

REVIEW ESSAY

A METAPHYSICAL HISTORY OF ATHEISM

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Charles Taylor's most recent book, pithily titled *A Secular Age*¹, which grew out of the Gifford Lectures of 1999, can in many ways be considered a synthesis of his extensive oeuvre: His outstanding methodology in the history of ideas, steeped in Hegel's phenomenological approach, is connected with his valuable reflections on the theory of the social sciences as well as his strong religious engagement. It also forms a sophisticated theory of secularisation that, in terms of differentiation, is unparalleled. Of course, Taylor might have explained everything he had to say in considerably fewer pages, since the individual chapters are conceived more as independent essays. (ix) Certain examples recur regularly, and occasionally entire sentences are repeated word for word (360 and 400, 361 and 398). But, on account of Taylor's elegant writing, it is nevertheless always pleasant to read his prose. Particularly fascinating is the "stance" with which he approaches his theme—for he rightly maintains that Edward Gibbons' success has less to do with his material insights than with the dry irony of his "unflappable stance." (241, 272ff., 286ff.)² It is clear that Taylor's own approach is opposed to that of Gibbons—he approaches the topic of religion with a genuinely cognitive interest: His aim is not simply to learn *about* religious people, but to learn *from* them. But this intellectual candour, this sincere respect, applies equally to those who, in the past century, detached themselves from religion, people Taylor tries sympathetically to understand. On all 851 pages of the text, one

¹ That the book was written in the 20th century becomes obvious when the 19th century is called "the last century." (168) "One, two, three! Time runs very quickly, and we with it." ("*Einzweidrei! Im Sauseschritt/Läuft die Zeit, wir laufen mit,*" from Wilhelm Busch's *Julchen*.)

² Analogously, he writes about religion: "But I'm talking about the underlying attitudes. Once one frames these as doctrines, one betrays them, loses the nuances that they incorporated." (511)

detects a spirit of Christian charity that is uncommon among modern intellectuals, whether non-religious or Christian.

After the extensive introduction in which Taylor distinguishes three different concepts of secularisation (as a separation of church and state; as a decline in religious practices; as a shift in the nature of belief due to the availability of alternatives), the first three parts of the book deal with changes in the history of ideas from the world as it was five hundred years ago, when atheism was hardly a common view, indeed, when atheism conceived itself as a view fostered by the devil, up to the present-day situation. He sees in this desire for reform dating back to Hildebrand (Gregory VII) the decisive force that, with the Protestant Reformation, culminates in a new form of discipline for humans and leads to new “social imaginaries.”

In this way, Taylor deftly connects studies in the history of ideas with social-historical analyses *à la* Norbert Elias and Michel Foucault, and is thus able to ban “the specter of idealism” (212ff.) that he presumably sees lingering in John Milbanks’ alternative theory of secularisation. (773ff.) Key in this process is, for Taylor, the genesis of the “buffered self” (37ff., 134ff., 300ff.) that makes the earlier, porous self impenetrable, so to speak, creating a sharp distinction between the physical and psychical, which he sees as the essence of disenchantment.

The second part deals with deism and the idea of an impersonal order as the pivotal point at which the development of atheism was first made possible. The third part, titled “The Nova Effect,” discusses the continuous emergence of new positions since the 19th century—the radically enlightened views as well as the romantic reaction against a rationalisation perceived as spiritually impoverishing. Among these reactions, Taylor rightly draws sufficient attention to the immanent Counter-Enlightenment, as represented by Nietzsche. (369ff., 636ff.) The fourth part then introduces his actual sociological theory of secularisation, which is distinguished from other theories that easily become self-fulfilling prophecies. (525, 530, 535) Taylor opposes authors like Steve Bruce and is instead strongly influenced by the well-known sociologist of religion, Jose Casanova, and his studies on the enduring religious motives of political movements.³ According to Taylor, only the form

³ Jose Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

changes: “The new structures, indeed, undermine old forms, but leave open the possibility of new forms which can flourish.” (432) In the first step (“The Age of Mobilization”), institutions, including religious institutions, understand themselves more and more as the product of a conscious, collective deed, rather than, as in the *ancien régime* and its “paleo-Durkheimian polities,” an expression of a cosmological order. (459ff.) Paradoxically, this also occurs where organisations have to be formed in order to defend the old establishment. (445, 462) However, the second step goes even beyond these “neo-Durkheimian forms”: In the age of authenticity there is a commitment to subjective expression that has led, among other things, to a radical reshaping of sexual ethics. Admittedly, the fact that traditional religion no longer conforms to the spirit of the times can itself prove strongly attractive: “The very fact that its forms are not absolutely in true with much of the spirit of the age; a spirit in which people can be imprisoned, and feel the need to break out; the fact that faith connects us to so many spiritual avenues across different ages; this can over time draw people towards it.” (533) Therefore, it is wrong to speak of an inevitable demise of religion. In the fifth section, Taylor outlines the conditions of faith in a contemporary context. Modern science indeed offers an immanent framework, but one that is open to various interpretations. It is a peculiarity of our time that we are subjected to influences from opposing directions, seek out a middle path between orthodoxy and atheism (deism being the first of these, 599), and try to make ontological sense of the phenomenal experiences of freedom, of the moral law and of beauty. (609) In certain dilemmas, both sides, the religious and the secular, are involved in analogous ways (e.g., questions about transcendence, self-limitation, the meaning of violence).

The discussion that follows cannot fully address the wealth of fascinating interpretations, particularly of modern French and English intellectual history, which Taylor knows especially well. The breadth of his interests is particularly encouraging in a time in which the essence of philosophy is being undermined by an increasingly narrow specialisation, for Taylor is competent not only in historical, sociological, political and religious science but also in theories of art and literature (see, for example, his interpretation of Tintoretto’s *La Risurrezione* in the Sala grande di San Rocco, 97). Instead, I would like to concentrate on a few central philosophical premises in the book that will shed light on the specific character of his theory and will, perhaps, throw into relief an alter-

native theory. For the telling of history is inevitably influenced by the normative beliefs of the narrator, even if these beliefs are themselves reinforced by the way in which he narrates his story (on the positive circle operating here, 768; concerning the inevitability of "master narratives," 573).

Without the slightest doubt, Taylor is right in maintaining that the standard *subtraction story* doesn't work. (26ff.) Modern atheism is not simply a result of a decline in superstition that left behind a naturalist, i.e., non-religious, view of the world, if only for the simple reason that, first, modern science is rooted in a belief in God: "The new interest in nature was not a step outside of a religious outlook, even partially; it was a mutation within this outlook. The straight path account of modern secularity can't be sustained. Instead, what I'm offering here is a zig-zag account, one full of unintended consequences." (95) Still, there is a good deal more to say on this topic than Taylor tells, though he at least points to Nicholas of Cusa's central importance. (61, 99, 113) Second, contemporary secular humanism is itself bound to a Christian heritage, without which it would be entirely incomprehensible, perhaps not even possible.⁴ "The in fact very exigent demands of universal justice and benevolence which characterize modern humanism can't be explained just by the subtraction of earlier goals and allegiances." (255, 572) Not only do certain value judgements shape humanism; modern atheism would not even have come to pass without moral reasons. I think even Nietzsche, the anti-universalist, demonstrates this quite clearly: He is driven by the pathos of sincerity, and even if the overestimation of sincerity (that is in no way identical with truth) belongs to the era of authenticity, his unconditional will to sincerity, even at the cost of self-destruction, indicates that his atheism cannot be explained merely in terms of subtraction. Nietzsche does not simply return to the ancients. (247) The historical nature of the self makes such a return simply impossible.

Of course, this leads to a fundamental objection to every theory of secularisation: Secularisation cannot at all occur for the simple reason that certain value judgements are inevitable, and without a corresponding view of reality, and thus without religion in the broadest sense, there would be no value judgements. From this it follows immediately that it is fundamentally impossible to reduce the religious motives to other kinds

⁴ Taylor is aware of the difficulty of grounding his claim to necessity. (247, 267)

of motives, even if in a particular case they might be (self-)deceiving. (453, 459, 530) Taylor even considers whether the relative number of intensely religiously motivated people throughout all ages remains the same. (91) In *Morals and Politics*, I include religion among the irreducible components of any social system, and so it is unavoidable that both immanentist religions such as Confucianism⁵, as well as world views that conceive themselves as anti-religious, such as Marxism-Leninism, are designated as “religions.”⁶ As with Max Weber, Taylor is aware that he cannot really define “religion” (15), but by limiting himself to Latin Christendom, he can understand “secularisation” essentially as “immanentisation” (16, 429), or even as “de-Christianization.” (Of course, the importance of the incarnation doctrine speaks against Taylor’s conflation of the two latter terms, as he himself indicates. [144]) Taylor resists the sociological expansion of the concept of religion by functionalists (780 n. 19), but in other passages he agrees with them. (516ff., 714ff.) Indeed, at one point he states, “All the above shows that the religious dimension is inescapable. Perhaps there is only the choice between good and bad religion” (427, 708, 768; at 491, atheism is even described as “power of

⁵ The Chinese religion that appealed to Enlightenment thinkers of the 18th century becomes a problem in the 19th century, which is more fascinated with India than China. Cf. F. W. J. Schelling, *Philosophie der Mythologie* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1976), II, 521ff.: “The Chinese people, even if it is not younger than any of the various mythological peoples, does not show in its ideas anything that recalls the mythology of other peoples. We could say: it is an absolutely unmythological people [...]” (521) Nonetheless, according to Schelling, even though it is absolutely unmythological, it only seems unreligious. (522, 539ff.) Schelling, who sees in myth “a form of enchantment” (II, 596), recognises that the history of *religion* is continually characterised by repression of *mythology* (consider the Iranian religion: II, 204ff.) and that Christianity “itself plays a part” in overcoming mythology and even in undermining the old belief in revelation. (I, 260) Christianity was, therefore, itself a factor in this disenchantment, to employ a technical term found not originally in Max Weber, but already in Nietzsche (for example, in *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, 239). “Isn’t it clear that in the same time and in the same relation in which nature gradually rids itself of every form of divinity and degenerates into a merely lifeless aggregate, even the living monotheism dissolves more and more in an empty, indeterminate theism without content?” (II, 104ff.)

⁶ Vittorio Hösle, *Morals and Politics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004), 265ff., 467ff. From this it follows that I avoid the concept of secularisation as much as possible; as far as I can tell, the word occurs only once. (590)

another religious stripe"). Taylor is right when he occasionally remarks that the separation of church and state occurred, among other reasons, for religious reasons. (532, 797 n. 43) It resulted in a greater religious freedom. "We shouldn't forget the spiritual costs of various kinds of forced conformity: hypocrisy, spiritual stultification, inner revolt against the Gospel, the confusion of faith and power, and even worse." (513) The example of the U.S. shows how a state can identify itself with a form of religiosity that transcends denominations and, increasingly, even different religions. (454)⁷ In fact, the pluralisation of religious forms is the inevitable cost of religious freedom, and with it, a more frequent religious conversion that certainly does not preclude intensive religiosity. (833 n. 19) Taylor, the communitarian, knows that forced solidarity comes to a totalitarian end. (466, 485, 692)

Anyone who believes, along with Taylor, that there is in fact only a choice between good and bad religion will surely have an interest in the question of what makes it possible for us to decide between the two forms. Taylor himself doesn't address the question head-on, though neither does he conceal his own view. He represents a liberal Catholicism minus the doctrine of infallibility (512), an option that is broadly attractive because it does not try to demonise pre-modern Catholicism in any way and makes glaringly obvious, among other things, the banality of the *pro-choice* position. (478ff.) However much Taylor dismisses Pius' IX *Syllabus* of 1864 (569ff.), he also dismisses a simplistic model of progress, and notes: "But that doesn't mean that Catholics being suspicious of democracy in the nineteenth century might not have seen some of its dangers and weaknesses more clearly than we do as children of the twentieth century, who had to defend democracy against various gruesome forms of tyranny." (753) Still, Taylor's remarkable knowledge of

⁷ This is certainly the reason that the U.S.A. is less secularised (in the second sense of the word) than Europe: "In Europe it was easier to link religion with authority, with conformity to society-wide standards, not to speak of hostile divisions between people, and even violence." (149, 529) But Taylor allows that this cannot be the full explanation: "A fully satisfactory account of this difference, which is in a sense the crucial question facing secularization theory, escapes me." (530) In my view, the enormous influence of sceptical intellectuals in Europe plays a role unlike anything in the U.S., which, on account of the lack of an aristocracy, hardly has public intellectuals. Schopenhauer and Leopardi were successes in Europe already in the 19th century, but Melville, who felt similarly, first gained prominence in the 20th century.

Catholic history is not accompanied by a clear analysis of the crucial arguments in the philosophy of religion. Thus, his criticism of deism presupposes the authority of traditional orthodoxy. Taylor does not adequately account for the fact that the standards of orthodoxy have changed—even if he mentions several times the general decline of a belief in hell. (13, 223)

However, despite his insight into the evolving interpretations of Christianity, Taylor never feels compelled to inquire on his own account which tradition actually withstands the test of reason. His own Catholicism is influenced by the French personalism of the 20th century, as indicated by his fascination with Charles Péguy. (745ff.) He seems not to acknowledge that a rather formidable rationalist tendency has long been present within the Christian tradition. Those Enlightenment thinkers who no longer wished to recognise the authority of the church could in part be consistently interpreted as the successors to these rationalist theologians; and undoubtedly they were often driven by religious motives—the desire to think independently about God is a direct result of the unconditional significance attached to one’s own relation to the divine.⁸ And even today, alienation from the church is often enough caused by an objectively unjustified misuse of clerical authority, clearly one of the cardinal sins of the Church. Taylor admittedly denies a rationalist philosophy of religion, including even the proofs of God’s existence. (294, 551)⁹ His polemic against the modern epistemological model of justification in the wake of Heidegger seems to confuse origin and validity (559), and it also misconstrues the point of Descartes’ grand foundationalist project when he writes: “And, of course, knowledge of the things of ‘this world,’ of the natural order precedes any theoretical invocation of forces and realities transcendent to it.” (558) For, according to Descartes, of course, the knowledge of God precedes knowledge of the external world. Taylor is

⁸ Cf. Vittorio Hösle, “The Idea of a Rationalistic Philosophy of Religion and Its Challenges,” in *Jahrbuch für Religionsphilosophie*, 6 (2007), 159–81.

⁹ The proofs of God in the Middle Ages, Taylor writes, were only considered valid within a lived tradition. (293ff.) But this is a modern projection, not the medieval self-interpretation. See B. Goebel and V. Hösle, “Reasons, Emotions, and God’s Presence in Anselm of Canterbury’s *Cur Deus Homo*,” in *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, 87 (2005), 189–210, where, among other things, an argument is given against Karl Barth’s analogous interpretation of Anselm. Of course, reasons do not exclude deep emotions, as Taylor seems to suggest. (288)

certainly right that valuative beliefs underlie Descartes' epistemological project, but in my view that can clearly only mean that such beliefs, too, must be justified by means of the epistemic criteria developed. I am convinced that the idea of an "ultimate foundation" of ultimate norms is required in order to warrant the kind of trans-paradigmatic comparison that Taylor regards as entirely possible. (480)

Taylor seems just as little aware that the timelessness of God strongly suggests the idea of an impersonal order as the main content of a divine spirit, a timelessness taught not only by the pagan Platonists, but also by the majority of Church Fathers, who themselves were Platonists (God's timelessness is incompatible with Taylor's metaphor of the tennis player [277]). It may be that deism destroys the crucial tension in Christianity between Platonism and the doctrine of the Incarnation, but it cannot be denied that deism has exhaustively developed an essential moment of Christianity. And Taylor undoubtedly underestimates the explosive power behind the problem of theodicy in developing the modern concept of God. Certainly Taylor is right that, in "the age of worldviews" (Heidegger), the problem has attained a new level of intensity; for the simple reason that it was more difficult to get by in earlier times, one was content to trust in God as a redeemer, "while accepting that we can't understand how his creation got into this fix, and whose fault it is (presumably ours)." (233; 305ff., 388ff., 650ff.) But such historical references do not solve the problem at hand. One simply cannot understand the religious nature of the enthusiasm for a deterministic system of natural laws without realising that it helps resolve the theodicy problem—God allows innocent children to die because this simplifies considerably the laws of nature. This is Leibniz' famous reply, and even if it is not necessarily heart-warming, it is presumably fair to say that, as of today, no better reply has been offered. Analogously, the tension between divine omnipotence and human free will is neglected, a tension with which both modern theology and religion have struggled. Taylor emphasises that the doctrine of predestination "seemed to be generated inevitably from a belief in divine omnipotence" (262), and he remarks that Jefferson's deism was a reaction to the morally repugnant aspects of Calvinism. (78ff., 804 n. 59) Still, one would like to know what Taylor himself thinks about this tension, for the impression of its insolubility as well as of the inconsistency of traditional Christology certainly favours religious agnosticism.

“But if our faith has remained at the stage of immature images, then the story that materialism equals maturity can seem plausible.” (364)

In connection with the development of the contemporary world view, it seems important also to discuss the *moral* arguments that have led to doubts about the immortality of the soul. For in my view, such moral arguments have proven more effective than those that rely on the development of neurological research, the findings of which can always be interpreted in a parallelist manner. With authors such as Spinoza, Bayle and Kant, there is the familiar notion that virtue must be its own reward, that, in fact, it is morally disgraceful to set one’s sights on a reward in the afterlife. One might object that this position underwrites the subjectivist’s preference for a solitary heroism, against which Taylor plays off the notion of a highest good consisting of “communion, mutual giving and receiving, as in the paradigm of the eschatological banquet.” (702) Still, it is crucial to investigate the history of this argument as it pertains not only to the development of unbelief but also to the transformation of the Christian conception of the afterlife.

A further morally relevant reason for the crisis of Christianity is certainly the growing acquaintance since the 19th century with non-Christian religions and their investigation that employs the tools of modern historiography. Anyone who accepts ethical universalism (and it speaks well of Taylor that, in spite of his reservations about Kantian formalism,¹⁰ which I share, he stands firmly on the ground of modern universalism [120, 608, 671]), must of course ask himself with what right he can study other religions as an outside observer, so to speak, while refusing to assume a third-person perspective toward his own religion. This question is all the more pressing since the transition into the role of a distant observer, who brackets the search for truth, is fortunately not the only alternative. Goethe’s *The Mysteries (Die Geheimnisse)* and Hegel’s *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* are impressive examples of an attempt to overcome the provinciality of blindly identifying with one’s

¹⁰ Thus, Taylor is a value pluralist, but he exaggerates in attributing to Rawls and Dworkin a belief in “the myth of the single, omniscient code.” (52) For, in truth, it is monotheism that is averse to the kind of value pluralism that finds natural expression in ancient polytheism. Certainly, there are conflicts of values (704ff.), but it would be self-defeating for any ethical doctrine to give up the hope that the various value combinations form a kind of connex, transitive quasi-order. Thus, in my view, Taylor’s polemic against *a priori* principles (448) does a disservice to theism.

own religion due to sheer ignorance of other religions, while at the same time avoiding a position of complete neutrality. The search for a natural religion—which, according to Taylor, is one of the three features of deism (221), though he pays less attention to this than the other two characteristics (physico-theology and the impersonal order)—may have unjustly ignored a wealth of historical traditions. However, the kind of inter-religious dialogue needed today is hardly possible without the regulative idea of such a religion. Taylor, of course, rejects the idea that commitment to our own religion comes about as the result of comparing all religions. (680)

Here is not the place to pursue philosophical arguments for religion. I am much more concerned with the fairly trivial claim that every account of the secularisation process presupposes certain views within the philosophy of religion that do not disappear simply by leaving them out of the discussion. If anyone's concept of God differs from that of Taylor's, that person will also have a different view of the history of religious thought. Thus, he might grant, for example, that Leibniz, Lessing, Kant and German Idealism all played a key constructive role in formulating a more sophisticated concept of God. This is, by the way, not just the subjective perspective of a philosopher with hard-nosed rationalist tendencies; also, the most important modern theology—that of Schleiermacher—emerges partly in response to Kant and Fichte in the context of early Romanticism. It is unfortunate that the name of this most original theologian since Thomas Aquinas occurs only once, and indeed, quite in passing. (489) Considering the content of their doctrines, I find less regrettable the complete absence of the dialectical theologians of the 20th century, but in light of their enormous influence, also on Catholic theology, an inclusion of the Protestant history of theology in a book of this scope would have been appropriate. Within Catholic theology, Taylor points to the strides made by Yves Congar, Jean Daniélou and Henri de Lubac toward overcoming the Neo-Scholastic tradition by reverting to the Church Fathers and the preparation of the Second Vatican Council. (752, 847 n. 39). Taylor connects with Irenaeus of Lyons his own conception of human education out of a violence that is rooted in man's

animal nature but becomes culturally transformed quite early on (668)—of course, he might also have mentioned Lessing.¹¹

Things become even more complicated if the discussion about secularisation applies, not to Christianity alone, but to religion in general. For compared with ancient national religions, even Christianity appears to be a secularising force, as not only Schiller recognises in *The Gods of Greece (Die Götter Griechenlands)*. Taylor himself writes: “There were important Christian motives for going the route of disenchantment.” (26, 74, 143, 375) Disenchantment cannot be equated with the decline of religion, as Max Weber wrongly supposed. (553) If it is true even of the Reformation that it was both an expansion as well as a limitation of the sacred (79), there remains the question of how to evaluate the transition from national religions to universal religions during the so-called Axial age, a period to which Taylor, following Jaspers, devotes a good deal of attention.¹² On the one hand, Taylor laments the loss of popular cults whose significance he holds, along with Mircea Eliade and especially Victor Turner (47ff.), in high regard. These cults partially survived through the Axial age, even through the period of Christianisation, up until the 19th century. But the blame lies with Church authorities for repressing them more and more. Today, paradoxically, it would be the Pentecostal movement that stops this unholy tendency toward “excarnation” that prevailed in the Reformation. (614) “A strange turn of events, which would surprise Calvin, were he to return!” (503) “The Great Disembedding,” that individualistic dissolution of the organic communities of antiquity, begins with the Axial age. (146) On the other hand, Taylor takes into account that only the Axial age made it possible to develop a concept of transcendence, a concept foreign to earlier religions for which the

¹¹ Taylor is, of course, correct in maintaining that the mechanism of projection underlying human violence (686) is not foreign to secular humanism, which has much more of a problem with “useless” people than Christianity. (684)

¹² Of course, also prior to the Axial age, there were serious changes in the history of religion, even within the same culture. It is not at all easy, often impossible even, to measure their contribution to secularisation. Consider, for example, the emerging separation of the sacred area as *τέμενος* in the dark centuries of Greece in contrast to the palace temples of the Mycenaeans. Does this separation *revalue* or *devalue* the divine? Presumably, it does both at the same time, for, on the one hand, the religious aims to be conceived as an independent category and, on the other, it inevitably claims to impact the entire social world.

divine embraced both good and evil. "Seen from another angle, this means a change in our attitude to evil, as the destructive, harm-inflicting side of things. This is no longer just part of the order of things, to be accepted as such. Something has to be done about it." (153) For the first time the need of transcending nature and community arose.

The immanent Counter-Enlightenment seems from this perspective, not as irreligious, but as an attempt to return to an earlier (and more *primitive*, I do not hesitate in saying) form of religiosity, as a form, in Peter Gay's words, of "modern paganism." (771) Here, the central question concerning his own position is raised once again: Anyone who denies, against Aristotelianism, an immanentist foundation of ethics will recognise in universal religions the crucial breakthrough of a higher form of morality and, thus, also religious consciousness that finds its clearest conceptual articulation in Kant. Ultimately, the equilibrium model of early modernity (176ff.) is closer to Aristotle's view than to Kant's, according to whom morality can never be reduced to rational egoism or pursuit of happiness. But Taylor rejects a Kantian approach to ethics (282), and even if, following Ivan Illich (737ff.), he views the legal regulation of the church in an excessively negative or perhaps even nomophobic way (cf. 707), one must agree that the ability to overcome rigid ideas about justice, as in the South African *Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, is superb. (705ff.—But does that not imply that forgiveness is a higher moral principle?) It is regrettable, however, that he never mentions Rudolf Otto's peerless book, *The Idea of the Holy*, from 1917, which interprets the history of religion from the tension between the experience of the numinous and the moral imperative.

Yet Taylor would probably object to the above alternative account of secularisation in the following way: The reconstruction of belief in God from pure reason—be it theoretical or practical—does no justice at all to the social power of religion. Religion certainly is more than a theological insight based on arguments. But after the Enlightenment, religion can hardly be preached in good conscience *without* such arguments. What must be added to the arguments are socially shared emotions, and normally these are evoked only through paradigmatic histories. An interesting question is how, after the erosion of the Bible's authoritative status in the 19th century, partly due to the historical method, an existential re-appropriation of Biblical narratives in great world literature occurred. *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens, who had Unitarian sym-

pathies, is an excellent example.¹³ Religious kitsch, however, is not only aesthetically impermissible, it threatens to further alienate intelligent people from traditional religions. More important than good stories, of course, are living examples of faith; the need for these is great, and a single pope like John XXIII might attract more people to traditional religion than various repulsive popes have driven away. “A pope just had to sound like a Christian, and many immemorial resistances melted.” (727) Presumably, it is also the experience of human fallibility and guilt, such as that experienced in the aftermath of the French Revolution and the totalitarian adventures of the 20th century, that greatly intensifies doubts about the self-idolisation of humans. (598) The environmental catastrophe toward which we are inevitably headed will therefore encourage religious fervour in the strict sense.

Taylor’s construction of the history of the “buffered self” is quite successful, and it invites the reader to metaphysical speculation. In *Die Philosophie der ökologische Krise*,¹⁴ I distinguish between five concepts of nature that ultimately culminate in the Cartesian dualism of *res extensa* and *res cogitans*; analogously, in *Morals and Politics*,¹⁵ I distinguish between five interpretations of the relation between “is” and “ought,” which reach an apex in Kantian dualism. In the latter book, I interpret the trend toward the formation of subjective centres not only as a law of the development of conscious states, but as a metaphysical blueprint that structures the development of the organic world and, ultimately, the emergence of mind out of the principle of life.¹⁶ Insofar as the self-empowerment of modern subjectivity is an expression of this trend, I see in it, paradoxically, a necessary manifestation of the absolute. Certainly, this is not its last appearance, but we have to pursue further Taylor’s coy remark that “We might even be tempted to say that modern unbelief is providential, but that might be too provocative a way of putting it.” (637) Only the experience of the utter contradiction of a purely secular religion can lead to a deeper relation to God, a relation in which

¹³ See Vittorio Hösle, “The Lost Prodigal Son’s Corporal Works of Mercy and the Bridegroom’s Wedding: The Religious Subtext of Charles Dickens’ *Great Expectations*,” in *Anglia*, vol. 126 (2008), 477–502.

¹⁴ Vittorio Hösle, *Die Philosophie der ökologischen Krise* (München: C.H. Beck, 1991), 25ff.

¹⁵ Hösle, *Morals and Politics*, 5ff.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 226.

autonomy will come to play a more significant role than in earlier epochs. "To God belongs the East! To God belongs the West!" (*Gottes ist der Orient! Gottes ist der Okzident!*), as Goethe says in the *West-Eastern Divan*. To God belongs modern secularism as well.

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