

# SPIRITUALITY IN A SECULAR AGE: FROM CHARLES TAYLOR TO STUDY OF THE BIBLE AND SPIRITUALITY

## ABSTRACT

This essay proposes that those engaged in the study of the Bible in relation to spirituality would benefit from awareness of Charles Taylor's thinking in *A Secular Age*, which is a narrative not only about the emergence of the secular but also about the role of the spiritual in Western civilization. The essay indicates the significance of Taylor's work for understanding the present context of the experience of spirituality. It then suggests some possible implications for how biblical perspectives on spirituality might be studied, highlighting Taylor's category of the social imaginary. Finally, it reflects on the potential of Taylor's work for those who are interested in dialogue between a spirituality rooted in biblical perspectives and contemporary forms of spirituality, focusing on his notion of "fullness."

Among various possible approaches to the study of the Bible and Spirituality, one might have as its main aim the exploration of biblical spiritualities in relation to later traditions of spirituality, including those in our own time. This, in turn, might entail a dialogue between, on the one hand, academic investigation of biblical perspectives on spirituality and their interpretation and reception in Jewish and Christian traditions and, on the other, contemporary thinking about spirituality in other disciplines<sup>1</sup> and in our culture, some of which frequently disavows any particular religious tradition or even a relationship to any transcendent reality. Assuming both the viability and the value of such an

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1 On viewpoints from other disciplines, see e.g. Waaijman 2002:392-424; 2007:1-113. The latter article surveys recent work in twelve different disciplines. On the widespread interest in spirituality in the culture, see e.g. Kourie 2006:19-38; King 2009.

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approach, this essay suggests that it cannot afford to ignore the major work of Charles Taylor, particularly in his book, *A Secular Age* (2007). Taylor, now Professor Emeritus of Political Science and Philosophy at McGill University in Montreal, is one of the leading contemporary philosophers. His early work was on Hegel but he probably first came to more general prominence through his influential large book, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (1989). Since then he has published a number of other important books, leading up to the monumental landmark study, *A Secular Age*. This study has won many prizes, including the 2007 Templeton prize for progress in research or discoveries about spiritual realities. The consideration of it here has two main goals: (i) on the assumption that many of the readers of this essay may not have read the book, to introduce some of Taylor's thinking in such a way as to indicate its nature and scope and its significance for any study of spirituality and (ii) to indicate more briefly some of the implications of this thinking for study of the Bible and Spirituality in the hope that these will be taken up in further discussion and research.

Taylor's book tells a story of secularization in the West that resists standard reductionist accounts of how we have come to the situation where an exclusive humanism is the default position of most educated people and in the process it deconstructs any clear divide between the spiritual and the secular. So although ostensibly a story about the secular, it is inevitably also a story about the spiritual.<sup>2</sup> It is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to do anything like justice to Taylor's narrative, because this 874 page volume is in fact an incredibly rich, nuanced, thick description of the spiritual and its fate over the last five hundred years of Western civilization. It is best, therefore, to concede at the outset that any attempt at summary is bound to lose these qualities and to oversimplify and distort his argument.

## 1. ORIENTATION TO SECULARIZATION AND TO “FULLNESS” AS SHORTHAND FOR SPIRITUALITY AS HUMAN FLOURISHING

Before risking the folly of surveying the book as a whole, it is worth attending to Taylor's introductory chapter (2007:1-22) in order to gain some sense of orientation. In it he lays out some of the major broad issues and makes clear that he will be interested in a specific sense of secularity. He isolates three interrelated aspects of secularization. The first has to do with public

2 Despite its distinctive angle of approach, it would be instructive, therefore, though outside the scope of this paper, to compare Taylor's historical narrative of Christian spirituality in the West with other accounts. For reflections on historiographical accounts of spirituality, cf. Sheldrake 1996; Waaijman 2002:406-10; 2006:54-62.

spaces that have supposedly been “emptied of God, or any reference to ultimate reality” (2007:2). So whereas the political organization of pre-modern societies was in some way connected to the gods or a transcendent reality, this connection has been lost and religion or its absence is largely a private affair. The second aspect concentrates on the decline of actual religious belief and practice. The third, and this Taylor makes clear will be his focus, has to do more with the conditions of believing, its lived experience. So the big question he addresses in the book can be encapsulated as follows. How have we in the West moved

from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others (2007:3)?<sup>3</sup>

What are the factors that have produced an age or a society not only where we recognize that there are a variety of viable alternatives for living our lives but also where, arguably, for a majority of people an exclusive humanism is the default position?

The present state of affairs may seem obvious but, for Taylor, what has not been sufficiently recognized is that it means that the conditions of our experience of and search for the spiritual have become decisively different. He wants to emphasize that this situation raises issues not just for believers in God but also for everybody. It affects everyone’s relationship to what they consider most important in life. In the book, therefore, he devotes equal attention to the different kinds of lived experience of both those who understand their lives as believers and those who understand them as unbelievers.<sup>4</sup> And one of the reasons Taylor thinks that everybody is in a new situation in a secular age is because he refuses any simple metanarrative of secularization whereby the spiritual increasingly gives way to the secular or where the spiritual shaping of the secular is ignored or where exclusive humanism is seen as the inevitable conclusion of a rational process of the stripping away of the superstitions

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3 It is this third more fundamental sense of secularity that explains why, despite the present resurgence of interest in religion and spirituality, Taylor continues to talk of a secular rather than post-secular age. Any talk of the post-secular would only make sense in terms of the much more restricted first and second senses of secularization.

4 I toyed with employing the more neutral term “non-believers” where Taylor speaks of unbelievers but then realized that this might not be a trivial change of terminology and would obscure Taylor’s point. For him there is ultimately no such thing as non-belief as a stance and the not believing of those in a secular age is a not believing that remains shaped by the religious forces that have produced it and is therefore unbelief in that predominantly Christian tradition and a belief in other values that have emerged from it.

of an enchanted universe. He calls these one-dimensional accounts of a movement from primitive piety to enlightened rationality “subtraction stories.” They involve “subtracting” religious belief, dogma, fanaticism and illusion in order to leave what are supposedly the essential features of human nature that “were there all along” but had been covered over and impeded by what has now been sloughed off (2007:22). Instead, one of the things he is at pains to show in his account is how the position of exclusive humanism is as much a constructed reality as any religious belief and what forces were in play in this construction beyond any supposed empirical observation and scientific theorizing. One should add that he has no more time for the equally simplistic story of a sad decline from genuine religious belief and practice culminating in a collapse into moral relativism and social and cultural decay. His story is one of how spiritual and moral values were crucial in the development of secularism and of how these emerged from within and continue to be shaped by the Christian tradition.

But what is this spiritual aspect of human life that both believers and unbelievers have to negotiate and that is now experienced by both differently but under the common conditions of a secular age? In his introductory chapter Taylor sets out his view that we all see our lives as having a certain moral or spiritual shape revolving around our aspirations for a full and flourishing existence. All societies live with or by some sort of answers to questions such as, What constitutes a fulfilled life? What makes life really worth living? What do we most admire others for? (cf. 2007:16). It is here that he comes up with the shorthand term for this as “fullness.” In his own words:

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 worthwhile, more admirable, more what it should be. This is perhaps a place of power: we often experience this as deeply moving, as inspiring. Perhaps this sense of fullness is something we just catch glimpses of from afar off; we have the powerful intuition of what fullness would be, were we to be in that condition, e.g., of peace or wholeness; or able to act on that level, of integrity or generosity or abandonment or self-forgetfulness. But sometimes there will be moments of experienced fullness, of joy and fulfilment, where we feel ourselves there (2007:5).

Taylor, of course, concedes that no one summary term for the condition to which humans aspire is unproblematic. Any possible term would have something wrong with it and perhaps the major problem with this one is in relation to Buddhism where the highest aspiration is to emptiness (*sunyata*). But the Buddhist point could perhaps be put paradoxically – real fullness only comes through emptiness – and so with these reservations he finds the term at least as helpful as any other, if not more so (see 2007:780n8). More important is Taylor’s observation that there are three main ways in

which fullness is experienced. The sense of fullness can come at particular unsettling moments, say, of profound awe at the world around us or of our worries and distractions disappearing so that we are fully energized instead of in some psychic gridlock. Second, it can be experienced negatively through its absence or loss, a sense of exile from a place of fullness. Third, there is a middle condition where we find our everyday routines contributing to our happiness or fulfilment, say, in living happily with our family, while having a fulfilling vocation that makes a contribution to human welfare. But essential to this middle condition is the notion that we are keeping away the sense of exile or ennui and are in touch with the place of fullness or somehow moving towards it. Talk of moving towards it need not presuppose some transcendent goal. For many this middle condition of fullness *is* the goal. Living fully in this way is what human life is about; it is worthwhile in itself and thinking that there is something more, say, some higher level of sanctity or some completion after death, is in fact to jeopardize or undermine a satisfying human life. Nevertheless, one may still feel that within the framework of this life one has not yet arrived and is still aspiring to greater wholeness or satisfaction (2007:6-8).

Taylor identifies and attempts to describe this dimension of life in terms of the experience of fullness and its intuition about what matters most in life, because in it he sees revealed the key characteristics of an age's ideals and their capacity to inspire and empower people. His phenomenological approach therefore goes on to explore how the conditions for experiencing this fullness have changed over the centuries and how now in this secular age it is lived out differently for those who experience it against a transcendent background and those who remain within an immanent framework. And, broadly speaking, while believers experience it as received, as a product of divine grace, unbelievers, especially after the 18th century, experience it as grounded by something that lies within life itself, such as rational agency, the forces of nature, human emotion or desire, or courage in face of the absurd (2007:8-10). But what is different about a secular age is that the experience of fullness is no longer naïve but reflective. We all have to see our way of experiencing or searching for fullness, however plausible we might consider it, as one option among others. We are involved in navigation between two standpoints -

an 'engaged' one in which we live as best we can the reality our standpoint opens us to; and a 'disengaged' one in which we are able to see ourselves as occupying one standpoint among a range of possible ones, with which we have in various ways to coexist (2007:12).

The reason for this is that the arrival of modern secularity

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 (2007:18).

Yet exclusive humanists have to negotiate the other options in their midst as much as do religious believers.

How then does Taylor go on to tell this story? Here only the barest outline can be given in the hope that it will whet the appetite of some to read his account for themselves. After the Introduction the book consists of twenty chapters and is divided into five parts. These are followed by a short epilogue. The first four parts and their fourteen chapters provide a complex narrative of the developments from the late Middle Ages that led to the self-sufficient humanism that became a catalyst for a secular age and then depict the diverse consequences of this from the nineteenth century down to the present. This narrative is resistant to summary not only because of its scope but also because of Taylor's presentation. It does not have the straightforward linear plot one might expect from a historian. But this is, to a large extent, because Taylor combines history, phenomenology, philosophy and sociology in order to explore a wide variety of themes in the context of what he calls "social imaginaries,"<sup>5</sup> the sensibilities and background assumptions within which we live out our aspirations. These social imaginaries shape what is taken for granted in giving sense to our everyday practices. They are the ways in which people

imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations which are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images which underlie these expectations (2007:171).

Analysis of these themes begins in one place, involves digressions, picks up in other places, jumps ahead of itself in comparisons and contrasts with later stages, and becomes clearer as it progresses through the various eras. All this results in a circuitous narrative of interwoven patterns rather than a simple chronological account. In the process Taylor is concerned to emphasize that an important element in the shift of social imaginaries is when they cease to be oriented around elites and become embedded in whole societies. At the same time as investigating the social and political arrangements and forces that allow this to occur, however, he focuses on particular representative figures - philosophers, novelists, poets – because they are the ones who have left us the most articulate literary evidence of their experiences related to fullness and of their reflection on their significance. So, to take just one example, in the fascinating chapter on "Nineteenth-Century Trajectories," looking mainly at England from 1840 to 1940, one finds, among other matters, discussions of

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5 He has also written on this in Taylor 2004.

Carlyle, Arnold, Mrs. Humphry Ward's novel *Robert Elsmere*, Leslie Stephen, John Stuart Mill and George Macaulay Trevelyan set squarely within Victorian Christianity and its synthesis of Britishness, Protestantism, law, freedom, decency and civilization.

## 2. THE STORY OF THE RISE OF A SECULAR AGE

The bigger story (2007:25-535), of which this sort of treatment is a part, begins with the late medieval world and in Part I - The Work of Reform – Taylor depicts this as an enchanted world with a porous self linked to society and both being open to the influence of unseen forces – good and evil – that are causally responsible for ordinary events in the world. Various reform movements, both before and after the Reformation, play their part in the shift away from this world. The Reformation itself was instrumental in a drive to disenchantment in which any gap between sacred and secular was narrowed.

The power of God doesn't operate through various 'sacramentals,' or locations of sacred power which we can draw on ... The sacred is suddenly broadened: for the saved, God is sanctifying us everywhere, hence also in ordinary life, our work, our marriage, and so on (2007:79).

At the same time it produced a drive to re-order society, not only in its church life but also in its everyday life. It is no longer only those with a particular monastic vocation that are called to spiritual discipline and renunciation but this ideal is to be realized in the lives of ordinary Christians and in a well-ordered society. It is one thing, however, for those conscious of God's empowering grace to maintain such a programme of moral order but this movement is in danger of loading aspirations to ordinary human flourishing with a burden of renunciation they cannot bear and of repressing significant elements of life, such as natural sensuality and the need for Carnival, the wild side that will continually come back and demand negotiation. Devotion to God as Creator and relating Christ's lordship to the world then brings a renewed interest in nature, art becoming concerned with the imitation of nature and scientific enquiry becoming engaged in tracing cause and effect in an ordered cosmos. But, says Taylor,

the new interest in nature was not a step outside of a religious outlook, even partially; it was a mutation within this outlook (2007:95).

So the Reformation, along with Renaissance notions of civility, plays its part in the rise of the disciplinary society and of the new buffered self, with its boundaries, that is immune not only to spirits and demons but also ultimately to desire because of its disengaged rational control.

But an even more important part of this story is the providential deism of the late 17th century. The turn to nature and an increasing faith in rational processes as the guiding principle for human flourishing did not immediately lead to a social imaginary in which God as transcendent source no longer played a part. It is with Deism that “God’s goals for us shrink to the single end of our encompassing this order of mutual benefit he has designed for us.” Since God is now simply the architect who set the world in motion, there is a shift towards the primacy of impersonal order, where “God relates to us primarily by establishing a certain order of things, whose moral shape we can easily grasp ...” (2007:221). We can now see how human life can be organized so as to bring about fulfilment and happiness and when it appears progress is being made towards peace, prosperity and order in society, the idea can gain currency that these human goods are our only goals and can be achieved without the intervention or supernatural power of God. Grace is eclipsed and ends beyond human flourishing fade from view (cf. 2007:261). But again the slide into Deism was not simply the result of empirical enquiry. It became embedded on a large scale both because of the attraction of the moral ideals of freedom and beneficent order supposedly to be found in natural law and because of a deep distaste for the traditional authoritarian God who threatened to intervene in everyday life and for the enthusiasts who promoted this God and put in danger the order of mutual benefit (cf. 2007:274-75). We are now at the halfway house to exclusive humanism and, in order to keep this essay within reasonable limits, the stages that bring the narrative to the present day will need to be handled even more briefly.

The quasi-autonomous humanism of Deism and its immanent order serve as the key to understanding the transition from the pre-modern ubiquity of religious belief to the eventual rise of “exclusive humanism” as an option during the 19th century. Ironically, a secular perspective emerges from within religion before being taken up by unbelievers. With Deism

the positing of a viable humanist alternative set in train a dynamic, something like a nova effect, spawning an ever-widening variety of moral/spiritual options (2007:299).

This becomes embedded in the 18th and 19th centuries with both the sciences and the arts playing their part in the process. The increasing options of the nova effect include reactions to and rebellions against the flattening impact of an immanent frame and its dominant rational instrumentality that were experienced in the malaise of a loss of mystery, meaning, sacred time and the heroic. The reactions could be those of unbelief, including some forms of Romanticism and Nietzsche, or of religion, including the Evangelical Awakening, Methodism or 19th century French Catholicism. The nova effect, which began among elites, is then intensified as it becomes generalized

to whole societies. Sociological accounts of this development in chapters called “The Age of Mobilization” and “The Age of Authenticity” investigate the move from hierarchical to direct-access societies, the further loosening of any connection between the spiritual quest and larger groupings like state, church or denominations and the rise of a culture of authenticity in which people are encouraged to find their own way, to discover their own fulfilment. These accounts help to bring Taylor’s narrative up to the present day in which, he claims, after the Second World War “we are now living in a spiritual supernova, a kind of galloping pluralism on the spiritual plane” (2007:300). So the final chapter of this part of the book – Religion Today – surveys some of the spiritualities to be found in Europe and the U.S.A. and their characteristics, including a spirituality of search or quest and the phenomenon of being “spiritual but not religious.” For Taylor, this landscape is only to be expected because one of his main theses is that the social and intellectual conditions of both modernity and post-modernity have allowed new forms of spirituality to develop, keeping the immanent frame open to transcendental considerations. And this happens because the tensions to be seen in the Reformation and subsequent reform movements between the equally compelling demands of ordinary flourishing and the imperatives of Christian faith remain in deadlock in new forms, even after transcendence has been ruled out as the locus of human flourishing.

### 3. LIVING IN THE CROSS-PRESSES OF SPIRITUALITY IN A SECULAR AGE

The last six chapters of the fifth part (2007:539-772) draw on these interwoven stories in order to explore the present conditions and interrelations of belief and unbelief. This fascinating final part of *A Secular Age* attempts in just over 230 pages to set out how the available experiential options deal with some of the major issues, challenges and dilemmas that face us all and it deserves an essay in itself. What shapes it is Taylor’s view that we all live in the immanent frame in a secular age but that there are two different spins that can be put on this. There are all sorts of intermediate positions but, basically, for some the immanent frame is dependent on and open to a transcendent source while for others, the present majority, it is a closed world structure. Neither stance is the obvious, natural or only rational one. Instead both are construals and what pushes people one way or the other are their basic takes on life from within a variety of commitments and intuitions. As he says,

we can either see the transcendent as a threat, a dangerous temptation, a distraction, or an obstacle to our greatest good. Or we can read it as answering to our deepest craving, need, fulfilment of the good (2007:548).

He claims that our culture, though not necessarily all or most of its members, experiences cross-pressure between the draws of these two narratives about the immanent frame. This results in a multifaceted debate between belief and unbelief about fullness, but also in conflicting perspectives within both belief and unbelief over what constitutes genuine fulfilment (2007:600-601).

A major role in such debates is played by people's sense of their ethical predicament and motivations (2007:602-605) and this recognition leads to Taylor asking, What ontological reality can underpin the moral commitments (say, to universal human rights) and the aesthetic experiences that provide our sense of fullness, and are any of the intermediate positions between the two main narratives ultimately viable (2007:605-609)? In particular, Taylor investigates the aspiration to wholeness and the place of the body and sensual desires within this, showing that in this area both religious transcendence and secular humanism face a set of dilemmas. He looks at the case that Christianity denies or hampers human fulfilment, especially through its notions of renunciation and sacrifice, a case made in different ways by, among others, Martha Nussbaum and, before her, Nietzsche. But he then shows how this case exposes a similar set of problems for exclusive humanism either in its liberal humanist or its anti-humanist neo-Nietzschean form (2007:623-42). The same strategy comes into play as Taylor reviews how the two main narratives handle the tension between the demand to understand and respect the meta-biological roots of human violence and the imperative moral demand to end it (2007:643-75). He moves the discussion on by indicating the factors in play for both main versions of fullness in dealing with how to live with suffering and evil, whether by negative distancing moves or the practices summed up by the Hebrew phrase, *tikkun olam*, healing the world. Here topics such as philanthropy, humanitarian solidarity, fighting for justice, reconciliation, heroism, and a fixation with trying to capture ethical life in codes all come under review (2007:680-710). The last chapter of the dialogical section – Unquiet Frontiers of Modernity – switches tactics somewhat as it highlights certain areas of unease that people feel with the closed world perspective on the immanent frame. These pressure points include the spectre of meaninglessness, the desire to deal with the depth and fullness of ordinary life, especially through our contacts with nature and art, the tension between the need for narrative and commemoration and the experience of homogenized secular time, and finally the facing of death, which can be experienced as the denial of the significance of love, an escape from the confines of life, or, for some, the gaining of a privileged perspective on life (2007:711-26).

Within this wide-ranging, pluralist, critical and open analysis Taylor's own sympathies are, at most, implicit. He allows his own stance to emerge explicitly in the final chapter of the book entitled "Conversions." It is that of someone who is prepared to defend a commitment to transcendence, indeed a Christian

commitment, which could be specified as a nuanced, critical, post-Vatican II Catholic stance that draws in particular on the thought of Ivan Illich, the philosopher, cultural critic and former Catholic priest, who saw modernity – and much of the Church's relationship to modernity - not so much as the fulfilment or antithesis of Christianity but more as its perversion or corruption.<sup>6</sup> This final chapter explores the variety of factors in experiences and events that brought about the conversion or “reconversion” of individuals and groups to seeing Christianity as essential in their point of contact with fullness. The paradigm shift to this transcendent source of human flourishing often involves

an acute sense that the present immanent orders of psychological or moral self-understanding are deeply flawed, and an awareness of a larger order which can alone make sense of our lives (2007:744).

Taylor argues, through various case studies, that the different itineraries to Christian faith entail not some return to a “golden age” but a sense of achieving a critical distance from the prevailing notion of civilization in the immanent frame that can acknowledge both its good and bad features while moving towards God's order. Each itinerary will look for new ways of moving beyond the present order to God but will be partial and have its own perils and therefore needs to “be open to a conversation that ranges over the whole of the last twenty centuries (and even in some ways before)” and to the mutual understanding that comes from being part of the global network that constitutes the church (2007:754-55). In particular, however, Taylor wants to stress the importance of the aesthetic dimension, and especially poetry, as a way of opening up the immanent frame to a transcendent source. Poetry has the power to create worlds, to bring about a shift of register that opens up new possibilities. Through an extended discussion of Gerard Manley Hopkins (2007:755-65), he shows how images and symbols can not only articulate experience but also, through the specificity of the particular, strive to render and make accessible the reality of its transcendent source and thereby resonate with and bring life to a theological language honed by tradition. For Taylor it is the Incarnation and Resurrection that provide the key to this relation of the immanent frame and transcendent reality. Both, of course, subvert any fixed compartmentalization of the notions of immanence and transcendence and he calls for their fresh appropriation in contemporary spiritual itineraries that explore not only the restoration of the power of language but also the rehabilitation of the body, as, in an attempt to undo the hold of what he calls “excarnation” in modernity, they find new ways of giving expression to

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6 Taylor, in fact, wrote the foreword to Illich's final testament, published posthumously (Cayley 2005). One aspect of spirituality as a personal concern for Taylor is reflected in his involvement with John Main and The World Community for Christian Meditation, of which he was a part in its beginnings in Montreal, see Taylor 2009.

embodied liturgical practices and the link between erotic desire and the love of God.

#### 4. RETROSPECT

In a brief four page epilogue (2007:773-76) Taylor suggests his own account is complementary to those that tell what he calls the Intellectual Deviation story and he particularly has in view the sort of account provided by John Milbank and other thinkers in the Radical Orthodoxy movement. While that account is helpful in clarifying intellectual connections, for Taylor, it does not do enough justice to the various historical, social and cultural forces at work, to secularity becoming a mass phenomenon or to what he calls the Reform Master Narrative, that is, the various movements of reform within Christendom that demanded that everybody follow the highest ideals and that contributed to the disenchantment of the world while disciplining and re-ordering life and society.<sup>7</sup> For Taylor the inclusion in the story of these elements and the social imaginaries that shaped them is crucial. With the play of destabilization and recomposition that they entail, they break up any unilinear ideological narrative and provide a better understanding of the different dynamics at work in experiencing spirituality in a secular age.

If this were simply a review of Taylor's book, then clearly, where one has sufficient competing knowledge, one might well want to raise questions, qualify or object to aspects of his narrative or his discussion of contemporary issues.<sup>8</sup> But, for the purposes of this paper, it will be assumed that he is broadly right on most fronts, that his is the best available account of the secular age and spirituality in relation to it, and that, therefore, it is worth drawing out just a few

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- 7 For his generous, appreciative, though not uncritical, response, in which he also raises the possibility of a future new global version of Christendom based on a more benign and more festive Christianity, see Milbank 2009; 2010.
- 8 A collection of such responses from scholars across a wide range of disciplines has already appeared, in which Taylor replies at the end in an "Afterword: *Apologia pro Libro suo*," cf. Warner et al. (eds.) 2010. The main substantial criticisms have had to do with whether Taylor's understandable limitation of his study to Latin Christendom has nevertheless suffered from a neglect of the roles of colonialism and post-colonialism and of globalization and their effects even within the West, whether his narrative is too impressionistic or conjectural and ignores secondary sources providing information on the experiences of ordinary people that might run counter to his views; and whether his account, intentionally or unintentionally, not just in the explicit final chapter but from the start, is an apologetic that already formulates the issues and the notion of "fullness" in ways favourable to the Christianity Taylor espouses. Theological responses to the work, with Taylor again providing a response, can be found in Fodor & Cavanaugh (eds.) 2010.

of the book's many implications for a study of the Bible and Spirituality, some of which will doubtless be already apparent.

## 5. FROM TAYLOR TO STUDY OF THE BIBLE AND SPIRITUALITY

### 5.1 Understanding spirituality

It is a statement of the obvious that any effective engagement in dialogue with contemporary spirituality will need to understand both how the latter has come about and what are some of its essential features. Taylor's detailed narrative and his penetrating analysis of the cross-pressures of the contemporary scene provide incomparable resources for both tasks. Particularly important is his claim that we will not understand spirituality in a secular age unless we see it as a distinctively post-Christian phenomenon that owes its strengths and weaknesses to its dialectical relationship with Christianity. The secular age is neither to be regretted nor simply seen as inevitable. And if this is right, we should not simply line up the Christian faith and other religions on the side of the spiritual and see them as the antithesis of the secular. Even the closed world version of the immanent frame owes too much to its past, is too much of an achievement, and has too much to be valued about its own spirituality to be treated in this way. In addition, there is too much about Christianity that has been distorted for this to be an appropriate stance.

### 5.2 A depiction of spirituality appropriate for dialogue?

Taylor's view that a sense of and aspiration toward human flourishing and fulfilment is at the heart of spirituality and his use of "fullness" as a shorthand term for this experience have distinct advantages for dialogue. Spirituality in this sense takes in but is not reduced to special experiences or the inner life, it is concerned with both the presence and absence of that which fulfils us and it includes what drives and shapes ongoing ordinary life. The other indispensable (and even longer) resource for spirituality, Waaijman's magisterial and encyclopaedic *Spirituality: Forms, Foundations, Methods*, argues for a summary formulation of spirituality as "the divine-human relational process as transformation" (2002:6,312,424). This may well be the most helpful definition for spirituality in the major religions, but, despite the claim that these terms are more inclusive than might at first appear (Waaijman 2002:427-30),<sup>9</sup> it may still not be the most promising for dialogue with those who are doubtful

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9 Elsewhere, e.g. 2002:548-62, Waaijman places great stress on the importance of the dialogical for the study of spirituality.

about any divine reference, those whose default position is that there is no transcendent source or those who do not start off assuming that they need to be transformed. Schneiders (2005:16) has a more general definition –

the experience of conscious involvement in the project of life-integration through self-transcendence toward the horizon of ultimate value one perceives.

This may appear more promising for dialogue but it still involves having to see spirituality as a discrete and conscious project and contains what is a disputed notion for many in the immanent frame, namely, that the self has somehow to be transcended. Taylor discusses the latter issue at some length in his interaction with Nussbaum (2007:624-34). If one wants a conversation that is more than a one-sided critique and does not require a change of perspective from one's conversation partner at the start, then Taylor's generic definition may be both more concrete and more versatile. It contains a genuine point of contact for all participants in the dialogue, while fully accommodating the particular stance of different religious traditions and recognizing that in experience there is no such thing as spirituality in itself but only different specific spiritualities or versions of fullness. It is worth noting that, independently of Taylor, at least two others who have written about contemporary spirituality come up with a depiction that overlaps with his. Kourie (2006:23) can write that "Spirituality is the concern of all who feel drawn toward the 'fullness of humanity,'" while King (2009:4) thinks it perhaps more helpful to ask what spirituality does rather than what it is but, nevertheless, states that "it is an experience which seeks the fullness of life."

### 5.3 The possibility and nature of dialogue

As we have seen, for Taylor dialogue is possible because the immanent frame of a secular age need not be a closed world system. Whether it is treated as closed or as open to transcendence is a matter of faith in both cases. Neither a closed world structure nor its open alternative can be argued for on the basis of reason or supposed independent evidence alone. Both construals are arrived at, and rationality only operates, from within the ambit of prior commitments, predispositions and faith orientations. Because those with different orientations towards fullness face similar dilemmas over key issues, there are no easy certainties on either side. If the cross-pressures of our age expose difficulties for exclusive humanism, this does not mean that contemporary Christianity, informed by biblical perspectives, should be induced to claim more than it should and think it can simply offer "answers" instead of intimations and anticipations of how the dilemmas might be overcome. It should be no surprise, claims Taylor, that Christians fall into

similar deviations as exclusive humanists, because, as he has tried to show, both emerge from the long process of reform within Latin Christendom and are therefore brothers and sisters under the skin (cf. 2007:674-75). There can and should, therefore, be chastened, humble and honest discussion with the goals of overcoming mutual caricatures by understanding what fullness means for others and of discovering which stance and lived experience can respond most profoundly and convincingly to the aspirations for and dilemmas of human flourishing.

#### 5.4 Studying spirituality as lived experience

Both in showing how we have got to where we are and in analysing contemporary dilemmas, Taylor, as we have seen, is attempting to engage not simply with ideas but with lived experience. Now most of those involved in the study of spirituality would claim that one of the key distinctives of their approach is just such a focus on lived experience, however difficult they find it to articulate precisely what they mean by this.<sup>10</sup> Taylor's primary way into understanding the lived experience of spirituality is through the notion of the social imaginary that shapes it. How might this help in the study of texts and their appropriation? It suggests that in exploring the spirituality of the biblical texts we should be looking not just at their theological ideas and beliefs about human flourishing in relation to God and others and not just at the practices of faithful living and discipleship they propose but also at the social imaginary that animates both. According to Taylor, "the imaginary" is the way people imagine their lives and their world and "this is often not expressed in theoretical terms, it is carried in images, stories, legends, etc." (2007:172). It involves an embodied, affective, intuitive and pre-cognitive sense of how things are and of what is appropriate in our dealings with others and the world that is collectively experienced. It stands in a dialectical relationship with ideas or beliefs on the one hand and practices on the other. It is a way of giving significance to our world that is constituted by the symbols, images, pictures that fuel the imagination – hence Taylor's stress on language and poetry. It is social both because this sense is shared with and received from others and because it entails a vision of what counts as human flourishing in our relationships and social arrangements. In regard to ethical practices, the social imaginary is at work not so much in the conscious following of moral norms but in the underlying sense of knowing what is possible and how it might be brought about. Is there a link here with the roles of wisdom and discernment in biblical perspectives on spirituality, where the emphasis is not on intellectual knowledge but on a deeper sense

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10 See Waaijman 2002:385-91, for discussion of the focus on lived experience in study of spirituality and its social-cultural dimension; and 2002:308-9, for some of the questions that need to be raised.

of knowing what is fitting?<sup>11</sup> Equally important, however, is that this focus prompts us to ask how the biblical texts and the various contexts in which they are read shape the social imaginaries, and therefore the spiritual formation, of their readers. If the social imaginary is fuelled primarily not by ideas and ethical practices but by narratives, legends, symbols and imagery, how does this play out in the reading of Scripture for spiritual formation and what ways of reading are most appropriate for such a process? And, if we operate from within this implicit and precognitive script of the social imaginary, what is the role of Scripture, interpreted through tradition, in developing that script for flourishing in ways that keep us open to transcendence and counter the dominant script of the closed world order? Taylor's approach, then, may not so much supply another method for studying biblical spiritualities and their reception as a reminder that, to be adequate, any such study needs to do justice to the complex of non-cognitive factors, beyond and beneath beliefs and practices, that constitutes the social imaginary.

## 5.5 Complicating the hermeneutical task?

A major part of Taylor's thesis is that the secular age has introduced a totally different social imaginary with its consciousness that belief in a transcendent source of reality is an option, one view among others. So, if believers now hold the same beliefs as those in an earlier age, they are held in a very different way. For those of us who are interested in the relevance of the spirituality of ancient texts, this highlights a significant hermeneutical issue. However much we may want to stress the continuing significance and indeed reality of the perspectives of, say, the Jewish Scriptures or the Christian Bible, our appropriation of those perspectives cannot but be hugely different because of the changed conditions of our lived experience. Recognizing that all spiritualities are embodied and therefore embedded in particular cultures and societies and thereby represent some gains and some losses, some genuine insights and some perils, how do we appropriate such biblical spiritualities and do so within a totally different social imaginary? Or, to expand the question in the light of Taylor's work, how do we engage the complex task of living out of the world of the text in a way that is in continuity with its tradition of interpretation, while acknowledging that tradition is always developing and contested, that honesty about the tradition's failures and gross abuses and, therefore, change and innovation are necessary precisely in order to remain faithful to the tradition, and that our part in the tradition needs to be one that

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11 For an extensive discussion of discernment and practical wisdom and their relation to a phenomenological approach to the study of spirituality, see Waaijman 2002:484-591.

is attuned to and in communication with the cross-pressures of spirituality in our secular age?

## 5.6 “Fullness” and Scripture

One would not expect Taylor’s treatment to involve the Bible explicitly and, apart from his use of Illich’s reading of the parable of the Good Samaritan (2007:737-39), any references to texts are sparse. Yet the scope for examining Scripture and human flourishing is enormous. Here it is worth observing, however, that just Taylor’s choice of the term “fullness” is highly suggestive for study of the texts and for a way into their perspectives on the joys and sorrows associated with the aspiration toward flourishing. Limitations of space and the recognition that this is a matter that might well be taken up in future more detailed studies mean that discussion here will, of necessity, be frustratingly cursory. Taylor’s initial depiction of fullness included “peace or wholeness” (2007:5) and in the Old Testament one thinks of God’s blessing as enduing with power for fruitfulness and shalom, where the latter term often denotes that which goes beyond simply peace but includes wholeness and the movement towards fullness.<sup>12</sup> In regard to the New Testament, it so happens that this term or its synonyms occurs in texts on which I have written commentaries, John, Colossians and Ephesians.<sup>13</sup> The Johannine prologue depicts the incarnate Logos as full of grace and truth and the believing community as the beneficiary of this, because “from his fullness we have all received, grace instead of grace” (1:14,16), while the Johannine Jesus declares of his mission – “I have come that they may have life, and have it in abundance” (10:10). Colossians reflects a dispute about where genuine fullness is to be found and how it is experienced – in “the philosophy” enticing believers by its visions and ascetic practices or in the Pauline gospel – with the writer wanting to persuade readers that in Christ “all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell” (1:19) and “in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness in him” (2:8-10). Ephesians takes this further. It talks of “the fullness of time” (1:10) and sees the Church both as displaying the fullness of Christ who fills all in all (1:23) and as needing to move towards that fullness, “so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God” (3:19) and attain “to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ” (4:13), and, as part of this process, it urges believers to be filled by the Spirit (5:18).

Such texts cry out for a reading that elaborates their force within the rich spiritualities and social imaginaries of John, Colossians and Ephesians, but

12 Cf. e.g. Swartley 2006:30, 41 with its diagrams of semantic and conceptual domains for *shalom* and *eirene*; for an application to spirituality and the New Testament, cf. also de Villiers 2008; 2009.

13 Cf. Lincoln 1990; 2000; 2005.

what is, of course, immediately apparent is that they already bring a quite distinctive perspective to bear, one that sets my search for or experience of fullness in a much larger framework of reality. In bringing them together, we might say that their sense of the whole, of which our experience is but a part, starts not simply with some general notion of transcendence but with God as abundant and fecund fullness, a fullness God freely wills to impart to humans. It continues with the conviction that when humans refuse to accept the gift of the fullness of life, God's giving does not cease but, in sustaining creation, in a gracious covenantal relationship with Israel, and then in Jesus Christ, works to overcome the alienation from the source of fullness that has resulted from this refusal. Out of God's own triune superfluity the Father sends the Son so that in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth is to be found the embodiment of divine fullness in fully human form and so that through him humanity and the world might be restored to union with the wellspring of abundant life. Just as through the power of the Spirit Jesus received fullness from God, so through that same Spirit believers experience the divine fullness that Jesus received in his humanity and are enabled in community to share in the communication of God's plenitude to others and to the world.

What was it that led these writers in their particular settings to articulate their communal experience of Christ in this language and within this sort of framework? But also what does the appropriation of such a particularist account do for dialogue? Is space opened up for dialogue by considering the way these texts relate the fullness of God in Christ among believers to the same fullness that fills all in all (Eph. 1:23) or the fullness in Christ to the reconciliation of all things (Col. 1:19,20) or the fullness of life and light in the incarnate Word to the enlightenment of all (John 1:4,9)? And if the fullness experienced is that of reconciling love, does that not at the very least entail an appreciative listening to and learning from the experiences of those who do not share the same framework? Given that the church's experience of fullness in historical and contingent settings is inevitably partial, provisional, imperfect and distorted, how might it be corrected and filled out by others' differing spiritualities of fullness, even if they fail to attribute those experiences to the same source? And, in turn, how might the church's way of experiencing and thinking about fullness be made intelligible as a pointer to the source of others' experiences or as providing necessary critique of distorted aspects of their spiritualities? In provoking these and other questions, Scriptural texts like the ones cited not only invite us to explore the experience of God's fullness in a variety of ways in our own settings but also return us to the sort of hermeneutical issues raised earlier and to the cross-pressures of our secular age and the necessary conversations with those from different perspectives that Taylor's work so perceptively highlights.

Clearly, what have been offered here are only the initial reflections of one biblical scholar with an interest in relating study of the Bible to spirituality. They will achieve their purpose, however, if they have drawn attention to the immense resources of Taylor's work for cross-disciplinary study of spirituality in its integral relation to human flourishing and have whetted the appetite of other biblical scholars for exploring these for themselves and engaging in further critical reflection on the potential fruitfulness of Taylor's thinking for their own studies in the area of the Bible and spirituality.

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