

A SECULAR AGE

# A Secular Age

CHARLES TAYLOR

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To my daughter Gretta

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## Preface

This book emerges from my Gifford Lectures at Edinburgh in the spring of 1999, entitled “Living in a Secular Age?”. It’s been quite some time since then, and in fact the scope of the work has expanded. Basically, the lectures of 1999 covered Parts I–III of the present book, and Parts IV and V deal with matters I wanted to discuss then, but lacked the time and competence to treat properly. (I hope the passing years have helped in this regard.)

The book has grown since 1999, and also increased its scope. But the first process hasn’t kept pace with the second: The larger scope would have demanded a much bigger book than I am now offering to the reader. I am telling a story, that of what we usually call “secularization” in the modern West. And in doing so, I am trying to clarify what this process, often invoked, but still not very clear, amounts to. To do this properly, I should have had to tell a denser and more continuous story, something I have neither the time nor the competence to do.

I ask the reader who picks up this book not to think of it as a continuous story-and-argument, but rather as a set of interlocking essays, which shed light on each other, and offer a context of relevance for each other. I hope the general thrust of my thesis will emerge from this sketchy treatment, and will suggest to others further ways of developing, applying, modifying, and transposing the argument.

I want to thank the Gifford Lectures Committee at Edinburgh for giving me the initial impetus to start on this project. I also owe a debt of gratitude to the Canada Council for an Isaac Killam Fellowship during 1996–1998, which allowed me to get started; and to the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada for their Gold Medal Award of 2003. I benefited greatly from visits to the Institut für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen in Vienna in 2000 and 2001. The Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin gave me a fellowship in 2005–2006 that allowed me to complete the project in the best possible conditions, including discussions with José Casanova and Hans Joas, who have been working on parallel projects.

I must also express my gratitude to the members of the network around the Centre for Transcultural Studies. Some of the key concepts I use in this work have emerged during our exchanges.

In producing the book, I was greatly helped by Bryan Smyth, who made or discovered many of the translations as well as preparing the index. Unmarked translations are almost always by him, occasionally modified by myself.



A SECULAR AGE

# Introduction

1

What does it mean to say that we live in a secular age? Almost everyone would agree that in some sense we do: I mean the “we” who live in the West, or perhaps Northwest, or otherwise put, the North Atlantic world—although secularity extends also partially, and in different ways, beyond this world. And the judgment of secularity seems hard to resist when we compare these societies with anything else in human history: that is, with almost all other contemporary societies (e.g., Islamic countries, India, Africa), on one hand; and with the rest of human history, Atlantic or otherwise, on the other.

But it’s not so clear in what this secularity consists. There are two big candidates for its characterization—or perhaps, better, families of candidate. The first concentrates on the common institutions and practices—most obviously, but not only, the state. The difference would then consist in this, that whereas the political organization of all pre-modern societies was in some way connected to, based on, guaranteed by some faith in, or adherence to God, or some notion of ultimate reality, the modern Western state is free from this connection. Churches are now separate from political structures (with a couple of exceptions, in Britain and the Scandinavian countries, which are so low-key and undemanding as not really to constitute exceptions). Religion or its absence is largely a private matter. The political society is seen as that of believers (of all stripes) and non-believers alike.<sup>1</sup>

Put in another way, in our “secular” societies, you can engage fully in politics without ever encountering God, that is, coming to a point where the crucial importance of the God of Abraham for this whole enterprise is brought home forcefully and unmistakably. The few moments of vestigial ritual or prayer barely constitute such an encounter today, but this would have been inescapable in earlier centuries in Christendom.

This way of putting it allows us to see that more than the state is involved in this change. If we go back a few centuries in our civilization, we see that God was pres-

ent in the above sense in a whole host of social practices—not just the political—and at all levels of society: for instance, when the functioning mode of local government was the parish, and the parish was still primarily a community of prayer; or when guilds maintained a ritual life that was more than pro forma; or when the only modes in which the society in all its components could display itself to itself were religious feasts, like, for instance, the Corpus Christi procession. In those societies, you couldn't engage in any kind of public activity without “encountering God” in the above sense. But the situation is totally different today.

And if you go back even farther in human history, you come to archaic societies in which the whole set of distinctions we make between the religious, political, economic, social, etc., aspects of our society ceases to make sense. In these earlier societies, religion was “everywhere”,<sup>2</sup> was interwoven with everything else, and in no sense constituted a separate “sphere” of its own.

One understanding of secularity then is in terms of public spaces. These have been allegedly emptied of God, or of any reference to ultimate reality. Or taken from another side, as we function within various spheres of activity—economic, political, cultural, educational, professional, recreational—the norms and principles we follow, the deliberations we engage in, generally don't refer us to God or to any religious beliefs; the considerations we act on are internal to the “rationality” of each sphere—maximum gain within the economy, the greatest benefit to the greatest number in the political area, and so on. This is in striking contrast to earlier periods, when Christian faith laid down authoritative prescriptions, often through the mouths of the clergy, which could not be easily ignored in any of these domains, such as the ban on usury, or the obligation to enforce orthodoxy.<sup>3</sup>

But whether we see this in terms of prescriptions, or in terms of ritual or ceremonial presence, this emptying of religion from autonomous social spheres is, of course, compatible with the vast majority of people still believing in God, and practising their religion vigorously. The case of Communist Poland springs to mind. This is perhaps a bit of a red herring, because the public secularity was imposed there by a dictatorial and unpopular régime. But the United States is rather striking in this regard. One of the earliest societies to separate Church and State, it is also the Western society with the highest statistics for religious belief and practice.

And yet this is the issue that people often want to get at when they speak of our times as secular, and contrast them, nostalgically or with relief, with earlier ages of faith or piety. In this second meaning, secularity consists in the falling off of religious belief and practice, in people turning away from God, and no longer going to Church. In this sense, the countries of western Europe have mainly become secular—even those who retain the vestigial public reference to God in public space.

Now I believe that an examination of this age as secular is worth taking up in a

third sense, closely related to the second, and not without connection to the first. This would focus on the conditions of belief. The shift to secularity in this sense consists, among other things, of a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace. In this meaning, as against sense 2, at least many milieux in the United States are secularized, and I would argue that the United States as a whole is. Clear contrast cases today would be the majority of Muslim societies, or the milieux in which the vast majority of Indians live. It wouldn't matter if one showed that the statistics for church/synagogue attendance in the U.S., or some regions of it, approached those for Friday mosque attendance in, say, Pakistan or Jordan (or this, plus daily prayer). That would be evidence towards classing these societies as the same in sense 2. Nevertheless, it seems to me evident that there are big differences between these societies in *what it is to believe*, stemming in part from the fact that belief is an option, and in some sense an embattled option in the Christian (or "post-Christian") society, and not (or not yet) in the Muslim ones.

So what I want to do is examine our society as secular in this third sense, which I could perhaps encapsulate in this way: the change I want to define and trace is one 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. This has been a recognizable experience in our societies, at least since the mid-nineteenth century. There will be many others to whom faith never even seems an eligible possibility. There are certainly millions today of whom this is true.

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

An age or society would then be secular or not, in virtue of the conditions of experience of and search for the spiritual. Obviously, where it stood in this dimension would have a lot to do with how secular it was in the second sense, which turns on

levels of belief and practice, but there is no simple correlation between the two, as the case of the U.S. shows. As for the first sense, which concerns public space, this may be uncorrelated with both the others (as might be argued for the case of India). But I will maintain that in fact, in the Western case, the shift to public secularity has been part of what helped to bring on a secular age in my third sense.

## 2

Articulating the conditions of experience turns out to be harder than one might think. This is partly because people tend to be focussed on belief itself. What people are usually interested in, what arouses a lot of the anguish and conflict, is the second issue: what do people believe and practice? How many believe in God? In which direction is the trend going? Concern for public secularity often relates to the issue of what people believe or practice, and of how they are treated in consequence: does our secularist régime marginalize believing Christians, as some claim in the U.S.A.? Or does it stigmatize hitherto unrecognized groups? African-Americans, Hispanics? or else gays and lesbians?

But in our societies, the big issue about religion is usually defined in terms of belief. First Christianity has always defined itself in relation to credal statements. And secularism in sense 2 has often been seen as the decline of Christian belief; and this decline as largely powered by the rise of other beliefs, in science, reason, or by the deliverances of particular sciences: for instance, evolutionary theory, or neuro-physiological explanations of mental functioning.

Part of my reason for wanting to shift the focus to the conditions of belief, experience and search is that I'm not satisfied with this explanation of secularism 2: science refutes and hence crowds out religious belief. I'm dissatisfied on two, related levels. First, I don't see the cogency of the supposed arguments from, say, the findings of Darwin to the alleged refutations of religion. And secondly, partly for this reason, I don't see this as an adequate explanation for why in fact people abandoned their faith, even when they themselves articulate what happened in such terms as "Darwin refuted the Bible", as allegedly said by a Harrow schoolboy in the 1890s.<sup>4</sup> Of course bad arguments can figure as crucial in perfectly good psychological or historical explanations. But bad arguments like this, which leave out so many viable possibilities between fundamentalism and atheism, cry out for some account why these other roads were not travelled. This deeper account, I think, is to be found at the level I'm trying to explore. I will return to this shortly.

In order to get a little bit clearer on this level, I want to talk about belief and unbelief, not as rival *theories*, that is, ways that people account for existence, or morality, whether by God or by something in nature, or whatever. Rather what I want to

do is focus attention on the different kinds of lived experience involved in understanding your life in one way or the other, on what it's like to live as a believer or an unbeliever.

As a first rough indication of the direction I'm groping in, we could say that these are alternative ways of living our moral/spiritual life, in the broadest sense.

We all see our lives, and/or the space wherein we live our lives, as having a certain moral/spiritual shape. Somewhere, in some activity, or condition, lies a fullness, a richness; that is, in that place (activity or condition), life is fuller, richer, deeper, more worth while, more admirable, more what it should be. This is perhaps a place of power: we often experience this as deeply moving, as inspiring. Perhaps this sense of fullness is something we just catch glimpses of from afar off; we have the powerful intuition of what fullness would be, were we to be in that condition, e.g., of peace or wholeness; or able to act on that level, of integrity or generosity or abandonment or self-forgetfulness. But sometimes there will be moments of experienced fullness, of joy and fulfillment, where we feel ourselves there. Let one example, drawn from the autobiography of Bede Griffiths, stand for many:

One day during my last term at school I walked out alone in the evening and heard the birds singing in that full chorus of song, which can only be heard at that time of the year at dawn or at sunset. I remember now the shock of surprise with which the sound broke on my ears. It seemed to me that I had never heard the birds singing before and I wondered whether they sang like this all year round and I had never noticed it. As I walked I came upon some hawthorn trees in full bloom and again I thought that I had never seen such a sight or experienced such sweetness before. If I had been brought suddenly among the trees of the Garden of Paradise and heard a choir of angels singing I could not have been more surprised. I came then to where the sun was setting over the playing fields. A lark rose suddenly from the ground beside the tree where I was standing and poured out its song above my head, and then sank still singing to rest. Everything then grew still as the sunset faded and the veil of dusk began to cover the earth. I remember now the feeling of awe which came over me. I felt inclined to kneel on the ground, as though I had been standing in the presence of an angel; and I hardly dared to look on the face of the sky, because it seemed as though it was but a veil before the face of God.<sup>5</sup>

In this case, the sense of fullness came in an experience which unsettles and breaks through our ordinary sense of being in the world, with its familiar objects, activities and points of reference. These may be moments, as Peter Berger puts it, describing the work of Robert Musil, when "ordinary reality is 'abolished' and

something terrifyingly *other* shines through”, a state of consciousness which Musil describes as “*der andere Zustand*” (the other condition).<sup>6</sup>

But the identification of fullness may happen without a limit experience of this kind, whether uplifting or frightening. There may just be moments when the deep divisions, distractions, worries, sadnesses that seem to drag us down are somehow dissolved, or brought into alignment, so that we feel united, moving forward, suddenly capable and full of energy. Our highest aspirations and our life energies are somehow lined up, reinforcing each other, instead of producing psychic gridlock. This is the kind of experience which Schiller tried to understand with his notion of “play”.<sup>7</sup>

These experiences, and others again which can't all be enumerated here, help us to situate a place of fullness,<sup>8</sup> to which we orient ourselves morally or spiritually. They can orient us because they offer some sense of what they are of: the presence of God, or the voice of nature, or the force which flows through everything, or the alignment in us of desire and the drive to form. But they are also often unsettling and enigmatic. Our sense of where they come from may also be unclear, confused, lacunary. We are deeply moved, but also puzzled and shaken. We struggle to articulate what we've been through. If we succeed in formulating it, however partially, we feel a release, as though the power of the experience was increased by having been focussed, articulated, and hence let fully be.

This can help define a direction to our lives. But the sense of orientation also has its negative slope; where we experience above all a distance, an absence, an exile, a seemingly irremediable incapacity ever to reach this place; an absence of power; a confusion, or worse, the condition often described in the tradition as melancholy, ennui (the “spleen” of Baudelaire). What is terrible in this latter condition is that we lose a sense of where the place of fullness is, even of what fullness could consist in; we feel we've forgotten what it would look like, or cannot believe in it any more. But the misery of absence, of loss, is still there, indeed, it is in some ways even more acute.<sup>9</sup>

There are other figures of exile, which we can see in the tradition, where what dominates is a sense of damnation, of deserved and decided exclusion forever from fullness; or images of captivity, within hideous forms which embody the very negation of fullness: the monstrous animal forms that we see in the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch, for instance.

Then thirdly, there is a kind of stabilized middle condition, to which we often aspire. This is one where we have found a way to escape the forms of negation, exile, emptiness, without having reached fullness. We come to terms with the middle position, often through some stable, even routine order in life, in which we are doing things which have some meaning for us; for instance, which contribute to our ordi-

nary happiness, or which are fulfilling in various ways, or which contribute to what we conceive of as the good. Or often, in the best scenario, all three: for instance, we strive to live happily with spouse and children, while practising a vocation which we find fulfilling, and also which constitutes an obvious contribution to human welfare.

But it is essential to this middle condition, first that the routine, the order, the regular contact with meaning in our daily activities, somehow conjures, and keeps at bay the exile, or the ennui, or captivity in the monstrous; and second, that we have some sense of continuing contact with the place of fullness; and of slow movement towards it over the years. This place can't be renounced, or totally despaired of, without the equilibrium of the middle condition being undermined.<sup>10</sup>

Here's where it might appear that my description of this supposedly general structure of our moral/spiritual lives tilts towards the believer. It is clear that the last sentences of the previous paragraph fit rather well the state of mind of the believer in the middle condition. She goes on placing faith in a fuller condition, often described as salvation, and can't despair of it, and also would want to feel that she is at least open to progress towards it, if not already taking small steps thither.

But there are surely many unbelievers for whom this life in what I've described as the "middle condition" is all there is. This is the goal. Living this well and fully is what human life is about—for instance, the threefold scenario I described above. This is all that human life offers; but on this view this is a) no small thing, and b) to believe that there is something more, e.g., after death, or in some impossible condition of sanctity, is to run away from and undermine the search for this human excellence.

So describing fullness as another "place" from this middle condition may be misleading. And yet there is a structural analogy here. The unbeliever wants to be the kind of person for whom this life is fully satisfying, in which all of him can rejoice, in which his whole sense of fullness can find an adequate object. And he is not there yet. Either he's not really living the constitutive meanings in his life fully: he's not really happy in his marriage, or fulfilled in his job, or confident that this job really conduces to the benefit of humankind. Or else he is reasonably confident that he has the bases of all these, but contrary to his express view, cannot find the fullness of peace and a sense of satisfaction and completeness in this life. In other words, there is something he aspires to beyond where he's at. He perhaps hasn't yet fully conquered the nostalgia for something transcendent. In one way or another, he still has some way to go. And that's the point behind this image of place, even though this place isn't "other" in the obvious sense of involving quite different activities, or a condition beyond this life.

Now the point of describing these typical dimensions of human moral/spiritual



life as identifications of fullness, modes of exile, and types of the middle condition, is to allow us to understand better belief and unbelief as lived conditions, not just as theories or sets of beliefs subscribed to.

The big obvious contrast here is that for believers, the account of the place of fullness requires reference to God, that is, to something beyond human life and/or nature; where for unbelievers this is not the case; they rather will leave any account open, or understand fullness in terms of a potentiality of human beings understood naturalistically. But so far this description of the contrast seems to be still a belief description. What we need to do is to get a sense of the difference of lived experience.

Of course, this is incredibly various. But perhaps some recurring themes can be identified. For believers, often or typically, the sense is that fullness comes to them, that it is something they receive; moreover, receive in something like a personal relation, from another being capable of love and giving; approaching fullness involves among other things, practices of devotion and prayer (as well as charity, giving); and they are aware of being very far from the condition of full devotion and giving; they are aware of being self-enclosed, bound to lesser things and goals, not able to open themselves and receive/give as they would at the place of fullness. So there is the notion of receiving power or fullness in a relation; but the receiver isn't simply empowered in his/her present condition; he/she needs to be opened, transformed, brought out of self.

This is a very Christian formulation. In order to make the contrast with modern unbelief, perhaps it would be good to appose to it another formulation, more "Buddhist": here the personal relation might drop out as central. But the emphasis would be all the stronger on the direction of transcending the self, opening it out, receiving a power that goes beyond us.

For modern unbelievers, the predicament is quite different. The power to reach fullness is within. There are different variations of this. One is that which centres on our nature as rational beings. The Kantian variant is the most upfront form of this. We have the power as rational agency to make the laws by which we live. This is something so greatly superior to the force of mere nature in us, in the form of desire, that when we contemplate it without distortion, we cannot but feel reverence (*Achtung*) for this power. The place of fullness is where we manage finally to give this power full reign, and so to live by it. We have a feeling of receptivity, when with our full sense of our own fragility and pathos as desiring beings, we look up to the power of law-giving with admiration and awe. But this doesn't in the end mean that there is any reception from outside; the power is within; and the more we realize this power, the more we become aware that it is within, that morality must be autonomous and not heteronomous.

(Later a Feuerbachian theory of alienation can be added to this: we project God

because of our early sense of this awesome power which we mistakenly place outside us; we need to re-appropriate it for human beings. But Kant didn't take this step.)

Of course, there are also lots of more naturalistic variants of the power of reason, which depart from the dualistic, religious dimensions of Kant's thought, his belief in radical freedom of the moral agent, immortality, God—the three postulates of practical reason. There may be a more rigorous naturalism, which accords little room for manoeuvre for human reason, driven on one side by instinct, and on the other hemmed in by the exigencies of survival. There may be no explanation offered of why we have this power. It may consist largely in instrumental uses of reason, there again unlike Kant. But within this kind of naturalism, we often find an admiration for the power of cool, disengaged reason, capable of contemplating the world and human life without illusion, and of acting lucidly for the best in the interest of human flourishing. A certain awe still surrounds reason as a critical power, capable of liberating us from illusion and blind forces of instinct, as well as the phantasies bred of our fear and narrowness and pusillanimity. The nearest thing to fullness lies in this power of reason, and it is entirely ours, developed if it is through our own, often heroic action. (And here the giants of modern "scientific" reason are often named: Copernicus, Darwin, Freud.)

Indeed, this sense of ourselves as beings both frail and courageous, capable of facing a meaningless, hostile universe without faintness of heart, and of rising to the challenge of devising our own rules of life, can be an inspiring one, as we see in the writings of a Camus for instance.<sup>11</sup> Rising fully to this challenge, empowered by this sense of our own greatness in doing so, this condition we aspire to but only rarely, if ever, achieve, can function as its own place of fullness, in the sense of my discussion here.

Over against these modes of rejoicing in the self-sufficient power of reason, there are other modes of unbelief which, analogous to religious views, see us as needing to receive power from elsewhere than autonomous reason to achieve fullness. Reason by itself is narrow, blind to the demands of fullness, will run on perhaps to destruction, human and ecological, if it recognizes no limits; is perhaps actuated by a kind of pride, hubris. There are often echoes here of a religious critique of modern, disengaged, unbelieving reason. Except that the sources of power are not transcendent. They are to be found in Nature, or in our own inner depths, or in both. We can recognize here theories of immanence which emerge from the Romantic critique of disengaged reason, and most notably certain ecological ethics of our day, particularly deep ecology. Rational mind has to open itself to something deeper and fuller. This is something (at least partly) inner; our own deepest feelings or instincts. We have therefore to heal the division within us that disengaged reason has created, setting thinking in opposition to feeling or instinct or intuition.

So we have here views which, as just mentioned, have certain analogies to the re-

ligious reaction to the unbelieving Enlightenment, in that they stress reception over against self-sufficiency; but they are views which intend to remain immanent, and are often as hostile, if not more so, to religion than the disengaged ones.

There is a third category of outlook, which is hard to classify here, but which I hope to illuminate later in this discussion. These are views, like that of certain contemporary modes of post-modernism, which deny, attack or scoff at the claims of self-sufficient reason, but offer no outside source for the reception of power. They are as determined to undermine and deny Romantic notions of solace in feeling, or in recovered unity, as they are to attack the Enlightenment dream of pure thinking; and they seem often even more eager to underscore their atheist convictions. They want to make a point of stressing the irremediable nature of division, lack of centre, the perpetual absence of fullness; which is at best a necessary dream, something we may have to suppose to make minimum sense of our world, but which is always elsewhere, and which couldn't in principle ever be found.

This family of views seems to stand altogether outside the structures I'm talking about here. And yet I think one can show that in a number of ways it draws on them. In particular, it draws empowerment from the sense of our courage and greatness in being able to face the irremediable, and carry on nonetheless. I hope to come back to this later.

So we've made some progress in talking about belief and unbelief as ways of living or experiencing moral/spiritual life, in the three dimensions I talked about earlier. At least I drew some contrasts in the first dimension, the way of experiencing fullness; the source of the power which can bring us to this fullness; whether this is "within" or "without"; and in what sense. Corresponding differences follow about experiences of exile, and those of the middle condition.

More needs to be said about this distinction of within/without, but before elaborating further on this, there is another important facet of this experience of fullness as "placed" somewhere which we need to explore. We have gone beyond mere belief, and are closer to lived experience here, but there are still important differences in the way we live it which have to be brought out.

What does it mean to say that for me fullness comes from a power which is beyond me, that I have to receive it, etc.? Today, it is likely to mean something like this: the best sense I can make of my conflicting moral and spiritual experience is captured by a theological view of this kind. That is, in my own experience, in prayer, in moments of fullness, in experiences of exile overcome, in what I seem to observe around me in other people's lives—lives of exceptional spiritual fullness, or lives of maximum self-enclosedness, lives of demonic evil, etc.—this seems to be the picture which emerges. But I am never, or only rarely, really sure, free of all doubt, untroubled by some objection—by some experience which won't fit, some lives

which exhibit fullness on another basis, some alternative mode of fullness which sometimes draws me, etc.

This is typical of the modern condition, and an analogous story could be told by many an unbeliever. We live in a condition where we cannot help but be aware that there are a number of different construals, views which intelligent, reasonably undeluded people, of good will, can and do disagree on. We cannot help looking over our shoulder from time to time, looking sideways, living our faith also in a condition of doubt and uncertainty.

It is this index of doubt, which induces people to speak of “theories” here. Because theories are often hypotheses, held in ultimate uncertainty, pending further evidence. I hope I have said something to show that we can’t understand them as mere theories, that there is a way in which our whole experience is inflected if we live in one or another spirituality. But all the same we are aware today that one can live the spiritual life differently; that power, fullness, exile, etc., can take different shapes.

But there is clearly another way one can live these things, and many human beings did. This is a condition in which the immediate experience of power, a place of fullness, exile, is in terms which *we* would identify as one of the possible alternatives, but where for the people concerned no such distinction, between experience and its construal, arose. Let’s recur to Hieronymus Bosch for instance. Those nightmare scenarios of possession, of evil spirits, of captivation in monstrous animal forms; we can imagine that these were not “theories” in any sense in the lived experience of many people in that age. They were objects of real fear, of such compelling fear, that it wasn’t possible to entertain seriously the idea that they might be unreal. You or people you knew had experienced them. And perhaps no one in your milieu ever got around even to suggesting their unreality.

Analogously, the people of New Testament Palestine, when they saw someone possessed of an evil spirit, were too immediately at grips with the real suffering of this condition, in a neighbour, or a loved one, to be able to entertain the idea that this was an interesting explanation for a psychological condition, identifiable purely in intra-psychic terms, but that there were other, possibly more reliable aetiologies for this condition.

Or to take a contemporary example, from West Africa in this case, so it must have been for the Celestine, interviewed by Birgit Meyer,<sup>12</sup> who “walked home from Aventile with her mother, accompanied by a stranger dressed in a white northern gown.” When asked afterwards, her mother denied having seen the man. He turned out to be the Akan spirit Sowlui, and Celestine was pressed into his service. In Celestine’s world, perhaps the identification of the man with this spirit might be called a “belief”, in that it came after the experience in an attempt to explain what it

was all about. But the man accompanying her was just something that happened to her, a fact of her world.

So there is a condition of lived experience, where what we might call a construal of the moral/spiritual is lived not as such, but as immediate reality, like stones, rivers and mountains. And this plainly also goes for the positive side of things: e.g., people in earlier ages of our culture, for whom moving to fullness just meant getting closer to God. The alternatives they faced in life were: living a fuller devotion, or going on living for lesser goods, at a continuing distance from fullness; being “*dévo*t” or “*mondain*”, in the terms of seventeenth-century France; not taking off after a different construal of what fullness might mean.

Now part of what has happened in our civilization is that we have largely eroded these forms of immediate certainty. That is, it seems clear that they can never be as fully (to us) “*naïve*”<sup>13</sup> as they were at the time of Hieronymus Bosch. But we still have something analogous to that, though weaker. I’m talking about the way the moral/spiritual life tends to show up in certain milieux. That is, although everybody has now to be aware that there is more than one option, it may be that in our milieu one construal, believing or unbelieving, tends to show up as the overwhelmingly more plausible one. You know that there are other ones, and if you get interested, then drawn to another one, you can perhaps think/struggle your way through to it. You break with your believing community and become an atheist; or you go in the reverse direction. But one option is, as it were, the default option.

Now in this regard, there has been a titanic change in our western civilization. We have changed not just from a condition where most people lived “*naïvely*” in a construal (part Christian, part related to “*spirits*” of pagan origin) as simple reality, to one in which almost no one is capable of this, but all see their option as one among many. We all learn to navigate between two standpoints: an “*engaged*” one in which we live as best we can the reality our standpoint opens us to; and a “*disengaged*” one in which we are able to see ourselves as occupying one standpoint among a range of possible ones, with which we have in various ways to coexist.

But we have also changed from a condition in which belief was the default option, not just for the naïve but also for those who knew, considered, talked about atheism; to a condition in which for more and more people unbelieving construals seem at first blush the only plausible ones. They can only approach, without ever gaining the condition of “*naïve*” atheists, in the way that their ancestors were naïve, semi-pagan believers; but this seems to them the overwhelmingly plausible construal, and it is difficult to understand people adopting another. So much so that they easily reach for rather gross error theories to explain religious belief: people are afraid of uncertainty, the unknown; they’re weak in the head, crippled by guilt, etc.

This is not to say that everyone is in this condition. Our modern civilization is

made up of a host of societies, sub-societies and milieux, all rather different from each other. But the presumption of unbelief has become dominant in more and more of these milieux; and has achieved hegemony in certain crucial ones, in the academic and intellectual life, for instance; whence it can more easily extend itself to others.

In order to place the discussion between belief and unbelief in our day and age, we have to put it in the context of this lived experience, and the construals that shape this experience. And this means not only seeing this as more than a matter of different “theories” to explain the same experiences. It also means understanding the differential position of different construals; how they can be lived “naïvely” or “reflectively”; how one or another can become the default option for many people or milieux.

To put the point in different terms, belief in God isn't quite the same thing in 1500 and 2000. I am not referring to the fact that even orthodox Christianity has undergone important changes (e.g., the “decline of Hell”, new understandings of the atonement). Even in regard to identical credal propositions, there is an important difference. This emerges as soon as we take account of the fact that all beliefs are held within a context or framework of the taken-for-granted, which usually remains tacit, and may even be as yet unacknowledged by the agent, because never formulated. This is what philosophers, influenced by Wittgenstein, Heidegger or Polanyi, have called the “background”.<sup>14</sup> As Wittgenstein points out,<sup>15</sup> my research into rock formations takes as granted that the world didn't start five minutes ago, complete with all the fossils and striations, but it would never occur to me to formulate and acknowledge this, until some crazed philosophers, obsessively riding their epistemological hobby-horses, put the proposition to me.

But now perhaps I have caught the bug, and I can no longer be naïvely into my research, but now take account of what I have been leaning on, perhaps entertain the possibility that it might be wrong. This breach of naïveté is often the path to fuller understanding (even if not in this case). You might be just operating in a framework in which all moves would be in one of the cardinal directions or up or down; but in order to function in a space ship, even to conceive one, you have to see how relative and constrained this framework is.

The difference I've been talking about above is one of the whole background framework in which one believes or refuses to believe in God. The frameworks of yesterday and today are related as “naïve” and “reflective”, because the latter has opened a question which had been foreclosed in the former by the unacknowledged shape of the background.

The shift in background, or better the disruption of the earlier background, comes best to light when we focus on certain distinctions we make today; for instance, that between the immanent and the transcendent, the natural and the super-

natural. Everyone understands these, both those who affirm and those who deny the second term of each pair. This hiving off of an independent, free-standing level, that of “nature”, which may or may not be in interaction with something further or beyond, is a crucial bit of modern theorizing, which in turn corresponds to a constitutive dimension of modern experience, as I hope to show in greater detail below.

It is this shift in background, in the whole context in which we experience and search for fullness, that I am calling the coming of a secular age, in my third sense. How did we move from a condition where, in Christendom, people lived naïvely within a theistic construal, to one in which we all shunt between two stances, in which everyone’s construal shows up as such; and in which moreover, unbelief has become for many the major default option? This is the transformation that I want to describe, and perhaps also (very partially) explain in the following chapters.

This will not be easy to do, but only by identifying the change as one of lived experience, can we even begin to put the right questions properly, and avoid the naïvetés on all sides: either that unbelief is just the falling away of any sense of fullness, or the betrayal of it (what theists sometimes are tempted to think of atheists); or that belief is just a set of theories attempting to make sense of experiences which we all have, and whose real nature can be understood purely immanently (what atheists are sometimes tempted to think about theists).

In fact, we have to understand the differences between these options not just in terms of creeds, but also in terms of differences of experience and sensibility. And on this latter level, we have to take account of two important differences: first, there is the massive change in the whole background of belief or unbelief, that is, the passing of the earlier “naïve” framework, and the rise of our “reflective” one. And secondly, we have to be aware of how believers and unbelievers can experience their world very differently. The sense that fullness is to be found in something beyond us can break in on us as a fact of experience, as in the case of Bede Griffiths quoted above, or in the moment of conversion that Claudel lived in Notre Dame at Vespers. This experience may then be articulated, rationalized; it may generate particular beliefs. This process may take time, and the beliefs in question may change over the years, even though the experience remains in memory as a paradigm moment. This is what happened to Bede, who came to a fully theistic reading of that crucial moment only some years later; and a similar “lag” can be seen in the case of Claudel.<sup>16</sup> The condition of secularity 3 has thus to be described in terms of the possibility or impossibility of certain kinds of experience in our age.

### 3

I have been struggling above with the term “secular”, or “secularity”. It seems obvious before you start thinking about it, but as soon as you do, all sorts of problems

arise. I tried to conjure some of these by distinguishing three senses in which I will use the term. This by no means gets rid of all problems, but it may be enough to allow for some progress in my enquiry.

But all three modes of secularity make reference to “religion”: as that which is re-creating in public space (1), or as a type of belief and practice which is or is not in regression (2), and as a certain kind of belief or commitment whose conditions in this age are being examined (3). But what is “religion”? This famously defies definition, largely because the phenomena we are tempted to call religious are so tremendously varied in human life. When we try to think what there is in common between the lives of archaic societies where “religion is everywhere”, and the clearly demarcated set of beliefs, practices and institutions which exist under this title in our society, we are facing a hard, perhaps insuperable task.

But if we are prudent (or perhaps cowardly), and reflect that we are trying to understand a set of forms and changes which have arisen in one particular civilization, that of the modern West—or in an earlier incarnation, Latin Christendom—we see to our relief that we don’t need to forge a definition which covers everything “religious” in all human societies in all ages. The change which mattered to people in our (North Atlantic, or “Western”) civilization, and still matters today, concerning the status of religion in the three dimensions of secularity I identified, is the one I have already started to explore in one of its central facets: we have moved from a world in which the place of fullness was understood as unproblematically outside of or “beyond” human life, to a conflicted age in which this construal is challenged by others which place it (in a wide range of different ways) “within” human life. This is what a lot of the important fights have been about more recently (as against an earlier time when people fought to the death over different readings of the Christian construal).

In other words, a reading of “religion” in terms of the distinction transcendent/immanent is going to serve our purposes here. This is the beauty of the prudent (or cowardly) move I’m proposing here. It is far from being the case that religion in general can be defined in terms of this distinction. One could even argue that marking our particular hard-and-fast distinction here is something which we (Westerners, Latin Christians) alone have done, be it to our intellectual glory or stultification (some of each, I will argue later). You couldn’t foist this on Plato, for instance, not because you can’t distinguish the Ideas from the things in the flux which “copy” them, but precisely because these changing realities can only be understood through the Ideas. 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. This notion of the “immanent” involved denying—or at least isolating



and problematizing—any form of interpenetration between the things of Nature, on one hand, and “the supernatural” on the other, be this understood in terms of the one transcendent God, or of Gods or spirits, or magic forces, or whatever.<sup>17</sup>

So defining religion in terms of the distinction immanent/transcendent is a move tailor-made for our culture. This may be seen as parochial, incestuous, navel-gazing, but I would argue that this is a wise move, since we are trying to understand changes in a culture for which this distinction has become foundational.

So instead of asking whether the source of fullness is seen/lived as within or without, as we did in the above discussion, we could ask whether people recognize something beyond or transcendent to their lives. This is the way the matter is usually put, and I want to adopt it in what follows. I will offer a somewhat fuller account of what I mean by this distinction several chapters down the road, when we come to examine modern theories of secularization. I fully recognize that a word like “transcendent” is very slippery—partly because, as I hinted just now, these distinctions have been constructed or redefined in the very process of modernity and secularization. But I believe that in all its vagueness, it can serve in our context.

But precisely for the reasons that I explored above, I want to supplement the usual account of “religion” in terms of belief in the transcendent, with one more focussed on the sense we have of our practical context. Here is one way of making sense of this.

Every person, and every society, lives with or by some conception(s) of what human flourishing is: what constitutes a fulfilled life? what makes life really worth living? What would we most admire people for? We can't help asking these and related questions in our lives. And our struggles to answer them define the view or views that we try to live by, or between which we haver. At another level, these views are codified, sometimes in philosophical theories, sometimes in moral codes, sometimes in religious practices and devotion. These and the various ill-formulated practices which people around us engage in constitute the resources that our society offers each one of us as we try to lead our lives.

Another way of getting at something like the issue raised above in terms of within/without is to ask: does the highest, the best life involve our seeking, or acknowledging, or serving a good which is beyond, in the sense of independent of human flourishing? In which case, the highest, most real, authentic or adequate human flourishing could include our aiming (also) in our range of final goals at something other than human flourishing. I say “final goals”, because even the most self-sufficing humanism has to be concerned with the condition of some non-human things instrumentally, e.g., the condition of the natural environment. The issue is whether they matter also finally.

It's clear that in the Judaeo-Christian religious tradition the answer to this ques-

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