

Unitarian Universalism and the Secular Church

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What follows is not exactly a paper, or even a presentation, but a series of disjointed ruminations on Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor's massive 2007 undertaking – *A Secular Age* – and its implications for Unitarian Universalism. This is my third attempt to produce what looks like a paper, and I have finally come to the conclusion that, while I have discussed this text with other Christians, I have not discussed it with other UUs, and, for that reason, I am presenting you with two texts. First, is a detailed summary of the most salient features of Taylor's text developed by Chris Bateman, a philosopher who blogs at *Only a Game*. I have read dozens of reviews and lectures on Taylor's text in an effort to provide a summary of the book for those of you who have not managed all 900 pages. This summary is long (19 pages).

The second text is a series of questions upon which I have been reflecting since last May when I read the book as part of a seminar in which I participated called "Secularism and Religious Belief" taught by historian Mark Valerie. At the end of my text are a series of questions for discussion. In short, this is a beginning, an exploration that I hope will grow into a workable thesis and, eventually, the subject of my master's thesis.

Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*: A Summary

Chris Bateman (from *Only a Game*)

Social Imaginaries

Taylor begins his exploration of the change in the conditions of belief over the past five centuries by a detailed exploration of the nature of society and religion in Europe at the beginning of what can be termed the early modern period. I cannot do justice to the wealth of detail that he provides, but I will attempt to synthesise the key themes.

The dominant beliefs at the beginning of the time in question were those that had persisted throughout the Middle Ages, but new circumstances – such as European colonialism, and the invention of the printing press, brought about fresh changes. One crucial aspect of the changes that began at this time was a profound shift in what Taylor terms "the social imaginaries". He describes this idea as follows:

What I'm trying to get at with this term is something much broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in a disengaged mode. I am thinking rather of the ways in which they imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations which are normally met,

and the deeper normative notions and images which underlie these expectations.

For example, our modern social imaginaries include ideas such as the economy, which is seen as an exchange of services, and the concept of the people as the source of the law, that is, democratic self-rule. But these would have been very alien ideas in the early modern period! The social imaginary at that time was dominated by the idea of the Great Chain of Being, which implied a hierarchical order beginning at God, and descending through royalty, to nobility and the clergy and finally down to the peasantry. This served as the unchallenged background of society for centuries.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Max Weber (pictured above) described a key element of the social imaginary of that time by saying “the fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the ‘disenchantment of the world’”. But in the early modern era, this “disenchantment” was a very distant possibility. Drawing on Weber’s infamous term, Taylor talks of the “enchanted world”, to emphasise that for the people who lived prior to the modern era, the influence of spirits and magic was very real indeed. Many of the formal rituals of the Christian Church at this time were concerned with offering protection to villagers from the perceived threat of evil spirits, as can be seen in practices such as “the beating of the bounds”, in which the whole village would walk the edge of their land to participate in a blessing that would protect their harvest.

The sense of the self that people had at this time was “porous”; open to influence from threats that could not be seen but which were nonetheless part of the background of belief. These influences could be positive (holy relics) or negative (evil spirits), but they were a crucial element in the social and cosmic imaginary of the time. Thus the transition to disenchantment involved a substantial change in the social imaginary, namely the establishment of what Taylor terms “the Buffered self”:

A crucial condition for [disenchantment] was a new sense of the self and its place in the cosmos: not open and porous and vulnerable to a world of spirits and powers, but what I want to call “buffered”...As a bounded self I can see the boundary as a buffer, such that the things beyond don’t need to “get to me”, to use the contemporary expression. That’s the sense to my use of the term “buffered” here. This self can see itself as invulnerable, as master of the meanings of things for it.

There was more to the emergence of an idea of the buffered self than simple disenchantment, however – indeed, to transition from a social imaginary where one was constantly threatened by spirits and forces to one in which these imagined dangers ceased to exist would have been profoundly difficult, perhaps impossible, for most people. The emergence of the buffered self also required “confidence in our own powers of moral ordering”, and this was another profound shift in the social imaginary, one that we will explore later. But in 1500, the moral order was anchored in religious beliefs and practice – the idea of a morality without God would have been difficult for

most people to conceptualise, especially since God (via the Church) was at the time the guarantee of protection against evil spirits.

A key step towards the coming transformations came with a new focus on the autonomy of nature – not as distinct from God, but as an aspect of God; the order of nature speaks of God's goodness, hence Aquinas' claim "to detract from the creature's perfection is to detract from the perfection of the divine power". There is a temptation to view the growing interest in nature as a step away from religion, a view which Taylor finds unsubstantiated in the historical facts:

The new interest in nature was not a step outside of a religious outlook, even partially; it was a mutation within this outlook.... That the autonomy of nature eventually... came to serve as grist to the mill of exclusive humanism is clearly true. That establishing it was already a step in that direction is profoundly false. This move had a quite different meaning at the time, and in other circumstances might never have come to have the meaning that it bears for unbelievers today.

This shift in perspective was to drive a profound transformation of the social imaginary. If the old viewpoint can be described as admiring the order of the world as an expression of God, the new viewpoint holds that we inhabit the world as agents of instrumental reason, and thus our duty is to bring about God's purpose on Earth, namely human wellbeing. This is the birth (or rather, rediscovery) of a religious humanism, whose first expression can be detected in the rise of a disciplinary society – an attempt by cultural élites to condition the populace at large to a higher ethical standard, to reform not just personal conduct, but to remake societies to render them more peaceful, ordered and industrious.

The origin of this transition, however, came through earlier religious traditions, and dated back more than a millennia before the drive to reform began to manifest. Karl Jaspers referred to the final B.C. millennium (Taylor uses B.C.E.) as the "Axial Age" – a time when various "higher" forms of religion emerged independently in different civilizations, as a result of founding figures such as Confucius, Gautama, and the Hebrew prophets. Taylor comments in regard of these new belief systems:

The surprising feature of the Axial religions, compared with what went before, what would in other words have made them hard to predict beforehand, is that they initiate a break in all three dimensions of embeddedness: social order, cosmos, human good. Not in all cases and all at once: perhaps in some ways Buddhism is the most far-reaching, because it radically undercuts the second dimension: the order of the world itself is called into question...

The Axial religions pushed for a disembedding from the established social order, but they were to some extent prevented from doing so because they were "hemmed in by the force of the majority of religious life which remained firmly in the old mould." The lives of élite minorities may have been transformed to religious individualism, but something more was required to bring this change to society as a whole. So the

appearance of religious humanism was to complete the disembedding that had begun in the Axial age:

We could say that both the buffered identity and the project of Reform contributed to the disembedding. Embeddedness... is both a matter of identity – the contextual limits to the imagination of the self – and of the social imaginary: the ways we are able to think or imagine the whole of society. But the new buffered identity, with its insistence on personal devotion and discipline, increased the distance, the disidentification, even the hostility to the older forms of collective ritual and belonging; while the drive to Reform came to envisage their abolition. Both in their sense of self, and in their project for society, the disciplined élites moved towards a conception of the social world as constituted by individuals... This final phase of the Great Disembedding was largely powered by Christianity. But it was also in a sense a “corruption” of it, in Ivan Illich’s memorable phrase.

This disembedding process was a profound transformation of the social imaginary which brought about not only the disenchantment of the world, but a new concept of society as constituted by individuals. It is perhaps hard for those of us who live within a social imaginary which takes as axiomatic this individuality to fully appreciate what a profound transformation this was. Its culmination was to come centuries later, in events such as the French and American revolutions with their notions of a Republic born of the will of the people, able to see themselves as the source of the law. But first, it was necessary for the religious humanism that motivated this change to undergo its own profound mutation.

Exclusive Humanism

The transitions in the conditions of belief that culminated in the new idea of society constituted as individuals, and the growing sense of a “disenchanted” world, brought about a considerable shift in the both the practice and understanding of Christianity among the élites of the eighteenth century. The “buffered self”, which was a key requirement for disenchantment, gradually served to drive towards an idea of a “buffered world”. This led to new ideas about God which marked a radical break from earlier theology, and the arrival of a new outlook often referred to as “Deism”.

The move towards Deism was in effect a narrowing of the purposes of divine providence. The basic idea in Deistic theology is that rather than God being constantly and actively intervening in the world, the natural order was created by God for our benefit, and our commitment in return was simply to flourish in order to fulfill God’s plan. This was a significant shift from earlier theology, which may also have recognised this facet, but which also expected more – God’s purposes were inscrutable, but they included our love and worship of him (for whatever reason), and thus immediately placed upon us a demand that went beyond human flourishing.

The theology that emerges in the eighteenth century shows a profound anthropomorphic shift: any sense of further purpose becomes eclipsed by the concept that what we owe to God is simply the realisation of his plan, which is to say, the achievement of our own good. With the shift in the social imaginary towards the notion of society constituted as individuals, this meant that by committing to a moral order of mutual benefit, we were doing what was asked of us by God. This was the rise of Providential Deism, a theology which believed that the natural order of things had been established for our benefit – even though it was up to us, as the inhabitants of the resulting world, to co-operate towards our own flourishing.

The anthropocentric shift towards a belief in the primacy of the order of mutual benefit also brought with it a transformation in the view of the world towards an idea of impersonal order. Previously, the orthodox Christian conception was of “God as an agent interacting with humans and intervening in human history”. Via Deism, this was to change towards the notion of “God as architect of a universe operating by unchanging laws, which humans have to conform to or suffer the consequences”.

We can see the extent to which these new theological beliefs changed the attitude towards religious practice by looking at what were considered “dangerous” expressions of religion in the eighteenth century:

Three kinds of dangerous religion were categorized as “superstition”, “fanaticism”, and “enthusiasm”. The first designated the enchanted dimension of religion, the rites and cults and practices which partook of magic in their understanding... ‘Fanaticism’ designated the kind of religious certainty that seemed to the agent concerned to licence going well beyond, and even committing gross violations against the order of mutual benefit. While ‘enthusiasm’ meant the certainty that one heard the voice of God, and could act on it, without having to rely on external authority, ecclesiastical or civil.

Now, the Deist theology was largely the domain of elites at this time, but it was still creating profound shifts within Christianity, including what Taylor terms “the decline of Hell”, which is to say a growing reluctance to accept traditional beliefs about God as an implacable source of punishment. The old juridical-penal doctrine – that by sinning we offended God’s honour and thus he was obligated to punish us – began to be seen as quite repulsive by the intellectuals of the Enlightenment.

Indeed, this hostility towards the older, orthodox interpretations of Christianity allows for the creation of radical new ways of approaching both religion and morality, and this in turn created conflicting philosophical tensions. Thus we see philosophers such as David Hume (pictured above) pulling away from Christianity, which he was greatly hostile towards, and dismissing notions such as miracles on an a priori basis (a leap of faith away from orthodox religious thought). Hume in turn inspires Immanuel Kant, considered to be the greatest philosopher of the modern age, who remains a Christian but radically reformulates what this means and develops the idea of reason as the basis

for morality. Kant sees this as founded in God – reason is God-given, if you will – but this new viewpoint still marks a significant step away from older notions of morality being *prescribed* by God. Now, what is moral can be derived intellectually.

Thus a massive shift in horizon occurs: humanity is now seen as forming societies under the modern moral order of mutual benefit, fulfilling their purposes by using what Nature provides by exploring the impersonal order with the aid of disengaged reason. This is wholly new epistemic predicament. And we can see how this shift opened the door for what Taylor terms “exclusive humanism”, which is to say, the acceptance of the kind of view of the world closely related to that espoused by Providential Deism, in which human flourishing is the highest good which we cooperate towards, but without reference to God or any kind of higher reality. (It can be argued that calling this “atheism” places the emphasis in the wrong place: it implies a necessary opposition that obscures what is actually of value about this kind of belief system).

This was no trivial change in perspective! As Taylor notes:

A standard subtractionist story would convince us that once the old religious and metaphysical beliefs withered away, room was finally made for the existing, purely human moral motivation. But this was not the case. It may seem to be, because the locus now of the highest moral capacities was identified as in “human nature”. And that links up with centuries of non-exclusive humanism, and in particular with the moral theories that came down to us from the ancients... But it is already evident that, in one sense, this modern humanism is different from most ancient ethics of human nature, in that it is exclusive, that is, its notion of human flourishing makes no reference to something higher which humans should reverence or love or acknowledge. And this clearly distinguishes it from, say, Plato, or the Stoics.

Furthermore, the emergence of exclusive humanism wasn't something that was inevitably going to come about – we have no reason (beyond a leap of faith) to believe that under different circumstances this would have occurred. The new system of belief abandons all notions of transcendence (of a reality beyond that of everyday experience) in preference for a view of the world as entirely immanent. Taylor stresses that this development of exclusive humanism should be surprising:

So exclusive humanism wasn't just something we fell into, once the old myths dissolved, or the “infamous” *ancien régime* church was crushed. It opened up new human potentialities, viz. to live in these modes of moral life in which the sources are radically immanentized. The subtraction story doesn't allow us to be as surprised as we ought to be at this achievement – or as admiring of it; because it is after all one of the great realizations in the history of human development, whatever our ultimate views about its scope or limitations.

And this amazing achievement originated from *religious* motives, it grew out of Providential Deism, which drove a process between (say) 1650 and 1800 which allowed freedom to emerge as a value in itself – something which came to be seen as a crucial feature of any acceptable political system. That religion was intimately connected with this process can be seen from the fact that one of the primary forms of freedom that was valued during this transition was in fact freedom of belief. This can be clearly discerned in the early days of the American Republic, particularly in Thomas Jefferson's push for “a wall of separation between Church and State” – not to protect the citizens from religion, but to prevent the government from interfering with the citizenry's right to determine their own manner of worship.

Thus, while emergence of this new perspective is open to interpretation in many different ways, one of the most common ideas concerning the origin of exclusive humanism is demonstrably false: it did not originate out of a conflict between religion and science. Although Galileo's story in the 17th century had already foreshadowed it, this battle had yet to begin in earnest.

“Religion” versus “Science”

Why are these terms in quotes? It is because if one were to examine the whole of the phenomena collected under the term religion, and under the term science, one would find more conflict internal to each domain than between them. Yet there is undoubtedly a sense in which people believe in the reality of this conflict. What we mean by “religion” in this sense is not the entirety of religious phenomena, but simply a position of artificial confidence created by particular orthodox kinds of Christianity, and what we mean by “science” is rather a position of artificial confidence created by “the success of post-Galilean explanations”. Taylor notes:

The pure face-off between “religion” and “science” is a chimaera, or rather, an ideological construct. In reality, there is a struggle between thinkers with complex, many-leveled agendas, which is why the real story seems so confused and untidy in the light of the ideal confrontation...

The roots of this conflict lie several centuries in the past – in the “scientific revolution” that commenced in the sixteenth century, and in the resulting tensions which reached their apex in the nineteenth century – but even then (as we shall see shortly) the situation is not as clear cut as it is usually imagined. There is an obvious public side to the echoes of this conflict today in the battle between ideological Darwinians and Biblical fundamentalists in the United States, about which Taylor notes the following:

So then as now, in post-Galilean Europe and post-Scopes trial America, a fragilization of faith partly due to disenchantment, combined with an internalization of this disenchantment, produces a face off between “religion” and “science” of a strangely intra-mural quality. This is the face-off which figures so prominently in the ex parte “death of God” story so popular among unbelievers. One party, moved purely by the interests of “science”, that is,

finding an adequate explanation for the undeniable facts, squares off against another, mainly actuated by an extra-scientific agenda, that of maintaining cherished beliefs and/or traditional authority... But the actual history doesn't fit this dramatic picture. If we look at the period we're examining, we see that the mantle of sober scientists was often seized by the defenders of orthodoxy.

This was a point that the philosopher Paul Feyerabend was also keen to observe in his reassessment of the Galileo controversy: it may seem in retrospect that Galileo was fighting for "truth", but there were profound flaws in his actual research for which the establishment were quite justifiably cautious in accepting many of his claims. The fact that his position would come to be seen as factual was not enough in this case – Galileo may have intuited the actual situation from his observations, but his scientific research was in fact insufficient to carry his claim at the time. This does not, of course, exonerate the Church's behaviour in this controversy, but it does render the historical situation more complex than is usually considered.

The driving forces behind this conflict were changes to the cosmic imaginary (that which "makes sense of the ways in which the surrounding world figures in our lives", and is the parallel to the social imaginary discussed two weeks ago). No longer was the idea of an ordered cosmos the basis of humanity's concept of its position in the grand order of things. Rather, a vast – perhaps infinite – universe was seen to lie in the space beyond our world: "Cosmos to universe: the way the world is imagined changed..."

This change created conflict with particular religious beliefs at the time of Galileo, and the problem was to reoccur with increasing force in the Victorian era with Darwin's theory of natural selection (Darwin himself never used the term evolution, as this had a different implication at the time). Taylor is keen to try and place this aspect of the story in adequate context, as it is easy to be misguided by focusing on the replacement of one *theory* by another, but the transformation of the cosmic imaginary requires much more than this. Kuhn and other philosophers of science have demonstrated in recent decades that "without an adequate alternative framework of explanation, the most refractory facts will not budge us from our established beliefs, that they can indeed, often be recuperated by these old beliefs." Taylor accedes:

This is not to deny that science (and even more "science") has had an important place in the story; and that in a number of ways. For one thing, the universe which this science reveals is very different from the centred hierarchic cosmos which our civilization grew up within: it hardly suggests to us that humans have any kind of special place in the story, whose temporal and spatial dimensions are mind-numbing. This, and the conception of natural law by which we understand it, makes it refractory to the interventions of Providence as these were envisaged in the framework of the earlier cosmos, and the connected understanding of the Biblical story. Seen in this light, "Darwin" has indeed, "refuted the Bible".

But the usual perspective we have about the role of Darwin in the transition to widespread unbelief is misleading because it presents the theory of natural selection as

the pivotal point of this conflict. Yet in fact the Victorian era was already grappling with this problem long before the publication of *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* in 1859.

Taylor identifies the historian Thomas Carlyle (pictured above) as a central figure in this debate. Carlyle had been raised in a strict Calvinist family, and his family had expected him to become a preacher; however, while studying at the University of Edinburgh he lost his Christian faith. Carlyle's work brought into the public awareness a wholly new perspective on history, and revealed what Taylor terms “the dark abyss of time” against which humanity was an almost insignificant speck. This was an important part of the background conditions in which Darwin’s theory appeared:

...evolutionary theory didn’t emerge in a world where almost everyone still took the Bible story simply and literally... this world was already strongly marked by ideas of impersonal order, not to speak of the dark abyss of time; and... an influential formulation had already been given to the displacement of Christianity by a cosmic vision of impersonal order, that of Carlyle. This doesn’t mean that Darwin was without impact. His theory gave an important push towards a materialist, reductive view of the cosmos, from which all teleology was purged (because explained away on a deeper level). But it enters a field in which many people had already felt the pull of the primacy of impersonal order; it did not initiate this pull on its own.

One of the most fascinating parts of Taylor’s account in connection with “religion” versus “science” is his exploration of the experience of conversion that people have when they abandon (say) Christian beliefs in favour of scientific materialism. He demonstrates quite comprehensively that this move does not occur as a result of “some rigorously demonstrated scientific conclusion”; in fact:

...the appeal of scientific materialism is not so much the cogency of its detailed findings as that of the underlying epistemological stance, and that for ethical reasons. It is seen as the stance of maturity, of courage, of manliness, over against childish fears and sentimentality... the story that a convert to unbelief may tell, about being convinced to abandon religion by science, is in a sense really true. This person does see himself as abandoning one world view (“religion”) because another incompatible one (“science”) seemed more believable...

But by “science” here we mean scientific theory plus “a picture of our epistemic-moral predicament in which science represents a mature facing of hard reality”. It is this whole package which beats out “religion”, which is to say religious faith plus a rival epistemic-moral predicament. The actual findings of science are less important here, and certainly do not prove the impossibility of God – Taylor examines both the proofs and the disproofs of God (as have other philosophers before him), and shows once again that neither really hang together in any convincing fashion. As with all metaphysics, such issues can never be resolved decisively one way or another. Thus:

When “science” beats “religion”, it is one such [epistemic and moral] vision which expels another... But once this happens, then the very ethic of “science” requires that the move be justified retrospectively in terms of “proofs”. The official story takes over.

As a theist, Taylor has a unique perspective on conversions to unbelief, and notes that part of the appeal here is “the relief of revolt”. When one has a childish conception of God, for instance, as a protecting father who could prevent our suffering but does not, then the pain of holding onto one’s faith in the context of the unkindness of everyday existence can become unbearable – the only way to alleviate the cognitive dissonance is to ‘flip’ into atheism. Against this, Taylor shares his own image of God as suffering with us, but is keen to note that any kind of faith in God can be seen as childish from some perspective.

Returning to the core theme of secularization, Taylor identifies a pervasive “unthought” which can mislead unbelievers when they consider religion just as easily as equivalent “unthoughts” may lead believers into strange ideas. This hidden outlook is strong among intellectuals and academics who, having undergone a conversion to unbelief (or perhaps having begun there) believe that religion must decline either because science shows it to be false, or because disenchantment invalidates it, or because it depends upon authority and cannot survive the modern importance placed upon individual autonomy. This forms part of what Taylor terms the “intellectual hegemony” in the academic world, which excludes or renders irrelevant the study of religion, especially in the fields of social science, history, philosophy and psychology. Academics who study religion are often met with surprise, as if religious matters no longer had any bearing on the modern world. The extent of this problem, I can attest, is greater than most people give credit.

The historical battle between “religion” and “science” marked a powerful transition of the cosmic imaginary, one which did indeed create problems for conventional Christian faith both in the Victorian era and beyond. But this transition was not a change to an imaginary where scientific materialism is inevitable and religious faith is impossible:

...the salient feature of the modern cosmic imaginary is not that it has fostered materialism, or enabled people to recover a spiritual outlook beyond materialism, to return as it were to religion, though it has done both these things. ...it has opened a space in which people can wander between and around all these options without having to land clearly and definitively in any one. In the wars between belief and unbelief, this can be seen as a kind of no-man’s-land; except that it has got wide enough to take on the character rather of a neutral zone, where one can escape the war altogether. Indeed, this is part of the reason why the war is constantly running out of steam in modern civilization, in spite of the efforts of zealous minorities.

We live in a world where the landscape of belief has diversified into an unfathomably variegated patchwork quilt of possibilities, against which both the narrow cleaving to

ancient tradition represented by “religion” and the equally blinkered flattening of religious beliefs to irrelevance represented by “science” are merely the polar extremes.

The Nova Effect

Taylor describes an important aspect of the modern conditions of belief by saying that “we are now living in a spiritual super-nova, a kind of galloping pluralism on the spiritual plane.” This is what he terms the *nova effect*, which he sees as originating in the establishment of a viable exclusive humanism. The development of secularity in Taylor’s third sense (a world of diverse belief) passes through several stages; the first was the development of exclusive humanism as an alternative to Christianity in Western society (which we looked at two weeks ago), the second was the diversification this triggered as the different positions began to argue amongst themselves:

The multiple critiques leveled at orthodox religion, Deism, and the new humanism, and their cross-polemics, end up generating a number of new positions, including modes of unbelief which have broken out of the humanism of freedom and mutual benefit (e.g., Nietzsche and his followers) – and lots else besides. So that our present predicament offers a gamut of possible positions which extend way beyond the options available in the late eighteenth century. It’s as though the original duality, the positing of a viable humanist alternative, set in train a dynamic, something like a nova effect, spawning an ever-widening variety of moral/spiritual options, across the span of the thinkable and perhaps even beyond. This phase extends up to the present.

The increasing awareness of other cultural traditions, and the cosmopolitanism born of so many different cultures living side by side in an ever-shrinking world has only served to accelerate this nova effect in recent decades.

As mentioned last week, the polar extremes of the space opened up by the nova effect are orthodox religion and its mirror image, an orthodox materialist scientism which denies the validity of other belief systems as fervently as orthodox Christianity insists on itself as the only valid mode of belief. In both cases, the ridiculousness of such a rigid position in light of the vast panoply of ways that people now approach both belief and unbelief is rendered invisible by a premature certainty inflated by contrasting solely with the polar opposite beliefs, and not considering the intermediate positions at all.

Taylor explores the materialist positions in order to demonstrate that there is more to unbelief than its opponents would tend to admit. From the materialist perspective:

We are alone in the universe, and this is frightening; but it can also be exhilarating. There is a certain joy in solitude, particularly for the buffered identity. The thrill at being alone is part sense of freedom, part the intense poignancy of this fragile moment, the “dies” (day) that you must “carpere” (seize). All meaning is here, in this small speck. Pascal got at some of this with his

image of the human being as a thinking reed.

This can be contrasted by what people of belief experience in the face of the modern cosmic imaginary:

Here is where a religious person will easily confess a sense of mystery. Materialists usually want to repudiate this; science in its progress recognizes no mysteries, only temporary puzzles. But nevertheless, the sense that our thinking, feeling life plunges its roots into a system of such unimaginable depths, that consciousness can emerge out of this, fills them too with awe.

In demonstrating that the sense of mystery exist among unbelievers as well as believers, Taylor quotes from Douglas Hofstadter who expresses a sense of “cosmic awe” at the image of the world opened by a reductionistic perspective, that from which “the most substantial and familiar of objects or experiences fades away, as one approaches the infinitesimal scale, into an eerily insubstantial ether, a myriad of ephemeral swirling vortices of nearly incomprehensible mathematical activity. This in me evokes a cosmic awe. To me, reductionism doesn’t ‘explain away’; rather, it adds mystery.” Hofstadter is thus sharing in the mystery of the universe experienced by believers, but from a materialistic perspective.

The sense of awe that is experienced from a position of unbelief can serve to “recapture the sense of connection and solidarity with all existence”, leading to a kind of “nourished materialism”:

And so materialism has become deeper, richer, but also more varied in its forms, as protagonists take different strands to the complex facets [of the modern cosmic imaginary]. The reasons to opt for unbelief go beyond our judgments about religion, and the supposed deliverances of “science”. They include also the moral meanings which we now find in the universe and our genesis out of it. Materialism is now nourished by certain ways of living in, and further developing, our cosmic imaginary; certain ways of inflecting our sense of the purposelessness of this vast universe, our awe at, and sense of kinship with it.

Of course, the shift in the cosmic imaginary did serve to change attitudes towards the idea of God, and not just because the early modern apologetics of design (‘there must be a God, because everything shows signs of design’) were thoroughly undermined in the Victorian era by a scientific explanation for this teleology (namely evolutionary theory). The need for an ordering presence behind the visible order is thus shaken. Taylor observes that the “vast unfathomable universe in its dark abyss of time makes it all too possible to lose sight of this ordering presence altogether.” Yet the mystery that is revealed can in itself be a powerful source of spirituality: “Our sense of the universe is not unequivocal... It can occlude all sense of order and meaning, but it also can be the

locus of powerful spiritual meanings. When these are denied, the result is often a narrow and philistine scientism.”

In exploring the nova effect, Taylor considers various materialist beliefs without any obvious prejudice. These are not his beliefs, but he is not willing to dismiss them just because they are different to his own. In a fascinating footnote, he even considers what his beliefs might be were he a materialist:

...you don't have to have faith to believe in the continuing saliency of independent religious motivation. You could think that evolution had played a cruel trick on the human race, and given us an unquenchable thirst for transformation to which no objective possibility corresponded. This seems to me the next most likely hypothesis after theism, and still more plausible than the Disappearance Thesis.

Although we can now see the nova effect spread throughout the whole of society (and the internet serves to make this grand variety of beliefs even more apparent), it took time for this to become part of the experience of everyday life for everyone. Initially, the widening of positions of belief and unbelief was constrained to “happening among social élites, sometimes – when it comes to the development of new forms of unbelief – only among the intelligentsia.” Only in the twentieth century did it begin to influence the lives of everyone in society – and in particular, after World War II. Taylor recognises that “the trajectories differ significantly between national cultures”, but lacks “the space and the competence” to explore all these changes in full. (He also notes that “probably the reader lacks the patience” – the story so far has filled four hundred pages, and is only half-way complete).

He summarises his interpretation of the process of secularisation, contrasted staunchly against mainstream secularity theory's idea of the inevitable decline of religion, as follows:

Positively, my aim is to suggest, in place of the supposed uniform and unilinear effect of modernity on religious belief and practice, another model, in which these changes do, indeed, frequently destabilize older forms, but where what follows depends heavily on what alternatives are available or can be invented out of the repertory of the populations concerned. In some cases, this turns out to be new religious forms. The pattern of modern religious life under “secularization” is one of destabilization and recomposition, a process which can be repeated many times.

Thus the principle characteristic of the religious landscape of today is not that faith or religion has declined – considering the world as a whole it is far from clear that this is the case – but rather that it has diversified.

The third and final phase of the move towards secularity in Taylor's third sense is the arrival of a new "mass phenomena of 'expressive' individualism". Expressivism had been the invention of the Romantic period of the late eighteenth century, as part of the growing nova effect. Intellectual and cultural elites had been searching for some authentic way of living or expressing themselves throughout the nineteenth century, and in the twentieth century this quest came to affect a much larger part of the population – particularly in the wake of the social revolutions in the Sixties.

This is the dawn of what Taylor terms the Age of Authenticity – a movement within the nova effect which brings about a large-scale shift in the understanding of the good to a position whereby each individual is granted the freedom to determine their own beliefs and morality, with the sole injunction that it must be 'authentic', which is to say "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, by society, or the previous generation, or religious or political authority".

Thus the spiritual super-nova, accelerated by the adoption of an expressivist ethic of authenticity, has multiplied the number of possible beliefs to a near-infinite degree so that the situation in the West (and elsewhere) is such that:

...the gamut of intermediate positions greatly widens: many people drop out of active practice while still declaring themselves as belonging to some confession, or believing in God. On another dimension, the gamut of beliefs in something beyond widens, fewer declaring belief in a personal God, while more hold to something like an impersonal force; in other words a wider range of people express religious beliefs which move outside of Christian orthodoxy. Following in this line is the growth of non-Christian religions, particularly those originating in the Orient, and the proliferation of New Age modes of practice, of views that bridge the humanist/spiritual boundary, of practices which link spirituality and therapy. On top of this more and more people adopt what would earlier have been seen as untenable positions, e.g., they consider themselves Catholic while not accepting many crucial dogmas, or they combine Christianity with Buddhism, or they pray while not being certain they believe. This is not to say that people didn't occupy positions like this in the past. Just that now it seems to be easier to be upfront about it. In reaction to all this, Christian faith is in the process of redefining and recomposing itself in various ways, from Vatican II to the charismatic movements. All this represents the consequence of expressivist culture as it impacts on our world. It has created quite a new predicament.

In the wake of the nova effect, and the impact of the Age of Authenticity, what is the modern situation concerning religious belief?

Religion Today

How do people respond to religion in the modern world? To explore this issue, Taylor draws upon a wealth of studies of religious attitudes in Europe, the United States and former Soviet nations such as Ukraine to construct an impression of the state of religion today. The background to this exploration is that which we saw last week – the nova effect, which has created a near-infinite number of spiritual and religious positions, and the ethic of authenticity, which allows each to establish their own path, with the sole provision that it rings true to the person concerned.

Taylor summarises the general thrust of the moral zeitgeist as follows:

...it is clear that the ideals of fairness, of the mutual respect of each other's freedom, are as strong among young people today as they ever were. Indeed, precisely the soft relativism that seems to accompany the ethic of authenticity: let each person do their own thing, and we shouldn't criticise each other's "values"; this is predicated on a firm ethical base, indeed, demanded by it. One shouldn't criticise the others' values, because they have a right to live their own life as you do. The sin which is not tolerated is intolerance. This injunction emerges clearly from the ethic of freedom and mutual benefit, although one might easily cavil at this application of it.

So the background to morality in the modern West has evolved from the process that gave us exclusive humanism (via the modern moral order of mutual benefit), which Taylor also sees as the seed of the nova effect which has multiplied the possible positions to a point beyond measure. He is also noting here that the common appreciation of this falls rather short of the high ideals it has emerged from: there is potential for criticism.

One significant change is that not only has the attitude towards this kind of "soft relativism" shifted dramatically, it is now standing on its own whereas previously it was part of a wider system. Locke, for instance, felt the Law of Nature had to be inculcated in the populace by strong discipline – the goal was individual freedom, but the method was one people today would be unlikely to accept. It was two hundred years before a less rigid formulation was developed: John Stuart Mill's "harm principle" ('no-one has a right to interfere with me for my own good, only to prevent harm to others'). This is widely endorsed today – but in Mill's day it was quite a shocking suggestion, seeming to be "the path to libertinism".

Today, the harm principle is so prevalent that it serves as a justification to deny the validity of traditional religious authority, and embrace a kind of unlimited pluralism:

For many people today, to set aside their own path in order to conform to some external authority just doesn't seem comprehensible as a form of spiritual life. The injunction is, in the words of a speaker at a New Age festival: "Only accept what rings true to your own inner Self." Of course, this understanding of the place and nature of spirituality has pluralism built into it, not just pluralism within a certain doctrinal framework, but unlimited. Or rather, the limits are of

another order, they are in a sense political, and flow from the moral order of freedom and mutual benefit. My spiritual path has to respect those of others; it must abide by the harm principle.

Drawing upon sources such as Wade Clark Roof, Paul Heelas, and Linda Woodhead, Taylor paints a picture of today's spiritual seekers as trying to find "something more":

...they are seeking a kind of unity and wholeness of the self, a reclaiming of the place of feeling, against the one-sided pre-eminence of reason, and a reclaiming of the body and its pleasures from the inferior and often guilt-ridden place it has been allowed in the disciplined, instrumental identity. The stress is on unity, integrity, holism, individuality; their language often invokes "harmony, balance, flow, integrations, being at one, centred".

The modern spiritual quest is often contrasted directly with religion (which is generally used as if to mean solely orthodox religion):

This kind of search is often called by its practitioners "spirituality", and is opposed to "religion". This contrast reflects the rejection of "institutional religion", that is, the authority claims made by churches which see it as their mandate to pre-empt the search, or to maintain it within certain definite limits, and above all to dictate a certain code of behaviour.

These features of "spirituality", its subjectivism, its focus on the self and its wholeness, its emphasis on feeling, has led many to see the new forms of spiritual quest which arise in our society as intrinsically trivial or privatised. I believe that this is part and parcel of [a] common error... the widespread propensity to identify the main phenomena of the Age of Authenticity with their most simple and flattened forms.

Spirituality and religion are thus set up as polar opposites, yet Taylor notes that despite this prior assumption, it is perfectly possible for the spiritual quest to bring someone into a more conventionally religious position:

Again, "finding out about oneself, expressing oneself, discovering one's own way of becoming all that one can... be" is opposed to "denying or sacrificing oneself for the sake of a super-self order of things, or even... living by reference to such an order." But this contrast can't be considered exhaustive. The first term could be seen as a definition of the contemporary ethic of authenticity; the second invokes one view of what is supremely important in life. The question set in the first can initiate a quest, and this *can* end in the second as an answer. Nothing guarantees this, but nothing ensures its opposite either.

While Taylor is keen to observe that the spiritual quest *may* end in religion, he is equally keen to stress that pre-empting the spiritual quest (by, for instance, insisting that orthodox religion is the only valid response) is tremendously short sighted:

Some people want, of course, to declare a fundamental opposition between this search for integrity and the transcendent: [Heelas and Woodhead] quote a minister who told his congregation that “wholeness” should matter to them less than “holiness”, but that is what one might expect from a hostile observer for whom religious authority renders this kind of quest useless and dangerous. There is no reason to buy into this kind of myopia.

Another important aspect of the state of religion in the modern West is that there an increasingly varied set of ways that one can relate to traditional religion. In the context of Christianity (which has dominated the history of the West), Grace Davie speaks of “believing without belonging” – that is, Christians without a church, and those who have faith in God, and even identify with a particular denomination, yet never attend services. Danièle Hervieu-Léger identifies another pattern in Scandinavia, in which people identify with the national church but attend only for the rites of passage (birth, death, marriage) while expressing considerable skepticism concerning that church’s theology.

Mikhaïl Epstein (pictured above) finds even further diversity of Christian beliefs in post-Soviet Russia:

...Epstein introduces the concept of “minimal religion”. He also speaks of an overlapping category, the people who declare themselves “just Christians” in surveys of religious allegiance, as against those who adhere to one or other Christian confession, like Orthodox, or Catholic. This kind of religious position Epstein sees as “post-atheist”; and this in two senses. The people concerned were brought up under a militantly atheist régime, which denied and repressed all religious forms, so that they are equidistant from, and equally ignorant of, all the confessional options. But the position is also post-atheist in the stronger sense that those concerned have reacted against their training: they have acquired in some fashion a sense of God, which however ill-defined places them outside the space of their upbringing.

The situation in the United States in this regard is very different indeed, and Taylor explores the differences from a number of different perspectives. He points to an aspect of this difference from polling data: people in the US tend to exaggerate their religious involvement (they claim to go to church more often than they do) while people in Europe tend to understate it. There seems to be a sense that people have an impression of what is “normal” in their culture, and thus people skew their responses towards their expectations. He wonders if the belief in mainstream secularization theory acts in part as a “self-fulfilling prophecy” in Europe: because the beliefs of intellectual élites can define the “religious imaginary” for the populace at large, the attitude of the academic world in Europe (which is quite hostile towards religion)

seems to have created a cultural atmosphere where people are almost embarrassed to admit their connections with religion.

Yet on the other side of the Atlantic, this has not happened. The academic world in the US is as “deeply invested in unbelief as its European counterpart” but here it “seems without effect on large segments of the greater society”. Part of this may lie in the role of religion in the formation of the national identity in the United States:

...the continuing importance of religious identity in national integration keeps a majority of Americans happy in “one nation under God”, even while they are disputing bitterly with others about the supposed entailments of this, in areas like abortion or gay marriage. Lots of voters in “blue” states, who abominate the zealots of the Religious Right, are in their majority members of mainline churches, who will still happily sign on to the hallowed formulae of harmoniously co-existing denominations.

An additional facet Taylor identifies is the tendency for Europeans to feel that churches and religion imply authority and “conformity to society-wide standards, not to speak of hostile divisions between people, and even violence.” This “baggage of submission and conformity” has largely been lost in the United States (despite popular European misconceptions to the contrary), whereas in Europe the echoes of an embarrassingly fractious religious history encourages people to “seek extra-religious forms of meaning.”

A common theme throughout these explorations is the way in which “it is a pluralist world, in which many forms of belief and unbelief jostle, and hence fragilize each other”. Belief is no longer an obvious and unchallengeable position, although there are cases where it may be a “default” solution – but there are also milieux (“including important parts of the academy”) where unbelief is the default solution – and between these conflicting poles, only the most narrow-minded of belief systems (whether founded on belief or unbelief) can resist the increasing currents of fragilization.

As we saw previously, it is between these polar opposites that the impossibly diverse spiritual landscape of the nova effect lies, but in this space traditional religion suffers from specific disadvantages:

Whatever the level of religious belief and practice, on an uneven but many-sloped playing field, the debate between different forms of belief and unbelief goes on. In this debate, modes of belief are disadvantaged by the memory of their previously dominant forms, which in many ways run athwart the ethos of the times, and which many people are still reacting against. They are even more severely disadvantaged by an unintended by-product of the climate of fragmented search: the fact that the falling off of practice has meant that rising generations have often lost touch with traditional religious languages.

Thus religion today is a complex many-faceted affair, belaboured by the weight of its historical excesses and failures (particularly in Europe), but in the constant process of re-inventing and exploring itself anew. Most believers today are as far from orthodox religious practice as they are from unbelief, and all but the most bellicose bigots accept this vast range of beliefs as a legitimate expression of “the spiritual quest”.

Unitarian Universalism and the Secular Church
Jane E. Rosecrans, PhD

Secularism and Unitarian Universalist Theology

Having read *A Secular Age*, how might we place UU history within the larger history Taylor traces? Taylor places the church within secular society, but he does not discuss *how secularism has affected the church itself*. All churches make efforts to attract new members, but many of them have done so by advancing a new approach to religious studies – the “economics of religion” -- that is often associated with Laurence Iannaccone, an economist at George Mason University and the founder of the Association for the Study of Religion, Economics, and Culture. This new field examines religion in market terms, as a system in which there exists a market for believers; producers of religion compete for customers by seeking converts from the “unchurched” or those who have chosen, in Tim Keller’s words, “a non-institutional, personally constructed spirituality,” or by competing against both secular culture as well as the increasing competition of new faith traditions.

Obviously, Taylor’s work poses some difficulties for UUs because he focuses on the implications of secularism for Christianity. Unitarian Universalism is different because its own history in this country has often paralleled the development of secularism itself. It, more than any other faith tradition, has *embraced* secularism. Secularism, according to Taylor, refers not to the *absence of “belief”* but to the conditions for belief, conditions under which “*belief becomes optional*.” The parallels with Unitarian and later Unitarian Universalist theological development are striking. Early Unitarianism developed along two pathways – the Deism of Philadelphia Unitarianism and the Romanticism of the American Transcendentalists. Emerson and others raged against the rationalist argument the earlier Unitarians were forced to make in the debate with the Calvinists during the “Unitarian controversy.” In its place, Emerson and others embraced “self-culture,” situated God within the self and regarded divinity as immanent in all creation.

The Free Religious Association moved Unitarianism into a post-Christian creedlessness, where it has remained. Unitarianism embraced science and religious humanism, further marginalizing religious experience. In the 1950s and 1960s Unitarianism embraced a largely political identity – opposition to the Vietnam War and nuclear proliferation, support for the women’s movement and the Civil Rights Movement, and so on. By the 1980s and 1990s, our churches appealed to the “unchurched,” not by making a secular case for God as Christians did, but by institutionalizing Keller’s “non-institutional, personally constructed spirituality.” This

is, in effect, the story of American secularism's development over the past two centuries.

But isn't secularism a good thing given the trail of human rights abuses caused by the church pre-secularization? Prior to the Enlightenment, all manner of hysteria reigned, women were persecuted and executed as witches, the Spanish Inquisition reigned unimaginable horrors on heretics, Jews and Muslims were persecuted, murdered and banished. I have found it more useful to think of Taylor's work as a persuasive account of how we got where we are, or returning to Michael Morgan's summary of Taylor, "[h]ow . . . we get from a closed, hierarchical order governed by the divine, an enchanted world inhabited by demons, forces, magic . . . to a disenchanted, mechanistic world inhabited by the disengaged or 'buffered' self?" Yes, secularism was a good thing, and the pluralistic, democratic world we live in was largely shaped by the Enlightenment. **But, what then, is the place of religious experience and faith?**

Davidson Loehr's controversial sermon at the 2004 SUUSI, "Why Unitarian Universalism is Dying" explores questions that seem relevant to the present discussion. In his sermon, he points to one way in which religious experience and belief have become marginalized in our own churches: "From the mid-19th to the mid-20th century, Unitarians moved steadily away from a religious center and into a political center grounded in the basic assumptions of secular cultural liberalism. Unitarian thinkers had moved out of theology into psychology, sociology, anthropology, and politics."

I fear Loehr is right. I have stopped counting the number of UUs I have met who have joined our churches for political opportunities rather than religious faith or spiritual exploration and in this our churches sometimes come across as social institutions no different than the YWCA, the Sierra Club or NOW. No wonder my minister has been forced to preach that giving to our church is not the same as giving to Greenpeace. As Taylor makes clear, while social justice remains important to the process of how we "do church," it cannot be the central program (and in this he makes clear that many contemporary Christian churches are also implicated).

The seven principles themselves describe secular values through secular language. Again, according to Loehr: "All seven principles come from the secular culture and secular values of America's cultural liberals....That's why so many visitors can recognize the principles as the sort of things they believe anyway." In 2003, then UUA president William Sinkford created a firestorm of controversy when he suggested that our Purposes and Principles "contain not one piece of traditional religious language, not one word." Even the *New York Times*, in its reporting of the controversy, summarized the principles as "inclusive generalizations about human dignity, justice and 'the interdependent web of all existence.'" Sinkford believed that any "new language" should allow, not necessarily for "God-talk," but for "the possibility of reverence, to name the holy, to talk about human agency in theological terms." Another former president of the UUA, William Schulz, views himself as a religious

humanist but told the *Times*, “I’ve long been critical of the position of some humanists that would sanctify secular language and lock us into a calcified rationalism.”

Of course, this is about much more than language and it affects all American faith traditions. Rabbi Jack Spiro, in his letter to the editor of the *New York Times* in response to UCC minister Jeffrey MacDonald’s op-ed “Congregations Gone Wild,” observed that “[t]he crisis of the ministry is theological. During the many years I served in the congregational rabbinate, I witnessed the radical changes taking place in the beliefs or nonbeliefs of both professionals and congregants. Nothing will solve this problem except radically revised theological perspectives.”

What are the implications for UU theology? How might UUs recapture religious experience? Is this desirable or even possible? Barry Andrews, Minister of Religious Education at the UU Congregation at Shelter Rock and the author of several books on Transcendentalist spirituality, has maintained that “Unitarian Universalism is weakened by what appears to be a void in our spiritual life. We need, in Havel’s phrase, a ‘transcendental anchor’ to keep us from drifting into religious shallows and uncertainties.”

The questions that have struck me as I have engaged with this text and that I would like to discuss are:

- ⇒ **What are the implications of Taylor’s *A Secular Age* for Unitarian Universalism**
- ⇒ **How well does UU history parallel the development of secularism articulated by Taylor and, if so, what does this mean?**
- ⇒ **Does Unitarian Universalism embrace secularism? Is religious experience and faith marginalized in our theology and practice?**
- ⇒ **How might we reconsider recent critiques of Unitarian Universalism in light of Taylor’s work?**
- ⇒ **How important is “religious experience” to UU theology? What is “religious experience”? How might UUs recapture it and is this even possible given our creedless plurality?**