

Is there an Inherent Secularising Tendency in Christianity (Gauchet)? Yes, but beware (Voegelin and Taylor)

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“Reading the morning newspaper is the realist’s morning prayer.” (Hegel 2002, 247)

Abstract

The secularisation idea is that modernity leaves religion behind. But for Gauchet, modernity just is religion transformed, without remainder. The Axial Age discovery of the inner world of the psyche and its symbolic expressions, was at the same time a growth in understanding of God as creator, transcendent and incommensurable with all of creation. Henceforth, religion would be in the key of personal struggle and symbolic transformation, putting aside heteronomy. Taylor adds a caveat: the self-image of the self-sufficient, autonomous individual subtracted from the canopy of “higher” mythological entities obscures the basic human need for recognition and identity. This issues in an unhelpful politics of mobilisation and manipulation. Likewise, Voegelin sees both liberal modernity and present-day religion as largely gnostic, closed and ideological versions of the traditions. Secular public policy types the religions as sects. But the autonomy of self-determination arises out of religion, and a plausible secularisation thesis would see contemporary culture as containing within it the possibility for a secular expression of the authentic religious tradition—including resistance to sect-like religiosity. The revisionist history suggested here entails a rethink of the image of modernity in terms of a complete break with the pre-secular culture, and entails a re-positioning of religion within secular society.

Keywords: secularisation; Gauchet; Taylor; Voegelin; subtraction story; incommensurability

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Introduction

The quotation from Hegel above indicates a shift from the vertical to the horizontal in the general human and religious outlook. Let us take this as a first description of the meaning of secularisation. It refers, very broadly, to a decisive expansion of the capacity of persons to determine their own lives by means of this shift of orientation. According to Gauchet, it is a development that arises out of religion, but puts religion to one side. For Gauchet (1985, 197), Christianity is the religion to exit from religion, “*la religion de la sortie de la religion.*”

In their partial agreement with this thesis of Gauchet, Voegelin (2004) and Taylor (2007) add caveats. For these writers, the self-image of our secular society is wanting, to the extent that it overlooks the basic human need for identity and, in practice, fails to facilitate this. This self-image is linked to the historical secularisation theory that society has progressively exited from any religious framework. Secular society, they argue, lacks the proper resources to facilitate persons to find or construct their identities. The result is a manipulation (although not generally *seen* as such) of such identities, in what Taylor (1994) had earlier termed “the politics of recognition” and a conflictual assertiveness that Voegelin sees as provoking a version of Hobbes’s *Leviathan* ([1651] 2017), the state as a monster feared by all, so suppressing the parties in question from breaking into open war. Liberalism can turn into totalitarianism.

The secularisation theory to which they are objecting is graphically captured by Taylor’s (2007) description of it as the “subtraction story” of the development towards modern culture. Simply subtract the whole canopy of mythological stuff, gods, ancestors, angels, miracles, and so on, and what you are left with is just what was always there, namely ourselves, deciding for ourselves about our lives: secular liberal democracy.

Now you can only subtract two things that are of the same kind, comparing apples with apples. If you take away from my four good ideas, my two pairs of dirty socks, what is left over? Trick question: the objects here are clearly not commensurable, of the same kind. The subtraction story of secularisation assumes that heavenly things and earthly things are commensurable. This would mean that the more there is of the one kind (sharing the same “space”) the less of the other: the more human freedom, the more God must withdraw! But the Hebrew and Christian concept of God is distinctive in denying this commensurability. God is creator, not part of the created universe, the highest part, as it were.

In contrast, a justifiable secularisation thesis points to how this incommensurability idea of God and world has been put into practice so that the expansion of human freedom of self-determination is an authentic development of the religion, seeking to eliminate slavery, to move toward a society of equal freedom for all, seeing freedom of conscience as sacred. This gives us a critical perspective on the common notion of secularisation as referring to a sociological theory of modernisation that entails the separation of church and state, and a falling off of religious adherence. This common notion is linked to the

“subtraction story” of how modernity develops. What is being put forward here, on the contrary, is that the changes in culture at issue here (growth of science and technology and so on, leading to greater freedom of self-determination) do not at all necessarily lead to the demise of religion in people’s lives. The common historical thesis, on the other hand, systematically ignores crucial evidence, in particular, to do with what counts today as religious expression.

This clarifies an important point. From an African perspective, secularisation may seem a particularly Western concern. Religion in Africa was never a “vertical” thing, to the neglect of the “horizontal” dimension of human life. On the other hand, no one doubts that freedom of conscience is very much on the agenda in African religious circles; it is almost seen as a central mission for the churches, for which resistance must be overcome. But this is quintessentially a concern of a secularised culture. A secular ethic is framed by individual freedom of choice. In contrast, a pre-secular ethic is framed by our human nature seen as normatively determined “from above,” as it were, humans being situated below the (purely spiritual) angels, above the (purely bodily) beasts. The difference may be illustrated in an anecdotal manner by a sermon I heard while teaching in Lesotho in the 1990s. The priest explained from the pulpit that of course women have a place in the church—but *as women!* Here, the cosmic and social hierarchy of natures is assumed.

In a secular culture, identities are constructed and largely, as mentioned above, a matter of mobilisation. “People need to be convinced that they are really X’s and not Y’s” (African and not Western, to change Taylor’s example, 2007, 457). Identity, in “the politics of recognition” is asserted within the frame of mobilisation, even manipulation.

For our purposes, therefore, we are going to follow Taylor (2007, 3) and focus on the understanding of secularisation as entailing a set of changed conditions of religious belief, that it is now one option among others. This fits in with the broader idea of secular modernity, defined by a decisive expansion of the capacity of persons to determine their own lives. The caveat has to do with secular culture’s failure to accommodate the basic human need for identity and recognition, to provide the appropriate conditions for persons to forge identity in a new and self-conscious way. In the existential anxiety about identity, fundamentals of the culture are left unquestioned and unquestionable; WOKE being just the latest manifestation, it excludes and “cancels.” Freedom can turn into its opposite, as earlier argued in Horkheimer and Adorno’s ([1944] 2007) classic, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Of course, humanist liberals, as Voegelin (2004, 136) remarks, may be offended by the point that the Enlightenment leads, or may lead, by virtue of its own logic, to totalitarianism.

And this applies to religion too, understood within the secular frame: it becomes ideological, in contrast to the thrust towards a progressive, open, productive culture. This ideological approach is expressed by Moore (1968, 38) as the idea that “our man Jesus was right.” Religion becomes sectarian. The result is a distorted way of dealing

with it, a political way, a matter of groups constituted through being insiders versus the outsiders—in the Puritan idea, the godly versus the worldly. But this approach fails to link into the great transformation of religion towards symbolising our inner struggle to become ourselves and build an open society. Secular society has, in part, appropriated this enlightened view of the human condition and targeted religion as the opponent of this; as being about something else, or alien to this project of humanisation. Insofar as religion buys into this version of itself, it will be fighting for a “place” alongside (and commensurate with) a culture that is closed to the healthy development of the conditions for human flourishing, for that inner growth giving identity, that animated the transformation of society.

The Justifiable and the Unjustifiable Secularisation Theses

For these reasons, we can surmise that there are two intertwined elements in the understanding of the secularisation process and the practice of it. The unjustifiable thesis sees a basic conflict between human freedom and religion: the individual is autonomous to the extent of not being framed by anything “higher.” The justifiable secularisation thesis sees no conflict between human freedom and divine action. The growth of freedom in history is seen as in harmony with religion. Three markers are evident in this.

First, the freedom of self-determination marks the fundamental transformation of perspective that has been termed the Axial Age in religion, around 800 to 200 BCE. This refers to the discovery of the world of our interior life, marking the period of the transformation of the religions towards a focus on humanity, as seen in the prophets of Israel, or the philosophers of the classical period in Greek culture, or in Buddha’s simplification of the Hindu religion. Taylor (2012, 30–31) discerns four factors that mark this transformation: a transcendent understanding of the divine, the development of second-order thinking, a globality of vision, and a more humanist interpretation of the religious tradition. The Axial Age in these religions has been carefully traced by a number of authors, notably Voegelin ([1956] 1974) in his four-volume *Order and History*, and more recently, Bellah (2011) and Armstrong (2006).

In the second place, this interior struggle to determine one’s own life is the central theme of world literature or storytelling, from Gilgamesh’s quest for the tree of eternal life, Odysseus’ determination to return to his home, and Abraham’s doubts about his call from Yahweh to leave his home, to Emma’s growth in self-knowledge in Jane Austen’s novel by the same name, or, closer to home, the heroine of Dangaremba’s (1988) *Nervous Conditions*. In each case, as compendiously outlined by Booker (2004) alongside the ostensive plot (“above the line”), there runs a parallel plot to do with the challenge of personal growth (“below the line”) (see Giddy 2020).

Thirdly, the discovery of the internal world is the discovery of living by symbols and symbolic transformation, the ideas and values charged with significance that give meaning and motivate action. We create the world we live in by symbolising it and then

living through these symbols, whether the cross or the swastika. The discovery of the transcendent creator God as a symbol of ultimate meaning is one with the discovery of the human psyche. Faith will henceforth always include this journeying dimension towards responsibility for our world. Voegelin (2004, 81), in his wide-ranging *The New Science of Politics* (my translation in this and the following references to the German edition) puts it in this way: “Not only does one discover one’s own psyche as instrument of the transcendent, but at the same time divinity in its radical supra-human transcendence.” A symbol is always more than can be said in propositional terms. Jesus as symbol (his challenge was to set his face towards what he saw was to be his fate in Jerusalem), or Mohammed as symbol (risking all in journeying from Mecca to Medina) will always be more than any dogmatic formulation. Understood in this way, religion can be seen to be at the heart of an open, secularised society.

The unjustified secularisation interpretation of European and global history foreclosed the possibility of a secular expression of this struggle for self-determination. It is unjustified because the human capacity for self-determination was precisely the central factor in those developments towards modernity. The ongoing possibility of a new, secular expression of such transcendence is, therefore, a dimension of the contemporary culture. This changes how European history, thought of as modernity breaking with the pre-modern culture, is going to be periodised.

Of course, there are problems with this revisionist history. First, religions continue to express themselves in pre-secular supernaturalist terms. The Roman Catholic Church, for example, continues to see itself as “franchised” from above (Mackey 2006). So far as concerns Evangelical Christians, the five “fundamentals”—including the physical resurrection of Jesus and the Virgin birth—show little sign of speaking to a differentiated consciousness, aware of the distinction between historical fact and symbology or myth. Secondly, contemporary culture is characterised precisely by the experience of loss of purchase of the great symbolic traditions, as Tillich argues in his classic, *The Courage to Be* (1968, 55): “The contents of the tradition, however excellent, however praised, however loved once, lose their power to give content today. And present culture is even less able to provide the content.” He continues: “A system of ideas and values can be emptied because they are no longer understood in their original power of expressing the human situation and answering existential human questions. This is largely the case with the doctrinal symbols of Christianity” (Tillich 1968, 57). So, the thesis being put forward here, that secularisation does not end religion, must restrict itself to a *possible* historical understanding, not any definitive one.

Thirdly, the thrust towards human freedom is often blocked by the religions themselves. In Puritanism and Calvinism, in particular, any free interpretation of the biblical texts is disallowed. As far as concerns the Catholic Church, one can point to the proliferation of sect-like religious movements (Neo-catechumenates, Communion and Liberation, Focolare) under the papacy of John-Paul II, only now being investigated by the Vatican for their psychological abuse of members, the manipulation of identity much as in the

Moonies, and 25 years after these sects were exposed in Urquhart's 1996 book, *The Pope's Armada* (*National Catholic Reporter*, August 6, 2021).

Gauchet's Disenchantment Theory of Christian History

Let us now unpack Marcel Gauchet's theory of disenchantment. (I am repeating here some of Giddy 2019.) Secular modernity, he argues, is characterised in particular by four factors, all of which can be linked to the influence of the Christian religion: representative government, empirical method, productivity as an end in itself, and future orientation (Gauchet 1997, 103). Gauchet is following on Max Weber's thesis connecting the rise of capitalism with the promotion of a less hierarchical and more individualist spirituality in Protestant Christianity. Gauchet argues that this "sanctification of secular efficacy" is an authentic development of the tradition. The responsible citizen engaged in productive work embodies what was previously described in terms of the good Christian.

In the pre-axial religion, Gauchet (1997, 24) argues, the idea is that "we owe everything we have, our way of life, our custom, and what we know, to beings of a different nature—to Ancestors, Heroes, or Gods." Our sense of ourselves is coloured by this "indebtedness." The first factor contributing to the undermining of this approach is, ironically, the formation of the state and the rise of the despot. Now domination is transferred from the heavenly realm to earth. Now it can be seen how such domination can be challenged, if not immediately, then in the future. A new possibility to appropriate one's freedom is opened.

The second factor in the move to a secular worldview is the idea of God as "distant." Strengthening the image of the Other implies that the world is less the domain of a capricious divinity; the greater the gods, the freer humans are. The post-exilic period in Israel, captured in Second Isaiah, is crucial: the experience of being in exile, marginalised, and homeless, resulted in an uncoupling of the Hebrew god with a particular territory and culture. God could work through all cultures, Cyrus being the key example, allowing the exiles to return home. Gradually, human responsibility for society became more self-conscious. "We used to have to bow before the law; now it has become our duty to make use of it" (Gauchet 1997, 91). The complete withdrawal of the god from the cosmos opens the way for the idea that it is the will of individuals that constitutes the social order. As Gauchet puts it, this "restoration of the social bond to human control is an achievement unique to Western history. This history is religious to the core" (Gauchet 1997, 59). The Protestant Reformation is a further key element in this shift. It involves "a sacral legitimising of the lay sector, independent of and alongside the properly religious one" (Gauchet 1997, 159). This is a point also made at length by Taylor (1989, Part Three) in his discussion of "the affirmation of ordinary life." For Gauchet (1997, 61), this will lead ultimately to the idea of self-sufficiency without reference to God.

The third factor in Gauchet's historical explanation of secularity is our attitude towards nature. Religion, originally, is the desire to merge with nature, he argues (Gauchet 1997, 26). As part of nature, the human position is fixed, below the angels, above the beasts. The human task is to conform to this pre-ordained cosmic slot, or, through ritual, restore any disruption of it.

Finally, Christianity. This is crucial to Gauchet's explanatory history. The divine joins the human in an ordinary person removed from power. This shows the gap between institutional structure and authentic faith. Only a retreat into one's inner self can open the meaning of God's unknowable being. The route to a disenchanted, non-hierarchical culture is clear (and, developing this idea of Gauchet's, to a subjective—or rather intersubjective—spirituality of the symbolic world, at least as a possibility). For Gauchet, “there is at least as much, if not more, religious inspiration behind what has flourished since the 16th century outside established dogma, than in what has been preserved inside it” (Gauchet 1997, 61–2, cited in Cloots, Latré, and Vanheeswijck 2015, 964).

Thus far, Gauchet. His historical analysis seems at first glance more or less plausible. It does, however, arguably omit a crucial factor in any historical explanation, an omission associated with his first explanatory factor—the rise of the despot. This, we can recall, opens up the possibility of free self-determination precisely through challenging the despot's power. The problem is this: If the transition from other-worldly to this-worldly framing depends, historically, on the rise of the despot as figurehead for our new approach, what enabled the (first) despot *himself* to shift his own frame of reference and exercise power in this way? Had he learnt from a previous despot about this new possibility? But here we have an infinite regress. The implication is that the rise of the state is an *expression* of the human capacity for self-determination; however, it does not, as it were, *account for* this capacity central to secular modernity. This human faculty of reaching beyond oneself and one's conditioning is what gives rise to the problem of identity, referred to above.

Eric Voegelin: Modernity as Christian Gnosis

Like Gauchet, Voegelin sees Christianity as an interpretive framework for understanding history, unpacking the secular meaning of religion in the line of Hegel and Feuerbach. He points to the secular use of the trinitarian formula to grasp the forward movement of history, tracing this back to Joachim of Flora in the 12th century. The first period, Joachim suggests, is the time of the Father, with the revelation of Christ the second period, followed by that of the Holy Spirit. The first is the time of the laity, the second the active contemplative lives of the priests, and the third the spiritual life of the monks. The humanists, in turn, took the triad to be seen in the periodisation of European history into the Ancient World, the Middle Ages and the Modern period. According to Comte ([1830] 2015), the first period is theological, the second metaphysical and the third scientific.

To begin with, Voegelin (2004, 131) makes the point that we clearly do not have any final perspective on history and its definitive trajectory. “The sequence of history as a whole is not an object of experience, history has no ‘type,’ because the sequence of history itself stretches towards an unknown future.” What we are seeing in these periodisations, if taken as definitive, is the temptation of a gnostic distortion of the religion (Voegelin 2004, 135). One reason lies in the desire to distinguish the faith from the general culture once it had become “Christian.” But Christian faith is not like that; it is not a sect. He points to the classic text of Hebrews 11.1: Faith is the substance (or seed) of what we hope for, the evidence of what we cannot see. The temptation to turn it into definitive knowledge (accessible only to the few) was very early on taken to task by Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* (around 180 CE).

The positive side of the appropriation of religion as something immanent cannot be gainsaid. The achievements are too obvious: gains in the natural sciences and in technology to the growth of social conscience and the spirit of responsibility. All this lends support to the secularisation thesis. This has, however, been accompanied by various forms of gnosis, shutting down further positive growth. Aquinas (1989) expands on the definition of faith we saw above as the seed for what we hope for. As living faith, he says (Aquinas 1989, 335, *Summa Theologiae* IIa IIae Art. 4, Q.5, in McDermott’s translation), “it sets the mind always on course for truth, and as living by the love of charity it sets the will always on course to a good goal.” Any block to an inquiry is contrary to faith. But gnostic forms of faith manifest this kind of block.

In the first place, we can look at the Puritan movement and Calvin’s standardisation of any biblical interpretation that is to be considered orthodox. The vision was of being free from institutional control, free under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, at least for the brethren, not for the worldly (Voegelin 2004, 146). (In parenthesis, Marx’s idea of the withering away of the state is born of the same eschatological vision.) But very soon it was seen that real freedom of scriptural interpretation would result, as Voegelin says, “in the same chaotic situation as in the early years of the Reformation” (2004, 148). Calvin’s *Institutes* put an end to that freedom, giving a formulation in biblical expressions that made any earlier interpretation obsolete and unnecessary. In this way, Voegelin points out, it functions exactly as the Qur’an for Moslems, which in its own self-understanding displaces any need to read the earlier accounts of, for example, Adam, Moses, or Jesus. “Calvin’s work can thus be described as the first self-consciously created gnostic Qur’an” (Voegelin 2004, 148). And many other examples of the same shutting-down can be picked out of modern history: in the 18th century, Diderot and d’Alembert’s *French Encyclopaedia* ([1751] 2009) functioned as the new starting point for followers. In the 19th century, Comte saw his own work in this way; and similarly, in the communist movement, the texts of Marx expanded through the patristics of Leninism and Stalinism (Voegelin 2004, 149).

Voegelin (2004, 144) argues that it is the Reformation that marks the breakthrough of gnostic movements into Western institutions. He follows Richard Hooker’s critical take

on early English Puritanism, *Ecclesiastical Polity*, in judging that the gnostic movement is far removed from the authentic Christian tradition. In support of Hooker, Voegelin takes as example the 1641 pamphlet of the Puritans, *A Glimpse of Sion's Glory* (Voegelin 2004, 154). The role of the angel in chapter 20 of the book of Revelations, to cast Satan into outer darkness, is here appropriated as their own task by the Puritans themselves. Voegelin (2004, 156) quotes from the text: "You see that the Saintly today possess little in this world; at the moment you are the poorest and hardest pressed of all. But then ... will the world belong to you. Your kingdom will be not only heaven but also this material world." Voegelin comments: "All of this has nothing to do with Christianity." God has been transformed here into man.

Voegelin sees modern political leadership as tasked with resisting any gnostic, apocalyptic movement, even one democratically elected. "When a gnostic leader comes forward and says, that God or Progress, race or the dialectic has chosen him as existential ruler," Voegelin (2004, 153) argues this must be opposed. Political leaders must take action not to allow this propaganda to issue in a repressive regime. And this is the case even for governments that have a democratic framework and a bill of rights. In the USA, it is Justice Jackson who made a similar point: the bill of rights cannot be taken as a suicidal contract (Voegelin 2004, 153–154). In his commentary on *The New Science of Politics*, Opitz (2004, 247) notes that, for Voegelin, a society must be structured so that in its ordering principle it facilitates the openness of humankind to transcendence.

Charles Taylor: The Subtraction Story of Secularisation

Charles Taylor puts his finger on the problem. This facilitation will be off the agenda of a secular society understood in terms of the "subtraction story" of secular modernity (Taylor 2007, 22–29; 1997, ix–xv). This subtraction story would have it that people have been freed from the make-believe of religious ties, allowing them to become what they naturally always were. The scales have fallen from our eyes, we have become enlightened, and the canopy of sacred entities has been revealed to be a mirage.

"The mistake of moderns is to take this understanding of the individual so much for granted that it is taken to be our first-off self-understanding 'naturally'," argues Taylor (2004, 64). Autonomy is taken for granted, and religion is treated as a private option: the policy of the secular state is to treat them in terms of a human rights procedure, "leave them alone."

The situation is somewhat different in Francophone culture. Here we find a more self-conscious appropriation of the value of autonomy, and the policy of *laïcité*, addressed to the religions, is "leave us alone." Democratic politics, as Nancy (2006) says, represents autonomy over against heteronomy, the *pour-soi* (for-itself) over against the *en-soi* (in-itself). Citizenship is a form of political or moral resistance to heteronomy. The state, therefore, has the duty to symbolise this value.

Taylor does not draw attention to the difference between these two approaches, but the latter would better fit with his thinking. For Taylor, autonomy is something that must be appreciated, celebrated and symbolised: it should not be elided and treated as if the autonomous individual is simply “there.” It is, in fact, an achievement of human self-transcendence. To understand what has prevented this realisation, and what is behind the subtraction story, we have to go back to historical developments in the understanding of religion in the early modern period, namely the turn to Deism.

We have, in the introduction, highlighted the importance of Taylor’s analysis. The subtraction story forgets the incommensurability of God and world. The problem, for Taylor, is Deism. Deism takes divine action to be commensurable with, and hence a rival to, human freedom. The starting point in Deism is a Newtonian world that operates strictly in accordance with the forces discoverable in the physical sciences in a closed system. In other words, omitted from the picture is the dimension of human intentionality and meaning. The new symbolic world of human interiority has, under the pressures of the prestige of science and the dominance of technology, been shifted to simple subjectivity, of no public import.

Taylor sees four factors in the historical development of this idea. Firstly, there is the eclipse of the idea of a “higher” purpose. Purposes are confined to “the common intent and mutual happiness of his rational creatures” (Tindal, cited in Taylor 2007, 222). Secondly, there is the eclipse of grace. Nothing more is needed in human life than reason and discipline, our gifts by nature. Thirdly, the sense of mystery is put to one side. God, the designer, does not adjust things in particular cases! And fourthly, the notion of God transforming human beings into God’s own likeness is dropped. One classical idea in the Christian tradition was that of partaking in the life of God, expressed for example in the gospel of John, the idea of indwelling—the Son in the Father and we in the Son.

The aims of religion are now seen to coincide with the aims of the political society. No longer is it thought that the Christian vision is that of sharing in the life of God, “*theosis*.” Now, comments Taylor, the “next world” has a different function, “not to complete a path of ‘theosis’ begun here, but to provide rewards and punishments which fulfil the demands of justice on our actions in history” (Taylor 2007, 736, cited in Cloots et al. 2015, 966). It is functioning more or less as supplementary to the job of the police and the prosecuting authority.

All this amounts to what he terms the “polite society,” the society that is rational and functions very well without any intervention from above. Such intervention, as Hutcheson argued in 1755, “would immediately supersede all contrivance and forethought of men, and all prudent action” (cited in Taylor 2007, 224). Acts judged “prudent” are those that promote economic progress and manners that lead you to treat the other person as independent, with their own aims, for mutual benefit. This is the God that will come to the aid of decent folk, and ensure crime is punished, in this world or if not, in the next. Gilson (1941, 106–107) describes this kind of religion: “a vague

feeling of religiosity, a sort of trusting familiarity with some supremely good fellow to whom other good fellows can hopefully apply when they are in trouble: *le Dieu des bonnes gens*.” Religion, in other words, has become an ideology, at the service of a particular kind of bourgeois society.

For Taylor, it is necessary to bring to mind the new kind of society as an achievement, although not completely a positive one. “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’s after all one of the great realisations in the history of human development, whatever our ultimate views about its scope or limitations” (Taylor 2007, 255). So, secular humanism is experienced as “exclusivist,” as if no questions could be asked of it. It is closed to reflection. Taylor’s aim is to uproot this idea, this picture of things. Humanism, he writes, “wasn’t just something we fell into, once the old myths dissolved, or the ‘infamous’ ancient regime church was crushed. It opened up new human potentialities, viz. to live in those modes of moral life in which the sources are radically immanentized” (Taylor 2007, 255). This would include the appreciation of the values of “ordinary life,” work and the family. These would be “romanticised” or “mythologised,” seen as the place for our religious imagination.

Religion as (gnostic) Ideology and Contemporary Resistance

The unjustified secularisation thesis, as pointed out at the start of our discussion, has had a much-misunderstood practical consequence: the failure of the modern state to accommodate the basic human need for recognition that arises once the pre-secular framing of identity—as it were, from above, prescribed or given—falls away. In the frame of mobilisation, symbols are evoked for purposes of attaining power. This is giving disproportionate weight to the “above the line” and institutional components of identity. What is missed is the “below the line” symbolic world of personal challenge, growth, and building of a community that is potentially inclusive of all.

It would be consequential with the justified secularisation understanding of the history of culture to resist, or relativise, these religious and political manifestations. We find such resistance depicted by several contemporary novelists. In Camus’s ([1948] 1994) *The Plague*, Dr Rieux, a doctor putting himself at the service of the people of Oran in the time of the pandemic, resists Fr Paneloux’s entreaty that he affirms belief in God. But Paneloux is positing his own faith in a Deist version of God, in other words, holding to a world that runs along lines that preclude a truly personal dimension, so that transcendence is situated strictly in a world above. He shares the view of the unjustified secularisation thesis, namely that the more humans are free and self-determining, the less the need for God or for religion. In the end, Paneloux refuses medical treatment when he catches the plague—it would go against his religious beliefs, he thinks! Religion functions here as an ideology.

Pamuk’s novel *Snow* (2004) describes some of the contemporary social and religious conflicts in the rural town of Kars in Turkey. The reformists have mobilised, in the style

of the 1930s modernising movement of Kemal “Ataturk” by putting on a play in order to show how a girl may be liberated by throwing off her headscarf. In response, the counter-mobilisation has the young religious enthusiasts cry out, “Down with the enemies of religion! Infidels!” “Why not take everything off and run to Europe stark naked!” (Pamuk 2004, 85). The religious enthusiasts attempt to convince the more reflective individuals to “stand up” for the legitimising God—in this case, the one called upon to challenge and overthrow the dominant European system (also identified with Christianity). The hero of the story is Ka, a poet who has the future of the people at heart, but who is sensitive to the nuances in Islam’s relation to the West. He is confronted with the question as to whether or not he is an atheist, and he replies he doesn’t know.

“Then tell me this: do you or do you not believe that God Almighty created the universe and everything in it, even the snow that is falling from the sky?”

“The snow reminds me of God,” said Ka.

“Yes, but do you believe that God created snow?” demanded Mesut.

Ka did not reply. He watched the black dog run through the door to the platform to play in the snow under the dim halo of the neon light. (Pamuk 2004, 155)

The novel is no apology for “Europe.” When Ka returns there, he seems to represent a negative side of that society, a sense of alienation, expressed, in Ka’s case, through the consumption of pornography.

Resistance to inauthentic religiosity—Dr Rieux and Ka—is decisive for whether or not the religion is going to flourish in secular culture or else wither away. What is evident is that the boundary lines of what is and what is not the authentic religious tradition, are going to be fought over. The religious traditions, if we follow the scholarship of those authors on the Axial Age, are moving towards greater openness. This is achieved through the frame of the transformative symbolisation that animates the heroes and heroines in countless stories. It is notable that one theologian who pointed to this in the case of the Christian religion, Haight (2005), in his book, *Jesus, Symbol of God*, was found by the Vatican authorities, more precisely under the influence of then Cardinal Ratzinger, to be in error and he was forbidden to teach in Catholic universities (see appendix 1, in Haight 2005, 507–514).

Taylor ends his tome on our “secular age” by citing what Mikhail Epstein commented in respect of post-soviet Russia. “Those people who have found God in the wilderness feel that the walls of the existing temple are too narrow for them and should be expanded” (cited in Taylor 2007, 534). That wilderness is our secular culture, and this remark could equally be applied to contemporary believers in general. Our analysis indicates they are correct in their feeling: Christianity is incorrectly thought of along the model of a sect.

Conclusion

In the opening two sentences of his book, Voegelin (2004, 19) notes that every contemporary political theory is also an interpretation of history. He is thinking of the eliding of this historical positioning in secular liberalism and also positivism in political science. We can reverse his statement and note that what we say about the historical process will entail an interpretation of the present situation. A new look at history, and the most prominent assumptions about our present historical moment, will give us a new view of the present, in particular of the situation of the religious traditions.

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