Christian Faith in a Secular Age

by *Scott Ronald Paeth*

The question of how to define the nature of secular society in the twenty-first century, and how as Christians we should relate to the secular context in which we dwell, has been a subject of intensive discussion since the publication of Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* in 2007.[1] This volume offers Taylor's analysis of the historical process by which we moved from a world deeply suffused with a sense of religious reality to one that views such conceptions as at best optional. Along with that shift came myriad other cultural shifts, rooted in the transformation from a world of "porous selves"—radically open to supernatural connection—to a world of "buffered selves"—shielded from the transcendent by a materialistic worldview.[2] This transformation led to a wholesale reconceptualization of how we as persons relate to our world, one another, and ourselves. Yet, Taylor emphasizes, this transformation was not the result of any decision made by any person or group at any particular point in time. Rather, it was the result of incremental shifts in our conception of the world over a period of hundreds of years, leading, inexorably and involuntarily, to the world we now inhabit.

Scott Ronald Paeth is Associate Professor of Religious Studies at DePaul University, Chicago. His is the author of *Exodus Church and Civil Society: Public Theology and Social Theory in the Work of Jurgen Moltmann* (Ashgate, 2008).

Taylor's description of these transformations was so powerfully drawn that it has defined the debate about religion and secularization for the past ten years. Yet it was only one description among many that have been offered since the end of World War II, when the idea of "secularization"—the inevitable decline of religion in the modern era—became a subject of fascination for sociologists, political scientists, demographers, and theologians, who struggled to understand the causes of these shifts and their implications for the future of religion and the possibility of social cohesion.

For Christians in Western society, the reality of secularization poses particular problems, as Christianity increasingly shifts from a role as hegemonic cultural leader and enforcer to being one voice in the midst of a cacophonous and multivalent discussion of what society is and ought to be. Such a decentering of Christian ideas and symbols in the larger public discourse has created a disorienting sense of ideological vertigo among many Christians. And while this process of decentering has taken place over a period of centuries, it is only really in the last fifty years that the reality of the situation has become so clear as to require a direct response from within the church. But given the state of the debate, the question becomes: What response should be offered?

1 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).
2 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 27.

In this article I will offer an analysis of secularization from within the Christian tradition, with an emphasis on the challenge that the moral and metaphysical dissensus created by secularization causes, not only for a Christian conception of the world, but even for the very possibility of establishing a persuasive case for Christianity in the midst of the social and ideological fragmentation of contemporary society. If, as Taylor argues, there is no going back to an earlier era of Christian ideological hegemony, the intellectual task for Christianity going forward will be to create a case for a Christian option in the midst of the sea of options confronting us, and to recognize that only through the persuasiveness and attractiveness of its self-description will Christianity be able to remain a viable and vibrant voice in the public discourse of the secular world.

The Problem of Secularism and Post-Secularism

The theory of secularization did not begin with Charles Taylor, but has been a feature of Western sociological analysis for more than half a century. The roots of the theory extend back to the work of Durkheim and Parsons, who identified differentiation and lack of group cohesion as creating the risk of fragmentation within society. This fragmentation manifests itself in the decline of institutional forms that provide a symbolic sense of social unity, among which religion is a primary example.

In the post-war world, particularly in Europe, this reality seemed to begin manifesting itself in the decline of religious observance throughout the continent. Reduced adherence to institutional religion was connected to an explicit rejection of religious belief and the vocal advocacy of atheism within the intellectual sphere of society, while other cultural forms—such as art and literature—became much more central to people's symbolic world views. This was in turn connected, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s, to revolutionary and counter-cultural political movements, often rooted in Marxist theory, that took religion to be a manifestation of bourgeois conservative ideology.

In many ways, of course, this was nothing new. Contrary to the image of Christianity as representing an unquestioned form of culturally dominant authority, religious adherence in the Western world has frequently experienced periodic fluctuations. As David Martin argues:

> Instead of regarding secularization as a once-for-all unilateral process, one might think in terms of successive Christianizations followed or accompanied by recoils. Each Christianization is a salient of faith driven into the secular from a different angle, each pays a characteristic cost which affects the character of the recoil, and each undergoes a partial collapse into some version of "nature."[3]

Martin identifies four "Christendoms" emerging through the history of Christianity that each gave rise to an accompanying form of "secularization." The reversion to nature in opposition to the institutional expressions of Christianization are, from Martin's perspective, the foreseeable costs that accompany the rise of new forms of culturally predominant Christianity.

While Martin identifies the latest shifts toward secularism with the spread of evangelicalism, this analysis neglects the rise of a specifically anti-religious discourse within modernity—and certainly since the eighteenth century—that does not have prior precedent in Western culture. Prior reactions against Christendom were often religious reactions against the perceived corruption of institutional forms of Christian faith. Or else, as in the early Christian period when it was at odds with the paganism of the Hellenistic world, it was a clash between rival forms of religion. However, modernity gave rise to a particular form of irreligion, rooted in a naturalistic and materialist metaphysic, which found its justification in the successful methodologies of modern scientific inquiry.

3 David Martin, *On Secularization: Towards a Revised General Theory* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005), 3.

Coupled with democratic, anti-monarchist movements, which, particularly during the French Revolution, equated religious adherence with the forces of reaction, this scientific spirit began to steadily displace the standard religious narrative of humanity's place in the world. This represented a definitive break with early instances of Martin's proposed dialectic between religion and nature.

However, Martin's analysis is at odds with the narrative sketched by Taylor, who views the process of secularization over the past half-millennium not as a manifestation of the ordinary ups and downs of religious observance in Western society but as a stable and ongoing shift of the relationship between religion and other forms of cultural expression. Rather than an elastic form of give and take, Taylor views religion generally as having been definitively displaced at the center of cultural influence as a result of an incremental process by which religious authority dissolved in the presence of other, more powerful, cultural motivators. Thus the emergence of the current "secular age" represents a fundamental shift in the social imaginary of Western society. As he describes it: "A secular age is one in which the eclipse of all goals beyond human flourishing becomes conceivable; or better, it falls within the range of imaginable life for masses of people."[4]

Taylor is particularly interested in religion broadly construed, understood largely in terms of connection with a transcendent form of reality, rather than the particular symbols, institutional forms, and authority structures of particular religions, though those are clearly implicated in the process by which the "transcendent frame" of religious life has been replaced by the "immanent frame" of modernity. However, from Taylor's point of view, what it *means* to dwell within a secular age is to lose site of that transcendent referent as a meaningful aspect of human life. Thus, when he argues that secularization entails the idea that human flourishing becomes the sole objective of human activity, he means that human life, in a secular framework, exists solely for the sake of achieving only those forms of happiness that can be understood and experienced in the context of individual human life. There is no "beyond" toward which we can orient our aspirations. Everything that is capable of fulfilling us as human beings is available here, and only here. The search for any form of happiness "beyond" is by definition bound to fail. Taylor continues:

> In order to understand better the phenomena we want to explain, we should see religion's relation to a "beyond" in three dimensions. And the crucial one, that which makes its impact on our lives understandable, is the one I have just been exploring: the sense that there is some good higher than, beyond human flourishing. In the Christian sense, we could think of this as agape, the love which God has for us, and which we can partake of through his power. In other words, a possibility of transformation is offered, which takes us beyond merely human perfection. But of course, this notion of a higher good as attainable by us could only make sense in the context of belief in a higher power, the transcendent God of faith which appears in most definitions of religion. But then thirdly, the Christian story of our potential transformation by agape requires that we see our life as going beyond the bounds of its "natural" scope between birth and death; our lives extend beyond "this life."[5]

This displacement of religious life-forms in the modern context represents a definitive and irreversible shift in the way religion generally—and for our purposes Christianity in particular—relates to its social context and setting. The rubber band is not likely to "snap back" in Christendom's direction at any future point, and thus the way in which Christians navigate the cultural waters within which we dwell must necessarily undergo a transformation.

4 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 19-20.
5 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 20.

The connection between secularization and modernity has been described by theorists such as Talal Asad, who has noted that both ideas are multifaceted and contested within modern society, but that nevertheless the two remain intertwined with one another among the congeries of different principles that bind them together:

> It is right to say that "modernity" is neither a totally coherent object nor a clearly bounded one, and that many of its elements originate in relations with the histories of peoples outside Europe. Modernity is a *project*—or rather, a series of interlinked projects—that certain people in power seek to achieve. The project aims at institutionalizing a number of (sometimes conflicting, often evolving) principles: constitutionalism, moral autonomy, democracy, human rights, civil equality, industry, consumerism, freedom of the market—and secularism. It employs proliferating technologies (of production, warfare, travel, entertainment, medicine) that generate new experiences of space and time, of cruelty and health, of consumption and knowledge. The notion that these experiences constitute "disenchantment"—implying a direct access to reality, a stripping away of myth, magic, and the sacred—is the salient feature of the modern epoch.[6]

Earlier forms of secularization theory, such as that proposed by Peter Berger, assumed that this march of disenchantment would continue without interruption in the decades to come. Religion would not, under this theory, totally disappear, but would rather simply become increasingly marginal and irrelevant to public life, as adherents shrank to an insignificant proportion of the population.[7] The disenchanting power of modern life, according to this theory, strips religion of its public power and social authority.

While Europe seems (in some ways) to have provided a paradigm case of this form of secularization in action, throughout much of the rest of the world secularization seems to have run aground in the face of resurgences in religious commitment. In the Middle East, earlier movements toward secular forms of Pan-Arab nationalism collapsed in the face of resurgent forms of Islam. At the same time Israel, founded as a secular democracy, has had to confront the growing political power of its own religiously motivated citizenry. In the United States, the secularization thesis crashed against the resurgent political awareness of evangelical Christians, while in India Hindu nationalism has come to dominate national politics. In many places around the world, rather than seeing the marginalization of religion, we have seen its reassertion of its place at the center of public discourse.

However, the waters are murkier than they at first appear. Resurgent evangelicalism in the United States takes place alongside the "rise of the nones": Citizens who explicitly reject adherence to religious institutions, regardless of what they may or may not believe about the presence of a transcendent reality.[8] India continues to cling to its identity as a multireligious, secular democracy, even with a *Hindutva* Prime Minister. Israelis in Tel Aviv live a wholly secular life even as religiously motivated West Bank settlers insist on reclaiming *Ha'aretz Israel* for the Jews alone. Far from displacing religion, secularism seems to have grown up in its midst, producing a polysemous public discourse in which religious and secular frames contend for dominance, where there is not an external political authority in place to impose a single—religious or secular—frame. In those cases, conflict between religious and secular frames is artificially suppressed by an externally imposed uniformity, whether through explicitly authoritarian means in places like Iran and Saudi Arabia or through more subtly repressive means in places like France.

6 Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 13.

7 Peter Berger, *The Heretical Imperative* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1979).

8 Michael Lipka, "Religious 'Nones' Not Only Growing, They're Becoming More Secular," *Pew Research Center* (http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/11/11/religious-nones-are-not-only-growing-theyre-becoming-more-secular/). And indeed, one can see the paradoxical intertwining of these trends in the most recent American election, where a candidate who was clearly completely religiously illiterate was nonetheless forced by political expediency to embrace a form of religious identity that was totally alien to him.

The continuing reality of religion in the midst of secularism's growing influence has produced a new iteration within the literature of secularism: post-secularism. As a term, post-secularism does double duty, as it denotes on the one hand the perplexing continuation of religion's power in spite of the emergence of secularity in the modern era, and, on the other hand, the need to move beyond secularization theory as a means of describing the role of religion in the modern world. Thus it is both a "post-secularization" theory and post "secularization theory," as the limitations of that earlier theory have become increasingly apparent even to its most prominent proponents (such as Berger).[9]

Jürgen Habermas has spoken of the emergence of the post-secular as a result of an "awareness of what is missing" in a purely immanent account of human flourishing.[10] Among the contributions that religion makes to society, and which are lacking in its absence, Habermas identifies rites and rituals of passage and transformation, solidarity and the motivation to solidarity which are embedded in religious teachings, a sense of the foundations for moral action, and the ability to provide public justification for one's political stances. As dimensions of human community, these factors are important for providing the ground and motivation for social action; prior to the modern era (and particularly the post-World War II era), the binding agent that held these various dimensions together in a single worldview was religion. Elsewhere, Habermas argues that "it remains doubtful, when we consider the element of human motivation, whether a society with a plurality of world views can achieve a normative stabilization—that is, something that goes beyond a mere *modus vivendi*—through the assumption of a background understanding that will at best remain on the formal level, limited to questions of procedures and principles."[11]

If Taylor is right, and we have entered an irreversible period of secular hegemony, and yet Habermas is also correct that this means we have lost something of crucial social significance, then the eclipse of religion in the modern era has created a void of meaning and justification in the cultural landscape in which we dwell.[12] On the one hand, we stand at risk of a collapse into *anomie* and meaninglessness in the absence of a substantive and unifying ideology, which both provides a basis for action in the present and places our actions against the horizon of a larger historical meaning. On the other hand, the reassertion of religious hegemony in the face of that risk creates the possibility—indeed, I'd say the likelihood—of a religiously rooted form of authoritarianism, which has the potential to victimize religious minorities, marginalize dissenters, and justify religiously motivated violence in the name of ideological cohesion.

The challenge of Christian faith in a secular age is that of avoiding the Scylla and Charybdis of these alternatives, if at all possible, and to do so in a way that can allow us to continue both to contribute meaningfully to the public discourse in which we are participants and preserve an intellectual and moral integrity in the face of the plurality of dissensus with which we are surrounded.

The Irreducible Pluralism of Modern Society

One of the key elements of modernity that leads to the rise of secularism is the breakdown in centralized and unitary authority structures in both political and religious dimensions of life. It is no accident that Taylor begins his narrative of social transformation in the year 1500, a year that stands at the pivot point between the discovery of

9 Berger acknowledged the failure of secularization theory to account for the resurgence of religion. See Peter Berger, "Secularism in Retreat," *The National Interest* 46 (Winter 1996), as well as *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999).

10 Jürgen Habermas, *An Awareness of What Is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Post-Secular Age* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2010).

11 Jürgen Habermas and Josef Ratzinger, *Dialectics of Secularization* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 22.

12 As Habermas notes elsewhere, the connection between religion, and specifically Christianity, and modernity is of particular importance for providing the normative foundation for modernity itself. See, for example, *Religion and Rationality: Essays on Reason, God, and Modernity*, ed. Eduardo Mendieta (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 149.

the "new world" (and eventually the establishment of a free republic unbound by central monarchical authority) and the advent of the Protestant Reformation.

Within a Europe ruled (in principle) by a single Holy Roman Emperor, and under the authority of a single Pope, the prospect of a wide-open plurality of world views was dim. State violence and spiritual coercion were standard means by which a singular political and religious consensus were preserved. While heretical sects regularly arose throughout the Middle Ages, they were just as regularly crushed, if they could not be absorbed within the existing structure of the church. Waldensians, Hussites, Albagensians, Fraticelli, and many others were brutally murdered in the name of the central spiritual authority of the church, while political intrigue and war preserved at least the structure of the Medieval monarchy, even as the nobility began to fracture and a sense of national identity arose among peoples sharing common ethnic and linguistic bonds. Only some religious minorities, particularly Jews, were (barely) tolerated, and had no meaningful role in the formation of religious consciousness.

However, the combination of the rise of national identity and the establishment of safe havens for reformers such as Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli in Germany and Switzerland began to make it possible for a genuine religious debate to begin to take place in Europe. For the first time in a thousand years, religious and political unity were under threat. This began the process by which what we now think of as modernity began to establish itself. The move from objective authority within the structure of the church to the subjective authority of believers over their own spiritual lives, and from a central political governing authority to distinct national authorities, eroded the capacity to enforce a singular way of being in the world. Taylor illustrates this process specifically with respect to Calvin's theology, writing:

> This now changes the centre of gravity of the religious life. 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. In one way, we can say that the sacred/profane distinction breaks down, insofar as it can be placed in person, time, space, gesture. This means that the sacred is suddenly broadened: For the saved, God is sanctifying us everywhere, hence also in ordinary life, our work, our marriage, and so on.[13]

By rendering religious devotion a primarily personal act, and encouraging what Weber calls a "worldly asceticism," absent any institutional forms by which persons could connect with a larger source of spiritual significance, Protestantism, and Calvinism in particular (at least, according to the narrative Taylor borrows from Weber), jump start the process by which the "rationalization" of economic life begins to take place. It is this process that, on the Weberian account, ultimately leads us to be imprisoned in the "iron cage" of a disenchanted modernity.[14] This erosion of the "bulwarks of belief" creates conditions for a new set of social presuppositions, rooted in individual autonomy, perhaps most fully realized in the philosophy of Kant.

What this ultimately means for contemporary society is that the social and political institutions in which we dwell lack the kind of apparatus for the imposition of unity that existed in the premodern context. One can hardly mourn the passing of the rack and the stake as means of ensuring spiritual conformity, but the resulting freedom of individual conscience, in the absence of institutional forms capable of managing dissent, makes it impossible to insist, in the context of democratic and religiously pluralistic society such as those in the West, on the primacy of any one religious worldview over moral and political discourse. On the one hand, this liberty can be seen and

13 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 79.
14 Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958).

welcomed as the end result of the process of human liberation from tyranny; on the other hand, it can be seen as an invitation to chaos.

Regardless of how one views it, this pluralism has become the irreducible fact of modern society. In the absence of central authority structures, democratic societies become the setting in which the radical autonomy of the modern self seeks to negotiate disputes over potentially incommensurable moral and political positions. This is a point Alasdair MacIntyre notes in *After Virtue*:

> Protest is now almost entirely that negative phenomenon which characteristically occurs as a reaction to the alleged invasion of someone's *rights* in the name of someone else's *utility*. The self-assertive shrillness of protest arises because the facts of incommensurability ensure that protestors can never win an *argument*, the indignant self-righteousness of protest arises because the facts of incommensurability ensure equally that the protestors can never lose an argument either. Hence the *utterance* of protest is characteristically addressed to those who already *share* the protestors' premises. The effects of incommensurability ensure that protestors rarely have anyone else to talk to but themselves. This is not to say that protest cannot be effective; it is to say that it cannot be *rationally* effective and that its dominant modes of expression give evidence of a certain perhaps unconscious awareness of this.[15]

In other words, the kind of disputation that takes place around issues of major controversy in democratic societies cannot be resolved through rational deliberation precisely because we no longer have any agreement about the nature of rationality itself. While Kant's faith in human autonomy was rooted in a conception of universal reason (one shared by Habermas), MacIntyre's analysis of the fragmented character of modern moral discourse asserts that reason itself has become the territory of controversy. *De gustibus non est disputandum*. Just as there can be no dispute in matters of taste, so there can be no dispute in matters of morality, as taste and morality are each questions of subjective preference.

Of course, in actual fact there is ample dispute over matters of morality, precisely because our behavior determines how we live together as a community. So some forms of social consensus over matters of behavior are necessary for the proper functioning of society. But that consensus hangs by a thread, and all that it takes to sever the thread is to call it into question. Once the validity of any moral norm is challenged, the rational basis on which it lies crumbles, precisely because there is always an alternative rational account to undermine its validity.

Earlier Habermas, along with John Rawls and other liberal theorists, believed that such minimal consensus was adequate for the management of democratic societies. Agreement on substantive matters of morality or underlying justifications for the ordering of society itself were unnecessary as long as social discourse was rooted in a form of what Rawls refers to as "reasonable pluralism."[16] However, this precondition for social order depends upon our capacity to recognize a common framework for moral action that is itself subject to question. It would appear then that the reality of inescapable pluralism in modern societies has created a rather rickety social structure which is only capable of remaining upright to the degree that no individual or group decides that it is in their best interest to topple it.

But, throughout the democratic world, this appears to be precisely the situation in which we find ourselves. Nascent authoritarian movements, ethnic nationalism, and reactionary religious groups have found common cause in seeking to overcome democratic pluralism through a reassertion of authoritarian dogmatism. But can this be a viable path for Christians to pursue?

15 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 85.
16 See John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

The Nostalgia for Authority

What I am calling here the nostalgia for authority emerges in numerous ways in contemporary society.[17] As noted at the end of the previous section, the rise of political authoritarianism, racial demagoguery, and reactionary forms of religious expression have found common cause around the world. These movements are more or less explicit in their embrace of anti-democratic and racist rhetoric, but all make at least some appeal to the renewal of traditional religious forms of authority as critical for the creation of social cohesion. As a result, these movements have also attracted adherents from various more traditional religious movements.

Of course, this nostalgia for authority is nothing new. Just as forms of conservative Protestantism threw their weight behind fascism in Germany, while conservative Catholics backed it in Italy and Spain, religious conservatives today are renewing their acquaintance with contemporary forms of anti-democracy. The idea that democracy, in itself, possesses a virtue that should be recognized even by those who are marginalized by democratic processes rings hollow when one is fundamentally motivated by a fear of the ultimate loss of values, and a desire to reassert cultural norms that can't be enforced in the absence of a central authority structure. What good is democracy, one might ask, if democracy leads to destruction?

To those who have been advantaged by democratic processes, particularly those marginalized by earlier, traditional forms of life, democracy, at least insofar as it is motivated by values of equality and human dignity, holds an enormous amount of good. But the preservation of social gains by marginalized groups depends on the preservation of those fundamental values. And, paradoxically, it is precisely the pluralistic character of democratic society that allows authoritarian traditionalists — who wholly reject that pluralism — to utilize it as a means of undermining those very commitments. By the same token, to the degree that democratic forms of life depend on a conception of reason that transcends the boundaries of group interest or preference, this authoritarian approach to politics involves a rejection of rationality per se. The problem isn't even one of an inability to achieve consensus about the rational ends of society. Rather, it is the rejection of rationality as the proper means of organizing public life.

Though here again, this is nothing new. Fascism in the 1930s was explicitly rooted in a rejection of rationality as a resource in public debate, while the Reign of Terror in the French Revolution was a repudiation of the promised "religion of reason" with which the revolution began. One could also point to the Chinese Cultural Revolution or the Killing Fields of Cambodia for further examples. While Habermas, Rawls, and others recognize that minimal forms of overlapping social consensus are necessary to prevent violence, nostalgic authoritarianism embraces violence, or the threat of violence, as a primary means of asserting and maintaining power. In the words of Max Horkheimer: "When even the dictators of today appeal to reason, they mean that they possess the most tanks."[18]

In one sense, this embrace of irrationalism is a rejection of the Weberian idea of the rationalization of social life—a means by which to *escape* modernity's iron cage and reassert some enchanted dimension of human life. However, the transcendent vantage point sought by authoritarianism is not in a God who cannot be bound within the framework of immanent human experience, but rather that of racial, national, or religious identity. But these are false forms of transcendence, bound as they themselves are to the immanent experience of particular social or ethnic groups. But in any event the implication of this is that secular reason cannot constrain the desire for human transcendence, and, in the absence of a means by which the transcendent can be made symbolically real in the midst of our imminent frame, people will rebel against precisely those structures that maintain that frame in place, even at the cost of any authentic form of transcendence.

17 See Max Horkheimer's treatment of the issue in his essay "The Authoritarian State" in *Telos* 15 (1973): 3-20.
18 Max Horkheimer, "The End of Reason," *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* 9 (1941): 368.

If the inescapability of pluralism, and the fact of its own precarious justification on the shaky ground of universal rationality, coupled with the "rationalization" of social and economic life, creates this nostalgia for authority, the question that Christianity needs to confront is whether there are resources within its own, admittedly particular, tradition that may provide grounds for the recovery of a justification of common life that does not at the same time succumb to the temptation to nostalgic authoritarianism.

Here we might turn to natural law theory as just such a resource, but, as I want to show, natural law gets us no closer to overcoming the incommensurability of exclusive modes of discourse than any other method does, though it may offer resources for preserving the internal coherence of a Christian conception of the relationship between morality and reason.

Natural Law, Universal Reason, and the failure of Cultural Consensus

At first glance, theories of natural law or common grace appear to offer precisely the kind of bridge I am proposing in seeking to overcome the impasse of secular reason and subjectivism into which the secular age risks falling. Particularly as expressed in the context of Roman Catholicism, reliance on natural law seems to offer intellectual resources that may serve to combat the slide to relativism that is frequently evoked by the pluralism of modern society. If so, a sufficiently robust explication of the concept could pacify the authoritarian temptation in contemporary politics.

However, I am not terribly sanguine that natural law theory per se can provide any such resources. On the one hand, its claims to universality are justifiably called into question within the context of pluralistic discourse, and, on the other, its mode of expression often plays right into the rhetoric of authoritarianism itself, albeit unintentionally.

For my purposes, I want to consider two relatively recent expressions of Catholic natural law theory: the first, written by Pope John Paul II in *Fides et Ratio*, and the second by Pope Benedict XVI in his Regensberg Address. Each of these expressions is rooted in the classical Catholic understanding of natural law but at the same time is responding to the circumstances of the contemporary world, and so each has something to say to the question of Christian faith in a secular age that earlier iterations of the concept might not.

In the case of *Fides et Ratio*, John Paul II asserts that faith and reason "are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth."[19] The innate connection between faith and reason that John Paul here sketches is in stark contrast to the division that is drawn between them in the context of secular thought. He recognizes this, though at the same time identifies this as the *problem* that reliance on the unity of faith and reason is intended to solve:

> At the present time in particular, the search for ultimate truth seems often to be neglected. Modern philosophy clearly has the great merit of focusing attention upon man. From this starting-point, human reason with its many questions has developed further its yearning to know more and to know it ever more deeply. Complex systems of thought have thus been built, yielding results in the different fields of knowledge and fostering the development of culture and history. Anthropology, logic, the natural sciences, history, linguistics and so forth—the whole universe of knowledge has been involved in one way or another. Yet the positive results achieved must not obscure the fact that reason, in its one-sided concern to investigate human subjectivity, seems to have forgotten that men and women are

19 John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio,* Blessing, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091998_fides-et-ratio.html. .

> always called to direct their steps towards a truth which transcends them. Sundered from that truth, individuals are at the mercy of caprice, and their state as person ends up being judged by pragmatic criteria based essentially upon experimental data, in the mistaken belief that technology must dominate all.[20]

This tendency, he argues, leads to precisely the kind of subjectivism and relativism described above, stating: "A legitimate plurality of positions has yielded to an undifferentiated pluralism, based upon the assumption that all positions are equally valid, which is one of today's most widespread symptoms of the lack of confidence in truth."[21] He concludes that "the hope that philosophy might be able to provide definitive answers to these questions has dwindled."[22]

Pope Benedict XVI strikes a similar note in his Regensberg address, when he writes, with reference to the narrowing of the concept of reason in the modern age to the realm of the quantitative, "A reason which is deaf to the divine and which relegates religion into the realm of subcultures is incapable of entering into the dialogue of cultures" and asserting that it is the domain of philosophy and theology to examine the metaphysical grounds on which scientific methodology is based.[23]

Elsewhere, Benedict addresses the connection between natural law and the establishment of justice in the realm of positive law, particularly with respect to human rights:

> One final element of the natural law that claimed (at least in the modern period) that it was ultimately a rational law has remained, namely, *human rights*. These are incomprehensible without the presupposition that man *qua* man thanks simply to his membership in the species "man," is the subject of rights and that his being bears within itself values and norms that must be discovered — not invented. Today we ought perhaps amplify the doctrine of human rights with a doctrine of human obligations and of human limitations. This could help us to grasp anew the relevance of the question of whether there might exist a rationality of nature and, hence, a rational law for man and for his existence in the world.[24]

John Paul II similarly emphasizes the necessary connection between faith and reason for the sake of ensuring the foundations of morality and human dignity in *Fides et Ratio*, writing, "Insisting on the importance and true range of philosophical thought, the Church promotes both the defence of human dignity and the proclamation of the Gospel message. There is today no more urgent preparation for the performance of these tasks than this: to lead people to discover both their capacity to know the truth and their yearning for the ultimate and definitive meaning of life."[25]

What both popes emphasize in their appeal to the connection between faith and reason is the degree to which this connection is necessary for preserving the metaphysical and moral foundations of human knowledge. The fear of relativism, and the possibility of a slide into barbarism that potentially entails, is central to their concerns. Reason is only truly rational to the degree that it directs us to the objective truth found in God and attested by the Church.

20 John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio,* no. 5
21 John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, no. 5.
22 John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, no. 5.
23 Benedict XVI, "Faith, Reason, and the University: Memories and Reflections," para. 7, http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg.html, .
24 Habermas and Ratzinger, *Dialectics of Secularization*, 71-2.
25 John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, no. 102.

Yet Benedict is aware in his dialogue with Habermas that the status of objective reason isn't nearly as secure as he would like it to be. His plea to "grasp anew the relevance of the question whether there might exist a rationality of nature and hence, a rational law for man and for his existence in the world" is grounded in his prior recognition that the foundations for that kind of natural rationality have been eroded by the theory of evolution, writing "The idea of the natural law presupposed a concept of nature in which nature and reason overlap, since nature itself is rational. With the victory of the theory of evolution, this view of nature has capsized."[26] Thus his appeal for a renewal of the inquiry into the relationship between morality, reason, and nature is based on the awareness that this relationship has already been severed in the context of the modern world.

Similarly, the "legitimate plurality of opinions" that John Paul II endorses, which he decries being replaced by "undifferentiated pluralism," can't be easily distinguished from the entire history of modern philosophy. To the degree that *any* plurality of opinions was available free from the power of coercive authority, it was only a prior agreement on the boundaries of discourse that prevented precisely the slide he seeks to reverse. Yet, if such a plurality is permitted at all, it must be permitted with regard to the boundaries themselves. And if the boundaries are off limits, in a realm of free inquiry, who is going to prevent it? Once again we see that in the absence of a central authority structure and the capacity to police those boundaries, democratic societies are *in principle* bound to call them into question.

And this is not only the case with respect to morality and social organization. Science, it should be noted, is not immune from this phenomenon. While the methodologies of science have been strikingly effective at producing concrete and replicable results, and thus at creating a self-justifying model of rational inquiry, the reality is that in an open democratic social discourse there is no innate preference for "good" versus "bad" science. Rather, evidence of climate change is derided as "junk science" while evidence of the effectiveness of vaccination is ignored in deference to the authority of a widely debunked study suggesting its ineffectiveness. And one could multiply such examples with ease. No realm of reason is free from the universal solvent of an untethered skepticism.

But if this is the case, then on what basis do John Paul II and Benedict XVI believe that a universal conception of the unity of faith and reason can be restored? Ultimately, each of them is forced to revert to the authority of the church as a first principle. It is a premise of their arguments, not a conclusion. And far from establishing a basis from which the restoration of a foundation for human inquiry in natural law can be discovered, this approach must either become one subjective (and thus relativistic) position among others, or it must make common cause with the forces of authoritarian coercion in order to reestablish its centrality by force.

Christian Faith and Moral Meaning in a Fragmented Society

If this is the case, then it may seem as if there is no recourse for Christianity in the midst of a secular age. The fragmentation and social dissensus within which we dwell is simply an unalterable feature of the ideological landscape. In that case, one could hardly blame MacIntyre for his somewhat defeatist stance. After all, if he is correct that "the barbarians are not waiting beyond the frontiers; they have already been governing us for quite some time" then it makes a large degree of sense to simply hunker down and await "another—doubtless very different—St. Benedict."[27] One puzzles over what would be precisely "different" about the St. Benedict that MacIntyre has in mind. By evoking the monastic tradition, he gives the sense of advocating for a retreat from the corruption of the

26 Habermas and Ratzinger, *Dialectics of Secularization*, 69.
27 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 245.

world into communities where the virtues could be practiced unhindered. But what would that look like in the context of the modern world, if not like an *actual* Benedictine monastery?[28]

This separation from society is of course one option, though it hardly contributes to overcoming the existing fragmentation of society. To extend the metaphor that MacIntyre utilizes at the beginning of *After Virtue*: If modernity represents a catastrophe on the scale of an apocalyptic disaster, then the "Benedict option" is to find the nearest mine shaft and start digging south. But for those who recognize the pluralism and dissensus within society as a problem, maybe even a crisis, but hardly an *apocalypse*, the right question to ask is not "where can I hide?" but "how can I help?"

But if this is the case, where should Christians be in the midst of the ideological fragmentation of the secular age in which we live? What's more, if our task is to engage as one voice among many in the midst of the cacophony of differing points of view, what resources are available to us in making a persuasive case that Christianity still has something to say in the modern world that's worth listening to?

In the first place, we need to rethink the model of rationality that we bring to the discourse. The approach to faith and reason advocated by John Paul and Benedict assumes a unitary conception of rationality, which devolves from God to nature to human consciousness. Thus while reason is seen as existing and functioning apart from faith, it is ultimately subsumed into the stance of faith, and, what is more, into the authority structure of the church as the guarantor and steward of the Gospel. But if rationality is not unitary but multifaceted, and emergent within the context of human inquiry, then the plurality and dissensus within modern society is not a hindrance to the development of reason but a benefit, as it allows for variegated perspectives on beauty, goodness, and truth to non-coercively contend within the field of democratic discourse.

If the challenge of living as a Christian in a secular age is finding a way to meaningfully engage one's culture while living with integrity as a Christian, then rejecting recourse to authoritarian alternatives is a central value to uphold. There are undoubtedly many facets of social life amid a pluralism of worldviews that will not sit well with Christians. However, the resources of rationality that we have available to us allow us to engage without recourse to violence.

The key question at the heart of Christian life in a secular age is this: What is it that the Gospel requires of us? It does not require that we always get our way. It does not require that we enforce agreement among all sectors of society. It does not require that we impose conformity with force. And it does not require us to maintain a singular and unchangeable conception of the place of Christianity as the hegemonic source of social values within Western society.

It is worth contemplating the position of Christians in societies that have not heretofore been predominantly Christian. In other cultural contexts Christian minorities neither retreat from engagement in social life nor attempt to take over. Rather, they seek those places where they are called by God to be in the midst of the world, where they can be useful—practically, intellectually, spiritually, politically, or otherwise.

It is difficult for Christians in the West to accept the fact that we are not *the* normative voice in the twenty-first century, but only a voice among voices. However, it should be noted that we are *still* the single loudest voice. We

28 Indeed such "Benedict option" communities do exist, defining themselves as part of "a historically conscious, antimodernist return to roots, an undertaking that occurs with the awareness that Christians have to cultivate a sense of separation, of living as what Stanley Hauerwas and Will Willimon call 'resident aliens' in a 'Christian colony,' in order to be faithful to our calling." http://www.theamericanconservative.com/dreher/benedict-option-faq/

can use that power to attempt to close down the discourse, or we can find ways to contribute to the discourse that are constructive for the whole of society.

What does the Gospel require of us? Ultimately the rule and norm of Christian public action should be precisely what Jesus proclaimed: That we should strive always to love God above all things, and our neighbors as ourselves. If we strive to do that we might find, as James K. A. Smith suggests in commenting on Taylor, that rather than waiting for St. Benedict, we've in fact been waiting on St. Francis instead.[29]

29 James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) To Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 139.