵Wahl, see n. 12, v.

¹⁶G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (1807; repr., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 131, ¶ 217.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 129, ¶ 212.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 136, ¶¶ 227 sq.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 138, ¶ 230.

²⁰Taylor, *Hegel*, see n. 6, 497 sq.

The language of immediacy is pervasive here; agency and identity are freed of all mediations, putting the buffered self firmly into the driver's seat. The conundrum of the unhappy consciousness is skipped. While Taylor concedes that one of the malaises of modernity is a sense that the buffered self is inadequate, he doesn't take this to indicate a crisis of modernity.

All this has implications for Taylor's project in several respects. Crucially, he sidelines or downplays the tragic experiences signified in Hegel's system by the presence of the unhappy consciousness. As a result, his evaluation of our age is essentially triumphalist—occasional qualifications notwithstanding.

Eschaton Lost?

This point needs further development to work out its implications for Taylor's project. In my reading, Taylor's bracketing of the unhappy consciousness is bound up with his understanding of Christianity. The (frustrated) impulse to redeem the world, to reconcile the divine with reality, to bridge the separation from the ideal that is embodied in the unhappy consciousness is largely absent in Taylor's rendering of western Christendom.

The theologian Friedrich Gogarten argued that secularization is an outgrowth, indeed a necessary consequence of Christianity.²¹ Thus, he writes, in order to account for secularization and secularism, it is not enough to deal with intellectual history. Rather, an explanation of the emergence of secularity first and foremost has to be theological, that is, it must spell out which aspects of the Christian faith give rise to secularization. The point seems well taken. Yet *A Secular Age*, which bears comparison with Gogarten's work in some ways, never deals with theology explicitly. There's an extensive treatment of anthropological literature in the early parts of the book, a long historical account spanning five centuries, as well as a discussion of sociological accounts of secularization, but the little Taylor has to say on theology is very implicit. That appears to be one of the points of John Patrick Diggins's review for the *New York Times Book Review* when he writes that Taylor "leaves [knowledge of God] off the menu."²²

At the same time, one can also take Taylor to task for having an essentialist view of Christianity—for spelling out too definitively what God and one's relation to God in the Christian tradition is about. In several places he invokes the "spirit of Christianity" (612)

²¹Friedrich Gogarten, *Despair and Hope for Our Time*, trans. Thomas Wieser (1953; repr., Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1970), 13.

²²John Patrick Diggins, "Review of *A Secular Age*," *New York Times Book Review* 112, no. 50 (Dec. 2007): 15. For a similar point, see also Stathis Gourgouris, "A Case of Heteronomous Thinking," *The Immanent Frame* (Jan. 19, 2008).

or refers to “the essentials of the faith” (244). He appears to waver back and forth between seeing Christianity as a revelation of fluctuating shape, and as a fixed entity with set boundaries. He never clarifies whether he assumes a transhistorical substance unequivocally identifiable as “the Christian” in his story of Western Christendom over the course of a semi-millennium.²³ MacIntyre’s notion of “social traditions” would have been a way for Taylor to establish this more clearly (if not in an exhaustive manner).²⁴ The question is, what is Christianity defined by in Taylor’s view?

In my reading, Taylor equates Christianity with *agape*. Of course, Taylor also writes that the renunciatory vocations that formed the second tier of western Christianity played a role at one time, but they are not essential to his definition of Christianity. The drive to Reform attacked the higher vocations and helped to reconcile the faithful with the principalities and powers of the earthly city. Christianity’s rejection of the world appears fairly accidental, and Taylor appears to strongly discount the tension between the established order and the eschaton. In Taylor’s account, Deism has its origin in “the eclipse of certain crucial Christian elements, those of grace and agape” (117).

But I think this implicit theology comes to the fore most strongly in his deradicalization of Ivan Illich’s account of the “corruption of Christianity” in the final chapter (737 ff.). While Illich thinks Christianity must break with the established order and rediscover its true self lest it perish, Taylor tones down the message: “We should find the centre of our spiritual lives beyond the code, deeper than the code, in networks of living concern, which are not sacrificed to the code, which must even from time to time subvert it” (743).

Thus, the overriding emphasis still is placed on Christianity’s message of benevolence, reconciliation and love. It is defined as an anti-structure in relation to the structure of the liberal-capitalist state. And as we know from Taylor’s discussion of anti-structure in chapter 1, the anti-structure provides space to blow off steam and transgress the existing structure in carnivals, rituals and other festivities. Ultimately this transgression serves to uphold the order that is transgressed: “The tension resolves into an equilibrium” (45). Deference to political authority remains untroubled.

A number of traditions within western Christendom remain beyond the pale of Taylor’s conception. This gerrymandering²⁵ is crucial for Taylor’s project. By effectively pulling religion’s teeth, he can conceive of a non-contradictory coexistence of the religious and

²³Correspondingly, the perspective constantly shifts between Taylor the Christian believer who participates in the Christian tradition and Taylor the detached commentator on that tradition.

²⁴“The activities which inform a tradition are always rationally underdetermined; that is, we can specify no set of rules, no set of rational procedures, which are either necessary or sufficient to guide the activity informing the tradition as it proceeds” (MacIntyre, *The MacIntyre Reader*, 67).

²⁵The term is unfortunately no longer mine to coin in this context; it was used by Walter Kaufmann, *Critique of Religion and Philosophy* (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1961), § 56.

the secular in western modernity. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

To clarify what I'm getting at, I want to juxtapose his implicit theology of love and reconciliation with a theological stance spelled out by the theologian Stanley Hauerwas.²⁶ Hauerwas's position makes for good contrast, not least because it is decisively non- or post-liberal.

Hauerwas distinguishes the "ethics of love"—that is, a theological stance that would "make love the primary message of Jesus"²⁷ and thus is very close to the kind of theology I am ascribing to Taylor—from the "ethics of truth." The contrast comes out most clearly in the following passage, worth quoting at length:

Christian ethics as an ethics of love reinforces our illusions by retreating into an ethic of interpersonal understanding and acceptance as if becoming an I to a Thou is the height of human attainment. But ethically our life involves more than person-to-person interaction; we exist as social creatures, and as such we confront social problems that require not love but justice. For example, the emergence of black power is the result of the black man's perception that he no longer wanted to be loved by the white—what he wanted was justice—that is, he wanted power to protect his own interest in a way that did not continue to depend on the good will of the whites. For good will is no less tyrannical than bad will in its continued control of the other. The black man discovered that there is no greater enemy to his people than the white liberal's attempt at loving reconciliation, for such reconciliation comes without destroying the structural racism of our society. Moreover, the black man has learned that there is no more destructive love than the white man's need of the "negro cause" to insure the white man moral identity and to assuage his guilt.²⁸

Clearly this conception of the Christian message poses a much stronger challenge to the secular-liberal order than Taylor's construal. Hauerwas points to the possibility that Christianity is not just a call to resolve conflict, but may actually seek confrontation (as it did in the struggles of the sixties he refers to). Taken in this way, it would not be content with acting as a privatized anti-code, but might be closer to a Christian version of the "Bolshevik stance" Taylor chides in chapter 19.

Historical examples of this kind of stance abound. In fact, one might go as far as answering Taylor that each "drive to Reform" that reconciles the Christian tradition to the powers-that-be breeds a counterdrive that might be called the "left wing" of Reform.²⁹

²⁶Stanley Hauerwas, "Love's Not All You Need," *Cross Currents* (Summer–Fall 1972): 225–237.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 227. Hauerwas elaborates: "I suspect the temptation to so interpret the Gospel has its basis in the general desire of men to assume that the moral life and the achievement of the good is an easy thing that requires no discipline or training. Love denotes an *immediacy* ..." (my emphasis).

²⁸*Ibid.*, 230.

²⁹The term is used by Franklin H. Littell, *The Origins of Sectarian Protestantism: A Study of the Anabaptist View of the*

Troeltsch's typology of "church" and "sect" hints at this bifurcation into a mainline and a radical branch of reformed Christianity.³⁰ In the middle ages, the Anabaptists were the strongest historical case of this counterdrive. A religio-political movement in the early sixteenth century, the Anabaptists carried out a social revolution under a communistic ideal to realize the Kingdom of God on earth (with a temporary success in the Westphalian city of Münster). The Hussites and Taborites in the Czech lands are comparable cases, as are most groups that mainline reformers like Luther and Calvin called "fanatics" (*fanaticus* or *Schwärmer*). These groups were credited by socialist intellectuals as forerunners of modern socialism,³¹ and Ernst Bloch saw in Thomas Müntzer the "theologian of revolution."³²

This counterdrive is not simply an epiphenomenon in the history of the Christian tradition. In fact, as Paul Boyer argues, the eschatological vision of Anabaptists and other heretical groups has endured well into the present.³³ Whether we think of movements of radical eschatological and soteriological hope for the future, or the apocalyptic visions concocted by right-wing theologians-cum-cold-warriors, there is a considerable strain in western Christianity that adopts an ethico-political stance toward the established order that is not easily reconciled with it. Whether explicitly tied to the history of Anabaptism or not, there exists an "anabaptist moment" in the Christian tradition readily apparent in surveying contemporary Christian social ethics.³⁴

Taylor, however, sees no place for it. In his account sects are "frustrated churches" that "despaired of the larger society" (449), thus seemingly without any lasting effect on the Christian mainstream or long-term implications for secular modernity. Can these demanding forms of Christian faith and life really be bracketed in considering the predicament of most milieux in the secular age?

This point needs to be taken further yet by pointing to forms of secularized eschatology that are as much part of the heritage of western modernity as secularized *agape* is.

Church (New York: Macmillan, 1964).

³⁰Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, 2 vols., trans. Olive Wyon (1911; repr., New York: Harper, 1960), I, 328 sqq.

³¹E. Belfort Bax, *Rise and Fall of the Anabaptists* (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1903); Karl Kautsky, *Vorläufer des neueren Sozialismus*, 2 vols. (Stuttgart: Dietz, 1923).

³²Ernst Bloch, *Thomas Münzer als Theologe der Revolution* (Munich: Wolff, 1921).

³³Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992). In a recent essay, Boyer repeats this conclusion: "These ancient eschatological beliefs are not merely of historical interest; they attract millions still today" (Boyer, "The Foreordained Future," 69). It is a matter of further study to what extent this finding can be generalized to other western countries.

³⁴See, for instance, Mary Elsbernd, "Social Ethics," *Theological Studies* 66, no. 1 (2005): 137–158. Her overview of discussions on "faith and public life" (147–150) and "reconciliation and social conflict" (150–154) in Catholic theology shows that the kind of stance a Christian or the Christian community is to adopt vis-à-vis the established power is still a topic of considerable debate. American theologian and ethicist William Cavanaugh in particular reads like an anabaptist Catholic.

These, too, remain beyond the purview of Taylor's account. Liberal critics have argued that this heritage lives on as an infantile messianism across the spectrum of radical politics.³⁵ Undoubtedly there is something to that.³⁶ But the eschatological will to "haste the day / When faith shall be sight"³⁷ can be encountered in other forms, too. One instance is the eschatologized view of the political history of the American colonies that was an important ingredient of the ideology of bourgeois revolution in the United States. As the dispensationalist view of history, it persists to this day, though perhaps it is no longer part of American high culture as it was in earlier centuries. Another historian, Richard Gamble, wrote the following on the persistence of the apocalyptic vision in the United States:

With surprising consistency, though to varying degrees over time and with shifting emphases, Americans have been habitually drawn to language that is redemptive, apocalyptic, and expansive. Americans have long experienced and articulated a sense of urgency, of hanging on the precipice of great change.³⁸

The bourgeois Enlightenment and its technological and socio-political advances did not stamp out the eschatological vision; eschatology appears immune to disenchantment.³⁹ My contention is that the narratives of modernity, at least in some parts of Latin Christendom, instantiate elements of the apocalyptic form that need to be given adequate consideration if the modern predicament is to be understood.

I can only hint at some troubling features of secular modernity likely to be overlooked as a result of this gerrymandering. One part of the history of Latin Christendom that is not dealt with in Taylor's story (at least not in a systematic manner) is the history of the crusades. Taylor renders the crusades as "a 'solution' to the grinding conflict *between* Christian faith and the aristocratic-warrior way of life of the rulers of medieval society" (686, my emphasis). This already locates them as something external to Christendom, forced upon it by the historical conjuncture. Indeed, Taylor argues, "a phenomenon like the Crusades . . . is profoundly at odds with the spirit of Christianity" (689), as is any form of scapegoating violence. How Taylor justifies separating the ideas or "spirit" from the practice here is not quite clear, particularly in light of his critique of epistemology (see, for instance, chapter 15.5, 556 ff.).

³⁵"Viewed from the standpoint of the relatively liberal and rational civilization which is our own, the eruption of apocalyptic fanaticism into present-day politics must necessarily appear a strange and perplexing calamity" (Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 313).

³⁶To get a sense of that one must only look through the Joseph Buttinger collection of rare books on utopia in the Mina Rees Library.

³⁷From the last verse of Horatio Spafford's hymn, "It is Well with My Soul."

³⁸Quoted in Talal Asad, *On Suicide Bombing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 86 sq.

³⁹Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More*, see n. 33, ch. 2, esp. 66 sq.

There is another way to read the relationship between the crusades and the history as Christendom. Tomaž Mastnak, in his impressive study on the political history of Christendom and the crusades, argues that the spiritual upshot of Latin Christendom is inextricably linked to the history of the crusades.

The most sublime idea and the most brutal force dwelt in a common house that they built together. This is not to say that the Crusades cast a shadow on western Christian intellectual and spiritual achievements. To the contrary, these achievements blind us to the crusades as an important factor that shaped the western world, as a factor without which the creativity of the big names of the Christian West would not have been what it was.⁴⁰

The reason I bring this up in this context is because the crusades were situated within an eschatological imaginary which they, in turn, helped to materialize.⁴¹ The crusades were the pursuit of the eschaton by the children of Israel. The devout eschatological motivation to pacify and unite (dare I say: reconcile) Christian society induced the medieval church to wage what it thought was a God-willed war.

Hegel also gives weight to the crusades as a crucial part of the genesis of spirit in his discussion of the unhappy consciousness. Trapped in the tragic dualism of the changeable and the unchangeable, the unhappy consciousness seeks out the “incarnate unchangeable” (i. e., Christ) as “an object of immediate sense-certainty”⁴² by going to the Holy Land to see Christ’s tomb. But this enterprise is “doomed to failure.” The unhappy consciousness continues to seek the divine beyond itself after experiencing the frustration of the tragic enterprise of the crusades.⁴³

Thus, the unhappy consciousness seeks union with the divine through surrender to the mediator, by sacrificing its belongings, its will, and ultimately its life.⁴⁴ Has the secular age eliminated this subservience to mediating institutions and the practice of self-sacrifice? Taylor’s discussion of the modern social imaginary indicates as much (chapter 4, esp. 209). If nothing else, however, it is this point of Taylor’s narrative that needs to be complexified. On this question, again, Hauerwas is a source of interesting and provocative insights.⁴⁵ And his answer is unequivocal: secularization has not rid society of the mediator; it placed the nation-state in the mediating position. Like the authoritarian church whose clout the state was able to break, the modern state demands sacrifices. The ultimate sacrifice is brought

⁴⁰Tomaž Mastnak, *Crusading Peace: Christendom, the Muslim World, and Western Political Order* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 346.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 45.

⁴²Hegel, see n. 16, 132, ¶ 217.

⁴³This interpretation is hinted at very briefly by Taylor, *Hegel*, see n. 6, 160, 492.

⁴⁴Hegel, see n. 16, 137, ¶ 229.

⁴⁵Stanley Hauerwas, “Sacrificing the Sacrifices of War,” *Journal of Religion, Conflict and Peace* 1, no. 1 (2007).

in war.⁴⁶ This is significant because war is not accidental to the modern nation-state. Only by waging wars the state can narrate itself as a coherent entity, and the sacrifice one brings the state allows one to be part of this whole. This is just as true of the liberal-democratic state, “post-Durkheimian” as it may appear.⁴⁷ Even the “expressivist age” knows its rituals, rituals that share the same deep “Christian roots” (371) with the universalism of secularized *agape*.⁴⁸

With this in mind, Taylor’s characterization of our present age needs to be problematized. He writes (371):

We live in an extraordinary moral culture, measured against the norm of human history, in which suffering and death, through famine, flood, earthquake, pestilence or war, can awaken world-wide movements of sympathy and practical solidarity. Granted, of course, that this is made possible by modern media and modes of transportation, not to speak of surpluses. These shouldn’t blind us to the importance of the cultural-moral change. The same media and means of transport don’t awaken the same response everywhere; it is disproportionately strong in ex-Latin Christendom.

Whether or not the global inequalities in “surpluses” can really be discounted as much as Taylor implies here is beside the point. The main contention I am concerned with at this point is a different one, namely that it is specifically and exclusively this “remarkable” and “unprecedented” moral good that we in secular modernity inherit from Latin Christendom. Can the “the age of Hiroshima and Auschwitz” be neatly separated from the creation of nonstate charitable groups such as Amnesty International and Medecins Sans Frontières? Don’t we have to assume that the “contemporary concern to preserve life, to bring prosperity, to reduce suffering worldwide” is contingent on the destruction of life, on global poverty, on the production of suffering and alienation? Can the compassion of the western world be considered in isolation from its cruelties?

As I tried to argue in this section, a more thorough account of the Christian tradition could help us to comprehend the origins of this paradoxical coexistence (or co-dependence—I don’t claim to know how the relationship should be understood) of the “most sublime” and the “most brutal.”

⁴⁶On the rhetoric of sacrifice in war, see also Stanley Hauerwas, “Why War Is a Moral Necessity for America, or How Realistic is Realism?” Photocopy provided by Talal Asad (2006).

⁴⁷An interesting problematization of the idea of a post-Durkheimian dispensation is given in Robert Bellah, “After Durkheim,” *The Immanent Frame* (Nov. 23, 2007).

⁴⁸A similar point is made by Asad, see n. 38, ch. 3. Specifically, he “suggest[s] that the cult of sacrifice, blood, and death that secular liberals find so repellent in pre-liberal Christianity is a part of the genealogy of modern liberalism itself, in which violence and tenderness go together. This is encountered in many places in our modern culture, not least in what is generally taken to be ‘just’ war” (Asad, *On Suicide Bombing*, 88).

The Fanatical Counterpublic

Many have criticized Taylor for another type of gerrymandering that undoubtedly has crucial implications as well, namely the boundaries he decided to draw around “Latin Christendom” as the locus of his master narrative of western modernity. He runs the risk of being blind to crucial connections overstepping the bounds of the west, whether cultural, economic or political, or a combination thereof (as in empire). Furthermore, what Nilüfer Göle calls “intercivilizational encounters”⁴⁹ are given short shrift. I want to point to another boundary that is drawn in *A Secular Age*: that *within* western Christendom against a group Taylor calls “fanatics.”

Taylor’s primary concern in dealing with “fanaticism” (and cognates such as superstition and enthusiasm) is to show how this category was used by exclusive humanists to discredit religion tout court, and by Christian reformers to polemicize against individuals and groups with dissenting socio-political views (see, for instance, chapter 6 on “Providential Deism”). This paves the way for the disengaged stance (see chapter 7) and the fragilization of views and positions characteristic of the secular dispensation. Reflecting on the emergence of disengagement (in considering the work of English historian Edward Gibbon), Taylor writes (286):

Think of the force of [Gibbon’s] style, which broadcasts an irenic distance, what will later be called “unflappability.” It is so judiciously disengaged, only allowing the meanings which structure the narrative to emerge in understated, straight-faced irony. Part of the power of this style for those whom it grips comes from the stance itself, which can seem (if you’re at all inclined this way) so superior to the hot, hyper-engaged “fanaticism” of so many of the people described. How can you not admire this? How can you not feel that this is a superior epistemic stance?

How are we to understand Taylor’s own position between disengagement and “fanaticism”? Of course, he doesn’t side with those who provide closure to the immanent frame by rejecting religion on account of its fanatical excesses (548). In fact, his emphasis on the need for transformation—the last chapter is called “Conversions” for a reason—might suggest a certain proximity to fanaticism (430).

Elsewhere, however, Taylor draws clear lines between the kind of position he finds acceptable, and the fanatics. In his discussions of the tensions of secular modernity, fanatics are clearly on the side of suffering and evil (681). Later, Taylor goes so far as calling their faith “idolatrous” and “dangerous” (769). For the most part, he seems to equate these “fa-

⁴⁹Nilüfer Göle, “Spaces of the Secular Republic,” paper presented at the conference “Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age,” Yale University (Apr. 2008).

natics” with “the bellicose, hegemony-loving parts of U. S. society which President Bush speaks to” (283)—that is, mostly midwestern “values voters” that identify with evangelical Christianity.⁵⁰

The tension created by Taylor’s ambiguous positioning *vis-à-vis* fanaticism thus breaks down, and “fanaticism” is located outside the Christian tradition. This backs up what I argued above, i. e., that in Taylor’s rendering Christianity is essentially about benevolence and love.

Taylor’s vigilance may be motivated by his attempt to create a conciliatory space for believers and nonbelievers. Liberal believers (such as Taylor) and their exclusive-humanist counterparts certainly concur that the religious right is reprehensible. Against the backdrop of premillennial fundamentalist theology, the differences between mainline Christians and liberal-humanist nonbelievers appear petty. Compared to the untamed ways of the savage, the unrefined table manners of one’s neighbor are downright courtly.

In engaging in this kind of implicit polemic, Taylor replicates a common historical pattern. Since the times of the Roman empire, adherents of deviant religious forms have been labeled (pejoratively) as *fanatici* by representatives of the state religion.⁵¹ At least since Luther, the term was not merely used to defame heterodox doctrines, but especially the political and social effects expected to ensue from them.⁵² In Britain in the seventeenth century, the term was increasingly used to pathologize Dissenters, i. e., those that broke away from the established church. Hobbes called them “pernicious to peace” and asked, “And what is a fanatic but a madman?”⁵³ As “madmen,” they were no longer political opponents, but psychological deviants who (one can presume) were subjected to the whole range of “treatments” Foucault documented in his work.

Today’s liberal-democratic states employ several more or less overt disciplinary methods of treating deviant forms of Christian faith and practice. For instance, evangelicals (among other “so-called sects and psycho-groups”) have been the subject of a parliamentary commission of inquiry in Germany. The commission used a personality-structure test on individuals drawn to “radical Christian groups.”⁵⁴ (Interestingly this part of the inquiry

⁵⁰Theirs is the same bellicosity as that “in much contemporary Islam” [!] (283).

⁵¹Werner Conze and Helga Reinhart, “Fanatismus,” in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, ed. Otto Brunner, Werner Conze, and Reinhart Koselleck (Stuttgart: Klett, 1975).

⁵²Dominique Colas, “Civil Society’: A Historical and Conceptual Approach,” in *Ambivalenzen der Zivilgesellschaft: Gegenbegriffe, Gewalt und Macht*, WZB Discussion Paper SP IV 2004-501, ed. Dieter Gosewinkel and Sven Reichardt (Berlin: Wissenschaftszentrum, 2004). I suspect Colas’s book, *Civil Society and Fanaticism: Conjoined Histories*, would be an instructive read on this point, but unfortunately I was unable to get my hands on it.

⁵³Quoted in Conze and Reinhart, see n. 51, 308.

⁵⁴Deutscher Bundestag, *Enquete-Kommission “Sogenannte Sekten und Psychogruppen”*, Endbericht (Bonn: Bundesanzeiger Verlagsgesellschaft, 1998), 198 sqq.

was led by a pastor in the established Protestant church.) In France an evangelical Christian told a reporter that “evangelicals make [the French] afraid.” The article continues:

Wariness of evangelicals also lingers in the French government, which has a standing special committee to oppose questionable cults of all types. In some areas, evangelical preachers say they have a hard time getting permits to build new houses of worship, a complaint shared by their Muslim counterparts.⁵⁵

Clearly there is a crucial difference between these practices and what Taylor calls the “immanent frame.” Whereas the immanent frame is about how our sense of the world is “spun” (see chapter 15), these practices rely on a system of power connected to, but much more diffuse than, the liberal-democratic state.

In a slightly different way than this term was intended by Hauerwas, these regulating procedures are instances of “the democratic policing of Christianity,”⁵⁶ that is, efforts to rally Christians behind established state institutions. It is not just the secular republics of Europe that engage in this kind of policing. Even *bona fide* anti-secularists like Charles Taylor that otherwise oppose reductive “subtraction stories” can be found to reduce Christianity to a moral source for ethical commitments in the established order.

I already hinted at some of the implications of this in the previous section. On this issue, we might further ask why Taylor (along with many other liberal commentators) finds it necessary to pinpoint a group that “revert[s] to living in another bubble, enjoying a false confidence in their own hard-edged truths” (769)? Why have polemics against (religious or political) fanatics been such an enduring feature in western states, particularly since the bourgeois revolutions of the late eighteenth to mid-nineteenth centuries? In fact, early Enlightenment thinkers that used the term in a polemical vein were often quite reflective about the term. The French encyclopedists, otherwise confident that the spread of reason would stamp out (religious) fanaticism, wrote that “On ne peut rien produire de grand sans ce zèle outré qui . . . met au jour des prodiges incroyable de valeur et de constance.”⁵⁷ Rousseau and Herder made similar concessions.

In an essay in defense of fanaticism, Hauerwas argues that attempts to distinguish fanatical from non-fanatical stances, like the attempt to distinguish terrorism from “just” war, is bound to fail.⁵⁸ Just as there is nothing intrinsically good about (as MacIntyre puts it) “dying for the telephone company” (i. e., in conventional warfare), there is nothing in-

⁵⁵Elizabeth Bryant, “Migrants Fuel Evangelical Growth Across Europe,” *Religion News Service* (Oct. 18, 2006).

⁵⁶Stanley Hauerwas, *Dispatches from the Front: Theological Engagements with the Secular* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), ch. 4.

⁵⁷Quoted in Conze and Reinhart, see n. 51, 313.

⁵⁸Stanley Hauerwas, “The Nonviolent Terrorist: In Defense of Christian Fanaticism,” in *Incredible Forgiveness: Christian Ethics between Fanaticism and Reconciliation*, ed. Didier Pollefeyt (Leuven: Peeters, 2004).

trinsically bad about fanatically bearing witness to a “particularistic” tradition. Attempts to silence such particularistic traditions in the interest of ensuring the peace are counter-productive “because, contrary to liberal sentimentality that assumes if people only come to know one another better violence is less likely, the exact opposite may be the case.”⁵⁹ In fact, he argues, traditions that embody alternate rationalities and trigger “epistemic crises” in questioning the legitimacy of the state’s rights to police, punish, and wage war against outsiders are a greater cause for hope than any universalistic ethic entrusted to the institutions of the state.

Polemics against “fanatics” thus seem primarily to be motivated by the need to overcome legitimation crises. That would explain the persistence of these polemics in western modernity: no social and political order has ever been able to claim universal legitimacy. Every public is an “illusory totality” that always excludes a “counterpublic.”⁶⁰ While certain counterpublics may be able to penetrate into and alter the public sphere (as Taylor argues), the horizon of possible experiences still remains restricted. Even Taylor has to limit the horizon in his project, even though he is quite generous in terms of the positions he is willing to admit. As any observer of contemporary Christianity knows, “fanatics” constitute a sizable group, for better or worse. One wishes there was some kind of reflection on the ramifications of this in a book the size of *A Secular Age*. This, along with the points mentioned in the previous section, would have made for a more truthful, if more troubling, image of secular modernity.

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⁵⁹Hauerwas, “The Nonviolent Terrorist,” see n. 58, 101.

⁶⁰On these terms, see Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere*, trans. Peter Labanyi, Miriam Hansen, and Assenka Oksiloff (1972; repr., Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

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