

Interpreting Secularity: Taylor and Voegelin

Rodney W. Kilcup

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Reading Charles Taylor's 2007 book, A Secular Age last winter turned out to be as challenging as I expected it to be. It is a massive book with a fascinating subject matter, often prolix, poorly edited, and definitely stimulating. As I got into it I was immediately struck by how different the polemical tone was from that of Eric Voegelin. Taylor focuses on a number of malaises in modern Western culture in a text that is frequently conversational, digressive and whimsical; Voegelin sees an ongoing crisis that receives intense analysis, sober scrutiny, and impressive rhetorical flourishes. There is a great difference in the thrust of the underlying animating questions, the types and range of historical scholarship referenced, and the understood shape of the problem of modernity. Taylor sets out an account of a secular age and its problems, shaped by his views about the background frameworks that control our beliefs about the possibilities of a fulfilled life. Voegelin reads modern historical life from a perspective that insists that the human condition does not radically change over time and that it has been adequately illuminated by noetic events in antiquity, particularly in the philosophical reflections of Plato and Aristotle.

What I want to do here is to bring into play the distinctive views of Taylor and Voegelin on the issue of political religions. Both make efforts to define the foundations of modernity and both are very concerned about the role of religion in modern culture. This is my report on that,

although it is not a final word. And it will bring me around to the topic of Voegelin's treatment of The Political Religions.

There is much in Taylor 's argument that is helpful and insightful. The erudition is vast. Nonetheless, there is also much that, from a Voegelinian point of view, falls short. Taylor 's impressive historical scholarship does not allay concerns about the philosophical side and the reading of secular modernity. I will argue that he uses a philosophical filter that ultimately fails to provide an adequate account of the secularizing processes he intends to describe. His categories are not adequate to the task he has set himself. Some reviewers, generally anti-religious humanists, have attacked him as merely an apologist for a liberal Roman Catholic point of view; others have noted his tendency to make assumptions about the objective referent of transcendent experience and his failure to deal with distinctions between esthetic and religious experience. Some of this is interesting, but none of it seems to me to get to the heart of the matter as it appears from a Voegelinian perspective. I will focus on three related issues which, in my opinion, limit the value of Taylor 's discussion: historicism, the framing of the question of 'religion', and the related failure to identify religious vitality in the immanent world.

One of the major concerns in A Secular Age, is to set out a much more complex and sophisticated account of the development of western secularism than the view (advanced by Durkheim and Weber, for example) that he calls "the subtraction theory." That widely cultivated view holds that secularity is adequately explained by the decline of religious belief and practice, at last leaving the culture free to develop those spontaneous traits which, supposedly, spontaneously develop once suppression by religious ideology is ended. Take away religious coercion and the secular flowers of natural science, instrumental rationality, natural rights,

utilitarianism, the ultimacy of the immanent horizon, radical individualism automatically spring up, apparently as they have been keenly waiting to do for millennia. That, he insists, is not how we got to this modern place, transported "from a society in which belief in God is unchallenged and indeed unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one opinion among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace."¹ [1]

Stated broadly, his aim is to show how "the modern secular world emerged from and out of the more and more rule-bound and norm-governed Reform of Latin Christendom."² [2] The transition he describes is from a medieval world in which sacred presence was found everywhere (in social relations, culture, nature as well as church) and the relationships between subject and object were not detached and disengaged, to a "disenchanted" modern world, intelligible through the categories of science, in which a detached, "buffered" self is separated from a world of external, dead objects. The former was brimming with meaning; the latter struggles to find any. This profound historical change was not imposed on Christendom but initiated by the religious community itself. He observes that because "the main motor in the drive for order and disenchantment was the religious one,"³ [3] the primary movements that could draw people of all kinds into the trend toward religious disenchantment were found in the Catholic and Protestant churches.

¹ [1] Charles Taylor, A Secular Age (Cambridge , MA : Harvard University Press, 2007), 3. Hereafter cited as SA. See also SA, 569-574.

² [2] SA, 741-42.

³ [3] SA, 807, n. 3.

I will give a quick partial list of some of the relevant topics to indicate the scope of his bold historical sweep:

- (1) the suppression of carnival, magic, and the worlds of spirits as too dark and demonic;
- (2) an increased emphasis on personal responsibility for belief and behavior, including an expanded expectation of courtesy;
- (3) the elaboration of a more individualized and less permeable identity that in turn makes it possible to see society as a collection of individuals, which then becomes the basis for rejecting the prior theory of hierarchy;
- (4) hence a revision in the understanding of God's presence, now understood as His presence through his plan, which is increasingly understood to intend our mutual benefit and security through our common agency;
- (5) the development of a sense of a 'buffered' self, relatively impermeable and self-controlling, with the expectation that the mature self becomes rational by being disengaged and observational;
- (6) the emergence of Providential Deism and with it the sense that there is no call to a life beyond human flourishing in the immanent frame of reality;
- (7) through it all, the attenuation of the sense of the reality of sacred times and places, allowing for the a strong conviction that all time and all space are profane and open to rational understanding and exploitation for the sake of progress;

(8) the emergence in the last half of the 20th century of a form of "expressive humanism", involving an unlimited pluralism and the validation of spiritual quests related to the cultivation of an 'authentic' individuality, generally socially disconnected.

In the last sections he discusses the travails, dilemmas, and possibilities of the contemporary secular world. He notes the tremendous explosion of secular belief systems and ideologies in the 19th century, describing it as a "Nova effect." In order to grasp the essence of the situational reality, he creates an ideal typology of what he believes are the three most powerful, defining belief options in modern culture: secular exclusive humanism, secular anti-humanism (think Nietzsche and Foucault), and transcendental belief generally treated as experience of or belief in the Judeo-Christian God.

Taylor is most fascinated by the close relationship between religious belief in a transcendent God and what he labels exclusive humanism. Exclusive humanism is critical of the Christian claim for the reality of a transcendent God, but it cannot be understood simply in terms of its critiques of Christianity. In fact, he claims, Christianity and exclusive humanism are remarkably similar in some areas. Exclusive humanism may rest content in the immanent order and reject any form of transcendence, but it is indebted to the religious tradition out of which it emerged. Consequently, "the new humanism bears the marks of its origins . . . not only in being committed to goals of active, instrumental ordering of self and world; but also in the central place within it of universalism and benevolence."⁴ [4]

⁴ [4] SA, 808. n. 3.

At the center of the West's secular world there is an utterly novel perspective:

I would like to claim that the coming of modern secularity in my sense has been coterminous with the rise of a society in which for the first time in history a purely self-sufficient humanism came to be a widely available option. I mean by this a humanism accepting no final goals beyond human flourishing, nor any allegiance to anything else beyond this flourishing. Of no previous society in history was this true.⁵ [5]

For many, perhaps most, in the secular West the immanent order is all there is⁶ [6] and they define their fulfillment and flourishing in terms of the options available in this order, considering those who do not embrace this obvious humanistic and progressive view of life as victims of superstition, ignorance, fear, or perhaps mental illness. Belief in God simply makes no sense. For others there is a distinct sense of loss and a longing for the experience of transcendence that struggles with a deeper conviction that moral integrity requires accepting a disenchanted world (Weber). Taylor holds that while exclusive humanists may maintain the ultimacy of the immanent in good faith, they are in danger of over-reaching when they reject the possibility of transcendence. Sounding somewhat Voegelinesque on this point, he writes that the denial of transcendence appears, from a religious perspective, "to be bound to lead to a crumbling and eventual break-down of all moral standards. First secular humanism, and then eventually its pieties and values come under challenge. And in the end nihilism."⁷ [7] Taylor regards this humanism as a notable accomplishment, but still a very ambiguous one.

⁵ [5] SA, 18.

⁶ [6] Broadening the usual set of references for this, and perhaps winking, Taylor cites Peggy Lee's song, "Is That All There Is?", SA, 311.

⁷ [7] SA, 376.

. . . it is the sense of an absence; it is the sense that all order, all meaning comes from us. We encounter no echo outside. In the world read this way, as so many of our contemporaries live it, the natural/supernatural distinction is no mere intellectual abstraction. A race of humans has arisen which has managed to experience its world entirely as immanent. In some respects we may judge this achievement a victory for darkness, but it is a remarkable achievement nonetheless.⁸ [8]

Taylor notes that exclusive humanists are not particularly threatened by the transcendental believers who are convinced that there is a religious dimension to human flourishing. That simply does not compute for the humanists, even if they wish it did. The real threat to exclusive humanists comes from another frame of mind that is equally secular and anti-religious, the secular anti-humanists. In the current situation the struggle is not simply a contest between transcendental believers and exclusive humanists, but more of a three-cornered debate in which the third party is made up of secular anti-humanists who reject the view that our highest goal is to preserve life and to decrease suffering, to expand benevolence, work for progress, and embrace the pleasures of ordinary life. Nietzsche led the way here, attacking the complacency of the still-too-Christian exclusive humanists from within the framework of secularity. As Taylor describes it, Nietzsche and his followers give a different twist to the picture of the good life:

Life itself can push to cruelty, to domination, to exclusion and indeed does so in its moments of most exuberant affirmation. . . . There is nothing higher than the movement of life itself (the Will to Power). But it chafes at the benevolence, the universalism, the harmony, the order. It wants to rehabilitate destruction and chaos, the infliction of suffering and exploitation, as part of the life to be affirmed. Life properly understood also affirms death and destruction. To pretend otherwise is to restrict it, tame it, hem it in, deprive it of its highest manifestations, what makes it something you can say "yes" to.⁹ [9]

⁸ [8] Ibid.

⁹ [9] SA, 373.

For Taylor, this fissure within the secular humanist community sheds light on the weaknesses of the exclusive humanist position and on the likelihood of its ultimate limitations as a guide to fulfillment. In a brief speculation about the possible future, Taylor traces this humanistic fragility

(1) to the difficulty in dealing with the question of life's meaning exclusively in the immanent frame;

(2) to moral ambiguities regarding violence and coercion that arise in the pursuit of strongly held progressive values (e.g., human rights, peace, equality);

(3) to problematic humanist efforts to shut off an innate desire for transcendence;

(4) to the inherent limitation of the humanist-progressive expectation of progress;

(5) to a sense for coming generations of living in a lifeless wasteland, leading to exploration, especially by the young, beyond the boundaries of the immanent frame.¹⁰ [10]

Taylor's fundamental approach to the topic of secularity is very different from that of Eric Voegelin, and it is a difference with large consequences. In order to get to that contrast it is necessary to say something about the role of Taylor's historicism. He is interested in the implications of the fact that in the modern Euro-American world a naïve construal of religious belief is increasingly difficult if not impossible. In a secular age everyone is aware that belief is

¹⁰ [10] SA, 770.

inevitably a construal of experience and that we are obliged to engage in self-conscious, self-aware construals that are not mere naïve responses to experience. Whereas Christian belief was the default option, now we are "in a condition in which for more and more people unbelieving construals seem at first blush the only plausible ones."¹¹ [11] Christianity has been relativized as merely one of several possible options, no longer the obviously most compelling. History does not only change our condition; it changes us, the way we perceive, the way we think and experience our human existence, our goals and purposes. What is behind this for Taylor is his view that belief or unbelief is more than a matter of articulated theories or ideas. It is, he holds, something that must be seen in terms of a taken-for-granted background in which the differing historically developed backgrounds control the range of plausible options. As he notes, people affirming identical creedal positions in 1500 and 2000, having had different lived experiences, articulated or not, are not construing their experiences identically.

This emerges as soon as we take account of the fact that all beliefs are held within a context or framework of the taken-for-granted, which usually remains tacit, and may even be as yet unacknowledged by the agent, because never formulated. . . . The difference I've been talking about above is one of the whole background framework in which one believes or refuses to believe in God. The frameworks of yesterday and today are related as "naïve" and "reflective", because the latter has opened a question which had been foreclosed in the former by the unacknowledged shape of the background.¹² [12]

Taylor indicates that the background to this background theory is found in the works of Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Polanyi.¹³ [13] We might appropriately add other sources well-

¹¹ [11] SA, 12.

¹² [12] SA, 13.

¹³ [13] *Ibid*.

known to Taylor, such as Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, and Gadamer. The contention here is that history radically conditions life, and that in order to understand that history we must attend to the way that elementary experiences of life are embedded, for example, in specific legends, games, rites, family life, work organization, cultural assumptions and social customs and practices of all sorts. These create that taken-for-granted reality, whether articulated or tacit, held reflectively or naively. Background frameworks as such are universal, but their specific meanings and implications are historically relative, determined by human beings in a constant flow of change of which they might or might not be aware. This is the level at which Taylor wants to tell the story of secularization. It is not that concepts and theories and philosophical formulations are unimportant (he does discuss them), but that the background frameworks of the taken-for-granted provide the deep experiential reality out of which reflection emerges. For Taylor as for others in the phenomenological school, this is a powerful and essential form of modern consciousness-raising, a deeper understanding of what it means to be an historical being.¹⁴ [14]

With this emphasis on controlling backgrounds and the practices that are possible because of them, and ultimately on the theoretical reflections made possible by these backgrounds and these practices, Taylor sets out to describe the processes of secularization, so to speak, from this experiential ground up

This tradition of historicism flows from Husserl to Heidegger to Merleau-Ponty, and Taylor, for whom Merleau-Ponty was a mentor, has been a vigorous defender of it. One powerful drive in this tradition has been the critique of Descartes' understanding of man as a

14 [14] "We are in fact all acting, thinking, and feeling out of backgrounds and frameworks which we do not fully understand. To ascribe total personal responsibility to us for these is to want to leap out of the human condition." SA, 387.

disengaged knower, a subject who is an examiner of the world of objects. The point of this school of thought is that Descartes ignores the radical historical situatedness, the embeddedness, of the mind in the body and in society.

Voegelin, too, has a negative view of the Cartesian tradition and its epistemological framework, but he is also strongly critical of the historicist solution developed in the phenomenological tradition. He disagrees with the position that historical life can transform the foundations of the human condition, although it does certainly transform life circumstances. Voegelin would escape the claims of Descartes and the phenomenologists by arguing that we do have experience that is not confined to objects, but of participation in a human and transcendent reality in our open consciousness, and that the reality of this experience has been uncovered in philosophy since the work of Plato and Aristotle. Whole civilizations may lose sight of this experience and misconstrue it, but it is recoverable, Voegelin avers, difficult as that may be, particularly in a culture fascinated with visions of immanent fulfillment. The Voegelinian view, then, is that the phenomenological stress on radical historicity is a profound error. In 1943, in a vigorous letter to his friend Alfred Schutz he developed a critique of Husserl's Crisis of the European Sciences as a threat to the very possibility of philosophy, as a distortion of reality, and as a misapprehension of human consciousness.¹⁵ [15] Thus Voegelin would reject as unhelpful an attempt to explain modern secularity exclusively in terms of the social and cultural history made possible by background frameworks. That historical work can give an account of how trends and traditions in many aspects of cultural, social, political and religious life have changed

¹⁵ [15] Eric Voegelin, "A Letter to Alfred Schutz," in vol. 6 of The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, ed. David Walsh (Columbia : University of Missouri Press, 2002), 45-61.

for masses of people, but it is not by any means an adequate philosophical approach: it assumes what cannot be demonstrated. Beyond that, it does not address secularization as a matter of noetic failure and thus fails to explain it.

From the framework of Voegelin's interpretive perspective there is another, related and inherent difficulty in Taylor's approach to the topic of religion in this text. This issue is the way that Taylor defines "religion" in terms of a immanent/transcendent dichotomy that is not critiqued, and then confines the religious category to the recognition of a sense of fulfillment in something "beyond" or transcendent to human life.

In his "Introduction" he points out that how "religion" is defined is important for the discussion to follow, and this, he acknowledges, means he is facing a nearly insuperable task, considering the great variety of things called religious.

But if we are prudent (or perhaps cowardly), and reflect that we are trying to understand a set of forms and changes which have arisen in one particular civilization, that of the modern West . . . we see to our relief that we don't need to forge a definition which covers everything "religious" in all human societies in all ages.¹⁶ [16]

Here he refers to his earlier account of the secularizing change he has begun to explore, moving from a sense of fulfillment related to some 'beyond' to "a conflicted age in which this construal is challenged by others place it (in a wide range of different ways) 'within' human life." That is, the definition of 'religion' to be used here is one controlled by the nature of the

¹⁶ [16] SA, 15.

conflict he has described previously as central. Immediately he claims that this will serve very well:

In other words, a reading of "religion" in terms of the distinction transcendent/immanent is going to serve our purposes here. This is the beauty of the prudent (or cowardly) move I'm proposing here. . . . The great invention of the West was that of an immanent order in Nature, whose working could be systematically understood and explained in its own terms, leaving open the question whether this whole order had a deeper significance, and whether, if it did, we should infer a transcendent Creator beyond it.¹⁷ [17]

Of course, as Voegelin would insist, it is manifestly true that millions, perhaps billions, of people view the possibility of human fulfillment in relationship to their views of transcendence and immanence, although, equally manifestly, it is very difficult to see why that sociological fact is held to be conclusive for philosophy. Is it possible that successful analysis of the immanent/transcendent antithesis requires precisely a probing examination of the assumptions behind that dichotomization, that polarization? Or, put very simply, is it possible that the very issue requiring discussion is the one that Taylor excludes, that issue being a rational and philosophical evaluation of the assumptions and motives that entail that immanent/transcendent tension?

But Taylor moves on without hesitation, making it very clear that it is precisely this view that is decisive for him and his argument:

So defining religion in terms of the distinction immanent/transcendent is a move tailor-made for our culture. This may be seen as parochial, incestuous, navel-gazing, but

¹⁷ [17] Ibid.

I would argue that this is a wise move since we are trying to understand changes in a culture for which this distinction has become foundational.¹⁸ [18]

It is "foundational," he goes on to write, because this is the way that people usually describe the possibilities of fulfillment, which seems to mean that the way people usually formulate this topic should be what is taken for granted. His goal here is to understand changes that have taken place within western culture, not to carry out a philosophical evaluation of the assumptions that lay beneath the western polarization of immanent and transcendence. That is not in any sense the object of further philosophical reflection. The ashes of Eric Voegelin, I believe, are stirring.

To put the whole matter beyond any possible doubt, he explains ". . . I want to supplement the usual account of "religion" in terms of belief in the transcendent, with one more focused in the sense we have of our practical context."¹⁹ [19] That practical context is the way that, given our experiences and our interpretation of those experiences, particularly the compelling power of modern scientific understanding, we think about what makes life truly worth living and the way (or ways) we arrive at an answer that we can live with. But it must be asked: is it possible to explain secularization adequately if the discussion is confined to the framework established by the given "practical context" as experienced by the vast majority of westerners? Is the drama over immanence or transcendence for human flourishing to receive no critique, no philosophical exploration? What we are offered here is what might be called an historical and cultural

¹⁸ [18] SA, 16.

¹⁹ [19] Ibid.

sociology of the development of the popular perception of secular possibilities of fulfillment that ultimately entailed a great loss of religious conviction and institutional power. This is then followed by a series of insightful reflections, generally from a generous, liberal, Roman Catholic position, on the current state of this historical change and on some possible outcomes in the future. This history is often informative and persuasive, but it is not clarified by a well-grounded philosophical discussion of the central categories.

Having confined the topic of religion within the framework of practical concerns for individual fulfillment, Taylor has nothing to say about and does not see embodiments of religion in secular institutions, given that religion belongs to the transcendent frame. This flows inevitably from the limitations of the framework he established for the category of religion. He writes, "So "religion" for our purposes can be defined in terms of "transcendence". . . ." 20 [20] In his view, the secular-immanent world cannot by definition be a religious world. That is the meaning of his observation "◆ so instead of asking whether the source of fullness is seen/lived within or without [immanence or transcendence], as we did in the above discussion, we could ask whether people recognize something beyond or transcendent to their lives."21 [21] Religion has to do with transcendence, not with immanence.

In a discussion of the desire for eternity, Taylor refers to the way that art (painting, writing) intends a certain type of eternity, seeking to communicate with future generations and thus, in a sense, being held in memory and keeping time alive. He then refers to "other lesser modes or

20 [20] SA, 20.

21 [21] Ibid.

substitutes for eternity. One can make the eternal be the clan, the tribe, the society, the way of life."²² [22] Clearly for Taylor humanist longings for eternity do not yield 'religion,' but "lesser modes or substitutes" for the real thing. Such efforts testify to the loss that exclusive humanists experience when the God of Jewish and Christian faith is simply no longer available, as he is not in their secular understanding. In Taylor 's view these substitutes are never fully adequate replacements for the real God, and since they do not relate to real transcendence they are not real religions.

Thus it is no surprise that when he refers to Hitler and National Socialism it is not to identify religious themes but to point to violence, extreme nationalism, the loss of a universal ethic, the fascination with power and leadership and death. Hitler's political violence is contrasted with religious violence.²³ [23] Nazis have some linkage to Nietzsche, he explains, although in a vulgarized reading of him, and they draw on the expressivist culture of the post-WWI period.²⁴ [24]

All of this may well be true, but it seems to miss the essence of the matter. The National Socialists were anti-humanist and anti-Christian, but they did invoke a sense of the sacred linked to racial and national identity and to the triumph of these in history through the heroic leadership of the Fuhrer and the sacrifices of the national-racial martyrs. The role of the sacred was essential for creating popular support, a point that was unambiguously articulated at the time,

²² [22] SA, 721.

²³ [23] SA, 549.

²⁴ [24] SA, 373-374, 486.

thus suggesting not the demise of religious sentiment but its vitality. How else are we to understand the use of myth, music, ritual, drama, art, architecture enlisted to convey a profound sense of the sacredness of the people, i.e., the race, brought into unity and action through the leader? That religious reading is precluded by Taylor 's categories.

Voegelin's 1938 essay on The Political Religions is strongly relevant here and provides a remarkably different picture, one that allows us to define what is foundationally problematic in Taylor 's account. Voegelin understands the problem of secularization as above all a religious problem rooted in modern times, which has created a (poorly understood) political and religious crisis.²⁵ [25] The life of a people, he writes, cannot be understood adequately without reference to its religious root:

A community is also a realm of religious order, and the knowledge of a political condition will be incomplete . . . firstly, if it does not take into account the religious forces inherent in a society and the symbols through which these are expressed or, secondly, if it does include the religious forces but does not recognize them as such and translates them into areligious categories. Humans live in political society with all traits of their being, from the physical to the spiritual and religious traits. . . . The political community is always integrated in the overall context of human experience of world and God, irrespective of whether the political sphere occupies a subordinate level in the divine order of the hierarchy of being or whether it is deified itself.²⁶ [26]

25 [25] Eric Voegelin, The Political Religions in vol. 5 of The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, ed. Manfred Henningsen (Columbia : University of Missouri Press, 2000), 24. Henceforth cited as PR.

26 [26] PR, 70.

Humans will create a relationship with a divinity of some sort, whether it be the transcendent God or an immanent substitute (or substitutes) for him, deifying something in the mundane order of being, perhaps the race or the nation or the life force or nature.

Behind this is Voegelin's conviction, repeated ceaselessly throughout his life, that in the noetic discoveries of antiquity the key to the right ordering of man and society in relation to transcendence had been very adequately articulated. Not that Plato or Aristotle should be taken as political philosophers for the modern nation state, which was utterly foreign to them, but that they grasped the fundamental existential and ontological realities of the human situation. He observes in The Political Religions that this envisioning of the foundations of order has been largely lost since the Renaissance, and the loss is so profoundly significant that for most moderns the issue of the order of being cannot be accurately seen or stated. He argues that the explosion of knowledge about the world (history, psychology, medicine, astronomy, biology, and so on) "fills up the new understanding of the world and pushes all knowledge about divine order to the edges and beyond. . . . The world as contents has suppressed the world as existence. The methods of science as the sole forms to study the contents of the world are declared to be the generally obligatory basis of man's attitude toward the world." 27 [27] As is evident in Hobbes' 17th century theorizing, within this frame of mind the state can be seen as an autonomous sacred entity, an ecclesia uniting all moral and spiritual authority and deriving its sovereignty from itself:

The ecclesia is increasingly breaking away from the association of the universal empire that has its hierarchical peak in God until, in some instances, it becomes independent and

27 [27] PR, 59-60.

closes itself off in an inner-worldly way. There is no longer any sacral permeation from the highest source; rather, it itself has become an original sacral substance.²⁸ [28]

Human nature does not change; the reality of the human condition does not change. God or transcendence may disappear from view, but "the human condition remains alive in each individual soul; and when God is invisible behind the world, the contents of the world will become new gods."²⁹ [29] These new gods are made socially effective through myths and symbols created, revised and adapted to the religious needs of the progressive humanists and life-affirming anti-humanists living in the immanent frame. Atheism and skepticism may flourish, as well as visions of human progress and perfection (Kant), but avoiding the creation of gods is not an option in Voegelin's view. Insofar as Taylor is unable to acknowledge the religious vitality that permeates life in that immanent frame, Voegelin's position is that he misreads and distorts the nature of modern secularism. Taylor 's attempt to define the issue of the secular simply as a question of immanent fulfillment versus transcendent fulfillment, even though done with great nuance and insightfulness, does not penetrate to the heart of the matter. Voegelin writes that some intellectuals do not understand how this great evil emerged in Europe out of its progressive, modern culture, "from the secularization of life and the humanitarian doctrine which emerged in modern times. That is the soil from which such an anti-Christian religious movement as National Socialism could prosper."³⁰ [30] Hence for Voegelin the issue

²⁸ [28] PR, 60.

²⁹ [29] PR, 61.

³⁰ [30] PR, 24.

of secularity was and is a religious and political crisis, while for Taylor it presents a number of malaises.

For Voegelin the 1938 effort was not by any means the end of his reflections on these matters. In 1973 he criticized the way he formulated issues in The Political Religions, saying that he had been too vague and that he had not adequately differentiated some aspects of his subject matter. The problem he faced in 1938 was that "The intellectual apparatus for dealing with the highly complex phenomena of intellectual deformation, perversion, crookedness, and vulgarization did not yet exist, and studies to create this appropriate apparatus were required."

31 [31] He came to see that there was a problem with using the category of religion: "The interpretation is not all wrong, but I would no longer use the term *religions* because it is too vague and already deforms the real problem of experiences by mixing them with the further problem of dogma or doctrine."³² [32] What made this statement possible was precisely Voegelin's own development of the intellectual apparatus required for handling the spiritual pathologies of the modern age, in particular the theory of consciousness that he worked out in the 1940s and 1950s, after developing his critique of Husserl's phenomenology. With the language of his theory of consciousness he was able to clarify the nature of transcendent experience and of the various misrecognitions and distortions of it in the immanent frame, with their secondary realities, without getting distracted by the unique dogmatic claims of particular universal or immanent religions. The theory of consciousness allowed him to focus on experience and not to

31 [31] Eric Voegelin, Autobiographical Reflections, (1973), in vol. 34 of The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, ed. Ellis Sandoz (Columbia : University of Missouri Press, 2006), 78.

32 [32] Ibid.

get needlessly entangled in the various historical interpretations and elaborations of that experience through religious and political institutions. It allowed him to take a step back to account for the experience which lies prior to any religious articulation. The account of pneumopathology remains the same although the explanation of its nature is offered in the more analytically helpful language of a theory of human consciousness.

There is a great quantity of insightful, stimulating historical observation and argument in Taylor's book. He wins the case against the subtraction theory and his work will doubtless lead others to build on his insights. But Taylor wraps the history in a philosophy that is finally not adequate to his subject. The radical historicism implicit in the theory of background frameworks leads to the absence of philosophical reflection on the nature of the immanent/transcendent tension, which is absolutely essential for getting the Problemstellung right. The roots of that tension have decisive implications for defining the nature of secularity, but Taylor focuses his discussion to practical contexts. His insistence that the category of religion applies only to transcendence leads to his inability to see religious vitality in the secular world's political and cultural life. There is much to learn from Taylor ; there is also reason for caution.
