Religion and Secularism

Edited by Patrick Murray and Ronald A. Simkins

1. Three Rival Versions of the Relationship of Religion to Modernity

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Abstract

This essay explores Bernard Williams's portrayal of his, Alasdair MacIntyre's, and Charles Taylor's views on how to move in relationship to religion in our modern world: backward in it (MacIntyre), forward in it (Taylor), and out of it (Williams). I contend that this portrayal is not entirely accurate in each case, though there is some truth in it, and that looking at each author's view on the relationship of religion to modernity is instructive for those of us who wish to keep religious faith alive in our modern, secular age. I begin with Williams, and then discuss MacIntyre and Taylor in turn. I seek to show how MacIntyre and Taylor can help us to overcome the challenge to religious faith that Williams presents and how both offer important guidance for the life of faith in our modern, secular age.

Keywords: religion, modernity, secularity, Bernard Williams, Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor

Introduction

Bernard Williams (1929–2003) is widely regarded as one of the most important moral and political philosophers of the last fifty years. On several occasions in his writings he was concerned to position himself in relation to the work of two of the most important Catholic philosophers of the last fifty years (who are also widely regarded as among the most important moral and political philosophers): namely, Alasdair MacIntyre (b. 1929) and Charles Taylor (b. 1931). Each of these three philosophers has been interested in the importance of history for philosophy, and especially in how we are to understand modernity and its significance for thinking about ethics, politics, and religion, and the relationship between them. In an essay outlining his view of the importance of history for philosophy (especially moral and political philosophy), Williams writes:

> My two associates in the view I am sketching are Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor. They are both Roman Catholics, though of different sorts. I used to find this a disquieting fact but no longer do so. All three of us . . . accept the significant role of Christianity in understanding modern moral consciousness, and adopt respectively the three possible views about how to move in relation to that: backward in it, forward in it, and out of it (2005: 53-54).

It is not entirely clear why Williams used to find MacIntyre's and Taylor's Catholicism disquieting, though perhaps he has something like what Thomas Nagel describes as a "fear of religion": "I want atheism to be true and am made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers. It isn't just that I don't believe in God and, naturally, hope that I'm right in my belief. It's that I hope there is no God! I don't want there to be a God; I don't want the universe to be like that" (1997: 130). Nagel refers to this as the "cosmic authority problem," which seems linked to a concern for individual autonomy.[1] Whether or not Williams shares the same perspective as Nagel here need not concern us.

What I am concerned with is Williams's portrayal of his, MacIntyre's, and Taylor's views on how to move in relationship to religion (especially *Christian* religion) in our modern world: backward in it (MacIntyre), forward in it (Taylor), and out of it (Williams). I contend that this portrayal is not entirely accurate in each case, though there is some truth in it, and that looking at each author's view on the relationship of religion to modernity is instructive for those of us who wish to keep religious faith alive in our modern, secular age. I will begin with Williams, and then will discuss MacIntyre and Taylor in turn. I will seek to show how MacIntyre and Taylor can help us to overcome the challenge to religious faith that Williams presents and how both offer important guidance for the life of faith in our modern, secular age, even though they have their differences.

A note on terminology before proceeding: for the purposes of this essay, when I speak of "religion" or of something being "religious" I will mean these terms in a traditional

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[1] Roger Scruton contends, somewhat provocatively, that an underlying motive for contemporary atheist culture is "the desire to escape from the eye of judgment [whether human or divine]" (2).

Western theistic sense, since it is God that is primarily at issue in Williams's disagreements with MacIntyre and Taylor.

Williams: "Out of It"

We can get a better sense of Williams's position by considering two other occasions where he contrasted his views with those of MacIntyre and Taylor. The first is the following brief sketch of their respective positions (which he acknowledges is a "cartoon sketch"): "Taylor and MacIntyre are Catholic, and I am not; Taylor and I are liberals, and MacIntyre is not; MacIntyre and I are pessimists, and Taylor is not (not really)" (1995b: 222, n. 19). And, second, in his review of Taylor's *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity*, he writes of Taylor and MacIntyre:

> [Both] think most modern accounts of moral experience are quite inadequate; both find importance in the ethical and explanatory powers of tradition. But they also profoundly differ, since MacIntyre, very roughly speaking, thinks that liberalism and the Enlightenment are disasters, and if we can get away from them without complete catastrophe we shall be lucky. Taylor . . . expresses wonderfully well why he resists that view, and lays out in a generous, illuminating, and convincing way the human value that is to be found in . . . distinctively modern ideals [e.g., authenticity], even if the account their defenders give of them is defective. But as one who agrees with Taylor about the Enlightenment, and disagrees both with him and with MacIntyre about God, I think that Taylor, in his search for the sources of value, seems not to have taken seriously enough Nietzsche's thought that if there is, not only no God, but no metaphysical order of any kind, then this imposes quite new demands on our self-understanding. Though Taylor inhabits, unlike many philosophers, what is clearly and vigorously planet Earth and relishes its human history, his calculations still leave it being pulled out of orbit by an invisible Being (1990; cf. 1993: 159; 2005: 31).

Williams is wrong to say here that Taylor "seems not to have taken seriously enough Nietzsche's thought that if there is, not only no God, but no metaphysical order of any kind, then this imposes quite new demands on our self-understanding." In fact, much of *Sources of the Self* and Taylor's more recent tome *A Secular Age* are taken up with exploring and taking seriously the "disenchanted" self-understanding of those who have rejected belief in God or in a metaphysical order of any kind. The main disagreement between Williams and Taylor then is over God's existence. On this point, we see that Williams regards Taylor as having made a mistake in his "calculations."

Like Nietzsche, Williams accepts a common understanding of secularization, where it is seen as a process of ineluctable decline in religious faith and practice resulting primarily from modern science, especially Darwinian science, which, so it is claimed, has made theism unbelievable for those who are well-educated and honest with themselves.[2] We see this view

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[2] Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks reports that Williams (who was his doctoral supervisor) once asked him: "Don't you believe there is an obligation to live within one's time?" (14). The apparent assumption here is that if

operative in Nietzsche's famous "God is dead" declaration, which he takes as meaning that "the belief in the Christian god has become unbelievable" (1974: §125, §343). Later he writes: "Looking at nature as if it were proof of the goodness and governance of a god; interpreting history in honor of some divine reason, as a continual testimony of a moral world order and ultimate moral purposes; . . . that is *all over* now, that has man's conscience *against* it, that is considered indecent and dishonest by every more refined conscience" (1974: §357).[3] In a similar fashion, Williams writes: "We are in an ethical condition that lies not only beyond Christianity, but beyond its Kantian and its Hegelian legacies . . . We know that the world was not made for us, or we for the world, that our history tells no purposive story, and that there is no position outside the world or outside history from which we might hope to authenticate our activities" (1993: 166; see also 1995a: 109-10; 1985: 30-53, 197-202).

So what exactly does this entail for ethics? Nietzsche of course thinks that the entailment is much more radical than what is typically recognized by many "enlightened," secular humanists:

> They are rid of the Christian God and now believe all the more firmly that they must cling to Christian morality. . . . [One] must rehabilitate oneself after every little emancipation from theology by showing in a veritably awe-inspiring manner what a moral fanatic one is. . . . We others hold otherwise. When one gives up the Christian faith, one pulls the right to Christian morality out from under one's feet (1954b: §5).

Nietzsche thus seeks to jettison all vestiges of Christian morality, including any emphasis on love or compassion and the equal intrinsic dignity of all human beings. He offers instead an ethic of power (i.e., a "master morality") that regards as "good" whatever "heightens the feeling of power in man, the will to power, power itself" and regards as "happiness" the "feeling that power is growing, that resistance is overcome" (1954a: §2), which is based on a view of life as "essentially appropriation, injury, overpowering of what is alien and weaker; suppression, hardness, imposition of one's own forms, incorporation and . . . exploitation" (2000: §259). Rather than being concerned to reduce suffering, Nietzsche wants to affirm it as part of any worthwhile life because he sees it as integral to the process of overcoming

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people are well-educated and honest with themselves, then they will have to admit that traditional religious faith is not a live option.

[3] For another well-known "death of God" view, see Weber, which is where the phrase "the disenchantment of the world" is coined. For a more recent sociological expression, consider these remarks from Steve Bruce: "In so far as I can imagine an endpoint [to secularization], it would not be self-conscious irreligion; you have to care too much about religion to be irreligious. It would be widespread indifference (what Weber called being religiously unmusical); no socially significant shared religion; and religious ideas being no more common than would be the case if all minds were wiped blank and people began from scratch to think about the world and their place in it" (42; quoted in Taylor 2007: 435; cf. Taylor's remarks on the "death of God" view at 4, 21, 426-37, 550-93).

resistance and achieving greatness in the expression of the will to power (e.g., in artistic, athletic, intellectual, or political achievement).[4]

Although Williams has also been a critic of "moral fanaticism" (as expressed, e.g., in utilitarianism and Kantianism), he does not follow Nietzsche the whole way in his "revaluation of values." Indeed, it is not clear that he is really prepared to move completely *out of* Christianity insofar as it has shaped a "modern moral consciousness" that he still affirms in the form of certain egalitarian liberal values, such as those expressed in "respect for freedom and social justice and [the] critique of oppressive and deceitful institutions" (1985: 198). Unlike Nietzsche, Williams accepts the humanistic goal of reducing suffering. But he thinks that a key modern challenge is whether we can affirm certain inherited "thick ethical concepts" – e.g., cruelty, brutality, kindness, fairness, etc., which are seen as action-guiding and world-guided – in light of a more reflective stance towards the world (as contrasted with the less reflective stance of a traditional, pre-modern view) that tends to undermine or even destroy this purported ethical knowledge (see 1985: 129-30, 140-48, 159-68, 198-200). Modern reflectiveness, he thinks, reveals to us the "radical contingency" of our ethical beliefs, where these beliefs are seen as being entirely dependent on the contingencies of our personal, cultural, and evolutionary histories. He remarks: "This sense of contingency can seem to be in tension with something that our ethical ideas themselves demand, a recognition of their authority" (2002: 21).

Williams agrees with MacIntyre that the Enlightenment project of seeking to provide a rational justification for morality apart from a teleological conception of the world has failed, but he does not think that this means we must abandon the values of the Enlightenment (e.g., freedom, equality, toleration, etc.; see 1985: 198). Indeed, Williams seeks to show how we can still reflectively inhabit certain thick ethical concepts – e.g., cruelty (as bad), fairness (as good), etc. – that inform these Enlightenment values with *confidence*, which he says is "basically a social phenomenon" in that it is based on the confirmation that our ethical beliefs receive in our social world and the way in which they enable us to navigate this world (1985: 169-70; cf. Rorty: xv, 73-78). But is such confidence really justified?

I think not. For one thing, to affirm fully the radical contingency of our ethical beliefs seems to have a deflationary effect on these beliefs. As Williams acknowledges, it means giving up a kind of normative authority, where we see ourselves as recognizing ethical demands (say in regard to human dignity or the life of virtue) that stand independent of our desires as that with which we ought to be concerned and which when shown proper concern constitute a normatively higher mode of life. For instance, we do not typically experience it as a contingent fact that we should pursue kindness over cruelty, but rather we see it as something that is "categorical": i.e., we ought to pursue kindness over cruelty irrespective of what we happen to desire. To give up this kind of ethical *necessity* – which seems to be at home in a theistic worldview where there are "ultimate moral purposes" – means that at best we can say that these ethical beliefs concern things we *happen* to care deeply about in a way that structures our sense of identity (see Cottingham; McPherson 2015).

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[4] One of Nietzsche's central concerns throughout his work is to address the problem of "cosmodicy," i.e., the problem of justifying life in the world as worthwhile in light of the prevalent reality of suffering. For more on this and an extended critique, see McPherson 2016.

Second, Williams's appeal to ethical confidence seems at odds with his pessimistic outlook, rooted in his belief that "the world was not made for us, or we for the world." Indeed, he maintains: "the most plausible stories now available about [human] evolution . . . [suggest] that human beings are to some degree a mess, and that the rapid and immense development of symbolic and cultural capacities has left humans as beings for which no form of life is likely to prove entirely satisfactory, either individually or socially" (1995a: 109). And given the lack of robust moral consensus in modern societies (as MacIntyre highlights, as we will see), it is not clear what kind of confirmation, if any, our ethical beliefs receive in our social world. There is, to be sure, some general consensus around values like freedom, equality, human dignity, and so forth, but how these are to be understood is a matter of deep disagreement that expresses itself in the "culture wars" (e.g., is human dignity understood as something inviolable and inalienable that we have simply in virtue of being human, or is it something we have only in virtue of being autonomous agents?). Elsewhere Williams writes critically: "Philosophy, and in particular moral philosophy, is still deeply attached to giving good news" (2006: 49). As Martha Nussbaum has pointed out, there is a world-weariness here:

> [Doing] good for a bad world did not energize [Williams], because his attitude to the world was at some deep level without hope. The world was a mess, and there was no saving or even improving it. . . . His liberal politics were difficult to reconcile with this view, and this perhaps explains his increasing withdrawal from politics, and even political thinking, in later life. . . . [What] seems to energize [him] is . . . a sense that one had been honest where others are dishonest, that one had faced the worst with honesty and it has not destroyed one. This attitude is hard to argue against, since the world is indeed full of bad things. Perhaps Kant was right to say that one simply has to adopt some "practical postulates" of a more hopeful kind if one is to engage constructively in the world of human affairs (2008: 236-37).

It is not quite right to say that Williams thought there is *no* improving the world, though it does seem fair to say that he became increasingly pessimistic in a way that is at odds with Enlightenment values (especially insofar as they are tied to a progressive, "march of history" ideology). This is also at odds with the hopefulness inherent in a Christian worldview, and so here we can see Williams as moving *out of* Christianity.[5] Finally, it is noteworthy that

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[5] On the difference between Christian hope and progressive optimism, Christopher Lasch writes: "The essence of hope . . . lay in the 'conviction that life is a critical affair, . . . that nothing in it is abiding, that nothing temporal is able to bear the weight of human faith,' and yet that life is good and that conviction of its goodness forbids us 'to give up any part of human life as beyond hope of redemption.' . . . Hope does not demand a belief in progress. It demands a belief in justice: a conviction . . . that wrongs will be made right, that the underlying order of things is not flouted with impunity. Hope implies a deep-seated trust in life that appears absurd to those who lack it. It rests on confidence not so much in the future as in the past. . . . If we distinguish hopefulness from the more conventional attitude known today as optimism – if we think of it as a character trait, a temperamental disposition rather than an estimate of the direction of historical change – we can see why it serves us better, in steering troubled waters ahead, than a belief in progress. Not that it prevents us from expecting the worst. The worst is always what the hopeful are prepared for. Their trust in life would not be worth much if it had not survived disappointments in the past, while the knowledge that the future holds further disappointments demonstrates the continuing need for hope" (46-47, 80-81).

Nussbaum appeals to Kant's "practical postulates," among which of course is a God with ultimate moral purposes (see also Nussbaum 2003).

MacIntyre: "Backward in It"

At this point let us now consider MacIntyre, who is seen by Williams as wanting to go *backward in* Christianity, which apparently involves a wholesale rejection of modernity. In Taylor's terms, MacIntyre would seem to count as a "knocker" rather than a "booster" of modernity, at least on Williams's reading of him (see Taylor 1991: 10-12). As mentioned above, Williams also sees MacIntyre as like him in being a pessimist, but different from him in rejecting liberal politics and the Enlightenment.

If MacIntyre is a pessimist, then it is certainly in a different way than Williams, since as a theist he does affirm that the universe expresses ultimate moral purposes. Indeed, MacIntyre sees the difference between the theist and atheist in our secularized culture as being not merely a disagreement about the existence of God, but a disagreement about *everything*:

> To be a theist is to understand every particular as, by reason of its finitude and its contingency, pointing towards God. It is to believe that, if we try to understand finite particulars independently of their relationship to God, we are bound to misunderstand them. It is to hold that all explanation and understanding that does not refer us to God both as first cause and as final end is incomplete, and that foremost among the finite particulars of which this is true are we ourselves as human beings (2011: 23).

MacIntyre clearly does not share Williams's judgment that Darwinian evolution rules out a theistic teleological worldview, especially since evolutionary stories must include not only inputs such as "hadrons, leptons, and bosons," but also – *amazingly*, he thinks – outputs such as "opera-loving, James Joyce quoting, equation-solving, atheistic physicists." What science cannot explain is "why a universe that is at its physically fundamental level devoid of intentionality should . . . generate not just intentionality, but such technicolor examples of intentionality as those provided by opera-loving, James Joyce quoting, equation solving, atheistic physicists" (2011: 26-27).[6] This explanatory incompleteness calls into question the ultimate intelligibility of the world. Elsewhere MacIntyre writes: "No matter how far scientific explanation is taken, the existence of whatever it is that exists and its having the characteristics that it has remains surd facts, yet to be made intelligible" (2009: 77). MacIntyre does not share the skepticism of Enlightenment philosophers, such as Hume and Kant, with regard to our ability to reason with confidence about metaphysics, and in particular about the existence of God given what we know of the world.[7] In line with

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[6] It is noteworthy that there have been recent scientific accounts of the universe as "biophilic" and "noophilic," i.e., as having a tendency – and some have said an inevitability – to give rise to life and then to conscious intelligence. Freeman Dyson writes: "I do not feel like an alien in this universe. The more I examine this universe and study the details of its architecture, the more evidence I find that the universe must in some sense have known that we were coming" (50; cf. Rees; Conway Morris; Davies).

[7] On MacIntyre's Thomistic realism vis-à-vis Enlightenment skepticism, see 2006: 125-215; 2009: 105-80. Consider especially the following: "[If] the Thomist is faithful to the intentions of Aristotle and Aquinas, he or she will not be engaged, except perhaps incidentally, in an epistemological enterprise. The refutation of skepticism will appear to him or her as misguided an enterprise as it does to the Wittgensteinian. . . . The

Aquinas and others who pursue the classical project of "natural theology" (including many contemporary philosophers of religion), he holds: "To make this or that aspect of the finite world adequately intelligible is to refer it to its relationship to God," as first cause and final end (2009: 61; cf. 2009: 17, 76-78).

This claim is not the only thing that is distinctive about a theistic worldview. As suggested in the above remarks, the theist regards human beings as has having a special place in the cosmic order: "their aspirations to complete and perfect their understanding of the order of things and of their place within it is matched by an aspiration to achieve a relationship with a fully and finally adequate object of desire, an end to which, if they understand themselves rightly (on the theistic view), they are directed by their nature" (2009: 77-78). Not only is God the ultimate source of intelligibility, but God is also perfect in goodness and thus MacIntyre maintains: "finite beings who posses the power of understanding, if they know that God exists, know that he is the most adequate object of their love, and that the deepest desire of every such being, whether they acknowledge it or not, is to be at one with God" (2009: 5-6).[8] All this suggests, contra Williams, that concern about God is not going away.

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epistemological enterprise is by its nature a first-person project. How can I, so the epistemologist enquires, be assured that my beliefs, my perceptions, my judgments connect with reality external to them, so that I can have justified certitude regarding their truth and error? A radical skeptic is an epistemologist with entirely negative findings. . . . But the Thomist, if he or she follows Aristotle and Aquinas, constructs an account both of approaches to and of the achievement of knowledge from a third-person point of view. My mind or rather my soul is only one among many and its own knowledge of my self qua self has to be integrated into a general account of souls and their teleology. Insofar as a given soul moves successfully towards its successive intellectual goals in a teleologically ordered way, it moves towards completing itself by becoming formally identical with the objects of knowledge, so that it is adequate to those objects, objects that are then no longer external to it, but rather complete it. . . . The mind, actualized in knowledge, responds to the object as the object is and as it would be, independently of the mind's knowledge of it. The mind knows itself only in the second-order knowledge of its own operations and is known also by others in those operations. But even such knowledge when achieved need not entail certitude of a Cartesian sort" (2006: 148-49). For MacIntyre (as for Aquinas and Aristotle), metaphysics rather than epistemology is first philosophy (see 2006: 186). He goes on to write: "There is . . . an ineliminable theological dimension . . . to enquiry conceived in an Aristotelian mode. For enquiry aspires to and is intelligible only in terms of its aspiration to finality, comprehensiveness, and unity of explanation and understanding . . . [The] very idea of a unified, even if complex, ultimate and final true account of the order of things in nature and human history has hidden . . . within it some view of the relationship of contingent beings to some ground beyond contingent being" (2006: 157-58). As for how this view can be vindicated against rival views (including Kant's antinomies), MacIntyre says: "The first principles of a particular science are warranted as such if and only if, when conjoined with whatever judgments as to what exists may be required for that particular science, they can provide premises for a theory which transcends in explanatory and understanding-affording power any rival theory which might be advanced as an account of the same subject matter" (2006: 159).

[8] MacIntyre's most recent book concludes with these remarks: "[There] is no particular finite good the achievement of which perfects and completes one's life. There is always something else and something more to be attained, whatever one's attainments. The perfection and completion of a life consists in an agent's having persisted in moving toward and beyond the best goods of which she or he knows. So there is presupposed some further good, an object of desire beyond all particular finite goods, a good toward which desire tends insofar as it remains unsatisfied by even the most desirable of finite goods, as in good lives it does. But here the enquiries of politics and ethics end. Here natural theology begins" (2016: 315; see also 2016: 52-57, 226-31, 313-15).

So what then is MacIntyre pessimistic about? He is particularly pessimistic about the possibility of arriving at robust moral consensus in the modern world. He says about the prospects for achieving such moral consensus that "we ought to be as deeply pessimistic as is compatible with a belief in Divine Providence" (1990: 361). In *After Virtue*, which was written just prior to his conversion to Catholicism, MacIntyre lays out in detail his reasons for such pessimism. He argues that the "Enlightenment project" of seeking to provide a rational justification for morality apart from a teleological conception of human life has failed, as evidenced by its manifest inability to secure rational agreement. The result is the creation of an "emotivist culture" in which the appearance of rational argument masks what is at bottom attempts to manipulate others in service of arbitrary preferences, and this often gives way to mere assertion and counter-assertion, typically with a shrill and defensive tone. MacIntyre writes: "It is easy also to understand why *protest* becomes a distinctive moral feature of the modern age and why *indignation* is a predominant modern emotion" (2007: 71). One might think here of one of the latest manifestations of the emotivist culture: viz., the so-called "crybully" phenomenon where one seeks to shut down a discussion by saying that he or she is made to feel "unsafe" by the mere expression of opposing views, and also by labeling one's opponents as "bigots" and the like (see Kimball).

Because of the lack of moral consensus, MacIntyre sees modern cultures as defined by a "bureaucratic individualism," where "the free and arbitrary choices of individuals are sovereign," but only in the context of a bureaucratic state that may limit these choices (2007: 35). This is in essence the liberal state, in its various guises, which claims to maintain a neutral stance between competing conceptions of the good life for human beings and seeks to provide a political and economic framework – viz., democratic government and a free market economy – shaped by certain rights and liberties through which individuals can pursue whatever conception of the good life they may happen to have so long as they do not infringe upon the ability of others to do likewise. But the liberal state is not in fact neutral. As MacIntyre says: "liberal individualism does indeed have its own broad conception of the good, which it is engaged in imposing politically, legally, socially, and culturally wherever it has the power to do so, [and] in doing so its toleration of rival conceptions of the good in the public arena is severely limited" (1988: 336). More specifically, liberalism presupposes an "unencumbered" self that seeks to advance its conception of the good understood in terms of individual choice or preference-satisfaction and thus it places greater burdens on those who see themselves, as Michael Sandel puts it, as "obligated to fulfill ends [they] have not chosen – ends given by nature or God, for example, or by [their] identities as members of families, peoples, cultures, or traditions" (1996: 12; cf. 1996: 13-14; see also MacIntryre 2007: 31-35, 244-55). We might also regard the liberal good of individual choice/preference-satisfaction as in fact an "anti-good" insofar as we understand the good to be that which stands independent of our choices and desires and places normative demands upon us (Taylor calls this a "strong good," as opposed to a "weak good," which is based on what we happen to desire).[9]

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[9] A strong good is an object of strong evaluation, which, according to Taylor, involves "discriminations of right or wrong, better or worse, higher or lower, which are not rendered valid by our own desires, inclinations, or choices, but rather stand independent of these and offer standards by which they can be judged" (1989: 4). I thank Patrick Murray for suggesting this way of thinking about the liberal good as being in fact an "anti-good."

In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre contends that from the standpoint of a morally, socially, and/or religiously encumbered self one ought to reject the modern liberal political and economic order, especially in virtue of its individualism and acquisitiveness:

> This does not mean that there are not many tasks only to be performed in and through government which still require performing: the rule of law, so far as it is possible in a modern state, has to be vindicated, injustice and unwarranted suffering have to be dealt with, generosity has to be exercised, and liberty has to be defended, in ways that are sometimes only possible through the use of governmental institutions. But each particular task, each particular responsibility has to be evaluated on its own merits. Modern systematic politics . . . simply has to be rejected from a standpoint that owes genuine allegiance to the tradition of the virtues; for modern politics itself expresses in its institutional forms a systematic rejection of that tradition (2007: 225).

What MacIntyre encourages then is a politics of local community that is also a politics of resistance to the corrosive influences of the liberal political and economic order. "What matters at this stage," he writes, "is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us. . . . We are waiting not for a Godot, but for another – doubtless very different – St. Benedict" (2007: 263).

The appeal here to St. Benedict is suggestive of the religious direction MacIntyre's thought would take following *After Virtue* and his conversion to Catholicism. We get a picture then of the relationship of religion to modernity that emphasizes an oppositional stance by focusing on cultivating local forms of religious, moral, and intellectual community that resist the corrupting pressures of the modern world. However, I do not think it is fair to say that MacIntyre simply wants to go *backward in* Christianity. Indeed, he remarks that we need "another – *doubtless very different* – St. Benedict." His concern is not to return to some earlier, pre-modern era, but rather to hold onto and cultivate the goods that we have or that are possible for us today in the face of severe challenges.[10]

Taylor: "Forward in It"

I think it is fair to say that MacIntyre leans strongly in the direction of a "knocker" of modernity, even if he does not reject everything about it. Charles Taylor, by contrast, wants to situate himself between the "boosters" and the "knockers" of modernity, though I think it is fair to say that he leans in the direction of a "booster." He writes: "There is in fact both much that is admirable and much that is debased and frightening in [the developments of modernity], but to understand the relation between the two is to see that the issue is not how much of a price in bad consequences you have to pay for the positive fruits, but rather how to steer the developments towards their greater promise and avoid the slide into debased forms" (1991: 11-12). In other words, Taylor thinks that we must "separate the wheat from

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[10] In his recent book, MacIntyre speaks of his task as that of seeking "to act against modernity from within modernity" (2016: xi).

the tares," to use an important gospel image (Matthew 13:24-30; Taylor appeals to this image in 2007: 124, 646, 657, 675).

We see this basic stance at work in his understanding of the relationship of Christian faith to modernity. One of the clearest expressions of this is in *A Catholic Modernity?*, where he writes:

> The view I'd like to defend, if I can put it in a nutshell, is that in modern, secular culture there are mingled together both authentic developments of the gospel, of an incarnational mode of life, and also a closing off to God that negates the gospel. The notion is that modern culture, in breaking with the structures and beliefs of Christendom, also carried certain facets of Christian life further than they ever were taken or could have been taken within Christendom. In relation to the earlier forms of Christian culture, we have to face the humbling realization that the breakout was a necessary condition of the development (1999: 16).

Here Taylor seems to lean in the direction of a booster (and we also see his Hegelianism coming out), even though he acknowledges that in modern, secular culture there are ways of "closing off to God that [negate] the gospel." But how has modern, secular culture "carried certain facets of Christian life further than they ever were taken or could have been taken within Christendom"?

First, consider modern freedom. Taylor writes: "This kind of freedom, so much the fruit of the gospel, we have only when nobody (that is, no particular outlook) is running the show. So a vote of thanks to Voltaire and others for (not necessarily wittingly) showing us this and for allowing us to live the gospel in a purer way, free of that continual and often bloody forcing of conscience which was the sin and blight of all those 'Christian' centuries" (1999: 18). In other words, modern freedom allows for a more *authentic* form of faith in which we freely choose to love and serve God, rather than being compelled to do so, and this is something to which MacIntyre does not seem to give due recognition (see Taylor 1991). Of course, modern freedom can also encourage people to reject God by promoting an ideal of the sovereign individual (or the unencumbered self), where autonomy is the predominant value (recall Nagel's "cosmic authority problem"). Additionally, we might question Taylor's claim that "no particular outlook" is "running the show" in modern, secular societies, which seems to accept liberalism's supposed neutrality at face value, and which we have seen MacIntyre contest in arguing that liberalism does seek to impose its own conception of the good life (viz., that of the unencumbered, preference-satisfying self). Additionally, certain strands of "liberalism" can also engage in the "forcing of conscience" (and thus become *illiberal*), as we see in the U.S. with the H.H.S. mandate, attempts to repeal the Hyde Amendment, and so forth. To his credit, Taylor has been a defender of freedom of conscience for religious believers (see 2011), but one could maintain that modern, secular culture is here more closed off to the gospel than he acknowledges.

There is a second point on which Taylor thinks we have made real advance in our modern, secular culture in relation to gospel values and which also seems to be overlooked by MacIntyre: viz., the increased concern for universal justice and solidarity, which amounts to a secularization of Christian *agape*. However, often this is based on a denial of any

transcendent good beyond ordinary human flourishing, and thus it also involves a closing off to the gospel.[11] Here we have the standard secular humanist claim (made, e.g., by Comte, Mill, Marx, etc.) that in order to affirm fully and work for "this-worldly" human wellbeing, we need to deny "other-worldly" concerns. Taylor identifies two key problems with respect to this denial of a transcendent good beyond ordinary human flourishing: First, it can provoke a Nietzschean or anti-humanist response (which is also anti-liberal and anti-egalitarian) because it stifles a sense of the higher in human life in its focus on ordinary human flourishing and is thus seen as flattening (1999: 26-30). Second, secular humanism seems to be parasitic on the Christian view of *agape*, which is based on a teleological vision of human life centered on a "telos of communion" (1999: 30-37; see 2007: 764). Once we give up this vision, can we still *fully* embrace the Christian (or quasi-Christian) ethic of love? Nietzsche thought not, as we saw above, and Taylor is skeptical too. He sees secular humanism as often depending upon (1) an agent's sense of his or her own self-worth, which can lead to a problematic sense of moral superiority and attempts at self-aggrandizement; (2) an appeal to a conception of human dignity that is vulnerable, in the face of human failure, to a descent into despair, contempt, and coercion of the recalcitrant; and (3) a sense of righteous indignation at injustice (recall MacIntyre's claim that indignation is "a predominant modern emotion"), which can lead to hatred of others and new injustices.

So how can we overcome these problems? Taylor suggests the following Christian solution:

> It can be described in two ways: either as a love or compassion that is unconditional – that is, not based on what you have made of yourself – or as based on what you are most profoundly, a being made in the image of God. They obviously amount to the same thing. . . . Now, it makes a whole lot of difference whether you think this kind of love is a possibility for us humans. I think it is, but only to the extent that we open ourselves to God, which means, in fact, overstepping the limits set in theory by [secular] humanism (1999: 35; see also 2007: 695-703; 1989: 515-21).

From this it is clear that Taylor is not convinced by the "death of God" view of secularization, where, as stated earlier, it is seen as a process of ineluctable decline in religious faith and practice resulting primarily from modern science, which is claimed to make theism unbelievable for those who are well-educated and honest with themselves. Taylor does not deny that modern science has played an important role in the story of the decline of religious faith and practice: "For one thing, the universe which this science reveals is very different from the centred hierarchic cosmos within which our civilization grew up; it hardly suggests to us that humans have any kind of special place in its story, whose temporal and spatial dimensions are mind-numbing" (2007: 566; cf. 2007: 322-51). However, what he questions is any supposed knock-down argument here for atheism or materialism.

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[11] Perhaps in some cases there is a commitment to truth as a transcendent good beyond ordinary human flourishing, but often truth is regarded as valuable insofar as it promotes human flourishing, as we see in the frequent connection that is made between modern science and human improvement.

From a believer's perspective, Taylor says, "the argument from modern science to all-around materialism seems quite unconvincing. Whenever this is worked out in something closer to detail, it seems full of holes" (2007: 562). For instance, the argument often depends upon reductive, mechanistic explanations of human life that make "no ultimate reference to human meanings," but such explanations are far from conclusive and indeed they go against our own self-understanding (2012: 288-89). Taylor could also have recourse here to the sort of arguments that MacIntyre deploys in seeking to show how theism provides a more complete form of explanation and understanding of the universe, including its apparent purposiveness in giving rise to conscious, intelligent, meaning-seeking beings such as ourselves, which does suggest that "humans have [a] special place in [the universe's] story." However, Taylor's primary method of defense against the view that science provides compelling support for atheism is to appeal to our engaged experience of the world; e.g., he writes: "I can . . . have a religious life, a sense of God and how he impinges on my existence, against which I can check the supposed claims to refutation" (2007: 567; cf. 2007: 8, 10-11).[12] Elsewhere he also writes: "It is no longer usual to sense the universe immediately and unproblematically as purposefully ordered, although reflection, meditation, spiritual development may lead one to see it this way" (2007: 325). Whatever stance we take here – whether theistic, atheistic, or otherwise – it will require some "leap of faith," and one will often feel "cross-pressured" by considerations that count in favor of religious faith and those that count against it.[13]

In light of his dissatisfaction with the "death of God" view of secularization (where science is said to refute theism), Taylor seeks to provide a more adequate account of the condition of secularity (which is necessary for understanding what kind of process secularization is). In *A Secular Age*, he contends that we should not view secularity simply as a condition of decline in religious faith and practice or a condition where religion has been removed from public life (though both of these may be true in some cases). Rather, it should

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[12] In my interview with Taylor, I asked him if he saw biophilic and noophilic theories of the universe – where there is said to be a tendency for the universe to give rise to life and then to conscious intelligence – as challenging the supposed knock-down arguments from science against religious belief. He replied: "Yes, definitely. Absolutely. But I don't see anytime soon our getting to the same kind of total consensus around, let's say, a biophilic theory that we have about quantum mechanics; we've had enough arguments there, but it's fairly clear. I think these are so deep, so difficult questions that it's quite possible they remain unresolved intellectually until the very end of time. So then we're back with the hermeneutic question, which is always an all-in question; it is not just 'How do you explain the cosmos?,' but 'How do you explain life, my life, what's meaningful and so on?'" (Taylor 2012: 290).

[13] Taylor writes: "What pushes us one way or the other is what we might describe as our over-all take on human life, and its cosmic and (if any) spiritual surroundings. . . . If pressed, one can often articulate a whole host of considerations which motivate this stance, such as our sense of what is really important in human life, or the ways we think that human life can be transformed, or the constants, if any, of human history, and so on. But the take goes beyond these particular insights. Moreover, these themselves can be changed through further events and experience. In this way, our over-all sense of things anticipates or leaps ahead of the reasons we can muster for it. It is something in the nature of a hunch; perhaps we might better speak here of 'anticipatory confidence.' That is what it means to talk of a 'leap of faith' here. . . . Of course, experience can bring an increase in our confidence in our stance. But we never move to a point beyond all anticipation, beyond all hunches, to the kind of certainty that we can enjoy in certain narrower questions, say, in natural science or ordinary life" (2007: 550-51; on being "cross-pressured" see 2007: 430-37, 548-49, 555-56, 591-93, 595-609).

be seen primarily as a situation where religious life is "one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace," as contrasted with "a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God." Taylor thus maintains: "An age or society [is] secular or not, in virtue of the conditions of experience of and search for the spiritual" (2007: 3). He also describes this as the experience of and search for "fullness": "We all see our lives, and/or the space wherein we live our lives, as having a certain moral/spiritual shape. Somewhere, in some activity, or condition, lies a fullness, a richness; that is, in that place (activity or condition), life is fuller, richer, deeper, more worth while, more admirable, more what it should be" (2007: 5).

Taylor thinks this is also true of those who accept the "death of God" view of secularization; indeed, he sees this view as often being driven by a certain moral vision or ideal of fullness, which is centered on a picture of courageous, disengaged reasoning: "The unbeliever has the courage to take up an adult stance, and face reality. He knows that human beings are on their own. But this does not cause him just to cave in. On the contrary, he determines to affirm human worth, and the human good, and to work for it, without false illusion or consolation" (2007: 561-62; cf. 2007: 9). We saw something of this stance in Williams.[14] Recall Nussbaum's remarks: "[What] seems to energize [Williams] is . . . a sense that one had been honest where others are dishonest, that one had faced the worst with honesty and it has not destroyed one." But we also see how fragile this stance can be when we consider Williams's world-weariness, which seems far from ideal human fullness and which, according to Nussbaum's account, caused him to withdraw from political engagement.

It is in large part because of the human concern for fullness or a deeper sense of meaning in life that Taylor does not think religion or concern for "transcendence" (viz., God) will go away.[15] The continued draw to transcendence in our secular age can be seen in what Taylor describes as a "malaise of immanence," which refers to the feeling of emptiness, flatness, loss of meaning, or lack of deeper resonance that people experience within a completely immanent, naturalistic framework, especially where there are no higher goals for human life beyond promoting ordinary human flourishing and seeking preference-satisfaction (2007: 302-3, 307-20; cf. 2007: 620-21). In several places he expresses this malaise in the words of the famous song by Peggy Lee, "Is that all there is?" (2007: 311, 507, 509, 545). Another way Taylor explores the draw to a religious framework of meaning is in terms of the way in which we can ask about the "meaning of meaning"; on this point he writes:

> What we do always has a point; we undertake various projects, and in-between we keep going the routines which sustain our lives. Through all this, something may be growing: a life of love; children who are becoming adults and then leaving to live their own lives; we may be getting better at some valuable and useful activity. But we can also be struck by a question of what

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[14] Other examples of this stance include Bertrand Russell in "A Free Man's Worship," Dr. Rieux in Camus' *The Plague*, Freud in *The Future of an Illusion*, Weber, and Nietzsche (*sans* the humanistic concern).

[15] The following could be seen as a response to Steve Bruce's remarks about religious indifference in n. 3.

this all adds up to; what is the meaning of it all? Or since the individual projects and the recurring routine all have their purpose, the question comes as a higher order one: what is the meaning of all these particular purposes? (2007: 677).

In other words, to ask the meta-question about the meaning of our various meaningful projects and relationships is to ask about "*the* meaning of life" or the overarching significance of life (see 2007: 308-9). Here we can see how one might be drawn to theism since it provides a teleological worldview (centered on the "telos of communion") according to which the universe in general and human life in particular are seen as permeated with meaning. Moreover, the universe is seen as expressing "ultimate moral purposes" (to use Nietzsche's phrase) to which we must align our lives. This allows us to overcome Williams's problem of the radical contingency of ethics and affirm the normative authority of ethical demands (say in regard to human dignity or the life of virtue) that stand independent of our desires as that with which we ought to be concerned and which when shown proper concern constitute a more meaningful life, i.e., a greater "fullness" (see 2007: 589).

Perhaps there are some non-theistic ways of adequately addressing the meaning of meaning, though the idea of an ultimate purpose for human life does seem to make most sense in a theistic framework (i.e., seeing the universe as expressing an ultimate purpose seems to require believing in a purposive Being that created it).[16] Or perhaps we might seek to avoid raising the meta-question of the meaning of meaning and be content with the meanings that arise for us within a given form of life, though Taylor thinks such an approach has serious drawbacks, since "once [the meta-question] arises for someone [it] will not easily be put off by the injunction to forget it" (2007: 677; see also Nagel 1979: 21). In any case, living in a secular age, where we can be cross-pressured between competing conceptions of ultimate reality and ideals of human fullness, means that many of us will be "spiritual seekers." And in the foregoing I have tried to give some indication of how for Taylor the "experience of and search for the spiritual" may require completion in religious terms, and thus we should not expect religion simply to go away.

We also saw above how Taylor thinks the modern emphasis on universal justice and solidarity may require completion in religious terms. There is a sort of Hegelian dialectic in Taylor's appraisal of modern, secular culture: we needed a break from Christendom to enable a more universal concern; however, given the motivational difficulties of secular humanism, he thinks that in order best to achieve such universal concern we may need to go beyond secular humanism by participating in God's *agape* (i.e., unconditional love) for human beings and by coming to see human beings as made in the image of God. We can see then how Taylor seeks to move *forward in* Christianity, in what he calls a "network of agape,"

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[16] See Nagel 2010, 2012, and Midgley 2011a, 2011b for defenses of non-theistic cosmic teleological views. It is worth noting that some of the most important thinkers of the twentieth century, viz., Einstein, Freud, and Wittgenstein, have regarded the question of the meaning of life as being an inherently religious question. Einstein writes: "To know an answer to the question, 'What is the meaning of human life?' *means* to be religious." Likewise, Freud says: "The idea of life having a purpose stands and falls with the religious system." Finally, Wittgenstein states: "To believe in God means to understand the question about the meaning of life. . . To believe in God means to see that life has a meaning" (quoted in Sacks: 19; cf. Cottingham).

which is an idealization of the church's engagement with the world (2007: 158, 282, 739-42). But moving *forward in* Christianity does not mean that he denies the importance of tradition (he is a Catholic after all, and one who found inspiration in *ressourcement* theologians such as Henri de Lubac and Yves Congar). I also do not think it is quite right to call Taylor a "liberal," as Williams does, at least if we mean by this a person who regards individual autonomy as being of greatest importance. Like MacIntyre, Taylor is widely-known as a "communitarian" critic of liberalism, though a "progressive" one who believes that on the whole we have made significant progress in the modern world, and thus he appears to lean in the direction of a booster of modernity.

One could of course challenge this progressive picture, as we have seen MacIntyre do. Consider also the widespread disregard for the unborn, those with disabilities, and the elderly and the dying, especially among those who prize individual autonomy above all. Here we have another kind of closing off to the gospel, i.e., to what Pope John Paul II called the "gospel of life."[17] If one believes that all human life from conception to natural death possesses the same intrinsic dignity, then claims about our great strides in universal human concern might ring somewhat hollow (even though there is some truth to it in certain areas). One might see here a deep conflict between modern, secular liberal culture and authentic Christian culture, as Pope John Paul II does when he contrasts the "culture of death" with the "culture of life." And we can also see conflict with authentic Christian culture in the patterns of greed and other forms of selfishness in modern culture that Pope Francis has discussed, which expresses itself in what he calls a "throwaway culture," which in turn has lead to human and environmental harm and degradation. And we could mention a number of other sources of conflict as well.

Conclusion

From the standpoint of Christian faith, and on the basis of the foregoing, I think it is most reasonable to hold that modernity is something of a mixed bag, or as Taylor puts it, "in modern, secular culture there are mingled together both authentic developments of the gospel, . . . and also a closing off to God that negates the gospel." For those of us who wish to keep religious faith alive in our modern, secular culture, I think we would do well to learn from what Taylor and MacIntyre have to say, which helps us not to fall into some excess of one side or the other. Taylor is especially helpful for trying to bring out what is good in modernity, whereas MacIntyre is especially helpful for making us aware of the distinctively modern threats to the life of faith and virtue. Indeed, it seems to me that we do need to heed MacIntyre's neo-Benedictine call to cultivate local forms of religious, moral, and intellectual community that resist the corrupting pressures of the modern world, but this should also include what Taylor calls a "network of agape" that extends outward into the world (and I see no reason to think that MacIntyre would deny this).

Part of extending outward here is to seek out people of goodwill, of whatever religious or non-religious perspective, with whom to work together for the common good. But there is likely to be some significant disagreement about what the common good consists in. And

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[17] Taylor does acknowledge this in several places (see 1989: 517-18; 2003: 317-18; 2007: 684), but it is not given much emphasis in his overall assessment of modern, secular culture.

so extending outward will also require argumentative engagement with divergent views. However, we have seen that MacIntyre is very pessimistic about the possibility of reaching robust moral consensus in modern, secular cultures. Taylor, by contrast, is somewhat optimistic, at least with regard to convergence on an ethic of universal human concern, though the problem is that there is much divergence in the details of what this means in practice. Should we then share MacIntyre's pessimism? It some ways it seems at odds with his own affirmation of the natural moral law, the precepts of which (e.g., foster and protect human life, cultivate the virtues, seek understanding, etc.) are said to be accessible to the conscience of all mature human beings as they are engaged in pursuing their good. But MacIntyre argues (compellingly) that these precepts are often ignored in modern cultures because of widespread erroneous moral ideas: viz., the primacy of individual autonomy, consequentialism, and moral subjectivism (see 1994: 191-95; 2000: 110-14). What we need then is argumentative engagement with such ideas to show why they are erroneous and prevent us from fully achieving our good as human beings. This requires what Taylor describes as the "ad hominem" model of practical reasoning, which, as the name suggests, appeals "to the person," especially to his or her deepest moral and spiritual sense of things. Taylor writes: "I can only convince you by my description of the good [or vision of human fullness] if I speak for you, either by articulating what underlies your existing moral [and spiritual] intuitions or perhaps by my description moving you to the point of making it your own" (1989: 77). This is a matter of "reasoning in transitions": "[Such reasoning] aims to establish, not that some position is correct absolutely, but rather that some position is superior to some other. It is concerned . . . with comparative propositions" (1989: 72). The most common form of this is where such a transition is brought about by "error-reducing moves" (say in regard to autonomy-centered, consequentialist, and subjectivist views), e.g., "by the identification of contradiction, the dissipation of confusion, or by rescuing from (usually motivated) neglect a consideration whose significance [one] cannot contest" (1995: 53). The ultimate court of appeal here is the "best account principle": "What better measure of reality do we have in human affairs than those terms which on critical reflection and after correction of the errors we can detect make the best sense of our lives?" (1989: 57).

The best we can typically achieve in these circumstances is what Taylor elsewhere calls "anticipatory confidence," where "our over-all sense of things anticipates or leaps ahead of the reasons we can muster for it" (2007: 550). We will often continue to be "cross-pressured" between opposing viewpoints. And so for those of us who wish to keep religious faith alive in the modern world, we will need an ongoing argumentative engagement with rival standpoints such as that of Williams.[18] In this essay I have tried to provide at least the beginnings of such argumentative engagement. I have sought to show that there are reasons to resist Williams's "death of God" view of secularization, where science is thought to refute theism. I have also sought to show how Williams's own moral commitments indicate that he is not fully out of Christianity, though his own tragic worldview makes it difficult to find adequate support for these commitments. And so perhaps it is here especially that theistic

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[18] Williams in fact is the key antagonist in MacIntyre's most recent book (2016), though MacIntyre is more concerned there with ethics than with the issue of keeping religious faith alive in our modern, secular age.

faith – with its view of the universe as expressing "ultimate moral purposes" – still has something important to offer our modern world.[19]

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[19] I thank Patrick Murray for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

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