

Article

On Changing the Subject: ‘Secularity’, ‘Religion’, and the Idea of the Human

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Abstract: The ‘religion/secular’ frame should be retired as a way of characterizing contemporary northern European cultures. The concepts of ‘secularity’ and ‘religion’ are both falsifying and question begging. They invisibly and unhelpfully predetermine the conversation about who and where we are now. Further, they are terms which increasingly lack salience in these cultures. If we seek to locate and articulate, in order to reflectively engage, the horizons within which contemporary northern Europeans generally live, the goods that orient people’s lives, the ideas and values that move and motivate them, we need to talk not about ‘religion’ and the lack of it, but about the idea of the human. Within the concept of the human is nested today the sense of orientation, meaning, goodness and importance that notions of ‘religion’ used to express. This is the conceptual territory on which arguments about ‘what really matters’ are now conducted. If one wishes to have salience in contemporary culture, one needs to speak to this.

Keywords: religion; secularity; the human; witness; contemporary culture; humanism



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Since this [concrete, historical] man is the way for the Church, the way for her daily life and experience, for her mission and toil, the Church of today must be aware in an always new manner of man’s ‘situation’. (Vatican Council II 2012, p. 21)

1. Our “Situation”

David Foster Wallace begins his celebrated commencement address, ‘This Is Water’, with a story about the invisibility to us of our own milieu:

There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says ‘Morning, boys. How’s the water?’ And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, ‘What the hell is water?’ (Wallace 2009, p. 3)¹

The “water” is our world-picture. It is our moral imaginary; a framing narrative so tacit, so proximate, that we can only bring it to conscious awareness with effort. It is an “unthought”, a field of ideal forces that carve out the space of the thinkable and shape it” (Costa 2022, pp. xvi–xvii). Only by becoming aware of this “water”, Wallace argues, can we exercise some freedom in relation to it: only then can we interrogate it, and ask whether it serves and enables or limits and confines us.

The argument which follows pursues a negative and a positive response to Wallace’s invitation. In the first instance, we propose that if we seek to engage contemporary culture, we should desist from tracking and plotting ourselves within a secularity-religion frame.² Instead of locating and relocating ourselves on that spectrum, we should ask instead how these concepts function; what work they are doing. We should change the focus from

the question of the fate of something called “religion” in a “secular” world, to how this “secularity-religion” frame has become an agent in its own right, and what that agency effects. Having asked this second question, we suggest that the notion of “secularity”, and its correlative term “religion”, should be retired as conceptual sites for characterizing and engaging our times and our identities.

The second part proposes a different conceptual site for such engagement: the idea of the human.

This is not a critique of (what is called) “the secular”. It is simply an argument in favor of changing the subject. If we try to bring to conscious awareness the tacit world-picture of contemporary people, the horizon within which they locate themselves, the claim made here is that the secular-religion frame now obscures those horizons, but the idea of the human reveals them.³

There is an obvious demographic reason for retiring the secular-religion frame. In contemporary northern European societies—the demographic which is the object addressed in this argument and which usually is described as “secular”—“secularity” and “religion” are no longer the primary terms in which people express their sense of what is important to them.⁴ Because secularity has been defined as *not-religion*, one would define oneself as “secular” only if that over-against which one speaks has some kind of social currency. People do not express their identities primarily in terms of being “secular” in the same way that I do not express my identity primarily in terms of *not-being-a-horse-owner*. For most people in these cultures, talking about why they do not go to church is similar to talking with them about why they do not own horses. It may or may not be interesting, but this question does not touch the deepest core of their care, their concern. Not enough people own horses for *not-being-a-horse-owner* to be a salient identity marker in this cultural frame. Arguments about something called “religion” are increasingly culturally defunct in these societies. To pursue a conversation in these terms only establishes the marginality of that conversation.

If we, however, seek to characterize the “water” in which we are swimming, this demographic situation is not the fundamental reason for abandoning the secular-religion frame. The fundamental reason is to do with what that frame allows us to see, or prevents us from seeing. The term “secular” in general usage identifies an absence of something, and therefore fails to capture the medium in which we are thinking, feeling, and living. To define the contemporary imaginary in terms of what it (supposedly) no longer believes in is to miss its characteristic intuitions, claims, and values. The secular-religion frame diverts our attention from the moral center, the constitutive goods, of our time and place.

If we want to locate and articulate, in order to reflectively engage, the horizons within which contemporary northern Europeans live—the goods that orient their lives, the “truths” that seem self-evident to them, the ideas and values that move and motivate them—we need to talk about the human. This is the site on which the temple is now built. To acknowledge this is not to accept “secular humanism”, nor does it constitute an endorsement of Feuerbach. It is simply to observe that the temple is now constructed on anthropological ground. To recognize this shift is not to ratify it. What is offered here is an argument more in the mode of description: that within the concept of the human is now nested the sense of orientation, meaning, goodness and importance that notions of “God” or “religion” used to express.

We may or may not choose to celebrate this change, and we may have any number of views about how sustainable, coherent or compelling this new cultural “situation” may be. Some may see in this shift the (unacceptable) substitution of an immanent frame for a transcendent one. Certainly, as we argue below, the idea of the human cannot be sustained as a merely empirical object, and its sacralization cannot be sustained in a rationalistic or reductionistic mode. But we are not concerned here with evaluating this change, or with proposing what to do about it. To say that the human is the object of popular “faith” in the contemporary moment does not tell us by itself what frame would be needed to sustain that faith, nor even whether it *should* be sustained. What it does tell us, however, is that

if somebody wants to continue making sense of the notions of “God” or “religion” for contemporary people, she needs now to show what those words mean for, and in terms of the human being, her flourishing, her fulfillment, and her identity. We do briefly propose, however, in closing, that Christians could turn to the humanism of their own tradition(s) as a resource for cultural engagement with our contemporary situation. This is not meant to foreclose the question of whether the human of secular northern Europe is or can be the same as the Christian human, nor whether the migration of the sacred into the human should be defended.

Identifying the idea of the human as the site for cultural witness is also not to assume that that term has a settled meaning or content for the contemporary mind. On the contrary, noticing the centrality of that concept creates the possibility of identifying where our cultures are asking open questions about the shape, purpose, and meaning of this world and of our lives within it. It allows us to identify the live frontiers of those cultures, the (un)settlement at their heart.

2. Changing the Subject *from*: Deconstructing the “Secular-Religion” Frame

In contemporary usage, the term “secular” has its natural antonym in the term “religion”. These antonyms are related in a narrational way. “Religion” and “secularity” are two ends of a “y” axis, plotted against the “x” axis of time. The notion of the secular per se contains and reproduces a particular story. This is a metanarrative: a usually tacit story which orients the other stories a culture or community wishes to tell.⁵ One historian summarizes the popular version of this story as follows:

There exists a global thing called ‘religion’, which has existed everywhere since the dawn of history. In Olden Days, consequently, there was a lot of ‘religion’ about. In Recent Times, however, ‘religion’ has declined. This is a New Thing: it is not a return to Even Older Days, before they had ‘religion’, because such an era does not exist. It is also, essentially, a Permanent Thing. On the macro level, there can be no going back to Olden Days. This decline of ‘religion’ (or, more accurately, ‘the social significance of religion’) in Recent Times is sensibly referred to as ‘secularization’. (Brewitt-Taylor n.d.)⁶

Some metanarratives have causal properties, as historian Jeffrey Cox has pointed out. They are not just descriptive, but agential. While history trades in many master narratives, secularization, Cox (2001, pp. 24–35) argues, is unique in that it is “causal, invocatory, comprehensive and partly hidden; it is also uncontested”.⁷ As David Nash (2014, p. 531) observed, “Whatever we conclude about secularisation as historical reality, it is crucial to understand what the secularisation narrative *does*, and has done”. Insofar as the secular is defined with reference to that story, the same goes for the concept of “religion”. If the secular-religion frame is causal—if it *does something*, intellectually and socially—what is its effect?

Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor has proposed that this narrative functions as a “subtraction story”. It pictures a process of historical change in which “the secular” is what persists now that something called “religion” has retreated. Just as the tide draws the sea back leaving the beach underneath exposed, to use the image of secularization employed by Matthew Arnold in his poem “Dover Beach”, so “religion” retreats, revealing the substratum which was there all along, free of the superstructure of religious beliefs. When conceived in this way, the resulting substratum appears purely natural, obvious, uncontroversial. “The secular” is, in this account, the basic, factual and sober. In relation to it, “religion” appears as a question-begging overlay.⁸

The function of this metanarrative—what it *does*, to use Nash’s term—is, at least, twofold. Firstly, it casts faith communities in the role of pushing back against a tide of all-but-inevitable historical change. In its story, they are on the losing side of history, an ever-diminishing remnant. Secondly, and more importantly, it presents the task and role of these communities as especially question begging, or odd, in contrast to the “obvious”

givens of the secular. We experience this effect whether or not we view the drawing-back of (something called) “religion” as a tragic loss—the melancholy, long withdrawing roar of “Dover Beach”—or as the long-awaited victory of reason and Enlightenment. As Taylor (2014) points out, the issue is not *whether* you “believe” but how “belief” itself is characterized: its obviousness, or lack thereof. (Of course, the word “belief” is already characterized, in its colloquial meaning, as something question begging.) “Religion” is thus defined precisely *as* an overlay, and the secular *as* the obvious and the given. We internalize this scheme not consciously but implicitly. It is in the air we breathe.

The attractiveness of this metanarrative for a society that considers itself “secular” is clear enough. It expresses its confidence that it dwells only on the firm ground of that which is obvious, and has walked away from the precarity of the supra-empirical claims of “religion”. It also offers an unexpected security for the people and communities this story identifies as “religious”. It gives them a specific identity in practicing resistance against the “secular world”. They know who they are and what they need to do. Having a defined role can be attractive, even if it is a restrictive or burdensome one. The faint air of doomed heroism has a certain glamour about it. Nevertheless, this identity is not only a confinement, but one both recent and ill-fitting.

Over recent decades, scholars in history, sociology, philosophy, and theology have contested and redefined the meaning of both secularity and religion. The author of the largest recent survey concludes the burden of proof is now decisively upon those who seek to maintain any usefulness for the “secularization” concept, a shift he describes as having “been so remarkable as to make legitimate, if not mandatory, the reference to Thomas Kuhn’s notion of a paradigm shift” (Costa 2022, p. 179):

[O]ver the past fifty years, this ‘package’, i.e., the epistemic imaginary that has oriented for three centuries the understanding of the trajectory of religion in human history, has been first challenged and then gradually deconstructed both from a socio-historical and philosophical point of view (and, I suspect, also from a theological angle) to the point that, in the end, the burden of proof has shifted from the new to the old interpretative framework which, with hindsight, tends to appear apodictic, maximalist, and in some cases even proclamatory. (Costa 2022, pp. xxiii–xxiv)

Conversations among scholars are often thought to be, especially in anglophone cultures, “merely academic”. This is one among many disproofs of that lazy generalization. How we frame ourselves and our identities has immeasurable practical consequence. Perhaps I am under the impression that the woman I am trying to have a conversation with is a French speaker, when she is in truth a German speaker. In this instance, the knowledge that she is a German speaker is not “merely academic”. My ignorance of this will render the conversation a failure. I need to “frame” her as a German speaker—that is, I need to characterize her accurately—in order to communicate with her. If I maintain an invincible ignorance on this point, if I refuse to reframe the situation, we will never have a conversation. Finally, if it turns out that I do not presently speak German, then insofar as I take it on myself to communicate with her, I must learn German.

In view of this, it is surprising that conversation in society and church remains so enchanted by the secular-religion frame and invokes it with as much gusto as ever. If scholarship proposes that the secular-religion frame is a theoretically defunct model of the contemporary imaginary—or, more weakly, if scholarship indicates that that frame does not capture as much as, or as accurately as, it claims to—then this is anything but a specialist conversation for experts. It is an urgent matter to attend to, for all who use the frame. The slowness with which the scholarship is entering the mainstream is an indication of how embedded the secular-religion frame is. It is the “water” we are swimming in.

2.1. Retiring “Religion”

If modern usage of the term “secular” takes its primary meaning from the term “religion”, then without a stable meaning for the latter, the former loses traction. But the

term “religion” is functionally empty. As Paul Griffiths (2000, p. 30) writes, the scholarly discussion of the term

rapidly suggests the conclusion that hardly anyone has any idea what they are talking about—or, perhaps more accurately, that there are so many different ideas in play about what religion is that conversations in which the term figures significantly make the difficulties in communication at the Tower of Babel seem minor and easily dealt with. . . . [This goes] far toward an explanation of why the discipline [which studies religion] has no coherent or widely shared understanding of its central topic.

It is unclear what the empirical referent of the term is. Generations of scholarly efforts to devise a definition have produced nothing that satisfies everyone. Defining it narrowly in terms of reference to the supernatural, or the worship of a deity, excludes much of what most of us instinctively call “religion”: Buddhism or Taoism, for example. Focusing the definition on a system of beliefs excludes the unsystematized character of “Hinduism”, or the practical focus of Confucianism.⁹ Definitions referring to “institutions” tend to exclude the non-institutional “religions” of, for example, indigenous or East Asian communities of practice. Define it broadly in terms of ideologies or axiologies, however, and the term gathers up nationalisms, political systems such as Marxism and capitalism, and civic movements such as environmentalism.¹⁰ Terms such as “meaning” or “the spiritual” include phenomena that most people do not want to call “religion”, especially when “religion” and “the spiritual” are often used now as antonyms. William James’ (1970, p. 59) effort to define the term as belief in “unseen order”, aside from the limitations of the word “belief”, suffers obvious empirical limits. The world is full of unseen order, many aspects of which, such as the law of gravity, have no obvious connection to “religion”.

The phenomenological inadequacy of the term is by itself grounds to wonder whether the work it is doing is more a reflection of a contingent schematization of different realms of human activity than it is of empirical fittingness. The history of the term bears out this suspicion. Originally, the word named a virtue of Roman religion (“scrupulousness”), and then a virtue of Christian religion (“faithful observance”). Only in the sixteenth century did the term shift towards its contemporary usage, according to which it refers to a genus with a number of members, of which something called “Christianity” is one.¹¹ This usage generated the familiar “World Religions paradigm” and with it the genesis of a discipline called “religious studies”. This paradigm takes it that we can identify a set of members of this genus which share given characteristics, rather as we might compare different types of cars: this one has four doors, this one two; this one has manual, that automatic transmission, and so on. This is how the subject is taught in European schools: we make tables in which a column represents a “religion”, and the lines have titles such as “beliefs”, “scripture”, “rituals”, and “ethics”.

Connotations of dogmatism (in the negative sense), violence, and institutional control are internal to the term “religion”; the sixteenth-century European ‘Wars of Religion’ are present within the word itself, and therefore implicit by inversion in the term secularism, which appears an agent of peace and freedom. With these associations, the application of the word cannot but confine and pigeonhole those so labelled. Not only do contemporary northern Europeans often profess with feeling that they are “spiritual, not religious”—the assumption being that these are alternatives, or at least in some tension—but Christian thinkers have distanced Christianity itself from the term. Theological sensibilities as different as those of a Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, or John Milbank see that somehow the category has falsified Christianity itself. Brother Roger of Taizé, for example, felt the need frequently to explain that “Christ did not come to earth to create a new religion, but to offer to every human being a communion in God” (*Ateliers et Presses de Taizé* 2008, n.p.).

If we ask where the category “religion” comes from—the features which characterize the members of the genus—the answer is Christian Europe of the sixteenth century. European Christians who encountered non-European cultures sought to categorize those

cultures in terms familiar from their own, using distinctions based in Reformation Protestantism which were not only foreign to those cultures, but often functioned to suppress and control them.

[R]eligion was supposed to be an otherworldly belief system, a contract agreed upon by God and believer. This disembodied, propositional definition of religion was the template that allowed European intellectuals to make sense of the ideas of colonized subjects. By reducing difference to sameness, by disembodiment of subjects' ideas and practices, comparative religion functioned as a strategy of intellectual and political control. (Peterson and Walhof 2002, p. 38)

The current usage of the word tells us more about the European Christianity of those who went out with the word "religion" in their minds than it does about those they encountered.¹² Many of those cultures do not, for example, distinguish between "supernatural" and "natural", "belief" and "practice", "spiritual" and "material" or between a realm called "the religious" and others that we might think of as "political", "economic", and so on. Others have no use for notions of "revelation", "deity", or "institution".

Categorizing phenomena as "religious" was an act of strong interpretation, not description, in which a contingent conceptual schema was universalized, and then used to carve up phenomena to which that schema was wholly extraneous.

In searching for the concept of religion outside the West, Wilfred Cantwell Smith wrote: "One is tempted, indeed, to ask whether there is a closely equivalent concept in any culture that has not been influenced by the modern West". Smith answers the question with a "no". Since Smith, a generation of scholars has pursued this question and shown, in increasing detail, that his negative answer is correct (see Smith 1962, pp 18–19, quoted in Cavanaugh 2009, pp. 85–86).

The idea of religion as a genus is hidden even in the labels we use: *Buddhism*, *Hinduism*, *Judaism*, *Taoism*. None of these are names these communities natively give to themselves. At the risk of falsifying with further simplifications, but to make the point: there are those who take refuge in the Three Jewels, who live as members of the *sangha* and who practice the *dharma*. There are the members of the people of Israel, an identity which has nothing directly to do with profession of belief, or even to some degree with self-conscious belonging. There are those who let themselves be taught by the Tao Te Ching, there are those who hold Muhammed to be the final prophet of God, there are those who consider themselves bound by the Mandate of Heaven, and so on. Only by an act of, at least, interpolation, can these people be accurately characterized as "Buddhists", "Jews", "Taoists", "Muslims", and "Confucians".

The ruthless homogenization implicit in the word "religion" has impoverished our understanding of both past and present.

Think about it: if 'religion' includes every single human culture from 50,000 BC to about AD 1500 (50,000 BC being approx. for the beginning of behaviorally modern humans), plus about 84% (Pew Foundation 2012) of the world's current population—what does this vast category of people have in common, such that we can profitably generalize about them? (Brewitt-Taylor n.d.)

If there is no definable essence of "religion" (cf. Asad 1993, pp. 27–54),¹³ the concept of the "secular" starts to slip through the fingers.

2.2. Retiring 'Secularity'

If we take over the secular-religion frame uncritically, we define our present over against an imagined past. But as decades of scholarship have established, this "past"—this opposite to secularity called "religion"—was really just the Christianity of sixteenth-century Europe. It existed in such a partial and limited way that to use it to define the whole present, the whole "modern", can only be misleading. Insofar as conversation in society and church remains strangely separate from these findings, the causal role of this falsifying metanarrative in shaping our minds and societies remains invisible, and so

cannot readily be questioned, even though it is unjustified. In consequence, interrogations of contemporary culture too often remain superficial.

The ambivalence of the common-sense understanding of “secularism” has been underscored by scholarship over the last five or more decades. There is increasingly less consensus on when secularization begins; a wide diversity of theses about what secularization is caused by, or correlated to; and little consensus on what sort of change secularization is.¹⁴ Is it a change in people’s institutional memberships? In their formally professed beliefs? In their self-description? In their feelings?

[T]he debate on secularization is not only very complex—a judgement that could probably be applied to any other socially relevant phenomenon being studied today—but also messy. In many cases it is not clear, in fact, what exactly is at stake, where are the most significant disagreements, even whether the basic premises are agreed upon or not. (Costa 2022, p. xxii)

The term “secular” has itself had a complex evolution. In original Christian usage, the term expressed the Christian meaning of time. The *saeculum* was the age between the first and second comings of Christ, an age in which the temporal order was conceived, and granted its own legitimacy with associated legal, social, and commercial autonomy. A concern with periodization might be expected in any cultural lineage with Messianism in its DNA. “Secularization” in this original sense was the first periodization; an identification of history in terms of eras which were successive and progressive, a view famously associated with Joachim of Fiore. Now, secularization means the opposite: the de-Christianization of time and history.

Two recent historiographies of the British twentieth century present an opportunity to reconceive what is being claimed, and what is hidden, in the concept of secularization. Both recognize that the term denotes a critical change in the social consciousness, but locate that change later than is usually imagined, in the revolutionary decade of the 1960s.¹⁵ The two scholars, Callum Brown and Sam Brewitt-Taylor, characterize this decade differently, however. Brown argues that people suddenly emigrated from the moral universe of their forbears during this decade, particularly because of the “mutually enslaved” changing perceptions of femininity and piety. This universe “quite quickly collapsed . . . when women cancelled their mass subscription to the discursive domain of Christianity” (Brown 2000, p. 195, quoted in Morris 2003, p. 968). “[A] major transformation in leisure culture—in music, in magazines, in newspapers, and so on—finally killed it” (Morris 2003, p. 968). On Brown’s account, the sex and gender revolution is as important as it thought it was at the time, or perhaps more so. It is what underpins the loss of credibility of the churches and of faith more generally. Brewitt-Taylor, in contrast, proposes that secularism was a deliberate invention of church leaders during the 1960s. This concept of the secular, however, did not bear its present meaning. It signified not the retreat of Christianity, but its final victory. It was a term which communicated not “desacralisation, but . . . universal resacralisation” (Brewitt-Taylor 2018, p. 48). Brewitt-Taylor argues that this meaning of “secularity” expressed a radical theology prompted by the Cold War era.

These two theses—that secularism is fostered by a cultural transformation at the level of anthropology, and that secularism is an explicitly theological invention—form historiographical counterparts to established philosophical and theological unpackings of the secular. Charles Taylor has argued that it is the moral horizon, rather than the metaphysical, that defines the secular, and that this moral change involves a new stress on the individual and his or her self-expression, a valorization of authenticity, and a naturalized understanding of the world in which the human self lives (Taylor 1992). John Milbank argues that the secular is a theological invention, founded on an incorrect understanding of creation, namely that creation’s autonomy consists in its occupying a space where God is not—the space of the *saeculum*, whose meaning came to signify a reserve apart from God. This space is then supposed to be characterized by the “independent” operation of temporal powers (Milbank 2000). What these accounts have in common, with their disparate geographical and temporal remits, is that the change that the notion of “the

secular” is supposed to capture is not only or mainly a change in what people take to be true, but in what people take to be good. The goods at stake are human goods; they concern what it is for a human being to be well; to be herself; to be human. The so-called sexual revolution, for example, is an outcome of an extended process of social change regarding what is good for human beings to be and to do.

One obvious way to resist the universalizing simplicity of the secular-religion meta-narrative is to make it more granular. Rather than asking about “religion” and “secularity” in generic and global terms, we can ask particular questions of particular places and times, defining and redefining our terms to meet specific domains of concern. Such an approach has the advantage of recognizing the contingency of the ways we set up the conversation, and the emptiness of the terms when used as universal genera. [Costa \(2022, pp. viii–xix\)](#) describes this methodology:

The search for their intemporal essence has been set aside, the ‘religious’ and the ‘secular’ open up to a situated and tentative work of redefinition and reimagination, offering themselves as culturally determined routes that coexist alongside other options that can be appropriated in different social contexts and adapted to them. Hence, there are no longer two simple substances competing for the same share of reality, nor is there a single (anthropological) matrix that manifests itself in different guises according to the stage of development reached by humanity, but we have a plurality of contingent cultural constructs whose understanding cannot be separated from thick and contextual descriptions.

At the scholarly level, such a method has evident utility. What it does not immediately address is the way in which the secular-religion frame is—or has become—intrinsically *causal*. Additionally, that among its effects is that it limits and determines the conversation that communities popularly characterized with these terms are able to have about themselves and their cultural environment. At this level, the established metanarrative is still an active agent, even if broken down by ground-level analysis. The confining effect of the metanarrative is all the more objectionable if its justification is conceptually empty.

If the terms “religion” and “secularity” have no safely generalizable meaning which transcends the particular, the localities of time or place, one needs to ask what the point is of continuing the terms at all. If they are wholly equivocal across specific applications, why continue to use them? Why speak about “Buddhism”, rather than “Pure Land”? Is not even “Pure Land” too general? Do we not need to rather speak about “Jodo Shinshu”; or “Shinran’s Jodo-Shinshu”; or even “Shinran’s Jodo-Shinshu of fourteenth century Honganji”? Careful study at granular level is of course empirically responsible and useful. But if we are going to talk *only* about this or that community, in this or that place and time, and the diverse loyalties which feature there and then, we need some other frame in order not to have wholly equivocal conversations, conversations which therefore do not illuminate *one another* at all. In which case, we are arguably better off adopting a different frame altogether.

3. Changing the Subject to: The “Human”

The issue which emerges from reflection on the question-begging nature of the terms “religion” and “secularization” is not the familiar one of: why does something called “religion” no longer exist in contemporary society? This term typecasts the communities labelled with it. They need a frame for their own identity, and their surrounding identities and cultural landscapes, that does not so deterministically govern what they can say and do. We need less naïve terms with which to identify the positive content of contemporary cultures, to conceive and frame their constitutive value claims.

An instructive comparison in academic terms is the recent development in the field of “science and religion”. A group of scholars have noticed that the reification represented by these terms is historically and philosophically unsupportable. They have responded by insisting on an exclusively granular, topically specific approach to interactions between these fields, pioneering a new methodology: “Science-Engaged Theology” ([Perry and](#)

Liedenhag 2021, pp. 245–53). The instinct is an admirable one, but despite its best efforts, the new trajectory reproduces the essentialization it tries to resist (Grey 2021). This instantiates the difficulty involved in the present proposal. If the conversation is to go on, a moribund frame cannot easily be retired without the articulation of a positive alternative which is able to work at a general level.

An alternative to the secular-religion frame is the frame of the *sacred*. In this frame, one does not inquire into an alleged disappearance of a social phenomenon, but asks rather about a migration of the locus of value from one sphere into another (Cavanaugh 2011). In the lineage of Emile Durkheim, who saw the cult of the human as the heir to what he defined as premodern religion, sociologist Hans Joas has analyzed contemporary societies in terms of a migration of this locus of value—“the sacred”—from deities or transcendent spaces into the human person (Joas 2013). He defines “the sacred” not as a (in the conventional sense) “religious” quality, but as a site of “subjective self-evidence and affective intensity” (Joas 2013, p. 5).

Rather than seeing a set of claims called “the religious” as having given way to a space in which no substantive claims are made, no “beliefs” are proposed or defined, thinking in terms of the migration of the sacred delineates contemporary societies as loyal to a positive, definable constellation of values. Where the primary moral term—the term in which a shared sense of the normative was expressed and codified—used to be “religion” and its cognates (that which is “revealed”, for example), our languages of value now make reference to something called “the human” instead. This is the ground on which shared moral consensus is now built. These are the terms in which moral authority is invoked.

If there is a methodological assumption here, it is the broadly Tillichian one that society will always organize itself around some values taken to be “ultimate” or governing in this way, explicitly or tacitly. In the contemporary West, that place of ultimacy is accorded to the human itself. This holds true even in a culture for which the valorization of the human sits uncomfortably close to what is derogatively called “anthropocentrism”, and which is making tentative moves towards “post-humanism”. How long the resulting tension can be maintained given the (current) fragility of the idea of the human, as argued below, remains to be seen.

The quality of *self-evidence* possessed by this new sacred is illuminated by historian Alec Ryrie. The individual dignity of the human becomes self-evident to Western Europeans in what Ryrie calls “the age of Hitler”: the post-World War Two era in which public morals are defined by negative contrast to the horrors of Nazism. In this period, the Western world

rushed to embrace and define itself by a new concept: *human rights*. In the age of Hitler, the post-Second World War age in which we live, that idea is our *shared faith* . . . [I]n the American Declaration of Independence in 1776 [Thomas Jefferson] famously wrote that ‘we hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal, and are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights’. You will notice, of course, that he did not mount an argument for the existence of these rights. [. . .] He insisted they were self-evident: just obvious. Which is, not coincidentally, exactly how generations of clergymen claimed that we know that there is a God. Subsequent declarations of rights have done the same thing. The French declaration simply asserts that the rights it describes are ‘the natural, unalienable and sacred rights of man’. So how do we know that human beings have rights? The answer is that *we just know*. (Ryrie 2022, italics added)

One can capture the absoluteness of this self-evidence, and the affective intensity which accompanies it, by imagining its contravention.¹⁶ In doing so one can grasp the contemporary imaginary’s positive content—its being, so to say, a set of definitively held constitutive values, rather than the evacuation of a space. Let us place ourselves imaginatively in the presence of an act of (deliberate) torture. Such acts were once, in principle, uncontroversially licit. We might not have liked being there when it was done, but that is different from experiencing it as absolutely beyond the pale. Our reaction now when we imagine such a scene, as a creature of a moral universe in which the human has been

sacralized, is not one of mere dislike. No; we are overwhelmingly revolted. We are appalled. For us, it *self-evidently* violates an absolute sacrality, an indubitable norm: the dignity of the person, of her bodily integrity. Additionally, we experience this violation with *affective intensity*. We are horrified; outraged; nauseated; rendered speechless.

The idea of the human exercises a near-universal degree of moral command across late-modern northern hemisphere societies. The investment of sacrality in the human person is most obviously expressed in contemporary cultures through the conceptual vehicles of “dignity” and “rights”. This language is the core of what is in reality “a *de facto* global civil religion” (Madsen and Verschraegen 2016, p. 275).¹⁷ It is the language of governance, political, legal, and economic practice. The resemblance of this social structure of value to what is typically thought of as “religion” is inescapable: the public profession of belief in non-empirical axioms leading to expected, and policed, social practices. The “Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen” of 1789 can, in this account, be seen as the first institutionalization of beliefs that become obligatory for all citizens, expressing positive and publicly binding moral content in a socially decisive way. Many of the things that make modern societies distinctive vis à vis premodern ones can be connected with the valorization of the human, and especially his or her bodily integrity and individuality: an international legal political order grounded in shared norms; representative democracies; modern practices of punishment; public administration; the abolition of slavery; and the codification of these in the “Universal Declaration of Human Rights” of 1948.

Three particular features of this sacralization of the human are worth adverting to here. Firstly, and to repeat, the social change it manifests and represents is a change not in what we consider to be “true” but in what we take to be “good”. The human being and her welfare is now the yardstick of the good. Second, the role played by the sacralization of the human is related to the disintegration of alternative grounds of consensus: the increasing societal differentiation which is characteristic of modernity.¹⁸ It is a way of forming a unitary social purpose, a sense of shared identity, without having to invoke (what are seen as) divisive “religious” claims about which we cannot expect or engineer substantive agreement. Thus, language about the human is in some way a direct substitute for language about God or revealed truths. Thirdly, the social salience of this language is measured not in whether we actually *do* value the human, but whether we *say* we do. Rather, as the Romans expected public obeisance to the defined deities from everyone, including those who privately denied those deities’ importance, contemporary societies define moral acceptability by professed subscription to human rights. It is a litmus test of public credibility.¹⁹ Arguing that the human is the new locus of the sacred is not to say that the human is always treated as sacred—this is very obviously not the case. Nor is it to say that there is a unified conception of the “human” to whom those rights adhere. It is just to say that this is the conceptual territory on which arguments about “what really matters” are conducted. If one wishes to have salience in contemporary culture, one needs to speak to this. The critical point the present argument seeks to make is no more than this: that it is time to change the subject. A new frame for engaging contemporary culture is needed, and that frame must focus on the idea of the human, and the goods enmeshed within its fabric.

We can, however, briefly raise the question of what specific opportunities the sacralization of the human presents. For Christians in particular, it is tempting to move into this space by claiming it immediately as already “Christian” territory. This seems an attractive move in apologetic terms. A good deal of human rights literature is essentially an extended argument that this lineage emerges seamlessly from core Christian claims and histories, and that therefore Christianity alone can provide justification for the key moral structures of contemporary post-Christian societies. But is not straightforward to claim the sacralization of the person as a vindication of Christianity, or even a cultural situation which demands Christianity for its justification. As Joas (2013, p. 5) caustically remarks, this kind of view is unable

convincingly [to] explain why a particular element of Christian teaching that for centuries proved compatible with the broadest range of political regimes,

none of which were founded on the idea of human rights, should suddenly have become a dynamic force in the institutionalization of those rights. . . . Even if we concede, at least retrospectively, that human rights may to some extent be considered a modern rearticulation of the Christian ethos, we must be able to explain why it took seventeen hundred years for the Gospel to be translated into legally codified form in this regard. . . . It looks a bit of a sleight of hand when something is claimed as an achievement of one's own tradition despite its having been condemned by representatives of that same tradition when it first emerged.

That is not to say, that human rights are not compatible with the Christian tradition—they are. Hastening to apologetics, however, is unwise. What we can rather do safely is drawing two practical conclusions from the new status quo. Firstly, there is nothing obvious about this migration of the sacred, and it will enjoy no necessary permanence. Indeed, the conversation this culture is increasingly having with itself is not the older one of “religious”/“post-religious” (or “Christian”/“post-Christian”), but “human”/“post-human”. This is the cultural frontier in Northern Europe, and there is a real conversation to be had here. Secondly, some conversations that faith communities may be shy about or exhausted with are, for better or worse, as important as they seem.

On the first point: making contemporary people more self-conscious about what they take for granted immediately creates the possibility of a meaningful dialogue. Why do we locate goods—that is our sense of what is important, what is valuable—in the place(s) that we do? What kinds of histories are assumed here? How can this sense of what is good be sustained, narrated, defended? What kinds of justifications are needed, if any?

There is some awareness that the concept of “personhood” is both delicate and wrought. Less often considered is the conceptual fragility of the term “human” itself. “The human” seems to be available as an empirically circumscribable physical object, a naturally occurring organism with multiple instances. Therefore, it seems plausible to construe it in the way it is unreflectively understood: namely, as a natural species. This account satisfies the subtraction thesis: we only believe now in that which is “given”; which is obvious because it is naturally available. But, to paraphrase Milbank commenting on the term “the good”, the idea of the human “is [not] more finitely secure, less mythological[,] than the term ‘God’. . . . [It] condenses a narrative of absolute finality” (Milbank 2000, p. 233).

“The human” looks at face value as a readily available species term, but the nominalism of contemporary natural sciences rules this out as a secure means of reference. The existence of natural kinds in biology has been contentious since Darwin; modern biology actively undermines essentialism about species (Hull 1986). The natural variation of *homo sapiens*, both synchronically (people are different, also genetically) and diachronically (its having developed in a continuous series from what we would consider the pre-human and the semi-human) has made it difficult for biology to be realist about it. Additionally, it is complex to use biology to critique essentialism about race and at the same time use it to defend species realism; and that is without starting on the critique of “speciesism” which is increasingly popular in ethics.²⁰ There is a pervasive intuitive nominalism about universals in popular consciousness, and most do not want to reach for Platonism to make sense of the notion of a human species. This is in considerable tension with our desire to maintain an objective and universal referent for the term “human”.

Furthermore, modern biology, as usually understood, does not establish that the human is characterizable in a more-than-biological way. Even if biology were to supply a satisfactorily realist account of natural species, the “human” to which we ascribe rights and dignity—the human which has been sacralized—is more a cultural than a natural object, as trans- and post-humanistic literature has long pointed out.²¹

The sacralized human person is no less “mythological” than any (so-called) religion, or indeed than the secular itself. It is not a mere empirical object. Contemporary cultures have not transferred loyalty from a non-empirical and therefore precarious object to an empirical and therefore epistemically secure one. They have transferred loyalty from one

storied fabrication to another. A project of narration is needed to explain, to scrutinize, and to defend that change. In that project, new styles and modes of engagement, both critical and constructive, become possible. The fact that “the human” has little self-evident meaning taken by itself is no charge against it. It is just that, as with many other concepts on which we rely daily, such as the notion of the good, it is narratively dense. It contains a world-picture that cannot be unstoried. It is a member of the history of ideas. As long as we are not afraid of this in principle, there is no reason to wring our hands about it.

One is not ipso facto granting normativity to contemporary culture, nor to the potential idolization of the human as its new sacred, if one consents to engage it on its own ground. On the contrary, tracking the migration of the sacred enables the new locus of normativity to come to light, and therefore to be interrogated. Nor is one (necessarily) critiquing the lack of a substantive definition, or justification, of the idea of the human. It is arguable that a failure to articulate a coherent concept of the human will hamper the effort to universalize human rights; and that relativism about those rights is not unrelated to a lack of conceptual architecture propping up the idea of the human (Brown 1997, 2013). The notion of rights is one among the many areas in which the idea of the human has become a civilizational lynchpin. Rights language mediates the concept of the human in many debates which are now central, including gender, sexuality, migration, genocide, artificial intelligence, and bioethics. Asking searching questions about what kind of philosophical architecture we might need to conduct these debates well has never been more important. Nevertheless, the claim here is not a normative one about the desirability or not of a particular idea of the human, nor of the necessity of certain kinds of conceptual justification for that idea, but simply that the human is the point of salience now. It is the accepted yardstick, in contemporary northern Europe, for distinguishing progress from regress, civilization from barbarism. It is the temple in which—rightly or wrongly—people worship. It is the hill people will die on.

Many urgent questions arise as to the legitimacy, dangers and potentials of this sacralization. These cultures do betray some awareness of the fissures in the dominant way of thinking about the human. There is for example a lively anxiety around “anthropocentrism” in its alleged role in causing the environmental crisis (White 1967). But such issues cannot helpfully be framed, let alone answered, if the ideological topography is not mapped in wider perspective. Aside from a real preparedness to acknowledge everything that is at stake in the idea of the human, a mere critique of anthropocentrism will remain superficial (cf. Grey 2020). The debate about the supposedly baleful effects of anthropocentrism or human exceptionalism is empty if conducted in the absence of a deeper conversation about what we now take an *anthropos* to be, and what justifications are needed and/or available for such a construal.

On the second point: insofar as it is the horizon of the good and not the true which defines this situation, and insofar the human is at the center of that picture of the good, issues such as those identified as central by Callum Brown have become flashpoints for a reason. They are where the birds of the sacred come home to roost. They concern, on the one hand, the question of the dignity and integrity of human bodies, and, on the other hand, the question *to whom* that identity belongs. Exhausted though faith communities may be by the obsessive focus on these issues in their engagement with contemporary cultures, they cannot get around it by arguing that questions of sexuality, gender, bioethics, etc., are secondary in comparison to supposedly primary issues concerning truth claims about ultimate matters. The human good *is* the ultimate matter for contemporary cultures. Perceptions of that good directly mediate dominant conceptions of what is and is not *given*, fixed or non-negotiable in ‘the human’. This is where ultimacy abides now.

Although it remains culturally compartmentalized, there are signs of a new attentiveness to the idea of the human in the development of a vigorous debate around trans- and post-humanism.²² Three qualifications are worth noting, however. Firstly, this conversation has more public attention in continental Europe than it has in the United Kingdom. Secondly, as with pro-life politics in the United States, there is a danger that the debate func-

tions as a mere proxy within a territory that is governed by a secular-religion dichotomy. Specific issues in applied ethics—say, around human enhancement, stem cell research, or gay marriage—then become fortresses to be gained or lost in a battle that is still, underlyingly, about something called “religion”, and its struggle to the death with something called “secularism”. Thirdly, this debate demonstrates with disturbing clarity both how fragile is our idea of the human, and how little we have grasped what is civilizationally at stake in it. The status quo in global governance, economics, politics, law, health, medicine, development, and much of the machinery of the modern state, is directly implicated in the good functioning (or not) of a concept of the human.²³ In this sense, the debate over post- and trans-humanism is more central than its usual treatment suggests. It is really a conversation about the coherence of the single term which is most central to our shared discourse. This is not a concern first of all of practical ethics in the narrow sense; it is about the sustainability of the contemporary imaginary, and all the shared practices which arise from it.

If these proposals have intentionally been offered in rather deconstructive mode, they need not remain there. The trajectory adopted so far was meant to resist the idea that contemporary culture is characterized by a disappearance of something, a non-belief in something; but this was established in order that its constitutive values, its positive content, can come to light. It has been suggested that this positive content is nested in the idea of the human, and in the light of this, a constructive moment becomes possible. There is an objective need for rigorous thinking about the human, but this is not only or mainly an imperative of theoretical import. These are cultures convulsed by arguments about gender and race, but with no substantive agreement about that of which gender and race are predicates: the human itself. Ours is an age whose defining horizon is anthropological, but in which there is no satisfactory account of what an *anthropos* is. In this territory, a genuine *novum* can be explored; an innovative cultural engagement can take place.

To ask in any detail what that constructive moment should look like is beyond the bounds of the argument offered here, which has sought minimally, if stringently, to advocate for a change in subject. But we can speculate on some parameters for a fruitful way forward.

Such an engagement would, firstly, support and affirm the process not of disinterested but of interested conversation—because the human in our time is the object of ultimate concern. This would involve creating or sustaining civic and public spaces for conversation, as indispensable features of a society which seeks to consistently treat the human as sacred. These would be conversations which allow people’s felt sense of moral horizon to come to the surface, there to be expressed, attended to, and constructively contested. The central premise of such spaces would not be a particular content, but simply the importance and urgency of the conversation itself, and they should be structured to promote the widest possible participation.

Secondly, and relatedly, this engagement would stand as an act of recognition of the worthiness of the enquiry itself. It would celebrate and affirm the human precisely *as a question*. The question that the human *is* persists no matter whether it is recognized, and no matter whether one accepts “Christian” humanism or not. The Second Vatican Council made this recognition central to the Church’s task in the world: “Every man [sic] remains to himself an unsolved puzzle, however obscurely he may perceive it” (Vatican Council II 2012, p. 21). If something here is to be resisted, it is the elision of the question in public discourse; an impatience—all-too-characteristic of our age—with the unboundedness of the inquiry, which can lead its short-circuiting by technical or practical agendas, which seem to have to the virtue of avoiding pointlessly speculative enquiry, but which in reality treat the question as though it was already answered. This, however, only fortifies implicit and uncritically presupposed notions of the human, which should be brought to light. To honor the question that the migration of the sacred into the human raises is already a constructive undertaking. What is a human being? What is a person? In what does her sacredness consist? “What Augustine said is still true: man is an abyss; what will rise out of these depths, no-one can see in advance” (Ratzinger 1969, p. 1).

In the last analysis, however, such engagement would not merely be a conversation facilitator, and would not stop at the posing of questions. It would have a positive vision to articulate, which speaks to the dominant moral instincts of the moment. The Christian churches in particular will be at their most salient if they offer a holistic humanism. At its best, this would be a narration of the human as an ecologically embedded social animal, whose identity is incapable either of empirical or logical reduction, but which is not therefore unsusceptible to reasoned reflection and discernment. John Paul II described the vocation of the churches as essentially, and not merely contingently, humanistic. “Man” [sic], he said, “is the way of the Church” (Pope John Paul II 1991, p. 6);²⁴ “For the Church, all ways lead to man” (Pope John Paul II 1979).²⁵

Understanding the relation between Christian humanism and the humanism of contemporary cultures is a critical theological task, one which will inevitably bring to the surface differences between theological sensibilities. Classically Catholic and Protestant voices may find themselves in dispute over the assessment of contemporary valorizations of the human. This is rightly contested ground. The important thing is that the theological conversation not become a self-referring enclave, but touches contemporary people’s felt concern. If a person is really hungry, then whatever you have to say to her, you are more likely to be listened to if you frame it in terms of food.

4. Conclusions: Starting from Where We Are

The secular-religion frame remains too often the term of reference in which “faith communities” have tended to frame their activity, and by which they are in turn framed by the societies in which they exist. When these are such questionable concepts, doing so much illicit work, why take them as reference points? One effect of the dominance of this framing has been to obscure how question begging the contemporary settlement itself is. It distorts our perception of our time, of our selves and our world, of the role and task of churches and other communities who may consider themselves to be at some distance from the surrounding culture, if we let those terms be our organizing logic. There is nothing given about the set of goods which are enshrined in the contemporary imaginary. That is clear both from history and from the precarious realities of the present. Whether we wish to see those goods be sustained and grounded in a governing position, or whether we wish to contest them, they need to be seen as the historically contingent insights that they are. They need analysis, explication, interrogation, illumination.

In the case that we *do* want to defend these goods, to substantiate and consolidate them, justification must take the form of *narration*, because nothing else is likely to break through the fragmentation of public conversation into camps. In any case, we should consider carefully what such analysis and narration could or should look like; what resources there are for it within contemporary culture, and whether those are sufficient to animate the idea of the always-sacred human person. Exploring such terms is a task for another and larger enterprise, one which must ask whether a purely immanent frame can sustain a sacralization of the human, and if not, *which* transcendence would do.²⁶ Christians in particular are likely to be worried by a humanism which refers to no norm beyond those specified by humans themselves. To this concern, only two brief responses can be made here.

Firstly, the present argument has sought only to establish a frame for cultural engagement. This has been, in the non-pejorative sense, a pragmatic proposal. It has been argued that engaging via the idea of the human has more salience, begs fewer historical and conceptual questions, and gives less away, by retiring a frame which bestowed a false normativity on what is merely another contingency. Second, whatever the constructive enterprise will look like, it must desist from any nostalgia for, or fond reimagining of, a foundationalist epistemology. A certain epistemic circularity is not avoidable for anyone, whoever they are and whatever they think. The question is whether one construes this circularity as vicious or virtuous, as a closed circle, or as a spiral. An account of human reasoning as reliable *in* and not *despite* its embedded, embodied, and relational character

will be intrinsic to a credible humanism. Christianity is, arguably, uniquely equipped to articulate this.²⁷

The question about the sustainability and justification of our current values is not, however, the one this article has sought to address. The concern here has been to invite a change in subject. Apologists, theologians, and churchmen have often tried to engage contemporary culture by defending the existence of “God”, or by pursuing engagements between “religion” and “science”, or asking whether “religion” causes violence, and so on. These are distractions. Those who take up these weapons (if we can for a moment use a martial metaphor) are boxing with shadows, because they pitch the battle on the wrong territory, where the opponent is no longer interested in fighting. The conceptual site on which contemporary culture is meaningfully engaged is not that of “religion”, or even “God”. It is that of “the human” and her good.

The interesting question to put to contemporary people is not “What do you believe?”, but “Who are you?”; “Who are we?” The important conversation—in the literal sense of possessing *import*: weight, significance—is a conversation about what a human being is. What fulfils her; what hurts her; what renders her life meaningful, worthwhile, or not; what makes it possible for her, despite everything, to go on. In the opinion of the authors, it is as a humanism that Christianity finds itself most salient, most vital, in relation to contemporary culture. “Since this [concrete, historical] man is the way for the Church, the way for her daily life and experience, for her mission and toil, the Church of today must be aware *in an always new manner* of man’s ‘situation’” (Vatican Council II 2012, p. 21, italics is added). The “religion-secular” frame no longer captures this situation for people in contemporary northern Europe.

An old Irish joke tells of a tourist in Galway who asks one of the locals for directions to Dublin. The local replies: “Well, if I were you, I wouldn’t start from here”. It is time to walk away from the wreckage of decades of increasingly sterile debate about something called “religion”. If the place we want to get to is, at least, a real conversation—not small talk, entertainment, or painfully circular role-play—then we should not start from here. Instead, we should pick up the idea of the human, and go on from there.

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Notes

- ¹ Wallace’s speech, at Kenyon College in 2006, is described by *Time* magazine as one of the best commencement speeches of all time. It was eventually published as a short book (Wallace 2009), but is much better watched as a video. It is available online.
- ² On the historical invalidity of this “distinction”, see Harrison (2015).
- ³ Christian communities in particular are invited to ask to whom they are witnessing. There is an interesting grammatical ambivalence in the English term “witness”. If a Christian “witnesses to”, the “to” may specify either that which one testifies about—“I bear witness to the truth”—or the person(s) before whom one witnesses: “I witnessed to them about Jesus”. The former “object” of witness perdures, but the latter is in continual change. If the witness to the unchanging is to land amidst the changing, the church must read “the signs of the times”, as Pope John XXIII (1961) proposed in his Apostolic Constitution *Humanae Salutis*. This was the document convoking the Second Vatican Council. The phrase was taken up in multiple successive teachings, pre-eminently the Council’s Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*. As a piece of biblical interpretation, John XXIII’s instruction has had its critics (concern about this was current at the time of the Council; see, for example, Chenu (1965)). But the phrase aptly expressed the increased contextual sensitivity of Christian evangelism over subsequent decades.
- ⁴ This is of course a key qualification of the argument which follows. Aside from considerable portions of contemporary North American culture(s) which might also be described in this way, the world as a whole needs to be characterized in quite different terms. At the global scale, the issues which the “religion-secular” framing is supposed to capture are not only salient but increasingly so (cf. Pew Foundation 2012).

- 5 “The main features of this rickety theoretical construct are as follows: (a) religion is thought of in terms of origin, past, descent; (b) intentionally or not, Christianity and religion tend to become interchangeable terms; (c) modernity is conceived as a largely homogeneous phenomenon; (d) change is always interpreted in a *weltgeschichtlich* key, that is, in terms of universal history” (Costa 2022, p. xxvi).
- 6 Sam Brewitt-Taylor (n.d.) summarizes the picture that the “post-secular turn” in historiography contests. This is explored in more detail in Brewitt-Taylor (2021).
- 7 It was largely “uncontested” at the time of Cox’s writing, but two decades later, that consensus has cracked.
- 8 “I will be making a continuing polemic against what I call ‘subtraction stories.’ Concisely put, I mean by this stories of modernity in general, and secularity in particular, which explain them by human beings having lost, or sloughed off, or liberated themselves from certain earlier, confining horizons, or illusions, or limitations of knowledge. What emerges from this process—modernity or secularity—is to be understood in terms of underlying features of human nature which were there all along, but had been impeded by what is now set aside. Against this kind of story, I will steadily be arguing that Western modernity, including its secularity, is the fruit of new inventions, newly constructed self-understandings and related practices, and can’t be explained in terms of perennial features of human life” (Taylor 2014, p. 22).
- 9 For a representative example, see, for example, the debates in Chen (2013).
- 10 Cf. for example, Please see the reference Reigel (2005).
- 11 For a genealogy of the concept in the West, see Cavanaugh (2009).
- 12 “From this awareness comes the need to rethink the very concept of secularism, which not only could not be understood, but in all likelihood could not have spread so rapidly if it had not served the interests of the new entrepreneurial classes both within Europe’s borders, and outside, in colonial expansion” (Costa 2022, p. xviii).
- 13 Cf. Russell T. McCutcheon (1995, p. 285) who asks: “What counts as religion and, more importantly, who gets to decide? How useful is this category, given its clearly European and largely Christian-influenced heritage?”
- 14 The work of Burchardt et al. (2015) has been instrumental exposing the changing meanings and effects of the notion of the secular across diverse spatio-temporal contexts at the global scale. Their important contribution confirms the contested and fragmentary purchase of the concept, but remains to one side of the argument here, which is concerned with unpacking the situation of contemporary northern European societies, not the concept of the secular across cultural boundaries.
- 15 In suggesting that the advent of “the secular” is more recent than previous scholarship had understood, they offer an important corrective to the metanarrative of a steady, predictable, and invincible decline. A later dating of the secular breaks the key connection, still deeply embedded in popular consciousness, between secularism and the scientific worldview, and between the secular and modernity, in any directly causal sense.
- 16 Both the effectiveness of this example, and Ryrie’s argument that public moral sensibilities in the West are in some sense reactions to Nazism, exemplify the point made at a general theoretical level by Hans Joas: experiences of violence and trauma play a decisive role in our conscious appropriation of particular values (Joas 2013, p. 69ff).
- 17 Perhaps the word “global” here requires some qualification; across China, some of the Arab world, and much of the former USSR, the notion of human rights exercises less command. The point here is not that these regions are the sites of multiple human rights abuses. The point is simply to note that the notion of human rights lacks discursive authority in these societies.
- 18 Please see the reference (Joas 2013), Chapter 6.
- 19 Ryrie (2022) notes the instantaneous fall from grace which accompanies the public departure from this norm.
- 20 Seminally, Please see the reference Singer (1975).
- 21 For an influential example, see Haraway (1991).
- 22 For a critical assessment, see Dürr (2021a, 2021b).
- 23 Yuval Noah Harari (2017) is right about this in “*Homo Deus*”; however, the conclusions he draws from this are highly contestable.
- 24 He continues: “[The Church’s] sole purpose has been care and responsibility for man . . . We are not dealing here with man in the ‘abstract,’ but with the real, concrete, ‘historical’ man. We are dealing with each individual, since each one is included in the mystery of Redemption, and through this mystery Christ has united himself with each one for ever. It follows that the Church can not abandon man, and that ‘this man is the primary route that the Church must travel in fulfilling her mission . . . the way traced out by Christ himself, the way that leads invariably through the mystery of the Incarnation and the Redemption.’ This, and this alone, is the principle which inspires the Church’s social doctrine” (Pope John Paul II 1991).
- 25 He writes: “We are speaking precisely of each man on this planet . . . This man is a way that, in a sense, is the basis of all the other ways that the Church must walk—because man—every man without any exception whatever—has been redeemed by Christ, and because with man—with each man without any exception whatever—Christ is in a way united, even when man is unaware of it” (Pope John Paul II 1979).
- 26 Christine Korsgaard (1996), for example, argues that the source of ethical normativity is the rational, reflective and immanently-known self-consciousness of human beings. John Paul II, in contrast, takes it that only a Christological anthropology and a synthesis of faith and reason can ground the sacredness of the person (cf. Hittinger 2016).

²⁷ Cf. Please see the reference Grey (2023), especially Part I.

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