Aesthetic Ecclesiology:

An Anglican Theological Response to the Work of Charles Taylor on the Secular

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Short Abstract

In this thesis I consider the work of Charles Taylor from a theological perspective, specifically relating this consideration to the topic of ecclesiology. I argue that Taylor and related thinkers such as John Milbank and Rowan Williams point toward what I call an "Aesthetic Ecclesiology", that is an ecclesiology that values highly and utilizes the aesthetic in its self-understanding and practice.

I begin with the observation that Taylor's work provides an account of the breakdown in Modernity of the conceptual relationship of the immanent and the transcendent. I add to Taylor's account that of John Milbank and the Radical Orthodoxy movement, arguing that

Milbank's work is largely complementary to Taylor's, and that, whereas Taylor's genealogy operates on a largely historico-cultural level, Milbank's takes account of high-level elite movements within the realms of theology and philosophy. The final chapter utilizes the theology and ecclesiology of Rowan Williams, whose work is seen as, again, complementary to what has gone before, adding to it by providing first-hand priestly and episcopal reflection in addition to an emphasis on the Church as rooted in history and, at points, taken to its limits.

I conclude that certain important ecclesiological implications follow from the observation of the illegitimate breakdown of the conceptual connection of the immanent and the transcendent: firstly, this observation implies that the aesthetic may be a more theologically rich category than it is often given credit for. It is neither an irrelevance nor necessarily idolatrous but can be a legitimate conduit for the presence of the divine. It is argued therefore that the reconnection of the transcendent and the immanent coheres well with an understanding of the Church that takes into account the material reality of the sacraments and the Church's status as historical, global and eschatological. Secondly, the aesthetic provides the Church with a powerful apologetic: beauty cannot be reduced to the presuppositions of secular materialism, and so must be accounted for by recourse to transcendent categories.

Long Abstract

This dissertation is primarily a theological response to the work of Charles Taylor, particularly his seminal work *A Secular Age*, but it also draws on other sources in his corpus. From Taylor's work and that of related thinkers, I argue for what I call an "Aesthetic Ecclesiology". An aesthetic ecclesiology is an ecclesiology that values highly and utilizes

certain “aesthetic” components that were perhaps more readily identifiable in the pre-modern world. By this term, I do not mean simply that which is pretty and attractive, but that which participates in Beauty in its full theological sense and that which is more deeply embodied. Part of this argument, therefore, implies a rationale for Christian and ecclesial art and architecture, but it goes further than this because it also implies that the material practices and self-understanding of the historical Church – such as its sacramental assemblies, it liturgies, and its historical, interconnected catholic nature – can similarly be thought of under the rubric of aesthetics.

The flipside to this argument is that the secular can be critiqued by utilizing various Taylorian notions such as excarnation, disenchantment and social atomization, and showing how these movements disembody individuals and de-aestheticize human existence. One of the central implications of Taylor’s work is that the secular and its symptoms are fundamentally Christian in origin, and thus have the potential to be re-orientated toward the truth because they already exist within a Christian framework. Although the work of Taylor is deeply appreciated here and utilized positively in the majority of this work, I also critique certain aspects of it as being too sanguine about elements of the secular, and therefore capable of further radicalization. Two central critiques in my thesis, for example, concern the tightening up of the relationship between disenchantment and religious decline and the implications that follow, and a critique of Taylor’s concept of ordinary life as impoverished without some kind of transcendent component (and indeed arguably contradictory to other central strands of Taylor’s work, particularly in *A Secular Age*).

This is the point at which I bring Taylor into dialogue with other related thinkers such as John Milbank and the Radical Orthodoxy movement more widely. I argue that John Milbank provides this discussion with an alternative genealogy which nevertheless complements and

extends that of Taylor. Whereas Taylor's genealogy operates on a socio-cultural and historical level – a "ground-up" approach, to put it simplistically – Milbank's genealogy gives an account of high-level intellectual and academic moves which are believed to trickle down and to permeate culture in a less perceptible but still equally powerful measure. Both accounts, I argue, are congruent and complementary, but Milbank's critique of Taylor, alluded to above, is an ultimately more consistent description of Modernity, avoiding the, at times, paradoxical or even contradictory aspects of Taylor's account.

I conclude my treatment of Milbank through a comparison of his ecclesiology with that of Rowan Williams. I argue that, as Milbank himself notes at points, the ecclesiology of Radical Orthodoxy can be supplemented by attention to the lived and historical reality of the Church and the interactions of its members. I utilize Rowan Williams in the final chapter, therefore, in order to bring in a highly sophisticated theological voice who writes from the complementary perspective of a priest, bishop and Archbishop of Canterbury. I note also that Williams provides an emphasis on the challenges and failures of the Church in history and of the Church as taken to its limits through circumstance. I also utilize what I consider to be Williams' catholic emphasis on ecclesiology, discussing specifically his emphasis on the nature of history and time, his reflections upon the episcopate and his realist sacramental theology. I outline in this final chapter many ways in which the observations of Charles Taylor, read through the metaphysical critique of Milbank, can be turned into a productive ecclesiology through the categories that we are given in the work of Rowan Williams.

I believe that at least the following major conclusions follow from this genealogical study: firstly, if the separation between the immanent and the transcendent is a truly illegitimate move within the genealogy of Christian theology, then their realignment with one another surely provides us with a conception of the aesthetic as the locus of divine mediation. The

material and embodied, therefore, can be reconceived not as simply a focus for potentially idolatrous practices nor as a mere irrelevance when set aside the more important spiritual concerns of the Church, such as an emphasis upon teaching and abstract prayer; rather these things can be seen as a legitimate conduit for the divine and as, therefore, a powerful aspect of the Church's pedagogy and witness. The material instantiations of God's beauty in art and architecture, the presence of Christ in the elements of bread and wine, the embodied nature of catholic Christianity, understood as a body that stretches throughout time and history, all of these things cohere better with a metaphysical description of the relationship of God and creation that does not recognise a separation between the immanent and the transcendent but rather sees the transcendent as always present within the immanent and indeed sees the latter as dependent for its very being upon the former. Thus this argument provides a challenge to certain types of Protestant (or otherwise) critiques of the aesthetic, whilst furnishing aesthetically-minded ecclesiological approaches with a theological rationale for their activities. One of the unique aspects of this thesis may be the attempt that I make to avoid, largely-speaking, the normal focusses for this kind of the discussion, which are usually Reformation controversies over, for example, the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist or disputed practices such as the invocation of the saints in heaven.

The second group of conclusions are orientated more toward a critique of the secular: if the aesthetic is understood as a conduit for the arrival of God's beauty within the world, then this provides theology with a critique of secular and materialist accounts of reality. Art cannot be accounted for properly, so I argue, without recourse to its transcendent component. The secular seeks not only beauty in art, but also beauty in life and ethics, yet it cannot ultimately understand these things without challenging its own ontologically

reductive presuppositions. There is thus a further ecclesiological rationale for beauty in art, in the life of the Church and in the holiness for which ordinary Christians strive: this is an aesthetic witness to the unbelieving world around.

I conclude this study by making the point that, beyond the category of material and embodied beauty, the notion of the aesthetic can be applied more broadly, that it can be applied to the categories of goodness and truth too, and that this may be the logical progression for any further treatments of aesthetic ecclesiology.

Introduction

An Aesthetic Ecclesiology

The purpose of this study is to argue for an ecclesiology that utilizes the aesthetic in its self-understanding. This is a theological response to Charles Taylor's work, particularly *A Secular Age*,[1] and employs mainly Anglican voices in order to challenge and deepen aspects of Taylor, whilst applying his work to the topic of ecclesiology. Among the many things we can learn from *A Secular Age* is the fact that Modernity is enabled conceptually by the late medieval separation of the realms of the immanent and the transcendent.[2] Although the journey charted by Taylor between the advent of Modernity and the fully blown secular age itself is tortuous and contains a multitude of non-necessary twists, turns and regressions, I

[1] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2007).
[2] Throughout this essay I will tend to refer to this separation by using the pairing "immanence"/"transcendence", but it will perhaps clarify at the outset to say that I view this pairing as interchangeable with that of "nature" and "grace". These pairings refer to the relationship of the realm of the created things of God, on the one hand, and the realm of God himself on the other. The relationship of the immanent/transcendent and nature/grace is central to this entire project as will become clear. I will show in detail, particularly in the chapters on John Milbank and the Radical Orthodoxy project, how one of the constituent aspects of metaphysics in Modernity is its inability to think of the realm of the immanent as dependent upon or even related to the transcendent. I will also show how Milbank draws on the work of, for example, Henri de Lubac to rearticulate a way of conceiving nature as brought to completion or fulfilment in the supernatural.

argue that we can see in his great work that this fundamental aperture is the constitutive and necessary aspect of the modern age. Without it, there simply would not be secularism as we experience and understand it. It is argued in this dissertation that this separation is theologically unacceptable and must be exposed as such. To become complicit with the separation between the immanent and the transcendent is to become complicit with the secular and its assumptions. Conversely, to successfully challenge and overcome this separation is to provide a more faithful and powerful witness to the claims of orthodox Christianity.

When applied to ecclesiology, therefore, the question becomes, 'How can the Church challenge and overcome the illegitimate separation between the immanent and the transcendent?' The answer I propose is to recover what I call an "aesthetic ecclesiology". In contrast to denuded and deracinated forms of Christian spirituality that reject the material mediation of God's presence, an aesthetic ecclesiology retrieves the notion of material embodiment as a sign or symbol of the transcendent within the immanent. By the term "aesthetic", therefore, I mean the way that the divine is mediated through not only the visually beautiful and attractive but also through the more deeply embodied. I employ it in order to argue that we must recover a greater emphasis on architecture and liturgical beauty, a deeper appreciation for the embodied nature of the Christian sacraments, particularly the Eucharist, a greater emphasis on conviviality and the "festive", and a framework for understanding renunciation and martyrdom that does not fall prey to the critique that these things are necessarily world-denying and supercilious. In many cases, the pre-modern understanding of these things can provide us with a helpful contrast to our own understandings, but it is maintained throughout this dissertation that to argue along these

lines is not to embrace a hopeless nostalgia for a lost past, but to be challenged to greater levels of faithfulness as a result of the Church's catholicity throughout time.

The flipside to this argument is to provide a kind of critique of the secular and, in an oblique sense, an apologetic for the truth of Christianity. To do this, I utilize various Taylorian notions such as excarnation, disenchantment and social atomization as attempting to occlude the genuinely Christian. When we expose and critique these ideas, we see that they are insufficient to account for the fullness of human experience, particularly when it comes to the notion of the aesthetic. A central part of my argument is, therefore, that one of the greatest strands of the Church's witness to the secular world is to become an irreducible beacon of the beauty of God shone forth into the darkness of the crepuscular landscape of a post-Christian wilderness.

Why is this project worthwhile and what gives it its distinctive nature? I will answer this question by referencing the title of this thesis at four different points.

Firstly, this is a work that is primarily concerned with *aesthetics*. We must therefore venture to give some indication of what we mean by the term "aesthetics". We can begin this definition by situating aesthetics more broadly within that 'distinct discipline or sub-discipline dealing with philosophical questions concerning art and aesthetic value'[3] and which has as its chief focal point the question of beauty. In its modern form this discipline originates in the eighteenth century and comes down to us through Baumgarten, Burke, Kant, Hegel and Nietzsche, to name some, but it clearly comprises a far more ancient set of interests, which were treated extensively, for example, by Plato and Aristotle in *The Republic* and *The Poetics* respectively.

[3] C. Janaway, 'History of Aesthetics', in *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, ed. by Ted Honderich (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 9.

In the sense under discussion, the nature of the aesthetic enterprise concerns that which *appears* to the beholder, and beauty is considered to be the highest object of enquiry. Beauty can be understood, of course, in different ways: in terms of ethics, in terms of visual attractiveness or splendour, in terms of proportionality or fittingness (as in the Latin *convenientia*). In this thesis I use the term in a broad sense to incorporate all of these things and perhaps it might be easiest to use the notable Thomistic definition of beauty as *id quod visum placet* (that which pleases when seen).[4] Thomas's definition is notoriously limited to that which is heard aurally and that which is seen visually. He argues somewhat counterintuitively that 'in reference to the other objects of the senses, we do not use the expression *beautiful*, for we do not speak of beautiful tastes, and beautiful odors'.[5] In this essay I would like to broaden Thomas's definition to include the other physical senses and indeed the other faculties of human capability such as memory and moral apprehension. This will be important when I come to consider, for example, the sacrament of the Eucharist and the Church's ecclesial memory.

When we apply the aesthetic to the theological, creating "theological aesthetics", we are therefore concerned with the application of questions of beauty and that which is pleasing when seen or encountered to the topics of God, faith, theology and the Church. Because my thesis is concerned with ecclesiology and the nature of the Church, the enquiry into aesthetics relates to how the Church is perceived, not in terms of public opinion or P.R., but quite literally in the way that the Church is encountered through the human senses: its visual beauty, its touch and compassion, its collective memory, its smells and tastes in the

[4] For a significant discussion of beauty, cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Prima Secundae, Q.27, A.1, Reply Obj. 3. (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. by Fr Laurence Shapcote O.P., John Mortensen and Enrique Alarcon, eds. (Lander: The Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2012), p. 260).
[5] Ibid.

sacrament of the Eucharist, and other things of this sort. Because it is about sense and perception it can also be said to be concerned with that which is embodied, such as rituals and gatherings, in contrast to that which is purely abstract or aurally communicated.[6]

Having ventured this definition of the aesthetic, we can now turn to what is meant in the title of this thesis by "Anglican". In a straightforward sense, this thesis provides an Anglican response to the secular because in the final three chapters, which comprise most of the purely "theological" response, I utilise the work of two prominent Anglican theologians. In those chapters, I provide a description and rationale of, for example, the Anglican understanding of the episcopate and I argue for a certain understanding of the Church's tradition as contained in its ecclesial memory. Having said this, I do not insist, as a Roman Catholic might, on a centralized ecclesial structure which finds its ultimate authority and focus in the papacy. As an Anglican I can only see tradition in a quite broad sense that does not necessarily cast doubt upon other instantiations of the Christian Church simply because they are not part of this communion. This is an attempt, therefore, to write a thesis congruent with the Anglican tradition but which also, because of the open-ended nature of that tradition, is still useful (and hopefully interesting) to others who sit within a broadly catholic understanding of the Church and even to those who do not but who might benefit for other reasons.

At this point, therefore, I will provide briefly a broader context of what I mean by Anglicanism, commenting specifically on Anglican aesthetics afterwards.

To begin with, we can use the term Anglican

[6] This is not to discount the aesthetic dimension of sound, of course, but it is to say that there is a legitimate distinction between the aesthetic dimension of speech, song and music, and the communication of information in a more abstract and educative idiom. In his quasi-demotic mode of writing, Charles Taylor describes these as forms of communication that are 'more in the head' (cf. Taylor, *Secular*, pp. 554, 613, 771).

> […] to indicate those churches which have their origin in connection with the English, and who are members of the Provinces of the Anglican Communion, developed as a worldwide web of connection wholly unforeseen by those who established the Church of England in the Reformation and post-Reformation era.[7]

Perhaps one of the most significant historical distinctives of the Church of England and the Anglican Communion is to be found in the fact that the Church is both Reformed *and* catholic. As was notoriously emphasised by the early Anglo-Catholic Tractarians such as John Henry Newman, the Church of England broke with Rome in the sixteenth century and so is in no formal or official sense still part of the Roman Catholic Church, and yet, because the Church still retains its episcopal structure, including an insistence on the apostolic succession and a refusal of lay presidency, it maintains its identity as a part of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church spoken of in the Nicene Creed. It is Reformed in the sense that its formularies such as the *Book of Common Prayer* and the *39 Articles* maintain an emphasis on the authority of Scripture and are sceptical of independent traditions of the Church. But it is different to the Reformed churches of the Continent in the sense that it rejects the idea which, as Roger Scruton observes, was only seriously entertained for the first time during the Reformation 'that churches could be as well made as inherited'.[8]

The Anglican communion inherits therefore a somewhat mixed identity which can perhaps be illustrated with reference to the Archbishop of Canterbury. Kenneth Stevenson notes that 'the archbishop's relationship with his fellow bishops…has been, and continues to be, a source of creative tension in the life of the Communion'.[9] On the one hand, 'he does

[7] Ann Loades, 'Anglican Spirituality', in Mark D. Chapman, Sathianathan Clarke and Martyn Percy, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Anglican Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 149-164 (p.149).
[8] Roger Scruton, *Our Church* (London: Atlantic Books, 2013), p. 29.
[9] Kenneth Stevenson, 'Anglican Aesthetics', in Chapman, *Handbook*, pp. 165-175 (p. 166).

not…behave like a pope',[10] and yet, on the other, nor is he just one of a number of church leaders. At a gathering such as the one spoken of by Stevenson, the Lambeth Conference 2008, the Archbishop is more of a focal point, the centre around which other bishops are gathered, but who is not in any sense an executive head. The relationship between archbishop and bishop is perhaps analogous to that between bishop and priest, and further to that between priest and laity. It would be disingenuous to suggest that there is no hierarchical structure here, and yet, at his highest, Anglicanism is an attempt to mediate the divine through that structure in a genuinely servant-hearted way. This perhaps gives it a distinct feel in contrast to the more executive structure of the papacy, for example, and to the Roman Catholic Church in general. It is clear to any practicing Anglican that this structure is far from perfect, and for many the "creative tension" proves too much to bear. For these people, they might be tempted to describe the "creative tension" in less favourable terms such as "ambiguity", "looseness" or perhaps even "incoherence". Stevenson finishes *his* precis of Lambeth 2008 by defining the way Anglicans worship and believe as 'mixed, historic, and evolving'[11] and perhaps that is a good way of framing this unique identity.

Although this dissertation is not a work of art history nor a critical appraisal of specific art and aesthetics, it is nevertheless important to speak of the specific output of the Church of England in terms of art, worship and music. It would be hard to deny that the Church has contributed enormously to the Christian world through these means, and in a particularly distinct fashion.[12]

[10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid., p. 167.
[12] Of course anything said in the context of this brief precis cannot possibly do justice to the range and extent of the distinctive Anglican contribution to the worldwide Church and, indeed, to worldwide culture in general.

As I've already indicated, my work presupposes that a legitimate interpretation of the identity of this Church is that hybrid of Reformed *and* catholic spoken of by John Henry Newman and others. And this tradition gives us both a certain type of biblical orthodoxy – although one mediated to us through creed, Prayer Book, the *39 Articles* and our liturgical forms – whilst holding on to those distinctives that are more catholic in identity: an emphasis on place and space; the sacraments and the embodied, liturgical worship of the Church; an emphasis on visual and aural means of encountering the divine, and so on. In this sense, we can associate this catholic emphasis with the great artists and creators of the Anglican Church who tended to eschew Puritanism and more extreme forms of Protestantism.

Although Cranmer may be a partial exception to this rule, he nevertheless 'shaped a whole tradition of devotional theology'[13] which was echoed in the sermons of Lancelot Andrewes in the seventeenth century and, at around the same, in writings such as Jeremy Taylor's *Holy Living and Holy Dying*. We can also observe this tradition through the metaphysical poetry of John Donne, George Herbert and Thomas Traherne. Herbert's *The Temple*, for example, is a palpably aesthetic and embodied work, taking its form and even at some points its literal visual appearance from the lineaments and spaces of a church building, moving outwards from there to describe the wonder and agonies of a relationship with Christ. Traherne's prose and poetry is even more concerned with the things of the world – children, animals, nature, the weather – and the way that they mediate to us, if received with a certain relish and thankfulness, the presence of a God who is, for Traherne,

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In order to get something of a feel for this, one could look, for example, at the extensive treatment of Anglican spirituality in Geoffrey Rowell, Kenneth Stevenson and Rowan Williams, comps., *Love's Redeeming Work: The Anglican Quest for Holiness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

[13] Stevenson, 'Aesthetics', in Chapman, 'Handbook', p. 168.

the supremely good giver of all things. We can also speak, following Stevenson, of Elizabethan musicians such as Christopher Tye, Thomas Tallis and John Sheppard, whose compositions, emanating at first from the Chapels Royal and eventually into the cathedrals and parish churches, ensured not only that Anglican worship was characterised by music at the first, but that that music would be of the most beautiful and uplifting form.[14] The evolution of music in the Anglican Church is, of course, strongly associated with the service of Evensong, a singularly unique and spiritual creation, bringing together the evening office with the nascent musical tradition and the embodied and aesthetic feeling of the early Church of England. Evensong remains one of the gifts of the Church of England to the world and there is much evidence that it remains a powerful spiritual force for many both within and without the communion. It would, of course, be remiss not to mention Hooker here. Nobody would argue that Hooker is as great a stylist as Andrewes or Taylor, but, nevertheless, Hooker's work can be seen as a more purely theological statement of what the Church of England is, and this includes, for Hooker in his opposition to the sixteenth century Puritans, its catholic nature as episcopal and sacramentally focussed.

Having touched on aesthetics and Anglicanism, the third specific distinctive of my dissertation, and a principal focus of its argument, is that it is primarily ecclesiological in nature. I am not arguing for a "theology" in the abstract but for an account of the Church and its embodied life. There are two aspects here: on a personal level, I am a clergyman in the Church of England and so I am interested in the way that the work of the great philosophers and theologians treated here can be used practically in the life of the Church.

[14] Cf., Ibid., pp. 169-172.

After all, what is the point of writing about secularism if one has no intention of engaging with it?

It is also because I believe, following many others, that the separation between theology and ecclesiology (or ecclesial practice) is artificial and deeply damaging to the Church's mission in the world. The upshot of this false distinction (which one feels must be due on some level to Modernity's obsession with arbitrary dualisms) is that serious theological considerations of the nature of Modernity are tragically confined to high-level academic seminars, whereas the Church preoccupies itself with courses in "contextual" theology and attempts to equip its ministers with practical skills that it hopes will be effective in reaching our secular culture. At some points it innovates theological categories such as "missiology" in order to give an intellectual veneer to these practices. The result of this a-theological emphasis upon context and practical skills is an ever-greater separation between serious intellectual endeavour in deep theology and the practice of the faith, the ultimate consequences of which are a slew of superficial and ineffective answers to the problems that the Church faces. The greatest irony about this is, of course, that the Church of England, in attempting to address the problem of decline brought about by secularism, becomes fundamentally complicit in the presuppositions of secularism itself, and so begins to propagate, within its own structures, the very forces that guarantee its own demise. The most significant critique of this relatively recent phenomenon is Andrew Davison and Alison Milbank's *For the Parish*,[15] which shows how, amongst other things, so-called "Fresh Expressions" of "church" are complicit in, for instance, the false secular dualism between form and content, or, one might say, between practice and theology. This dissertation is an

[15] Andrew Davison and Alison Milbank, *For the Parish: A Critique of Fresh Expressions* (London: SCM Press, 2010).

attempt to contribute something of philosophical and theological depth to the Church that neither accepts this false separation between the academy and the Church, form and content, practice and theology, nor does it propose easy or faddish answers to questions which require serious intellectual and spiritual endeavour.

Finally, the fourth distinctive of my project is that it places all of these concerns in the context of the secular as construed by Charles Taylor in his ground-breaking work *A Secular Age*. I will go into much more detail concerning the significance of this work below, but suffice to say here that Taylor's tome is a unique treatment of the secular, brilliantly combining historical genealogy with contemporary phenomenology. In writing on Taylor from a theological and ecclesiological perspective, I hope to provide some insight into his work as I draw him into dialogue with theologians who are interested in similar questions. Therefore, it is hoped that a dissertation of this sort might bring out another dimension of *A Secular Age* by providing further ideas of how Taylor's important insights might be applied in an ecclesial and theological context.

Overview of Chapters

In the remainder of this introduction, I will provide a compressed chapter-by-chapter overview of my dissertation and, having introduced some of the major themes, particularly around Taylor, I will return to the question of his importance by way of a review of some relevant conceptual literature.

The first chapter of the thesis provides an introduction to Taylor and outlines a particular reading of *A Secular Age*. The introduction assesses some of the methodological challenges of engaging with this work and treats something of Taylor's significance as a figure and the importance of *A Secular Age* generally. I include here a defence of Taylor's motivation in

writing the latter, and this will prove to be important because it will strengthen Taylor's status as a philosopher and sociologist of sorts rather than as a particular kind of religious apologist, which is what some take him to be. The main bulk of the chapter, however, is a selective telling of the central genealogy of *A Secular Age*. Taylor's foundational genealogical argument in the book is that "Reform" was the force that brought about the nascent secular. Reform is central historically because it unwittingly unleashed a kind of equalizing phenomenon upon Latin Christendom which was eventually to result in the conceptual and practical separation of the orders of immanence and transcendence. The latter was the necessary step that needed to be taken in order to create space for the secular to inhabit. Central to this chapter is also, therefore, the repeated refrain, also critical to Taylor's argument, that the secular is *not* what is "just there" when the religious is removed. Rather, it is a creative and tangible construction, contingent in form, and therefore vulnerable to critique. This is important to point out because the secular itself leans heavily upon this "subtraction story" and covertly considers it to be a self-evident truth; when this subtraction story is challenged and called into question – as it is here through genealogy – the field is opened up once again, and religious and spiritual conceptions of reality are no longer easily dismissed *de facto* as arbitrary palimpsests layered over the dormant "reality" of the secular: perhaps the secular requires the same amount of imagination to conjure as the religious.

I choose in this first chapter to speak about several broad genealogical shifts which illustrate the ever-widening gap between the immanent and the transcendent: first, the reform of the multispeed system. The latter system allowed people within society to live at different "speeds" of spiritual intensity, occupying different roles with regard to religious devotion and proximity to the Church. Due to shifts in the piety of the High Middle Ages –

Taylor proffering the date 1215 and the Fourth Lateran Council's decree that all the laity go to confession at least once a year – this system came under a type of scrutiny that was to find its culmination eventually in the despoliation of monastic life in the Reformation and in the ubiquitous secularism of the modern west. The second shift I delineate is the disenchantment of the cosmos and the human experience of nature. Again, this is important because it shows us how the cosmos "model" of creation, which posited all things as existing upon a singular continuum often referred to as the Great Chain of Being, shifted to a dualistic "universe" model which saw only what was immanent to the individual as real and banished the transcendent to another realm. As such, nature was denuded of the spiritual and society was cut off from its transcendent foundation. Thirdly, I give an account of the homogenization of time, which moves from a multivalent understanding in which time was, at is were, *filled* with different significances and connections to other times through, amongst other things, liturgical celebrations and festive practices, to an understanding of time as linear, flat and empty. Tying in with the theme of the chapter, I show here how time shifts from being intertwined with eternity, and so constituting a spectrum with the latter, to standing alone, with eternity an unrelated chronological phenomenon. I then finish the chapter by applying this genealogical reading to Taylor's phenomenology, looking particularly at his accounts of the buffered self, the immanent frame and the central notion of excarnation. I argue that the anthropology Taylor describes is congruent with the genealogical picture of an ever-increasing separation between the immanent and the transcendent, and that, when this is applied to the human person, the latter is inevitably atomized in multiple ways. I finish this chapter by observing the historical contingency and arbitrariness of the duality that I have been charting, and by arguing that

such a conception must be resisted ecclesiologically because it constitutes a denuding and impoverishment of the Church's spirituality.

The second chapter follows immediately on from this by taking further an analysis of Taylor's phenomenology. This chapter focusses on the spiritual response of western culture to living in a secular age, and shows that living with the form of false duality between the immanent and transcendent results in a search for the transcendent through various forms of aesthetic practice. Although the secular posits a separation between the immanent and transcendent, the secular itself cannot live with this and still seeks the latter in the former. I call these methods "aesthetic" because they are embodied and often involve some kind of tangible material beauty. Again, the point is that we can see most clearly the secular's search for transcendence through the aesthetic, lending weight to the assertion that the aesthetic is a kind of immanent window that opens up onto a transcendent horizon.

I begin the chapter by describing "cross-pressure", which is the unique situation of western Modernity in which each individual lives with a plurality of seemingly plausible options for religious or non-religious belief, thereby creating a type of anxiety which is unable to confidently choose between alternatives. The idea of "fullness" is then introduced, which is the ubiquitous human search for the highest sense of fulfilment in life (what Thomas Aquinas would call "beatitudo"). Ostensibly it should be the case that the tension created by cross-pressure can be relaxed by the pursuit of fullness. However, the reality is that the identification of what constitutes fullness is by no means obvious. The point – which is somewhat subtly conveyed in Taylor – is that people find it hard to live with purely secular answers to the question of fullness. I press this argument further by drawing out Taylor's analysis of a type of crushing flatness and immanence in Modernity, brought about because there is no transcendent breathing space. Modernity cancels the

transcendent in quotidian human life and so life takes on a mundane aspect which is grey and depressing.

I then move to the heart of the chapter, which is an exploration of Taylor's analysis of the ways that this crushing immanence can be avoided on a secular model. These include the "subtler languages" of the arts, which convey an experience of the transcendent but without eliciting religious belief. They also include the notion of the "festive", which is a type of gathering that can be secular or religious, but which, again, does not necessarily imply belief and yet puts the gatherers in touch with a sense of the beyond. I show how the notion of pure immanence is rejected in Modernity through a continual search for the transcendent by means of quasi-spiritual and transcendent, aesthetic experiences.

I conclude the chapter with a more formal, philosophical argument that forces the issue implied by the phenomenology: subtler languages and the festive are, on some level, evasive of the ontological issue. Either we play down the phenomenology of the aesthetic (and impoverish what seem to be spiritually meaningful experiences) *or* we expand our ontology to admit the presence of the spiritual within the material (and move closer to traditional religious belief thereby saving, as it were, the profundity of the aesthetic). We cannot have the beautiful truly, in other words, without the transcendent. And it is empty to posit the transcendent without considering seriously the notion of traditional religious belief, particularly when Christianity has been the principal and highest source of aesthetic beauty within all of human culture. All of this must be noted by the Church, and it must continue its tradition of producing aesthetically beautiful art and architecture, and it must apply the principle of beauty to its application of the sacraments and performance of its liturgy and ministry.

The third chapter introduces the work of John Milbank and the Radical Orthodoxy movement. I establish at the outset various points of commonality between Milbank's work and that of Taylor and I argue that they are mutually complementary, with Milbank providing a kind of high-concept, metaphysical analysis of the story that Taylor tells on a more historico-cultural level. I include in this section Milbank's, in my view, successful attempt to critique and radicalize Taylor with regards to his treatment of disenchantment and ordinary life. At both points, Taylor buys into the subtraction stories of Modernity and at both points this can be avoided by arguing, firstly, that the type of disenchantment that he proposes is not inevitable, and, secondly, that the type of ordinary life he proposes is contradicted by his own critique of the phenomenology of Modernity. My main argument in this chapter, however, is that Milbank's narrative clearly shows us how the metaphysical and ontological understandings of Modernity bequeath us an anti-aesthetic legacy because they separate out God from his creation, and, therefore, make it impossible for us to see that he is present within nature and operative through it. In order to show this, I give a detailed explanation of three ontological claims that Milbank and Radical Orthodoxy make about Modernity: firstly, that Modernity operates with a flat, nihilistic ontology that cannot give depth to even the most profound human experiences. In contrast, Milbank suggests a "participatory" framework very much inspired by Neoplatonic Christian accounts, which he believes can provide depth and substance to human culture. Secondly, I give an account of the breakdown of the medieval unity of nature and grace, and show that Milbank believes that a rereading of Thomas Aquinas along the lines suggested by Henri de Lubac is vital to its recovery. Thirdly, I outline one of the key arguments of Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory*, which is that Modernity lives with an implicit "ontology of violence" which undergirds its culture and politics. In contrast, Milbank suggests a rereading of St. Augustine

which can furnish us with an "ontology of peace" which sees beauty as aboriginal to creation. After outlining these ontological claims, I then move on to describe three further metaphysical deviations detailed by Milbank, relating to Scotian univocity, Ockhamist nominalism and late-medieval voluntarism. I show how all of these deviations have negative implications for aesthetics because they all problematize and diminish the relationship of the immanent to the transcendent. Univocity turns God into *a being* and demotes him from his status as the source of Being itself, thereby removing him from the world and displacing him to an unknown region of the universe; nominalism erases the universal connection that creatures and concepts have to one another and thereby makes a sacramental view of the world impossible; and voluntarism completes the transformation of God from the benign source of being, love and goodness to an arbitrary tyrant who simply interrupts the course of nature through acts of will. I show how, through all of these moves, the notion of Christian aesthetics and the sacraments of the Church are undermined and diminished. I conclude the chapter by arguing that, in order to save aesthetics and sacraments, metaphysical and ontological considerations also need to be addressed.

In my fourth chapter, I develop a "participatory ecclesiology" based on the foregoing analysis of Milbank and building on the insights of the earlier chapters on Taylor. Having looked at the historical, phenomenological and theological background, I argue that the implication is that various types of ecclesiology are complicit with secularism and are therefore impoverished. These ecclesiologies are those which downplay the importance of mediatory features such as the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist, because the (secular) presuppositions they possess preclude the mediatory potential of creation. Drawing on one of Milbank's critiques, I argue that this form of ecclesiology inevitably leads to a kind of consumeristic model of the Church which finds it hard to account for the needs of its

congregants to grow together towards union with Christ, imbuing them instead with a misplaced confidence that, if they possess an ill-defined set of beliefs which are labelled "faith", they will be with Christ in the hereafter. This simply leaves them where they are as citizens of the secular state and allows them to be formed into typical consumers but, even worse, the type of consumers who have no guilt over their indulgence because they believe themselves to have already been forgiven by God for it.

The main body of the chapter looks at an alternative ecclesiology which begins by linking Milbank's ontology of peace to the life of the Church and moves on to utilize the metaphysical notion of participation as an organizing principle. The central point I make in this section is that the embodied and catholic aspects of Church practice, the liturgy and the sacraments, are ways of showing forth and instantiating this understanding of the Church as a peaceful movement into the world of the life of God, characterised by notions such as grace, giftedness and forgiveness. And I conclude this section by arguing that the true apologetic of the Church is its ability to show forth the beauty of God into the world and thereby draw the world to him. This is, therefore, a restatement of arguments made in previous chapters, namely that the separation between the immanent and the transcendent is artificial and the Church must consider the two orders as one and utilize the aesthetic in order to show forth the transcendent through the immanent.

To finish the chapter, I utilise an essay by Martin Gainsborough in order to summarise the ecclesiology of John Milbank and to draw it alongside that of Rowan Williams. I argue that there is a significant amount of commonality between the two ecclesiologies and that Williams' ecclesiology is an appropriate supplement to that of Milbank. I particularly emphasise in this regard Williams' reflections from the perspective of priest, bishop and Archbishop of Canterbury and his treatment of the Church taken to its limits.

In the fifth and final chapter, therefore, I begin with an overview of Rowan Williams' religious epistemology and ontology, arguing that a central theme of Williams' entire output is that of the non-competitive nature of the relationship between God and creation. Again, this theme is resonant with the metaphysics of Milbank and Radical Orthodoxy and is also consonant with the historical genealogy of Taylor and its central theme, namely the illegitimate separation between the immanent and the transcendent. I suggest here that, just as Williams' theology can be understood as an attempt to enable his readers to have a new vision of the world as radically imbued with the presence of God, so can the Church present itself as an attempt to show forth the presence of God into the world.

The second section of this chapter takes this further by an analysis of the myriad ways in which Williams celebrates the concept of catholicity. My argument in this section is that it is the embodied nature of the material history and global presence of the catholic Church in the world that can truly show forth something of the ubiquity of God. I argue that history itself functions as a kind of dispossession of the present, consistently calling the Church to a renewed faithfulness, and I show how the episcopate and the sacrament of the Eucharist in particular stretch backwards in time, forwards into the future, and outwards across the world, providing a network of interdependence that refracts the face of Christ himself in countless different ways.

I end this chapter, and the main argument of this dissertation, by suggesting that the catholicity of the Church is given to us primarily as a pedagogy in holiness and a call to imitate the self-giving love of Christ in his kenosis. I argue that the ecclesiological aspects of the Christian witness to an ontological peace are necessary supplements to the significant theological articulations of writers such as David Bentley Hart and John Milbank. It is by instantiating our witness to Christ's self-giving love that we truly embody and show forth his

presence in the world. This material and aesthetic witness is truly the way to reveal the hidden reality, which is that the transcendent has never been separated from the immanent, but rather constitutes its completion.

Review of Relevant Conceptual Literature

Having laid out the mechanics of my argument and introduced some of the major themes, I will now return to the question of the importance of Taylor's contribution in the context of other relevant scholarly work. I stated above that Taylor's work is ground-breaking and thereby hinted at its importance. But why does it deserve to be treated in the way that I am suggesting, and what sets it apart from other approaches to the secular, particularly those which are genealogical in nature?

Part of the answer to this question can be stated by saying that *A Secular Age* is simply the most copious and multifaceted treatment of the secular available, treating comprehensively all related topics and issues through a myriad of genera. It is a kind of *Summa Seculoriae*, although, unlike the scholastic approach, it possesses something of a fugal structure that switches between past and present, doubling back on itself and hopping between centuries. It opens up a sense of plenitude that defies comprehensive analysis but at the same time calls forth almost any conceivable question around the secular. This is why, in my view, this particular work has been taken up across so many different disciplines to such applause.

Having said that, I have already hinted in my chapter overviews that I am interested in two main features of *A Secular Age*, namely historical genealogy and contemporary phenomenology. I want to utilize Taylor in this way because, in doing so, I can make an apt comparison with Milbank and Radical Orthodoxy and, via Rowan Williams, apply the

questions raised thereby to the quotidian experiences of people who actually *live* in a secular age and to their relationships to Christian theology and the Christian Church. The fusion of genealogy and phenomenology in *A Secular Age* is one of the most powerful aspects of this work, and, as I will show below, although there are many treatments of the history of secularism, *A Secular Age* is the one that most pertinently and, at the greatest length, articulates a phenomenological description of the contemporary effects of that genealogy. In this sense, it is without a peer that I am aware of.

Taking up the question of genealogy, then, it is clear that Taylor sits within a certain scholarly stream on the emergence of secularism and its relationship to the medieval period. It is important to stress that this consensus is at odds with the traditional and widespread take on secularization routinely associated with Marx, Freud, Durkheim and particularly Max Weber. It is that consensus which is also defended today most significantly by Peter Berger and Steve Bruce.[16] This consensus is culturally influential on an enormous scale and is that which is (albeit normally unwittingly) believed in and lived out most comprehensively by secular people. Indeed, believing something like this story is what makes secularism possible in the first place. It is the origins myth of Modernity. Central features of this story are recognizable, therefore, to the ostensible man on the Clapham omnibus. What are these features? In a basic sense, the secularization story says that around the time of the seventeenth century, in the wake of the disaster of religious war caused by the breakdown of medieval Christendom and the weakening of the Roman Catholic Church's hold on power, there was a great intellectual leap forward, which

[16] On these two, see in particular, Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (New York: Doubleday, 1969), and *The Many Altars of Modernity* (New York: Walter De Gruyter, 2014), and Steve Bruce, *God is Dead: Secularization in the West* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002).

inaugurated a new way of looking at things that was so significantly different from that of the past that it constituted an entirely new age, a period of maturity and adulthood for mankind, an Enlightenment. There was thus a fundamental break between the things of the medieval and superstitious past and the enlightened and rational present, a supersession. In the old outlook, God was seen to be the creator and master of nature, whereas in the new, scientific outlook, the bracketing off and eventual elimination of formal and final causation in the development of the modern scientific method gave human beings the astonishingly effective capacity to manipulate nature to their own ends and to predict its outcomes. Whereas previously nature had been viewed as a kind of sacrosanct reflection of God's creative benevolence – as in the twelfth century poetry of Alain de Lille, 'Omnis mundi creatura/quasi liber at pictura/nobis est in speculum' – in the new outlook it came to be seen as a utility for humanity, which could be penetrated and probed through the Baconian "new instrument" of a totalising, rational enquiry.[17] Somewhere along the line, the bracketing out of formal and final causation became something more than a scientific method and developed into a comprehensive view of reality such that, so it was implied, any question that could not be treated by the scientific method's investigatory apparatus was a non-question and every meaningful question could demonstrate its validity only by recourse to its heuristic outcome. In a critique of this move, David Bentley Hart suggests, 'To bracket form and finality out of one's investigations as far as reason allows is a matter of method, but to deny their reality altogether is a matter of metaphysics'.[18] And so the scientific method, because of its success, was from then on taken to possess unlimited

[17] Francis Bacon, *The New Organon*, ed. by Lisa Jardine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
[18] David Bentley Hart, *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

power, not only to improve the lot of humankind through the development of technology and the utilization of nature, but through its capacity to provide better answers to questions of origins, ontology and metaphysics than previously held religious outlooks. Of course, the most famous example in our popular imagination is the question of the origin of mankind: whereas once we superstitious humans believed that a primal pair of human beings from whence all others sprang were created by God six-thousand years ago, because of the scientific discoveries of Charles Darwin, now we know that mankind developed over the course of millions of years through the process of biological evolution.

What else does this view involve? As well as the scientific story, there is the related story of the triumph of reason over faith, rationality over superstition. Again, whereas in the medieval period, human beings were slavishly controlled by the dictates of the Church and their intellects constrained and monitored by pre-Orwellian, ecclesiastical thought police, in the modern age, again partly because of the success of the sciences, it was discovered that human reason, when unshackled from such bondage, was capable of discovering more truth and creating a better world that did not just privilege the ecclesiastical, monarchical and aristocratic elites. As Michael Gillespie puts it, in place of the self-interested, medieval world of ecclesial power, the modern world was 'conceived as the realm of individualism, of representation and subjectivity, of exploration and discovery, of freedom, of rights, equality, toleration, liberalism, and the nation state'.[19]

This story of secularization is constituted, therefore, by the idea that religion and reality were discovered to be separable from one another and, in many ways, opposed. Therefore, the secular consensus rests on a number of dichotomies between, for example, faith and

[19] Michael Allen Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. xi.

reason, revelation and science, the Church and the state, and between the private realm of belief and the public realm of politics. This is perhaps where the secularization thesis arrives most pertinently: in the claim that, whatever religion is, it is a matter purely for the individual and should neither be forced upon anybody else, nor should it have any play or privilege in the neutral, public sphere. This is linked to the idea of secular reason because the latter is potentially accessible to everybody; it is, in that sense, public. Religious belief is not like that because it rests upon the individual decision to believe and this cannot be proven to be right in the same way that a scientific experiment can demonstrate something to be true. Again, Gillespie summarizes this concisely:

> This transformation diminished the role of God and the authority of religion in human life. Practically, it led to the increasing limitation of religious authority first in the political and economic realms and then gradually in the social and cultural realms as well, transforming religion into a private belief or practice and religious institutions into voluntary associations […] the Enlightenment […] sought […] not merely to privatize religion but to eliminate it, imagining it to be a crutch for immature humanity or a pernicious fraud perpetrated and sustained by corrupt clerics.[20]

As religion is privatized and its authority marginalized therefore the secular story ends up positing for human beings a type of "freedom" that is seen as a fundamental good. This freedom is variously understood – Is it a freedom to do whatever one likes as far as it does not harm others? Is it a freedom to conduct business in any way that is profitable as long as it does not stray beyond the confines of the law? Is it a freedom to believe what one likes about the nature of reality? Is it a freedom to define reality as one wishes even if this is contrary to an established consensus?[21] – but underneath every attempt to define secular

[20] Ibid., p. 271.

[21] One thinks here, of course, of the contemporary clash between a feminist position that sees female biological sex as constitutive of what it means to be a woman, and celebrates the difference that is thereby constituted in contrast to the male sex, and the emerging transgender position that argues that human beings are free to determine what gender they are based upon their own sense of personal identity. These two views are not congruent with one another and they can be mapped onto the kind of scientific positivism that a

freedom must be the assumption that the individual is in a position to decide what is meaningful, important, good, attractive or true. Brad Gregory's definition is helpful here:

> […] in principle truth is whatever is true to you, values are whatever you value, priorities are whatever you prioritize, and what you should live for is whatever you decide you should live for […] All human values, meanings, priorities, and morality are contingent, constructed, and subjective […] As it was put in 1992 by the U.S. Supreme Court's majority decision in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*: "At the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life."[22]

This freedom goes hand in hand, of course, with the rise of industrial technology, international corporations and consumer culture and issues in the freedom not only to decide what is good but in the freedom to *purchase* what will result in the good life. Religious commitment, whether to Christ's imperative to sell your goods and give to the poor in Christianity or to the detachment from all connection with the particulars of human existence in Buddhism, is not good for business, and does not create agreeable consumers. The secular mindset – with its assumptions that religious and metaphysical claims are meaningless and false, that human existence is not an ecstatic movement towards a divine end but a decision on the part of the individual to pursue happiness in the way he or she desires and that what constitutes goodness is only the movement toward that end so long as it does not preclude someone else's self-realization (as though this is anything but a fantastical impossibility) – flirts with a kind of bland consumerism of the self, its highest expression being the designer logo, purchased at a

person such as Richard Dawkins represents against a post-structuralism that sees categorical definition as indicative of furtive attempts on the part of the powerful to maintain their dominance. There is a clash of "freedoms" in this sense: the freedom, on the one hand, to believe and act as though the scientific evidence is definitive of reality against the freedom to believe and act as though the preference of the individual is in a position to delineate what is true.

[22] Brad Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2015), p. 77.

much greater price than the individual garment cost to produce, and thereby projecting to the world a preference for the expensive over the cheap, the fashionable over the mundane.

Communism, in opposition to the capitalist model, posited the human being's ability to define a utopian reality independently of (and explicitly in antagonism toward) religious belief through the wresting of the means of production from the corrupt elite. The central difference between the consumerist secular model and the communist one is that the former sees the individual as sovereign whereas the latter, obviously, sees the collective in that role. Even though the communist metanarrative has largely been discredited through a series of political mass murders that resulted in the enslavement and deaths of literally hundreds of millions of people,[23] the impulse toward socialism as a less draconian form of collective responsibility is still strong in western democracies and particularly in western universities.

Leaving that aside, however, the cultural freight of the central story of the secular that I have been describing and its gradual though inevitable improvement of the human lot in the face of religious backwardness and superstition is perhaps most clearly demonstrated through reference to a slew of well-known academics, journalists and scientists, some of whom brand themselves as "New Atheists" and "Brights", who devote themselves to writing popular bestsellers attacking the concept of religion on the basis of an exaggerated and buffoonish version of this story. The interesting point here is that any serious academic or thinker in these areas knows that these works have very little to no actual intellectual

[23] See, for example, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918-1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974-1975) and Jisheng Yang, *Tombstone: The Untold Story of Mao's Greatest Famine* (London: Allen Lane, 2012).

credibility but that they reach a wide audience because of the presuppositions they promote which are already shared by their readership.[24] There is a pre-packaged set of cultural and metaphysical prejudices, in other words, residing within the chthonic underworld of the collective consciousness that these works speak to in a tone of shrill incredulity.

This story then, with its manifold twists and turns, rests securely upon the presupposition that Modernity is best understood as a new age in contradistinction to the age of the past: the past was religious, but Modernity has disproved religion; the past was superstitious, the present is scientific; the past was irrational and put stock in faith, the present, is rational and beliefs now require substantiation; the past was an age of technological darkness and stagnation, the present is an age of technological mastery and the development of man's environment for his own benefit; the past was an age of despotism and the abuse of power, the present is a democratic age in which all have a say; the past was an age of discrimination, the present is an age of equality. And the list could go on. But the basic point is something along the lines of "that was then; this is now".

Given the power of this story, therefore, what do Charles Taylor and others who share something in common with him say to cavil? After calling into question the 'self-congratulatory story that Modernity tells about itself',[25] Michael Gillespie identifies Hans

[24] Among them are, of course, Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Black Swan, 2007), the late British journalist, Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great: The Case Against Religion* (London: Atlantic, 2007), and Daniel C. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as Natural Phenomenon* (New York: 2006). The latter of these works is particularly striking: written by a professional philosopher, it is nevertheless an argument which is entirely based upon the genetic fallacy and the assumption that religious people believe that there is an absolute dichotomy between the work of God and the work of nature. Also within this genre it is worth mentioning, A.C. Grayling, *The Age of Genius: The Seventeenth Century and the Birth of the Modern Mind* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016) if for nothing else than the fact that it explicitly basis its premise upon the idea of a total supersession between the seventeenth century enlightenment and the preceding age of darkness.
[25] Gillespie, *Modernity*, p. 11.

Blumenberg and Amos Funkenstein as two seminal thinkers of recent times, who, in different ways challenged and complicated our understanding of the relationship between the modern and the medieval. Funkenstein's *Theology and the Scientific Imagination*, first published in 1986, made the claim that the relationship of modern science to medieval scholasticism was one characterised not by supersession but by continuity. In that work, he argued that seventeenth century developments in scientific thought, far from being a prodigious attempt to pioneer a new understanding of reality, were in fact seen as largely the same enterprise as theology and in profound congruence with the metaphysical understandings that had grown up around it.[26] Why is this important? Because it demonstrates that metaphysics, and hence religious self-understanding, is not overcome by Modernity but that Modernity is, at least in part, constituted by it. In other words, it shows that Modernity is metaphysical, that religious commitments are at some level part of its self-understanding.

These implications bear comparison with those produced by Karl Löwith and the corresponding refutation of his position by Hans Blumenberg. Löwith argued that Modernity is not the advent of a new anthropological horizon but is fundamentally dependent upon a secularized paradigm of Christian eschatology.[27] The secular notion of progress, therefore, is a utopianism that fails fully to value the present whilst simultaneously striving after an unrealizable future. He contrasted this with pagan cyclical theories of time which are able better to account for the past and present. Again, in discontinuity with the secular story of supersession and inevitable development outlined above, Löwith argued that the Christian

[26] Amos Funkenstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination: From the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).
[27] Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949).

paradigm of *creatio ex nihilo*, incarnation and final judgment is 'the only possible source of the modern notion of a single, unified, future-directed history of progress, despite the irreligious and even antireligious postures of many of the modern theorists of progress'.[28] Again, the point here is that Modernity is hypocritically parasitic upon Christianity by adopting its frameworks – in this case the central framework of history as development towards a specific end – stripping them of their *recognizably* metaphysical content, thereby casting men in the central role and presenting them as though they are entirely novel ideas which on some level render Christianity defunct.

Blumenberg's refutation of this position is achieved not by denying completely the continuity of the modern age with the preceding Christian age but by arguing that the modern age represents an answer to a problem posed to it by medieval Christianity. In a theme that will become familiar throughout this thesis, Blumenberg identifies the nominalism of William of Ockham as key to the story, because it was Ockham's denial of universals and his attribution of voluntaristic power to God that made the universe radically contingent in a way that had not been conceived before in Christian theology. Blumenberg argued that, given this problem, mankind's choice was either to persist in focussing on the next world and placing our hopes there *or*, again as Wallace summarizes, 'to set out…to construct whatever may be possible in this particular world in the way of security and self-realization "even if there is no God"'.[29] One is accepting, therefore, a problem that arises from a permutation *within* Christianity but developing a novel response in order to provide a solution to that problem.

[28] Robert M. Wallace, 'Translator's Introduction', in Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. by Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1985), pp. xv-xvi.
[29] Ibid., p. xix.

Blumenberg's story is therefore *not* entirely congruent with the story of secularism as supersession for at least two reasons. Firstly, in asserting that human self-assertion is the answer to the godless world conjured up by William of Ockham, he does not therefore accept as its corollary the notion of progress as continual development, mastery and utopia. This *would* constitute an illegitimacy because it would imply that Löwith's secularization thesis is correct and that the secular is nothing but an aping of Christian eschatology. Secondly, and again this will become very important when I look at Taylor in more detail, for Blumenberg the secular is *not* simply what is left over after metaphysics and religion have been banished from the scene. It is rather an achievement, something constructed out of the pieces of a largely ruined medieval Christendom. In a forceful passage he makes this clear:

> […] "the world" is not a constant whose reliability guarantees that in the historical process an original constitutive substance must come back to light, undisguised, as soon as the superimposed elements of theological derivation and specificity are cleared away. This unhistorical interpretation displaces the authenticity of the modern age, making it a remainder, a pagan substratum, which is simply left over after the retreat of religion into autarkic independence from the world. In any case one does not achieve a historical understanding of secularization by conceiving its implied "world" as the recovery of an "original" reality that had been lost with the entry of Christianity.[30]

Aside from notions of progress then, the salient point for my use of Taylor is simply to show that even a proponent of the legitimacy of the modern age such as Blumenberg believes that Modernity is the end result of shifts within a medieval metaphysical paradigm *and* that, therefore, Modernity is not simply what is left over after one removes the religious and/or superstitious. These genealogical claims are entirely congruent with Taylor's idea of the late medieval separation of the realms of the immanent and the transcendent, or nature and

[30] Blumenberg, *Legitimacy*, pp. 8-9.

grace, and with his aversion to "subtraction stories", which posit the secular as simply the subtraction of the religious. Again, my argument is that to accept the secular genealogy, beginning with the shifting metaphysics, results in an ecclesiology that is anti-aesthetic because it removes the transcendent from the immanent and therefore the spiritual from the material. Blumenberg's thesis confirms the genealogical part of the former claim because Blumenberg agrees that it is the metaphysics that enables secularism. He may see greater discontinuity between Christianity and secularism than Taylor does, but there is at least a sufficient level of continuity here to show that the late medieval metaphysics and the advent of the secular are causally related.

My point here is to show that Taylor's thesis, which concerns paradigm shifts within medieval Christianity, is part of a strong scholarly consensus which mitigates powerfully against the previously held consensus influenced by Marx, Weber and co. In order to establish this more fully, I will here identify several more important scholars who, although they might differ in terms of detail, are nevertheless telling the same type of story: namely, a story which, because of perceived theological shifts, posits a fundamental continuity between the medieval and religious past and the secular and non-religious present/future.

Published around the same time as Funkenstein's work, Michael Buckley's *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* went to great lengths to show how the possibility of atheism, as it is conceived in Modernity, arose due to the attempts of thinkers such as Descartes to establish a set of indubitable beliefs that would put theological thought on a secure footing. The point here is that the modern type of atheism that sees the universe as distinct from a non-existent spiritual realm is parasitic upon the scientific thinking of the seventeenth century which arose within a deviant Christian paradigm and that, prior to that, there simply was no atheism in this sense. And this was because the pre-modern conception of the

relationship between the world and God or the gods was thought of in terms of continuity. Critias of Athens may have ridiculed the Pre-Socratic depiction of the gods, but he did not disbelieve in the realm of the gods in general. Even Plato, who is often taken to have posited two distinct realms of being, saw the relationship of the realm of the forms to the realm of appearances as a type of continuity: 'There are not two worlds, but the imperfect phenomenon and its perfect truth now grasped in the modes of religious affirmation and denial'.[31] Buckley argues therefore that atheism is better understood as an aberration within Christian theology itself, not as something entirely novel, and not as something that is just there once Christianity is removed:

> Theism and atheism are not simply an accidental conjunction, a successive accumulation of contradictory opinions. A bond of necessity stretches between them: atheism depends upon theism for its vocabulary, for its meaning, and for the hypothesis it rejects.[32]

Another scholarly work already mentioned is relevant at this point: David Bentley Hart's recent treatise *The Experience of God*, although not primarily a genealogy of secularism, nevertheless contains a compelling and timely argument: that modern conceptions of God, which are necessary for contemporary atheism, are actually based upon anthropomorphic misunderstandings of Christian doctrine, and the criticisms they employ fail resolutely to say literally anything about how God is conceived within classical Christian theology. The genealogical picture conjured up by Hart is one in which formal and final causation were bracketed out in the development of the modern scientific method, which eventually proved itself to be so powerful that it was felt that this method could somehow provide the key to understanding all of reality, including the

[31] Michael J. Buckley, S.J., *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), p. 4.
[32] Ibid., p. 15.

existence or non-existence of God. The problem Hart identifies, of course, is that the empirical methods of modern scientific discovery have absolutely nothing at all to say about the radical contingency of being itself. Nor do they, on account of their efficacy, imply in any real sense that there is no such thing as final causation, and, indeed, in many ways rely on ostensibly metaphorical terms like “information” and “intention” that are nonsensical unless they really relate to some kind of implicit teleology. The point for my purposes, however, is to say that, here again, something has shifted in the theological mindset to make this possible: form and finality are bracketed out, whilst the understanding of God has changed. He is no longer that source of being which undergirds and donates itself to individual instances of being, but he is himself an instance of being, potentially discoverable. Like Zeus, you could go and have tea at his house, if you could find out where he lives.

Modern science, therefore, clearly plays a role in this story, and is central to the three narratives that I have mentioned so far in Funkenstein, Buckley and Hart. But is there a link here between what I have been saying about the shifting of the late medieval metaphysics and the rise of modern science? Are these explanations in competition with one another or is it possible to synthesize them?

This is, to be sure, a complex issue, and a degree of speculation is necessary. But we can see that there is at least a congruence between the rise of nominalism and the mutation of the scientific method into a type of metaphysics of its own as described particularly well by Hart. How is this the case? Modern science only gets going because the foundation of inquiry moves from interest in universals to investigation into particulars. Michael Gillespie identifies a combination of William of Ockham’s nominalism and his insistence on not multiplying causes beyond necessity as key to this

development. Whereas the foundation of science was, in the high medieval period, predicated upon the shared common essence of things in universals and so pursued through syllogism, in the early modern period the foundation of science, having rejected universals, moved its focus on to particulars and began to investigate the empirical world. This does not imply, of course, a godless metaphysics, but it is a step towards atheism or secularism because, taken to its extreme, it might imply that to investigate the physical world is to investigate all that truly is. Gillespie summarizes in this way:

> Since each individual being for Ockham is contingent upon God's free will, there can be no knowledge of created beings prior to investigation. As a result, humans cannot understand nature without an investigation of the phenomena themselves. Syllogism is thus replaced by hypothesis as the foundation of science.[33]

So the continuity between the shifting metaphysics of late medieval Europe and the rise of the scientific method in the early modern period is plausible and there is no contradiction between the type of genealogical argument that I am offering through Taylor and the type, emphasized by Hart, Buckley and others, that looks to the rise of the natural sciences.

Gillespie's argument in general is, again, congruent with that offered in this thesis. For Gillespie, 'Modernity…was the result of an ontic revolution within metaphysics that accepted the ontological ground that nominalism established',[34] thereby setting up a dichotomy between an emphasis upon human freedom, epitomized by humanism, and an emphasis upon God's predestining will, epitomized by the Reformation. Whereas philosophical realism envisioned a metaphysics whereby God's sovereignty operated on the level of primary causality and human free will on the level of secondary causality, in

[33] Gillespie, *Modernity*, p. 23.
[34] Ibid., p. 262.

the nominalist paradigm such a complementarity was precluded because, in the absence of universals, only God's will could make things what they were and only that will could make them behave in a certain way. Thus, a showdown between human and divine wills was inevitable. This was where, according to Gillespie, the notion of nature and the cosmos as a machine derived as,

> Thinkers such as Bacon, Descartes, and Hobbes sought a new beginning that gave priority not to man or to God but to nature, that sought to understand the world not as a product of a Promethean human freedom or of a radically omnipotent divine will but of the mechanical motion of matter.[35]

From this point onwards, therefore, the die is cast and a modern existence that admits no possibility of a transcendent horizon is all but inevitable.

The argument that the nominalist revolution was key to the origin of Modernity can also be seen in the work of two other prominent recent scholars, Louis Dupré and Brad Gregory. Brad Gregory's *The Unintended Reformation* is a sprawling, genealogical epic that treats in analytic fashion the relativization of doctrine and belief, the subjectification of morality, the rise of consumerism and the secularization of the universities. But underlying all of this is Gregory's observation that what comes first in all of this is metaphysics:

> The wide *demographic spread* of unbelief is without question a modern story that belongs especially to social and cultural history, beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century and accelerating enormously in Western Europe and somewhat in the United States since the 1960s. But its *intellectual bases* remain what they were in the seventeenth century, and even more deeply, what they were in the late Middle Ages: a univocal conception of being and the use of Occam's razor in the relationship between natural causality and alleged divine presence […] Nothing *conceptually* original, including Darwinian evolution, has been added for many centuries.[36]

Again, we can see how congruent with Gillespie's thesis such an observation is, and how much it shares in common with what I have already said about Taylor's approach.

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[35] Ibid.
[36] Gregory, *Reformation*, p. 64.

Finally, in order to round off this survey of thinkers who have made similar observations, Louis Dupré must be mentioned. In works such as *Passage to Modernity* and *Religion and the Rise of Modern Culture*,[37] Dupré has analyzed the details of the "protracted battle"[38] between nature and grace. Dupré's analysis is even closer to what I am trying to say about Taylor than Gillespie or Gregory. He writes, for example, that in order to understand the relationship between Modernity and religion, we have to begin at 'the point where the medieval synthesis of nature and grace fell apart':

> This […] occurred in the nominalist theology of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries when the term *supernatural* came to refer to a separate reality and the teleology of nature became detached from that of the supernatural order. This separation led to a naturalism that contributed to the later rise of atheism.[39]

Again, Modernity can be understood as a desperate attempt to reconnect the lost unity of nature and grace, but this attempt has been a failure and, therefore, 'As the idea of nature grew more and more "secular," Christian faith became increasingly remote from ordinary life'.[40]

Dupré's analysis here provides an exact analogy with the way that I intend to utilize the aesthetic in my main argument. In Dupré's work, grace and nature are separated and, because Modernity did not find a way to put them back together, nature became inevitably more secularized and the immanent was seen as an unnecessary accretion. When applied to aesthetics, we can see that the separation of grace and nature involved the desacralization of the material world and forms of artistic creativity. Because grace is removed from the

[37] Louis Dupré, *Passage to Modernity: An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), and *Religion and the Rise of Modern Culture* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008).
[38] Dupré, *Religion*, p. 27.
[39] Ibid., p. 111.
[40] Ibid., p. 27.

material, the material is seen to be more and more secular and is therefore either irrelevant to Christian faith or an idolatrous temptation to sinful distraction. Either way, it becomes impossible for the modern mind to imagine that the material is a conduit of the divine. Again, this is something that I intend to draw out of Taylor in some detail below, but a brief overview of the relevant scholarship proves that Taylor's basic genealogical moves, although differing in some details, nevertheless mirror those of a range of other specialists in this area.

And not only that: what these works show compellingly is that a purely supersessionist understanding of the relationship of Christianity to the modern world lacks the explanatory power that it needs because it ignores the metaphysics, preferring instead to imagine that, as a result of the success of the natural sciences, it has committed them to the flames. This central, philosophical myth is crucial for Modernity's self-understanding as a Promethean act, throwing off the dead weight of the superstitious past and embracing the enlightening power of science. But what all of these scholars have shown, in one way or another, is that there is an implicit metaphysics here, and to ignore it as though it were an irrelevance is a vast oversight. The accounts of Modernity as Promethean achievement do not answer, for example, the question of being or the nature of form and finality. The intriguing and fascinating possibilities that scholars such as Dupré, Gillespie, Gregory, Taylor and others open up, therefore, is that Modernity could be re-enchanted, once again lit up by the celestial music of the heavens and the spiritual light that called forth the Cathedral at Ely from the dust of the earth. The possibility is surely worth considering.

I made my case for Taylor above by saying that the metaphysical genealogy he lays out sits within a certain stream and that the specific claims around the immanent and the transcendent are well made and have a lot of scholarly status behind them. I added to that

that, in my view, the real achievement of *A Secular Age* is that it does not just provide us with yet another contribution to that discussion, but it applies the historical to the phenomenological in a way that is deeply insightful and uniquely copious. Having established this, I will now turn to a discussion of Taylor, fleshing out some details of his genealogy before looking in depth at his phenomenology. I will move on later in the thesis to the relationship of all of this to the notion of aesthetics and its application to ecclesiology.

Chapter One | Charles Taylor's A Secular Age (1): Genealogy of the Secular

Introduction: Narrowing Down the Focus

Upon taking up the pen to write of the work of Charles Taylor, even when one confines oneself largely to only *one* of his monumental works, one is immediately set upon with an almost innumerable amount of dangers and obstacles. The reason for this is, simply, because of the copiousness of Taylor's learning and the dizzying range of the subjects he treats. *A Secular Age*, which is the main text under consideration here, is, in a sense, concerned with nothing less than literally everything that has happened in recorded history in western civilization. Taylor, helpfully in my view, makes an early concession, that this text is dealing with the west or what could be called the North Atlantic world and was formerly called Latin Christendom. He acknowledges that the phenomenon of secularism exists well beyond the borders of this world, but he concedes that his 'canvas is on the verge of being

too broad'[41] already and that, therefore, he must stick to one (albeit extremely wide-ranging) subject area in order to preserve his focus.[42]

Before addressing the issue of how I intend to narrow the focus sufficiently however, it is also necessary to point out two broad points concerning Taylor: firstly, it is certainly the case that the topic of the secular is redolent with possibilities and that it would be myopic in the extreme to insist on some kind of singularity or conformity.[43] Put simply, there are many seculars, and, oftentimes, apparent conflict or disagreement between them can be based merely on semantic differences. Indeed, as I will indicate below, I think that Taylor's third sense of the secular is often misrepresented perhaps for precisely these sorts of reasons.

The second necessity is to give an account of why it is important to engage with Taylor specifically. It scarcely needs pointing out that Taylor's *A Secular Age* has been engaged on a vast scale by all manner of academics and departments. To take two examples of this, the collection mentioned above, *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age,* boasts treatments by pre-eminent scholars in the field of sociology, theology, political theory and philosophy, literature, cultural theory and history. Within the pages of that work, Robert Bellah

[41] Taylor, *Secular*, p. 21.

[42] This does not please everybody, of course, and it can be added as a legitimate rejoinder that the editors of the compendium *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age* wonder about the legitimacy of his rationale on the basis that he underestimates how easy it is to annex the west from the rest of the world and, therefore, underplays that extent to which there might be an interplay between, for example, the west and its colonies in the formation of western secularism. Cf. Michael Warner, Jonathan VanAntwerpen and Craig Calhoun eds., *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2010), pp. 26-27.

[43] Apart from the works already mention in my introduction, cf. Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam and Modernity* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2003); Peter Berger, *The Many Altars of Modernity* (New York: Walter De Gruyter, 2014); José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Danièle Hervieu-Léger, *Religion as a Chain of Memory*, trans. by Simon Lee (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2006) and *Le Pèlerin et Le Converti: La Religion en Mouvement* (Paris: Flammarion, 1999); Olivier Tschannen, *Les Théories de la Sécularisation* (Geneve: Droz, 1992), and these not to mention notable sociologists such as Linda Woodhead and Grace Davies.

describes it as 'one of the most important books to be written in my lifetime',[44] and José Casanova begins his account in the following way:

> Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* offers the best analytical, phenomenological, and genealogical account we have of our modern, secular condition. By "best" I mean that it is simultaneously the most comprehensive, nuanced, and complex account I know.[45]

And many other authors in the volume begin their entries with similarly ringing endorsements. Another example of its reception can be found in *New Blackfriars*, which, in 2010, devoted an edition to a symposium on Charles Taylor and *A Secular Age*.[46] In the introduction to that collection, Fergus Kerr cites the declining place of the Roman Catholic Church in the modern west as evidence of its need to accept its place within a secular age.

This latter example provides a helpful bridge to my next point, which is that, although *A Secular Age* opens up possibilities for all sorts of different approaches, mine is an attempt at a *theological* approach, and a specific kind of theological approach at that. For this work, therefore, I am thinking about the theological claims that Taylor makes and the implications of those claims for doctrine and practice. Of course, these things cannot be disconnected from other relevant disciplines such as sociology and history, but these other disciplines are the servants of theology in this context. Taylor is not primarily a theologian, although his works contain both implicit and explicit theological presuppositions and propositions. In *A Secular Age*, he speaks rarely in an explicitly theological mode. These moments do come, but it is not his primary goal to put forward some kind of theological solution for the predicaments that he raises, nor is it his aim to provide an apologetic for his Roman Catholic beliefs, although there are a few scholars who have (erroneously) accused him of the latter.

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[44] Quoted in Michael Warner, Jonathan VanAntwerpen and Craig Calhoun, 'Editors' Introduction', in Warner, *Varieties*, pp.1-31 (p. 1).
[45] José Casanova, 'A Secular Age: Dawn or Twilight', in Warner, *Varieties*, pp, 265-281 (p. 265).
[46] 'Symposium on Charles Taylor', *New Blackfriars*, 91(1036) (2010), 625-724.

My design, therefore, is to formulate a theological response to Charles Taylor with particular reference to his phenomenology of Modernity. It is my intention to provide an internal rationale to Christian theology and ecclesiology, and, therefore, my argument can be explicitly stated thus: a consideration of secularism upon Taylor's account and the theological accounts that follow imply that a sacramental and aesthetic emphasis within Christian theology and ecclesiology is essential to resist both religious decline and a denuding of the Church from within. Implicit within this argument, therefore, is a sort of apologetic, implying as it does that, firstly, Modernity provides an impoverished, "flat" take on reality that is ultimately unsatisfactory to human beings who are created in the *imago Dei* and are therefore orientated to transcendental and ecstatic ends, and that, secondly, in order for the Church to maintain any kind of significant relevance to a secular age it must resist secular impoverishment by re-embracing and re-articulating its sacramental and participatory character in such a way as to imbue reality with the meaning that inheres within it. The Church must resist and correct, therefore, anti-sacramental notions that perdure within its theologies (anaemic, memorialist understandings of the Eucharist for example), but it must equally expunge the frippery and superficiality of much so-called Anglo-Catholicism. The latter has the capacity arguably to be even more obnoxious than the most debased and simplistic evangelical fundamentalism because it comes close to the form of true transcendental worship but misses the substance entirely by choosing to focus on the surface rather than penetrating to the depths within. Put simply, the sacramental character of our worship is a *pedagogy in reality*, which should result in some kind of this-worldly transformation, rather than a parade of desiccated rituals and vested pomposities.

In an essay which I will return to, John Milbank makes the crucial point that Christianity ultimately has the resources to ground the ethical in everyday life whilst "exceeding" it in

the transcendental reality of God.[47] If such an understanding is taken together with an emphasis upon sacramental worship, what should result is not pomposity and lace-orientated vanity, but the transformation of the inward heart and outward forms of life. There should be no disjunction, in other words, between worship and discipleship because the purpose of the Church's existence is to offer to God the totality of its functions and activities so that, as another great Anglican systematician put it, for the Christian person, 'their life and their liturgy may be one'.[48] In this sense, one of the implications of my work is surely a call to the Anglo-Catholic wing of the Church of England to re-discover something of the essence of the original Oxford Movement, the concern of which was not just external ritual but crucially service to the poor, the transformation of the inward heart and the preaching of the gospel.

In contrast to my purposes therefore it is apt to remark that one of the aspects of *A Secular Age* that is so extraordinary is its fundamental sense of irenic restraint. Over the course of about eight hundred and fifty pages, Taylor resists almost totally the urge to thrust his own conclusions, theological or otherwise, into the midst of the developing explorations. Sadly, multiple reviewers have overlooked this laudable feature and decided instead to attempt some kind of psychological deconstructions of Taylor's motivations in order to discredit his thesis.

One particularly egregious example of this is Gregor McLennan's article in the New Blackfriars symposium,[49] the errors and misstatements of which are so legion that it makes one wonder how McLennan could have read the whole book (which he appears to have

[47] John Milbank, 'A Closer Walk on the Wild Side', in Warner, *Varieties*, pp. 54-82 (p. 64).
[48] E.L. Mascall, *Corpus Christi: Essays on the Church and the Eucharist* (London: Longmans, Green and Co Ltd, 1965), p. 29.
[49] Gregor McLennan, 'Uplifting Unbelief', *New Blackfriars*, 91(1036) (2010), 627-647.

done), understood its basic genealogical moves in a sophisticated way (which, again, appears to be the case), but at the same time fundamentally misunderstood both Taylor's intentions and analysis. One could comment extensively on these basic indiscretions, but suffice to mention here McLennan's implication that Taylor is interested in '(seeing) off'[50] the challenge of secularism, that his 'main target and bugbear' in *A Secular Age* is 'the unbeliever',[51] that although he '(strives) to give the rationale for unbelief its fair due, Taylor is nevertheless on a mission' to show that experience in a secular world 'tilts towards the belief',[52] that he simply wants to contest 'the relentless coming of unitary secular unbelief',[53] all summed up in the article abstract, which states that the author is 'motivated to contest Taylor's framing of the "unbeliever" as spiritually deprived and intellectually complacent'.[54] Anybody, surely, who has read this book with care will see how reductive and unfair these characterisations and criticisms are, suggesting a completely different tone and approach to that actually employed by Taylor. It is obvious, for example, that Taylor does not erect some kind of simplistic binary between belief and unbelief whereby those who buy into the latter are seen as having fragile stances which are apt to be critiqued and destroyed whereas those who possess the former are firmer in their existential predicament. Quite the opposite: as I will show below, the whole concept of "cross-pressure", which is absolutely fundamental to Taylor's formulation of the secular, mitigates against this: far from seeing the secular world as one in which the unbeliever is extremely vulnerable to the critique of the believer – that the former's viewpoint is lacking in

[50] McLennan, 'Unbelief', p. 627.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Ibid., p. 628.
[53] Ibid., p. 631.
[54] Ibid., p. 627.

spirituality or intellectual coherence and so on – the whole point of cross-pressure is that it creates a situation in which nobody, or at least nobody who is cognizant of the existence of other people, finds it easy to hold *any* type of belief with such confident triumphalism *for the reason that* we are all continually beset by sophisticated or otherwise winsome interlocuters whose beliefs contradict or challenge ours and, therefore, *all* belief is mutually "fragilized" (to use another of Taylor's coinages). Perhaps the lowest moment of McLennan's article is, however, when he characterizes Taylor's view of '"everyday" life in Modernity' as 'nothing but terrible flatness and keeping the "lack" at bay'.[55] Again, this kind of characterization is frustrating because Taylor's account makes such a feature of everyday and ordinary life in Modernity; if McLennan has indeed read these extensive passages, then he has misunderstood them. In *A Secular Age*, Taylor makes it abundantly clear many times that he sees Modernity and the secular as making "invaluable gains"[56] that could not have come about without the end of Christendom. One of the central thrusts of his entire output is that which is articulated late-on in *A Secular Age*, in what he calls "homecomings to the ordinary":

> […] one should recognize the positive force and value of these homecomings to the ordinary. There is an important human experience here, one which has been repeated again and again in Modernity, and one which in itself, in spite of its doctrinal dressing, is very often profoundly positive, for it involves the rediscovery and affirmation of important human goods. What is recovered in these moments of return is a sense of the value of unspectacular, flawed everyday love, between lovers, or friends, or parents and children, with its routines and labours, partings and reunions, estrangements and returns.[57]

This rediscovery of the value of ordinary life is, in Taylor's view, probably *the* central benefit conferred upon us by the Reformation and subsequently by Modernity, and it is also the

[55] Ibid., pp. 639-640.
[56] Taylor, *Secular*, p. 777.
[57] Ibid, p. 628.

principal argument of his monumental *Sources of the Self*, where it is referred to as the "affirmation of ordinary life",[58] as well as being stated in concise form in his lecture *A Catholic Modernity?*,[59] and in various other places. So, no, Taylor emphatically does *not* think that Modernity is 'nothing but terrible flatness', and one really does not know what to make of such assertions. The fact is that McLennan's article, because he so fundamentally misunderstands Taylor's intentions, reads as a straightforward apologetic for some kind of scientific naturalism: he takes *A Secular Age* as an assault on *his* worldview, and, therefore, he feels the need to reassert that worldview in the form of rebuttals to arguments that he imagines Taylor has made. This, to my mind, is actually a good indicator of the power of Taylor's work: far from being, as McLennan imagines, an evocation of some mysterious "we" that can be referred to as justification for religious belief,[60] Taylor's phenomenology is acutely well-observed and must be taken seriously or dismissed emphatically.

Again, the problem with this, as Taylor points out in his afterword to *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, is that these reviewers fundamentally misunderstand not only Taylor's motivations but the very thesis itself, taking it as some kind of apologetic argument for Roman Catholicism. This kind of criticism is often particularly located around Taylor's concept of fullness. I elaborate on the concept of fullness extensively in my second chapter, but suffice to point out here that Taylor's primary motivation in articulating this and other frameworks within *A Secular Age* is that he believes quite vehemently in freedom of thought, religion and conscience, and that this freedom has resulted in and will continue to

[58] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 211-302.
[59] Charles Taylor, 'A Catholic Modernity?', in James Heft, ed., *A Catholic Modernity?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 13-41.
[60] McLennan, 'Unbelief', p. 643.

result in basic and fundamental differences between religious and non-religious takes on reality. To quote some of his concluding remarks in Warner's volume:

> I think what we badly need is a conversation between a host of different positions, religious, nonreligious, antireligious, humanistic, antihumanistic, and so on, in which we eschew mutual caricature and try to understand what "fullness" means for the other.[61]

> Let me come out of the closet and tell you what it means to be my kind of Catholic. I think that we have a calling to understand very different positions, particularly very different understandings of fullness […] if one doesn't do that, one hobbles around on crutches. That is, you give yourself a sense that your position is right because of some caricature of the alternative you entertain […] We all need to get over those crutches by really coming to experience the power and attraction of quite different understandings of the world, atheist and theist.[62]

Ultimately, Taylor states that his aim is to enable the building of friendships across these boundaries, and these based 'on a real mutual sense, a powerful sense, of what moves the other person'.[63]

> Now, what has that got to do with Christianity? Everything, to me: that is what it's all about. It's all about reconciliation. It's all about reconciliation between human beings, and it doesn't simply mean within the Church, and it doesn't mean that it's conditioned on being within the Church […] I resonate with Herder's idea of humanity as the orchestra, in which all the differences between human beings could ultimately sound together in harmony.[64]

He admits that this motivation is derived from his faith but rejects the accusation that he is trying surreptitiously to cajole others towards that faith. Rather he wants to 'get this conversation going across as many differences'[65] as possible and concludes firmly that 'this is the kind of thing we have to be doing'.[66]

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[61] Charles Taylor, 'Afterword: Apologia pro Libro suo', in Warner, *Varieties*, pp. 300-321, (p. 318).
[62] Ibid., p. 319.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Ibid., p. 320.
[65] Ibid.
[66] Ibid., p. 321.

The afterword is, of course, a transcription of orally delivered remarks, and it is notable that Taylor speaks so frankly and emotionally about his motivation in writing *A Secular Age*: he clearly feels a measure of perhaps wilful misunderstanding on the part of some of his interlocutors and some disappointment that his central thesis did not come through as pertinently as he would have liked.[67]

This feeling is understandable, particularly for those who have taken time to familiarize themselves with Taylor's oeuvre. I have already mentioned *Sources of the Self*, in which Taylor's principal argument concerns one of the benefits of the decline of Christendom, namely the discovery of the modern concept of the individual and his or her ordinary life. Further to this, he makes it clear in *A Catholic Modernity?* that he likes to define catholicity as "universality" and "wholeness" and that this implies, for him, that attempts to make other nations and cultures "fit" into a narrow form of Catholicism would 'suppress something of the diversity of humanity that God created; unity of the part masquerading as the whole'.[68] The implication of this, although perhaps somewhat underdefined,[69] is that he is not particularly interested in, say, worldwide evangelism as much as he is invested in promoting "unity-across-difference" as opposed to "unity-through-identity". This theme

[67] It is worth noting also his melancholic remarks in New Blackfriars regarding McLennan's critique: 'The essential points of my argument hadn't come through. This is not the first time I see this happening. I can see that I did a very poor job of expressing my main thesis in the book'. Charles Taylor, 'Charles Taylor Replies', *New Blackfriars*, 91(1036) (2010), 645-647 (p. 645).

[68] Taylor, 'Modernity', in Heft, *Modernity*, p.14.

[69] It is not clear to me whether Taylor is talking here about, for example, evangelism from Christianity to other faiths, or if he is outlining a preferred form of cultural accommodation *within Catholicism*. Later on in the lecture he talks, for example, about 'no widening of the faith without an increase in the variety of devotions and spiritualities and liturgical forms and responses to Incarnation' (Ibid., p. 15). Even given this ambiguity, it is still obvious that Taylor is not arguing, in this lecture, for anything other than a greater level of understanding on the part of Catholicism of its place within culture and of the relationship of other cultural forms to Catholicism.

comes across in a very balanced way throughout the lecture, and it is hard to deny that what I have described is Taylor's clear agenda.

The point I have been labouring in this section is, therefore, that Taylor's analysis is pretty much as balanced as it is possible to get. There are no objective viewpoints in these matters, of course, but, when an author's stated presupposition is that there is an inherent value in unity-in-difference and that we need to be very careful about squeezing other approaches into a narrow and uncatholic unity-in-identity, then this is surely a good starting point for a relatively dispassionate account. This strengthens the ensuing argument of this thesis, in my view, because it shows that Taylor's agenda is not primarily theological and apologetic. It gives credibility to my analysis that it is not beginning from a theologically opinionated or overly partisan source but developing its own theological argument as a response to that relatively impartial impetus. Although I intend to make a theological argument, it cannot be said that I am simply continuing one that has already been started off by Taylor. The theological points he makes in *A Secular Age* occur toward the end of the book, after the vast majority of his analysis, and are brief and tentative.[70]

It is, therefore, not my intention at this point to pass judgement on Taylor's basic motivations or presuppositions. Taken alone the above remarks from *A Catholic Modernity?* raise to my mind a number of questions concerning the seriousness with which, in a theological framework, we should understand the notion of human sin, or the possibility of wilful human error. Granted that inhabiting the viewpoints of others is a laudable, helpful

[70] Probably the main example of this comes in the context of a discussion on (re-)embodiment in Christianity. Taylor suggests, 'Making theological sense of this once again will undoubtedly involve another look at certain issues of sexual ethics: contraception in the Catholic case, and homosexuality, among others,' and opines that we must recover something of 'the link between erotic desire and the love of God' (Taylor, *Secular*, p. 767). But, again, views like these are almost never stated in *A Secular Age* and, when they are, they are fleeting.

and charitable aspiration, at what point do we need to *engage* the alternative viewpoints, to judge them as sub-optimal, degrading, dehumanizing and so on? Asking these sorts of questions as a response to *A Secular Age* is entirely legitimate because, as I have shown, Taylor intends his work as a conversation starter.

This is where my project starts off: as simply one way, within the context of theological thought, of taking up a single thread that Taylor lays down. Starting from Taylor's phenomenology of Modernity, what does this mean for theology and for ecclesiology? What conclusions can be drawn? For which viewpoints can we argue? These are the kinds of questions I want to ask, broadly speaking, within the framework of recent Anglican systematic theology.

Before moving on to a theological and ecclesiological response, therefore, it is necessary now to lay out, first, the genealogical context for the relevant aspects of Taylor's phenomenology, and then move to a description of the phenomenology itself.

A Secular Genealogy

Taylor's *A Secular Age*, in the broadest terms, is an interplay between history and ideas. The editors of *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age* are quite right to observe that 'Taylor's history is in this sense closer to what is usually called genealogy',[71] even though Taylor is somewhat ambivalent about Foucault and Nietzsche in general. The point here is that Taylor does not treat the past as though it is a neutral set of facts that can be surveyed impartially via the power of disembodied rationality (indeed, this would cut across one of his most central arguments). Rather history provides a context for the ideas and beliefs that

[71] Warner, 'Introduction', in Warner, *Varieties*, p. 21.

we hold today, and not only for those ideas and beliefs themselves but for the *way that we hold them*, the moods that they carry and create, and the robustness or fragility that they possess. This quality of *A Secular Age* is one of its remarkable strengths. There is a multivalence to it which ultimately issues in a highly relatable and persuasive phenomenology. John Milbank comments that *A Secular Age* constitutes,

> […] a new intellectual genre – a kind of historicized existentialism, in which the philosopher seeks to disinter the assumed "mood" or Wittgensteinian "picture" that causes people, often unconsciously, to take up the positions that they do, far more fundamentally than any mere conceptual reasoning.[72]

Even given the fact that Taylor is not attempting to act as a theologian in this work, it is still clear that such an approach will produce theological implications. One of the few reasonably strongly asserted theological suggestions in *A Secular Age*, to give an example, is that prudishness about sex and related matters within Roman Catholicism are the outcome of a long process of "excarnation", which is actually a betrayal and a reversal of the central Christian doctrine of the incarnation. The phenomenological outcome of this, therefore, might be that the discomfort and guilt that many Catholics feel over matters of this sort, particularly those aspects which have been either outlawed or treated as second-best states of affairs by the Church (such as marriage), are not really the voice of conscience or the Holy Spirit, but are constitutive of those Catholics' places at the end of that process: it is not authentic Christianity that makes you *feel* this way, rather it is the cultural baggage that has accreted to the *true* story of the incarnation. Taylor never quite puts it like that but this is quite likely the implication of his phenomenological argument. The important point is to

[72] Milbank, 'Closer', in Ibid., p. 78.

give some context to our instincts and feelings, so that we might more clearly see them for what they are. Such a project is, in theory at least, possessed of great power.

The purpose here, however, is to clarify the particular approach, which I concur is best called a genealogy. It is a genealogy of secularism and, therefore, it is imperative that we define what "secularism" means in this context. Here Taylor lays out a three-fold definition: firstly, there is the alleged emptying of public spaces of 'God, or any reference to ultimate reality'.[73] Accounts of secularism which deal with this sense tend to focus on the political implications of secularism and the interactions between Church and state. Secondly, there is the sense in which secularism can refer to 'the falling off of religious belief and practice, in people turning away from God and no longer going to Church'.[74] The third sense of secularism focuses 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.[75]

How is it that it was 'virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable'?[76] It is this question that is central to *A Secular Age* and, again, not just understood in terms of cognition (the historical conditions that led some people to have this set of beliefs in their brains and other people to have conflicting beliefs in theirs), but in terms of *what it is like* both to hold those beliefs and to know and experience the fact that other people believe other things that are quite contradictory. This is one of the aspects of *A Secular Age* that

[73] Taylor, *Secular*, p. 2
[74] Ibid.
[75] Ibid., p. 3.
[76] Ibid., p. 25.

distinguishes it from other accounts of secularism: it is not just a history of ideas exercise that traces a particular type of intellectual development in terms of its long-term effects (although it is that in part) but it is deeply interested in the experience of those who stand at the end of this process.

This mood or background setting is referred to early on, utilizing Heideggerian terminology, as a kind of "pre-ontology",[77] by which Taylor means the type of setting that is necessary in order to form incipient beliefs that develop later on. Understanding this pre-ontology is to understand the background conditions for the things that we believe, often in an unreflective and pre-critical manner.

The other related term which is utilized here is Foucault's notion of an "unthought",[78] and this leads on to one of Taylor's most important arguments in *A Secular Age*. The unthought is the belief or argument that is held at this pre-critical stage; it is something that one has simply just imbibed by living where and when one does. Taylor contends that one of the principal unthoughts that we live with in Modernity concerns what he calls "subtraction stories" about religion. It is one of the characteristic aspects of an unthought that, when it is articulated in the context in which it is held, it is immediately recognizable to the audience of the speaker. This is certainly the case here: the subtraction story articulates a progressive view of history as the gradual sloughing-off of forms of religious belief as scientific knowledge and technological mastery progress. I have already discussed this type of modern self-understanding in my introduction which I noted is often associated with social theorists such as Marx and Weber. But there are theological examples of this type of move as well, such as Bultmann's famous assertion:

[77] Ibid., p. 3.
[78] Ibid., p. 428.

> We cannot use electric lights and radios and, in the event of illness, avail ourselves of modern medical and clinical means and at the same time believe in the spirit and wonder world of the New Testament.[79]

It may be that Bultmann had thought through very carefully what the link is between the development of the electric light and the diminishment of belief in the supernatural, but it seems quite uncontroversial to say that, for many (perhaps hundreds of millions) in the western world, the link would remain convincing on a superficial level *and* deeply underexplored. In that sense it would be a pre-conceived unthought. What if it turned out that the movement from utilization of electricity to non-belief in the supernatural were based on an egregious *non sequitur*? Would the implications not be significant?

Taylor's purpose is to excavate this kind of assumption through his genealogy and to replace it with something more compelling, a better story of how we came to the place we did vis-à-vis religion and religious belief. He believes that the modern individual and modern secularism is a tangible construction and that the subtraction story that is often used to explain the modern world is hopelessly inadequate because it does not pay attention to the positive assertions that were made in the lead-up to modern secularism and those that endure today. Taylor's view also stresses the radical *contingency* of this process, a zig-zag pattern that by no means needed to take the path that it did. This also mitigates against the subtraction story of Modernity, because the latter sees an inevitable link between human progress in the areas of technology, scientific and economic development and the decline of religious belief.[80] And so the subtraction story posits a linearity to history, whereby this state of affairs was inevitable.

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[79] Rudolf Bultmann, *New Testament Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, trans. by Schubert Miles Ogden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1998), p. 4.

[80] In sophisticated defences of secularism, this inevitability is sometimes challenged. I have already mentioned Blumenberg's epic work *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, in which he goes to great lengths to delineate the

In order to see all of this more clearly, therefore, it is now necessary to lay out something of the story that Taylor narrates in *A Secular Age* and the terminology that he invents to describe various aspects of it. This is a highly difficult task for some of the reasons mentioned above, so it must be said that it is beyond the scope of this chapter to treat of every narrative turn and neologism that Taylor describes and utilizes. Rather, I will stick to particular aspects of his story which will lead elegantly into a discussion of his phenomenology.

The Reform Master Narrative

To recapitulate one of the central claims of this thesis, in the medieval period and prior the "aesthetic" was intrinsically related to Christianity. There was no separation between the abstract and the concrete, the spiritual and the material, as it were, but both were seen as set upon one continuum. The divine, in other words, was mediated through the embodied. The primary difference, in this regard, between the secular age of the contemporary world and the past ages that Taylor describes in his genealogy is that, in the former, the continuum that encompassed the material and the spiritual is divided into two. This is one of the key themes of his overarching genealogy.

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difference between overarching philosophies of history that put forward 'the notion of progress as a necessary and inevitable process' (Blumenberg, *Legitimacy*, p. xx) and his own category of "human self-assertion" as the inevitable post-religious challenge 'to construct whatever may be possible in this particular world in the way of security and self-realization "even if there is no God"' (Ibid., p. xix). Although Blumenberg would be an exception to the habit of thought that I am describing, this instance does not negate the point above because it is still true that the idea of secularism as inevitable progress which invariably takes leave of a less-sophisticated past is still totally pervasive in modern culture. To see this, one only has to observe certain turns of phrase such as, "This is the twentieth-first century," taken to imply that a certain type of behaviour or state of affairs is unacceptable, or to note that the description of a person as belonging to a past age, whether Medieval or Victorian, is considered to be an insult.

The term "Reform Master Narrative" (hereafter, following Taylor, RMN) is only introduced in the epilogue of *A Secular Age*, but it is certainly a helpful shorthand to refer to Taylor's overall story. One feels that, in the background of this story, there is an all-encompassing, epochal Hegelian dialectic that stretches back into the primordial pre-Axial paganisms that preceded the contemporary world religions which brought about the former's demise, ushering in the Axial age. But the Axial age is no clean break from the pre-Axial and contains within itself a sort of fragile equilibrium that would eventually destabilize and result in the post-Axial secularism which appears so normal to us today. This thesis-antithesis-synthesis movement is clear though not overplayed. (Hegel is mentioned a mere fourteen times in eight-hundred odd pages, and this mostly in the context of narratives of the Enlightenment alongside other key figures such as Marx and Fichte.)

According to Taylor, 'the rituals of pre-Axial religion were concerned with securing human flourishing, and protecting against the threats of disease, famine, flood, etc'.[81] This emphasis on ritual was not, however, simply an attempt at manipulation of certain higher powers because it was 'accompanied by a sense of awe at (them), and often a sense of wrongness in going against them…as well as feelings of devotion and gratitude for favours confirmed'.[82] The shift to the Axial age consists in two major deviations from the pre-Axial because the former redefines the transcendent realm. Whereas in the pre-Axial age the transcendent realm had an element of ambiguity about it vis-à-vis the human good, in the Axial age it becomes 'unambiguously affirmative of this good'.[83] The other shift in the understanding of the transcendent is even more significant, because whereas the pre-Axial

[81] Taylor, *Secular*, p. 439.
[82] Ibid.
[83] Ibid., p. 152.

saw the transcendent as in some way *within* the cosmic order, the Axial conceives of it in such as a way as that it 'may now be quite beyond or outside of the cosmos, as with the Creator God of Genesis, or the Nirvana of Buddhism'.[84] The implication of this shift in religious understanding, which Taylor also links with the 'guarantor of just rule in Chinese thought' and with the realm of the Forms in Plato, is significant for the existential condition of humanity:

> The highest human goal can no longer just be to flourish, as it was before. Either a new goal is posited, of a salvation which takes us beyond what we usually understand as human flourishing. Or else Heaven, or the Good, lays the demand on us to imitate or embody its unambiguous goodness, and hence to alter the mundane order of things down here. This may, indeed usually does involve flourishing on a wider scale, but our own flourishing (as individual, family, clan or tribe) can no longer be our highest goal. And of course, this may be expressed by a redefinition of what "flourishing" consists in.[85]

And so the initial tension that underlies the whole of Taylor's narrative is really first seen here in this redefinition of the transcendent (or transcendence) and the consequent ambiguity that surrounds the notion of flourishing, by which we understand the ultimate inclination, telos and aspiration of humanity. It can no longer be that we are orientated only toward this-worldly goals – shelter, comfort, enjoyment of earthly pleasures of various sorts – but that we must factor in both our relationship to the transcendent as we live now and invariably the consequences of that relationship for the hereafter. The relationship between the immanent and the transcendent is complicated by this movement.

Taylor's basic historical argument, when applying this shift to Latin Christendom, is that the uneasy alliance that held in pre-modern Christianity between the immanent and the transcendent was eventually resolved by the two being prised apart from one another at a

[84] Ibid.
[85] Ibid., pp. 152-153.

conceptual level. How did this happen? Broadly speaking, in the late medieval period, the west entered a period of "Reform" (including but also preceding the Reformation), during which various aspects of Axial Christianity received tremendous challenge. And this was to set the stage for a secular age. Taylor summarises this himself in the following way:

> I am talking not of a particular, revolutionary moment but of a long, ascending series of attempts to establish a Christian order, of which the Reformation is a key phase. These attempts show a progressive impatience with older modes of postaxial religion in which certain collective, ritualistic forms of earlier religions uneasily coexisted with the demands of individual devotion and ethical reform which came from "higher" revelations. In Latin Christendom, the attempt was to recover and impose on everyone a more individually committed and Christocentric religion of devotion and action, and to repress or even abolish older, supposedly "magical" or "superstitious" forms of collective ritual practice.[86]

In order to delineate specifically how this happened, therefore, I will note four significant shifts that Taylor outlines in *A Secular Age*: the shift from a "multispeed system" of belief in which different Christians within medieval society operated at different levels or intensities of devotion to a "single-speed system" in which ordinary Christians were cajoled and encouraged to move up to a higher level, whilst those who practised various forms of higher spirituality and renunciation were pulled down; the shift from the cosmos experienced as enchanted to the universe experienced as disenchanted; the shift from an understanding of time as multivalent or "kairotic", including "higher" times, to simple chronological homogeneity; and the shift from the "porous" self to the "buffered" self and the immanent frame, including the notion of excarnation. As I delineate these four shifts, I will attempt to pull in various other themes and developments that can be seen as related to them. The basic point to bear in mind, however, is that in some way all of the new conditions created by these shifts understand the relationship between the immanent and the transcendent in

[86] Taylor, 'Afterword', in Warner, *Varieties*, pp. 304-305.

terms of a duality as opposed to a continuum and therefore prepared the way for the coming of the modern secular.

1. The Reform of the Multispeed System

Reform begins in the late medieval period with an attempt to eradicate the long-held distinction between lay and renunciative vocations. This had been held as a kind of mutually beneficial equilibrium, whereby those who could not live up to perfection were helped or "carried",[87] as Taylor says, by those who could – clergy, monks, nuns, and saints of various types.[88] Taylor notes a type of dissatisfaction with this system which appears reasonably uniquely in Europe around this time. It is unclear *why* exactly this dissatisfaction existed in the form that it did, but, according to Taylor, 'it seems…to be a fact about the late-medieval and early modern period'.[89] This drive to Reform coincided largely with new forms of popular religious piety which emphasized devotion to the suffering humanity of Christ and practices that would conjure up intense feelings of affection and passion towards him, specifically in his humiliated form. One only needs to think of some of the medieval mystics like Julian of Norwich, with her intense focus upon the body of Christ in its crucified state – complete with detailed description of his wounds, his bleeding, the agony on his face, and so on – in order to get a sense of what this looked like. Then there was the preaching of the mendicant orders which constituted a kind of "internal crusade"[90] to improve the quality of the spiritual life of the laity. But the efforts at Reform were largely clerically or elite-imposed, and so constituted a top-down reorganization of society. Taylor identifies a

[87] Taylor, *Secular*, p. 63.
[88] For another account of this phenomenon in medieval France, cf. Georges Duby, *The Three Orders: Feudal Society Imagined*, trans. by Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).
[89] Taylor, *Secular*, p. 63.
[90] Ibid., p. 68.

potential starting point as the edict of the Lateran Council of 1215, which laid down the requirement of auricular confession for all of the laity at least once a year.

But it was really around the time of the Reformation when this sense of unease came to a head. Taylor identifies three main strands: the turn to a more intense, inward form of devotion, a corresponding egalitarianism that produced suspicion of Church-controlled "magic", particularly when it came to the sacraments, and, finally, the newly articulated idea of salvation by faith, which seemed to call into question any religious practices that smacked of either idolatry or attempts to earn salvation by what then seemed to be prideful acts of renunciation.[91] On the latter, Taylor cites Calvin, whose view was that, due to our depraved state, God does literally everything necessary in order to bring about our salvation and we contribute nothing of any sort. Therefore, 'the power of God doesn't operate through various "sacramentals", or locations of sacred power which we can draw on. These are seen to be something which we can control, and hence blasphemous'.[92] Rather, the only thing we can do is to throw ourselves upon God's mercy in faith that he will save us.

The upshot of all of this is, of course, a full-scale assault upon renunciative vocations such as monasticism and, in countries like England that felt something of the fullness of the urge towards Reformation, the abolition of these forms of devotional life and the destruction and despoliation of their habitations. This was all part of an effort to bring down, as it were, from that higher level, those who were deluded into thinking that their myriad acts of piety were efficacious in earning grace from God, and a corresponding desire to raise up those who had no higher spiritual aspirations because they had been till that point simply complacent in their empty trust in the higher types. Hence the multi-speed system becomes

[91] Cf. Ibid., pp. 75-76.
[92] Ibid., p. 79.

the one-speed system. In theory at least, ordinary life becomes the locus of spiritual meaning, whilst the higher vocations are seen as what they are: a shambolic and prideful delusion. Taylor summarizes:

> Consider the Reformers' attack on the supposedly higher vocations of the monastic life. These vocations were meant to mark out elite paths of superior dedication but were, in fact, deviations into pride and self-delusion. The really holy life for the Christian was within ordinary life itself, living in work and household in a Christian and worshipful manner.[93]

Clearly, this unease with and even hostility to the multi-speed system is still very much with us. The precise nature of it is often left unarticulated but it would certainly touch on the same themes: suspicion of legalism, hierarchy, the concept of borrowed faith as opposed to individual responsibility, superstition attached to certain sacramental practices, and so on.

This shift also relates a major theme in Taylor which has already been mentioned: that of the affirmation both of ordinary life and of the dignity and value of the individual. These things were formerly derogated, according to Taylor, within Christendom prior to the Reformation because the "higher" types were always seen to be superior in a fundamental sense, not merely as one expression of a sanctified existence but as the apex of spirituality. Thus, ordinary life, including any kind of emphasis on mundane realities to do with the body and materiality, was inevitably denigrated as second-class. The move to a one-speed system, therefore, was an attempt to smooth out the vertical nature of the multi-speed system and to put everyone on the same level. A drive towards absolute equality of status is arguably the key characteristic of secular western Modernity and this drive, so Taylor implies, finds its impetus in this moment early in the thirteenth century.

[93] Taylor, 'Modernity', in Heft, *Modernity*, pp. 22-23.

Why does the shift to a one-speed system constitute the breakdown of the alliance between the immanent and the transcendent? In itself it represents the move towards an overall higher spiritual state for society and culture, and this indeed was the intention of those involved in the reforming work. The problem with all of this, however, is the unintended effect, which is to take a multivalent religio-cultural situation, in which society straddled a spiritual topography with various different layers, and to flatten out that landscape so that it becomes merely flat and homogenous. The effect of this historically has clearly not been to raise western culture to a ubiquitously higher spiritual state. Perhaps this particular reform did not cause the breakdown of western Christendom but it certainly did nothing to stop it, and the secularism that we see around us today can be understood conceptually as directly related. This is what happens when the higher and lower types are equalized: not that the lower types are raised up, but that the higher types are pulled down. The previous synthesis of higher and lower constituted a mutually beneficial and balanced situation whereby the higher said more prayers and lived more spiritual and devotional lives; this was not possible for the laity and so, in some sense, the laity relied on the higher types to be the religious heart of the culture. In this sense, the higher types constituted a kind of sign and provocation to the laity to not forget their vocation to holiness and devotion *as laity*. This is conceptually related to the idea of the bishop or priest as a kind of *altera Christi*: a living sign of Christ among us. It seems clear that, when these signs are removed, what is left is not a holy laity, but a secularized laity, with no impetus, example or provocation.

The conclusion of this process appears to have been therefore that the immanent-transcendent continuum was bisected, and permission to occupy the latter denied. Therefore, all people began to live more and more on that immanent level.

2. Disenchantment

This leads on to a discussion of disenchantment, which is, of course, a Weberian notion that has enjoyed extremely wide currency.[94] This relates to the shift away from an enchanted cosmos in which not only objects but the whole structure of society – including the economic, political and cultural – were seen as charged with spiritual meaning and power and related in some kind of fundamental way to the notion of the sacred, to a universe that was seen as governed by mechanical laws of nature and which exhibited nothing of these spiritual qualities.[95] Again, this links with the overall thrust because disenchantment incorporates a separation between the realms of the immanent and the transcendent. Upon disenchantment, the transcendent may very well exist but it is not infused within or connected to the immanent. Disenchantment creates a situation in which, because the transcendent is no longer visible or accessible within the immanent, the former becomes a kind of optional extra: out of sight, out of mind.

Taylor summarizes this shift by claiming that, in the early modern period, 'we moved from living in a cosmos to being included in a universe'.[96] There are several strands to the "cosmos" model, namely that it was seen as meaningfully structured, bounded, and a reflection of the orderly mind of God. Deriving from Aristotelian and Platonic cosmological models,

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[94] It is to be noted that Taylor employs the phrase "disenchantment" in his own way in *A Secular Age*. In *Sources of the Self*, he explores the notion of the former in a more straightforward, Weberian sense, defining it as 'the dissipation of our sense of the cosmos as a meaningful order' (Taylor, *Sources*, p. 17). But his treatment in *A Secular Age*, although owing something to Weber clearly, is distinct.

[95] I have decided to include in this section both a description of the shifting metaphysical picture along with that of the way that individual objects lose their spiritual charge. It may be that the former is not traditionally associated with the phrase "disenchantment", however, it seems to me to be all part of the same process, and the division between objects and the universe smacks of the kind of modern dualism that would have been alien to a pre-modern sensibility.

[96] Taylor, *Secular*, p. 59.

> This kind of cosmos is a hierarchy; it has higher and lower levels of being. And it reaches its apex in eternity; it is indeed, held together by what exists on the level of eternity, the Ideas, or God, or both together – Ideas as the thoughts of the creator.[97]

As creatures of the creator, we come to see ourselves as part of an orderly and bounded universe which coheres elegantly with belief in a meaningful history, set in motion and guided by God himself. This includes not just the planetary spheres, but the angelic hosts and other creaturely realities inhabiting a descending scale such that 'the whole sweep of cosmic-divine history can be rendered in the stained glass of a large cathedral'.[98]

Perhaps the most significant pre-modern theological articulation of this "Great Chain of Being" is Pseudo-Dionysius' twin treatises the *Celestial Hierarchies* and the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchies*[99] (later radicalized through a more Christological lens in Maximus Confessor's *The Church's Mystagogy*),[100] on which Rowan Williams comments helpfully:

> How does God share his life with creation? […] the structures of participation whereby heavenly and earthly realities transmit the divine life down through a descending scale, a hierarchy, at the summit of which stand the supreme angelic orders of seraphim, cherubim and "thrones". On earth, "our hierarchy" of bishops, priests and deacons reflects the heavenly order and, in the liturgy (monks, laity and catechumens; Dionysius share the Neo-Platonic passion for triads everywhere) a symbol of the "intelligible realities" above.[101]

There was, therefore, a felt interconnectedness between all orders of culture and society. However, there was a major problem. At the end of his masterful survey of the medieval picture of an interconnected cosmos through its depiction in early forms of English literature, C.S. Lewis comments that, although 'few constructions of the imagination

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[97] Ibid., p. 60.
[98] Ibid.
[99] Cf. Pseudo-Dionysius, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. by Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), pp. 143-259.
[100] Cf. Maximus Confessor, *Maximus Confessor: Selected Writings*, trans. by George Charles Berthold (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), pp. 181-225.
[101] Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to St John of the Cross* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2014), pp. 119-120.

seem…to have combined splendour, sobriety, and coherence in the same degree, it nevertheless had one serious defect; it was not true',[102] or at least not true according to a particular modern construal of truth, as Lewis goes on to point out.[103]

Therefore, Taylor continues, in contrast to the harmonious and elegantly interlocking picture of descending spheres of a God-infused cosmos, we find ourselves, 'partly as a result of the scientific revolution',[104] inhabiting a universe which has a certain type of impersonal order 'exhibited in exceptionless natural laws'[105] which do not seem to relate to an overarching intelligence or eternal principle, nor do they convey (at least *prima facie*) any sense of meaning on a human level. Further, it is not bounded in the same way, but infinitely vast: 'Our planet, our solar system is set in a galaxy…Our origins go back into the mists of evolutionary time, so that we become unclear as to what could count as the beginning of our human story'.[106]

The shift towards a "universe" model of the cosmos has clear metaphysical implications. The metaphysical shift can be concisely summarised by describing a movement away from a metaphysical model that emphasized participation of the cosmos in God, in which God was understood as immanent to and transcendent of the creation, to one which increasingly saw God's relationship to creation, in a quite literal way, as that of a craftsman to the object created – William Paley's "watchmaker" being the obvious paradigm example here. In this model, God is not immanent to his creation any longer (at least not necessarily so), nor is he transcendent, but he is simply disconnected. Following Paley, therefore, the way is paved

[102] C.S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 216.
[103] Ibid., pp. 216-223.
[104] Taylor, *Secular*, p. 60.
[105] Ibid.
[106] Ibid.

for the rise of modern apologetics, which, in many of its forms argues for a similar metaphysical picture: implicitly assuming that *being* is a sort of neutral space which we can take for granted (this being a fundamental capitulation to the ontology of secularism), it searches for traces of divine handiwork so that the existence of a god who is external to creation can be proven. These types of apologetic arguments are doomed to failure, of course, because no such being exists, and, if it did, it would certainly not be the God of Christianity. In any case, it is clear that the bifurcation of creation into the realms of the immanent and the transcendent in the process of disenchantment is of a piece with the story that I have been outlining throughout this section.

I noted above Taylor's interest in the "background conditions" of belief, as when he says, for example, that his 'target is our contemporary lived understanding; that is, the way we naïvely take things to be'.[107] This is important because the shift in background conditions relates to the process of disenchantment.

Beginning from the modern view, therefore, Taylor outlines a bounded understanding of the relationship between minds and their environment: in the modern view, human beings have minds understood as bounded, "inward spaces",[108] and "meanings" inhere in minds. Objects in the world, therefore, only have meanings insofar as we give those meanings to them. In other words, the only "meanings", in that sense, in the universe exist in the human brain.[109] Objects in the external world, according to the modern view, are inert except when affected by natural processes. Nature and objects do not *mean* or *intend* anything for us.

[107] Ibid., p. 30.
[108] Ibid., p. 31.
[109] I am not aware that Taylor discusses whether or not animals apart from humans could be included in this, apart from to say: 'Thoughts, etc., occur in minds; minds are (grosso modo) only human' (Ibid.).

Taylor outlines how the pre-modern, enchanted world differs from this. Firstly, all swathes of people, including elites, five-hundred years ago believed (in this naïve sense) in a cosmos which is filled with spirits, good and bad, including Satan, demons, angels and departed saints. These do not violate the modern idea that meaning only exists in minds because these entities are in some way recognizable as agents, sharing much in common with the way humans understand their own existence: they are conscious, they *think* and intend things, they do things on purpose, they have some kind of tangible or intangible bodily or spiritual presence and so on. In keeping with Taylor's broadest thesis, the pre-modern world did not just include these explicitly Christian notions, but also made room for preaxial notions of the supernatural: for example, alongside Satan and demons, we can also include 'spirits of the wood, which are almost indistinguishable from the loci they inhabit'.[110] And conversely, of course, we have the notion of relics and pilgrimages to particular places, which were seen as loci of spiritual power, miracles, healing etc. Many today (include this author) would want to dispute whether the latter are best described as preaxial hangovers which illegitimately perdure into the postaxial, Christian age, and were rightly expunged by more orthodox types; but it must nevertheless be admitted that the notion of, for example, certain trees or woods as haunted by particular spirits or other entities certainly fits within the preaxial, pagan paradigm. This illustrates again that it is hard to disentangle the pagan and preaxial from the genuinely Christian and axial, and shows the plausibility of the claim that this tentatively-held equilibrium and its dissolution resulted in, firstly, the Reformation and the events leading up to it, and, secondly, the modern, secular age.

[110] Ibid., p. 33.

Related to this point, the second major difference between the premodern and modern naïve view is that, in the former, objects and things were held to possess meaning and power, whereas in the latter they do not. Examples given are the relics of the saints, objects or items of clothing associated with them in some way, pieces of the true cross, candles blessed at Candlemas, and so on.[111] Again, relating to the broader point: how to disentangle the pagan and preaxial from the genuinely Christian and orthodox in this matter? If the list just given were the only one under consideration, it would indeed be easy to dismiss such an understanding as mere paganism with no place in orthodoxy Christianity (as, of course, the Continental Reformers did, and as many do today). But there are, at least, two significant caveats from a theological perspective.

Firstly, Taylor mentions, among objects which were seen to be endowed with supernatural power, the Host. And, without wanting to get distracted here by Eucharistic controversy, it is at least a complicating factor that the majority of Christian theologies of the Eucharist throughout history have attributed some kind of "meaning" (in Taylor's sense) to the Eucharistic elements after consecration: these are held to "become" or "to be" the body and blood of Christ. If this is true (in whatever sense), then these objects must possess some kind of intentionality, spiritual power or curative properties. Whatever they are (unless one is a bare memorialist, or possibly some kind of receptionist who does not associate the elements themselves with the spiritual power wrought through the Eucharistic

[111] Ibid. Another way of seeing this, which I consign to a footnote for fear of digression, is that articulated by Peter Harrison, who argues that biblical exegesis underwent a paradigm shift as a result of the rise of natural science: that shift consisted of a hermeneutical "reading" of creation in the light of the meanings given to it by Scripture to an understanding of creation as the result of natural processes, denuded of spiritual depth. Nature goes from being a book that can be read in the light of Scripture and in terms of the meanings inherent within it by virtue of its being created to that of a realm that can be investigated and ultimately instrumentalized for the benefit of humanity. I have already mentioned quite a lot of this of this in my introduction and it all elides elegantly, in my view, with the story that Taylor is telling about Modernity. Cf. Peter Harrison, *The Bible, Protestantism, and the Rise of the Natural Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

liturgy but acknowledges Christ's presence in a more ethereal manner), they are not *just* objects in a series of objects, like the other things that we come into contact with all the time. The point is that, although some modern Christians (of the more Protestant variety) might want to reject the pre-modern view of the charged nature of the cosmos, we would still have to reckon with the notion of the Eucharistic elements: if the Eucharist is *only* a memorial, it is easier to repudiate the supposedly pagan elements of the premodern worldview when it comes to objects and meaning; if the Eucharist is something else, it is far harder to throw out, root and branch, the latter. We can see here why it is that the Eucharist takes on such a significance in the broader discussion about secularism and its ontology, and hence why I will come back to the issue later on: the bread and wine, being a set of charged objects, potentially constitute an objection to the ontology of the secular order. Again, if the elements are a mingling of the transcendent within the immanent, the orders, as it were, of grace and nature, then the disenchanted reading of all objects and matter as inert and unintentional comes under significant scrutiny.

The second point is that the New Testament, when it comes to objects, seems to assume a straightforward, pre-modern, "enchanted" conception. This can be illustrated in multiple passages: John 9:6-7 in which Jesus mixes mud with saliva and rubs it into the eyes of a blind man, telling him to go and wash in the Pool of Siloam in order to bring about his healing; Acts 5:15-16 in which it is implied that Peter's shadow carried some kind of curative power; Acts 19:12 in which the miraculous power that God wrought through the apostle Paul was manifested at the mere touch of his handkerchiefs and aprons, which are also said to have possessed apotropaic capacities; 1 Corinthians 11:28-30 in which the apostle Paul says that, as a result of the unworthy reception of the Eucharistic elements, many of the Corinthians have become unwell and some have even died. We might also add to this list Luke 8:46 in

which Jesus knows that the woman with the issue of blood has touched the hem of his garment because he perceives that power (*dynamis*) has come out of him. The grammatical make-up of this statement implies that it was not Jesus' intention or action that healed the woman but that it was the direct result of her touching (in faith, admittedly) an item of his clothing. In other words, the clothing itself (by virtue of touching the body of Christ) was charged with power, which was *taken* out of it.

All of this is not to say anything other than what has already been outlined: the preaxial, pagan notion of charged objects and spiritual possession is not easy to disentangle from the genuinely Christian and postaxial.

Ecclesiologically the Anglo-Catholic, Roman Catholic and Orthodox perhaps have fewer problems with these notions. The evangelical, Protestant or Reformed Anglican, however, may need to reckon with both the weighty history of Eucharistic theology and, perhaps more significantly, the views of the writers of the New Testament, in which some objects clearly possess spiritual intention and power. If it is assumed that Scripture is inspired and that the writers were not labouring under a misapprehension, it must be accepted that objects have the potential to be charged and intentional in these ways.

To summarize, therefore: *that disenchantment has happened* cannot seriously be questioned. How or why it happened is a more difficult issue. Suffice to note here, however, that Taylor's points about justification by faith and the increasing elite unease with supposedly pagan, magical and superstitious practices associated with priestcraft, all elide with a shifting metaphysical and cosmological picture, resulting in a turn against the material, including images, objects as locations and instruments of spiritual power, overliteralized and corporeal understandings of Eucharistic transubstantiation and

inappropriate usage of the consecrated elements, as in the famous Corpus Christi parade and semi-pagan rituals such as the beating of the bounds.

Taylor rightly mentions several times Eamon Duffy's *The Stripping of the Altars*,[112] which is a powerful evocation of the non-linear transition from a Roman Catholic to a Protestant and Reformed, Anglican England over the course of about two-hundred years from 1400-1580. Duffy's argument is that the Reformation in England was indeed an almost entirely elite-imposed project of religious mobilization that took a lot of time and energy to succeed in its aim of banishing all elements of ostensible popery in this nation, and, indeed, only partially succeeded. Again, this powerful, historical argument elides seamlessly with various aspects of Taylor's narrative.

In the English Reformation, we can document, therefore, an explicit and intentional move toward a disenchanted view of religious doctrine and ritual. One of the clearest resources for seeing some of this is the transition in liturgical assumptions in the rite of baptism from the Sarum Rite, to the early 1549 Book of Common Prayer, to the revision of 1552. Martin Bucer, Protestant exile from Germany and Regius Professor of Divinity at Cambridge at the time, was asked by Thomas Cranmer for a Reformed critique of the 1549 prayer book. The points that he made about the changes in baptismal liturgy are pertinent: Bucer emphasized, amongst other things, that the exorcism of the candidate for baptism was not necessary, that the apparently superstitious aspects of the ceremony like anointing the hands with oil should be scrapped, that extra-biblical elements such as salt, bread, candles and consecrated water should be abolished, that pains should be taken that all in the Church should be able to hear the whole of the service by moving the location of the

[112] Cf. Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400-1580* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005).

baptism to the inner body of the Church, and that the notion of proxy faith should be removed (or at least complicated).[113]

It seems that at this point in England the Taylorian naïve framework that accompanied the pre-modern worldview was undergoing a dramatic shift. This shift, already precedented in Regius professors like Martin Bucer and Peter Martyr (his equivalent at the time in Oxford), would come to be applied with radical consistency to aspects of liturgy and theology. And we can see the beginnings of this with Bucer's insistence that the objects previously used as channels of spiritual power in baptism – salt, bread, candles, water – should be scrapped altogether, and in his downplaying of the previously ubiquitous importance of exorcism. Again, all of this is congruent with Taylor's analysis: namely, that belief in the spiritual power of objects and even in the interpenetration between the spiritual and natural realms were downplayed or even renounced as idolatrous. Further, Bucer's anthropology conveys a parallel shift characteristic of the Reformation in general: the individual responsibility of everyone for his or her own faith, hence the notion of everybody being able to hear the whole of the service in the vernacular, or the problematization around the notion of proxy faith. One of the fascinating aspects of Taylor's work is that it implies that these kinds of theological and liturgical battles, although being fought at a very sophisticated level academically, nevertheless are also characterised by an incommensurability between different background assumptions or pre-ontological frameworks possessed (broadly speaking) by Protestants and Catholics and, further, that it is these *frameworks* that are (or were) the real issue at hand, and not the individual controversies themselves.

[113] Cf. Martin Bucer, *A Review of the Book of Common Prayer*, trans. by Arthur Roberts (London: James Nisbet and Co, 1853).

Again, it seems that the English Reformation gives us a clear example of the tension inherent within the Axial equilibrium, and the delicate balance between the immanent and the transcendent. Within the argument of this thesis, therefore, the playing down of the aesthetic element within the baptismal liturgy is indicative of the creation of a framework in which there is an aperture between the two poles rather than a spectrum or a continuum in which both concepts are related.

To summarize therefore, disenchantment in *A Secular Age* relates to the process whereby the cosmos picture of reality turns into the universe picture and, in congruity with this change, meaning becomes confined to the human mind and matter becomes inert. Related to this, disenchantment also includes the notion that individual instances of creation are no longer spiritually symbolic or charged with ethereal power, but are merely part of a machine-like natural system, and it encompasses the nascent Protestant paranoia over the use of images and objects in the worship of the Church. In its most concise form, one can say that disenchantment is simply the removal of God from his creation, and the erection of a hard distinction between him and it: God may create it, but he does not inhabit it. Metaphysically this is the distinction that makes possible the secular realm, for without it no such thing could be conceived.

3. Times and Time

Related to the larger concept of disenchantment is that of the differently lived and experienced notions of time. This is an especially opaque concept for modern people. Why is this? It seems easier, somehow, to conceive of an enchanted universe in which, say, objects and animals have consciousness, and angels and demons exist, than to recreate an entirely different sense of the experience of time. The latter is more abstract and harder to

imagine. For this reason, it is all the more crucial to try and get a reasonable understanding of the change and its significance.

One of the uncontroversial phenomenological statements of *A Secular Age* is that in Modernity 'time like space has become a container, indifferent to what fills it'.[114] This is an allusion to Walter Benjamin's "homogenous, empty time".[115] There may be certain exceptions (of which more below) but it is clear that even these do not amount to a fundamental difference in the contemporary experience. Time in Modernity is very simple: it is just a succession of moments – one following another – which are filled with events, productive or unproductive, and happenings. Time is, therefore, often conceived of in an instrumental sense because it lacks its own inherent meaning or telos: "time is money" is an unremarkable and commonplace axiom of Modernity, implying, as it does, that time *spent* (another economic metaphor) engaged in non-profitable activity could have been used better in securing some kind of pecuniary benefit.

Taylor makes it clear that pre-modern time is multivalent. Take, for example, the notion of "Carnival", which closely relates to the above conception of the hierarchical cosmos. It is widely known that Christendom in the medieval period would stage observances that suspended and overturned the normal order of things: 'For a while, there was a ludic interval, in which people played out a condition of reversal of the usual order. Boys wore the mitre, or fools were made kings for a day; what was ordinarily revered was mocked, people permitted themselves various forms of licence, not just sexually but also in close-to-violent acts'.[116] What was the purpose of all of this? Taylor proffers that it was a type of

[114] Taylor, *Secular*, p. 58.
[115] Ibid.
[116] Ibid., p.46.

"anti-structure", an inherently felt need within a highly ordered and hierarchical society like medieval Christendom, to release, from time to time, the mounting tension. Although there are various theories as to what purpose was served by the notion of Carnival, Taylor mainly grants credence to the supposition that such observances operated like a kind of safety valve to let off steam: 'The weight of virtue and good order was so heavy, and so much steam built up under this suppression of instinct, that there had to be periodic blow-outs if the whole system were not to fly apart'.[117]

The disturbing aspect of this for moderns, however, is not just that people need to let off steam once in a while (indeed, we retain that colloquialism today and understand what it means) but is the implication that this kind of 'complementarity, the mutual necessity of opposites…of states which are antithetical, can't be lived at the same time'.[118] This might imply, therefore, the postulation of both a world and a cosmos which needs *both* order and chaos, 'in which we have to give place to contradictory principles'.[119] Anti-structure is closely linked to the multispeed system described above, and is, of course, antithetical to the values embodied by Reform. On the former system, not all individuals can live consistently holy lives with no breaks or deviations, and so an arrangement grows up whereby they are helped out by others who can (or at least who can focus on it as a vocation) *and* by the occasional releasing of tension through Carnival. Society and individuals, on this view, need a break, and cannot live consistently in one mode; and this not just in terms of the need to recover physical energy, but additionally to be allowed to slack off when it comes to religious observances and even, every once in a while, to indulge

[117] Ibid.
[118] Ibid., p. 47.
[119] Ibid.

in illicit activities that would be unacceptable at other times. And the last word of that sentence is key: it is the *timing* that makes this activity licit or illicit, and not just because it is agreed upon that this slot of time will be used for such-and-such an activity: the time itself – its metaphysical quality – is different. Differentiation and equilibrium are, therefore, built into the very fabric of society and into the notion of time.

Anti-structure and Carnival are possible, therefore, only because the pre-modern world had thoroughly different notions of time to the modern. In our way of looking at things, religious or secular, it does not matter at what point one commits an unspeakable act; rather the matter of importance is *that one did it* and how one should be punished or make amends. The pre-modern view is different because it implies that different acts count differently at different times (i.e. whether it is Carnival time or not). Taylor identifies Carnival as one of the "higher times", which are a way of reordering normal time (or what he refers to as "profane time"). Higher times introduce "warps" and inconsistencies into regular time-ordering and situate themselves more closely to other higher times regardless of chronological relationship. He gives the example of the sacrifice of Isaac, which is closer in time to the crucifixion of Christ than it was to the day before the sacrifice because the 'two events were linked through their immediate continuous places in the divine plan'.[120] Or, to give another example, Christmas Day in the year 1500 is closer to the original event of the birth of Christ than the former is to Midsummer's Day in the same year. The events *participate* in each other, which relates them to one another in a way that is more proximate than mere chronological succession.

[120] Ibid., p. 55.

Taylor goes on to relate this to three models of time that were then in operation, the interplay of which gave the medieval period its sense of multivalent chronology. The first type is Platonic eternity, in which the realm of the forms is a timeless realm, characterised by perfect immutability, which we ascend to by rising out of profane time. The second relates to the Augustinian notion of time as gathered up into an instant in God's eternity, which we access only by knowing God and participating in his life. And finally, he invokes a more general notion, held on a wider scale than his canvas of Latin Christendom, and developed not by philosophers but through folk tradition. This general notion relates to origins, which are held to be founding events that happened in "time out of mind" and which we can connect with by commemorating them and thus in a sense reliving them by ritual, renewing or rededication: 'The Great Time is thus behind us, but it is also in a sense above us'.[121]

All of this, of course, maps on to the concept of the Christian liturgical year: Christ's life and the events of the Old Testament that lie behind it are re-enacted and touched through liturgy, sacrament, calendar and various other means. And, to evoke Duffy once again, in the English Church this is all massively scaled down at the time of the Reformation, to the extent that the Corpus Christi parade and the Easter Morning drama of the *Quem Quaeritis?* are known now only to students of history. This is at least partly because the events of the Church year are no longer meant to metaphysically participate in the times that they commemorate. But, in a way perhaps analogous to the memorialist position on the Eucharist, they are simply observances and illustrations, only making present these events to the minds of those involved.

[121] Ibid., p. 57.

There is a different phenomenological vibe to all of this. Not only is time seen as inherently non-linear and, in a sense, multidirectional, but space and place, on this rendering, also have a similar sense of multivalence. If one reads the works of Abbot Suger, for example, one quickly picks up the sense that, for him, the experience of rendering and inhabiting the Gothic took on an *anagogical* dimension that united him to Christ in heaven and to particular events of the incarnation. Writing of the central west portal at St.-Denis, for example, Suger pontificates:

> Whoever thou art, if thou seekest to extol the glory of these doors,
> Marvel not at the gold and the expense but at the craftmanship of the work.
> Bright is the noble work; but, being nobly bright, the work
> Should brighten the minds so that they may travel, through the true lights,
> To the True Light where Christ is the true door.
> In what manner it be inherent in this world the golden door defines:
> The dull mind rises in truth through that which is material
> And, in seeing this light, is resurrected from its former submersion.[122]

All this to say that the notion of time as "gathered" is also linked to place and therefore to God's eternity. Times and places which are unhallowed or out of place are disordered and do not fit together in the way that they should. This time-out-of-joint concept is notoriously invoked by Shakespeare in order to indicate foreboding, as in, for example, the first scene of Macbeth in which foul and fair weather ominously co-exist seemingly at the behest of the witches.[123]

The main point therefore is to say that the empty, homogenous view of time as a container is the naïve experience of time in Modernity. The case is complicated by the exceptions that I will outline in the second chapter, but the fact that there are exceptions

[122] Quoted in Erwin Panofsky, *Abbot Suger on the Abbey Church of St.-Denis and its Art Treasures* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 23.
[123] On Shakespeare and the breakdown of the divine order, cf. Hubert Dreyfuss and Sean Dorrance Kelly, *All Things Shining* (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 2011), pp. 17-19.

does not change the central observation. Taylor believes that a unique aspect of secularization is that it has created a 'tight, ordered time environment'[124] so much so that time has come to seem to us like nature, like it could not possibly be any other way. Again, in keeping with his general thesis, this is not simply because we have done away with higher times but because, through a variety of cultural, technological and scientific changes, we have constructed a linear view of time. And there is no inherently obvious reason why a linear view of time is any more common-sense than a hierarchical or vertical understanding.

Drawing together this section with the previous two, therefore, we can see a developing picture of the shift away from a pre-modern, multidirectional, multilinear and multivalent picture of reality in which a hierarchical cosmos was imaged upon earth by a vertically ordered societal structure in which one being was linked to another and to all through a chain of reference, a process of life-transmission or spiritual communication, in which times, time, spaces and space were inherently motile and flexible, in which one could travel, as it were, from place to place and time to time depending not on literal geography and chronology but through a kind of liturgical participation which was not merely bounded by the specifically ecclesial. There is a different set of metaphysical assumptions underlying this view from that of the modern paradigm in which these sorts of motions are far harder to conceive: in place of the Great Chain of Being, we have what Taylor later calls a "direct-access society", which is a kind of radical horizontality whereby 'each member is "immediate to the whole"',[125] in which each member is the same distance from the centre – which is really no place at all – a perspective-less, egalitarian take on the way that we relate to society. Whereas pre-modern "access" was always mediated in the multivalent sense,

[124] Taylor, *Secular*, p. 59.
[125] Ibid., p. 209.

modern society offers the same kind of access to all (or at least aspires to).[126] This is clearly the long-term result, so Taylor argues, of the process of Reform that began through the levelling out of the multispeed system. The radical secular egalitarianism that we live with today is linked causally to the religious egalitarianism that was argued for by the Reformers. Similarly, in place of the flexible, motile understanding of time and space, we now see these things as inherently inert, capable of no type of "anagogical" transportation, but containers that must be filled with activities or items. This all relates us back to the notion of the separation of the immanent and the transcendent, as we see in each area the insistence on a type of flattening: in the religious and social there must be absolute equality between persons; in the ontological there cannot be multivalence but all must exist upon one level; and in the realm of time and space there can be no differentiation between different types but all is flat and empty.

Having sketched out, therefore, these broad-picture changes which constitute, as it were, a kind of silhouette of the secular, I will finish my outline of Taylor's genealogy by bringing in his contemporary anthropology in distinction to the anthropology that preceded it. This next section is, in other words, an outline of the effect of these broad changes upon the human person and how he or she inhabits the secular reality.

[126] This parenthetical caveat refers to the critique made by some commentators of Taylor's analysis here: namely that 'it is simplistic to associate hierarchical social relationships with premodern societies and egalitarian ones with Modernity' because 'egalitarian relationships between specific social bodies are perfectly compatible with hierarchical relationships within those bodies themselves'. Ian Angus offers a Marxist reading of capitalism as an example of this, for, on such a critique, even in a modern society, 'the worker and the capitalist are not "immediate to the whole" in the same sense at all'. Ian Angus, 'Recovery of Meaning?: A Critique of Charles Taylor's Account of Modernity', in Carlos D. Colorado and Justin D. Klassen eds., *Aspiring to Fullness in a Secular Age: Essays on Religion and Theology in the Work of Charles Taylor* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014), pp. 243-261 (p. 252). Given this point of nuance, we can still say that the basic shift that Taylor describes, from a ubiquitously hierarchical society such as the premodern to a society that aspires towards some kind of near-total egalitarianism such as the modern, is significant and constitutive of the modern identity in an important sense.

4. The Self

This is, again, a complex issue to simplify in so short a space, so I will focus on three of Taylor's neologisms from *A Secular Age*, all of which relate to his anthropology of Modernity: the buffered self, the immanent frame, and excarnation. Before that there are two more general points that need to be made in order to frame what follows.

The first point relates to his earlier work *Sources of the Self* and links it with *A Secular Age*. In the earlier work, he argued that human beings are constituted by "inescapable frameworks" which necessarily try and make the connection between the way that we live (or choose to live) our lives and a search for the good. The good can be understood in almost any way (i.e. non-religiously or with reference to a transcendent horizon) but the point is that we all seek it, however conceived, and that we orientate our lives towards it. This might sound obvious, but it is an important point to make because it mitigates against those who would claim that it is possible to live without such a framework and that therefore they are accessing some kind of neutral or objective take on reality in not constructing one. In *Sources of the Self* it is clear that Taylor has positivists or materialists in mind and those specifically who would posit that "religion" or "religious aspirations" are somehow super-added onto normal, or perhaps natural, human existence. Against this, Taylor argues that all human beings, and not just those who are "religious", orientate themselves to a specific end. The point is that we all have subjective values, which to some extent place us within a community of the likeminded and also orientate us in contrast or even contradiction to others who possess antithetical approaches:

> I want to defend the strong thesis that doing without frameworks is utterly impossible for us; otherwise put, that the horizons within which we live our lives and which make sense of them have to include […] strong qualitative discriminations […] the claim is that living within such strongly qualified horizons is constitutive of human agency, that

> stepping outside these limits would be tantamount to stepping outside what we would recognize as integral, that is, undamaged personhood.[127]

This argument relates to *A Secular Age* insofar as it is a kind of anti-subtraction story, applied to anthropology: we do not discover the real self in Modernity simply because we have sloughed off archaic and scientifically misinformed and superstitious doctrines related to it. Rather, we reconstruct the self according to new values or conceptions of the good. One of the central questions that we face in Modernity, therefore, is whether or not a post-Christian culture has the philosophical or meta-ethical resources for such a project of reconstruction, whether it can, in other words, retrieve from the detritus of a shattered Christendom, the remnants of the authentically human. I would tentatively suggest that we are seeing the outset of the failure of this project and, indeed, it seems that Taylor's sanguine disposition on the affirmation of ordinary life needs to be seen in light of this: universal human affirmation is only possible when it is undergirded by a Christian ontology (or similar) that unequivocally affirms the human as originating from, participating in and orientated towards the divine life; when this premise is removed, the human as conceived cannot survive, and boundary lines will be drawn based around something other than humanity's relationship to God. We already see this – as had been pointed out many times – through secular academics such as Peter Singer, who, because he grounds the concept of personhood in the ability to make rational decisions and the possession of self-consciousness, argues that the taking of life of the unborn, infants and the disabled is *de facto* not morally equivalent to the taking of the life of a rational and conscious human

[127] Taylor, *Sources*, p. 27.

being.[128] And, indeed, at the time of writing there is widespread concern at the liberalization of abortion laws in certain states in America, which threaten to allow terminations up to full term, the end of which appears to be the inevitability of state-sanctioned infanticide. In the latter case, the ontological status of the infant is dependent upon something other than a Christian anthropology which conceives of all of humanity as made in the image of God.

To return to the basic point then, anthropology is always constructed according to values which relate to the good, whether founded upon a Christian conception or upon a post-Christian, secular conception. There is no neutral anthropology.

The second point is simply a framing device for what follows. Whether or not we affirm them as generally positive or negative, it is unquestionably the case that the anthropological shifts that Taylor describes are in the direction of increasing individual atomisation. We have already seen how the pre-modern society, cosmos and calendar created a type of dynamic movement and flexibility between different strata and times and how, with the creation of new metaphysical frameworks, new pictures of societal organization and new homogenous understandings of time, this pre-modern "vertical" picture changes into a modern "horizontal" picture. In a similar way, the corresponding anthropological shift is towards an ever-greater sense of self as disconnected from nature and cosmos. Whereas the pre-modern individual was embedded in nature, one with it, vulnerable to it and very much a part of it, the modern individual is differentiated from it, a subject apart from it, and very much protected and distinct from it.

[128] Singer goes so far as to say, in regard to the abortion debate, that life probably does begin at conception but, because he does not believe that life *per se* must be protected, it is irrelevant to the ethical argument. Cf. Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

I have begun describing, of course, Taylor's notion of the "buffered self". This notion relates to the concept of disenchantment and is preceded chronologically by the "porous self". In our discussion of disenchantment, we saw that the realm of nature was populated by spiritual beings (Christian and semi-pagan) and was filled with objects that could convey or intend meanings. The porous self was related to this environment in an immediate sense, understanding no thick boundary between the two; it could be blessed by holy relics with spiritual power, but it could also be possessed by demons or cursed by black bile, which, as Taylor notes, did not just *cause* melancholy but embodied, indeed *was*, melancholy.[129] The porous self recognized no boundary between the individual's mind and the environment and, therefore, 'the source of (the porous self's) most powerful and important emotions are outside the "mind"'.[130]

Conversely, in Modernity we are buffered selves, who live with a much stronger sense of the separation between ourselves and our environment. Of course, this relates to the conceptual shift from universe to cosmos, as we discussed earlier, but it is also informed by an increasing confidence, on the part of human beings, that our world exists in such a way that it can be manipulated and controlled through scientific and technological advances: things are more understandable now and we are able to *utilize* nature. The latter becomes less threatening and so we are not vulnerable to our environment in the same way; we are not worried about demon possession or about the moral or spiritual implications of diagnosable illnesses or the emotional intentionality of fluids or objects. We are distanced from the world in this sense. Meanings are created by *us* and intended upon that which is

[129] Taylor, *Secular*, pp. 37-38.
[130] Ibid., p. 38.

outside of us. This is, as Taylor notes, 'a very different existential condition'.[131] But, due to this, our age is also characterised to some extent by a desire to recover connection with the external environment, whether this is through a frisson of the uncanny in watching horror films, that of the Romantic sublime in nature, various forms of environmentalism or attempts at simple living.[132] Suffice to say that the most effective attempts still fall short of the naïve experience of the porous self, as that of full immersion differs from dipping one's toe into the water. Thus, Taylor on Romanticism: 'The experience it evokes is more fragile, often evanescent, subject to doubt. It is also one that draws on an ontology which is highly underdetermined, and must remain so'.[133]

The second concept I want to introduce here is that of the "immanent frame", which relates closely to the notion of the buffered self. Again, this is a phenomenological category that describes the boundary between the individual and the outside world. In this case, however, the emphasis is on the unique way in which Modernity posits an experience of all structures of existence – political, scientific, social, educational, technological, even religious – as 'understood in their own terms, without reference to the "supernatural" or "transcendent"'.[134] This is to be distinguished from the pre-modern order in which all things were directly related to the sacred. In Taylor's own patois, even though the immanent frame is a perennial feature of contemporary existence, it is a possibility for us to "spin" it as open or closed to the transcendent. This, for Taylor, is the difference between the religious and non-religious, broadly-speaking: religion is that which is orientated, both now and beyond this life, towards a greater *telos* than the merely immanent. This is the decision,

[131] Ibid.
[132] Ibid.
[133] Taylor, 'Afterword', in Warner, *Varieties*, p. 304.
[134] Taylor, *Secular*, p. 594.

therefore, that we face in Modernity: things are not felt as instinctively sacred, but we can choose – indeed it feels at some level like we *must* choose – whether or not we go on spinning them in the one way or the other. Hence the stage is set for what Taylor goes on to describe as "cross-pressure", which is the existential experience of that very dilemma.

In *A Secular Age*, all of this is meant as another example of naïve experience: we are talking about the existential background conditions and not conclusions that follow at the urging of consciously constructed premises. This is an important point because many reviewers have misunderstood Taylor here. Again, McLennan's article seems deaf to the phenomenological point, claiming that it is not possible 'to have *two takes* within the immanent frame, one of which does not accept the immanent order *qua* self-sufficient', and this for the reason that Taylor has previously defined the immanent order as 'something that is unequivocally "self-sufficient"', and so must be 'understood on its own, without reference to interventions from the outside'.[135] Taylor himself elsewhere notes that similar misunderstandings of the immanent frame have been made: 'The central target…is the change in the conditions of belief…The crucial features concern whether an issue arises about belief, and if so, in what terms and in what context?'[136] It seems that those, like McLennan, who misunderstand Taylor here do not accept the distinction that he makes between those frameworks and conditions that are more or less ubiquitous within a given culture – that which is naïvely felt – and beliefs or takes on those prior conditions that *construe* them in a particular way. When McLennan talks about immanence as something that does not rely upon transcendental accretions, he does not acknowledge that the open take on the immanent frame is a decision to open oneself to the transcendent even though

[135] McLennan, *Unbelief*, p. 641.
[136] Taylor, 'Afterword', in Warner, *Varieties*, p. 307.

that is not the default phenomenological experience. The converse is also true: the decision to keep the immanent frame closed is a particular construal of the immanent frame that chooses not to allow for anything else beyond it. The point is, again, that to acknowledge a transcendent beyond is not the default opposition because either construal is a decision to interpret the immanent frame in a certain way. Taylor puts this clearly:

> This understanding (of the immanent frame) draws on the sharp distinction between "natural" and "supernatural" that became dominant in Latin Christendom. The sense of the immanent frame is that of living in impersonal orders, cosmic, social, and ethical orders which can be fully explained in their own terms and don't need to be conceived as dependent on anything outside, on the "supernatural" or the "transcendent." This frame can be lived as "closed" but also as "open" to a beyond, and the tension between these two spins runs through the multiplying gamut of mutually cross-pressured positions.[137]

As above, the emphasis is on the *possibility* of seeing the frame as opaque to the transcendent or on the equally non-necessary step of opening the frame to the latter.

The two terms defined above therefore, imply a certain dualism between the individual and the environment, a boundary between self and nature, *and* an existential demarcation between the self and the transcendent. This is, in essence, the meaning of the terms "buffered self" and "immanent frame". In both of these forms, we see analogues with the overall genealogical process of the separation between the immanent and transcendent orders. When looked at anthropologically, this separation undergoes a kind of radicalization which is constituted by the atomization of the individual: not only is the individual bounded and therefore distanced from a spiritual realm that might exist within nature or creation, but, precisely because the activity of mind is restricted to the human individual, the latter is, like never before, set apart from his environment: the human being may be an animal, but

[137] Ibid., pp. 306-307.

he is most certainly not *within* nature and constituted by it in the same way as other animals. He stands apart from it, and from his fellow man, and is therefore very much alone.

This leads us to the third term to be introduced in this subsection, "excarnation". Excarnation can be seen as a type of existential response to the increasing dualism between the immanent and the transcendent. The logic is consistent: if the immanent is a realm which does not participate in the transcendent, if it is merely "natural" or secular, then the transcendent realm alone is the proper domain of the spiritual. Therefore, since we do not experience the spiritual through the natural or material realm, religion and spirituality must take on an ethereal, or perhaps purely "spiritual", character. The latter can be characterised by a type of rationalism or a gnostic emotionalism. But, whatever form it takes, because it seeks the transcendent horizon and conceives of it as disconnected from the immanent, it will construe religion and spiritual practices as fundamentally disembodied. Excarnation, therefore, introduces a boundary *within the individual* between spirit and body and is, according to Taylor, profoundly at odds with the incarnational character of Christianity. It is the process, parallel to the Enlightenment promotion of instrumental reason, whereby '"enfleshed" forms of religious life' are replaced by 'those which are more "in the head"'.[138]

The issue here is not whether or not bodily experiences are valued highly or celebrated in general. Who could deny that secular Modernity celebrates the passions of the body? However, rather like a certain construal of Gnosticism, this type of celebration of the body is made possible precisely for the reason that the body is *not* seen as significant with regards to one's spirituality: the body is irrelevant to one's spirituality and therefore it can be separated out from ethical or devotional concerns. This heresy is at least as old as the New

[138] Taylor, *Secular*, p. 554.

Testament which we can see by looking at 1 Corinthians 6:13: 'Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food'. St Paul's response is, of course, to try to persuade the Corinthians that the deeds done in and with the body have immense spiritual significance.

Therefore, to return to Taylor, 'The issue is whether our relation to the highest…is mediated in embodied form'.[139] Does the body play a role, in other words, in mediating the presence of the divine, or is the divine accessed in a cognitive sense alone? Clearly, Taylor says that in the modern period, we lose the capacity to conceive of the body as a mediator between us and the transcendent. Thus, embodied human experiences such as feasting, sexual union, and liturgical practice are ubiquitously called into question and separated out from anything that might be considered spiritual. Again, we can see something of this in the *Book of Common Prayer* solemnization of matrimony. In the preface to the 1662 rite, the priest is to say that matrimony signifies 'unto us the mystical union betwixt Christ and his Church'.[140] But this remains opaque, especially when the three reasons for which marriage was ordained are enumerated: firstly, for the procreation of (Christian) children; secondly, 'for a remedy against sin, and to avoid fornication', so that those who marry may 'keep themselves undefiled members of Christ's body'; and, thirdly for 'mutual society, help and comfort that the one ought to have of the other'.[141] We can see something of Taylor's critique here because marriage, although good and a help in the Christian life, is not said to be *in itself* a mediation of the divine presence, an instantiation or construal of God's love and presence in the world. Rather, it is said to be given by God, not to enhance our relationship to him, but to help us to avoid the sin of fornication, to structure family life, and

[139] Ibid.
[140] *The Book of Common Prayer: The Texts of 1549, 1559 and 1662*, ed. by Brian Cummings (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 434.
[141] Ibid., p. 435.

for mutual encouragement and support. The view of the sexual union within marriage is remedial and pragmatic rather than unambiguously spiritual and inherently good.

This example, therefore, constitutes something of a shift from the age immediately preceding it. Taylor writes of that time,

> In the (for me crucial) case of Pre-Reformation Latin Christendom, there were the specifically Christian celebration of the Mass, the rituals of the liturgical year, like Candlemas, and "creeping to the Cross" on Good Friday; the Christian rites of passage; a new sexual ethic; an ambivalent attitude to war; a definition of the "corporal works of mercy" institutionalized in the life of certain religious orders. And then, of course, there were a whole host of ceremonies and rituals which bespoke a pre-Christian origin, albeit somewhat transformed and integrated into Church practice.[142]

He also notes, 'individual and small group disciplines of prayer, fasting, devotion; modes of marking time; new ways of living conjugal sexual life; and new works of healing and sharing, which could give bodily and at times public expression to the worship of God'.[143] And the point is, again, that the dramatic shift that becomes visible in the incipient decades of the Reformation (which perhaps had its antecedents in the preceding centuries) is indicative of a general move towards excarnation: material, liturgical practices are thrown out, largely through a campaign of vandalism and violent suppression, and Christianity takes on a less embodied and more rationalistic form with one's relationship to God accessed primarily through cognitive means.

One of the further implications of this, noted by Taylor, is that the ethical becomes separated out from the intuitive. Because modern culture is "theory-orientated" we can no longer trust intuitions of beauty or experience to guide us towards goodness: 'we can't accept that part of being good is opening ourselves to certain feelings: either horror at

[142] Taylor, *Secular*, p. 614.
[143] Ibid., pp. 613-614.

infanticide, or agape as a gut feeling'.[144] Again, this is not to say that in Modernity people do not care about their feelings or the experience of beauty, but it is to say that an ethical stance that is not explicitly grounded in a demonstrable rationale is subject to suspicion. One is here reminded of Pascal, who foresaw much of this and insisted that intuition provided an epistemological guide that operates on a far deeper level than reason. His voice has not been heeded in the modern age.[145]

To reiterate, excarnation, in erecting a boundary between the body and the spirit, locates things of religious significance on the side of the latter, thereby freeing the former to inhabit a purely secular sphere. The implication for this with regard to spirituality and ecclesiology is that material, liturgical and embodied practices become an irrelevance or, in many cases, a danger. This attitude is clearly seen both in the subtle liturgical shifts of the Reformation period and, more dramatically, in the iconoclastic frenzies of the same time. One of the principal arguments of my thesis is that this dualism needs to be understood in its historical context and critiqued thereby. As with Paul in 1 Corinthians 6, so here: the body is meant for the Lord and the Lord for the body. The spirit and the body belong together and must not be rent asunder. The implication for ecclesiology, as I make more explicit in what follows, is to question any account of the Church that would denude it of its historic and embodied practices.

Conclusion

We have seen in this chapter, therefore, a broad genealogical shift that, in every case, moved us towards a dualistic conception and experience of reality. The nature of this

[144] Ibid., p. 555.
[145] Cf. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. by A. J Krailshheimer (London: Penguin Books, 1995), pp. 53-56, 'Submission and Use of Reason'.

dualism was the separation of the transcendent from the immanent: we used to have a holistic experience of reality, with the individual occupying a position in an interrelated hierarchy, which included and exceeded the societal structure; it was an enchanted cosmos in which angels, demons and other spiritual beings and forces were active, and in which objects were at least potentially charged with meaning and intention; society and culture were experienced ubiquitously as related to and a participation in the sacred, which included the pre-modern sense of time as homogenous – thicker and thinner depending on the point in the liturgical year; the individual was deeply embedded in all of this, not possessing the kind of bounded agency that appears obvious to modern, western people, but porous to spiritual forces and transcendent reality.

The material and embodied nature of all of this was taken for granted and was central to Christian faith and practice. Due to the various philosophical, cultural and ecclesiological events of this period, however, the embodied nature of Christian practice came under intense scrutiny and, through the Reformation, metamorphosized into an excarnated religion that valued a disembodied, rationalistic approach and eschewed bodily practices as irrelevant at best and idolatrous at worst.

The concluding point of this chapter, therefore, is to see this excarnation in the light of the broader story that Taylor tells: it is the result of the breakdown of the Axial equilibrium which held together the Christian revelation and the pagan celebration of the world. "Reform", in attempting to equalize the spirituality of all, set off a process which would encompass far more than simply the equality of clergy and laity, a process which would, in time, transfigure the entire horizon of western culture, homogenizing and flattening out what had once been a shimmering, multivalent hierarchy. But the dualism that was characteristic of this process – the separation between the immanent and the transcendent

– was, and remains from a theological perspective, a false aperture. In the sense that it forces us to locate the spiritual on the side of the non-material, it is an aberration from the tradition of the Church. And to accept it is to accept the secular, because it is this distinction and the implicit evacuation of the spiritual from the embodied that makes the secular possible. As I will make clear in the next chapter, such a distinction (because it is a false distinction) will not hold forever or for all, and humans beings, both religious and non-religious, will discover the transcendent potential within the material, and so seek it out in various ways. The challenge for the Church is therefore, firstly, to reject any kind of excarnated ecclesiology within its own thought and practices, and, secondly, to utilize the aesthetic and embodied as an attempt to mediate transcendence into the world.

Chapter Two | Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* (2): Phenomenology of Modernity

Introduction

Having outlined a version of Taylor's genealogy of the secular in chapter one, this chapter will now provide a version of Taylor's phenomenology of Modernity. Again, it hardly needs saying that there is much more in *A Secular Age* than is possible to treat here, and so this is a selective phenomenology, which references the most relevant aspects of Taylor for my argument. This is not to ignore the points at which Taylor's account is open to question, which I will endeavour to show.

Although Taylor's account is far from a straightforward apologetic, my argument is that a strong apologetic can be constructed from its implications. What is this apologetic? In order to answer this question, I will pose one further: what follows phenomenologically from the genealogy outlined in chapter one? If mankind labours under the (tacit) misapprehension

that there is an absolute and common-sense separation between the realms of the immanent and the transcendent, then what kind of phenomenological picture results? The response is that the phenomenology we should expect upon such an understanding is one in which alternative transcendent experiences are frequently and widely sought as a result of a great sense of emptiness, ennui and, in many cases, loss. We should also expect a widespread feeling within the secular that it somehow lacks a soul, and a suspicion that that soul was not something purely fantastic and invented by "religion" in the superstitious past but that it is essential to life in the present and still sought with longing. We should also expect, given that traditional religious answers are no longer trusted, that that search for the transcendent would be conducted in a wide variety of ways. Versions of all of this are prominent themes in *A Secular Age*.

Taylor's phenomenology of Modernity shows us most foundationally, therefore, that the secular is unsuccessful in purging the transcendent from its midst. Using Taylorian categories, I begin this chapter by describing the essentially modern predicament of "cross-pressure" and how this impinges on our search for "fullness". I then argue that the kind of solutions that the bare secular offers are insufficient and that the individual within the secular, therefore, inevitably seeks out various methods of engaging with and experiencing the transcendent through "subtler languages" and "ambiguous spaces". I also take into account Taylor's notion of the "festive", which is perhaps a slightly subtler form of longing for transcendence but which nevertheless bears all the hallmarks of traditional religion in terms of communal gathering as a conduit for the ecstatic. I argue that all of these methods are constituted by the notion of the aesthetic not only because they are often orientated towards artistic or natural beauty but also because they are fundamentally embodied and so resist the secular desire for disenchantment and excarnation. I conclude by making the

argument that the secular cannot account for these experiences without either denying or impoverishing them. The phenomenology of Modernity, therefore, confirms and extends the argument made in chapter one: the aesthetic as a mediator of the transcendent is real and present, sought in many ways by the wandering soul. In recognizing this, theology and ecclesiology have an opportunity to respond.

Cross-Pressure

The identification of cross-pressure is perhaps the most pertinent phenomenological observation in *A Secular Age*; it is a thread that runs throughout the work and characterizes Taylor's own attempt to stand in a Jamesian 'open space where you can feel the winds pulling you, now to belief, now to unbelief'.[146] Cross-pressure can be explained by picking up on Taylor's concept of the immanent frame. The immanent frame, as has been discussed, is a naïve backdrop that can be spun as either open or closed. The nature of this situation means that, unlike the predicament five hundred years ago in which no such decision needed to be made, now each person must make those decisions on an individual basis. And not only this, but the nature of our age is such that one *has* to make such decisions with a degree of independence – from our parents, for example, or from schoolteachers – in order for them to *count* as authentic.[147]

This decision-making burden gives rise to cross-pressure. The latter is not necessarily a fixed position in which one is coerced to convert or apostatize but is precisely the situation of those who are caught between the two poles of committed belief and outright non-belief. Oftentimes these people want to hold on to a sense of those transcendent reference

[146] Taylor, *Secular*, p. 549.
[147] This argument in made in chapter thirteen of *A Secular Age* and is a central constituent of Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1991).

points that suggest the possibility of making sense of the most important facets of human existence – notably the ethical, aesthetic and relational aspects – whilst being simultaneously sceptical and cautious about the possibility of traditional religious structures. Cross-pressure is therefore often a type of non-belief, not in the sense of actively *not* believing, but in the sense of being *unable* to commit one way or another. This tension often results in (another of Taylor's neologisms) the "nova" effect in which 'we are torn between an anti-Christian thrust and a repulsion towards some (to us) extreme forms of reduction; so we invent new positions'.[148] One of these new positions is, for example, Romanticism, which retains the possibility of transcendence within nature but also forswears commitment to traditional religion. The nova effect, which is an elite level proliferation of outlooks, gives rise then to the "super-nova". The latter occurs because 'the nova has come to involve whole societies'[149] and must therefore manifest itself beyond the elite as a popular-level movement. This links us back to the supposition at the beginning of this chapter that the combination of a loss of traditional religious structures combined with the recognition of an inherent need for the transcendent would naturally result in a proliferation of alternative religious and quasi-religious solutions.

The concept of cross-pressure is closely related to a common feature of secularization theory which concerns religious pluralism. Thus Harvey Cox, when laying out his notoriously influential thesis in *The Secular City*, begins by claiming that 'secularization…occured only when the cosmopolitan confrontations of city living exposed the relativity of the myths and traditions men once thought were unquestionable'.[150] The important point here is not

[148] Taylor, *Secular*, p. 599.
[149] Ibid., p. 412.
[150] Harvey Cox, *The Secular City* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2013), p. 1.

necessarily the *means* by which people come into contact with other religions and worldviews (in Cox's argument, it is because of the rise of urbanization), but *that* it happens in some way. Because of this cosmopolitan melting-pot of diversity, therefore, secularization 'has relativized religious world-views and thus rendered them innocuous…It has convinced the believer that he *could* be wrong, and persuaded the devotee that there are more important things than dying for the faith'.[151] On a purely logical level, Cox's argument here is lacking: it is quite obvious that the existence of other types of religious beliefs do not trivialize or relativize one's own *per se*. Nor, it might be added is this situation unique to secular Modernity, as a superficial familiarity with the history of pre-modern apologetics from Justin Martyr to Thomas Aquinas would show. However, the force of Cox's statement comes in the recognition that the experience of significant differences creates a scenario in which the subjunctive mood becomes prevalent and disturbing: every person is a walking question mark, implicitly penetrating and interrogating one's most deeply held beliefs. By way of contrast, in the year 1500 every person inhabited more or less the same cosmological framework and so consistently affirmed one another whilst raising no possibility of serious alternatives.[152]

[151] Ibid., p. 3.

[152] A powerful and somewhat haunting example of the pluralistic, secular mindset reaching back, as it were, into the ubiquitously Christian, medieval past can be found in G.K. Chesterton's account of Thomas Aquinas' final confrontation with Siger of Brabant: having fought him over his rival interpretation of the correct interpretation of Aristotle's relation to Christianity, Aquinas was nevertheless deeply shocked by the implications of the encounter: '…in the abyss of anarchy opened by Siger's sophistry of the Double Mind of Man, he had seen the possibility of the perishing of all idea of religion, and even of all idea of truth. Brief and fragmentary as are the phrases that record it, we can gather that he came back with a sort of horror at that outer world, in which there blew such wild winds of doctrine, and a longing for the inner world which any Catholic can share' (G.K. Chesterton, *St Thomas Aquinas & St Francis of Assisi* (Thirsk: House of Stratus, 2008), pp. 70-71)). It was as though Thomas, due to his sanctity and prodigious intellect, could dimly foresee in Brabant's doctrine the whole deviant path of modern philosophy, from Descartes to Derrida, and its exile from the great edifice of catholic truth upon which he had laboured his entire life. He had some kind of intuition, as it were, of the secular, and he looked upon it with terror.

In the secular such a process is inverted so that confirmation becomes destabilization, and affirmation becomes interrogation. Cox's triumphalist assertion that relativization implies the rendering of religious worldviews innocuous is technically weak, but it does speak of the disturbing presence of cross-pressure in the face of multiple differences.

Nor is it easy to explain away this difference using some kind of positivistic framework that invokes progress or a greater level of sophistication: we might have different views of the world, but yours is clearly inferior because you have a regressive conceptual framework, perhaps related to your less economically or morally developed cultural background. Rather, in the secular age, difference exists everywhere at all levels of conceptual sophistication and status. Consider, for example, the Richard Dawkins-Rowan Williams dialogue, moderated by Anthony Kenny, that took place in the Sheldonian Theatre in 2012: here we see three highly educated, exceptionally intelligent and successful academics, occupying centre stage in the principal theatre of the city of one of the greatest and most prestigious universities in the world. All three of them have significantly different conceptual frameworks and worldviews. Dawkins is, of course, some kind of reductive materialist, who believes in the non-existence of anything beyond nature. Rowan Williams is a Christian priest who ascribes to the Apostles' and Nicene Creed in a reasonably straightforward way, and so clearly has significant room within his outlook for the supernatural. And even Anthony Kenny constitutes an alternative take because he occupies the place of the agnostic: though rejecting quite firmly the notion of the *Christian* God, he nevertheless does not rule out the possibility of the supernatural, or the existence of something beyond nature. Indeed, Anthony Kenny was a practising Roman Catholic priest until the point at which he felt that he had such difficulty with certain apparently absurd

doctrinal formulations, that he could no longer continue with integrity.[153] On one highly public and prestigious stage, therefore, we see three men of similar intellectual and academic stature (far surpassing what has been possible for almost all human beings who have ever lived), each possessing a worldview that contradicts the other two in some fundamental way. The unconvinced member of the audience listens to one of them speaking and finds himself swayed, thinking that this is surely the final word on such-and-such a matter, but then another of the participants opens his mouth and argues the contrary. This sounds convincing too. And then a third. And so on. The listener is caught in the aperture between belief, non-belief and un-belief, and this conjures up a healthy exposure to Taylorian cross-pressure.

Additionally, the phenomenon of cross-pressure can be compared to the problem of choosing or creating meaning. Bernard Lonergan argues that meaning-making is constitutive of human identity in at least three ways: firstly, through the individual and collective interpretation of experience; secondly, through man's transformation of his own environment; and, thirdly, 'there is man's transformation of man himself'.[154] Lonergan argues for a fundamental distinction between Greek, "classical" culture and Modernity. The former focussed on what is essential and universal in man, whereas 'modern science aims at the complete explanation of all phenomena, and so modern studies of man are interested in every human phenomenon'.[155] This is therefore a movement away from the universality of

[153] Cf. Anthony Kenny, *A Path from Rome* (Oxford: Oxford Paperbacks, 1986), and Anthony Kenny, *The Unknown God: Agnostic Essays* (London: Continuum Books, 2004).
[154] Bernard Lonergan, 'Dimensions of Meaning', in Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran eds., *The Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan Volume 4* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1988), pp. 232-245 (p.235).
[155] Ibid., pp. 240-241.

human phenomena towards the particularity of each and every individual person and, as such, creates a situation in which,

> […] comes the moment of existential crisis when we find out for ourselves that we have to decide for ourselves what we by our own choices and decisions are to make of ourselves, but the psychologists and existentialists have revealed to us our myriad potentialities without pointing out the tree of life, without unravelling the secret of good and evil.[156]

The problem here is obvious: whereas meaning was at one time prescribed to us by traditional authorities, now we are in a situation in which we have the freedom to choose. This freedom, however, is a purely negative freedom (to use Isaiah Berlin's terminology) and, as such, only presents us with equally plausible options and no criteria for decision. As Rowan Williams writes:

> Real choice both expresses and curtails freedom – or rather it should lead us further and further away from a picture of choice that presupposes a blank will looking out at a bundle of options like goods on a supermarket shelf.[157]

But that is the very sense that we are left with in Modernity: the lost individual unable to choose between differently appealing alternatives. The problem is one of criteria: because traditional authorities can no longer define for us that which we need in order to pursue the good life, we have no categories for choice other than the arbitrary whims of desire based on circumstances and need. We are under the tyranny, therefore, of our baser instincts and bereft of the possibility of any kind of higher aspiration. This experience of cross-pressure (to return to Taylor's vocabulary) unquestionably creates a particularly modern form of anxiety, such that, in choosing, I will preclude a better option and make a terrible mistake; preferable, therefore, to stick in the middle and try to take a little from both columns

[156] Ibid., p. 243.
[157] Rowan Williams, *Lost Icons: Reflections on Cultural Bereavement* (London, England: Continuum Books, 2003), p. 38.

without committing fully to either. But this middle position itself will be limited, precisely as a result of a lack of commitment: like the man who is pursued by too many eligible women and, because he does not want to give any of them up, marries none and remains a bachelor.

Aside from this anxiety, another implication of the phenomenon of cross-pressure is that, in this ramification of options, the possibility of rational analysis is problematised. As Lonergan writes,

> The effort to understand is the common task of unnumbered scientists and scholars. But judging and deciding are left to the individual, and he finds his plight desperate. There is far too much to be learnt before he could begin to judge. Yet judge he must and decide he must if he is to exist.[158]

The issue is, therefore, that any ultimate decision will always have a sense of provisionality, a sense that, with further study or a broadening of interests, one will be better informed. This relates to the redirection of sources of authority away from the priestly and philosophical to a dazzling range of ever-ramifying specialists, all of whom have their own interests, priorities and contradictory viewpoints. Interesting questions are raised thereby about the (perhaps hidden) role of tradition in Modernity, but this observation also implies that the phenomenological approach of Charles Taylor could be that which is most free of intellectual clutter: unable to reason our way to satisfactory conclusions, perhaps there are intimations of truth in our *experience* of the secular as opposed to our analysis of its claims to rationality.

There is a distinction to be made here between the already mentioned aspiration, on the part of Taylor, to stand nobly in the Jamesian "open space". This is the attempt not just to

[158] Lonergan, 'Meaning', in Lonergan, *Works*, p. 244.

understand the opposing opposition but to 'actually feel some of (its) force'. [159] And the point of doing this is to increase our levels of intellectual and cultural empathy. In contrast, however, cross-pressure is a more general phenomenological atmosphere that is pervasive in the secular age, and it is to be distinguished because it is the default setting, as it were, of the individual in Modernity: one does not *choose* to feel this pressure; it is simply what happens to us as a result of living with the difference. It is a result of inhabiting the immanent frame with the possibility (and the responsibility) of spinning it one way or another. Again, the very existence of pluralism in such a culture reminds one, unless one is very isolated, that these choices are not obvious, arbitrary or held without any tension. As such, we can see the difference between the Jamesian open space, which is more of an intentional and existential inhabiting of difference, and the quotidian experience of cross-pressure, which is largely automatic.

I have shown therefore that cross-pressure is the ubiquitously experienced phenomenon of living with differences that, to some extent, destabilize our most deeply held beliefs. I have gone slightly further than Taylor, however, in arguing, following Lonergan, that this cross-pressure results in a peculiar kind of modern anxiety in which choice is ostensibly relativized and complicated. It is important to note that Taylor does not characterize cross-pressure in this way exactly. Perhaps Taylor would even see the phenomenon as one of the boons of Modernity: namely that religious belief is no longer coerced but is left to the conscience of the individual. In this way of looking at it, choice is good, and we need it if our lives are going to be meaningful rather than slavishly conformist. I have gone further than

[159] Taylor, *Secular*, p. 549.

Taylor in characterizing it in the way that I have, therefore, and, I will go on to argue that the anxiety which I describe is brought into sharper relief in the search for fullness.[160]

Fullness

Taylor begins his discussion of fullness by saying that he wants to focus on 'different kinds of lived experience'[161] rather than on "rival *theories*".[162] He is appealing once again, therefore, to a phenomenological analysis. He introduces the concept of fullness in the following way:

> 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.[163]

He then gives various suggestions for what these experiences might be like: they could be events which we find deeply moving, inspirational places or experiences that energize us, epiphanic breakthroughs like that of Bede Griffiths in which the sense of fullness 'unsettles and interrupts our ordinary sense of being in the world, with its familiar objects, activities and points of reference'.[164] The latter is particularly interesting because Griffiths characterizes it as an experience of the sacred breaking into ordinary experience through the beauty of nature.

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[160] It beyond the scope of this essay to say more on the subject of anxiety, but it is obviously the case that anxiety is not the preserve of Modernity alone, and that the Middle Ages knew of this experience. However, I would argue in passing that medieval anxiety and modern anxiety are very different things. The latter, as I have shown, is based on a breakdown of authority and an inability to make sense of human life because of a cross-pressured environment, whereas medieval anxiety concerning questions of ultimate significance was due to a belief overload, an immediate sense of impending judgment, the fear of heresy and witchcraft, and things of that sort. In Modernity, therefore, anxiety is based on a ubiquitous sense of doubt whereas, by contrast, in the medieval period, anxiety was predicated upon the presence of the sacred within all of aspects of life, and therefore something closer to immediate experience and certainty.
[161] Taylor, *Secular*, p. 5.
[162] Ibid., p. 4.
[163] Ibid., p. 5.
[164] Ibid.

Prima facie, anybody reading this would understand what Taylor is talking about: after all, who could deny that there are moments in life that seem to be more profound, significant, moving, and so on, than others? The important move that Taylor makes, however, is to say that these experiences point us towards a 'place…to which we orient ourselves morally or spiritually'.[165] That is to say, because these experiences carry a deeper sense of profundity than others, they become worthy of a deeper sort of attention which, in some sense, comes to characterize the whole identity of the person who has them. This is more than simply a desire to repeat pleasurable or enjoyable experiences but relates to existential questions around who we consider ourselves to be and what we consider our lives to be about.

Taylor contrasts the notion of fullness with that of "exile" or "ennui". This is the "negative slope" of existential orientation, where life seems to lose its focus and meaning, when the "place of fullness" is lost, or we are cut off from it, almost to the point at which it seems unattainable or non-existent. Unless we are punishing ourselves or inclined towards some kind of sadomasochism in which we intentionally inflict suffering upon ourselves, the refusal and avoidance of emptiness and suffering is a constituent (we might say healthy) part of human existence.

Again, the point is not simply that human beings have pleasurable or unpleasant experiences in life and that they seek the former and not the latter (as in a kind of utilitarian ethical theory); rather, it is that these experiences of fullness constitute something existentially significant about the human condition, and, therefore, we orientate ourselves towards them morally or spiritually. We see them as more than simply pleasant; more,

[165] Ibid., p. 6.

perhaps, than merely subjective. We start to promote them, advocate for them, praise them to friends or in public. This could go for the convert to Christianity who joins an evangelistic mission after encountering Christ at a prayer meeting or in a dream, but it could equally go for the atheist biologist or cosmologist who, because he sees frequently and powerfully such beauty and wonder in the complexity of animal life or in the vastness of the universe, occupies a public platform in order to share this experience with others and, in many cases, to advocate for its ostensibly attendant ontology. Dawkins, of course, fits this description, as do many of the "New Atheist" crew who, in various ways, suggest that forms of scientific knowledge and inquiry are superior alternatives to religious belief and practice. These experiences need not be evangelistic, but they do appear to imply some kind of hold upon objectivity that transcends the merely pleasant. And, further to this, the desire to persuade others seems to complement, or perhaps to complete, these convictions.

In addition to fullness and ennui, Taylor chronicles a "stabilized middle condition"[166] in which we have avoided exile/ennui but have not attained a complete grasp upon fullness. This is a situation in which life has some kind of meaning, perhaps through the goodness of marriage and family, a fulfilling vocation and some kind of positive contribution to human welfare, but in which it is not in constant (or even regular) contact with fullness. It could be that the believer feels that this middle way is right because, having once had the experience of fullness to show him the way, he now finds life tolerable as he inevitably draws closer to God through gradual growth in holiness and proximity to the eschaton. Taylor argues that it is essential for the person in the middle condition to remain in some sort of contact with the source of fullness, however oblique, so that exile/ennui can be kept at bay. It is also crucial

[166] Ibid., p. 6.

that the individual must move, however slowly, towards union with that source. This is important because, if the place of fullness is only experienced once and then all trace lost then the middle condition will be undermined: the initial experience of fullness can then be reinterpreted as a fluke or as a delusion. The middle condition is sustained, in other words, by intimations of fullness, the experiences of which do not need to match the initial contact.

Again, this might seem applicable more to the religious believer (particularly a certain type of western Christian) than to anyone else. But it can be applied quite easily to other scenarios that do not involve religious commitment. In literature, for example, a well-known archetypal malaise is represented by the characters Frank and April Wheeler in Richard Yates' *Revolutionary Road*.[167] This is the malaise of the wealthy suburbanite couple, who, having begun a life involving marriage, career advancement and affluence, feel a certain type of emptiness and longing for something "deeper" or "more profound". The malaise has nothing to do with religious belief or commitment but is orientated around a sense of disappointment with the attainment of previously attractive or lauded aspirations. Whereas the desire for these things may have constituted an intimation of fullness, in the acquisition of them, the hope of fullness is dashed, and another rival conception of fullness must take its place. *Revolutionary Road* is a particularly heart-rending example of a couple whose substitute conception of fullness is so hopelessly underdefined and inadequate that it eventually results in their complete destruction: seeking to move to Paris in order to pursue Frank's desire to do something more artistic or intellectual than his mundane office job, their vision of fullness becomes variously obscured and unbelievable so that their lives are

[167] Richard Yates, *Revolutionary Road* (New York: Little Brown Co., 1961).

overshadowed by a fearful ennui that puts them at odds with one another and shatters their relationship.[168]

Even though the middle condition may be unbearable for some, however, it is still true that 'there are surely many unbelievers for whom this life in…the "middle condition" is all there is'.[169] Living well, in this case, may involve admittedly less spectacular aspirations – family life, a good job, watching the football on Sunday afternoon with children, and so on – but these things in themselves are not insignificant (for obvious reasons), *and* to reject or curtail them in favour of some transcendent or salvific goal would be to exchange something tangible and real for that which is illusory and fantastic.

Taylor delineates, therefore, three different conditions with reference to fullness: the experience of fullness itself, the experience of exile as the negation of fullness, and then the middle condition, which can be understood in various ways. Taylor clarifies his intentions by saying that the reason he is describing things thus is 'to allow us to understand better belief and unbelief as lived conditions, not just as theories or sets of beliefs subscribed to'.[170] However, there is also an admission on Taylor's part that the 'description of this general structure of our moral/spiritual lives tilts towards the believer',[171] and this perhaps because the implication of fullness, on a phenomenological level, is better understood as an elusive transcendence that is more akin to what one would expect upon a Christian (or similar) view than on a materialist/naturalist. Indeed, upon the latter, why would there be any kind of

[168] One can observe a cruel irony in the casting of the film adaptation of *Revolutionary Road* in the twin leads Leonardo di Caprio and Kate Winslet. In James Cameron's *Titanic* several years previously, these two had embodied the high romantic notion of fullness found in deep and passionate erotic love, tragically wrested from their grasp. But *Revolutionary Road* puts paid to the notion that, had Jack survived the sinking of Titanic and eloped with Rose, they would have lived happily ever after.
[169] Taylor, *Secular*, p. 7.
[170] Ibid., p. 8.
[171] Ibid., p. 7.

transcendent aspiration of this type at all? Is it really explicable upon some kind of bare, evolutionary paradigm? Other animals do not aspire to fullness or avoid ennui.

From a theological and confessional perspective, it does appear to make more sense to explain the experience of fullness as the longing for the divine and transcendent than it does to look to some kind of reductive framework. Theologically this is simply a standard Augustinian anthropology. And, again, in my argument, the phenomenology does not need to be ubiquitously accepted: rather, it is offered to the reader assuming a common experience of life.

Additionally, even though I argued above that Taylor is not operating primarily as an apologist, there are still moments when one can agree with a commentator like Paul Janz, who, in his excellent engagement with Taylor, argues:

> […] while this goal is nowhere directly declared or defended, the indirectly but unmistakably conveyed message is nevertheless that belief in God, or "openness to transcendent sources," is by some distance the better or rationally more sound option for explaining the fundamental questions of human life that press upon us inexorably and with urgency: questions of moral sources, of human aspiration to "fullness," and of responsible human relationality in the world more generally.[172]

One such moment is in Taylor's delineation of the "place" of fullness, which he distinguishes, sharply, from the middle condition. Ultimately, Taylor does not allow that the middle condition can be coterminous with fullness, as passages like the following make clear:

> 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

[172] Paul D. Janz, 'Transcendence, "Spin," and the Jamesian Open Space', in Colorado, *Aspiring*, pp. 39-70 (p. 46).

> 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.[173]

Having previously allowed that the middle condition might be all that there is and that this is no insignificant thing, therefore, Taylor juxtaposes *that* assertion with a description of the unbeliever that implies that the place of fullness is always elusive. The very language of "place" itself implies a separation: there is a "place" of the middle condition and a "place" of fullness and they share no common territory. It is not unreasonable to conclude, therefore, that this is Taylor's view of the middle condition in the unbelieving mode: it will always be unsatisfactory, even if all aspirations are fulfilled. There will still be an emptiness, a fight against ennui, that must be driven back by a restless reorientation of one's desires: Alexander, upon having no more worlds to conquer, must now, to stem his tears, invent new ones. This is where the power lies in stories like *Revolutionary Road*: what do you do when you get everything you want and it is still profoundly disappointing?

The objection to such a description could always be that the reader simply does not connect with this vision of life, saying that he has everything he wants and feels no lack of fullness, or that he has most of what he wants and realizes that the rest is unobtainable and is content with that. But the point of the phenomenology as I advance it is based on a belief that it connects in general with lived human experience. Again, an analogue with fictional literature is not inappropriate here: it is a description of the way that things seem to the author, not a deductive argument from premises.

The reading of Taylor I am suggesting, therefore, is that the search for fullness, upon a purely secular paradigm, will not secure its desire but will either settle for what it knows is

[173] Taylor, *Secular*, p. 7.

not really fullness or continue that search in frustration. The middle condition is more bearable for the believer than for the unbeliever because the former hopes for ultimate union with the source of fullness whereas the unbeliever has no such consolation. The very existence of the desire for fullness in Taylor quite easily elides with the traditional Augustinian anthropological observation that the human heart cannot be satiated by anything except the eternal. Why would we need fullness if no such thing existed?

Flatness in Modernity

Continuing with my critique of the secular, therefore, I argue here that, not only does the secular not provide a sufficient answer to the problem of fullness, but that one of the characteristic experiences of the secular is of a kind of crushing immanence and flatness. People react against this in various ways, not least by breaking out of the closed spin on the immanent frame and creating new positions that seem to offer a less reductive account of human existence. The reason that people do this is because, as Taylor says, 'If the transcendental view is right, then human beings have an ineradicable bent to respond to something beyond life. Denying this stifles'.[174] And it is this stifling that is one of the unique constituents of western Modernity in its exclusive humanist mode.

It is important to clarify that transcendence here relates to the concept of "religion", which Taylor sees as ubiquitous in human culture with the exception of western exclusive humanism (and perhaps antique Epicureanism):[175] the transcendent is a horizon that

[174] Ibid., p. 638.

[175] Taylor notes that 'Epicureanism was a self-sufficing humanism' because, 'It admitted Gods, but denied them relevance to human life' (Taylor, *Secular*, p. 19). So, it may constitute a singular exception, although the ontological framework upon which it is based is completely distinct from modern secularism. And, in any case, Taylor is talking about the possibility of irreligion occupying a vast platform within culture and being "a widely available option" (Ibid.) rather than the preserve of a small elite, as it was in the case of Epicurus.

exceeds both the temporal moment of our earthly existence *and* concerns for material comfort, wealth, pleasure etc. The transcendent, though not denying the importance of the latter (which, as already mentioned, is one of Taylor's major points both in *A Secular Age* and elsewhere), orientates us beyond them to that which is ultimate. Therefore, when we live as though such transcendent concerns do not exist, we stifle that which is at the core of the human need, namely our ecstatic end.

Taylor elucidates this in one of his discussions of the buffered self. The buffered self has a certain attraction to it: it is anthropocentric and so it posits immediately felt human desire as of central importance. Additionally it provides 'a sense of power…a sense of invulnerability'.[176] Because we live now in a disenchanted world, we are no longer vulnerable to spirits or ethereal forces that would cross the boundary between us and them to do us harm. This is a maturation in which we take pride, as we grow beyond the childish belief in a supernatural world possessed of angels and demons. We contrast ourselves with the immaturity of the past and it evokes in us a feeling of superiority:

> Gibbon is an excellent example. The sense of invulnerability and distance from the unreason of the past finds expression in the cool self-possession, the "unflappable" tone in which the wild and disturbing antics of monks and bishops in Byzantium are recounted.[177]

Therefore, Taylor argues that this sense of prideful maturity relates to developing notions of Renaissance "civility" and "civilization" which '(inflect) the ideals of discipline, education, decorum, and good political order'.[178] We are thus related back once again to Taylor's main historical thesis, as we see in this an inflection of the drive toward Reform.

[176] Ibid., p. 300.
[177] Ibid., p. 301.
[178] Ibid.

Therefore the buffered self possesses an inherent attractiveness and emotional quality which is easily recognizable to the contemporary person. However, there is also a significantly negative side to the ostensible gains offered by the buffered self, and the reactions against it are one of the central features of Taylor's historical account: forms of pietistic Christianity, evangelicalism, Romanticism of various sorts, Nietzschean anti-humanism, post-modern nihilism, and so on.

The basic point here is that, although the buffered self creates a sense of security because it is cut off from the transcendent with its threats and demands, it does so at the expense of a deeper sense of meaning in life:

> I am thinking much more of a wide sense of malaise at the disenchanted world, a sense of it as flat, empty, a multiform search for something within, or beyond it, which could compensate for the meaning lost with transcendence; and this not only as a feature of that time, but as one which continues into ours […] Although we respond to it very differently, everyone understands the complaint that our disenchanted world lacks meaning, that in this world, particularly youth suffer from a lack of strong purposes in their lives, and so on.[179]

Some might object to this because Taylor overstates his case, saying that "everyone understands" this complaint. However, one must not read too much into his meaning here: he does not mean that everyone sees the force of the argument, but that, generally speaking, people understand that the eclipse of transcendent values leaves a significant gap in our sense of meaning. This gap has to be filled in some way if we are to avoid calumny. Many people think that this process is perfectly surmountable, and that to return to transcendence would be a grave error. But this is not to say literally that they do not understand the objection.

[179] Ibid. pp. 302-303.

Taylor takes this further by contrasting this sense of meaninglessness in Modernity with the inverse experience in an age such as Luther's: far from being a lack of meaning, there was rather an excess, an overriding and overbearing sense that one's everyday decisions and choices were of infinite and eternal significance. This could have been (and indeed *was* for Luther, at least) existentially debilitating.[180]

But what is this sense of the loss of meaning in Modernity? How can we describe it further? Taylor attempts this by identifying our 'actions, goals, achievement' as lacking 'weight, gravity, thickness, substance', and claiming that, 'There is a deeper resonance which they lack, which we feel should be there'.[181] Every action that we undertake has some kind of utility or purpose behind it: we know why we get up and go to work, for example, or dress and feed our children in the morning, or go to watch our team on Saturday afternoon, 'But we can stop and ask why we're doing these things, and that points us beyond to the significance of these significances'.[182] And it is at this point that we might realize that there is no answer to this meta-question. Beyond the utility of achieving certain pleasurable or otherwise desirable ends, there is no overarching significance to our actions. Any apparent sense of significance therefore begins to seem arbitrary, based on human will or luck, and, once the illusion has been exposed through tragedy, disaster or ennui, it is difficult to believe in it once again.

This phenomenon is, perhaps, particularly notable in economically prosperous cultures because our immediate needs and demands are easier to meet. Life expectancy is high, and death seems a distant prospect; poverty and ill-health are things that happen to other

[180] Ibid., p. 303.
[181] Ibid., p. 307.
[182] Ibid., p. 308.

people in other worlds. We have enough money to live and to buy everything that we want and need. And so,

> […] we can also just feel the lack in the everyday. This can be where it most hurts. This seems to be felt particularly by people of some leisure and culture. For instance, some people sense a terrible flatness in the everyday, and this experience has been identified particularly with commercial, industrial, or consumer society. They feel emptiness of the repeated, accelerating cycle of desire and fulfilment in consumer culture; the cardboard quality of bright supermarkets, or neat row housing in a clean suburb; the ugliness of slag heaps, or an aging industrial townscape.[183]

Again, this is all recognizable in various familiar literary archetypes which have enjoyed wide currency. For example, Brett Easton Ellis' terrifying portrait of Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho*[184] is a perfect illustration of the eclipse of meaning. Bateman is an intelligent, well-educated, successful, healthy, good-looking, wealthy banker with an attractive girlfriend and a vibrant social life enacted in the most opulent restaurants and bars in New York. But Bateman is restless, edgy, and his personality appears to blend in with that of those around him to the extent that his friends are at points literally indistinguishable from himself, dressing the same, looking the same, and enacting petty rivalries over whose business cards are more deftly rendered. In this scenario, not only does Bateman seek meaning in the trivial (such as spending hours each day toning his muscular physique) and in the taboo (having intercourse with various people who are not his girlfriend), but he moves beyond these things and begins to hire prostitutes so that he can ritually murder and dismember them, keeping body parts in his fridge and doing experiments on them, killing homeless people in the street, murdering stray cats, and so on. Ellis' depiction is horrific (far exceeding what would have been acceptable in the admittedly brilliant film adaption by Mary Harron), but the point of the gruesomeness is to illustrate the extent to which

[183] Ibid., p. 309.
[184] Brett Easton Ellis, *American Psycho* (London: Picador, 2011).

Batemen goes in order to try and find some kind of significance beyond the success and pleasure that he has already achieved and that has so manifestly failed to occupy and complete him on a deep level.

Another example of this sort of archetype would be the various first-person, thirty to fourty-ish male protagonists of the novels of Michel Houellebecq. What is particularly interesting about Houellebecq is the way that sexual relationships are depicted in these stories. The protagonists are always looking to these to provide some kind of meaning or solace to their otherwise humdrum existence. In Houellebecq's novel *Submission*,[185] for example, the central character François enters into a deep existential crisis because a sense of joy he found in a particular encounter with two prostitutes fails to produce a sequel. For François the fact of this failure has deeper significance than the simple lack of pleasure: it seems somehow to rob his whole existence of hope and meaning. Houellebecq's delineation of these scenes are of note because they always involve unusually detailed descriptions of the various relevant body parts, their movements, shapes, and so on. There is a sense here of the pornographic but not for the purpose of eroticism; rather Houellebecq wants to make it clear that these exchanges are mechanical; they are, as it were, a fundamental refusal of the transcendent.[186] A fruitless search for ultimate fulfilment is a touchstone in Houellebecq's stories: the characters often find sexual satisfaction through meaningful relationships, but those relationships are short-lived as the partners of the protagonists, for example, move away to Israel because of fear of Islamic anti-Semitism (*Submission*),

[185] Michel Houellebecq, *Submission*, trans. by Lorin Stein (London: William Heinemann, 2015).
[186] Having said this, I would not want to read Houellebecq simply as closed to transcendence; it would be legitimate to see these experiences as epiphanic of their meaninglessness and therefore indicative of the possibility of spiritual fulfilment, the residual melancholy expressing a desire for God and the transcendent realm but with a deep underlying ambivalence.

become injured and disabled in the midst of orgiastic activities (*Atomised*),[187] or are killed by Islamic terrorists (*Platform*).[188] The point in all of this is that these sexual encounters and relationships might provide a sense of depth for a time, but they will inevitably come to an end, leaving the bereft with the feeling of pointlessness and absurdity. The pathological devotion with which the characters indulge in these things is an index of their fleeting existence. Houellebecq is ultimately a metaphysical pessimist, endorsing in contemporary form the words of St Paul, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die" (1 Cor. 15:12).

The point of these examples, again, is that material prosperity and comfort does not appear to bring the human person closer to a place of fullness. Rather, the desire for prosperity and comfort acts more like an addiction whose satisfying pay-off diminishes with each hit and therefore demands ever-increasing dosage.

The lack of significance of the contemporary wealthy and industrialized is perhaps mitigated against in people's attempts 'to solemnize the crucial moments of passage in our lives'.[189] Taylor refers here to birth, marriage and death as primary examples. The way that this was always done prior to Modernity was, of course, through connecting them up with notions of the sacred. But Taylor contends that in the contemporary world, 'the enclosure in the immanent leaves a hole', and that, 'Many people, who have no other connection or felt affinity with religion, go on using the ritual of the Church for these rites of passage'.[190] Nowhere is this more true than in the Church of England, which still conducts hundreds of thousands of these rites per year, oftentimes for people who otherwise do not attend the Church in which the rite takes place and have little personal belief in any of the

[187] Michel Houellebecq, *Atomised*, trans. by Frank Wynne (London: William Heinemann, 1999).
[188] Michel Houellebecq, *Platform*, trans. by Frank Wynne (London: Vintage, 2003).
[189] Taylor, *Secular*, p. 309.
[190] Ibid.

presuppositions of Christianity.[191] There is obviously an aesthetic component to this: people like getting married in beautiful, medieval parish churches. But there is also a desire to connect up the participants' otherwise purely secularized existence with a sense of the transcendent at particularly significant moments of life. Somehow, the secular does not seem to have the resources to connect with the profundity of these important moments. This may be perhaps because rites of passage like these touch upon existential and metaphysical themes that cannot be solemnized adequately in, say, modern, secularized spaces, but are felt to require the numinosity of a parish Church and the rites, robes and religious paraphernalia that go along with it.[192]

The point is, therefore, that the secular creates a sense of flatness that is often experienced as untenable. Taylor's writing is often an exploration of the various ways that people attempt to reorient or resist the secular so that this flatness can be avoided, and the multitude of variants – Romanticism, Nietzschean anti-humanism, New Ageism, return to traditional religious beliefs, etc. – are surely signs that the bare secular as a basic denial of transcendence is insufficient.

The Transcendent in Modernity

I began the above section with Taylor's observation that, if the transcendental view of reality is right, then human beings have 'an ineradicable bent to respond to something

[191] Cf. 'Statistics for Mission' in 2017, which shows that 106,000 baptisms, 41,00 weddings and blessings of civil marriages, and 133,000 funerals, were undertaken in that year. Bev Botting, 'Statistics for Mission 2017', < https://www.Churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2018-11/2017StatisticsForMission_007_.pdf>, [accessed 21 February 2019].

[192] It would of course be noted by the enthusiastic secularist that equivalent, non-religious and humanist services are now widely available and, in many cases, popular. But this observation in itself is not enough to explain why secular, non-religious people in droves still seek the services of the Church at these crucial rite of passage moments. Of course, time will tell if this is an enduring phenomenon, but the argument of Taylor suggests that it will be because it constitutes a deep, spiritual need upon the part of the participants.

beyond life'.[193] Part of my argument therefore is that the malaise of Modernity, its sense of flatness, its lack of depth, the human need to solemnize certain significant moments in life, and so on, are all signs that the purely immanent does not do for us, that there is always a stretching out for something more. In this section, I will develop this further, by arguing that, even though the medieval world has disappeared from us at least in terms of our naïve experience of reality, there are still various components of it, or analogues with it, that show us that many of its presuppositions are possessed of a greater capacity to bestow existential fecundity than those that are impressed upon us today. It must be stressed that this is only in a very oblique sense an apologetic for Christianity. It is not an attempt to construct a logically deductive argument that posits premises that force a conclusion. Rather, it is a series of observations about human behaviour that, it is argued, imply a transcendental component. The correlative of these claims is that that transcendental component is sought out through the "aesthetic", by which I mean, quite broadly, forms of historical and material mediation that, in one way or another, connect us with a sense of the divine. As such, these observations could fit well with truth claims made by other religions or with certain artistic or cultural movements. It would, however, be hard to square them with anti-sacramental forms of Protestantism or with iconoclastic variants of Islam.

Ambiguous Spaces (1): Subtler Languages

A principal way that Taylor explores the notion of the aesthetic in Modernity and its relation to transcendence is in his treatment of ambiguous spaces. These are spaces in which some kind of aesthetic and transcendent experience is sought, but which elide with

[193] Taylor, *Secular*, p. 368.

the unbelief of Modernity by not forcing upon the participant the overt need for ontic commitment.

In a section on the expanding universe of unbelief, Taylor traces three movements of what we might call broadly "artistic creation". At the first, chants, ballads, liturgies and things of this sort were inherently connected to the action that was being carried out: for example, a requiem mass sung during a funeral, offered as prayer and worship to God specifically within the context of that ceremony. These aesthetic acts were constitutive of the context in which they were performed. Secondly, 'a first disembedding takes place',[194] in which art begins to hold things up before us, a *mimetic* action which is more of a representation of something particular, be it an emotion, a scene of nature or a drama. In this case, the requiem mass would be played in the context of a concert, perhaps with other pieces that were related to the musical period or composer as part of the bill. The representation here is therefore not necessarily directly connected to the context in which the work is displayed or performed. The "second disembedding", seen most clearly in the case of music, constitutes a type of "subtler language", which makes no attempt to represent a particular form but still compels some kind of emotional or perhaps spiritual mood. In this type of "absolute music", 'we have something like the essence of the response, without the story'.[195]

This form of absolute art, which is most clear in the case of music but can also be observed in other artforms, reflects a wider shift in the social imaginary. Taylor summarizes thus:

> In pre-modern times, the beauty of art was understood in terms of mimesis: the imitation of reality which was set in an ordered cosmos, with its levels of being, which

[194] Ibid., p. 355.
[195] Ibid.

> was further understood as God's creation; or the imitation of the divine history, in portrayals, say, of Mary and her Son, or of the Crucifixion. It went without saying that great art refers us to the correspondences, to the order of being, to sacred history. With the fading of these backgrounds, with the coming of a buffered self, for whom this larger spiritual environment was no longer a matter of untheorized experience, though it might still be an object of reasoned belief, we have the growth of […] "subtler languages".[196]

A subtler language is, therefore, a species of artistic creation that no longer takes the correspondence between certain pre-modern cosmologies (such as the Great Chain of Being) and the artform as read. In fact, the correspondence is refused, and a new form of creation is sought, a new thoughtscape or symbolical representation of the concept at hand.

Bruce Ward, in his essay on the confluences between Dostoevsky's literary project and Taylor's philosophical one, sees the development of subtler languages in terms of a sophisticated style of engagement between belief and unbelief. Like Dostoevsky, Ward argues, Taylor rejects the polemical stance of those who insistently rail against the modern world by evoking nostalgia for the past and advocating for its return. The development of a subtler language is a way of 'creating a space for meaningful dialogue'[197] between these different stances, which can nevertheless still defend the notion of transcendence. The comparison with Dostoevsky is helpful because the latter provides a literary example of an author who refuses to evoke anything but brutal realism in his depiction of his contemporary Russia, making his concerns recognizable to readers of different levels of religious or non-religious commitment. There is no nostalgia for a pre-secular past, nothing but the acceptance of the dilemmas of the present (including the Taylorian notions of cross-pressure, the fragilization of belief, and the ubiquitous presence of doubt, as Ward also

[196] Ibid., p. 359.
[197] Bruce K. Ward, 'Transcendence and Immanence in a Subtler Language: The Presence of Dostoevsky in Charles Taylor's Account of Secularity', in Colorado, *Aspiring*, pp. 262-290 (p. 263).

shows us), and a "polyphonic" engagement with their resonances vis-à-vis questions that relate to notions of ultimate significance. This is surely one of the reasons that Dostoyevsky is still read so widely today: the openness within these stories speaks specifically to the modern predicament. This is a world we can understand and buy in to. And the mysteries that are raised thereby are never authoritatively defined or answered.

The point about the creation of subtler languages as a means of fruitful dialogue is important but, even more centrally, I want to pick up on what Taylor sees as the *significance* of these artforms more generally. Again, the analysis here surely 'tilts towards the believer' in a similar way to Taylor's analysis of fullness described above.

With subtler languages, the 'object is left unportrayed',[198] meaning that the subject of the artwork is not clearly defined (or not defined at all). Nevertheless, Taylor writes, 'we feel that there must be an object, an adequate object; or else this would be deception, play-acting'.[199] However, the advantage of the forms of subtler languages is that they move us 'without having to identify their ontic commitments'.[200] Taylor offers us various Romantic poets and poems as examples of those who portray spirituality, power and meaning within nature, but who nevertheless do not commit themselves to any form of overt religious belief. He quotes, for example, Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey*, which speaks of 'A motion and a spirit, that impels/All thinking things, all objects of thought,/And rolls through all things'.[201] The Romantic take would, generally speaking, critique the notion of instrumentalized reason, disciplined morality, and so on, but it would not tend necessarily in

[198] Taylor, *Secular*, p. 356.
[199] Ibid.
[200] Ibid., p. 359.
[201] Quoted in Ibid., p. 358.

the direction of religious belief. Rather, leaving its ontic commitments vague, it would emphasize the role of feeling, imagination and nature.

Having said this, however, there remains another way of understanding the movement of the emotion as a response to art, and that is to interpret it upon a purely atheistic framework. Taylor speaks of atheists who hold on to this kind of interpretation whilst they still attend 'concerts, operas, read great literature'.[202] In this way, 'one can complement an ethic and a scientific anthropology which may remain very reductive and flat'[203] with a sense of the transcendent and mysterious which we find in art. The mystery remains unacknowledged and unexplained. But might it not be said that, when the question is raised, a reductive and atheist ontology is inadequate to answer it? An ontic commitment to some kind of transcendence does not need to be made in order to experience the artwork but it is surely implied by that experience.

Again, upon a reductive view, art and the aesthetic create a kind of 'free and neutral space, between religious commitment and materialism'.[204] And it is not hard to see why, therefore, this approach is appealing to the contemporary world: we can have all of the benefits of the spiritual and esoteric without signing ourselves up to the dogmatism and archaism of organized religion.

A similar observation is made by Dupré in his survey of the intellectual sources of modern atheism. He sees the aesthetic experience as a "secular alternative" to religion and notes that it unites 'various and often discrepant appearances of reality within a single, coherent field of vision', conveying 'a glow of transcendence to ordinary reality'.[205] This is a type of

[202] Ibid., p. 356.
[203] Ibid.
[204] Ibid., p. 360.
[205] Dupré, *Religion*, p. 55.

"atheistic transcendence"[206] which, 'without referring to an absolute transcendence, nevertheless opens a different dimension in the real'.[207] In a passage which is evocative of Taylor's outline immediately above, Dupré summarizes:

> Whereas previously beauty had been viewed as a reflection of a divine transcendence or as an artistic imitation of a sacred model, the self-expressive or formal character it has assumed in modern aesthetics has a more ambiguous significance: it might easily develop into a substitute for religion.[208]

Like Taylor, therefore, Dupré notes a change in aesthetic theory that moves it away from the model of imitation towards a more self-expressive mode. In that sense, the aesthetic retains much of the esoteric and transcendent trappings of religion, but 'abstain(s) from making ontological claims for it'.[209]

This kind of ambiguous space is forged in other areas of our world too. Taylor mentions the way that people travel to see various "sights" often of religious significance: churches, temples, cathedrals. He argues that the reason for this is not simply because that is all the past has to offer us, but that 'there is a certain admiration, wonder mixed with some nostalgia, at these sites where the contact with the transcendent was/is so much firmer, surer'.[210] Elsewhere, in speaking of the shift from an enchanted to a disenchanted world, he identifies 'a widespread sense of loss here'[211] which comes about because we feel that our contact with the transcendent is so insubstantial in comparison:

> The sacred in the strong sense, which marks out certain people, times, places and actions, in distinction to all others as profane, is by its very nature localizable, and its place is clearly marked out in ritual and sacred geography. This is what we sense, and often regret the passing of, when we contemplate the medieval cathedral.[212]

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[206] Ibid.
[207] Ibid., p. 56.
[208] Ibid.
[209] Ibid., p. 55.
[210] Taylor, *Secular*, p. 360.
[211] Ibid., p. 552.
[212] Ibid., p. 553.

This sense of nostalgia and loss is certainly the case when it comes to cathedral tourism. Indeed the place of the medieval cathedral in England, for example, is as a kind of fascinating and beautiful religious vestige that carries with it an unmistakable sense of a vanished and unrecoverable past. One wonders at the minds and imaginations that could conceive of such titanic edifices erected to the glory of the divine. The tourist guides may offer to the guided tales of unbroken continuity in practice and worship from medieval times to the present day, but these stories are hard to believe, and we know that, when we are in the presence of these buildings, we are obliquely brushing up against a world and a humanity that is different to and far removed from our own. Again, the point is that this sort of quasi-spiritual tourism is a way of drawing near to transcendence without needing to have one's ontic commitments challenged. Its attraction is the nearness to the tangible transcendence of the pre-modern world and the feeling of its mystical power irrupting into the present.[213]

Ambiguous spaces of this sort can be seen as evidence of our deep need to encounter the transcendent within the aesthetic. They provide a kind of supernatural frisson without forcing the issue of ontological or religious commitment. The pressing question that I have

[213] It is worth mentioning here William Whyte's recent work including *Unlocking the Church: The Lost Secrets of Victorian Space* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). Whyte argues that the Victorians (re)discovered the notion of the Church building as, on the one hand, a kind of "text" that can be read and understood for edifying spiritual uplift and, on the other, as an engine for moulding the emotions of the worshipper. Whyte's work points perhaps to a need to explore further the phenomenology of religious space from a nuanced, historical angle and to expand the analysis that I have provided in this section. It could be that the Victorians' rediscovery of sacred space was a reaction to the ontological flatness of industrialized secularism. One of Whyte's principal arguments is that the idea that the building "speaks" to us is still ubiquitous today even in the form of those such as Richard Giles who argue ostensibly for a more utilitarian (as opposed to transcendent) approach. This could be seen, again, as a kind of secularization of the Victorian rediscovery of sacred space: buildings still carry meanings but now those meanings are congruent with less explicitly spiritual connotations.

outlined in this section is, however, why such experiences are possible or desirable in the first place. From where does the pleasure of such frissons originate?

Ambiguous Spaces (2): The Festive

Apart from these experiences of ambiguity in art and architecture, there is also a kind of transcendent ambiguity in Taylor's notion of the "festive". This relates the concept of the aesthetic not to art *per se* but to an experience of the transcendent in concert with large groups of fellow human beings. The festive stands in apparent continuity with the notion of medieval Carnival as a kind of release-valve, built into the practices of pre-modern society, which indicates that, though the hierarchical structure of the society is important, it is nevertheless not ultimate and at times the pressure needs to be relaxed.[214] The festive, for Taylor, is another expression of quasi-spiritual devotion. Its two components are that it involves large numbers of people coming together in a way that is different from and interrupts ordinary life, and that, in some way, 'this assembly is felt to put them in touch with the sacred, or at least, some greater power'.[215] There are various religious manifestations of this, both in Protestantism and Catholicism: large, Pentecostal gatherings for the former, pilgrimages to Lourdes for the latter. But there are also secular manifestations of the festive: concerts, sporting events, one-off significant cultural moments like the funeral of Princess Diana. Moreover, these gatherings are held to be among the most exciting and ecstatic events in life, connecting us to something beyond ourselves, and refreshing us, so that we can cope with the demands of the ordinary.

[214] Taylor refers obliquely to this connection in one such discussion of the festive, speaking of the fusion of the personal and collective in, for example, gatherings at stadiums for sporting events or rock concerts: 'There is a heightened excitement at these moments of fusion, reminiscent of Carnival, or of some of the great collective rituals of earlier days' (Taylor, *Secular*, p. 482).
[215] Ibid., p. 462.

Again, there is an analogue here with the notion of subtler languages. Taylor gives the example of Taizé, which is an enormous centre for pilgrimage, drawing in thousands of young people during the summer months. The reason given for its success is the fact that these young people (and others) are received as "searchers", that no commitment is asked of them, no awkward actions are demanded: 'They can express themselves'.[216] But, although there is a lack of pressure and no demand for commitment, the whole experience is still manifestly Christian, containing elements of Bible study and liturgy. Another important element of Taizé is, of course, singing together, which participants are invited to do in their own individual languages. Taylor designates this phenomenon as 'a form of Christian pilgrimage/assembly for the Age of Authenticity'.[217] The importance of authenticity, for Taylor, is that we have developed an idea of life which comes from the Romantic expressivism of the late eighteenth century, and which says that 'each one of us has his/her own way of realizing our humanity, and that it is important to find and live out one's own, as against surrendering to conformity with a model imposed on us from outside'.[218] Taylor sees this quest for authenticity as a fundamentally positive ideal, as it asks questions about 'what a better or higher mode of life would be, where "better" and "higher" are defined, not in terms of what we happen to desire or need, but offer a standard we ought to desire'.[219] As he says in *The Ethics of Authenticity*, he believes that this culture has recognized both its need to reject an outright relativism that excludes all external calculations from consideration, whilst still holding on to its ideal of finding the right path to follow within the integrity of the individual life and acknowledging that we

[216] Ibid., p. 517.
[217] Ibid.
[218] Ibid., p. 475.
[219] Taylor, *Authenticity*, p. 16.

work out our identities dialogically, which he describes as in communication with significant individuals and communities.[220] All of this clearly fits with the notion of the festive as embodied in Taizé, combining elements of the search for external meaning with a desire to hold on to the subjective quest for truth, and the attraction of undertaking this journey in the presence of a multitude of others from all peoples and nations.

This relates to the notion of subtler languages because Taizé does not assume too much about the presuppositions of the pilgrims, and it does not concretely refer back to a world of thought, a cosmology, a notion of authority, which they do not recognize. As with the notion of pure art or music, the ontic commitments are unclear and are uncoerced; space is made, therefore, for the attendees to retain that notion of authenticity, whilst being open to what these actions might imply.

All of this might be applied, albeit in a more inchoate form, to the rock concert, sporting event and gatherings of similar types: although there is not necessarily a search for "truth" here as such, there is a quasi-religious significance, even when expressed in half-joking or colloquial fashion such as the ever-present flag at Old Trafford that says, "MUFC: the religion". There is an instinctive recognition that something of religious significance is going on: a kind of collective devotion to what is felt to be a semi-sacred cause.[221]

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[220] Ibid., pp. 31-35.

[221] The religious aspects of the sporting arena are played down by Roger Scruton in his work *Where We Are: The State of Britain Now* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2019). Having noted that Britons are averse to 'spontaneous social emotion' (Ibid., p.24), he acknowledges the popularity of football in Britain and even that, in certain matches, 'fans scream hatred and loathing at each other', but he argues that this represents only 'an ethos of restrained membership' and that 'it is for a moment and for form's sake only' (Ibid., p.25). This fits with Scruton's overall thesis that part of the nature of British identity is constituted by the attraction of congenial membership in little platoons and clubs, but it is plainly insufficient to account for the attraction of stadium atmospheres and the intensity of engagement with sporting contests. 'The desire for riot' (Ibid., p.25), played down by Scruton, is an ever-present danger at football matches, and the argument that fans scream at each other only as a kind of badge of membership before their fellow supporters is to second guess the passion on display. In Scruton's work it is plain that he feels the need to read sporting events in this way because it fits with his thesis in general, which more broadly diminishes the importance of religious belief and the content of theological doctrine in discussion of British identity, as when he describes the Book of Common

Again, all of this grates against the notion of the instrumentalized, rational individual, who needs to be orientated to no transcendental or ecstatic end. It seems to be the case that the notion of popular festivity or conviviality supplies a need that is keenly felt by the secular and could be played up by the Church, albeit it in a subtle form that recognizes the specific attraction of the festive.

The Aesthetic as Sign of the Transcendent

We can see that the notion of the aesthetic, as articulated above, is a component of human life that most people would consider essential: without it life would seem empty, meaningless, devoid of joy. We can develop this in relation to high culture – as with the "pure" music of Bach or Mozart, and the Romantic poetry of Wordsworth and Keats – or in relation to popular culture – such as the English Premier League, which is watched by tens of millions of people throughout the world.[222] As to the latter we could also mention the success of fantasy novels like the *Lord of the Rings* and the *Harry Potter* series: both of these collections takes upon itself the burden of creating a familiar backdrop to its central story, situating the characters and events within a quasi-Christian framework. The stories are essentially tales of paganism which nevertheless speak very deeply to notions of Christological and eschatological truth. They are subtler languages, in Taylor's technical sense, and this perhaps suggests a reason for their immense popularity. It could, of course, be objected that these are simply fantastic stories that pander to the escapist: but, from whence the need for such escapism?

Prayer's Holy Communion service as 'distinguished largely by a metaphysical commentary that ridicules the old nonsense in new nonsense of its own' (Ibid., p.18).

[222] Cf. James P. Curley and Oliver Roeder, 'English Soccer's Mysterious Worldwide Popularity', *Contexts*, 15(1) (2016), 78-81: 'The EPL (English Premier League) is carried by 80 broadcasters in 212 territories worldwide, and an average game is watched by over 12 million people' (Ibid., p. 78).

The point is that all of these notions are instances of the transcendent punctuating the quotidian. Having established this by giving examples from art and culture, I will now lay out something closer to a formal, albeit inferential, argument: it is clear that, when we consider these examples and are pressed to make a decision, we are faced with a choice either to denude the significance of the aesthetic by denying a transcendent component, or to admit of a transcendent component and thereby preserve a sense of the deeper significance of the aesthetic.

In the case of pure music, the objects are not portrayed or specified, 'Nevertheless we feel that there must be an object, an adequate object; or else this would be deception, play-acting'.[223] Although Taylor certainly grants credence to the idea that there could an atheistic construal of such music, the strong implication is that these experiences are denuded by such a reading. This search for an object to which the artform refers could equally be seen in the manner in which devotees of Harry Potter or The Lord of the Rings feel the need to dress-up as these characters and make pilgrimages to important sites referred to in the stories. There is a desire here for a deeper sense of inhabitation, of communion and participation in the lives of the characters, a longing for a complete immersion in them. There seems to be, as with absolute music, a kind of remainder that is not satisfied by the stories themselves, a need to go beyond via supplementation, but a going beyond which will surely simply perpetuate that sense of joyful dissatisfaction.[224]

[223] Taylor, *Secular*, p. 356.

[224] I am aware that I am touching on C.S. Lewis' notion of "Joy", in the technical sense in which he employs it in his autobiography. I believe that the implicit argument of his book and that which I am outlining here are congruent with each other. Cf. C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (London: Collins, 2012).

In a discussion of the possibility of spinning the immanent frame one way or the other, Taylor notes three "grounds of repulsion"[225] from the closed take. Although the closed take implies a certain type of maturity and courage, and although it is claimed that it can provide a truly universal human ethic (as opposed to the religious which always prefers its own in-group), when we consider the human aspiration to fullness (which was discussed above) or human greatness, there are ways in which a reductive take does not seem to hang together. Firstly, 'there is the sense that we aren't just determined, that we are active, building, creating, shaping agents',[226] and that, upon reflection, this is an intentional process that involves something more than biological determination. The "ethical repulsion"[227] noted by Taylor refers to the fact that, upon a deterministic or closed reading, we do not seem to have scope to make ethical judgments about human action, whether for praise or blame. The second ground of repulsion is that we have ethical and spiritual motives that cannot be concurrently reduced to material impulse, for otherwise they would have no objectively binding sense. Thirdly, 'there are aesthetic objections: Art, Nature moves us; we have a deeper sense of meaning; we can't see our "aesthetic" responses as just another form of pleasurable reaction. They have a deeper significance'.[228]

This third category illustrates the challenge to the reductive point of view of how 'to align our best phenomenology with an adequate ontology, how to resolve a seeming lack of fit…either by enriching one's ontology, or by revising or challenging the phenomenology'.[229] This is a dilemma, the horns of which are difficult to escape. Either we enrich our ontology

[225] Taylor, *Secular*, p. 596.
[226] Ibid.
[227] Ibid.
[228] Ibid.
[229] Ibid., p. 609.

and accept that there is something more to this than is acceptable upon a framework of materialism, or we downplay the phenomenology.[230] The choice to do the latter would entail an attempt to describe the phenomenological in terms that would not imply an expansive ontology: upon reflection, the aesthetic experience was not really as significant as I first thought; perhaps there are other, more plausible explanations for how I am to account for it. But is the latter really an acceptable alternative? Can it save the aesthetic, or must it ultimately denude it of its significance?

> […] there are certain works of art – by Dante, Bach, the makers of Chartres Cathedral: the list is endless – whose power seems inseparable from their epiphanic, transcendent reference. Here the challenge is to the unbeliever, to find a non-theistic register in which to respond to them without impoverishment.[231]

The implication is that the latter is impossible, and to respond as though it were not is inevitably to diminish these great works of art. As above, we could take any one of a multitude of examples, but let us consider Chartres Cathedral: can we say with plausibility that this building can be explained without remainder by reference to its materials functioning upon the human body in such and such a way? Is the building, in other words, *nothing more* than so much stone and glass and wood? Surely such an analysis would be a drastic reduction of the significance of the encounter? The epiphanic quality, unaddressed, would still cry out for attention.

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[230] Again, something similar was realized by C.S. Lewis on his intellectual journey towards Christianity. Speaking of his encounter with Owen Barfield, he writes 'We had been, in the technical sense of the term, "realists"; that is, we accepted as rock-bottom reality the universe revealed by the senses. But at the same time we continued to make for certain phenomena of consciousness all the claims that really went with a theistic or idealistic view. We maintained that abstract thought (if obedient to logical rules) gave indisputable truth, that our moral judgment was "valid", and our aesthetic experience not merely pleasing but "valuable"…Barfield convinced me that it was inconsistent. If thought were a purely subjective event, these claims for it would have to be abandoned. If one kept (at rock-bottom reality) the universe of the senses, aided by instruments and co-ordinated so as to form "science", then one would have to go much further – as many have since gone – and adopt a Behaviouristic theory of logic, ethics and aesthetics. But such a theory was, and is, unbelievable to me' (Lewis, *Joy*, p. 242).

[231] Taylor, *Secular*, p. 607.

Again, the point here is not that the experience of Chartres' aesthetic as transcendent is some kind of universal experience, but that most people, at some point or other in their lives, have had some kind of non-reductive aesthetic experience through art or nature, and that they would be reluctant to cede an explanation of such an event to an exhaustive analysis based upon materialism: the power of such things is 'inseparable from their epiphanic nature'.[232] And the implication of this is that such an epiphanic quality *is* as real as the wood or the stone; it is inseparable from the aesthetic qualities of the artform. It truly conjures up something of the transcendent, and our aspirations to fullness are spoken to in encountering it.

To sum up these thoughts, the way that the aesthetic functions for Taylor is by providing ambiguous spaces in which the modern person can periodically cleave to the transcendent without having to identify or hold specific ontic commitments. The argument I have developed shows that these experiences, when pushed, inevitably tilt toward a transcendent explanation. Quite plainly, one can say that the aesthetic is both attractive to humanity and a sign of the divine presence in creation. This implies that it deserves a high place in our estimation and theologies.

Contentions

All of this is not uncontentious. Charles Lamore, in his somewhat overreaching review of *A Secular Age*,[233] is dismissive of the argument from fullness. He believes that Taylor is

[232] Ibid.

[233] Although Lamore gives a good summary of Taylor's genealogy and clearly grasps his arguments, his review tips over into polemic and silliness, especially towards his conclusion, when he, for example, describes philosophers as "spin doctors" who 'teach us how to make (problems) vanish by a misleading use of words' (Charles Lamore, 'How Much Can We Stand?', in *The New Republic*, https://newrepublic.com/article/63415/how-much-can-we-stand [accessed 22 November 2017]).

'rushing (his readers) to judgement' by forcing them to make 'a leap of faith' which, according to Lamore, is unwarranted. He writes,

> […] intimations are not an adequate basis for jumping to metaphysical or religious conclusions. They should be seen for what they are: inklings, no more. In such situations, leaping is precisely what we ought not to do […] We ought to remain unsure, hesitating, groping, searching for some insight, but always remaining wary, and concerned with the integrity of our beliefs.[234]

But some will find these assertions unsatisfying. Firstly, Lamore appears to outline a moral stance towards this question: his repeated use of the word "ought" is evidence of this. Taylor explores this theme of the "moral stance" towards the closed spin on the immanent frame extensively, noting that it is often thought in Modernity to require courage 'to resist the blandishments of comforting meaning'.[235] But the question must be asked of Lamore and others: why *ought* we to do anything? Why courageously resist the possibility of belief even though it might be a soothing placebo to one's tortured existential condition? The question is not irrelevant because the ethical objection to the closed spin on the immanent frame is a central concern to Taylor's exploration: arguably the fact of any sort of "ought" is an intimation which bespeaks the metaphysical *something-more*. It is also unfair to say that Taylor 'insinuates that (people) must take a stand and opt either for an open or closed view of immanence',[236] when Taylor is simply describing a particular phenomenology, albeit it with a knowingly Christian grid of interpretation. The fact that Lamore feels the need to protest this is evidence not of Taylor's furtive agenda but of the fact that the phenomenological conditions do indeed imply the kind of cross-pressure that Taylor

[234] Ibid.
[235] Taylor, *Secular*, p. 596.
[236] Lamore, 'How Much?'.

imagines: they push you now this way, now that, implying commitment but never giving enough to get you there.

Secondly, Lamore's assertion that experiences of fullness are "inklings, no more" is nothing more than that: an assertion. The question is whether or not these experiences point to some kind of further reality and whether or not they are, in fact, *themselves* experiences of transcendence though not necessarily recognized as such. It is banal to deny this argument with no justification as Lamore does, and all it does is throw us back to the problems around epistemology and tradition in Modernity.

Gregor McLennan has similar concerns to Lamore, claiming that Taylor is 'seeking an impossible kind of certitude, and one that jumps too hastily to its conclusions'.[237] It is quite clear, of course, that the desire for "certitude" is hardly on Taylor's agenda, and he makes no attempt at a deductive argument from his phenomenology. The above argument made in this essay, although an attempt to state more formally what is implicit in *A Secular Age*, is similarly not such an argument. At most it could be called an inferential deduction whose premises might be taken to imply (weakly or strongly) the conclusion.

In any case, McLennan wants to avoid any hint of the transcendent by arguing that 'immanent perspectives are also available that are almost as anti-naturalistic as Taylor's'.[238] This is a perplexing statement that receives little clarification in the example of Roberto M. Unger who 'praises the animating energy of many religious people', and wants to harness their spiritual qualities for his political project, but, who, at the same time, denies the existence of any 'evanescent spiritual substance that escapes nature and its laws'.[239] This is

[237] McLennan, 'Unbelief', p. 643.
[238] Ibid., p. 642.
[239] Ibid.

unconvincing because, although Unger might have an ontology of immanence, his view is certainly not "anti-naturalistic" because he has no time for anything that is not explicable apart from "nature and its laws". The ontological commitment to naturalism is still present here and it makes no difference if he is inspired by religious people. McLennan seems to want to borrow the language of transcendence, but only as a kind of exemplar for certain forms of social or political organization.

The second example he gives is similar; in it he implies that there could be some kind of non-naturalistic reductionism: 'There is no reason in principle why, under such a broadly conceived naturalistic horizon, the specificity of human qualities and the sometimes dramatic shifts of consciousness that we undergo cannot be perfectly well acknowledged'.[240] Again, this implies that the ontological commitment to naturalism would remain but the phenomenology would be rearticulated in a reductive mode. It was said above that the ontology would need to be enhanced to retain the significance of the phenomenology or that the phenomenology would need to be reassessed in order to retain a naturalistic ontology, and McLennan has suggested nothing here that would imply a third way which would avoid the horns of this dilemma.

So it does not seem that either Lamore or McLennan gives a response to the question of the aesthetic regarding transcendence and fullness, except to imply that the ontological commitment to naturalism must remain and that the phenomenological description must cohere with it somehow. Again McLennan wonders who is 'the phenomenological "we" that is invoked',[241] even at another point charging Taylor with an 'element of arrogance…in Taylor taking it upon himself to decide what understandings conform or don't conform to

[240] Ibid.
[241] Ibid., p. 643.

the reality of "our" situation and experience'.[242] But all that this criticism of Taylor's phenomenology does is create a third alternative to the two discussed above, which is to deny the phenomenology altogether, and to say simply that there are people who do not understand the pull of the aesthetic towards the notion of fullness or the transcendent. This might be because these people do not have aesthetic experiences, or that it never occurs to them that those experiences might imply a spiritual ontology. But surely we would want to say that it is indeed an immensely impoverished human life that would admit of no aesthetic experience whatsoever. And, again, because the aesthetic has been tied up with notions of transcendence so ubiquitously prior to secular Modernity, the attempt to disconnect them appears far from common sense. So, again, this objection does not provide a plausible solution to the argument laid out above.

Perhaps the strongest set of objections that could be levelled here are those of Paul Janz, who takes Taylor to task for his use of the term "transcendence", which he contests is nothing more than a kind of tautological truism that 'unbelievers will agree to as readily as believers',[243] because it means essentially, "not immanent". He argues that a 'critical or rationally demonstrative account…of what the meaningfully authoritative "content" of the transcendent might be for human life'[244] needs to be offered in order to give the term meaning. Later on in the essay, however, Janz, evoking the spirit of Austin Farrer in an apophatic key, argues that transcendence must 'for Christian belief, be found only and nowhere else than *in* the natural world, since this is the indispensable "site" at which divine

[242] Ibid., p. 639.
[243] Janz, 'Transcendence', in Colorado, *Aspiring*, p. 49.
[244] Ibid.

revelation discloses itself as a transcendent source'.[245] Janz wants to argue this because he is uncomfortable with the notion of a "gap" between the immanent and the transcendent. It does not seem that any of Janz's criticisms mitigate decisively against Taylor's central thrust; rather, they point out that a specific kind of metaphysical picture would need to be developed in order for a further concrete commitment to be made as a result of the epiphanic experience. As I have pointed out on a number of occasions, although Taylor implies that this phenomenological analysis tilts toward a transcendent beyond, it is never his intention to try to force anything like this sort of conclusion in any specificity. I agree with Janz that more must be said when we enter the realms of metaphysics. But all that is being argued for here is that the aesthetic is a significant phenomenological component of human experience and that this has implications for both the Church and for the Church's communication with the secular.

Conclusion

In the discussion of Charles Taylor thus far, I started out by describing the world that has gone from us with its enchanted, spiritual qualities, and how people inhabited that framework in an embedded and embodied manner. This world acknowledged the transcendent dimension in an immediate and "naïve" sense. Our secular age has moved far away from such an inhabiting, and our experience of the world and its relationship to the transcendent is always now a choice and an interpretation, which creates interesting types of pressure and possibilities for existential decision.

In this chapter, I have shown that Taylor's phenomenology of the secular points inexorably towards a transcendent solution, and that through what I have been calling the

[245] Ibid., p. 67.

"aesthetic". In carving out certain "ambiguous spaces" the secular person finds a way of ostensibly holding on to transcendence but without the need for all the fuss of theological commitment and the various religious engagements that this would imply. Likewise the festive provides a myriad of opportunities for ostensibly meaningful communal gatherings, but which, again, even in a traditional religious setting such as Taizé, do not force or even imply commitment. This is in line clearly with Taylor's ethic of authenticity, which tells us that to be authentic in the modern age is to assent freely from a position of personal conviction. The argument of this chapter, therefore, has shown that, even in a secular realm which has ostensibly banished God from the public sphere, the search for the transcendent goes on. This is sought not through, say, interest in Christianity as a focus for rational debate, but primarily through the embodied and aesthetic nature of human existence: the arts, communal gatherings, ambiguously embodied spiritual practices, and so on.

What does this mean for the ecclesial task? The implications are that the aesthetic and embodied practices of the Church are highly relevant in terms of reaching a secular age. The secular posits, on some very deep level, the separation between the transcendent and the immanent, the spiritual and the material, cutting one off from the other. The implication of this is that we live with an excarnated framework in which the material bears no relevance to the spiritual. This is not only metaphysically aberrant but unattractive, and it is inevitable that humanity will not adhere to it either in the present or long-term. The Church, therefore, must reject such a dualism and embrace more fully its aesthetic practices as, on the one hand, more faithful to its tradition, and, on the other, capable of deeper connection with the secular. Having established this, I will now turn to an analysis of John Milbank and the Radical Orthodox school in order to show how Milbank's approach can embellish Taylor's already extremely significant contribution.

Chapter Three | John Milbank (1): A Deeper Critique of the Secular

Introduction

In my introductory chapters, I have argued that a significant, if not primary, theme within Taylor's work is that of the theoretical and practical separation between nature and grace. This conceptual aperture creates a space for the modern secular. Since the immanent and the transcendent are now felt to occupy different horizons of reality, we are left with an excarnated experience of the material world. One of the implications of this is that the aesthetic is no longer felt to mediate the transcendent. In my second chapter I argued that this false duality cannot sustain itself and so culture inevitably seeks for the transcendent through aesthetic experience as a response to the flatness of quotidian life, and that this lends weight to the thesis that the aesthetic has inherent spiritual properties which are difficult to account for in Modernity. I have been suggesting all along that this provides us with an ecclesiological rationale for aesthetic creation and practices, and, in addition, that it shows us that beauty is important in the Church's witness to the world, pressing, as it does, questions of religious and metaphysical significance.

In this chapter, I will show that John Milbank and the Radical Orthodoxy (RO) project more generally provide significant further theological rationale to back up this initial argument.[246] I will also argue that Milbank's narrative gives a theological angle to the

[246] I intend to focus on Milbank's writings, especially *Theology and Social Theory*, in developing my argument, but I will often mention or quote other Radical Orthodoxy sources that either bear an affinity to or are directly influenced by his thought. As such, this chapter is not really on Radical Orthodoxy as a movement, which is far too diverse and broad to treat here, but more properly on Milbank in particular and those who articulate something of what I believe is fair to call *his* position.

historical narrative put forward by Charles Taylor that is mostly complementary. There are points at which Milbank argues for a more radical thesis than Taylor, and I will draw these out at the appropriate moments, but the two are clearly articulating a story with similar themes and a similar trajectory. Taylor says as much in his short epilogue to *A Secular Age*, which is a brief meditation on what he calls the Intellectual Deviation (ID) story. The latter is Taylor's term for Milbank's genealogy, vis-à-vis his Reform Master Narrative (RMN). Although Taylor believes that the ID story is incomplete in many ways, he goes on to say that he sees the two stories as 'complementary, exploring different sides of the same mountain, or the same winding river of history'[247] and concludes the entire work by saying that, 'We have to understand religious/spiritual life today in all its different thrusts, resistances, and reactions…Thus we need both ID and RMN to explain religion today'.[248] Taylor's observation provides further impetus for this chapter, observing that both his narrative and Milbank's need to be attended to in order to provide a fuller story of the secular. It is also significant that Taylor allows Milbank in particular to have a share in the last word of Taylor's epic work. As has already been shown there are multiple genealogical treatments of the secular, but it is a testament to the importance of Milbank's work that Taylor singles him out in particular above the chorus.

To simplify this somewhat, one could say that Milbank's story is a largely abstract, theological/philosophical account of the secular coming about as a result of top-down dissemination. Taylor's, on the other hand, is less dependent upon shifts at that high intellectual level, concerning itself more with widespread movements within the "social imaginary" brought about by cultural and religious change at the level of practice and

[247] Taylor, *Secular*, p. 775.
[248] Ibid., p. 776.

behaviour. As Taylor observes, 'ID deals with changes in theoretical understanding, mainly among learned and related élites. What we lack is a story of how secularity…emerges as a mass phenomenon'.[249] The Radical Orthodoxy narrative may rely therefore upon the assumption that what happened in the ivory towers of Oxford and Paris eventually trickled down and permeated the rest of western culture. Such an assumption is not necessarily wrong, but it seems that the main thrust of the Milbank and Radical Orthodoxy project relies upon its truth.

One of the significant similarities between Taylor and Milbank is that both see the secular as a positive construction, a feat of human imagination, which is retroactively redefined as just the bare nature of reality once the archaic superstition of religion and metaphysics is done away with. The secular is claimed to be simply that which is *really there* after the scum on the surface is removed. The central argument of *Theology and Social Theory* is clear about this:

> Once, there was no "secular". And the secular was not latent, waiting to fill more space with the steam of the "purely human", when the pressure of the sacred was relaxed […] The secular as a domain had to be instituted or *imagined*, both in theory and in practice.[250]

According to Milbank's thesis, Christian theology has accepted a duality between itself and sociology, whereby the latter is held to account for some more fundamentally human motivation and state of affairs than the ostensibly "religious". Therefore sociology can position and debunk theology, whilst remaining pristine and aloof in itself. On the contrary, Milbank argues, the sociological is an account of reality that is analogous to the "religious" insofar as it is a story which makes various mythical assertions. The difference is that the

[249] Ibid., pp. 774-775.
[250] John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), p. 9.

sociological, which is the theoretical basis for the secular, acts as though its logic is somehow more inviolable than that of the "religious", that is has been arrived at through reason, as opposed to the vagaries of faith. What is in fact the case, according to Milbank, is that the sociological is a disguised mandate for the agonistic power games of Modernity, including, amongst other things, contemporary global capitalism. Adopting an "archaeological approach", Milbank seeks to trace 'the genesis of the main forms of secular reason, in such a fashion as to unearth the arbitrary moments in the construction of their logic'.[251]

This is important because Milbank wants to re-enthrone theology as the queen of the sciences, and as therefore capable of providing 'its own account of the final causes at work in human history, on the basis of its own particular, and historically specific faith'.[252] He wants to purge Christian theology of its own heretical assumptions that are predicated on the supposed neutrality of secular and sociological accounts of religion, culture and society:

> I wish to challenge both the idea that there is a significant sociological "reading" of religion and Christianity, which theology must "take account of", and the idea that theology must borrow its diagnosis of social ills and recommendations of social solutions entirely from Marxist (or usually sub-Marxist) analysis, with some sociological admixture.[253]

For Milbank, the sociological is actually a theology in itself which disguises its own hidden metaphysical premises (such as the primacy and ultimate ontological reality of violence and power), and it derives not from the off-sloughing of Christianity and "religion" but from deviations internal to Christianity, intertwined at points with Nietzschean and/or Machiavellian neo-paganism, particularly in the economic sphere.[254]

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[251] Ibid., p. 3.
[252] Ibid., p. 382.
[253] Ibid., p. 3.
[254] Ibid., p. 37.

As such, the sociological and the secular can be illustrated with reference to the chapel at Blenheim Palace. As is well known, Blenheim Palace was constructed in the English Baroque style by Sir John Vanbrugh at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Arising as it did within an ostensibly Christian society, the palace is nevertheless a monument to human violence and egotism refracted through the antique imagery of Greco-Roman paganism. Nowhere is this more obvious than upon inspection of the palace's chapel, which, from a spiritual perspective, is a highly depressing affair. Two features are notable: firstly, the chapel is the wrong way around with the altar pressed upon the west wall as opposed to the east; secondly, it is totally dominated by an idolatrous sarcophagus which not only contains no Christian imagery but displays quite literally the apotheosis of the first Duke and Duchess of Marlborough, depicting them as Caesar and Caesarina, whilst at the base of the tomb is an effigy of the surrender of the Duke's enemy in the Spanish Wars of Succession, Marshal Tallard. The chapel is thus both deviant in its ostensibly Christian orientation *and* it is infused with a gaudy neo-paganism that is literally a celebration of war, violence, and the capacity of man to subdue his enemies. As far as Milbank's analysis goes, this monument is paradigmatic of the secular, because it originates from Christianity but constitutes its (literal) reversal whilst adopting and celebrating the assumptions of antique paganism.

What is immediately apparent in this brief précis of Milbank's approach is that there is a more overtly theological and semi-polemical agenda present than in Taylor's. Whereas Taylor's account does not really *blame* anybody in particular for the secular, Milbank's story identifies various heroes and villains, and is generally reluctant to celebrate unambiguously the gains of Modernity, tending to see them as always deviations of the properly Christian story and always in need of recovery by theology or the Church. Elsewhere, for example,

Milbank argues that 'Christianity switched the metaphysical focus towards "personality" as the ultimate reality' and, therefore,

> However, "distorted" the theologian may find Modernity to be in Christian terms, the fact remains that the ever-increased emergence of the personal in terms of free expression, sexual liberation, gender equality, and social mobility is ineluctably […] a Christian phenomenon. But […] this further emergence is crippled by the denial of an ultimate ontological reality open to the personal, or for which personhood could sustain itself infinitely in terms of the arrival at a telos of personal fulfilment. In the absence of the latter, personality degenerates into surface froth which in reality is manipulated by mass constraints, reducing even the apparent freedom of much modern art mostly to variants upon the predictable and preestablished.[255]

Although Milbank sees Modernity as a fatal deviation internal to Christianity itself, it is nevertheless the case that he is also sanguine about a recovery of Christianity proper: speaking of the problem, he observes that 'when one reflects upon the uniquely increasing global spread of Christianity (particularly in China) in our own day…the apparent unrealism of the question of a possible return of Christendom fades from sight almost entirely'.[256]

This is an important point because a central plank of critique often directed towards Milbank is that he is excessively nostalgic about the Middle Ages, seeing that period as the zenith of human civilization, never to be recovered in its purity again. Against this criticism, we can observe that, like Taylor, Milbank, although clearly critical of the nihilism of secular Modernity, is not uncritical of the Church and *its* complicity; indeed, he believes that the Church of the medieval period invented modern secularism! He makes clear in *Theology and Social Theory* when speaking of Augustinian eschatological salvation:

> If this is salvation, then […] it can only have been present intermittently during the Christian centuries. My onslaught […] against secular reason, has not been at all in the name of a past epoch of Christian dominance. On the contrary, while it is possible to recover the narrative and ontological shape of the Christian "interruption" of history, […] one should also recognize that this interruption appears to have tragically failed,

[255] Slavoj Žižek, John Milbank, Creston Davis, *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), pp. 116-7.
[256] Milbank, 'Closer', in Warner, *Varieties*, p. 82.

> and that it is the course of this failure itself which has generated secular reason. Once there was no secular […] but the invention of the secular began at least in the eleventh century.[257]

And, again, this critique is clearly parallel to Taylor's central thesis in *A Secular Age*: namely, that the Church created modern secularism largely through its excessive preoccupation with "Reform".[258] However, one of the differences that might be observed is that, whereas Milbank is seeking for a renewal of Christianity and the Church in various different ways, Taylor sees the secular in a more positive light, celebrating its gains as well as lamenting its losses.

This can be drawn out by looking at two significant points in the conversation between Milbank and Taylor. I believe that the arguments put forward by Milbank here are ultimately persuasive. They do not absolutely contradict Taylor, but they radicalize what he has already said by challenging some of the implications of his arguments.

Both of these points concern the "aesthetic" nature of the Church's response to secularism. And each of them picks up what Milbank argues is an implicit subtraction story within *A Secular Age* itself. Milbank claims that, once one has 'dumped [this] (lingering) whiggery', then 'Taylor's main thesis is confirmed and radicalized'.[259]

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[257] Milbank, *Theology*, pp. 440-441. Or, again, speaking of the fideistic positivism and apparent adult maturity of Barth and Bonhoeffer, 'What has been feverishly outgrown is not a natural childhood, but a non-innocent childhood of error which need never have happened – which is not *at all* to say that we should have remained forever in the culture of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. No, it is an *unknown* future that we have missed and must seek to rejoin' (John Milbank, *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 119).

[258] Again, this is quite clearly a basic part of the central argument of RO in general. In the introduction to the original book of essays, Ward, Pickstock and Milbank outline the nature of the project as a retrieval of the Christian tradition in order to challenge the nihilism of the secular. An important rejoinder, however, is articulated immediately afterward: '(RO is) radical in (a sense of) realising that via such engagements we *do* have to rethink the tradition. The fact of its late medieval collapse, the fact that such a collapse was *possible*, can sometimes point to even earlier weaknesses' (John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward, eds., *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 2.) and this is because, 'Christianity…*never* sufficiently valued the mediating participatory sphere which alone can lead us to God' (Milbank, *Orthodoxy*, p. 3). The latter is a point on which I elaborate below in the section on nature and grace.

[259] Milbank, 'Closer', in Warner, *Varieties*, p. 68.

What does Milbank mean here? The first point concerns Taylor's discussion of disenchantment. Although Taylor argues against the secular as a grand subtraction story, he nevertheless concedes that three central beliefs about enchantment were undermined by the rise of the scientific and historical outlook: firstly, nature as consisting of "acts of God"; secondly, the inseparability of the political and the religious order; and, thirdly, the belief that the world if full of magical forces. Milbank sees an inconsistency here because Taylor does not show how, at an elite level, disenchantment is a subtraction story; rather, Taylor himself seems to imply that 'a certain style of *theology* favoured this: a style wishing to monopolize all mystery in the one God'.[260] (This relates to Milbank's metaphysical critique of voluntarism which will be discussed below.) Milbank critiques Taylor's uncritical adoption of Rémi Brague, who argued that 'disenchantment followed inevitably from the collapse of the medieval world picture',[261] positing instead that disenchantment is a certain *construal* of that rise, and that Taylor, therefore, 'ignores Renaissance and Baroque attempts from Cusa through Bérulle to reenchant a heliocentric and infinite universe'.[262] And, although we can concede that certain claims that were made within the medieval picture of enchantment cannot survive scientific discovery, we do not have to 'abandon all notions of esoteric links between physical states and mental ones';[263] to the contrary, if mental states are real and are not completely separated from physical states, then we do indeed need some version of the pathetic fallacy in which physical states are in a certain way "enchanted" and have an effect upon mental states. Without this, there is a significant philosophical difficulty in connecting the two, which is untenable. 'Taylor himself at the end of the book implies that

[260] Ibid., p. 58.
[261] Ibid.
[262] Ibid.
[263] Ibid., p. 59.

the medial status of the body between objectivity and subjectivity…opens toward a more subtle, fluid, and undogmatic reenchantment of the cosmos'.[264]

All of this shows that Taylor's thesis, in its most radical form, implies that secularization was not inevitable (at least not in the strongly disenchanted form) and that the story of the rise of the natural sciences inevitably pushing out an enchanted worldview is another instance of subtraction.

The further important point to note concerns Taylor's apparent ambivalence over the relationship of disenchantment and the decline of religion. Although there are hints in the text that Taylor wants to deny this relationship, ultimately he must affirm that it exists because his central thesis is that Reform, which is an inherently disenchanting process that 'dampen[s] down a popularly festive and ecstatic spirit, intimately linked to enchantment',[265] is the main driver of secularization. Milbank concludes thus,

> […] one could argue that the details of Taylor's book show that he does *not* really believe that the fate of enchantment and the fate of religion are independent of each other. Rather, he thinks that a certain mode of monotheism has tended to disenchant and that this is in the long term *fatal* for religiosity.[266]

It is clear, therefore, that Milbank is arguing for a reading of Taylor that is congruent with the type of philosophical and theological critique of secularism propounded by himself and Radical Orthodoxy more generally. The following quotation brings this out:

> Monotheism that allows no sacramental mediation, that renders the divine will remote and inscrutable, that sharply divides nature from supernature, itself engenders an impermeable, drained, meaningless immanence that can readily be cut off from any transcendent relation whatsoever.[267]

[264] Ibid.
[265] Ibid., p. 62.
[266] Ibid., p. 63.
[267] Ibid., p. 62.

Milbank is calling, therefore, for resistance to such a sharp division as crucial for theology and the Church. This is why he critiques the idea that certain significant aspects of disenchantment were inevitable and could not have been resisted. There were creative attempts to formulate an enchanted, modern view of the universe, which Taylor himself notes.[268] One of these is the proto-Romantic attempt to develop a new sense of cosmic time based on the fascination of the newly-discovered antiquity of the earth.

Further to all of this, the Middle Ages did not possess a simple, single-source theory of causality, but '*did* know of speculation regarding immanent secondary causes even of exceptional natural events'.[269] Again, this is important because it shows us that disenchantment concerning God's involvement in nature, described by Taylor, cannot have been as simple as the shift from seeing God as immanently involved in natural processes, to realizing that these run independently of God. Rather, a more sophisticated understanding of causality in terms of influence was already at work.

The other point, mentioned in passing by Milbank, but which is important to draw out here, relates to Taylor's emphasis on the modern discovery of "ordinary life". Prior to *A Secular Age*, perhaps his most significant work, *Sources of the Self*, took this up as a central theme, and it plays a role in *A Secular Age* itself. Taylor explains:

> What I was trying to gesture at with this term is the cultural revolution of the early modern period, which dethroned the supposedly higher activities of contemplation and the citizen life, and put the centre of gravity of goodness in ordinary living, production and the family.[270]

[268] Such as his treatment of Hopkins in Taylor, *Secular*, pp. 755-765, also mentioning Dostoyevsky and emphasising Charles Péguy.
[269] Milbank, 'Closer', in Warner, *Varieties*, p. 59.
[270] Taylor, *Secular*, p. 370.

This emphasis relates to a more general ambivalence within Taylor's corpus. In his lecture on Catholicism and Modernity, he lays out the strands of this argument, contending that modern, secular culture 'mingle(s) together both authentic developments of the gospel…and also a closing off to God that negates the gospel'.[271] Modern culture, he argues, paradoxically needed to break off with Christendom in order to carry further certain facets of Christian life that were impeded by the institutionalization of the gospel within a certain cultural framework. He gives as examples of this universal human rights, the end of religious compulsion, and, as mentioned, the discovery of the goodness of ordinary life. Taylor therefore sees that, in the medieval period, there existed a competitive dichotomy between higher forms of religious life and so-called ordinary life. With the dethroning of the former, great swathes of people were liberated so that they could enjoy the latter. One of the interesting implications of this argument is that the reason that 'Western Modernity is very inhospitable to the transcendent'[272] is not primarily, as is often thought, due to the fact that Christianity has become epistemically unbelievable because of the advances of the natural sciences,[273] but because it is generally felt in this culture that religious belief is implicitly and inherently hostile and threatening to the great gain of Modernity, namely a sense of goodness in ordinary life.

This argument opens up great tranches of debate but suffice to say here that Taylor's ambivalence is surprising for at least two reasons. The first reason concerns his assertion

[271] Taylor, 'Modernity', in Heft, *Modernity*, p. 16.
[272] Ibid, p. 25.
[273] One of the surprising aspects of *A Secular Age* is the muted treatment of the ostensible conflict between science and religion. Taylor intentionally shifts his focus to other areas, noting at the outset that he is 'not satisfied' with this explanation of secularism because he does not 'see the cogency of the supposed arguments from…the findings of Darwin to the alleged refutations of religion' (Taylor, *Secular*, p. 4.) and therefore, he thinks that this is an inadequate explanation for why people abandoned their faith *en masse*.

that 'the break with Christendom was necessary for this great extension of gospel-inspired accounts'.[274] But could these gains not be read differently as emanating from within Christendom and belonging properly to it and only parasitically to Modernity? Obviously we are dealing in counterfactuals here, but when we consider the great cultural movement that occurred, roughly-speaking, during the Christian millennium, would it not be reasonable to say that, if secular Modernity had not arisen, Christendom would have been capable of dropping religious coercion, further developing the notion of human rights and curtailing the more supercilious aspects of the religious life? It seems a reasonable assumption. Among a litany of saints who argued against forced conversion was Thomas Aquinas, and, as Brad Gregory argues, 'createdness in God's image was why and how human beings had individual rights, as canon lawyers had begun to argue in the twelfth century'.[275]

What about this claim that the discovery of ordinary life needed the decline of Christendom to facilitate it and that it is an overall gain? In general, there is simply the risk of self-contradiction on the part of Taylor here. Even in *A Catholic Modernity?*, he concludes that 'the metaphysical primacy of life (as opposed to forms of transcendent hope) is wrong and stifling and that its continued dominance puts in danger the practical primacy'.[276] In the second chapter of this essay, I drew out a significant strand within *A Secular Age* which, in a way parallel to the more metaphysical account of Milbank, argues that Modernity suffers from a kind of malaise which can be described as flatness or crushing immanence: the individual within secular Modernity cannot account for the goodness of ordinary life, nor can he grasp hold of it, because the ontology and metaphysics that undergird Modernity are

[274] Taylor, 'Modernity', in Heft, *Modernity*, p. 26.
[275] Gregory, *Reformation*, pp. 372-373.
[276] Taylor, 'Modernity', in Heft, *Modernity*, p. 29.

so radically impoverished. Of course, the average person does not understand this intellectually, but one can observe the emptiness, the ennui, the longing of the human heart for depth: endless cycles of consumerism, religious devotion to the career ladder, inexplicable fanaticism around political causes. The point is that the ordinary must be grounded in something; it cannot just be because that is not enough to sustain the inherent goodness within things. Therefore Taylor's own account implies strongly that ordinary life collapses in upon itself when denuded of a transcendent outlet. The disappearance of Christendom and of belief does not secure ordinary life but imperils it.

Again Milbank picks this up in his critique of Taylor, noting that really there is an inherent danger of Taylor's observation succumbing to his own criticism around secular subtraction stories. This is because for Taylor it seems that ordinary life is just there 'once an excessive preoccupation with the otherworldly or the mentally elevated is removed'.[277] Milbank sees this as 'a secularization of ordinary life'[278] and observes that a good deal of ordinary life in the later Middle Ages was grounded in religious ritual connected to, for example, farming and agriculture. Pace Taylor, he argues that Modernity achieved no discovery of a natural sphere of quotidian goodness but 'the questionable disenchantment that directly promoted the functionalization and massified control of human existence'.[279] He suggests, as an alternative reading, that we can see in the eighteenth century in Lutheran parts of Germany and in Anglican England a re-enchanted form of ordinary life in which the family, the home, the garden and the surrounding forms of nature were all felt to be 'a means of grace'.[280]

[277] Milbank, 'Closer', in Warner, *Varieties*, p. 61.
[278] Ibid.
[279] Ibid., p. 62.
[280] Ibid.

Perhaps Taylor does not intend to be read in this way, and that what he is really trying to say is that Modernity benefits from a Christian inheritance that it does not understand, cannot come to grips with and will inevitable lose if it is not re-enchanted and reconnected to its source in Christian belief. The danger is, however, that Taylor seems to be saying that Christian faith itself needs to die away so that its implications can be fully felt. The latter, in my view, is a contradiction of Taylor's phenomenological critique of Modernity in *A Secular Age* and it constitutes a subtraction story.

Milbank's theological critique of secularism adds, therefore, a certain sharpness and clarity to Taylor's thesis, once it is made clear that Taylor appears to cede too much ground to certain of secularism's subtraction stories. I have outlined above two points that I consider to be significant: firstly, Taylor's ambiguity over the relationship between disenchantment and religious decline, and second, the ambivalence that exists within his discussion of ordinary life.

Having introduced some of the issues pertaining to the discussion between Taylor and Milbank, therefore, I will begin this chapter by giving a sketch of some of the salient and relevant theological and ontological themes of Milbank and RO, particularly concerning the "story" of the West and its attendant doctrinal shifts which are claimed to have had such a significant impact, and including the present theological moment in which, so it is claimed, a recovery of the fundamental unity of grace and nature and of the recognition of the priority of an "ontology of peace" are desperately needed. In the chapter following this, I will show how this more general theological schema relates to the topic of ecclesiology in Milbank's thought. To conclude, I will then argue that, although significant points of critique can be made of Milbank, there are gains to be had by eliding the broad Taylorian social and cultural sweep with Milbank's own narrative of intellectual deviation. I will draw out what I consider

to be the most significant themes in Milbank's ecclesiology and show how these point to a need to play up the aesthetic dimension in our ecclesiology. To put my argument succinctly, Milbank's intellectual deviation story is compelling – perhaps not in the details but in its general critique of theology and culture – and from it we can conclude that modern, Protestantized forms of Christianity, which are at points pathologically obsessed with rationality, purely "Word-based" approaches to faith, iconoclasm, paranoia over images and sensory stimuli, and a penchant for undermining the sacraments to the point at which they are simply near-dispensable audio-visual illustrations of biblical truths, are, on the one hand, an overreaction to pre-Reformation, Catholic extravagances, and, on the other, a modern form of Taylorian excarnation, which really have no relevance to the Christian tradition proper, and are unwitting instances of complicity with secular unbelief. This is a broad thesis to defend within a single chapter, and so it is put forward as a supposition which to my mind makes sense of the various historical, theological and ecclesiological points raised. But there is perhaps a broader study to be done on this topic, which would certainly include a history of doctrine angle that would consider various things, in particular the controversy over iconoclasm and the veneration of icons that concerned the Second Council of Nicaea in 787.

The Story of Milbank and Radical Orthodoxy: Theology and Ontology

I will now delineate some of the fundamental theological and ontological claims of Milbank and the RO movement in order to show their relevance to the topic of aesthetics and ecclesiology. My aim here is to train these arguments towards a denuded, excarnated ecclesiology, thereby ultimately lending weight to my attempt to articulate an "aesthetic" ecclesiology which is orthodox and traditional. In this sense, I share a huge amount in common with Milbank et al, but I believe that the kind of ecclesiology for which I am arguing

is ultimately more rooted in an historico-material Church that really exists and could plausibly take note of the kinds of things I am suggesting. Indeed, one of the critiques that I will make of Milbank below is along the lines of what I see as a kind of elitist and idealist approach to theology and ecclesiology, which seems to me to be unfortunate given the profundity of his contribution in general.

Once I have made these general ontological claims clear, I will move on to delineate three shifts within late medieval theology that lead to a denuded and anti-aesthetic view of both creation and the Church. Weaving in themes delineated in the first section on general ontology, it will become clear that one ontology (the ontology of the secular) is disincarnate, anti-aesthetic and ushers in secular nihilism and creation's disconnection from God, whilst the other (the orthodox ontology of Neoplatonic Christianity[281]) provides a basis for the salvation and celebration of the material world, and the mediation of the transcendent through creation and, in a more intensified form, through the Church's sacraments.

General Ontological Claims

1. Participation and Secular Nihilism

In keeping with the "intellectual deviation" narrative, spoken of by Charles Taylor, Milbank and RO have been clear from the very beginning that the exigencies and characteristics of human culture and, indeed, the Church and Christianity itself are dependent ultimately on a consciously or unconsciously assumed ontology. This claim bears resemblance to Taylor's category of the "naïve": we may never be told these things, they

[281] By "Neoplatonic" here I simply mean the kind of Neoplatonism that is advocated by Milbank et al. It is, of course, a matter of controversy and debate as to whether or not the Milbankian Neoplatonism accurately represents either that which was espoused by Thomas Aquinas (which was clearly a synthesis of Platonic ontology and metaphysics with Aristotelian) or the Neoplatonism of Iamblichus, Proclus etc.

may never have been made explicit to us in that way, but we nevertheless believe them on such a deep level that we do even not notice them.

The first collection of RO writings begins with an elucidation of the notion of "participation". Participation is to be distinguished from the naïvely assumed secular ontology with which the west lives today. As has already been mentioned, although celebrating the Christian millennium and most of the achievements of the High Middle Ages, RO is still critical of weaknesses within that tradition. Again, in a way analogous to Taylor, RO believes that Christianity, in this period, only half-developed the kind of ontology it needed in order to resist its inevitable deviation into nihilism. And hence why RO makes the ambitious claim that it is able to '"re-envision" a Christianity which *never* sufficiently valued the mediating, participatory sphere which can alone lead us to God'.[282]

According to this narrative, the Enlightenment was a partial refusal and critique of the decadent aspects of this partially developed Christianity but functioned eventually as the ultimate confirmation of these decadences. The RO project picks up on Christian critiques of the Enlightenment – notably Hamann, Jacobi, Chesterton – who 'in different ways saw that what secularity had most ruined and actually denied were the very things it apparently celebrated: embodied life, self-expression, sexuality, aesthetic experience, human political community'.[283] Although the secular goes to great lengths to embrace the bodily and material realms, the ruination of material and embodied life occurs because of the secular's denuded ontology: because the secular posits nothing beyond the material, the material terminates upon itself and so cannot properly value the things it seeks to celebrate – sexuality, the aesthetic, embodied life – and so, when it reaches out for these things, it finds

[282] Milbank, *Orthodoxy*, p. 3.
[283] Ibid., p. 4.

itself grasping something phantasmal, like a solid material hand passing through the ethereal form of a ghost. Ironically, although the secular ontology is an attempt at a form of materialism, it is actually *less* materialistic than an alternative Christian ontology which posits something beyond the material. It cannot therefore save materiality because, upon its presuppositions, matter is not grounded in anything else. RO argues that, if things are not more than they appear, then they are purely superficial and cannot be fully valued: this must be in part due to the fact that the secular material cannot give its adherents the kind of depth that is sought and so the material must be used up, tortured and abused in an attempt to gratify.

A good example might be that of sexual expression: on a purely materialistic, secular ontology, although one might feel that there is a deeper significance to sexual acts and the apparent love that they might express, the ultimate lack of ground for belief in such a depth gives way to an anaemic and technical approach to sexual intercourse which develops, as its end, the desire for subjective gratification.[284] Sex becomes an experience only, ended at the point of climax, and can be remembered as enjoyable and anticipated as the same, but cannot be said in any way to constitute profundity beyond these things. The point is, therefore, that, upon such an ontology, everything – even human bodies and relationships – become less than they are because they cannot give anything beyond themselves. This is why in Modernity both high and low culture find it hard to account for and therefore to produce anything classically beautiful: music, art, clothing, architecture, and many other spheres of aesthetic interest are often characterised by crassness, ugliness, shoddy

[284] I believe that this technical approach to sex as a refusal of the transcendent is the best way to understand Michelle Houellebecq's obsession with the clinical, pornographic levels of detail in his work. I have already mentioned his work in my second chapter.

workmanship, desire for profit, cynicism, despair, and so on. The quest for innovation and originality are perhaps the most legitimate forms of artistic expression in Modernity, given that the truly beautiful is no longer available.

In place of this ontology and the nihilism by which it is characterised, Radical Orthodoxy takes up the contention of the aforementioned critics of the Enlightenment, arguing that 'only transcendence, which "suspends" these things in the sense of interrupting them, "suspends" them also in the other sense of upholding their relative worth over-against the void'.[285] Jonathan Chaplin notes here that the term "suspension" 'is used in the sense of a suspension bridge, which collapses…without the tension of the upright supports'.[286] In this sense, we might say that, as creation is suspended above the void through its being upheld and permeated by participation in God, it is also deepened such that appearances contain something undergirding them, giving them substance and solidity. This is why the RO writers say in their introductory comments that 'all there is *only* is because it is more than it is'.[287] This ontology is seen by RO as originally 'developed by Plato and reworked by Christianity'[288] and finds one of its central articulations in Pickstock's reading of the *Phaedrus* in *After Writing*.[289] In that work she shows, contra Derrida, that Socrates' concern in the *Phaedrus* is primarily with orality over the written word. The analogy with Platonism rests on the Christian utilization of the notion of universals as a development of the Platonic notion of the forms: in short, the nature of things is not based merely on resemblance but

[285] Milbank, *Orthodoxy*, p. 3.
[286] Jonathan Chaplin, 'Suspended Communities or Covenanted Communities? Reformed Reflections on the Social Thought of Radical Orthodoxy' in James K.A. Smith and James H. Olthius eds., *Radical Orthodoxy and the Reformed Tradition: Creation, Covenant and Participation* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2005), pp. 151-182 (p. 175).
[287] Milbank, *Orthodoxy*, p. 4.
[288] Ibid., p. 3.
[289] Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998).

upon their metaphysical participation in a formal realm that lends its being to them. This participation is, in Christianity, transferred from the realm of the forms to the mind of God and gives us a model for the relationship between God and creation.

One of the most novel aspects of the RO project is that it does not merely ape Neoplatonism in its ontology, but it looks to French postmodernism to provide a contemporary philosophical counterpoint to Socrates. RO's ontology has in common with this type of postmodernism a stress on indeterminacy as opposed to Modernity's obsession with rational categorization and epistemological certainty. It rejects what Gavin Hyman describes as Modernity's 'desire for an all-encompassing mastery of reality by rational and/or scientific means',[290] noting that such mastery must inevitably be characterized by the exclusion of everything that could not be encompassed by it, which is often 'the nonrational or nonscientific'.[291] Both RO and the postmodern, by contrast, call into question the competency of Modernity to do such a thing, preferring instead to say that whatever reality is, it is too effulgent to captured by a comprehensive system.

Jonathan Chaplin and others have wondered 'whether this general ontology suffers from an apparently irreconcilable tension between an invocation of a premodern (Neoplatonic) metaphysics of harmonic order and stable identities and an undue dependence on a postmodern discourse of contingent social constructs in endless flux'.[292] However, this concern would be refused by RO because, although postmodern theory promotes

[290] Gavin Hyman, *The Predicament of Postmodern Theology: Radical Orthodoxy or Nihilist Textualism?* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), p. 12.
[291] Hyman, *Predicament*, p. 13.
[292] Chaplin, 'Communities', in Smith, *Orthodoxy*, p. 175.

indeterminacy, for RO the latter 'is not impersonal chaos, but infinite interpersonal harmonious order'.[293] Or as Milbank puts it,

> It's impossible to be dogmatic about things, everything is very fluid and very uncertain and so on. But, that doesn't necessarily point us in a nihilistic direction. It may suggest that knowledge is always fragmentary, analogical, a sort of partial grasp of an always inaccessible plentitude (sic) of truth.[294]

There are certainly questions here about RO's utilization of postmodern forms,[295] but it is fair to say that one can promote an indeterminate ontology that does not seek absolute, inviolable and punctiliar identity for everything but sees all things as existing in relationship to one another and to God, and which is also clearly distinguished from the nihilistic and deconstructive tendencies of the postmodern.

2. The Unity of Nature and Grace

A fundamental concern of Milbank's work, and directly related to the breakdown of a participatory ontology, is what he sees as the contemporary and secular division between nature and grace. Nature and grace, so Milbank argues, were never separated until certain deviations within later medieval theology. The dominant neo-scholastic theology that was eventually challenged by the *Nouvelle Théologie* of Henri de Lubac and several others in the

[293] Milbank, *Orthodoxy*, pp. 1-2.
[294] Philip Gonzales, 'Between Philosophy and Theology: Towards the Theological Implications of William Desmond's Thought, *An Interview with John Milbank*', *Radical Orthodoxy: Theology, Philosophy, Politics*, 5(1) (2019), 47-60 (p. 48).
[295] In my opinion, RO's utilization of postmodern forms of articulation is one of its weaker features. I am much persuaded by the arguments put forward by Roger Scruton that, although they may contain some insight, the works that are celebrated within this canon are largely intellectually fraudulent and many of their writers and thinkers are overrated (cf. Roger Scruton, *Fools, Frauds and Firebrands: Thinkers of the New Left* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015)). The claim that the style on display is somehow "performative" of deeper truth (in a way analogous to that of poetry) is utilized, in my view, to disguise the fact that what is being said is often the mystification of simple concepts (such as Derrida's *différance*) in an attempt to make them sound more complex, original, and intelligent than they actually are. There is a noetic and elitist air to these writings which makes the style especially inappropriate for a Christian theology that is seeking to resource the Church. As an example of this "performative" technique, I would cite Milbank's entry in *The Monstrosity of Christ*, which is intentionally unstructured and tangential over so many extremely difficult pages that it is almost impossible to read with any clear understanding of what is being said. There is, admittedly, much more to be said on this topic which could constitute an interesting study in itself.

twentieth century, following the interpretations of first Denys the Carthusian and later Cajetan,[296] mistakenly thought that Thomas Aquinas had posited such a separation, but this, it is claimed, is to fundamentally misunderstand Thomas's religious epistemology.[297] Rather on Thomas's view, reason is seen as an inchoate form of revelation, and the latter is seen as an intensification of reason. There are not two separate epistemological plains, in other words, one in which natural knowledge is conveyed and one in which supernatural knowledge is, but there is one way of knowing, and all of it in some sense revealed by God to humanity. In Thomas specifically, not only is reason framed by participation in God but, so Milbank argues, it is also 'framed by eschatology' and this because reason is always an ecstatic quest for the beatific vision, even if this is only dimly recognized: 'Reason ascending…is an inchoate and relatively non-discursive anticipation of the final end, and in consequence reason ascending is already grace descending'.[298] Again, the reading of Aquinas which de Lubac opposed denied this interpretation of Thomas's anthropology as implying 'an "innate" desire for the beatific vision', interpreting it alternatively as 'an "elicited" desire, which is *purely of the will*, although occasioned by a curiosity proper to the intellect'.[299]

Another way of approaching this controversy is to observe Milbank's critique of Barthian neo-orthodoxy. Barth sought a way to repudiate the unbelief and poverty of nineteenth century Protestant liberalism but instead produced a system which was unwittingly complicit with the metaphysical assumptions of the latter. Instead of challenging

[296] Cf. John Milbank, *The Suspended Middle: Henri de Lubac and the Renewed Split in Modern Catholic Theology* (Grand Rapids Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005), p. 17.
[297] Cf. John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas* (London: Routledge, 2001).
[298] John Milbank, 'The Programme of Radical Orthodoxy', in Laurence Paul Hemming ed., *Radical Orthodoxy: A Catholic Enquiry?* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2000), pp. 33-45 (p. 35).
[299] Milbank, *Middle*, p. 17.

Modernity's absolute break between subject and object, Barth assumed as much and so delineated a duality between human reason (which then operated in its own sphere with a "valid secular autonomy") and theological revelation which 'must be…exclusively grounded in the absolute divine descent of incarnation regarded more as a remedy for our finitude than our fallenness'.[300] By this last remark Milbank means that, upon a Barthian schema, the incarnation is not so much an ontological remedy for sin in the form of divinization, but simply a way of the divine communicating with an otherwise unreachable creation. It is a soteriological shift from ontology to epistemology in that sense. Therefore Milbank et al depart from neo-orthodoxy because it refuses 'all "mediations" through other spheres of knowledge and culture (and) assume(s) a positive autonomy for theology'.[301]

The upshot of this critique is that both liberalism and neo-orthodoxy are simultaneously buying into the fundamental ontological duality of Modernity, which is the separation between nature and grace, reason and revelation. Neo-orthodoxy, holding fast to this distinction, allows for no divine mediation through nature or human reason, and therefore makes creation merely an arbitrary receptacle for divine interruption, whereas liberalism refuses the extrinsic realm of grace and revelation altogether, preferring instead to see human reason as sufficient. It is quite clear how this elides with Taylor's historical narrative of the separation between the immanent and the transcendent, with the former corresponding to grace and the latter to nature. Applied to the aesthetic, the Barthian separation implies that creation is irrelevant to the dramatic disclosure of God to man and so the material does not play a role, whilst for the liberal the aesthetic is perhaps more

[300] Milbank, 'Programme', in Hemming, *Enquiry*, p. 34.
[301] Milbank, *Orthodoxy*, p. 2

expressive of humanity's understanding of God and thus remains grounded in the immanent.

In *Theology and Social Theory*, Milbank articulates two different versions of the "integralist revolution"[302] which challenged this duality in recent times. This difference, associated firstly with de Lubac and *Nouvelle Théologie* and secondly with German sources such as Karl Rahner, 'can be crudely indicated and misleadingly summarized by saying that whereas the French version "supernaturalizes the natural", the German version "naturalizes the supernatural"'.[303] Milbank prefers the French account because 'the thrust of the latter version is in the direction of a mediating theology, a universal humanity, a *rapprochement* with the Enlightenment and an autonomous secular order'.[304] Why is this the case? Milbank argues that Rahner de-supernaturalizes grace by claiming that the otherness of grace 'is present in the *a priori* structure of every created human spirit'.[305] Therefore, he asks, if that is the case, 'how can we give it any content?' and he concludes that we must 'understand Christian revelation and Christian teachings as just expounding, or making "explicit", the universal availability of grace'.[306] This dilutes Christian doctrine and experience as drawing out what is *just there* in nature, and therefore separating out completely the supernatural from the natural. Again, the *just there*-ness is indicative of the theme of the secular as a subtraction story that we have seen in both Taylor and Milbank.

In place of this, Milbank proposes the model of Henri de Lubac, the latter being an important influence for Milbank. He develops this analysis first in *Theology and Social*

[302] Milbank, *Theology*, p. 207.
[303] Ibid.
[304] Ibid.
[305] Ibid., p. 224.
[306] Ibid.

Theory and later on in the book-length treatment *The Suspended Middle*. The phrase "suspended middle" was coined by von Balthasar and refers to, as Milbank puts it, 'a new sort of ontology' developed by de Lubac, 'indeed in a sense a "non-ontology" – articulated *between* the discourses of philosophy and theology, fracturing their respective autonomies, but tying them loosely and yet firmly together'.[307] This non-ontology situates what is real in a middle space between philosophy and theology, the natural and the supernatural. Indeed, the phrase "middle space" is almost certainly misleading because it implies an autonomous area between the two. In fact, de Lubac argues that, in some sense, nature is always already graced, that 'the supernatural…is always manifest within Creation, is present at the heart of the ordinary'.[308] This is why Milbank chooses the terse phrase of Robert Bresson to sum up this view, 'Le Surnatural, c'est du reel précis'[309] – the supernatural is precisely the real. But, alongside this, the second movement concerns the fact that the ordinary points beyond itself and 'in its spiritual nature aspires upwards to the highest', and yet 'the "more" that is demanded by nature can only be received by God as a gift'.[310]

One of the implications is that there must be a "middle sphere" in which grace is mediated through nature whilst nature simultaneously and ecstatically reaches out for the supernatural. This, for Milbank, is the sphere of Christian culture, without which 'there is only a nominal, not a mediated grace, which must remain uncomprehended and without real effect'.[311] Why is this? It is because grace is no longer the mediation of God's salvific presence in the world, but 'the decree of an arbitrary God mediated by the power structure

[307] Milbank, *Middle*, p. 5.
[308] Ibid.
[309] Ibid., p. xii.
[310] Ibid., pp. 5-6.
[311] Ibid., p.13.

of a Church'.[312] The ecclesiological implications, upon this view, are grave because, by the neo-scholastic interpretation of Thomas, grace is reduced to a commodity which is handed out by ecclesiastical fiat, whereas the true reading of Thomas assigns grace a place within all of creation, all of which has an implicit, grace-fuelled *telos*. Grace is thus not something simply super-added to bits of creation, but inheres within all of it.

It is important therefore to resist a reading of the sacraments or of the structures of the Church as an arbitrary moment of divine intervention or as a bounded, sacralized arena within an otherwise denuded, secularized universe. To the contrary, de Lubac argues that the Eucharist, 'up to the year 1300 or so, remained…less a derivation from clerical power and a present miraculous spectacle than a re-presentation of the historical body of Christ'.[313] This coheres with de Lubac's famous dictum, to the effect that the Church (and its clerics) do not make the Eucharist, but the Eucharist makes the Church, the meaning of which must be that the Eucharist derives from the events of the incarnation and instantiates them within material history as 'the Eucharistic repetition of Christ's literal historicity'.[314] The Church's authority, therefore, is not an arbitrary intervention upon bare nature, but 'an hierarchical flow through time'.[315] Upon this reading, we must say that the sacraments are an intensification of the sacramental nature of creation itself, a drawing up of nature, by the gift of God, towards its true *telos*, which is union with him. This is the meaning of the Eastern Orthodox notion of the sacrifice of the mass (the other two being Christ's own sacrifice for sin and his abiding presence in heaven as he makes intercession for us), which is, in David Bentley Hart's words, 'at once an offering of bread and wine and so of ourselves

[312] Ibid., p. 23.
[313] Ibid., p. 66.
[314] Ibid.
[315] Ibid.

(of our substance)'.[316] In other words, it is an offering of creation itself before God for blessing, whilst being also a simultaneous acknowledgement that what is offered originates from God and belongs to God, hence the Orthodox phrase "thine own of thine own". The elements are not "secular" bits of creation; rather they are something, like we ourselves, that originate from God, are orientated toward God, and find grace as a gift that fulfils itself in God.

Viewed in this way, the Church's sacraments can be understood as the benign action of God within a creation which is already orientated toward and mediatory of him. The sacraments are in continuity with ordinary life and therefore draw ordinary life out of itself whilst enhancing it. As Milbank points out, this ontology refuses the nascent Enlightenment dualities of the 'Counter-Reformation papacy or the typed, bound, and sealed Scriptures, bare of all commentary, promulgated by the Reformers'.[317] Both of these approaches must be understood as attempts to shore up the presence of the supernatural within an otherwise secular order: because grace is not present in the world in a general sense, it must be located in a pristine, purely supernatural location, whether that be the teaching magisterium of the Church or in the unadorned words of Scripture, part of the mistake being to see these authorities as arriving for us as unmediated by historical and material contingencies. Revelation, upon de Lubac's view, has a much greater sense of continuity with the latter, and, therefore, his ontology provides more scope for the role of, for example, theologians within the academic realm and (ecclesial or non-ecclesial) aesthetic beauty as mediatory of the presence of God in the world.

[316] David Bentley Hart, *The Hidden and the Manifest: Essays in Theology and Metaphysics* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2017), p. 193.
[317] Milbank, *Middle*, pp. 66-67.

3. Ontology of Violence/Ontology of Peace

In continuity with Milbank's desire to refuse the theoretical dualities of Modernity is the foundational thesis to his most significant singular work, *Theology and Social Theory*. He writes there of his desire to 'show that from the outset the secular is complicit with an "ontology of violence", a reading of the world which assumes the priority of force and tells how this force is best managed and confined by counter-force'.[318] In contrast to this, however, Christianity 'recognizes no ontological violence' and 'construes the infinite not as chaos, but as a harmonic peace which is yet beyond the circumscribing power of any totalizing reason'.[319] This apparently simple thesis is then applied to various different spheres of human thought and action. In political liberalism, for example, a key claim is that Hobbes' theory of nature as "red in tooth and claw", fundamentally savage and in need of being restrained by state power, is in league with the assumption of the ontological primacy of violence.[320] Applied to the sphere of economics, Milbank argues that political and social theorists such as Adam Smith and Thomas Malthus construct a specifically Christian heresy in order to justify their speculations. This heresy says that God providentially orders the agonistic and individualistic desires of a fundamentally sinful humanity in order to bring about his communal designs for the universe. This justifies, therefore, the sinful means of economic consumerism – private vice, public benefit – and, again, implies the ontological primacy of sin and violence. Therefore, the "new science" of political economy 'can be unmasked as agonistics, as theodicy and redefinition of Christian virtue'.[321] Milbank includes in his critique sociologists such as Weber, Simmel, Troeltsch etc. before moving on, in the

[318] Milbank, *Theology*, p. 4
[319] Ibid., p. 5.
[320] Ibid., pp. 9-26.
[321] Ibid., p. 47.

second half of the book, to critique the postmodern theorists (mostly French with the exceptions of Nietzsche and Heidegger), who similarly enshrine an arbitrary violence grounded in an aboriginal difference at the heart of being itself: because difference, chaos, flux and so on, are the fundamentally reality of being, the latter is necessarily characterized by violence and, therefore, violence must be the most natural expression of human existence, including politics and culture. Hence Milbank's claim that, 'The neo-Nietzscheans cannot…wriggle out of the implication that, while nihilism may be "the Truth", it is at the same time the truth whose practical expression must be fascism'.[322]

More will be said on the alternative that Milbank proposes, but suffice to say here that, as was mentioned above, although Milbank accepts postmodernism's denial of the stability and certitude that is posited by Modernity and Enlightenment rationality, he similarly denies its inherent nihilism. How is this possible? Only by positing 'an infinite differentiation that is also a harmony',[323] which, in Christian terms must draw an analogy between the differentiation that inheres within the persons of the Trinity (and in a broader, more specifically Augustinian sense, the harmonious mutuality that characterizes the heavenly city) and the indeterminacy that is at the heart of creation. This is 'the Christian critique and transformation of Neo-Platonism':

> Building on the neo-Platonic recognition of the One as itself "without limits", beyond the sphere of division and contrast which involves dialectical negation, both Augustine and Dionysius (in their Trinitarian theologies) went further by situating the infinite emanation of difference within the Godhead itself […] This entirely reinvents the idea of order. Order is now more purely an aesthetic relation of the different, and no longer primarily self-identity or resemblance.[324]

[322] Ibid., p. 279.
[323] Ibid., p. 434.
[324] Ibid., pp. 435-436.

By "an aesthetic relation", Milbank means 'the "subjective" apprehension of a harmony displayed in the order of the differences, a desire at work in their midst'.[325] This is a particularly dense bit of writing, but it seems that Milbank means that within the *hypostases* of the Trinity there is a kind of dynamic relationship which can be understood analogically as the giving of gifts and the desiring of one for another. If this is what underlies creation, then "order" need no longer be defined in terms of stability but in terms of a Trinitarian relationality.[326]

In Milbank's general ontology, it is clear why this is such an important issue. Upon a participatory model in which creation is "suspended" from God, imbued with the presence of the one who is simultaneously *interior intimo meo et superior summo meo*, it cannot be the case that, underlying all of creation and being itself, there is a fundamental war of opposing and chaotic forces. This would be to identify God himself with violence and chaos, and it would be to inscribe those forces into the heart of the creator. Redemption, upon this view, would become inconceivable, because there would be nothing to be redeemed *from* or *to*. All would be violence, chaos, striving, the *agon*. The point here, contrary to some of Milbank's more extreme claims in *Theology and Social Theory* on this matter,[327] is not to say

[325] Ibid.

[326] This is a point at which Steven Shakespeare's analysis of Milbank's ontology is slightly misleading. Shakespeare is clearly invested in a postmodern, anti-essentialist view and so he wants to read Milbank in that way, even though Milbank's view is not congruent with it. This is clear when Shakespeare quotes Milbank as saying, 'we are not all tightly defined by a collective essence' (Steven Shakespeare, *Radical Orthodoxy: A Critical Introduction* (London: SPCK, 2007), p. 140). Through his analysis of Milbank's ecclesiology, Shakespeare is struggling with an interpretation of Milbank that understands him as saying that truth is basically found in relationships and narratives whilst at the same time claiming that there are somewhat fixed essences. It seems to me that Shakespeare is putting too little emphasis on the essentialist element in Milbank. As, for example, when Milbank says (in one of the texts Shakespeare discusses), 'If there is truth, then it is ontological – the fact that there are essences (however complex); the fact that there is a true way for things to be and a way things eternally are' (Milbank, *Being*, p. 106). Interestingly, Shakespeare quotes the second half of this in a partial concession to Milbank's essentialism, but neglects the part in which Milbank says, quite simply, 'there are essences'.

[327] For examples, see Milbank's reading of Girard and his subsequent theorizing on the atonement, of which the latter is essentially reduced to a subjective reaction on the part of humanity to the death of Christ over and

that force can have no place within creation and no beneficial effects upon it; rather the point is to say that these things, if fundamental to the nature of God and to creation, cannot be overcome ultimately, either through mortification of sin in the individual life and in the community of the Church, or in eschatological bliss, because they are intrinsic to the nature of being itself. The story of the redemption of creation is, therefore, fundamentally subverted and undermined.

To sum up these basic concerns, therefore, I have shown that for Milbank the centrality of the notion of "participation" as a suspension of creation with relation to the divine, the fundamental unity of nature and grace, and the refusal of an ontology of violence for an ontology of peace, are important focal points. Milbank and Radical Orthodoxy have much to say on the topic of aesthetics, as is made clear, for example, in the original collections of

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above Christ's objective work (Milbank, *Theology*, pp. 400-401), and this because the latter would not fit with Girard's understanding of Christianity's subversion of pagan notions of sacrifice. See also the following paragraph on Augustine, linking his account of coercion and ontology: 'His account of a legitimate, non-sinful, "pedagogic" coercion partially violates his ontology, insofar as it makes some punishment positive and ascribes it to the action of divine will. This is inconsistent, because in any act of coercion, however mild and benignly motivated, there is still present a moment of "pure" violence, externally and arbitrarily related to the end one has in mind, just as the schoolmaster's beating with canes has no intrinsic connection with the lesson he seeks to teach…Thus although a punishment may be subordinate to essentially suasive purposes which are at variance with worldly *dominium*, he fails to see that the duration of punishment has to be an interval of such *dominium*, for the lesson *immediately* and intrinsically taught here must be the power of one over another, and it is always possible that the victim will learn *only* this lesson' (Milbank, *Theology*, p. 426). In a more recent work of 2009 (based on an earlier article), Milbank accepts that there is a "tragic dimension" in life by which 'circumstances can force us to sacrifice some good we feel essential to our integrity' and so writes, 'In no sense does *Theology and Social Theory* recommend "pacifism", and the formal specification of truth as peaceful relation cannot be applied as a criterion authorizing non-resistance. The latter alone may be finally persuasive, finally redemptive, but no use of prescriptive criteria tell us when it is to be resorted to' (John Milbank, *The Future of Love: Essays in Political Theology* (London: SCM, 2009), p.141). Again, see Hans Boersma's essay in which he observes that Milbank develops his view from that of *Theology and Social Theory*, in which he is quoted as saying that punishment 'has an inherently negative, privative relationship to being' (Milbank, *Theology*, p. 202), to a view more open to the possibility of redemptive violence in the later *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon*, in which Milbank is quoted as saying that 'violence can only be eradicated collectively, by a strange apocalyptic counter-violence, which is in the end a divine prerogative, yet is also obscurely anticipated within time' (Milbank, *Being*, p. 42) (Hans Boersma, 'Being Reconciled: Atonement as the Ecclesio-Christological Practice of Forgiveness in John Milbank', in Smith, *Reformed*, (pp. 183-202) p. 202). The claim that "apocalyptic counter-violence" must eventually cancel out pre-existing violence seems to imply a final and significant purpose for retributive force. Boersma notes that Milbank perhaps modified his view due to new experiences, citing his comment to Stanley Hauerwas: 'You can tell I have had children since I wrote *Theology and Social Theory*!' (Boersma, 'Atonement', in Smith, *Reformed*, p. 199).

essays, which finishes with a triad of reflections upon the implications for aesthetics of Radical Orthodox presuppositions,[328] but suffice to say here that the basic implication of these ontological claims is that they play up the importance and possibility of the mediatory aspects of creation, which clearly have implications in turn for aesthetics and ecclesiology. This will become even clearer in the section below.

Three Deviations and their Contemporary Anti-Aesthetics Legacies

Having outlined some basic aspects of Milbank's ontology, I will now move on to the significant genealogical aspect of his project. This is important because it further illustrates the claim that the anti-aesthetic, "excarnated" thrusts of contemporary theology and ecclesiology are related to the theological shifts which led to the rise of the secular.

One of the key claims to be made by Milbank and RO is that some significant theological shifts took place in the High Middle Ages which contributed to the rise of Modernity and secularism.[329] I will outline the three key doctrinal shifts below, indicating for each one how it is relevant to my theme of the aesthetic. The three shifts are as follows: the movement from the analogy of being to the univocity of being; the movement from realism to

[328] Cf. Milbank, *Orthodoxy*, pp. 201-277.

[329] It is important to note that this claim is set against a broader historical understanding of cultural change, all of which constituted its own significant epochal moment. Indeed, Milbank argues that the crucial shift that took place in western history, even more so than the Enlightenment, Reformation or Renaissance, is that which began around the year 1300, when 'there started to be a far greater gap between specialists and non-specialists in all fields; administration became more technical and distant; clerical control over the laity further increased; sharper differentiations were made between academic disciplines; theology assumed a far more technical and difficult character; the traditional centrality in theology of participation, deification, apophaticism, allegory and the vision of the Church as something engendered by the Eucharist all were abruptly challenged, in a fashion that prove epochally successful. Meanwhile, much that had been taken for granted in the Aristotelian/Neoplatonic synthesis and had been shared with Byzantine, Jewish and Islamic culture, was declared from henceforth unacceptable by ecclesial authorities…the later break-up of Christendom was itself in large measure the upshot of the changes, and equally…the same changes ushered in a drift towards "secularity"' (Milbank, *Being*, pp. 111-112). Again, many of these themes are already familiar from my outline of the work of Taylor.

nominalism; and, finally, the movement from Aquinian intellectualism to Ockhamist voluntarism. I will treat nominalism and voluntarism within the same section because they are so closely related conceptually. For each one of these, I will delineate how the creation and its creatures are separated off from participation in God and rendered remote from his presence.

The Univocity of Being

As mentioned earlier, the RO narrative is peopled with heroes and villains, but perhaps the most significant duality espoused is that represented by Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus. The claim regarding these two thinkers is that, in contrast to the theological holism of Aquinas, Duns Scotus 'was the first inventor of a fundamental ontology',[330] which, in short, means that 'he divorced theology from philosophy',[331] by separating out God's nature from the more fundamental metaphysical category of being. This observation has been key to Milbank's theological project from the off, as is evident in *Theology and Social Theory*.

Before saying more on the details, it is surely worth pointing out that the claims regarding Duns Scotus are contested theologically, even by authors who would otherwise be sympathetic to the type of claims made by Milbank and RO.[332] What is the significance of this? This depends on the extent of the error. It seems to be the case that, even if Scotus and the other "villains" mentioned are not as guilty as is claimed, the kinds of theological

[330] Milbank, *Theology*, p. 305.
[331] Rupert Shortt, *God's Advocates: Christian Thinkers in Conversation* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2005), p. 104.
[332] Cf. David Bentley Hart, 'Review Essay: Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy*,' *Pro Ecclesia*, IX(3), 367-372; Robert Sweetman, 'Univocity, Analogy, and the Mystery of Being according to Duns Scotus', in Smith, *Reformed*, pp. 73-88; Daniel P. Horan, *PostModernity and Univocity: A Critical Account of Radical Orthodoxy and Duns Scotus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014). The movement's spokespeople are, of course, aware of these critiques and have issued various responses, among them, Catherine Pickstock, 'Reply to David Ford and Guy Collins', *Scottish Journal of Philosophy*, 54(3) (2001), 405-422. and 'Modernity and Scholasticism: A Critique of Recent Invocations of Univocity', *Antonianum* 78(1) (2003), 3-46.

suppositions that they are associated with first took root around the time period under discussion. Thus, even if it was not really Scotus who, for example, articulated the concept of the univocity of being exactly in the way that Milbank and Pickstock claim, the fact that it came about around that time and that it has had the effect that it has seems compelling, and, therefore, the issue of personal responsibility is an interesting yet ultimately more specific point. Conversely, one of the main interests of the RO narrative is, following the *Nouvelle Théologie*, to rehabilitate Thomas Aquinas through a detailed return to his writings, exonerating him of the charge of the absolute separation of nature and grace. Again, this is important if one is interested in retrieving Thomas himself, however, the overall narrative of RO could survive in an altered form if Thomas had in some way been responsible for this separation. Although this would, of course, significantly affect Thomas's legacy.[333]

The flip-side to this is that, if it could be shown that something like univocity had always been nascent within the Christian tradition since far earlier times and that it was in fundamental *continuity* with Christian orthodoxy, then the RO narrative *would* be undermined, perhaps fatally. However, these considerations would take us beyond the scope of this essay were we to pursue them further. The scholarly debate around RO continues, and suffice to say that it seems a strong hypothesis that, at the least, there *was* a fundamental shift of this type in the High Middle Ages and that there is a logical coherence

[333] Perhaps this is to understate the matter somewhat, as it could be argued that such a charge levelled against a figure as significant as Thomas could undermine what for many is the greatest theological synthesis of Eastern and Western Patristic theology, the early Renaissance rehabilitation of Aristotle and the highest aspects of medieval theology, and that it might, therefore, have wider implications. Cf. Milbank's comment that, for de Lubac, the retrieval of Aquinas matters because 'for de Lubac Aquinas represented the possibility of an East-West synthesis (Augustine plus the Dionysius/Damascene legacy) and even more crucially an attempt to incorporate Aristotle that *was* positive in so far as it meant a deeper reckoning with reflection upon the operations of nature and of this-worldly human behaviour' (Milbank, *Middle*, p. 24ff).

between the theological moves that were made at that time and the metaphysical presuppositions that undergird the secular now.

To return to the issue at hand then, the univocity of being is to be contrasted with the *analogia entis*, the analogy of being, the former associated with Scotus and the latter with Aquinas.[334] As is well known, Aquinas argued that language about God possesses meaning only in analogical relation to language about other things, and is neither equivocal (meaning that it refers to two distinct and entirely different things) nor is it univocal (meaning that it refers to exactly the same thing). The *analogia entis* says, therefore, that when we use a word like "good" or "love" to describe God, we are taking our normal conception of that idea and applying it analogically, which is to say that we have some idea of how those words relate to God whilst acknowledging that God infinitely exceeds that understanding, and this because God does not participate in goodness and love as creatures do, but because he *is* those very things in his essence. The Scotian critique of this position is that it does not provide an adequate account of the way that the analogy functions and that, therefore, in order to avoid the conclusion that language about God is simply meaningless, it must be the case that there is an element of univocity in our language. When applied to the concept of existence, the difference is significant. Whereas Thomas argued that being is part of God's essence fundamentally and that human beings simply participate in being in an entirely contingent way, Scotus argued, according to Milbank, that 'Being…could be either finite or infinite, and possessed the same simple meaning of existence when applied to either'.[335]

[334] Although these two figures are contrasted with each other in these writings, it is slightly misleading to articulate it in these terms because historically Scotus was not interested primarily in crossing swords with Thomas, but with Henry of Ghent. This is one of the observations made in the aforementioned Robert Sweetman, 'Univocity, Analogy, and the Mystery of Being according to Duns Scotus', in Smith, *Reformed*, pp. 73-88.

[335] Milbank, *Theology*, p. 305.

Therefore being becomes a more fundamentally category under which both God and everything else are subsumed. The argument for this is that, in order for our language about God to retain meaning, it must relate to God as a participation in the same genus as his creation. The reason for this is that, in order to create an analogical comparison between two difference species (say, a human and a dog), there must be some prior and broader category in which they both participate (here it would be the genus "animal"). Therefore, in order to say that a human is good in the same way as a dog is and that one is more good than the other, we must have some idea of the category that they both participate in, and to what extent of goodness they participate in it. When it comes to God, therefore, in order to make a meaningful statement about God such as "God is good" or "God is greater than a human being", God too must participate in an overarching category such that we understand that when we talk about goodness or power we are talking about the same thing. That overarching category, Scotus argued, is being, in which both God and creation participate univocally, and, hence we can make meaningful statements about God because God exists in the same way that creatures do. That existence may have a different level of intensity, but it is still fundamentally the same thing. Without this, it is argued, human language about God would be totally equivocal and therefore meaningless.

In Scotus, there is a clear sense in which human beings and creation exist in the same way that God does. Creation no longer shares its being with God and participates contingently in his necessary existence, but moves toward the status of autonomy. The danger is, therefore, as Milbank notes, that we 'start to idolize God' because we 'treat God as if he's a very big thing, and it's undeniable that people do eventually start talking about God as coming under the category of an individual, which isn't the case in the classical

tradition'.[336] This is the fictitious God who is more like, as Milbank says elsewhere, "an ontic idol",[337] than the source of being itself.

A separate problem then presents itself within Scotus, which is that of causality. This stands in contrast to the earlier, Neoplatonic-influenced, Christian understanding, in which causality was understood as influence or a "flowing-in",[338] so that there was an analogical understanding of the way that higher and lower causes operated.[339] On the new Scotian view the higher and lower causes, being thus understood univocally, come into competition with one another. The secondary, lower causes are held to operate independently from the primary, higher causes, which are then seen to temporarily suspend or interrupt the lower ones. Thus a duality between heaven and earth is constructed in which the latter can be separated conceptually from the former, excepting arbitrary intervention. God 'tends to come into zero-sum competition with his subordinates' and this '"monopolizing" God is likely to be conceived as a tyrant who usurps our powers because he operates on the same univocal plane of being as ourselves'.[340]

Again, in terms of both being and causality, space is created for the nascent secular to fill: if there is a God who is not in some way infused within the creation itself, both in terms of presence and influence, then that God is separated from creation; perhaps he is infinitely

[336] Shortt, *Advocates*, p. 109.
[337] Milbank, 'Closer', in Warner, *Varieties*, p. 67.
[338] Shortt, *Advocates*, p. 109.
[339] This is clear in Thomas Aquinas' treatment of free will, for example. Question 83, Article 1, Objection 2 sets up a dichotomy between man's power and God's power and quotes Romans 9:16 to the effect that man does not will but God does. Aquinas goes on to answer this objection by saying that this does not preclude free-will but only that 'the free-will is not sufficient thereto unless it be moved and helped by God'. In all of Aquinas' replies and in the *respondeo*, it is clear that Aquinas thinks of free-will as something that is initially enabled through the faculty of reason, which is given by God and can be influenced by him in its undertakings. For all of this see Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Prima Pars, Q.83, A.1. (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. by Fr Laurence Shapcote O.P., John Mortensen and Enrique Alarcon, eds. (Lander: The Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2012)).
[340] Milbank, 'Closer', p. 67.

greater, but he is nevertheless related to creation in the same way that one *individual* is related to another. Therefore a deist understanding of God is created: he is removed and uninvolved, or he might, simply, not exist at all, and this perhaps because such a God is philosophically incoherent and therefore fictitious.[341] Such a God is also vulnerable to Heidegger's suggestion, in his notorious "ontotheological" critique, that this being is simply an anthropomorphic transmutation of the ontic upon the plane of the ontological, or the related critiques of Freud and Feuerbach, who in different ways argued that belief in God is a form of paternal wish-fulfilment, a human father projected onto the screen of eternity.

It is clear how this overall, Scotian movement undermines the participatory, Neoplatonic ontology sketched above. In the latter, creation is "suspended" from God and so both constantly supported by him, but also infused with his presence. This is because he is not an individual who relates to creation as one individual relates to another, but because God is being itself and, as such, is infused within all instances of being, including that of the created order. Of course, one of the benefits of the univocity of being is that it avoids perhaps the principal problem represented by a participatory ontology, which is that it seems to preclude any "place" for creation, implying, perhaps, some kind of panentheistic schema, whereby creation is simply a part of the infinite God. Milbank acknowledges this problem, and observes that this is one of the benefits of 'the Scotist idea that creation embodies quantitively finite degrees of the same goodness that is infinite in God'.[342] However, this, it is argued, does not really answer the question inherent upon both schemas, 'Why add the

[341] As I mentioned in the introduction, this is one of the central points of Brad Gregory's genealogy in *The Unintended Reformation*: once the metaphysics are in place and only deism seems possible, Ockham's razor says that we should not multiply explanatory causes beyond what is necessary and thus the existence of God becomes an inevitably extravagant hypothesis. Cf. Gregory, *Reformation*, pp. 25-73.
[342] Shortt, *Advocates*, p. 109

finite to the infinite?', and ultimately Milbank speculates that, 'One needs perhaps to say that in some sense the experience of finitude, of lack, of weakness, mysteriously "adds" something to plenitude itself'.[343]

In all of this, we can see that the separation of nature and grace, reason and revelation, is absolutely central to these ontological concerns. As above, if we do not have some kind of participatory ontology, and especially if our ontology is that of Scotian univocity, it is clear that the only way that God can relate to creation is through arbitrary interruption. This goes for both general causality and special revelation. The latter, on such a schema, must consist of some kind of super-added informational download that miraculously appears within creation. Of course, this relates to the Milbankian critique of, for example, Karl Barth, and, by extension, various fundamentalist or merely literalist approaches to Scripture: creation is denuded of God's presence and we cannot know anything about God, nor experience God within creation, and therefore we need an absolute intervention, a parting of the clouds or a thunderbolt from heaven. Without this, we can have nothing except epistemological darkness: the darkness of separation.

It is obvious how this effects religious epistemology, and equally clear how it relates to the sphere of the aesthetic and liturgic. To return to a leitmotif of this dissertation, how is it that human beings imagined and executed the Gothic Cathedral? When we contemplate the famous "octagon" of Ely Cathedral, for example, that seems to suspend the observer between heaven and earth with its vertiginous power, it is clear that, if we were to try and

[343] Ibid. I would want to raise a question here concerning the danger of utilizing such terminology in our talk about God. As Milbank points out in various ways, when we talk about creation "needing" God or implying that God lacks something without creation, we are sailing close to the anthropomorphic, Moltmannian wind, and are in danger of theological shipwreck upon exactly the kind of ontic idol that was spoken of above. I am sure that Milbank does not mean this in the interview mentioned, and it is admittedly a comment that is made in passing.

construct such a thing today, it would not have the same authenticity, that it would be derivative of a tradition that is no longer our own, somehow fake and unconvincing. This is one of those sites, as I mentioned in the last chapter, at which, as Taylor says, 'the contact with the transcendent was/is so much firmer, surer'.[344]

This is a point at which the Milbankian analysis adds something essential to Taylor's narrative. Taylor gives us so much around societal, religious, political and anthropological shifts, all of which contribute to our understanding of the way that the transcendent aspect of existence somehow gets removed from our everyday experience, bounded by the buffered self, and so on. But the ontological shift described by Radical Orthodoxy is central to our understanding of why it is that the contact with the transcendent seemed "firmer" and "surer" in the medieval period and prior. To utilize Taylor's term, their "naïve" experience of reality was ontologically grounded in the ubiquity of God presence, whereas ours today is ontologically grounded in the *absence* of God's presence with certain prescribed exceptions. As such, it is unsurprising that we find it much more difficult to create works of aesthetic transcendence: the material no longer seems to conduct and transmit the divine presence into the world. Harking back to Taylor's three movements within artistic creation – from immediacy, to a first and then a second "disembedding" – the Gothic Cathedral, like a funeral mass in its original context, was not something to be contemplated as a representation of God's glory and power, or for an aesthetic experience of beauty, but it very literally embodied those things. Being in such a building was to touch them, and to experience them directly and literally. Behind such an understanding existed an ontological presupposition, namely, that creation was not an ontologically independent

[344] Taylor, *Secular*, p. 360.

entity, but existed within a participatory framework in relationship to God. The Scotian scheme of univocity divorces God and creation on an ontological level, and, therefore, aesthetics moves away inexorably from direct embodiment, to representation and, finally, to nebulosity. The end point of such a process is, of course, the cult of expressive ugliness or simple indifference to beauty that one sees in much ecclesiastical architecture today. This was partially recognized, if ultimately misdiagnosed, by Pugin.[345] Either the theological imagination of the architect is so impoverished that he or she designs a monstrosity of immoral proportions, or, perhaps more regularly, the aesthetic of the Church building is considered irrelevant and only functional considerations are promoted.[346] These considerations are often to do with the accommodation of a maximum amount of people (within fire safety limits) to listen to lengthy sermons of doctrinal imputation. And, of course, these buildings often double as centres for communal activities and, indeed, as arenas for secular businesses conferences.[347]

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[345] In my view, Pugin was right in his foundational instinct that architecture was inherently and directly linked with theology, ecclesiology and morality, but his genealogical critique was too simplistic, blaming, as it did, the Reformation for literally everything that had gone wrong, and proposing therefore a simple return to Roman Catholicism as the answer. My essay thus far makes it clear why such a critique fails, namely because it does not take account of the continuity between the High Middle Ages and the Reformation. There was no sudden break from the Gothic Medieval into the non-Gothic Reformation, rather, there was a transitional period which encompassed, among other things, the Renaissance architecture of Florence and elsewhere. This was pointed out when Pugin first published *Contrasts* by various reviewers. For an excellent biographical account, cf. Rosemary Hill, *God's Architect: Pugin and the Building of Romantic Britain* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

[346] For a good example of a theological examination of ecclesiastical architecture (admittedly more careful and complementary than my brief foray here), cf. Richard Kieckhefer, *Theology in Stone: Church Architecture from Byzantium to Berkeley* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[347] This is also true of medieval cathedrals themselves as they become increasingly secularized corporate entities, managed by businesspeople with no allegiance to the Christian Church whose concerns are purely financial. As such, when certain events such as 'Football in the Cathedral' (<https://www.gloucester.anglican.org/2018/football-tournament-cathedral/> [accessed 5 September 2019]) are proposed, they are given a kind of jaunty, theological rationale which is intended, on some level, to obscure the fact that these events are so extremely inimical to the design and intention of the creators as to be considered comical: 'Jesus fished with the fishermen and taught with the teachers; would he play football with the footballers? We think so; in fact, he'd probably play in goal'. See also, a sermon given by the Bishop of Lynn half-way up a helter-skelter that was placed in Norwich Cathedral in the summer of 2019: Bishop Jonathan Meyrick is said to have told the congregation that 'God is a tourist attraction' who 'wants to be

Is this supposed link between the loss of a participatory ontology and a decline in transcendental aesthetics plausible? Again, all that one can do here to suggest that the historical trajectory and the aesthetic development have a commensurability which are congruent with one another. To "prove" such a link would require a far greater and more in-depth historical survey than can be done here. Suffice to say that my argument is more intuitive, and based on a similar hunch to that of someone like Nietzsche, whose powerful observation is echoed in my own. Speaking of Christianity, he writes in *Human, All Too Human*,

> If belief in such a truth declines at all, if the rainbow colours around the outer edges of human knowledge and imagination fade; then art like *The Divine Comedy*, Raphael's paintings, Michelangelo's frescoes, Gothic cathedrals, art that presumes not only a cosmic but also a metaphysical meaning in the art object, can never blossom again. There will one day exist a moving legend that such an art, such an artistic faith, once existed.[348]

Nietzsche was, of course, speaking of the decline of Christianity *per se*, but when he mentions 'a cosmic' and 'metaphysical meaning in the art object', it is congruent with my argument to say that, when Christian ontology moves in the direction of univocity and the inevitably deistic implications, the former is fundamentally changed and obscured, such that

attractive to us' before 'treating them to a rendition of the Bee Gees' song Words as he reflected on the importance of smiles' (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-norfolk-49389623> [accessed 5 September 2019]). This was in the same summer that Rochester Cathedral installed a crazy golf course, causing at least one violent protest by a pensioner as he attacked a female chaplain and tried to hit a verger, accusing the cathedral of trying to turn the nave into "f*****g Disneyland" (<https://news.sky.com/story/pensioner-attacks-female-chaplain-in-row-about-crazy-golf-at-cathedral-11801947> [accessed 5 September 2019]). Of course, the moment one points out the incommensurability of setting and activity of all of this, one is derided as "humourless", a "fogey", a "regressive", and so on. The real theological questions are seldom addressed.

[348] Friedrich Nietzche, *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Freed Spirits*, trans. by Marion Faber with Stephen Lehmann (Lincoln and London, Nebraska Press, 1984), p. 132.

only a type of atheistic and unbelieving art can be produced, the quality of which is manifestly inferior due to its metaphysical limitations.[349]

The burden of this section has been to show, therefore, two things: firstly, the metaphysical nature of univocity as articulated by Milbank et al, and the way in which this was a departure from the previously held medieval synthesis of Christianity and pre-Christian metaphysics, and, secondly, the implications that this has not only for the generally held existential feeling of life in the west, but, more specifically, for art and aesthetics. I have argued that the notion of transcendence is impossible for us either to understand or reproduce as a result of these changes, and this is to our significant impoverishment.

Nominalism and Voluntarism

Having developed an argument regarding the decline of Christian aesthetics *in general* as linked with a shifting, "univocal" ontology, I will go on in the next chapter to relate this argument specifically to liturgy and the sacramental worship and worldview of the Church. Before doing this, I will outline two further movements in high medieval theology and their implications. Again, these observations are common to Milbank and the Radical Orthodoxy movement, but they also have correlatives elsewhere, many of which I mentioned in the introduction.

The first observation here concerns the historical introduction of the concept of nominalism, which is usually associated with William of Ockham (1285-1347), who notoriously (contra philosophical realism) denied the existence of universals, arguing instead that the only things that exist are particulars which happen to bear some

[349] A similar argument, albeit it with different details, is made by John Henry Newman in *The Idea of a University* (New York: Chelsea House, 1983).

resemblance towards one another. Again, a participatory ontology relies upon the existence of universals because individual instantiations need something prior to participate in. R.R. Reno speaks of universals as the 'glue that holds the world together',[350] and makes the observation that the loss of this glue means that the only way that words can retain their meaning is through violence and power. The latter relates to the kind of postmodern critique that is often developed by thinkers such as Derrida, Deleuze and Foucault. "Humanity", for example, must be a universal, upon a participatory ontology, because otherwise the individual instances of homo sapiens that we see around us are not connected in any objective sense, but only by convention. They share no essence and therefore just happen to be like each other. This raises a myriad of theological difficulties, particularly around concepts such as the human being as *imago Dei*, sin and atonement. How can Christ die, for example, for "humanity" when "humanity" is not an objective category but only an arbitrary assortment of resemblances? In a realist view, and in a participatory ontology, words need do more than simply signal; they convey and embody a universal reality. They need to *instantiate* something, with an "instantiation" being a particular that is an *instance* of a universal, a sign which instantiates the thing signified.[351] Again, the nominalist denies this objective link between sign and thing signified and claims that this is only a semantic convention.

Brian Douglas, in his monumental work on Anglican Eucharistic theology, applies this distinction helpfully to the issue of the sacrament:

[350] R.R. Reno, 'The Radical Orthodoxy Project', *First Things,* 100 (2000), 37-44 (p. 37).
[351] In Louis Dupré's terminology, following Susan K. Langer, this is analogous to the difference between a sign, which merely points to a reality, and a symbol: 'Symbols, then, do not refer the percipient directly to the signified object. Instead they *represent* it in the double sense of *making present* and *taking the place of*' (Louis Dupré, *Symbols of the Sacred* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000), p.1).

> Whereas the realist adopts what is sometimes called "the sacramental principle", that is, God chooses to use signs or things of this world, such as bread and wine, to convey and contain a signified spiritual reality: things such as the nature of Christ being instantiated in the bread and wine and received by those who receive them, the nominalist will deny this analysis. Instead of accepting a sacramental principle, the nominalist will argue that knowledge of the divine comes about through rational and semantic propositionalism, perhaps through hearing or preaching on the text of Scripture.[352]

Again, we see a clear distinction between what Douglas calls the "sacramental principle" (which I am arguing is related to a participatory ontology) and what he labels "semantic propositionalism". This is, broadly speaking, the difference between a denuded, protestant nominalist ontology which leads to anti-sacramentality, and a catholic, participatory ontology which issues in the opposite.[353]

The case of nominalism is treated most significantly in the Radical Orthodoxy corpus by Catherine Pickstock in *After Writing*. Pickstock's bold thesis is that the unliturgical world of secular Modernity is one in which written-ness replaces orality and that, therefore, the only way that words can retain their meaning is through the logic of transubstantiation in the Eucharist. Douglas rightly observes that Pickstock advocates for a realist ontology, writing as she does that 'what is recollected is not sought by a retrospective repetition…but a

[352] Brian Douglas, *A Companion to Anglican Eucharistic Theology: Volume 2: The Twentieth Century to the Present* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), p. 30.

[353] When I use the term "protestant" here, I only mean it in the narrow sense of the ontology under discussion. Brian Douglas, who I have just quoted, goes to extensive lengths to show that Anglican Eucharistic theology has always been mainly realist in its philosophical assumptions and that the presence of nominalism is largely peripheral. This clearly complicates the use of the word "protestant" because the Church of England is said to be protestant by some merely because it is not Roman Catholic. I use the term therefore in order to delineate a certain set of philosophical and ontological assumptions that I am critiquing as derivative of deviations and distortions in late medieval theology, which work themselves out in denuded, anti-sacramental and anti-aesthetic low-Church ecclesiologies, significantly in England in the iconoclastic frenzy of the anti-monarchical Puritans (many of whom stopped being Anglicans because they decided that the Church of England had not gone far enough in the sixteenth century) but in many other ever-ramifying factions as well. In order to try and delineate this usage somewhat, I tend to not capitalize the words "protestant" and "catholic" in this context, in order to show that I am not using them in the technical ecclesiological sense, but referring to a certain type of theological sensibility.

mediation of the transcendent in and through the immanent'.[354] Applied to the Eucharist, this indicates that a bare memorialism that sees the elements as nothing more than visual stimuli is refused in favour of a realist ontology that sees words (in the liturgy) and material (in the elements) as possessing the inherent capacity to conduct the divine into and through the created order. Thus, the Eucharist becomes the principal site at which the working of the transcendent through the immanent is most powerfully focussed. Pickstock clearly shares Taylor's concern that the transcendent and the immanent have been prised apart in Modernity, and she seeks a way to put them back together through the logic of transubstantiation.

Douglas makes the instructive comparison between Pickstock and Robert Doyle. Quoting the latter, he writes,

> Doyle […] argues for a "word ontology" rather than a "sacramental ontology" such that "God does not work in the world by way of sacraments or signs, but that he works directly, by his Word". For nominalists therefore, sacraments function only as promises or assurances of grace already accomplished and in no way […] as a means of delivering grace.[355]

When writing on Pickstock he observes therefore, 'Whereas Doyle argues against a sacramental principle based on realism, Pickstock seems to be arguing for just such a world, where "a philosophical gaze discloses the real beyond its foreclosed finite appearances"'.[356] This contrast strikes at the very heart of the argument of this chapter. The example of Doyle is used not because every kind of treatment of the Eucharist that denies the Real Presence of Christ in the elements necessarily constitutes a "word ontology", but because it is instructive for comparison to observe the distinction between the two types of theological

[354] Pickstock, *Writing*, p. 25.
[355] Douglas, *Companion*, p. 30.
[356] Doyle, *Companion*, p. 500, quoting Pickstock, *Writing*, p. 17.

sensibility. One flows naturally from a type of philosophical realism which coheres with a participatory ontology, whereas the other is the implication of a nominalism which denies the existence of universals and their capacity to instantiate themselves in the material.

There is a further observation to be made here concerning this type of "word ontology". It is quite clear that not all traditions that make the Bible of central concern are as a result anti-sacramental. But there *is* a historical link, which has been argued for by Milbank and others,[357] between nominalism and a desire to ground authority in a source which must be hermetically sealed off from other influences and pristine in its capacity to dispense truth. Milbank frequently observes that this issues in a kind of post-Tridentine Catholic/Reformation Protestant duality whereby the former insists on the authority of the bishop or perhaps the Pope to produce the sacramental body of Christ in the Mass and the latter the authority of Scripture in its self-interpretative perspicacity. Scripture, Milbank argues, was not understood in this way prior to the thirteenth century because the Bible was not seen as "bound", either in the sense of being literally bound into one book but also in the sense of being closed to a kind of expansion in continuity with the traditional commentary of the Church: 'It was up to the commentator to go on trying to achieve the Bible as the infinite Borgensian library spoken of at the end of St John's Gospel'.[358] Linked to this commentarial understanding was the practice of allegorical exegesis which connected Old and New Testament through Christological typology, but which also used creation itself in its allegorical ordering so that a creature might become a symbol of some biblical type (the pelican, for example, as not just the product of natural processes, but as God's self-

[357] Cf. Peter M. Candler Jr., *Theology, Rhetoric, Manuduction, or Reading Scripture Together on the Path to God* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdman Publishing Co, 2006).
[358] Milbank, *Being*, p. 134.

giving love in Christ).[359] Further, linked to these was the allegorical relationship of the text to the Church, so that 'in the "time being" after Christ, we could be redeemed, because his deeds indicated and made possible our anagogical performances'.[360] All of this was funded on account of a realist ontology because it assumed 'that there are "essential" shared universal meanings between things' and 'in consequence nominalism ensured the collapse of allegory as the real divine rhetoric'.[361] The upshot of this process is that the possibility of 'intrinsic aesthetic connections'[362] is lost, and all that we are left with is a kind of positivism surrounding notions of divine authority, which must be circumscribed in the ways mentioned. Upon a nominalist ontology, therefore, the creation cannot be a symbol of God or divine truth. The pelican, to us, is no longer Christ bleeding to feed his children, but is simply the result of the end of a process of evolution. Art and the aesthetic do not participate in divine truth. And the sacrament of the Eucharist, likewise, becomes something circumscribed, whether as a bare memorial which helps us to remember something that happened in a punctiliar moment in history or as an individual and similarly punctiliar miracle that is in absolute discontinuity with normal human life and the order of the universe. The metaphysical relationships between all of these things are broken down upon a nominalist ontology.

Charles Taylor shares a similar concern about language and, in a section towards the end of *A Secular Age*, suggests that poetry and poets such as Gerard Manley Hopkins might be in a position to re-enchant language by using it to capture something of the action of the

[359] I have already mentioned Peter Harrison' work*, The Bible, Protestantism, and the Rise of the Natural Sciences*, in which this is a key theme.
[360] Milbank, *Being*, p. 134.
[361] Ibid.
[362] Ibid.

things spoken of. The basic problem that he outlines is that in Modernity language has lost its "constitutive power", that this loss of constitutive power means that language and the realities that surround us can only be dealt with instrumentally, and, further, that *this* 'means that our language has lost the power to Name things in their embedding in this deeper/higher reality'.[363] Taylor does not use the metaphysical vocabulary of nominalism, but it is clear that he is referring to the same problem. His reading of Hopkins is interesting because Taylor considers his work to be unprecedented insofar as Hopkins renews Scotian notions of *heacceitas* 'in the vastly different context of the nineteenth century, where the universe, vast in time and space, has already quite broken out of the dimensions, as well as the Platonic-Aristotelian conceptuality of the mediaeval cosmos'.[364] This is again a point at which the Radical Orthodoxy genealogical approach complements Taylor, providing an insight into the metaphysics that underly both the phenomenological issues raised by Taylor and, in this case, the literary solution he is proposing. It is unclear to me, however, whether Taylor's proposals concerning Hopkins et al towards the end of *A Secular Age* imply the need to reinstitute a metaphysical universalism of some sort (perhaps more Aristotelian in tone) through a rediscovery of the poetic, or a contentment with the metaphysics of Modernity and the poetic as a way of reenchanting within this settled context. Regardless of Taylor's intention, it should be clear here that my view is that philosophical realism of some sort is the only solution to the kinds of problems that I have been outlining. There can be no re-enchanting of language or anything else upon nominalism.

The point about nominalism being clear, therefore, the next issue to be considered is voluntarism. Voluntarism is declared by Milbank to be 'one of the two important sources of

[363] Taylor, *Secular*, p. 761.
[364] Ibid., p. 764.

"secular reason"', the other being 'a revived "paganism" which derives from Plotinian neo-Platonism and comes through Machiavelli'.[365] Hans Boersma observes that voluntarism comes about historically through William of Ockham in answer to the question raised by nominalism: namely, if the similarity between things is not the result of a universal, then why the similarity between them? 'The reason is simple: the will of God…God's will is the cause of every individual thing looking the way it does'.[366]

The voluntarism of Ockham is therefore to be contrasted with the "intellectualism" of Aquinas. The latter says that the heart of reality is constituted by God's reason, by God's doing what flows naturally from his essence, and his imbuing of creation with a type of autonomy in the sense that it is set up to be a conduit for his grace in a particular way. The former says that creation is fundamentally characterized by God's will, which is inscrutable from our perspective. This rules out the possibility of a purely natural theology on the grounds that the analogy from our conception of, for example, goodness, cannot be made with reference to God: our understanding of goodness does not necessarily bear any relationship to the way in which God is really good, and so we cannot attribute to God such notions of goodness as we understand. The Reformers, including Luther, who was an Ockhamist himself, would later herald this view because it seemed to place a greater priority on the importance of revelation, since it ruled out the possibility of other sources of knowledge about God. But, of course, the anxiety over voluntarism (shared to an extent by John Calvin[367]) was that it made God's decisions arbitrary and removed our ability truly to

[365] Milbank, *Theology*, p. 435.
[366] Hans Boersma, *Heavenly Participation: The Weaving of a Sacramental Tapestry* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2011), p. 81.
[367] Calvin's view is ambivalent in the *Institutes*: on the one hand, he writes 'And we do not advocate the fiction of "absolute might"; because this is profane, it ought rightly to be hateful to us' (John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion: Volume II*, trans. by Ford Lewis Battles, John T. McNeill ed. (London: Westminster John Knox

understand good and evil. Upon voluntarism, God simply decides to be good rather than possessing goodness as a part of his essence. Upon voluntarism, God could have chosen (or he could still choose) something to be good that, from our perspective, appears utterly abhorrent, such is the absolute connection between his will and what is good. We are thrown back upon one of the horns of the Euthyphro dilemma, and goodness becomes arbitrary because it is simply declared to be such upon the caprice of the deity. Milbank puts it thus:

> The Lutheran or Calvinist God […] no longer acts out of any recognizable love, but rather by force of inscrutable decree […] (upon this view) the love of God is an elective indulgence against the background of his sovereign inscrutable reserve. God […] whether with respect to the creation, redemption or atonement, is not in any way bound in justice to love or to show mercy – which means of course, quite simply, that he is not self-bound to goodness, as the Catholic faith has always understood goodness.[368]

It is to be noted here that, upon the voluntarist view, the recourse to such a criticism would be to say that God *is* self-bound to be the way that he has promised to be (which we understand to be good) because he has revealed to us that he is this way and that he will continue to be so. Of course, this observation does precisely nothing to subvert the problem at the heart of voluntarism for, upon voluntarism, we have absolutely no guarantee whatsoever that God's will will be consistent. God could will that faithfulness to his word is evil and caprice is good; God could suddenly decide that child sacrifice is morally virtuous. And this applies to absolutely everything for, as Calvin says, 'whatever he wills, by the very

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Press, 2006), p. 950). But, on the other hand, in the same passage, he makes a set of claims beginning, 'For his will is, and rightly ought to be, the cause of all things that are…For God's will is so much the highest rule of righteousness that whatever he wills, by the very fact that he wills it, must be considered righteous. When, therefore, one asks why God has so done, we must reply: because he has willed it' (Calvin, *Institutes: Volume II*, p. 949). It seems, therefore, that, although at points he criticizes the notion of a God who acts in a purely arbitrary fashion, Calvin ultimately roots God's character in a will which is inscrutable from our perspective and therefore may contradict all human notions of goodness, however fundamental.

[368] John Milbank, 'Stale Expressions: The Management-Shaped Church', *Studies in Christian Ethics* 21 (117) (2008), 117-128 (p. 119).

fact that he wills it, must be considered righteous'.[369] How do we know that he will not will evil? He has told us that he will not will it. How do we know that he could simply declare that lying is good? We do not. Thus voluntarism provides no assurance at all of the character of God. And, without wishing to get side-tracked too much, this, I believe is one of the main reasons that the Continental Reformers could justify some of the more abhorrent theological notions in their systematic vocabulary, particularly those around double-predestination and the everlasting torment of infants: this is good because God wills it to be, even if it appears to us to be the most diabolical and cruel evil imaginable.[370]

To return to the point, voluntarism, according to Milbank, is linked to the secular because it further erodes the relationship between God and creation. Again, this theme is introduced in the *Radical Orthodoxy* essay collection, which makes the foundational link between voluntarism and the secular by claiming that the former brought about an "epistemological era" in which 'the true is that which is fully graspable by human reason', and not connected to our knowledge of God.

> (This era) arose because God was now regarded as a supreme, untrammelled individual Will rather than that *esse ipsum* in which mere existences come to share. Hence while Scotus and Ockham, Like Aquinas, were still interested mainly in human knowledge in so far as it reflected and afforded clues to divine knowledge, in the case of the former two thinkers the "pious" conjecture that God might so dispose things that what *appears* to humans has no connection to the truly real itself opens the space for the emergence of the modern "epistemological" focus.[371]

This view was held to be "pious", as the authors say, due to the need to safeguard some kind of reserved territory for God's decision-making faculty, his inscrutability and otherness.

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[369] Calvin, *Institutes*, p. 949.
[370] This is a point well-made and made at length in David Bentley Hart's otherwise significantly imbalanced, *That All shall be Saved: Heaven, Hell & Universal Salvation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), particularly pp. 65-92.
[371] Milbank, *Orthodoxy*, pp. 5-6

But the unintended consequence of this (directly related to the separation of reason and revelation as outlined above) is that human knowledge becomes disconnected from knowledge of the divine and so the realm of the secular is created by carving out that epistemological space.

One of the critiques Milbank makes therefore is that this view implies that salvation must be contingent upon the arbitrary decree of God. So the growth of the Christian into greater levels of sanctification, holiness and love becomes arbitrary, and the focus of the spiritual life is purely upon a moment of conversion and the guarantee of eternal security:

> Christianity is reduced to a readily graspable product: the promise of a mysterious relationship with Jesus, the absolute authority of a printed book, the reduction of complex doctrines to formulas about atonement, a single punctual act of faith which is like an absolute banknote, redeemable in eternity.[372]

The whole of the Christian life hinges, in other words, on whether or not God has made that decree, and the means of grace that he might have used in order to grant the Christian life of growth in virtue and love are not necessary. The clear implication of this is that, if salvation is indeed dependent upon the decree of God, the sacraments of the Church are reduced in significance. Indeed, such an understanding is quite normal in non-episcopal and anti-sacramental forms of contemporary Christianity: if God "saved" me at a point when I put my faith in him, what need do I have, therefore, to be baptized? What need do I have to receive Christ's body and blood in the Eucharist? Any such justification that might be given can always be met with the rejoinder that nothing really hinges on whether or not one avails oneself of these means: God has saved me anyway because he has decided to.

[372] Milbank, 'Management', p. 120

Related to this is the now familiar motif of the distancing of God from creation in general. The previous, intellectualist approach, would say something to the effect that creation (at least in its aboriginal state) is an outworking of the intrinsic goodness of God, a reflection of and participation in the fullness of his perfections, the sacraments of the Church being an intensification of this presence. Whereas upon voluntarism, creation becomes simply a container for the drama of redemption, which all hinges upon divine fiat. Upon all of this, the aesthetic can in no way be a conduit for the divine. The sacramental principle spoken of above cannot come into play, only a word ontology which communicates the magic shibboleth that will affect a salvific decree.

Conclusion

To summarise this chapter, I have outlined three general ontological claims and three metaphysical deviations common to the work of John Milbank and the Radical Orthodoxy "story". Although all of these are conceptually separate, they share in common a concern with the relationship of God and creation, and they form a coherent unity when understood within a modern or a pre-modern framework. I have argued that the modern understanding of the absolute separation of God and creation is fatal for Christian aesthetics and sacramental theology for the reason that those things rely absolutely on an ontological framework in which God is present in all aspects of his world. Without that framework, the material world can only be a container for a deracinated dialogue between God and exiled humanity. The pre-modern metaphysical understanding of grace as an intensification of nature, of the continuity of the natural and the supernatural, does the opposite, providing humanity with an understanding of creation as the site of God's presence and the material of that creation as the possibility of his manifestation. I also suggested that the great works

of Christian artistic transcendence, notably Gothic cathedrals, could not have been produced upon any other metaphysical framework, and hence their absence in the modern period.[373] What is clear from this analysis, is that, if the flatness and crushing sense of immanence in Modernity is to be transfigured, metaphysics and theology must play a central role, and an ontological framework more akin to the great medieval achievements of Thomas Aquinas and others needs to be insisted upon.

It is already clear how this metaphysical analysis is congruent with Taylor's genealogy of secularism: the grace-nature divide clearly maps onto Taylor's understanding of the relationship between immanence and transcendence and the ensuing disenchantment felt at every level. In the following chapter, therefore, I take this analysis further, applying it to ecclesiology and asking how both Taylor and Milbank can be utilized and deepened to this end.

Chapter Four | John Milbank (2): A Participatory Ecclesiology

Introduction

Having established, by using the work of John Milbank, a largely complementary metaphysical angle to Taylor's historical genealogy and contemporary phenomenology, I will now turn to a more specific discussion of ecclesiology. I will begin with some of the schools of ecclesiology that can be critiqued as a result of the foregoing analysis, showing how the metaphysical and ontological considerations already mentioned directly result in a kind of disembodied, antiaesthetic approach to Christian life and worship which is really complicit

[373] The Neo-Gothic revival is, of course, a partial exception to this claim, but even that was bound up in an attempt to revive not only the aesthetics of Pre-Modernity but also its metaphysical and sacramental theological understandings.

with secular unbelief. I then move on, again using Milbank's work, to establish what I call a participatory ecclesiology, which is a description of the Church that proceeds from an attempt to recover traditional Christian metaphysics. If we do the latter, then the ecclesiology that results is far more inclined towards aesthetic embodiment in the sacraments and liturgy and it provides us with a way of challenging the emptiness and ennui that is prevalent in Modernity by showing how the divine is present in the midst of the ordinary.

Problematic Ecclesiologies

It is perhaps already clear what kind of ecclesiology is critiqued as a result of the theological observations outlined above. To draw this out we can look to the central argument of one of Milbank's most practical essays on ecclesiology, which concerns in part a critique of the "Fresh Expressions" initiative in the Church of England. The latter is not the sole focus of Milbank's essay: rather he has in mind a more general exploration of the relationship of historical Protestantism to the rise of capitalism. This is directly related to the discussions of nominalism and voluntarism above, because, Milbank claims, voluntarism in particular turns salvation into an arbitrary moment of will on the part of God thereby rendering irrelevant the sanctification of the believer and the dispensation of the Church's sacraments. Milbank summarizes:

> This ensures already that the Church is diverted into the channels of business. For if the crucial thing is no longer the gradual inculcation of the *habitus* of charity, as for a genuine Catholic understanding, but rather simply the nominal imputed status of "being saved", then logically the task of the Church becomes simply one of mission, narrowly understood as the recruitment of ever more souls. Just as God is no longer primarily seen as a giver, but rather as an elector, so also the prime business of human beings comes not in the performance of works of charity but rather the

> communication of faith as the offering of a redeemable pledge […] The point of Christianity becomes mainly the production of more Christians.[374]

This is a highly disturbing critique and relies somewhat on the false either-or dichotomy between works of charity and personal faith in Christ. It climaxes in Milbank's claim that, because the human soul is itself the commodity in this transaction, 'the only business analogy, though it may be a remote one, would be with the slave trade'.[375] And he goes on to delineate how the "workers" in this organization (redeemed Christians) 'are now at once and without pause or struggle also entrepreneurs who can immediately innovate',[376] thereby turning the Church into a kind of ecclesial pyramid scheme, whereby the product which is dispensed to each saved soul must be passed to many more by each who have received.

All of this is quite depressing. However, it must be taken seriously as at least consistent with the ontological observations made above: because God's relationship to the world is now seen primarily in terms of his extrinsic and mysterious will, the embodied nature of Christian sanctification is marginalized, and the central promise of the sacraments as the conveyors of grace is undermined.

Although his argument is strident, Milbank has a point here: low-Church, protestant, evangelical Christianity sits between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand it knows that the Christian life far exceeds the production of more Christians for the purpose of its own arbitrary growth, and yet, on the other, it lacks the theological resources for explaining how this can be the case. Thus, it struggles to articulate concepts such as mortification of the flesh, obligation to those who are in need, the rejection of mindless consumerism and the

[374] Milbank, 'Management', pp. 118-119.
[375] Ibid., p. 120.
[376] Ibid.

wasting of time through the self-indulgence of crass, modern, Saturday-night TV culture. The logical import of the doctrine of justification by faith alone through grace alone, when denuded of any kind of substantial emphasis upon sacramentality or participation, means that, once one has made the commitment to Christ, one is free to indulge as much as one likes in all the things that our culture has to offer. One can, in fact, be the most free of all the liberated secular hedonists, precisely for the reason that no lingering guilt or trace of responsibility towards the Almighty remains. Again, this expression of Christianity knows that all of this is deeply wrong and misguided, but it lacks the theological resources needed to correct itself. This is because the theological excavation that needs to be done in order to change the inclination, á la Milbank et al, is dependent upon a reading of history that is highly critical of the Continental Reformation and its assumptions, the latter of which are implicit (though highly simplified and distorted) in modern day evangelicalism. There is no superficial fix, therefore, because, in a sense, the evangelical hedonist just described is *correct* to act in the way that he or she does based on the philosophical presuppositions that undergird this ecclesiology. This *is* the logical conclusion of voluntarism.

What are some of the other problems here? In another essay, Milbank points out the practical problems of equating God with a person, thereby turning him into an "ontic idol" and implying a "disenchanted" cosmos or universe. This turns God into 'a supreme individual (who) thus tends to come into zero-sum competition with his subordinates'.[377] We noted above how causality, upon a medieval understanding, was viewed more in terms of the "influence" of a primary causality upon a secondary causality, whereas in the modern, "disenchanted" view, there is one mode of causality that cannot be univocally controlled by

[377] Milbank, 'Closer', in Warner, *Varieties*, p. 67.

both God and creatures at the same time. This is, of course, linked with a hyper-Calvinistic understanding of providence that assert God's actively willing, and therefore literally causing, *everything* that happens, including the fall, all sin, and all condemnation of sinners. Thus, 'The "monopolizing" God is likely to be conceived as a tyrant who usurps our proper powers because he operates on the same univocal plane as ourselves'.[378] Interestingly, Milbank refers to the argument of Régis Debray, who asserted the link between religious violence and less sacramental, "disenchanted" approaches to monotheism: because God is a supreme individual, he can therefore speak to me, literally, as one person to another and therefore tell me precisely what to do: 'The desert delivers the crazed religious enthusiast who has heard directly the literal voice of God demanding to be represented by literal words and deeds that tolerate no rivals and little glossing'.[379] Again, this can be contrasted with a participatory view of the relationship between God and creation in which God mediates himself through sacramental, material and aesthetic means that constitute a more benign and gentle type of communication and cooperation.

Then there is the possibility of altering the mind of God in prayer and through other organizational acts, which can lead to anxiety over whether or not one has done enough. This, it seems, is the flip side to the type of evangelical hedonist mentioned above: whereas the latter sees God as ontically removed from creation and nominally imputing an incontrovertible righteousness, the former sees God as ontically proximate and thereby

[378] Ibid.

[379] Ibid., pp. 67-68. This observation seems pertinent on an anecdotal level: it is a common experience in contemporary charismatic evangelical circles, both Anglican and non-Anglican, to hear individuals relating words of prophecy and divine communication by using phrases like, "God said to me" and "God told me". This is doubtless sometimes shorthand for something akin to a feeling of conviction, a moment of spiritual illumination and so on. But it is also oftentimes means explicitly what is said: I heard the voice of God saying such and such. One of the problems with such a statement, of course, is that it precludes the possibility of discussion and thus of the need for the diverse and embodied community of the Church.

feels a sense of religious duty that conceives of God too literally as in need of constant placation. Milbank, to the contrary, suggests 'omitting the half-baked "bourgeois" mode of positivistic piety, prayer meetings, organizational obsession, and ill-informed, unimaginative Bible studies that waste the time one might spend having fun' in favour of a more genuine and catholic piety, whereby 'we "atune" ourselves to God's eternal purposes, and thereby a divine influence *really does* flow into us, and we can take it that this is God's eternally appointed providential means of action'.[380]

More could be said about the type of ecclesiology that Milbank is rejecting, of course, and it is perhaps unfair to target specifically low-church forms of evangelicalism rather than training one's critique on equally denuded and deracinated forms of ecclesiology such as contemporary liberalism's at times complete capitulation to the forces of secular Modernity which turns the Church into the slave of the state and contemporary culture, reducing the clergy to the status of social workers and conceiving of the laity as potential "activists" for the environment or other vaguely-conceived social improvements involving the promotion of abstract goods such as "tolerance" and "equality", the latter themselves being parasitic echoes of ecclesiological principles. This approach often goes hand-in-hand with a kind of Nestorian reading of the incarnation that emphasizes Christ's work as a cultural and social phenomenon and ignores the fact that he was God incarnate come to cast fire upon the earth. Such an approach clearly buys into the absolute separation between nature and grace just as much as the ecclesiology critiqued above because it wants to concentrate solely on immanent means to material and political improvements and has little to no interest in supernatural interruption, whether through the voice of Scripture or the miraculous

[380] Ibid., p. 68.

presence of Christ in the sacraments. The latter, particularly the Eucharist, is just as much reduced to a visual aid as in other forms of low-church ecclesiology and becomes a cipher for political and social causes.

The broad point is to say that our ecclesiology is directly affected by the underlying metaphysical presuppositions that we bring to it, and the observations made by Milbank et al help us to uncover the foundations of these shaky edifices. I am arguing here that one of the legacies of the theological deviations into nominalism and voluntarism is an excarnated legacy that has no place for the created order and thus posits a separation between the spiritual life and our actual embodied lives here on earth. One of the implications for ecclesiology is that the traditional functions of the Church are confused and distorted: the sacraments lose their significance and the role of aesthetic beauty in the mediation of God into the world is precluded. Further, as Milbank implies, the importance of the Church community in general is undercut because the individual no longer needs the mediation of priests for confession or laity for interpersonal sanctification, thus making a nonsense of, for example, the Pauline image of the body of Christ and its individual and complementary membership.[381]

Having looked at all this, I will now attempt something like a more formal definition of Milbank's ecclesiology, which I will characterize as "participatory".

Milbank's "Participatory" Ecclesiology

[381] 'St Paul wrote to Galatia and Corinth, not to regiments or weaving clubs for widows…One can't set up a Church in a café amongst a gang of youths who like skateboarding because all this does is promote skateboarding and dysfunctional escapist maleness, along with that type of private but extra-ecclesial security that is offered by the notion of "being saved"' (Milbank, 'Management', p. 124).

To provide a systematic summary of Milbank's ecclesiology is difficult, firstly, because of the occasional nature of his writings on the subject and, secondly, because, in many ways, all of Milbank's work is in some measure on the subject of ecclesiology. This is because, for Milbank, the Church is a kind of ontological reality that participates in multiple alternative realities simultaneously whilst providing a critique of the false, alternative human communities that are, at least to a very large extent, characterized by sin and rebellion against God. Not only this, but Milbank's ecclesiology also assumes that the Church is "democratic",[382] by which he means that the Church is constituted by the gifts that God gives to its individual members for the building up of its faith. The adjective "participatory" is apt, therefore, because it delineates both of these aspects: firstly, it is a participatory ecclesiology in the sense that it is fundamentally grounded upon a participatory ontology, and secondly, it is a participatory ecclesiology because it denotes the literal participation of all of its members.

These things are hard to tease apart, and, in delineating them below the interweaving and fugal overlapping of themes is inevitable, but I will attempt to progress from a description of the ontological themes supporting the ecclesiology, to some of the practical implications of their outworking. Along the way, I will mention some of the basic critiques that have been made, some of which are stronger than others.

1. Ecclesial Ontology

As has already been delineated above, Milbank's principal argument in *Theology and Social Theory* suggests that Christianity possess an "interruptive character" that distances it

[382] Cf. Milbank, *Being*, pp., 105-137.

from both Modernity and Antiquity.[383] This is because those systems, which include the postmodern, that see the heart of being as constituted by primordial violence, chaos and flux that need to be tempered by human force (whether that is literal state force exerted through the violence of legality or the force of definition that is necessary to police language in order to retain its power to define and direct) are fundamentally contradicted by the Christian narrative that sees being as aboriginal peace, gift and love. This analysis permeates Milbank's final chapter, which is a famous re-reading of Augustine's *De Civitate Dei*, the latter being in many ways the most important theological source for Milbank's theology and the Radical Orthodoxy project in general.[384] Hence the summary paragraph:

> The non-antagonistic, peaceful mode of life of the city of God is grounded in a particular, historical and "mythical" narrative, and in an ontology which explicates the beliefs implicit in this narrative. It is in fact the ontological priority of peace over conflict (which is arguably the key theme of his entire thought), that is the principle undergirding Augustine's critique. However, this principle is firmly anchored in a narrative, a practice, and a dogmatic faith, not in an abstracted universal reason.[385]

This quotation in many ways sums up all of the themes of Milbank's ontology and will be elaborated upon below, but as an initial foundation to Milbank's ecclesiology, the basic point is clear: 'Instead of Jove, the stayer of a preceding battle, Christians worship the one true God who originates all finite reality in an act of peaceful donation',[386] the latter being, as we have already noted, the effulgence emanating (not inevitably as in neo-Platonic

[383] Milbank, *Theology*, pp. 402-403.
[384] Cf. Graham Ward, *Cities of God* (London: Routledge, 2000) for another reading of Augustine's work. Ward's analysis differs slightly but perhaps significantly from Milbank's. Broadly speaking, whereas Milbank seems to want to play up the sway of violence over the non-redeemed part of creation, Ward is interested in excavating traces of religiosity and faith within the secular itself. It seems to me that these messages are compatible with one another and that the difference is one of emphasis. Perhaps the pragmatic level is where the question really bites: do we utilize, therefore, the disciplines of the social sciences (seeing as both Milbank and Ward agree that they are, at some level, religious) or do we read that religiosity as hostile and offer a critique only? This question, it seems to me, is at the very heart of the debate within Radical Orthodoxy itself.
[385] Milbank, *Theology*, p. 392.
[386] Ibid., p. 394.

ontologies, but, as a result of the Christian difference, a decision based upon love) from the heart of the Trinitarian God. Difference is, here, not a result of the primordial violence of the *Enuma Elish* that gives birth to the world, but it is a reflection of the 'infinite emanation of difference within the Godhead itself'[387] and thus can be received peacefully as a gift, which is not competitive but complementary.[388]

Yet how is this difference constituted as community after the sway of violence has taken dominion? Only by 'God and the heavenly Jerusalem – our "true mother" – reach(ing) down in compassion for the salvation of the world'.[389] The incarnation is, therefore, the means by which God makes his love for the world visible in Christ, and the community of the Church is simply a continuation of this visibility.[390] This salvation not only interrupts our systems of violence and preoccupations with control, but it alters the nature of our understanding of gifts and giving. Within an ontology of violence, the "gift" can never be pure from ulterior motives of domination and power, and yet, because creation and incarnation emanate from the love of a Trinitarian God, who is, within himself, a community of self-outpouring and receptive gift, the very nature of human life and love is transformed into something mutual and free from hostility. To return a gift is no longer to enact a counter-violence in order to extricate ourselves from our debts to one another, but it is to participate in and embody the reality of God's love.[391]

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[387] Ibid., p. 435.
[388] This Trinitarian theme, somewhat muted in *Theology and Social Theory*, is given full symphonic voice in the above-mentioned David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth*, which is an extended meditation on Milbank's observation, reflected through the Eastern patristic prism climaxing in Gregory of Nyssa.
[389] Milbank, *Theology*, p. 394.
[390] This is the main point of Bauerschmidt's essay in the original collection of Radical Orthodoxy writings. cf. Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt, 'Aesthetics: The Theological Sublime', in Milbank, *Orthodoxy*, pp. 201-219.
[391] Cf., Milbank, *Being*, pp. 44-60. These themes are explored elsewhere in Milbank in, for example, the important essay of 1995, John Milbank, 'Can a Gift be Given? Prolegomena to a Future Trinitarian Metaphysic', *Modern Theology*, 11(1) (2011), 119-161, and 'The Transcendality of the Gift: A Summary in Answer to 12

This is why the forgiveness of sins is central to the kind of sociality that the Church embodies. The Church alone has a community that is grounded in this sort of Trinitarian and incarnational ontology and so forgiveness, although a partial, difficult and painful experience in many ways, can exist within the economy of God's endless love for the world. This forgiveness is offered between members of the Church not because we must have our debts paid by one another, but out of love and in hope that we will grow together into the ecstatic joy of conformity to the image of God in Christ. This is a very different type of peace to that which is enacted through secular liberal conceptions of "negative" freedom and rights culture. The latter is characterised not by a vision of maximal human flourishing in relation to the transcendent, but is purely privative in the sense that it tells us what we can or cannot do based on whether or not those choices will impinge upon the choices of others to do the same. There is no human teleology in such a vision, and this is why political societies that pose as false alternatives to the Church (especially those which are based on a non-religious foundation) cannot truly exist as commonwealths (in the literal sense of a *common weal* that seeks some ultimate good as its *telos*) but are merely a collection of

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Questions', *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia*, 65 (2009), 887-897. In the former, for example, Milbank draws a distinction between 'give and take' and 'the historic interruption of *agape*' and notes the 'advice of Jesus and St. Paul (that) mutual forbearance and reconciliation through forgiveness - a certain offering of gifts…- ensures the perpetuation of *ecclesia*, the agapeic community, as a series of settlements out of court' (Milbank, 'Gift', p. 119). I elaborate somewhat on this theme below.

The notion of the gift as a type of violence is, of course, a stalwart of postmodern theory since Derrida but it has perhaps been given its most powerful and popular form in the 2015 Joel Edgerton directed film *The Gift*. In the story, a lonely, single, middle-aged man gives increasingly elaborate gifts to a younger, more successful and attractive couple who have just moved into his neighbourhood and who clearly do not reciprocate his desire for an intimate friendship. The couple are alarmed by these passive-aggressive displays of generosity but cannot ask him to stop because that would constitute a form of rudeness and would leave them open to the charge of ingratitude. As such, they find themselves unhappily in a debt from which they cannot extricate themselves without acquiescing to a completely unacceptable form of coerced friendship. The uneasy equilibrium eventually breaks down and the underlying hostility that was implicit in the initial giving of gifts manifests itself finally in violent and terrifying acts.

choices based on individual idolatrous predilections which may or may not interfere with one another.[392]

In his insistence that the Church, in order to bring about justice, must embody the suffering of Christ, Daniel Bell puts it this way,

> Forgiveness overcomes the irreversibility of injustice precisely as an innovative movement, as the outflowing of the divine plenitude that ceaselessly gives more and gives again, graciously bearing the refusal that injustice embodies and the suffering it inflicts.[393]

And yet, even given the fact that the Church exists following the historical event of the incarnation, it does not exist 'in time',[394] and certainly not as a fully realized heavenly utopia upon earth, but as both an echo of aboriginal peace and as an anticipation of eschatological reality. This is 'an "ideal transmission" through time, and despite its ravages'.[395]

This is why Steven Shakespeare's critique of Milbank's ecclesiology falls so flat when it comes to his critique of Milbank's ostensible idealism. Shakespeare imagines that Milbank is advocating a fully realized eschatological community which, because of its perfection, shows forth Christ into the world: 'This sounds like a tall order for any institution. But isn't it particularly hard to apply to the Church? Don't we have ample evidence through the Church's history of its fallibility?'[396] And yet the point is emphatically not that the Church is infallible, but that it *seeks* an eschatological peace that, contrary to the false and negative

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[392] This is, of course, a central theme in *The City of God*: justice is not simply about giving people freedom to do as they wish but it is constituted by giving to each his or her own due. This is why the Roman Empire was not just, because it did not give to God what was *his* due: '…the commonwealth never existed, because there never was justice in the community. Now it certainly was a commonwealth to some degree, and according to more plausible definitions…But true justice is found only in that commonwealth whose founder and ruler is Christ' (Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. by Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 75). Augustine goes on to elaborate his argument in the crucial sections in Bk. XIX, 21 and 24.
[393] Daniel M. Bell, Jr., *Liberation Theology after the End of History: The Refusal to Cease Suffering* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 152.
[394] Milbank, *Future*, p. 133.
[395] Ibid.
[396] Shakespeare, *Introduction*, p. 83.

universality of enlightenment liberalism, is 'not content with mere mutual toleration and non-interference with the liberties of others'[397] because it knows from whence it comes and, more importantly, whither it goes. These very factors are based in faith and hope, which refuse the apparently settled realities of fallen history and sinful human beings who operate within the Church's interstices. And they refuse these things not because they do not occur, even within the Church's own members, but because they are a shadow of reality which will be obliterated by the light of the eschaton. Echoing the famous Pauline language of 1 Corinthians 13, Milbank writes of the Church:

> In heaven it is perfect, but on earth its sway is not utopian; for now we glimpse dimly its perfection within a process of reconciliation that is but fragmentarily realized – like a fleeting passage of an aerial creature amongst the trees, which we are scarcely sure we have glimpsed at all […] The chink of light: the Philosopher's Stone, the curative herb *Moly*, the Holy Grail; this has been found. But it is increasingly lost again, and must ceaselessly be the object of a quest. Redemption remains a vague rumour, and only those possessed of a true light-hearted folly will dare to abandon everything else in order to pursue it […] The Church is the brotherhood and sisterhood of the Grail.[398]

To return to the theme of gift, therefore, we can see here a tight connection between Milbank's ontology and his vision of ethics and community and how this relates to his ecclesiology. In an essay of 1999, Milbank argues against the modern ethical consensus that he identifies with Jan Patocka, Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida and, to a lesser extent, Jean-Luc Marion. This consensus is that ethically the good must be defined as a non-returnable self-sacrifice, purified from any hope of return by the absoluteness of death and annihilation: 'Unless a gift is in this fashion sacrificial…it is argued, a gift reduces to a hidden

[397] John Milbank, *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Oxford, England: Blackwell, 1997), p. 154.
[398] Milbank, *Being*, p. 105.

contractual agreement, governed by a principle of self-interest; and actions out of self-interest, as Kant pointed out, are not pure gifts'.[399]

One of the salient points of this analysis is, as Milbank points out the ontological presuppositions that are in play in these ethical analyses:

> Recent thought has it that ours is a world in which death, the passing away of life beyond being into nothingness, is an ultimate horizon…Common to all these thinkers (with the exception of Marion) is an attempt to make nothingness or the continuous disappearance of life into the void the precondition for morality, rather than an obstacle in its path.[400]

Something appears to have gone badly wrong here. It seems counter-intuitive and contradictory to say that the precondition of ethics is nihilism, but that appears to be the conclusion that these thinkers draw us towards. Again the postmodern flux is what underlies all of human life and community and ultimately this is what must undergird our ethics, however hopeless and bizarre this might seem.

Milbank demurs from this analysis, instead arguing that 'only with faith in the resurrection is an ethical life possible'.[401] He argues that central to ethics is a specific attention to other individuals rather than to abstracted concepts such as untainted self-sacrifice. 'Convivial enjoyment of another is more important than suffering on his behalf',[402] and therefore our relationships with one another and our communities do not need to be characterised by a desiccated and morbid desire to commit suicide for each another and tumble over into the eternal void but can rather take on the far more biblical character of a feast. Following Robert Spaemann, Milbank argues that giving food to the hungry can be one-way (from giver to receiver) but it can also be done in the context of a mutual

[399] John Milbank, 'The Ethics of Self-Sacrifice', *First Things*, 91 (1999), 33-38 (p. 33).
[400] Ibid., pp. 33-34.
[401] Ibid., p. 34.
[402] Ibid., p. 35.

celebration of abundance. Again, within the context of a feast the joyless sense of self-abnegation that is characteristic of the ethics of postmodernism is precluded and 'egotism is mitigated'[403] because the giver receives at the same time as his giving is enjoyed.

Again the important thing is to realise that there are two ontologies at play here: the modern ethical vision assumes no resurrection and the totality of death: 'But that means that towards all those we have harmed and wounded and then lost without reconciliation, we can only rehearse an empty gesture of private, nominal apology. They can never forgive us, just as those who have injured us and vanished can never appear to be forgiven'.[404] Milbank suggests that the only way to ground all of our hope for ethics and reconciliation is in an "infinite community" through which reconciliation will become possible.

Resurrection is therefore the precondition of morality and, again, Milbank ties this together with the ontological primacy of the Trinity: 'The name of the Holy Spirit himself as "gift" is after all bestowed not only to denote a pure one-way gratuity, but also because the Spirit expresses the infinitely realized exchange between Father and Son'.[405]

To offer oneself up to death is not, therefore, to offer oneself to the void, but to give in the expectation of an infinite but non-identical and asymmetrical return to life in the eschaton. Death is not the point of this kind of ethics, but eternal life, and the offering of such a gift to the world which is, of course, constituted through the model of crucifixion and resurrection. And, again, it should be point out contra-Steven Shakespeare that this is all characterised not by immediacy and completion but by a sense of "eschatological delay" and is therefore an act of faith.

[403] Ibid.
[404] Ibid., p. 38.
[405] Ibid.

To apply this to the Church is to see the ontological primacy of the Trinitarian interchange of peace and love as fundamental to the ethical life of the *ecclesia*. In the essay mentioned above, Milbank makes this connection at length: because the Incarnation proceeds from this Trinitarian life,

> One receives gift *as* the gift of an always preceding gift-exchange. Only such a perspective makes sense of why *agape* arrives as an interpersonal event and *not* simply as a new command, 'Thou shalt love…'. We are instead given the *possibility* to love because we are given the true shape of love in the form of a love that is always already repeated, in a double sense – both within the series of Christ's continuous and coherent actions, and in the series of exchanges between him and his followers. To be a Christian is […] to *repeat differently*, in order to repeat *exactly*, the content of Christ's life, and to wait, by a necessary *delay*, the answering repetition of the other that will fold temporal linearity back into the eternal circle of triune life.[406]

There is a sense in this type of ecclesiology therefore of the Church as a repetition of the pattern of the self-giving love and beauty of the Trinity as revealed to her by Christ in the incarnation and transmitted through the apostles and first-followers of his ministry. Christ's revelation and teaching is not an arbitrary interruption within human history but is a recalling of humanity to its true task, which is to be God's vice-regency upon the earth, the image of his glory and love and to participate in his divine life. The Church at its highest is a continuation of this revelation, but always characterised by imperfection and that sense of "necessary delay" as we await consummation.

2. Ecclesial Participation

In a sense all of the above is somewhat evasive of the central concern of Milbank's ecclesiology, which is that of *praxis*. It is very difficult to talk about the Church along Milbankian lines *unless* one talks about what Milbank expects the Church, and the people in

[406] Milbank, 'Gift', p. 150.

it, to do. This is a point summed up in a debate that took place between Milbank and the agnostic secularist philosopher Angie Hobbs. Contrary to the latter's argument which attempted to claim Platonic morality for the secular world, Milbank made the counter-argument that Platonic morality cannot be divorced from a religious vision, because, for Plato, reason, which guides the ethical decision-making process, is not grounded simply in itself or in worldly concerns such as the lust for power, but it is subordinate to the convertible transcendentals of the good and the true and the beautiful. Milbank takes a further step when he points out that Platonism is problematically invoked today for the (democratic) secular because it is an elitist schema whereby only the few of sufficient nobility and education will achieve anything like the ethical vision of flourishing outlined in a text such as *The Republic*. He comments that it was almost as if Plato has anticipated the need for something like catholic Christianity, which would disseminate this reality not through abstract theory but through "institutions and rituals and patterns that convey all the time, running all through our life, this sense of the objectivity of the good".[407]

To return to one of the basic points of *Theology and Social Theory*, the Church, in this light, can be seen as an alternative social science, not because social sciences in general provide 'a fundamental account, in the sense of something neutral, rational and universal',[408] but precisely because they fail to do so and are in fact 'themselves theologies or anti-theologies in disguise', constituted, in those terms, as "heresy".[409] Christianity is, therefore, simply another story which attempts 'to provide its own account of the final

[407] This debate took place in Westminster Abbey on 14 November 2012.
[408] Milbank, *Theology*, p. 382.
[409] Ibid., p. 3.

causes at work in human history, on the basis of its own particular, and historically specific faith'.[410]

Given that this is the case, it must also be true that the social theory of Christianity is an explication of its practice and 'a "reading" of other human societies', which means that 'it becomes possible to consider ecclesiology as also a "sociology"'.[411]

This is where the ontological considerations, discussed above, can be invoked. As James Smith observes, 'the *telos* of RO's participatory ontology is practice'.[412] The false duality between practice and theory is a symptom of Modernity's preoccupation with such dualism, and it is questioned at a fundamental level by Milbank's observation. That is why it is legitimate to see a strong connection between an "ontological atomism" which issues from the univocity of being, nominalism and the rise of voluntarism, and a "social atomism" which isolates individuals.[413] What begins on the metaphysical level inevitably descends and becomes reified in the lives of individual human beings and within their communities. With the advent of the internet and the possibility of instant, interpersonal but disembodied communication, this kind of social isolationism is rendered both more insidious and more widespread. The Church, of course, stands against this (anti-)sociality, which is akin to the very notion of sin as *curvatus in se*, preferring instead to call the individual out of him or herself to share in the life of a community that has been forgiven and redeemed by God and must now, empowered by the Holy Spirit, in its very locality, redeem *itself*, member by member, on an interpersonal level. As Smith comments, 'The possibility of a participatory or

[410] Ibid., p. 382.
[411] Ibid.
[412] James K.A. Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-Secular Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2004), p. 231.
[413] Ibid., p. 232.

creational ontology and its attendant account of sociality are unfolded in and by the formation of the liturgy and practice of being the community of God'.[414]

It is important now, therefore, to show how liturgy functions in Milbank's theory, which will naturally lead into a consideration of the nature of the Church's witness to the unbelieving world. Liturgy works as both a retelling of the story of Christ *within* the Church to its members, and it functions in a complementary fashion as a narrational proclamation to the world *outside*.

Although *Theology and Social Theory* largely '(omits) the ritual dimension',[415] it does possess, as a central theme, an important argument that touches more widely on the notion of liturgy and the aesthetic. Challenging the Aristotelian distinction between *praxis* and *poesis*, Milbank says that what is made by human beings, the *factum*, is, although entirely contingent, nevertheless also a cooperation with God in the work of creation, and, as such analogous to the relationship of the Father and the Son. This is put forward in contrast to the secular understanding of the *factum* as entirely instrumental for the immanent purposes of humanity in terms of 'power, property, active right, and absolute sovereignty'.[416] Again, this is another example of the way that, according to Milbank, the secular is 'invented as the space of "pure power"'.[417] That is, this space in which what is given is then turned into something else for instrumental purposes is not just what happens to be there when the religious or metaphysical is removed, but it is *itself* based on religious

[414] Ibid.
[415] John Milbank, 'Enclaves, or Where is the Church?', *New Blackfriars*, 73(861) (1992), 341-352 (p. 342).
[416] Milbank, *Theology*, p. 13.
[417] Ibid.

premises which then get taken up and modified in secular theory. In this case it is Hobbes who 'had to construct a *factum* whose essence was its formality and predictability'.[418]

There are at least two different kinds of human making which can be explicated here: the first is that the Idea '"precedes" the work in the artist's mind as a reflection of the ideas of God'[419] and is then executed as such, being understood prior to its assemblage, which is defined as a kind of reordering of pre-existing material and, as such, not a genuine creation. The second is Milbank's position:

> […] the artistic or poetic "Idea" is no longer what "precedes" the work in the artist's mind as a reflection of the ideas of God, but instead becomes that which is conveyed as meaning to the received from the peculiar constitution of *the work itself*. Yet this is not a Hobbesian, nominalist move, because the Idea, though now inseparable from its own "image", still conserves for the mannerists the full Platonic value of a participation in divine understanding.[420]

This view of human making is at once more communal and dynamic than the first. Whereas the first begins with the individual's mind and ends in the execution of a preordained blueprint, the second becomes what it is in the process of its being made and, thus, in its construction, gives greater understanding to its creator or creators. The possibility of genuinely communal creation is held open here because this is rightly seen as a creation that takes shape as it develops. Again, this understanding finds its theological basis in the analogy with the Father and Son, the former having 'eternal understanding only in the "image" of the (latter)', hence the comment at the end of the initial quotation to the effect that this manner of construction is a 'participation in divine understanding'.[421] In this sense,

[418] Ibid., p. 12.
[419] Ibid.
[420] Ibid.
[421] Ibid.

therefore, human making, far from being a secular, instrumental pursuit, is always a participation in the transcendent.

In ecclesiological terms, we might say that the liturgical and the aesthetic, when understood in this way, can be seen as a direct participation in the creative and salvific work of the Trinitarian God. Firstly, the liturgy is conceived as a genuine co-creation, or as Milbank puts it elsewhere, 'a *continuous* emergence *ex nihilo*'.[422] In embodying the aboriginal peace of creation, the liturgy, in response to the prior work of God in creation and incarnation, is a recreation of this peace. It is a ritual that, when accepted and lived properly, becomes a newly created reality in the life of the Church. This latter point is essential, as Milbank says, when he writes that Paul's letters are characterized by "ritual priority": 'The Church is only the Church because it imbibes and becomes Christ's body, and rearticulates his earthly performance',[423] and yet 'ritual enactment…can only be guaranteed as an authentic repetition if it is genuinely reflected in the improvised "real-life" of those who transmit and perform it',[424] which, he goes on to say, is the reason for Paul's excessive amount of boasting: the authenticity of the Church (of Corinth's) "authentic founding" and "authentic Eucharistic performance" is all dependent upon his genuine credentials as an apostle.[425] We might see it as linked to one of the concerns mentioned above: genuine liturgy is not just that which is enacted in a certain place at a certain time with a certain amount of skill and correctness, but is that which is re-enacted in endlessly refracted lives of holiness and love. If it is *just* performed, then it is the utmost hypocrisy and a stench in the

[422] John Milbank, *The Religious Dimension in the Thought of Giambattista Vico, 1668-1744* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1991), p. 28.
[423] Milbank, *Future*, p. 136.
[424] Ibid., p. 138.
[425] Ibid.

nostrils of God. This is, of course, a theme that is thoroughly biblical, as both Old and New Testaments show.[426] On the other hand, we cannot accept such a critique by itself and say that, as a result, the aesthetic dimension is irrelevant and the beauty of the liturgy or the care taken by its enactors is somehow unimportant. Rather, the *whole* enactment of the liturgy is a participation in the beauty of God and the primordial peace that is his very life given to the world in its unfallen and eschatological state. As so it must lived *and* performed with integrity, and in such a way as to embody that reality. Again, as it was said by E.L. Mascall, the whole purpose of such ritual is that 'their life and their liturgy may be one'.[427] In these ways then, the aesthetic takes on a renewed perspective: far from being the mere rearrangement of less pleasant pre-existing bits of creation, it has the capacity to mediate the transcendent into the world.

In addition, regarding the Eucharist itself, it now becomes clear that the Eucharistic elements are a very literal interplay between God's creative work and humanity's: God creates the world with the capacity to produce the bread and the wine, but these things only come about through the work of human hands. Thus, when Christ took hold of the elements at the Last Supper, this was dependent upon the prior creative work of humanity. And so, in the same way as humanity is re-sanctified by the incarnation of Christ, the very work of human beings in tilling the soil is similarly sanctified by the close identification

[426] '"I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and cereal offerings, I will not accept them, and the peace offerings of your fatted beasts I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream"' (Amos 5:21-24, RSV). '"Beware of practicing your piety before men in order to be seen by them; for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. Thus, when you give alms, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by men. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward…And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by men. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward"' (Matt. 6:1-2,5, RSV).

[427] Mascall, *Corpus*, p. 29.

between the elements that come from the field and the vine and the very presence of Christ himself. As such, these things *stand in* for human making generally as a participation in God's creation.

Something like this articulation perhaps gives us a way of understanding the seemingly bizarre moments in Milbank's work when he appears to say that the Church is enacting some kind of literary fiction: 'The Church is first and foremost neither a programme, nor a "real" society, but instead an enacted, serious fiction',[428] he says in *The Future of Love*. And in *Theology and Social Theory* he says, contra MacIntyre, that his case is that secular reason is 'only a *mythos*, and therefore cannot be refuted, but only out-narrated, if we can *persuade* people – for reasons of "literary taste" – that Christianity offers a much better story'.[429]

There are two points to be made here: firstly, Milbank goes on to say that the rite of the Eucharist gives the Church

> […] a ritual distance from itself, to preserve itself, *as* the body of Christ under judgement *by* the body of Christ, which after all it can only receive. In a sense, this ritual distance of the Church from itself defines the Church, or rather deflects it from any definition of what it is. In truth it *is* not, but has been and will be.[430]

How to understand this "ritual distance"? As a type of story that the Church tells about itself, that it enacts in the rite of the Eucharist. The Church cannot become something else apart from or in distinction to that story because the rite continually reminds it of what it is, of what it should be, and what it will be in time to come. It has a type of displaced identity, therefore, a '(suspended) presence in favour of memory and expectation'.[431] This is the

[428] Milbank, *Future*, p. 133.
[429] Milbank, *Theology*, p. 331.
[430] Milbank, *Future*, p. 133.
[431] Ibid., p. 134.

sense in which it is a fiction, only insofar as it is, in the present, never fully what it is in its perfect state. Again, this is why critiques of Milbank's ecclesiology as idealistic fail to fulfil their ambition: Shakespeare gets it half right when he observes that, upon Milbank's understanding, 'We don't have access to Christ…without the Church's tradition and worship. If we assume that the Church is fallible and inadequate, this will mean that the Church can only hand on a fallible and inadequate Jesus'.[432] He would be fully correct if the claim were that the Church is the unambiguous, temporal extension of the incarnation into the world. But because Milbank posits this ritual distance, and only evokes 'a perfection in Jesus's practice',[433] whilst acknowledging the partial and stuttering nature of that perfection as the Church seeks to reembody it, Shakespeare's critique is unfounded. As Shakespeare himself says, in the face of protest, 'The Church must be reunited, because Christians must believe that the Church does not, ultimately, go astray'.[434] The difference here is, of course, in the word "ultimately".

The second point concerns Milbank's rejection of the use of 'the apologetic mediation of a universal human reason'[435] for the communication of the faith. This is because reason is always already a participation in some kind of foundational commitment to a metaphysics that is presupposed and not founded upon pure rationality *per se*. In fact, the possibility of such a foundation is refused totally by Milbank. Therefore, the project of Christian apologetics, insofar as it seeks to occupy the same neutral terrain of reason as the secular unbeliever, is wrongheaded and has given too much away to the secular narrative of subtraction. Rather, very much congruent with the post-liberal school of George Lindbeck

[432] Shakespeare, *Introduction*, p. 92.
[433] Milbank, *Word*, p. 162.
[434] Shakespeare, *Introduction*, p. 91.
[435] Milbank, *Theology*, p. 1.

and others, Milbank believes that the only way to engage with discourses outside of Christian theology is to "outnarrate" them, telling a better story, quite literally, which is inherently and internally attractive and persuasive. The possibility of critique is a large part of the point of *Theology and Social Theory*: the secular is not what is *just there* once the fantastic metanarrative, or *mythos*, of the religious is removed, but, as James Smith rightly says, 'nihilism's secular ontology is unveiled as a *mythos* and thus equal in epistemic status to the Christian *mythos*'.[436] Further to this, it is also possible to demonstrate the inconsistencies and frailties of anti-Christian accounts of reality through an immanent critique that only refers to the internal logic of those stories: 'Because secular accounts do not properly recognize the status of the world as creation, their framework is plagued with tensions and contradictions that can demonstrated *ad absurdium*'.[437]

When speaking of "literary taste", therefore, it seems that the Christian *mythos* must retain under scrutiny an internal consistency that does not collapse into absurdity. But why invoke literary taste as a criterion? This is reflected in another passage in which Milbank claims that the only reason to opt for an orthodox doctrine of the incarnation 'must come from the inherent attractiveness of the picture of God thence provided: no other picture, save of incarnation in a joyful and suffering life in time, gives quite such an acute notion of divine love, and involvement in our destiny'.[438] Again, although there is an appeal to internal consistency here, this must, at some level, be an invocation of the notion of the convertibility of the transcendentals, truth, beauty, goodness and being. Because these things are one in the Christian understanding then the most beautiful must be equal to what

[436] Smith, *Introduction*, p. 181.
[437] Ibid., p. 182.
[438] Milbank, *Theology*, p. 386.

is true, and therefore at the most fundamental level must be what is most persuasive. The desiccated logic of human reason as mere calculation is eclipsed by an understanding of reason as an ecstatic reaching out for what is not only true but simultaneously good and beautiful. This is not to say that all truth is beautiful, but that the most true, namely God, is ultimately what is most beautiful.[439]

This has a practically significant aspect to it: the aesthetic, when understood as something that is inherently persuasive, can be utilized not only in the beauty of art, architecture and liturgy, but in lives that are re-embodiments of the incarnate life of Christ:

> The only Christian approach here must be a persuasive attempt to recite particular cases, particular biographies as authentic embodiments of the *logos staurou*, the logic of the cross. Whereas, indicates Paul […] all philosophy is reduced to the level of mere persuasion (*peithois*), this *logos* alone is truly *demonstrative* (*apodeixei*) since it is realized in power in resurrection and the emergence of the Church.[440]

All of this is to say that Milbank's critique of philosophical or rational demonstration must come through ecclesiologically in the form of aesthetic persuasion. This links to much of what was said about Taylor's aesthetic above: the beauty that comes into the world with Christianity, in the arts, in architecture, in the Gothic cathedral, and also in lives dedicated to holiness, and the cumulative effect that those things have had to ameliorate human society, civilization and culture, could not and cannot be effected on this scale in any other

[439] Milbank's talk of "literary taste" might appear at first glance to be significantly removed from the clear apologetic intent of Thomas Aquinas, whose desire was to show that human reason has access to *certain* truths about God, most obviously that God exists in the form of pure actuality, and that this can be demonstrated syllogistically. It is a contorted way of getting there on Milbank's part, but the fact is that Thomas *did* believe and teach that reason is a dynamic, teleological yearning of the human mind for God, and the Roman Catholic maintains today that human beings, even in their fallen state, can know that God exists and desire union with him, even if they have not heard of his revelation in Christ. Thus, a certain type of apologetics is possible because it sees human reason as a desire for God which, even though fallen, can still come to believe and know certain things about God. This is, again, a form of *manuductio,* that sees reason as the handmaid of faith. The point here is that reason and the aesthetic are part of the same search for God, who is both truth and beauty.

[440] Milbank, *Future*, p. 139

way.[441] The secularist must ask, therefore, whether the beauty and goodness of such things can be separated out, without impoverishment, from their spiritual source. Or, conversely, perhaps such beauty and goodness can only be founded by what is true. Put another way, if Christ truly was the instantiation of all beauty, goodness, truth and being in the world, might this suffice for an explanation of this great aesthetic legacy?

Thus we find a way of linking up the inferential argument offered in my closing comments on Taylor: there we began on a phenomenological level, and argued that aesthetic experience itself is not reducible to a naturalistic description of efficient and material causes, but is impoverished upon such an account. Here we have arrived at the same argument, but we have approached the issue through ontology, metaphysics and finally ecclesiology: the beauty of God, when shown forth in truth throughout history and lives of holiness in the Church, is not reducible to bare, secular "nature". The force of this argument is ultimately not in its internal logic (though that is consistent enough) but in its aesthetic and narrative power. As Milbank commented during the above-mentioned debate with Angie Hobbs: since the time of at least Plato onwards, human beings have found that the best account of the good, the true and the beautiful is in religion, and this finds its culmination in catholic Christianity.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have developed from John Milbank and the Radical Orthodoxy project more broadly what I have described as a "participatory ecclesiology" and this in contrast to

[441] This is illustrated in David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and its Fashionable Enemies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009). It is also the subject of the recent, popular though substantive treatment in Tom Holland, *Dominion: The Making of the Western Mind* (London: Little, Brown, 2019). Holland, not a Christian himself, nevertheless acknowledges that his values are dependent upon the Christian legacy and thus are, in his view, culturally relative.

other forms of ecclesiology which play down the Church's mediatory status and focus instead on what Charles Taylor might call "excarnated" aspects of the Church's life. The latter I have shown in multiple ways to link with the metaphysically problematic deviations within Christian theology that I explored at length in chapter three. I have argued that a participatory ecclesiology is one that seeks to bring the aboriginal and eschatological peace of God's kingdom into the present through the practices of the Church: its liturgy, sacraments and interpersonal relationships characterised by love, service and forgiveness. And I have drawn extensively on the ecclesiology of John Milbank in order to demonstrate this.

All of this is indicative of the general argument of my thesis which is that Modernity has been responsible for the sundering of the immanent and the transcendent and that the Church must join together what has been rent apart through emphasising its "aesthetic" practices, meaning not only the cognitive learning of certain facts or ethical injunctions, but a tangible embodiment of the presence of God in the world through embodied manifestations and practices. I have also argued that John Milbank's ecclesiology has at points been misunderstood as utopian and idealistic and shown why these criticisms miss one of its crucial features: namely, the unfinished work and incomplete character of the Church on earth.

In an essay whose analysis of Milbank's ecclesiology is close to my own, Martin Gainsborough summarises his view:

> Milbank speaks of the Church as an exemplary but other-governed human community, a reconciled, non-violent, social order, a refuge from the enactment of punishment, and a space where we acknowledge that an individual's sin is never theirs alone. In his

> more recent work, Milbank emphasizes that the Church on earth is not utopian. Rather we glimpse its perfection dimly. It is only fragmentarily realized.[442]

Gainsborough argues that Milbank's ecclesiology is neither utopian nor dualistic and attributes these types of criticisms to a superficial reading of Milbank's work, noting as he does, for example, that Milbank is 'highly critical of the Church in a number of significant ways and acknowledges in the way he writes that the Church sometimes falls short',[443] and that, although Milbank 'does not look favourably on a Church which mimics the world of secular liberalism', nevertheless, there is in his writing 'a certain resignation to the "necessity" of the liberal state, and a "contractual", or legally bound peace'.[444]

Gainsborough's article is a helpful comparison of the ecclesiologies of John Milbank and Rowan Williams. The latter is the subject of the next chapter and so a comment on this comparison is helpful here. In my view, there is a fundamental overlap between the two ecclesiologies under discussion, and Gainsborough does not demur from this analysis. I will go into far more detail in the next chapter, but suffice here to say that, in the same way that Milbank sees the Church as a kind of recovery of an aboriginal goodness and eschatological peace, so Williams sees the Church not so much as a group of people getting together who have 'something in common called Christian faith'[445] but as 'a place or dimension in the universe that is in some way growing towards being the universe itself in restored relationship to God'.[446] This is the place 'occupied by Christ', which 'we are invited to

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[442] Martin Gainsborough, 'Priest in the Inner City: Subjecting the Ecclesiology of John Milbank and Rowan Williams to Empirical Scrutiny', *Ecclesiology*, 13 (2017), 11-31 (p. 29).
[443] Ibid., p. 16.
[444] Ibid., quoting Milbank, *Theology*, p. xv.
[445] Ibid., quoting Rowan Williams, '"The Christian Priest Today": Lecture on the Occasion of the 150th Anniversary of Ripon College, Cuddesdon', http://aoc2013.brix.fatbeehive.com/articles.php/2097/the-christian-priest-today-lecture-on-the-occasion-of-the-150th-anniversary-of-ripon-college-cuddesd [accessed 10 October 2018].
[446] Ibid., quoting Williams, 'Priest'.

enter'.[447] In both accounts, therefore, we see that the Church is not constituted by a kind of membership which is based on a shared idea. Rather it is a place which we are called to occupy and to inhabit and, as we occupy this place and embody the spirit of Christ within it, so we bring his peace and healing to the world. Again, in both accounts, there is no sense in which this healing can be attributed exclusively to the institutional Church alone. Gainsborough notes Milbank's analysis in *Theology and Social Theory* in recognizing this: 'Milbank wants us to view the Church as a "nomad city" "without a site or walls or gates", "where the lines between Church and world, spiritual and secular are blurred"'.[448]

Gainsborough's argument is that Milbank's ecclesiology is more subtle and flexible than his critics would allow. He argues that 'Milbank's ecclesiology can be usefully supplemented and embellished with what we might call the fragile, compromised, suffering Church – which is essential to its very essence as a community born out of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ'.[449] This is far from a criticism of Milbank, however, who himself, according to Gainsborough, 'acknowledg(es) that the task ahead may not just be one for academics', which he understands to mean that 'reflections on the nature of the Church need also come from those with a pastoral profile, including scholar priests'.[450] Gainsborough quotes Milbank himself, who comments in *The Future of Love* that the argument of *Theology and Social Theory* 'requires (infinite) supplementation by *judicious narratives of ecclesial happenings*, which alone would indicate the shape of the Church that we desire'.[451] This is a major point of Gainsborough's article as he supplements his analysis

[447] Ibid.
[448] Ibid., p. 15, quoting Milbank, *Theology*, p. 394 and 413 respectively.
[449] Ibid., p. 14
[450] Ibid, p. 18.
[451] Ibid., pp. 18-19, quoting Milbank, *Future*, p. 135. Italics Gainsborough's.

of Williams' and Milbank's ecclesiologies with five vignettes of his first-hand experiences of priestly ministry in order to illustrate the aforementioned 'fragile, compromised, suffering church'.[452]

Gainsborough's essay provides a useful bridge from Milbank to Williams for this thesis. Although my interest is not primarily on providing first-hand ethnographic studies, in my final chapter I will use Williams' informed reflections upon the nature of ordained ministry to further embellish the kind of ecclesiology for which I am arguing. Secondly, as Gainsborough suggests, Williams perhaps provides a special emphasis upon 'the Church taken to its limits, sticking with situations of "dis-ease and conflict", and not looking for "quick and false solutions"'.[453] This is not to say that Milbank does not look for these things,[454] but to emphasise that this is a particular area which Williams is interested in exploring.

Therefore, having utilized Milbank's ecclesiology and related it to specific practices of the Church – notably forgiveness, liturgy and the sacraments – with a truly orthodox metaphysical underpinning, I will now turn to Williams who, in general, outlines a metaphysically similar picture of a non-competitive relationship between God and creation. From there I will explore how Williams describes the Church as a place in the world that seeks to be transparent to God, how he does that often from the perspective of his own experience as a bishop, and, in particular, I will emphasise how the Church's aesthetic plays a role in that process.

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[452] Ibid., p. 30.
[453] Ibid., p. 11.
[454] Nor is it to say that Milbank and the Radical Orthodoxy project are not interested in practical application and without embodiment within the ministry of the Church, ordained or otherwise. As evidence of this, one can look at the collection of sermons in Alison Milbank, John Hughes and Arabella Milbank, eds., *Preaching Radical and Orthodox* (London: SCM Press, 2017).

Chapter Five | Rowan Williams: Ecclesiology and Epiphany

Introduction

To recapitulate the basic argument of this thesis: I hope to have shown thus far that the work of Charles Taylor on the secular warns the Church against any collusion in what I have been calling an anti-aesthetic approach to ecclesiology. This is because deviations within Christian theology and Christendom itself led to a separation of the realms of the immanent and the transcendent, thereby leading to the creation of the modern secular space. The implication of this for the aesthetic is that it can no longer act as a mediator for the divine and must be viewed with either indifference or suspicion. This implication is false because the original separation between the immanent and the transcendent, nature and grace, is false, and so must be resisted. Therefore to collude with an anti-aesthetic, anti-sacramental and disembodied approach to Christianity is to collude with secular unbelief itself and will lead to an impoverished ecclesiology. Against this, we must contend for an ecclesiology that embraces the aesthetic within the traditions of the Church, in its sacraments, liturgy and embodied forms. We must also insist on the potential of the material as a mediator of the divine for the arts and for human making and creativity more generally.

In this chapter I introduce the work of Rowan Williams, having already given a short precis of his ecclesiology in the conclusion to the last. Part of the reason for choosing Williams at this point – apart from those already mentioned above – is that he has often emphasized the notion of Anglicanism as (amongst many other things) fundamentally catholic in nature. This kind of Anglicanism can be contrasted with, for example, that which, in its historical form, has a greater affinity with the English Puritans or the Continental

Reformers. I believe that this kind of catholic Anglicanism was far less complicit with the trend toward secularism and hence why I utilise it in my argument. A thread of metaphysical realism, anti-nominalism, anti-memorialist sacramentalism, aesthetic appreciation and episcopal ecclesiology runs through Anglican history like words through a stick of rock.[455] This is traceable at least to Hooker, and comes down through the Caroline Divines such as Lancelot Andrewes and Thomas Ken, into the Oxford Movement and on to the twentieth century in the figures of great and largely forgotten systematicians such as E.L. Mascall and L.S. Thornton. Williams is permeated by all of these sources, and he is certainly one of the greatest living representations of this part of the Anglican tradition (if indeed, a thinker of such multivalence can be associated unproblematically with one tradition).

A good example of this kind of sentiment is given to us by L.S. Thornton in his introduction to Richard Hooker. Speaking of Hooker on the sacraments, Thornton notes a contrast between two types of theology, one which emphasizes the prophetic Word and is Judaic and Protestant, and the other which emphasizes the incarnate Word and is Christian and Catholic. Hooker represents the latter for Thornton, and Hooker makes a significant and repeated connection between the doctrine of the incarnation and the sacraments of the Church: 'A prominent feature of this kind of theology is that doctrine of "participation" in the life of Christ which (is), for Hooker, the link between the Incarnation and the Sacraments'.[456] Thornton, in using the word "participation", refers to the deification of human nature as it is taken up into the life of God through the incarnation. This participation in the divine life is mediated through the sacraments and the material world:

[455] To pursue this historical claim about Anglicanism further would take this thesis way beyond its remit. However, suffice to note that the author believes that there is much fruitful excavation to be done on this topic and that, in particular, certain twentieth century systematicians are ripe for re-examination.
[456] L.S. Thorton, *Richard Hooker: A Study of his Theology* (London: SPCK, 1924), p. 78.

> God is best honoured in religion, not by reducing the outward element as much as possible, but by putting the inward and outward into right relations with one another […] Hooker quotes […] from the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* of Dionysius: "The sensible things which religion hath hallowed are resemblances framed according to things spiritually understood, whereunto they serve as a hand to lead and a way to direct." […] Words could hardly be found anywhere in an ancient work which expressed more completely the mind of the primitive as well as the Mediaeval Church on the subject under discussion. Here, as elsewhere, Hooker goes back behind the controversies of the Reformation in this case to Christian Platonism, the earliest intellectual mould into which the Gospel was cast.[457]

The similarities here between Thornton's analysis and that of Milbank and Radical Orthodoxy are obvious. Both are advocating a participatory metaphysics in which the sensible things of the world, including the sacraments, are channels of the divine life. The two different approaches to theology spoken of in Thornton (the prophetic Word and the incarnate Word) are analogous to the two ecclesiological approaches I have been outlining: one memorialist, nominalist, rationalist, anti-aesthetic and complicit with the secular; the other realist, sacramental, aesthetic and in continuity with orthodox Christian metaphysics.

Again, the point here is that Rowan Williams is represents a culmination within modern Anglicanism of this great tradition and gives it perhaps its most sophisticated and significant contemporary form. Williams provides us with an important take on the themes that I have been exploring, and, as I have already said above, his approach supplements that of Milbank. It does this, firstly, in terms of Williams' reflections on the Church from his perspective as a scholar-bishop and, secondly, because Williams' contribution is, in itself, profoundly creative.

One of the points, therefore, that I hope to make in this thesis is that the aesthetic provides the Church an opportunity to invite the secular world to an epiphanic experience

[457] Thornton, *Hooker*, pp. 49-50

of the transcendent. In chapter two, the point was made extensively that aesthetic experience is irreducible to the philosophical presuppositions of the secular and that therefore it provides an opportunity for a reconsideration of the claims of Christianity and the transcendent in general. In this chapter, I will argue that there is an epiphanic quality to Williams' work that provides us with a model for thinking about this process theologically. I will argue that the primary value of the aesthetic is that it confronts us with the possibility of the epiphanic, a revelation of things invisible by means of things visible. And, indeed, I will argue that Williams' work implies a type of catholic ecclesiology which, in its aesthetic form, is in essence revelatory because it is given to us not in order to dispense information but fundamentally in order to *show us* something about the nature of God and reality.

In order to do this, I will begin by outlining something of Williams' religious epistemology and ontology in general and then move on to speak more specifically of his ecclesiology, the way that his ecclesiology is instantiated in the Church, and finally the implications of these things for my argument.

Religious Epistemology and Ontology

Surely one of the most ubiquitous themes that Rowan Williams returns to time and time again is the notion that God and his creation are not in competition with one another, that God does not in any sense strive with his creation for houseroom, that God's love therefore is ubiquitous because it is not limited to any particular space or geography. This theme is the very centre of Williams' recent book on Christology, a leitmotif sounded repeatedly:

> […] God is in no imaginable sense the rival of humanity […] the relation between finite and infinite agency can never be one in which more of one means less of the other […]

> God can therefore have no "interests" to defend over against the interests of the creatures God has made out of unconstrained and selfless love.[458]

This is why it is crucial, from a Christological perspective, that the eternal *Logos* is not thought of as 'some inhabitant, however exalted, of the universe',[459] because that would represent the displacement of part of the creation and the acquisition of the evacuated space by the divine.[460] God's presence to us is not like that, but is rather *interior intimo meo et superior summo meo*: and this because it is not a "thing", an object within the universe, but is uncircumscribable, and yet ever present in the deepest recesses of the heart, the outer reaches of the cosmos and the highest heights of the heavens.[461] It is a presence that does not seek to overturn the integrity of what it has made but represents what Mike Higton calls 'a love which steps over all the boundaries that we have scratched around the territory we call our own'.[462] Higton sees at the heart of Williams' theological project the question of the difference it would make to the way that we think about the world, the way we think about ourselves and other people, if we truly believed that we were held in this ubiquitous and eternally generous state. Recalling an anecdote from the past, he wonders,

> What difference would it have made if I let myself believe that I was held in a loving gaze that saw all the twists and distortions of my messy self, all the harm that it can do and has done, but also all that it could become, all that it could give to others, and all that it could receive? […] what difference would it have made if I had believed that this love nevertheless made no distinctions between people more worthy and people less worthy of love, no distinctions of race, religion, age, innocence, strength or beauty: a lavish and indiscriminate love?[463]

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[458] Rowan Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2018), p. 11.
[459] Ibid., p. 10.
[460] This, incidentally, is one of the reasons that Williams is cautious about the language of transubstantiation on which more below but cf. Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), pp. 206-207.
[461] The same point is made in response to an impoverished, straw-man understanding of the concept of God with typical erudition in the aforementioned David Bentley Hart, *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2013).
[462] Mike Higton, *Difficult Gospel: The Theology of Rowan Williams* (London: SCM Press, 2004), p. 16.
[463] Ibid., p. 2.

This is what it means for Williams to say, in the words of his sermon upon enthronement to the archbishopric of Canterbury, that 'we are *created*: that we exist because God has freely called us into life so that God's joy may be shared'.[464] Or, to put this in slightly different terms, Williams begins his first work, *The Wound of Knowledge*, by outlining the criteria for every Christian thinker who merits the designation as he or she who 'begins from the experience of being reconciled, being accepted, being held (however precariously) in the grace of God' and so becomes a bearer of 'God's question',[465] which, again, must be taken to be something like, "What difference does it make to *this* thinker or generation not to interrogate the traditional nexus of Christian belief – creeds, Scripture, the Church etc. – but to be interrogated by it, and to realize something of God's grace and love in this particular time and place?" This is a disorientating process as Williams sees it, a kind of 'anarchic mercy',[466] which challenges the great Christian saints 'in their readiness to be questioned, judged, stripped naked and left speechless by that which lies at the centre of their faith'.[467]

Part of what *theology* is, therefore, is an attempt to re-present something of God's presence in the world through the sort of articulation that grants a particular *vision*. Ben Myers, in his introductory work on Williams, rightly incorporates much of Williams' own poetry and analysis of Williams *as* poet in this regard, writing,

> The poet is someone who looks at language so closely that it becomes new, so that what was always familiar now seems utterly singular and arresting. Our normal perceptions are dim and dreamlike, but the poet rouses us to attention – not really to see something new, but to see anew what was right there is front of us all along.[468]

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[464] Rowan Williams, 'Enthronement Sermon', http://aoc2013.brix.fatbeehive.com/articles.php/1624/enthronement-sermon [accessed 3 April 2018].
[465] Williams, *Wound*, p. 2.
[466] Ibid., p. 7.
[467] Ibid., p. 1.
[468] Benjamin Myers, *Christ the Stranger: The Theology of Rowan Williams* (London: Continuum Books, 2012), p. 2.

This is perhaps why Williams' theology often takes the abstruse form that it does: he is consistently represented in the media and elsewhere as unnecessarily dense and obfuscatory, but there is a significant sense that, were his style smoothed out and simplified, an important dimension of his work would be lost: the making strange and making new, the granting of a novel vision to what was previously taken for granted.

Williams speaks in the prologue to *On Christian Theology* of three different styles of theological discourse, the first of which, the celebratory, is relevant: this style is 'an attempt to draw out and display connections of thought and image so as to exhibit the fullest possible range of significance in the language used',[469] the 'connections of thought and image' referring presumably to the interconnectedness of thought and speech about God and creation. Williams deploys Balthasar as an example of this type of theologian, who is less interested in arguing a series of logically interconnected points than evoking 'a fullness of vision – that "glory" around which his theology circles so consistently'.[470] The "rigour" that is required here is different to that of the logician, but will 'be familiar to anyone who knows anything about the composition of poetry or the attempt to find a proper aesthetic congruence in creative work'.[471] With these connections between theology, the aesthetic and the possibility of a newness of vision, we are already being drawn back to the discussion above of the necessity of the epiphanic with regard to the challenge of the secular. Williams' whole theological method appears to be predicated upon a desire to re-present the world in such a way as to grant a newness of vision so that we can see what has always been before us as transfigured by the presence of God's love.

[469] Williams, *Theology*, p. xiii.
[470] Ibid., p. xiv.
[471] Ibid.

There is more, however, because for Williams this love is conjoined with the notion of judgment. Even to put it in this way does the theme a disservice, for God's love *is* judgment. When Myers speaks of Williams' Christ 'as an intimate stranger, crucified and rising up into the broken world of human experience',[472] it must be understood that this is a far from unambiguously comfortable experience. Perhaps the most sustained treatment of judgment in this sense comes in Williams' *Resurrection*. There it is clear to us that the hope of the Gospel is the acknowledgement that at Easter it is not death *in the abstract* that has been overcome, but it is precisely overcome in the form of '*this man*…the pure victim, the carrier of mercy and acceptance'.[473] It is Christ, the one *we* put to death, and he represents the great lie of human self-sufficiency, of self-delusion and evasion of the truth. This revelation is at once intensely liberating and excruciatingly painful, exposing as it does our shame and nakedness to the harsh but purifying light of God's loving judgement. Ultimately, it is because God loves us that we can bring ourselves to this place of acceptance, embracing what we are because we are more deeply and infinitely loved by God himself:

> Forget you have a self to be shielded, reinforced, consoled and lied to: hear the bitter truth that the cross enunciates, and accept the pain and disorientation of that enlightenment, in the trust that you are not hated or abandoned; and come up from the flood a new person, "alive to God", living with your eyes firmly on the ground and goal of hope which is Jesus.[474]

These are the facts that change everything but, again, even though the grace is real, the *vision* that must be cultivated is deeply challenging and ever incomplete. This is the presence of God to us: a ubiquitous and loving fire that will purge us of our delusion if only we expose ourselves to it.

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[472] Myers, *Williams*, p. x.
[473] Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2014), p. 20.
[474] Ibid., p. 54.

To tie this together, therefore, we can say that God's non-competitive nature is both liberating but also worryingly comprehensive: liberating in the sense that it allows creatures their own integrity as created according to a certain non-arbitrary pattern and *telos*, but comprehensive in the sense that, because God is not *locatable* within a certain space or geography, he is also not circumscribable or avoidable. He is *everywhere*, and so his love and judgement are ever-present. If this presence were anything but the life-giving source of creation, it could only represent the oppressive celestial dictator repudiated with scorn by the late Christopher Hitchens, but, because it is the former and not the latter, this presence gently but forcefully offers truth, healing, joy and mercy.

We have seen in the above, therefore, that the Gospel, for Williams, is ultimately a challenge to human individualism and self-sufficiency, the diabolical lie that *I* do not need God or anyone else telling me how to live, how to exist, because I can do these things without assistance from my creator or any of his sentient creations. Again, *The Wound of Knowledge*, offers deep insight into this theme in the Gospels and Pauline epistles. Williams argues that St. Paul treats the Law as 'fundamentally, *self-dependence*', which tells us that 'it is possible to build up a secure reality for ourselves resting on tangible achievement by individuals; to erect a system that allows no authentically positive role for dependence, belonging'.[475] But this sort of independence stands at odds with Jesus' condition for entering the Kingdom of Heaven, that of a 'readiness to belong and trust', like a child (Mark 10:15), and of Paul's preaching, which, while not entirely disregarding the Torah, nevertheless set 'a different standard of probity before God', [476] representing the antithesis of a self-sufficient, self-justificatory and possessive approach to the Law. One of the most

[475] Williams, *Wound*, p. 6.
[476] Ibid., p. 7.

important implications, therefore, of the incarnation and particularly that which is seen in the cross, is that 'God provokes crisis and division',[477] not for pernicious or arbitrary reasons, but because he wants to free humanity of its delusion and inability to move away from selfish myopia:

> God provokes crises to destroy our self-deceiving reliance on "Law", our dependence on what we as individuals can make and sustain, or what we as societies can administer for our own unchallenged interest. Self-dependence is revealed as a mechanism of self-destruction. To cling to it in the face of God's invitation is to trust is a thinly veiled self-hatred.[478]

If this is the nature of God's involvement in the world – to offer to humanity a salvation predicated upon dependence – how does this relate to the question of the secular? We see here that the secular, construed in a certain way, represents a pre-salvific state, namely, the state of self-sufficiency, the state of dependence upon what we as individuals and society can create and obtain for ourselves. To refer back to Taylor, this kind of self-sufficiency represents the decision to "spin" the immanent frame as closed, and to refuse the possibility of need and trust in God. The Gospel, therefore, represents a provocation and a challenge to open the immanent frame, to acknowledge human dependence upon God and to accept the implications of man's weakness and failure. When secularism is construed as the non-necessity of God for human flourishing this must represent a denial of the fundamental calling of God to humanity. I argued above that the aesthetic calls for a non-reductive interpretation of art and the aesthetic because a reductive take can only impoverish its subject matter. Further to this, an analogy can be drawn with ecclesiology: the *Church* shows us that there is a way of being human in a community of other human beings conformed to the image of Christ and connected to God himself that cannot easily be

[477] Ibid., p. 5.
[478] Ibid., p. 7.

explained away by sociological theory or evolutionary science. This is where the notion of the aesthetic and the festive come together because in the festive, the gathering together of the people of God in the celebration of the sacraments and the ecclesial life more generally, a vision of humanity as it is intended to be is shown forth to the world. This vision of humanity and its showing forth is what I turn to therefore in the next section.

Ecclesiology as Epiphany

We have seen above the calling of the Gospel in which, through the incarnation, cross and resurrection, it is shown what it means to be created by God and so fundamentally dependent upon something other than our own individual resources. I argued that a certain construal of the secular mindset is at odds with this understanding, because it wants to describe reality as fundamentally independent of God and to understand religious belief as a private (and probably outmoded) nexus of beliefs. The latter ties in with the anti-aesthetic, atomized nature of the secular. At the heart of the secular social project, therefore, is an emphasis on the individual as independent, needless of God and of others. This is to be contrasted with the sociality represented by the Church, which indicates a quite different state of affairs. Williams' theology exemplifies this sociality both in his Anglo-Catholic ecclesiology and in his sacramental realism, the common theme being our need to acknowledge something more than our own private and temporal concerns and conclusions, and not only something more in terms of our reliance upon the community of the Church, past, present and eschatological, but ultimately in terms of God himself and of Christ's agency, which brings God to humanity and inaugurates a new society and a new mode of being human. I believe that this is ultimately why, at points, Williams seems excessively concerned about dogmatic statements that appear to shut down further

dialogue: not because of a woolly Anglican relativism, but because he wants to safeguard this understanding of our radical dependence upon God, displaying an awareness of how tempting it is for the individual to imagine himself in possession of a kind of total closure that ultimately precludes his need for the divine. The temptation to delusion is always there, and, therefore, this kind of dependence, which is ultimately a type of epistemological humility, needs to be cultivated as a spiritual discipline.

If the redeemed community of the Church can be described in this way, why then speak of it as "epiphanic"? This notion comes through in one of Williams' essays on Michael Ramsey whose *The Gospel and the Catholic Church* argues that 'the whole life of the Church' – not just speech and the proclamation of the message by words alone – 'is to be a setting forth of the Gospel'.[479] In his essay on Ramsey, Williams argues the following:

> What matters about the Church is not a system of ideas as such (though doctrine and dogma have their place) nor the structure of an organization competent to deliver certain judgements and to require obedience (though order is important in its proper context) but what the bare face of the Church shows.[480]

According to Williams, in the inter-war period Ramsey was looking for some other way through the issue of church structure that avoided the, as he saw it, worn out extremes of Protestant liberalism and Catholic authoritarianism. And he argues that the third way suggested by Ramsey had parallels with certain émigré Russian writers as well as some continental Catholic theologians, that way being 'the vision of the Church as "epiphany"'.[481] Ramsey's argument in *The Gospel and the Catholic Church* therefore is that the Church does not simply *have* a message, but the Church *is* the message, and to the extent that the

[479] Michael Ramsey, *The Gospel and the Catholic Church* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1956), p. 54.
[480] Rowan Williams, *Anglican Identities* (London: Darton, Longmann and Todd, 2004), p. 93.
[481] Ibid.

Church does not represent the message of the Gospel faithfully in its appearance, to that degree, its message is deficient.

Williams points out, therefore, that, whatever else the Church *does*, it must represent the truth of God's action in the world in the incarnation. If the secular represents, for example, the lost individual beset by endless choice, ill-equipped to make a decision because he is without wisdom and authority, then the Church represents redeemed sociality and a salvific tradition that emanates from the activity of the person of Christ himself.

And the latter is precisely the point: not that the Church simply provides a kind of trans-historical and global pooling of human interconnection through a shared structure of authority based around abstract ideas, but that it connects us to the divine and saving revelation of God to humanity *in history*. It is a revelation, therefore, that cannot exist without the eternal *Logos* taking flesh upon himself and living among us. The Church is not a natural institution brought about by human ingenuity and innovation but a supernatural revelation of God, and not just in its origin, but in its sacraments, which mediate that presence and connect us not just to the contemporary and historical churches that celebrate the same sacraments but also to the events in which those sacraments, particularly the Eucharist, find their origin and meaning. All of this moves us away from a conception of the Church as a receptacle for the propagation of an informative message within an ever-ramifying multiplicity of congregations, to a crucible of divine indwelling and an outpouring interchange between the different sites of catholicity dispersed throughout time and history.

Before embellishing these themes further, let us tie in this concept of epiphany with an exploration of some of the central themes of Williams' ecclesiology more generally. To expand on the quotation above, Williams describes the Church as

> […] a kind of space cleared by God through Jesus in which people may become what God made them to be (God's sons and daughters), and that what we have to do about the Church is not first to organise it as a society but to inhabit it as a climate or a landscape. It is a place where we can see properly – God, God's creation, ourselves. It is a place or dimension in the universe that is in some way growing towards being the universe itself in restored relation to God.[482]

So the Church, whatever else it may be about, is concerned with *seeing* things properly, from God's or from a redeemed perspective perhaps. But it is not just about the renewed vision of an individual or even a community; rather, as he says elsewhere, the Church is about 'embodying in our own selves the meaning that God proposes' and 'the revealing of the Son of God in us'.[483] This revelation is, of course, a revelation of holiness and goodness, but it can be thought of more broadly as an aesthetic revelation: as with Michael Ramsey, it is the revelation of a new community which is ordered in a particular way, towards love and goodness and a radical sense of interdependence. This is a revelation of what it means to be created by God and, in a sense, it is a revelation of what it means to actually *be* God. As Williams says elsewhere, referencing Gregory Dix, there is,

> […] only one 'coming' of Christ. The coming, the movement of the Son to the Father in eternity, in the incarnate life, in the gift of the Spirit, in the offering of himself that is recapitulated in the Eucharist, at the end of time. The Church's sacramental character is seen in the fact that it is, as we could put it, visibly 'inclined' towards the Father under the pressure of the Son's eternal movement, like grass under wind […] achieving its missionary aims by the degree to which it allows that 'pressure' to come through in its life and make a transfiguring difference in the world.[484]

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[482] Williams, 'Priest'.
[483] Rowan Williams, 'God's Mission and a Bishop's Discipleship: The Archbishop's Retreat Addresses Parts III, IV & V', http://aoc2013.brix.fatbeehive.com/articles.php/1739/the-archbishops-retreat-addresses-parts-iii-iv-v [accessed 22 May 2020].
[484] Rowan Williams, 'The Church as Sacrament', *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church*, 10(1) (2010), 6-12 (p. 11).

So we could say that, for Williams, the Church is a "place" which people are called to inhabit and, from that place, to make transparent the purposes and the presence of God in the world. The epiphanic quality of the Church comes through when those men and women are indeed made transparent through lives lived in holy love and interdependence. I will explore in detail below how certain features of a "catholic" ecclesiology deepen this understanding and link it with the aesthetic but an important note of caution needs to be sounded first.

If we are not careful we are going to start speaking about the Church in exactly the way that Williams warns against: namely, as a special and totalising possession that we are somehow lucky enough to possess, whilst everyone else is out there in the darkness. It can be, for example, 'a way of teaching ourselves not to see the particular human agony in front of us; or worse, of teaching ourselves not to see ourselves, our violence, our actual guilt as opposed to our abstract "religious" sinfulness'.[485] He even says in his article 'Church as Sacrament' that, 'Revelation is not a form of supreme human triumph, an epiphany of meaning achieved through act or speech; and so it is always something other than an epiphany, always characterised by death and resurrection'.[486]

It is helpful to draw out the context here of Williams' specific repudiation of the term "epiphany". His argument in general is that the association of the Church with the vocabulary of "mystery" in the Letters to the Ephesians and the Colossians points us towards an understanding of the Church as a sacrament. When we consider the Greek word that is utilised by Paul in this context, *musterion*, we see that the apostle was referring to

[485] Rowan Williams, *Writing in the Dust: Reflections on 11th September and its Aftermath* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2002), p. 4.
[486] Williams, 'Sacrament', p. 7.

'that dual sense of *musterion* which has in view both the secret that is uncovered and the riddling quality of the vehicle through which the uncovering takes place'.[487]

The dual sense of this word is important, therefore, because it refers to the fact that God does indeed 'breaks his silence' in the language of the incarnation but that that breaking of silence 'imposes another kind of silence and darkness', which comes through to us 'in the central character of what happens in Christ; and that central character is defined by St Paul as kenotic and cruciform, a revealing *in* what the world sees as hiddenness'.[488]

So there is no guarantee at all that the extent to which the Church becomes transparent to the purposes of God is the extent to which the world will recognise that transparency. In the same way, as Christ upon the cross became totally transparent to the purposes of God in the world, so he was not recognised as such but was rather scorned as a slave. Once again, Williams is cautioning us against triumphalism here, implying that, as with the cross, the Church's ostensible failures and descents into irrelevance could be a part of the manifestation of the mystery of God in the world (though that is not necessarily the case): the Church's 'insecurity and uneven "success", even in its public confusions or uncertainties, may be a part of the sacramental gift, to the extent that they represent a refusal to look for ultimate affirmation anywhere but in the creative and absolving Word of God in the mystery of the Cross'.[489] So the Church is most definitely not, in this sense, an *unambiguous* epiphany for all.

We see, therefore, that Williams talks about the Church as a space which we are called to inhabit with 'Jesus leading by clearing the way'.[490] And we are called to be transparent to

[487] Ibid.
[488] Ibid.
[489] Ibid., p. 10.
[490] Williams, 'Priest'.

the purposes of God in that place, which means an imitation of the incarnation and in particular the cross. I have drawn on Williams' essay on Ramsey and borrowed the language of "epiphany", not to refer to an unambiguous and triumphant manifestation of God in the world, but to the way that the Church's calling is not simply to convey some information which she happens to possess, but to *appear* in the world in a certain way, whether she is recognized or not.

I will explore now in what way the specifically "catholic" aspects of Williams' ecclesiology draw this out. I will undertake this exploration under three headings: the Church as historical, the ordained ministry of the Church and the Sacrament of the Eucharist. I will argue that each of these aspects of Williams' ecclesiology can be utilised in a discussion of the Church as an "epiphanic" manifestation of Christ in the world. This aesthetic manifestation, I continue to argue, is the Church's way of showing forth the transcendent in the midst of the immanent and thereby challenging that duality which is characteristic of the metaphysics and phenomenology of Modernity.

The Historical Church

In some of his early writings Williams argues that Christianity, from its very first documents in the New Testament and the epistles of Clement of Rome and Ignatius of Antioch, is fundamentally concerned with the material *history* of humanity and creation. The cross is central to this observation, for, if the cross were merely an appearance, then the sufferings of the saints are disconnected from the suffering of Jesus and therefore lose their Christological significance. Williams observes that, in Ignatius, we see that 'the model of Christ on the cross' - which was ultimately the model by which the earliest groups of Christian congregations were inspired - is 'that which finally governs human reality: to be

human is to be conformed to Jesus crucified'.[491] The point here is that, from its earliest days, although Christian experience has always appealed 'to a highly specific human experience of encounter with God', it has nevertheless *not* been characterised by 'a wholly private or ecstatic experience'[492] like those of sundry Gnostic sects. Again, one of the central arguments is that, because the Christianity of the first century was fundamentally concerned with historical reality in distinction from exclusive interiority, it had to be orientated around 'growth and conflict in human experience'.[493] And because of this emphasis upon the cross of Christ as the emblem and inspiration of Christian discipleship, 'the Church is the place where selfless service is learned, in the daily rub of communal life'.[494] This is the reason why one cannot simply write off Ignatius as a manipulative control freak, masochistically obsessed with his own bodily mutilation. His martyrdom cannot be reduced to such an analysis, even if it contains elements of truth. Rather, Ignatius' martyrdom is intended by him as 'a *gift* to his fellow-believers, as total a gift as he is capable of',[495] and in this he is showing to the churches to which he writes the outworking of his theory of the episcopate, not that the congregations should slavishly obey the bishop's arbitrary commands, but that they should see him as embodying 'the *typos*, the pattern, of God',[496] which is ultimately inspired by the diaconal service of Christ. And in this sense, there is no greater proof and justification of Ignatius' ministry than his desire to sacrifice all for Christ, giving up worldly power and status, subjecting himself to nakedness, humiliation and disgrace. For what could possibly motivate such action apart from a desire to be united

[491] Williams, *Wound*, pp. 18-19.
[492] Ibid., p. 21-22.
[493] Ibid., p. 22.
[494] Ibid., p. 17.
[495] Ibid., p. 21.
[496] Ibid., p. 17.

with Christ in his suffering as a sign to the Church of the all-surpassing value of knowing him and of its *telos* as a community of sacrificial love and service? Again, the emphasis here is not on the knowledge of God as 'a subject's conceptual grasp of an object', but upon 'sharing what God is…God is known in and by the exercise of crucifying compassion; if we are like him in that, we know him'.[497]

These observations lead inexorably to a catholic ecclesiology that is concerned with historical mediation. We can see this, for example, in Williams' treatment of Scripture. Although Scripture is interwoven within Williams' work in various different ways, it is rarely treated of as a subject in its own right. And one imagines that this must be because of the need for Scripture to be interpreted in the light of various other historical factors: the danger of *sola scriptura* always being that a timeless, totalising and diminishing interpretation will ossify into idolatrous possession of an imagined truth without the sort of openness upon which the differing temporal and geographic ecclesial interpretations implicitly insist. Over against this understanding, therefore, is a catholic ecclesiology that argues for the historical mediation that must take its place in the context of the relationship of the individual believer to God. Again, speaking of the early Church, this is summed up in the following way:

> The "catholic" insight is that [the relationship between believer and Lord] continues to be constituted by historical mediations – gospel and canon, sacrament, succession, communion, debate and exchange, with all the ambiguities involved in the life of historical and visible social realities […] early catholic Christianity, by allowing cultic access to an exalted Lord who was still identifiable and apprehensible as an individual of the human past, is a remarkable case of the *fusion* of anthropology with cosmology.[498]

[497] Ibid., p. 14.
[498] Rowan Williams, 'Does it Make Sense to Speak of Pre-Nicene Orthodoxy?', in Rowan Williams ed., *The Making of Orthodoxy: Essays in Honour of Henry Chadwick* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 1-23, (p. 17).

In the same essay, Williams argues that refusal of gnostic interiority is the only explanation for the epistolary habit of the early Church; the geographically dispersed churches are nevertheless linked by the apostolic teaching and presence that connects them to the Christ-event of the incarnation. Were the early churches concerned with a merely private spiritual experience, no epistles would be needed, because the kind of unity of heart and mind that they were seeking to create would be unnecessary. This was a unique sort of social interplay, Williams argues, for 'there were few if any analogues in the culture of the day to the enterprise represented by the canonical epistles'.[499] Williams argues for an image of the Church as interlinked by apostolic epistolary communication, which is an interchange between churches, rather than a centralised outpouring from Rome. He argues that this shows 'something of the nature of the origins of local Christian communities in *mission*', that is as planted by "non-local agencies" and so possessing 'a sense of belonging to and with parent groups of personalities'.[500] Therefore, from its very origins, the Christian Church was marked by a sense of interdependence and the need to consistently re-resource itself through its various different limbs, mediated, at least in the immediately primitive context through the apostles and, very soon afterwards, through the episcopate.

Before moving on to a fuller discussion of the latter, however, there is a serious concern here over the nature of historical inquiry, specifically with reference to the role of the past. This observation both introduces a nuance into Williams' thinking and challenges to a certain extent the historical approach of Milbank outlined above. In addressing the question "Why Study the Past?", Williams takes as a central problem the need to navigate between

[499] Ibid., p. 12.
[500] Ibid., p. 14.

the Scylla of an archaic conservatism and the Charybdis of a progressive disdain for the gifts of the past. He writes:

> […] the study of Church history suffers endemically from different sorts of misplaced certainty. There is the confidence that the past is really the same as the present – "the present in fancy dress" […] This allows us to appeal to the past as establishing ways of acting and thinking that need only to be faithfully repeated; or it reduces the past to a deviant version of that timelessly valid and obvious way of acting and thinking that characterises the present.[501]

As is already clear and will become more so, Williams rejects both of these approaches and sees the Christian past as a gift that, in its strangeness, challenges us to view the present always in a new light and, inversely, calls us to negotiate our understanding of the past in the light of God's action in the present. There is definitely an ambivalence here in the particular lectures under discussion. For example, Williams suggests that we must ask about any theological proposition whether or not it is 'a proper expression of transparency to the initiative of God in the Church'.[502] A statement like that is difficult because, on the one level, it seems obvious that the desire to respond to God's initiative would be a basic starting point for any statement of Christian theology, and yet, on the other, there is clearly a deeper meaning to it which is hard to fathom. The point, one feels, is that any understanding of the past which closes down the possibility of the priority of God's action is an understanding, whether conservative or progressive, that needs to allow itself to be interrogated. The danger of the argument that I am making in *this* thesis (which contains an explicit appeal to, or at least comparison with, the medieval period) is that of falling into the former category: namely, that I could be taken to be suggesting that all that needs to be done is to retrieve certain aspects of the past and to repeat them in the present.

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[501] Rowan Williams, *Why Study the Past? The Quest for the Historical Church* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2014), p. 88.
[502] Ibid., p. 108.

Williams' give us, therefore, a nuanced approach to the past which helps us both to celebrate and argue for the goodness of aspects of it whilst not fossilizing it and advocating for an impossible return. This could be summarized by saying that the past, present and future are not as separable as the modern imagination assumes, and, therefore, that in the present we need to allow ourselves to be resourced by the past, and, indeed, to some extent, to imagine ourselves as being connected to the past, in closer contact with it than the secular would allow. My point is that the secular does not consider this, and that it is ultimately the secular, with its flat, homogenous, empty view of time, that sets up the conservative-progressivist dichotomy: time is a linear thread along which history runs and so we can only access the past by looking back to it with respect or distain. Williams is arguing for a more dynamic and spiritual view of time. There is clearly a parallel therefore between Williams' approach to time and the kind of pre-secular time that Taylor outlines, which has been discussed in the first chapter. And so this observation means that we need to carefully nuance and distinguish the more dynamic view of time from the kind of ossified conservatism about which Williams is rightly concerned.

Again, this anxiety is central to Williams' critique of *Theology and Social Theory*. Written over twenty years before the lectures on *Why Study the Past?*, this critique still typifies Williams' consistent preoccupation with the vicissitudes of real history, as opposed to neatly quarantined "ideal" types or tropes. Williams begins with an admission of 'overall admiration for the learning and boldness of the enterprise', but nevertheless concedes 'a focal area of unease',[503] which he goes on to identify as 'the trap of fusing historical

[503] Rowan Williams, 'Saving Time: Thoughts on Practice, Patience and Vision', *New Blackfriars*, 73(861) (1992), 319-326 (p. 319).

narrative with "essentialist", diagrammatic accounts of ideological options'.[504] Williams observes a certain irony in the fact that, in an effort to retrieve a particular historical past that has been lost to an ossified present, 'the risk Milbank's exposition runs is…of slipping into a picture of history as a battlefield of ideal types'.[505] History, in this reckoning, is too neatly packaged, with the interplay between hermetically sealed orthodoxies and heresies, obediences and deviations: 'It seems that we are again confronted with something "achieved", and left with little account of how it is learned, negotiated, betrayed, inched forward, discerned and risked'.[506]

At another point Williams observes that, in his view, contra Milbank, 'The Church's peace is a healed history, not a "total harmony" whose constructed (and thus scarred) character doesn't show'.[507] I have already outlined why I do not think that Milbank's understanding of the Church as "perfect" is vulnerable to the criticism that the Church in history is imperfect, namely that Milbank is arguing for an Augustinian and eschatological peace to which the Church is orientated, and is explicit, even at the early stage of *Theology and Social Theory*, that the Church in history and in the present is hugely imperfect.[508] However, this difference is perhaps one of tone rather than explicit disagreement. For Williams, creation, because it is not God, is subject to the vicissitudes of history and so *must* be characterised to at least some extent by growth, which inherently involves dispossession. This is why Williams is always open to the concept of the tragic:

[504] Ibid., pp. 319-320.
[505] Ibid., p. 320.
[506] Ibid., p. 321
[507] Ibid., p. 322.
[508] 'Theology cannot shun the task of reflecting on "the fate of the counter-kingdom", or on how, for the most part, the Church failed to bring about salvation, but instead ushered in the modern secular…world' (Milbank, *Theology*, p. 383).

> Creation itself is not to be thought of as a moment of tragic rupture, a debauching of divine Wisdom, but it is surely pregnant with the risk of tragedy, conflicting goods, if the good of what is made is necessarily bound up with taking time. The Fall is not necessary, logically or ontologically, but […] its story can be "retrieved" as one outworking of what creation (logically) cannot but make possible if it really is *other* to God.[509]

It is perhaps paradoxical to say that, although the fall is not logically necessary, it is nevertheless true that creation makes logically possible an ontological alienation by virtue of creation's otherness to God. But this could be retrieved by observing that creation is, in itself, although an alienation from God ontologically, nevertheless still aboriginally unfallen and inherently peaceful whereas the *fallenness* of creation is a subsequent intrusion upon that initial peace. This nuance provides us with a way of thinking about ontological violence which safeguards and nuances Milbank's account. Although creation is distinct from God and, therefore, must be subject to the nature of createdness – i.e. growth, change, dispossession etc. – it is nevertheless marked by peace and harmony *until*, that is, the intrusion of sin and evil, which mars creation and distorts its original goodness. In this sense, violence can be seen as a kind of parody of the creation's original need for growth and change: Adam's peaceful cultivation of the earth is diabolically transfigured into the competitive striving and impure utilisation of the same matter which brings about jealousy and rivalry between the brothers Cain and Abel and the eventual murder of the one by the other.

Williams' and Milbank's reading of Augustine can therefore be synthesized in the following way. It was noted above that Milbank wrote of Augustine: 'His account of a legitimate, non-sinful, "pedagogic" coercion partially violates his ontology, insofar as it

[509] Williams, 'Time', p. 323.

makes some punishment positive and ascribes it to the action of divine will. This is inconsistent, because in any act of coercion, however mild and benignly motivated, there is still present a moment of "pure" violence'.[510] For Milbank, the Church is an embodiment of a lost aboriginal peace and of the eschatological future. It must, therefore, eschew all coercion because otherwise its fundamental identity will be betrayed. He therefore argues that Augustine is only partially consistent in working out this ontology. In Williams, we have already seen how creation in itself contains the possibility of alienation and tragedy by virtue of being what it is; fallenness, in that sense, is not such a betrayal of the nature of creation, although it is a departure from its aboriginal state. However, there is in Williams still the idea of an ontologically unfallen creation. In Williams' reading of Augustine, we see that, although there is explicitly broad agreement between Williams and Milbank in terms of their basic understanding of the argument of *The City of God*,[511] there is a difference over the idea of compulsion:

> […] the empirical state will be distinguished from the city of God insofar as it is always characterized by the exercise of compulsive power. Eschatologically this holds true: there will be no compulsion in heaven. But meanwhile the citizens of the heavenly city certainly *do* exercise coercion, nor are they necessarily compromising with the *civitas terrena* when they do so. They are merely working within the inescapable constraints of fallen finitude […] the difference is, as we should expect, in the ends for which it is exercised.[512]

The synthesis of both of these points of view is possible, therefore, when we observe that both adhere to some form of ontologically unfallen creation and the non-necessity of its corruption. For Williams, however, because creation *in esse* lends itself to the stronger

[510] Milbank, *Theology*, p. 426.
[511] 'There can be little doubt that Milbank's Augustine is more closely connected with the thought of the historical saint than many of the representations offered in the last half-century, at the very least to the extent that the central issue is our relation to or alignment with the infinite action of divine love' (Rowan Williams, *On Augustine* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), p. 128).
[512] Ibid., p. 118.

possibility of alienation from God, it should not perhaps surprise us to see that he finds it easier to conceive of benign compulsion within the heavenly city on its pilgrimage than does Milbank. There is less of a total contrast in Williams between unfallen/fallen and violence/peace. This is because within Williams there is a much stronger emphasis on the necessity of growth, even growth through conflict and, yes, coercion. And the further point about this is that growth is a tangibly *historical* phenomena, which means that history must be looked at *as history* in all its vicissitudes, rather than as providing fodder for the kind of "ideal types" he mentions with regard to Milbank above.

Williams wants to argue for the historical space – continuing into the future – in which the Church can grow and develop. Perhaps this is an area in which Milbank can be critiqued legitimately:

> What I am concerned to keep in view is the danger of setting the common life of the Church too dramatically apart from the temporal ways in which the good is realised in a genuinely contingent world […] The imagining of "total peace" must somehow be accessible to those whose history is not yet heald (sic) or even heard in and by the Church (how might a woman tell this story as a story of peace or promise?).[513]

Again, none of this is a particularly sharp criticism of Milbank's basic argument but more of a cautionary note that the kind of perfection Milbank describes is not identified in one particular era, the ostensible ideals of which the Church and theology must now slavishly adhere to, to the detriment of observing the real and really contingent ways that the Church must grow and develop, through setbacks and mistakes in time.[514] The comment about the

[513] Ibid.

[514] Martin Gainsborough sounds a similar note of caution when he observes that there can often be 'a gap between systematic theologians' articulations about the Church and the reality of the "actually existing" local or institutional Church: that is, the former are sometimes accused of "idealizing" the Church' (Gainsborough, 'Priest', p. 12). Gainsborough suggests quite sensibly that, in order to provide the required balance here, attention must be paid not just to the Church as a theological reality but also to the Church as a social and cultural phenomenon.

woman's voice at the end of the above quotation is a reminder to keep in mind that any triumphalism about the Church's past or present is questionable in the light of those who have suffered due to its failures. One thinks here in the present, for example, of the many children and young men who attempted to speak out about clerical abuse and were subsequently ignored by an indifferent hierarchy: how might their voices be heard in such a way as to bring about actual growth that counts in the sight of God as opposed to, say, that which counts in the sight of the secular media? These are complicated issues that only time and the work of the Holy Spirit in time can disclose.

All of this is to say, however, that the past must be treated, truly, as the past and not as we would like to imagine the past to be for our own theological convenience, that the past is, in itself, a gift of growth and development which in its very nature is a type of dispossession. Theory, therefore, does not somehow hover above the actual workings of historical contingency, readily identifiable as such, apt to be plucked from the ether of the past and utilized as ballast for the arguments of the present, but is always deeply bound up in human lives with all of their flaws, failures *and* achievements. If the critique of Milbank and Radical Orthodoxy holds any water here (and I think it does to an extent) it is that too little attention is paid to this.

Again, this further develops my argument that we find within Williams some deep theological resources for challenging some of the basic presuppositions of the secular. Here the notion of the Church as a historical manifestation that is both *within* time and is resourced by different times is understood to be the way that God makes Christ manifest within the world, such that he is not ossified in one particular chronological or cultural instantiation, but is refracted in the multivalent faces of all the saints. Again, the point here

is that the Church in its highest form becomes *visibly* transparent to the purposes of God through this cloud of witnesses, and hence it is rightly said to be an aesthetic manifestation.

Casting our minds back to Taylor's description of modern time as homogenous, empty, flat and linear, we find here a much richer view of time as an infinite series of dynamic contrasts between the present and the past. In the secular world, time has become merely a series of events, and the individuals within it are not connected dynamically throughout history to one another. This is of a piece with secular atomisation and the exclusive humanism of which Taylor speaks frequently. By contrast, in the truly dynamic sense that is represented by Williams, time becomes a vehicle for interconnection between human beings and with God himself. History therefore has the potential to reveal things that we cannot see in the present and so to become an epiphany of the divine in itself.

The Ordained Ministry of the Church

How does the ordained ministry of the Church show forth the presence of God in the world? It may be helpful to observe here that the catholic interdependence which I have spoken of above is not simply manifested within history but is also mediated through the sacramental symbols that have been given to the Church. Thus in an essay of 1982, Williams argues that the goal of the Church is 'the formation of a human community in which oppressive and diminishing relationships are transformed through meditation of a controlling story or image' and this because the incarnation, cross and resurrection of Christ 'constitute an *authoritative* reality in the believing community'.[515] Again, it would not be an overstatement to say that, in Williams' thought in general, the incarnation is *the*

[515] Rowan Williams, 'Authority and the Bishop in the Church' in Mark Santer, ed., *Their Lord and Ours: Approaches to Authority, Community and the Unity of the Church* (London, England: SPCK, 1982), pp. 90-112 (p. 94).

authoritative reality in the believing community and that, therefore, all true theology and, indeed, all ecclesiology are derivative upon it and in constant communication with it. This is, as he puts it elsewhere, 'the source event of faith'.[516] Given, therefore, 'Christianity's special emphasis upon redemption as an event with a particular location and date', we must acknowledge that 'there is a prima facie case for concern about whatever links us to such a particular location'.[517] This is, of course, in distinction from particular communities which are held together through a largely abstract ideal: Marxism, for example, is a system of thought that can operate almost entirely independently of any kind of concern with how the historical figure of Karl Marx lived and died. What is important in that context is what he wrote down and how we interpret it today. The Christian faith is not like that because whatever witnesses to God's action we possess today are given specifically as windows onto the fullest revelation of God in Christ; the Bible, in this sense, is not an abstract book of doctrines, but is fundamentally a pneumatologically inspired recording of the story of God's coming about among us in Jesus. Therefore, the work of the Church is concerned with finding ways of 'bringing believers truthfully and effectively into the presence of a specified past, the incarnate reality of Jesus'.[518] And the danger is that, 'Without this encounter with Jesus in the days of his flesh and in his life in his corporate Body in history, the believing self remains untouched by grace'.[519]

[516] Rowan Williams, 'What is Catholic Orthodoxy?' in Rowan Williams and Kenneth Leach, eds., *Essays Catholic and Radical: A Jubilee Group Symposium for the 150th Anniversary of the Beginning of the Oxford Movement* (London: Bowerdean Press, 1983), pp.11-26 (p. 22).
[517] Williams, *Why Study*, p. 91.
[518] Ibid.
[519] Ibid.

Therefore, the authoritative nature of this story is mediated in the present context not so much through an epistolary tradition as through symbolic mediation,[520] most notably the sacramental symbolism of baptism and eucharist. The former represents the individual's 'incorporation in a worshipping – a ritual-celebrating – group by means of an enactment of the Easter symbol…immersion and emergence, loss and recovery, death and life'[521] and the latter, as the corporate and repeated affirmation of one's baptismal vows (and about which there will be more in the next section), represents a renewing of this commitment. But, crucially, that symbolic mediation, through which the true authority of Christ is recognized, must hold together in the person of the bishop, who is the sign of Church's unity. Thus, 'if authority belongs primarily to the symbol, it belongs derivatively to whoever gives that symbol concrete form'.[522]

[520] Which are not so much two distinct conduits necessarily. Rather the distinction may be necessary here in order to remind ourselves that, in a system like Williams', Scripture is not a book of abstract doctrines as much as it is part of a network of mediatory symbols that has as its focus and goal the evocation of the source event. Indeed, in his recent work on language, Williams has made explicit the link between meaning and matter that is constituted by our use of words. When applied to Scripture, this kind of observation may move our understanding of Scripture (normally considered to be abstract) closer to our understanding of the practices of the sacraments (normally considered to be material) because the reading and enactment of the former takes on a more tangible feel. Williams, in the same work, also evokes the type of medieval symbology that was largely lost at the time of the Reformation. This type of observation is similar to that of Peter Harrison's work, which I have already mentioned. Cf. Rowan Williams, *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), particularly chapter 4, 'Intelligent Bodies: Language as Material Practice'.

[521] Williams, *Why Study*, p. 95.

[522] Ibid., p. 96. Williams goes on to specify how he sees the exercising of the bishop's authority in a way which is congruent with its nature as a mediation of the symbolism of the sacraments and which resists the deconstructive authoritarian critique offered by the likes of Theo Hobson. In my opinion, criticisms like those of Hobson resolutely fail to hit their mark because of their fundamental misunderstanding of the kinds of things that Williams is trying to say. For example, see the sustained criticism of Williams' ecclesiology in Theo Hobson, *Anarchy, Church and Utopia: Rowan Williams on Church* (London, England: Darton, Longmann and Todd, 2005) and 'The Policing of Signs: Sacramentalism and Authority in Rowan Williams' Theology', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 61(4) (2008), pp. 381-395. Hobson's argument is that the cultural-linguistic and seemingly postmodern aspect of Williams' writing is, in fact, in tension with and, ultimately, a smokescreen for an authoritarian clericalism. In making this argument, Hobson does little that is compelling and really only offers the worn-out, deconstructive trope that "power equals violence", as when he says things like, 'ecclesial orthodoxy is a matter of the policing of signs, which is necessarily violent' (Hobson, 'Signs', p. 382). Stephen Carr's review of Hobson's book makes the point concisely that there really is no compelling reason to believe that there is a contradiction between the, at times, postmodern idiom that Williams employs and his belief in the authoritative nature of the Eucharist and its transmission through the episcopacy (Stephen Carr, 'Anarchy, Church and Utopia: Rowan Williams on Church, Theo Hobson', *Theology*, 110(854) (2007), 141-142).

The main point is that the bishop (or his deputy) is the Eucharistic president and is therefore the focal point for the symbolic authority of the Eucharist. He makes the Eucharist, in other words, a symbol of the connection between the Church local and the Church universal, and of its dependence upon and relationship with Christ. The local Church is gathered around the bishop, who is himself connected to his contemporary bishops and to the historic succession of bishops, thereby constituting a geographical, historical, and eschatological continuity upon which all individual Churches are dependent. Williams' writings on this subject have a similar linguistic ring to those of Michael Ramsey, who, for example, in his work on the Christian priesthood argues that through the bishop's 'office as celebrant he symbolizes the focusing of the Eucharist in the givenness of the historical gospel and in the continuing life of the Church as rooted in that gospel'.[523]

Williams elsewhere engages in a dialogue within himself around the issue of lay presidency, using it as an example of an issue on which Scripture gives almost no guidance and about which the 'principle of transparency to God's action'[524] can be invoked by both sides. He begins by considering that the advocates of this practice might be decisively repudiating a theology of ordained ministry which sees the priest as a kind of magician, 'a special caste of Christians with distinctive supernatural powers', and of affirming, therefore, that the laity exist unencumbered by unnecessarily restrictive hierarchical structures of this kind, emphasising 'the free summons of God's word to the congregation over any human institutional considerations'.[525] This is swiftly countered, however (in a way which Williams

[523] Michael Ramsey, *The Christian Priest Today*, (London: SPCK, 2009), p. 10.
[524] Williams, *Why Study*, p. 107.
[525] Ibid., p. 106.

clearly finds decisive), by his pointing out that this leaves the local congregation autonomous and disconnected from the rest of the Church:

> Our indebtedness for our Christian identity to other Christians now and other Christians in the past is a central aspect of believing that the Church is Christ's body, not a transient human association. The requirement that the Eucharist is celebrated by an ordained minister is not about the powers of ministry but about the catholicity of the congregation, its proper openness and recognisability to the wider Church, so that the eucharist is more than the prayer of this group alone. [526]

Is there anything more to the role of the bishop than simply to *be* a sign of the Church to the Church, to connect the Church to its members through ritual? Does the bishop have anything to *do* practically on a quotidian basis and can the bishop make any difference to the practice of the liturgy itself? Yes, says Williams in the aforementioned of essay of 1982, for the bishop does not speak in abstraction from the worshipping community, but his *teaching* must be 'a shared exploration into the Church's common identity'.[527] He must be ministered to, and he must 'interpret these ministries, these contributions back to the Church, and interpret different sectors to each other; to manifest to the Church its own multiplicity of ways of apprehending and responding to its governing symbol'.[528] Some twenty-six years later, in the retreat addresses which Williams delivered as Archbishop of Canterbury beginning the Fourteenth Lambeth Conference, we find him utilising the same metaphor of interpretation. His central point is simply that the bishop is a friend and a stranger, a person who is always travelling from one place to another, quite literally, and therefore must speak different languages. The most important aspect of this role as linguist and interpreter, however, is that the bishop must take his cue from Christ himself:

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[526] Ibid., pp. 106-107.
[527] Williams, 'Authority', in Santer, *Authority*, p. 99.
[528] Ibid.

> Christ is obedient to the Father in all things, hearing the Father in eternity, living out that reality on earth […] He does it by learning our language, listening to our needs, answering our hunger […] Jesus' humility before the needs of the suffering, sinful world is absolutely at one with is obedience and humility before God, his source, his Father.[529]

In the incarnation, Jesus comes to learn our language so that he conveys to us God's message in familiar terms. In interpreting this source event through the ministry of the Church, therefore,

> The bishop does indeed *need* that stereophonic capacity. The bishop listens with one ear to the word of God, and the other to the languages of those among whom he or she ministers. And somehow the messages come to the one centre of heart and brain, and we live under the law of Christ.[530]

It is important to note that this role undertaken by the bishop is of a mediatory quality that Williams links analogously to the incarnation: the bishop does not simply dispense information but the bishop embodies the purposes of God in the world (or tries to) and attempts to interpret in himself what those purposes are to the Church.

In the fully catholic understanding, the bishop is therefore a kind of multivalent, interpretative symbol of the Church's life. And the point of all of this is that "catholicity" represents something opposed to the kind of *in curvatus se* which is characteristic of the atomised social groupings of secular Modernity; catholicity means in the Church 'mutual critical openness of the local body and the wider structure, the reciprocal nourishment offered by a particular local community. And if catholicity matters, structures of authority matter'.[531] Catholicity speaks of dependence upon and communication with one another, and a kind of dependency that can only be brought into being by God himself, initially through the incarnation and, here, through the mediatory role of the bishop and priest as the bishop's deputy.

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[529] Williams, 'God's Mission'.
[530] Ibid.
[531] Williams, 'Authority', in Santer, *Authority*, p. 93.

The Eucharist

Finally, there remains to be said something on the nature of the Eucharist itself. This is the symbol which must make God's purposes and presence in the world most transparent and is therefore the closest epiphanic manifestation to the cross itself, in both its revelatory and riddling quality. Whilst the bishop must be an interpreter of God to the Church there is also a time when, following Ignatius of Antioch, the silence of the bishop is pleasing to God. Although this statement is mysterious, Williams suggests that

> […] the silence of the bishop is somehow connected with God. The bishop whose ministry is centred on the Eucharist, performed with the wholeness of the Church in mind, will be a bishop who is silent in respect of many of the claims and pressures that are around, holding still so that God's word – not the bishop's – can come through. Open, therefore to the differences, the difficulties in letting God's word through, but also beginning, maturing, ending in the quiet that allows God to be God and doesn't impose the agenda of the individual and their fleshly nature.[532]

We might say, therefore, that the bishop's silence is a type of humility before God, an attempt to get out of the way, as it were, and allow God to say what he intends. Applied to the Eucharist, we might say that the Bishop's silence is indicative of the fact that the Eucharist is a communication *in itself* and special and continual attention must be paid to it.

In Williams' treatment of the Eucharist we can observe some familiar themes: in this sacrament the local Church and individual believers are drawn out of themselves and sacramentally connected with fellow believers and their "source event".[533] In every Eucharistic celebration, there is a "juxtaposition" of grace and rejection, precisely because 'those who eat as Jesus' table are his betrayers, then as now; yet from the death and hell to

[532] Williams, 'God's Mission'.
[533] Williams, *Resurrection*, p. 52.

which our betrayal condemns him, he returns to break his bread with us as before'.[534] For Williams, therefore, the imagery of the Eucharist oscillates between its institution on Maundy Thursday with its foreshadowing of the betrayal and desertion of his disciples, Good Friday, Easter Sunday and the post-resurrection appearances, most notably that upon the road to Emmaus because, although 'the Eucharist recapitulates the Supper, the betrayal and the cross…it does so as an *Easter* feast'.[535] This is a type of *anamnesis* that understands the source event as a becoming present again through the action of the Eucharist. And this is meant quite literally in the sense that, as Brian Douglas puts it, 'realist assumptions underpin this making of social and ritual signs and embody (or instantiate) the nature of God'.[536] And again, 'this idea means that the sign to which Christ gave new definition at the Last Supper…instantiates the universal nature of Christ's sacrificial work',[537] and this in the chronologically multivalent fashion described above. It is quite clear that such an understanding of the dynamic and pedagogical nature of the Eucharist is incongruent with nominalism and assumes a metaphysical framework that makes Christ present again in a more fluid manner than the former would allow.

As a result of this Williams speaks against both 'the extremes of internalization (the Eucharist as illustration of a doctrinal point) and depersonalization (the Eucharist as the confection of a life-giving substance)'[538] because both of these imply a kind of stasis that preclude the sort of transformation that is being achieved. In a key passage, Williams makes the point emphatically that it is not Christ's singular corporeal body that becomes present at

[534] Ibid., p. 34.
[535] Ibid.
[536] Douglas, *Companion*, p. 608.
[537] Ibid.
[538] Williams, *Resurrection*, p. 51.

the Eucharist, but Christ's presence in terms of the network of possibilities and relationships that only his *sacramental* presence can make possible, the grace that is made present by his history and purpose:

> If we are to say of Jesus that he is God's "body" in the world, we must as once make it clear that we mean the life, the history, of Jesus, what he makes, the relations he sets up. It is absurd to think here of "body" and "embodiment" referring simply to Jesus' physicality […] it is not simply Jesus' bare presence that is "gracious", but Jesus present […] in words and deeds that make grace concrete, that create healing, forgiveness and fellowship.[539]

Again, this is a point Williams has made more recently, in his observation that, from our first Christian documents there is a certain fluidity to the idea of Jesus' body: 'the range of activity ascribed to Jesus in Paul's writing alone is well beyond what is normally ascribable to a human individual – and…the very identity of Jesus is reimagined and redescribed as that which grounds the collective identity of the community'.[540] The point here stems from the observation that, in the eleventh and twelfth chapters of 1 Corinthians, Christ's body is spoken of both in terms of its presence in the sacramental elements and in those of its presence as an 'organism in which believers are elements'.[541] We see clearly, therefore, in these early writings, the origins of the doctrine of Christ's three-fold body – corporeal, sacramental and ecclesiological – and Williams' Eucharistic theology indicates that he sees Christ as sacramentally present in the Eucharist and so making the Church into the body of Christ, which he understands as the aforementioned "organism" in which the new life of redeemed humanity can be inhabited.

Williams sees this way of thinking about the Eucharist as profoundly coherent with Anglican writing of the "classical period", by which he means the Carolingian period of the

[539] Ibid., p. 98-99.
[540] Williams, *Christ*, p. 48.
[541] Ibid.

seventeenth century.[542] That period of reflection on the Eucharist strongly emphasized 'Christ's *personal action*'.[543] When considering the role of sacrifice in the Eucharistic liturgy, therefore, the 'stress [is] upon the heavenly prayer of Christ', which draws 'us into the eternal movement of self-giving love that the Son or Word directs towards the source of all, the God Jesus calls "Abba"'.[544] In the foreword to McAdoo's and Stevenson's work which makes this point in great depth, Williams returns to the notion that static accounts of Christ's presence in the Eucharist will inevitably impoverish our understanding; rather, the presence,

> […] is neither the presence of an idea in our minds […] nor the presence of a uniquely sacred object on the Table. It is the presence of an active Christ, moving in love not only towards the Father but towards us. The more we try to "immobilise" Christ, either in heaven (so that all that happens at the Eucharist happens in our minds) or in substantial presence on the altar (so that his action is virtually completed in simply being there under the sacramental forms), the less we understand of the dynamism of the sacrament, and of the transfiguring liberty of the risen Christ.[545]

To repeat the point above, therefore, the Eucharist shows us emphatically that the Church is not simply the continuation of a divine idea revealed to us by Christ, but it is the *place* of Christ's presence and agency, and, as a place, it possesses a materiality and a historicity that would not be encompassed were it simply an abstraction.

Summary

The foregoing three sections on history, ordained ministry and the Eucharist can perhaps be summarized, therefore, by speaking of history as a type of dispossession beginning from a place of profound *distrust* of the isolated individual and an acknowledgement of his or her

[542] Rowan Williams, 'Foreword' in H.R. McAdoo and Kenneth Stevenson, *The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Anglican Tradition* (Norwich: The Canterbury Press, 1995), pp. vii-x (p. viii).
[543] Ibid.
[544] Ibid.
[545] Ibid., pp. viii-ix.

need for the rest of humanity and creation. One of the most paradoxical aspects of Williams' output is that, beneath the gentle and inviting exterior of his countenance, there is a deep sense of the reality of sin and of its ability to deceive us. And this power can be so deceptive that it can make itself indistinguishable from what we consider to be holy and good. This can be figuratively described as a kind of stasis in which we simply cannot move on, cannot grow, cannot change, because there is nothing within us that can free ourselves by introducing something fresh. It is reminiscent, in that sense, of the lowest level of hell in Dante, which is simply ice and silence, broken only by the tearful chewing of Satan: the end of sin, the refusal of God's gift, is simply to be trapped in the stillness of oneself.

This is a kind of closure which, unless checked, ultimately precludes the work of the Holy Spirit. Why is this? Because God has made us at bottom to be creatures that exist within time and history and materiality, and these are the things that he uses to mediate his presence into the world. There is a type of humility in realizing this because it tells us that we are just one member in a matrix of billions, and that we, together, constitute the Church. History challenges and refreshes our preconceptions; the episcopate connects us across the world and throughout time, in its highest form interpreting the word of God to us and us to God; and the Eucharist, spanning and encompassing all of these things, *is* Christ himself with us in his grace and through our activities. The Church, in these ways and many more, can be taken as a million gifts given to each one of us, to free us from the pride and empty stillness of self-delusion and to open us up to the work of the Holy Spirit in God's creation.

The category of epiphany gives us a way of thinking about the mission of the Church, which is to beautify itself through faithfulness and holiness, opening itself up to God and so becoming receptive of his beauty. It is this beauty that works through the Church and radiates itself out to the world through the manifold acts of the Church's witness. This is an

aesthetic witness in that it seeks not simply to change the way that people think but to *show* them something of God's glory. And it is through this epiphany of God's beauty that the secular perhaps can be drawn towards the truth of the Gospel. But, as I have noted, this will not be so necessarily.

Conclusion: Pedagogy and Kenosis

Let us return to the initial question brought about by Taylor and to how the subject of ecclesiology might speak to it. Taylor raises for us the phenomenological category of "fullness", which we recall is a kind of experience of life at its most satisfying and deepest. But this is an experience, so Taylor argues, that *appears* to suggest some kind of remainder or excess. This is particularly true when we think about those areas of life that seem the most resistant to reduction to some kind of naturalism or materialism, namely, the aesthetic as applied to the moral, the social, and the spiritual. I suggested above the category of "epiphany" as descriptive of this kind of experience, namely, the experience not just of fullness but of the excess that seems to be suggested by it. Taylor racks up multiple examples of how this might happen, including those given above of great works of art and architecture. The point is that these epiphanies force us to consider that materialistic explanations of our experiences greatly impoverish them and are therefore inadequate and almost certainly untrue. Again, it is not that these experiences force us to accept the conclusion that there is a God or that the Christian religion is true, but that they *cohere* with those assertions far better than they do with a belief in some kind of reductive materialism.

But what, if anything, is particularly epiphanic about the Church? And how does this come through in Rowan Williams' ecclesiology? We have seen above that, for Williams, the Church is a divine instantiation, founded by Christ, and interconnected throughout history

and geography by the episcopate and, specifically, by the episcopal celebration of the Eucharist, which makes Christ present to the Church again and forms the Church into his body. In my analysis of Williams' take on the Eucharist above, I suggest that what the Eucharist is *for* is not simply to experience Christ - either through memorial or corporeal presence - in a static sense, but it is, on some level, to encounter and to be transformed by the risen and ascended Christ, who is present bodily in heaven and sacramentally in the Church. The purpose of the Eucharist, therefore, is a kind of divine pedagogy, which is not merely the impartation of information, but a meeting with the person of Jesus and with what his broken body and shed blood re-present, namely the self-giving, self-emptying love of God. In one of his most sustained treatments of the Eucharist, Williams begins by utilizing Aquinas and arguing that that sacraments are not some kind of arbitrary sign of God's unlimited power, but they are for 'making human beings holy'.[546] Again, later on in this essay, he argues that in the Eucharist, 'the primary concern should be for sacramental action rather an attempt to focus on "sacralized objects"'.[547]

Like the Caroline Divines of the seventeenth century, therefore, for Williams there is a deeply pedagogical primacy to the nature of the sacraments, particularly that of the Eucharist. The Eucharist exists to draw individuals out of their petty concerns and selfish power games, and to re-educate them into the nature of the new humanity which is begun by Christ and exemplified in his self-giving. And this is not something which is limited in the Church to the action of the Eucharistic assembly, but it is the very purpose of its catholicity and its orthodoxy. On the latter, Williams argues a similar point: orthodoxy is not some kind of ossified collection of propositions to which one must assent but constitutes a dialogue

[546] Williams, *Theology*, p. 197.
[547] Ibid., p. 206.

between present and past, so there might emerge 'the possibility of really encountering that past in its very oddness' which is where 'fruitful dialogue emerges'.[548] For Williams, orthodoxy is not about getting the right information, but it represents a historical interplay that makes possible greater levels of faithfulness to Christ.

> Here […] is the lifeblood of any Christian orthodoxy. It is a training, a path, a world to inhabit, by which the historical reality of Christ's death and resurrection are constituted the focus, the governing interpretation, of human lives; and it carries with it the conviction of universal accessibility and universal pertinence.[549]

Therefore, Williams seeks 'a renewal of dialogues with Christ crucified and risen' and he sees this in the communion of saints, 'a "tradition" of human biographies as a means of enlarged access to truth…an "orthodoxy" of narratives, a grammar of sanctity'.[550] And he goes on to say that 'catholic orthodoxy is…Christian orthodoxy at its fullest awareness of living in a shared world, of language, symbol, communion and communication'.[551] The Eucharist must be central to this as it concerns at a fundamental level the global and historical connections to the crucified and risen Christ, 'which is why Catholics speak of ministry in the Church as also sacramental, the effective present symbol of continuities'.[552] In all of this, therefore, the history of the Church, its orthodoxy, its sacraments, provide us with a myriad of contexts for seeing how the Christ event has been refracted in the faces and lives of the saints throughout history: the ecclesial memory. The Church calendar, for example, especially with reference to remembering and celebrating the saints in the Eucharist, connects us to those lives, and those lives, in turn, challenge us in our present context to evaluate our understanding of how and what the Christ event means for us *now*.

[548] Williams, 'Orthodoxy' in Williams, *Essays*, p. 14.
[549] Ibid., p. 20.
[550] Ibid., p. 22.
[551] Ibid.
[552] Ibid., p. 23.

This ecclesiology, therefore, touches upon all of those areas of life of which Taylor speaks that are potentially the stuff of epiphany and fullness: aesthetic, because the Church exists not just to contain and convey information, but in order to *show* something to the world in the very interconnectedness of its organic structure; sociality and relationality, because the Church has in its founder the mission to connect all human beings in relationships of mutual forgiveness and reconciliation and, because of that founder's action of self-giving sacrifice *on behalf of his enemies*, uniquely possesses the power to articulate and enact this mission; the spiritual, because this is simply where God is encountered, where coherent language about him in his economic and immanent Trinitarian life is spoken, where prayers are offered, songs are sung, acts of charity are undertaken and sacraments are celebrated.

The secular wants to retain - without the Christian language - the notion of *kenosis*, the idea that love and service are the highest goods of which human beings are capable. But the Church reminds the secular sphere that, with only its own resources and without those of the divine, it cannot and will not achieve what it desires. In fact, it cannot even make sense of its values: love, service, sacrifice, and so on. Perhaps, on the deepest level, the secular, without the aid of Christian theology, cannot recognize its own desire for kenosis, that is the outpouring of the self in sacrifice and even in martyrdom. This is not to say that there are no secular martyrs, but to say that martyrdom is a senseless or even contradictory action if goodwill is simply the end result of a biological process. The kind of ecclesiology represented by Williams implicitly shows us that this is simply not the world in which we live: it is a world created by God as an outflowing of his self-giving love, revealed and embodied in Christ, and instantiated in the Church.

If catholicity is a kind of pedagogy in holiness, therefore, this is provided for the Church so that its members might become, like Christ, those who are able both to live a life of self-

giving love and those who are also able to do such a thing consistently and with power. This is consistent because it coheres with the source event of the incarnation and the cross, and it is powerful because it is undertaken through the Holy Spirit in the Church and its material history and sacraments. In this sense, the Christian martyr is the greatest aesthetic form of witness because the Christian martyr is able to give away most freely all that he has by drawing on an infinite resource that is dimly though profoundly reflected in the catholicity of the Christian Church. This is the infinite life of the Trinitarian God himself. Opposed to the myth of original, ontological violence, the witness of the Church and its self-giving martyrdom is a sign of a complete lack of anxiety that life might be fully and finally lost, and is, instead, a pledge of exponential resources that cannot fade away. As David Bentley Hart comments,

> Theology must, because of what its particular story is, have the form of martyrdom, witness, a peaceful offer that has already suffered rejection and must be prepared for rejection as a consequence […] for Christian thought, the only peace that puts an end to war is the form of Christ, and its power to persuade.[553]

A significant part of my aim in this thesis has been to argue that it is not *only* theology in the abstract that is capable of bringing into reality the kind of community that has been suggested. Rather it is the *instantiation* of orthodoxy in the lives of the saints with the Church that undertakes this labour. Theology must play the part of describing and imagining the kind of the community that God calls the Church to be, but the blood of the martyrs and the myriad acts of charity of the faithful constitute the power of God that has transformed the world and human culture. The catholic Church teaches us about this and trains us for it.

[553] Hart, *Beauty*, p. 441.

There is no peaceful persuasion outside of that Church because there is simply no other city to inhabit.

Final Conclusion

Summary of Argument

Having avoided the great theologian of aesthetics Hans Urs von Balthasar for so long, I come to him now to frame this conclusion:

> In a world without beauty […] the good also loses its attractiveness, the self-evidence of why it must be carried out. Man stands before the good and asks himself why it must be done and not rather its alternative, evil. […] In a world that no longer has enough confidence in itself to affirm the beautiful, the proofs of truth have lost their cogency.[554]

The point here is that goodness and truth will be lost eventually but only after beauty has first been forgotten. For it is only beauty that can compel the human soul toward truth and goodness.

In the initial introduction to this thesis, I contrasted two schools of thought on the relationship between the Christian past and the secular present. The dominant school, represented by Marx, Weber and many others, sees secular Modernity as a radical break with the past: Christianity was characterized by superstition, hierarchy, dogma and so on, whereas the era in which we find ourselves now is characterized by reason, democratic liberty, modern science, intellectual freedom and many other related qualities. In this sense, these authors argue that secular Modernity constitutes a *supersession* with the Christian past. The alternative school of scholarship, which I have argued for here and which is represented in a particular fashion by Radical Orthodoxy and Charles Taylor, sees the

[554] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, trans. by Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1982), p.19.

secular modern present as being in a type of *continuity* with the Christian past. On this view, the connection between many of the dearly held values of the secular present and the Christian past is a demonstrable, historical fact. In addition to this, the secular modern imaginary is only made possible by Christianity and by developments in Christian thought. To reiterate an example from my introduction, modern atheism as a concept could only have come about through developments within Christian theology, as has been argued for by Michael Buckley. In Radical Orthodoxy, the regrettable developments in this story are often associated with Duns Scotus and William of Ockham, as I have shown above. As a result of all of this – the fact of continuity between pre-modern Christian ideas and secular values and the fact of the direct relationship between deviations within Christian theology and developments such as univocity and nominalism which informed the metaphysics of early Modernity – it is legitimate to see the Christian past and the secular present as in a far greater level of continuity than was implied by Marx and Weber.

We may have lost the capacity to see all of this easily, but authors like Buckley, Taylor, Milbank, Funkenstein, Dupré and others nevertheless provide a corpus of scholarship which strongly challenges the contrary notion. Although much of the shift from the Christian medieval past to the secular modern present must have occurred at a largely imperceptible social level, on the intellectual plane the thought of men like William of Ockham and John Duns Scotus was indeed seminal. Charles Taylor provides us with an interesting, bottom-up take on the emergence of the secular, arguing that the power of Reform brought about a kind of equalizing effect which contained in a nucleic form the secular as we now understand it. And, as I hope to have clearly argued, there is no serious contradiction between Taylor's genealogy and those of thinkers like John Milbank and the various authors I mentioned in my introduction. As I argued particularly in my third chapter, John Milbank

gives us an intellectual genealogy which does not contradict, but rather extends and confirms, Taylor's broad thesis.

I have argued that a clear theme that emerges from all of these works is the separation of the immanent and the transcendent, grace and nature, the spiritual and the material. The implication of this for aesthetics is that the material world was reconceived as not intrinsically related to the spiritual and, with the concomitant loss of belief in teleology in nature, the disenchantment of the world proceeded upon a certain path. In Christian history, this process perhaps met its most consummate focus in the west in the various Protestant iconoclasms beginning in the sixteenth century: not only was matter *not* seen as a conduit for the divine, but the various ways it had been thus conceived – beauty in architecture, art, statuary and stained glass, even the sacraments themselves, material as they are – were thus apt to be suspected as focusses for idolatry. But, of course, my point is that the intellectual and cultural shifts that enabled this to happen began much earlier and in subtler ways.

What is the situation we find ourselves in in Modernity? As is shown by Balthasar, the world still needs beauty, but it cannot account for its depth. The transcendent is still sought in immanent ways and through material means, but without a cosmological backdrop. And this, so I have argued, is insufficient and ultimately inconsistent. Ecclesiologically my argument is simply that the separation of the immanent and the transcendent, and the implication that the aesthetic cannot mediate the divine, are false suppositions which lead to aberrant conclusions. My argument therefore provides a theological rational for those parts of the Church that celebrate the aesthetic and material through ecclesial art and sacramental connection, and it provides a challenge to those parts of the Church that have become impoverished by accepting a kind of denuded Protestantism that, in fact, all too

often results in a secular aesthetic that owes more to the corporate consumerism of the late-modern west. My argument, ultimately, is that our discipleship and our witness are affected by this. If we abandon the notion of the divine, mediatory quality of beauty in the aesthetic, then we lose our rationale for the sacraments and their implied ecclesial memory. We take away the authority that theology has to claim for beauty something of the divine, leaving us scrabbling around desperately, searching for a way to understand what all of nature tells us so clearly, namely that, 'The world is charged with the grandeur of God/It will flame out, like shining from shook foil'.[555]

One of the major contrasts I have tried to draw here has been between Charles Taylor's anthropology of the secular – the buffered self, the immanent frame, exclusive self-sufficient humanism and so on – and a catholic anthropology that insists that the fullest vision of Christ is in the openness that we bear to the world which God has created and, specifically, to the way that Christ's face is refracted in "ten thousand places" through the lives of the saints and the works of the people of God. The catholicity of the Church, in other words, provides the ultimate antithesis to the buffered, atomized, lonely self in Modernity, opening it up to the world, the people in it and ultimately to God.

Another way of putting this, perhaps, is to say that I have shown how a Christian account of aesthetics point towards a plausible account of who human beings are what they do. Hence in my second chapter, I argued that, even given the dramatic shifts which I outlined from Taylor in chapter one, the human need for aesthetic and embodied experiences endures even though, upon a bare secular understanding, there is no real metaphysical rationale for why this might be the case. Our phenomenology in secular Modernity does not

[555] 'God's Grandeur', in Gerard Manley Hopkins, *The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 128.

match up with our ontology. It is misguided, therefore, if the Church imagines that the aesthetic is somehow irrelevant to its ministry and mission and one of the ways that the Church can regain its confidence is by rediscovering the pre-modern idea that the transcendent is shown forth to us in material beauty. This idea which was clearly central to the thought of Abbot Suger as he had a great hand in the birth of the first Gothic wave can once again be utilised in our time to speak of a depth and a meaning to things which the secular perhaps seeks after but cannot lay hold of. This is why I argue, following John Milbank, that very much lower forms of churchmanship which reject the sacraments and emphasise a lack of material beauty and experience are more complicit with secular values than they are aware.

My final conclusion in all of this is to say that the aesthetic undergirds a catholic ecclesiology that emphasises traditional aspects of the structure of the Church, such as the sacrament of the Eucharist and the episcopate, but which also embellishes our understanding and experience of the Church as a place in which we can show forth the beauty of God is creation. The secular longs for the beauty that is inherent within God's creation and which comes from God himself, and therefore the Church must seek to show forth that beauty as far as it is able. As I have shown through the work of Williams especially, these attempts will be fragmentary and stuttering and completely inadequate at times, and yet that is the task to which we are called.

Future Directions for an Aesthetic Ecclesiology

This thesis has argued for what I have called an "aesthetic ecclesiology", by which I mean an ecclesiology that takes account of the beautiful, the material and the embodied. I have implied that these are distinctive features that are often lost or opposed in more "low-

church" forms of Protestantism and that they are cherished by strands of the Church that are called "catholic". But, as I have referenced at points during this thesis, the notion of the aesthetic can be applied more broadly. What has been said so far therefore is only a beginning and future lines of study could perhaps proceed from it. To put it in Balthasarian language, I have only begun with the "glory" of the Lord, I have not yet turned fully to the "theo-drama" or to the "theo-logic", to goodness and truth.

What is goodness if it is not beautiful and embodied? There is surely something to be discovered if we apply the genealogical method here. We have come to think of goodness as something instrumental, as something that enables what we call freedom but which is actually just an ostensible lack of restraint and a licence for us to do what we want as long as it does not obviously contradict somebody else's freedom. Milbank, in tandem with Adrian Pabst, has critiqued this "negative liberty" as the common factor shared by "two liberal revolutions" – the capitalist and the cultural.[556] In Milbank's view, the political left and right are, in this sense, in secret alliance with one another: the former promoting a social, negative liberty, which allows for individual self-expression and release from the constraint of traditional morality, and the latter promoting a similarly negative freedom from economic restraint and the pursuit of unlimited wealth and power.

> This is to be contrasted with the promotion of "positive liberty", or the self-release of people from debilitating passions and degrading choices, in favour of the more strenuous pursuit of human flourishing. To believe in the primacy of positive liberty is to take the view natural to every parent that what is most freely chosen is genuinely attractive in its own right and most satisfying of creative individuality in the long run.[557]

[556] John Milbank and Adrian Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue: Post-Liberalism and the Human Future* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2016), p. 15.
[557] Ibid.

The point here is not to introduce and defend another of Milbank's theses, but just to indicate that these discussions – the emergence of the secular with its own attendant brand of quasi-Christian ethics and major innovations – has a significant bearing on the question of ecclesiology and has the potential to be treated aesthetically. If goodness can be said to be "attractive", how can we understand that goodness philosophically and how can we translate it into our ecclesiology?

As I have already noted, Martin Gainsborough makes the point at length that, following Milbank, systematic reflection on the nature of the Church must be supplemented by 'judicious narratives of ecclesial happenings, which would indicate the shape of the Church we desire'.[558] This is illustrated by Gainsborough in the five practical examples he gives of ecclesiology in action, ethnographic vignettes that illustrate the difficulties and dilemmas of the Church's real existence alongside a caring and pragmatic beauty that sees the Church as present in these struggles: the vicar in the pub after a shut-in, hearing people drunkenly "confessing" their difficulties and failures; listening to disadvantaged people who are being fobbed off by the system and trying to bring practical help when it is possible; attempting to integrate recovering alcoholics, former shoplifters and drug addicts into the church community whilst balancing the responsibility to keep the congregation safe.[559] These are all examples Gainsborough gives from his perspective as an ordained priest, but they are also the type of challenges that congregations share alongside the ordained ministry. I have written a lot about interdependence and the way that Christ is refracted in the faces of the saints throughout history, but these sorts of examples remind us that holiness and connection are hard-fought commodities, and that the Church frequently, perhaps more

[558] Gainsborough, 'Priest', pp. 18-19, quoting Milbank, *Future*, p. 133. Gainsborough's italics removed.
[559] For all of these examples, see Gainsborough, 'Priest', pp. 23-29.

often than not, falls far short of the ideal. Beauty, in this context, can perhaps be seen in the willingness of the Church not to give up on these situations, and to be committed to bringing about God's purposes in spite of the seeming impossibility of beneficial outcomes and its own continued failures.

What about the issue of truth? Balthasar famously delayed the discussion of truth until the final part of his great work. Why was this? It was because, for Balthasar, the heart must be captured first (beauty), then the soul (goodness), and then the mind (truth). Again, what does it mean to treat truth aesthetically? Perhaps, this is where a discussion of rhetoric and persuasion can be revived and applied to the secular. For a classic example of this we could look, for example, to Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana*.[560] Whatever it means to treat truth aesthetically, it must surely have some application to the preaching of the Church and presentation of the doctrine of Christianity. Surely anyone who has attended a Church of England parish for any length of time will agree that there is often a banality and a complacency about preaching which stems from a lack of emphasis upon the aesthetic nature of spoken communication.

There is a certain irony here, of course, because the Church of England has produced preachers of exceptional quality ranging from Caroline stylists such as Lancelot Andrewes and John Donne through to the passionate Wesleyan and Evangelical periods and into the Anglo-Catholic revival of the nineteenth century which produced Pusey, Keble and, a little bit later on, H.P. Liddon. Perhaps the reason that sermonising is less emphasized in modern Anglicanism is partly to do with the shift of emphasis from pulpit to altar that occurred in that period; perhaps also it is something to do with the parochial shape of ministry in the

[560] This is to be found in the fourth book in Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, trans. by R.P.H. Green (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 101-146.

Church of England, leading its ministers to adopt a more pastoral approach. Whatever the reasons for the ostensible lack of emphasis on preaching, it does not appear *prima facie* that there is any reason why the Anglican Church cannot hold together its emphasis upon the sacraments and material manifestations of its worship in, for example, architecture and liturgy, alongside an emphasis on carefully constructed and effective preaching. My point here is that the concept of the aesthetic can be applied quite easily to the notion of preaching, as it has been many times in the past in Anglican history. The aesthetic approach to preaching is to see the creation of sermons using language as an artistic task which aims at helping people to see the world anew in the light of Christ.

All of this is to say that this thesis is only a partial treatment of ecclesiology and aesthetics. A comprehensive aesthetic ecclesiology is not an ecclesiology that only takes account of the material manifestations of beauty. Rather, an aesthetic ecclesiology is one that acknowledges fully the truth that the human heart cannot be captured except by attraction. And so a treatment of beauty, goodness and truth would be essential for a fully realized aesthetic ecclesiology. This is an ecclesiology that seeks to reach a secular age, an age which wants beauty but cannot account for it, an age which wants to be good but at base has no real reason to be, an age which desires truth but only finds itself in a mire of complex and contradictory subjectivity.

The Church has, and has always had, the resources to fund an ecclesiology of this type. After all, its account of beauty finds its origin not in the physical strength and bodily perfection of the Greek and Roman gods, but in the form of a crucified slave, whose glory was simultaneously concealed and displayed in his being lifted up from the earth in love for those who betrayed him. If we can plumb the depths of this beauty and apply it to what we

make, do, think and say, then we can perhaps show forth his glory once again in a twilit landscape, and beyond the dim horizon.

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