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# Charles Taylor's Apophatic Theopolitics

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By  
Justin Rainey

Supervisor  
Prof. Dr. Jochen Schmidt



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Justin Tyler Rainey

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## A. Introduction

Pluralist, North Atlantic democracies are perennially faced with the problem of relating a common, maximally inclusive polity to particular peoples, communities, and religions or spiritualities in lifeworlds with unique, and sometimes strikingly different moral visions. A genuine modern democratic polity requires sufficient incorporation and recognition of all of its members, discrete subcultures, minority groups, etc., or else it suffers a deficit in legitimacy at the level of its governing authority.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, in an age of religion's declared comeback into politics, when social theorists have announced a kind of return of religion to the public sphere, does inclusion mean, as is sometimes implied, that we stand between the endangered liberties of secular liberalism and totalitarian theocracies?<sup>2</sup>

This seems especially problematic in recent discourses concerning migration and assimilation, as framed in highly contested notions such as multiculturalism. The urgency in addressing the problem will appear compounded if one accepts the narrative of democracy's fizzling ability to counter the degenerating forces of

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<sup>1</sup> This is a theme that runs throughout Charles Taylor's political writings. See, for example, Taylor, "Legitimacy Crisis," *Philosophical Papers 2*, 248-288; and Taylor, et al., *Reconstructing Democracy*.

<sup>2</sup> The narrative I have in mind here is the one told by Mark Lilla, and shared by others, which claims that the emergence of the secular state was the beginning of tolerant and peaceful political life, but such secularity (and hence liberal democracy) is threatened by the lingering presence of religion, growing ever more confident in the public sphere. Lilla, *The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics, and the Modern West* (New York: Vintage Books, 2007); Cf. Lilla, "The Politics of God," *New York Times Magazine* (Aug. 19, 2007), <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/19/magazine/19Religion-t.html>. Cf. Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (Hachette Books: New York, 2009); Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror and the Future of Reason* (W. W. Norton: New York, 2005). For an early seminal social-theoretical account of the return of religion to the public sphere, see, José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago: 1994).

global capitalism.<sup>3</sup> One philosophical temptation in such a climate has been to reduce the dilemma to a kind of struggle for power. By this definition, human political action is meaningful where it is successful; a view which unites strands in postmodern as well as popular liberalism.<sup>4</sup> But if it is assumed that human political action is only intelligible as enactments of pictures of the good or human fullness, pictures that are exposed to critique, question, response and reproduction, in dialogical exchange with others, then the problem extends beyond a negotiation of rights and privileges among individuals with competing interests, linked merely by contract. Politics by these lights appear to be more than merely mechanisms for keeping peace, stabilizing economies, or preventing war.<sup>5</sup> Rather, they are common projects of 'political identity' formation, constituted by specific ideals, histories, and goals.<sup>6</sup> What's implied here is that the negotiation mentioned above is broader and concerns what it means to be a good society. Thus, as an initial approximation, one could characterize the political identity problem such that particular, and at times vastly different moral visions should coalesce somehow in the task of constructing a common polity, understood in the

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<sup>3</sup> Thinkers as wide-ranging as Pope Francis (*Laudato Si*) and Jürgen Habermas have linked the weakening of the nation-state to global capitalism. Cf., Habermas, *Ach, Europa* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2008); and Habermas, *Zur Verfassung Europas. Ein Essay* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> As 2016 became the year of 'post-truth' politics and the rise in America of an 'alt-right' (two terms nominated for 'word of the year' by the Oxford English Dictionary) one has the sense of a mainstreaming of this view.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Rowan Williams, "Introduction," *Sic 5: Theology and the Political*, 1-3. Williams succinctly argues on this basis that political theory must be in conversation with theology, even if from very different perspectives.

<sup>6</sup> By 'political identity' I refer to the ways in which individuals and groups may think of themselves as Pennsylvanian/American, Quebecois/Canadian, i.e., nationalities or regional political identities, which are common, pluralist projects. I do not intend to refer to 'identity politics', which tends to connote contemporary forms of activism fueled by the desire for an individual's or group's recognition as authentic and authentically different. Cf. "Identity Politics," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/identity-politics>; see also, Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition."

framework of 'political identity'.<sup>7</sup> How does one hope to bridge the communicative gap for common polity building conceived in such a way?

In the work of Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, liberalism appears as the common political-identity project for North Atlantic democracies.<sup>8</sup> But his philosophical analysis of modern polities (their genealogies, moral features, internal contradictions, identities), often merge with his engagement in the negotiation itself, as he articulates his particular moral vision as one response to what he has coined the 'malaise of modernity'.<sup>9</sup> Taylor's work breaks at points from mere description and self-consciously intertwines with normative suggestion. Indeed, for Taylor, the 'picture holding us captive' as we imagine ourselves and our political/social lives (e.g., as atomist individuals in polities built merely to protect rights) is not only problematic for historical/philosophical explanation, but it actually limits human moral (and political) possibilities, or as he says in *Sources of the Self*, it contributes to a 'stifling of the spirit'.<sup>10</sup> Loosening of the hold of that picture by re-telling the grand narratives of the self and secular modernity thus seems intended also to open up space for language and forms of reasoning that may be otherwise sidelined from the broader dialog for constructing political identity and common polity building, as Taylor has pithily formulated it: this is reasoning about what it is good to *be* and not only what it is

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<sup>7</sup> See section A.2 below for my discussion on 'moral vision'.

<sup>8</sup> Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," *Multiculturalism*, 62. In the context of describing his 'hospitable, non-proceduralist' political model, he states, "Liberalism is also a fighting creed."

<sup>9</sup> Taylor, *Malaise*, 1-12.

<sup>10</sup> Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 102. The phrase 'picture holding us captive' is derived from Wittgenstein. Cf. Taylor, *Philosophical Papers 2*, 4; see also, Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 565-6. The idea here is of tacit, background understandings of a thing, which are usually left unquestioned.

right to *do*.<sup>11</sup> As he reconstructs such dialogs, what emerges from the polyphony is a vision informed by his Catholic faith.<sup>12</sup> In describing his own faith, Taylor says he identifies with those who 'believe again'; he has moved through periods of personal hiatus, witnessing and sympathizing with those who sense a disjunction of an anti-modern, protectionist Catholic church along with the Quebecois youth exodus in the 1960s away from the institutional fold. Taylor's Catholicism is contemplative and historicist, as recounted in a published conversation with Jonathan Guilbault.<sup>13</sup> And yet Taylor 'returns', drawing inspiration from models St. Francis of Assisi, Mother Theresa, Matteo Ricci who appear in his later works. Furthermore, his interaction with Catholic theologians like Ivan Illich are an explicit influence in Taylor's grand narratives of modernity's becoming as well as his picture of an ethical vision inspired by the New Testament such as in the account of the Good Samaritan.<sup>14</sup> Thus, leaving aside the question of the adequacy of Taylor's analysis of secularization and modernity, modern political identity, etc., this work seeks to illuminate just *how* his telling of the narrative relates to Taylor's apologetic.<sup>15</sup>

Does this perhaps hint at a tension in Taylor's work, as commentators have

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<sup>11</sup> Taylor, *Sources*, 79.

<sup>12</sup> Abbey, "Introduction: The Thought of Charles Taylor," *Charles Taylor*, 19. Abbey argues that Taylor's moral argumentation is analogous to his approach to language as inspired by Wittgenstein. Some elements in the articulation of his source (the Christian God) will necessarily remain unquestioned. "Some things have to remain in the obscure background for others to come to light." See, in the same volume, William E. Connolly, "Catholicism and Philosophy: A Nontheistic Appreciation," 166ff. Carlos Colorado has provided an extensive commentary on Taylor's religious vision in Colorado, *Transcendence, Kenosis, and Enfleshment*.

<sup>13</sup> Taylor, *Avenues of Faith*, see especially 79-92.

<sup>14</sup> Taylor, "Forward," *The Rivers North of the Future*, x-xi.

<sup>15</sup> For an extensive annotated bibliography of commentary, including not only critique of Taylor's social-historical theory and method, but also on Taylor's normative impulse, see Florian Zemmin, et al., *Working with A Secular Age*, 385-416. For another wide-ranging electronic bibliography on Taylor, see the Charles Taylor Bibliography online, <http://charlestaylor.net>.



suggested, between the particular Christian moral vision that clearly feeds into his political philosophy and the universalist, multicultural pluralism he espouses as the core of that political philosophy?<sup>16</sup> One could argue that these are expressions of very different projects. On the one hand, the philosopher by trade offers his political theory for secular modernity, but this is distinct and autonomous from any faith commitment. On the other hand, the Christian thinker—perhaps somewhat recreationally—offers his own personal evaluation as seen in the light of Catholic tradition.<sup>17</sup> It will be argued, however, that these two modes do not represent discrete projects, but rather one project, delivered in different voices or keys. The apparent contradictions are, in fact, part of a crucial paradox at the crux of his writing intended to bridge the communicative gap between *particular* moral vision and *universal* common polity. That is, he performs the kind of dialogical bridging he recommends.

### A.1 Basic Structure of the Thesis

The first half of this work builds the concept of ‘apophatic theopolitics’ as an interpretive framework for understanding more clearly Charles Taylor’s religious language, namely, as a certain mode of political theology. The assumption is that Taylor’s theology does not emerge out of or enter into a discursive void; rather it draws from and engages with contemporary theopolitical topoi, displaying

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<sup>16</sup> See e.g., Ian Fraser, “Charles Taylor’s Catholicism,” *Contemporary Political Theory* 4 (2005). Fraser views Taylor as essentially exclusivist and anti-pluralist. See also, Peter Gordon, “The Place of the Sacred in the Absence of God: Charles Taylor’s A Secular Age,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 69, no. 4, 647-73.

<sup>17</sup> Peter Berger’s description of himself wearing the two hats of sociology and theology comes to mind as a paradigm example of this mode of switch-track theorizing, which he links back to his model Weber. See his introduction to the blog *The American Interest*, posted July 2010, <http://www.the-american-interest.com/2010/07/09/an-introduction>.

continuity with contemporary political theological thought and discontinuity with others.<sup>18</sup> After laying the terminological groundwork in part A for the concept of apophatic theopolitics, part B provides the discursive political-theological context. A very brief history of the notion of the 'kingdom of God' and 'Kingdom of Man' as 'two kingdoms' provides an at-least low-resolution picture of a common dialectic in western (and prominently German) theological-political thought; the dialectic itself is chosen as a heuristic for thinking through variations on the kingdom metaphor in contemporary political theologies. To complete the preliminary contextual description, a list of 'apophatic parallels' found in each of the given theopolitical groups is provided. Together the two-kingdom notion and the grid of apophatic parallels provide the organizing framework for the analysis of contemporary strands in political theology.

The analysis of political theologies begins with Jürgen Moltmann, in whose work we locate an earlier adoption of an 'apophatic' kingdom in his metaphor of the church as a 'contrast community'. The metaphor's potency is evident in how it echoes in postsecular modes. Then, in looking at postsecular theopolitics, I position John Milbank's and Slavoj Žižek's work as amplified versions of the previous theopolitical projects represented by Moltmann and Caputo. Where they 'amplify' is in their attempt to provide an ontologically robust account of the political, from either the view that the political-material realm is ultimately held together by a transcendent harmony (Milbank) or by an ultimately immanent

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<sup>18</sup> Taylor's engagement and dialog with political-theological thinkers such as John Milbank, Luke Bretherton, Miroslav Volf, James K. A. Smith likewise signals his proximity to the field of political theology, or at least that such thinkers find engagement with Taylor's thought fruitful for their work in political theology.

agonism (Žižek). B.3 provides a discourse analysis of postsecular political theology as expressed in a dialogue between these two thinkers in order to demonstrate their development of apophatic topoi as it relates to their attempts to re-articulate a notion of the kingdom of God in their various theological projects.

The main foci as I look at each thinker are the driving metaphors for the kingdom of God. By viewing these in the light of themes in the apophatic tradition—the ‘beyondness’ of the Kingdom, the performative use of language, and its characterization as a ‘substantial negation’—we gain the sense for the push to apophatic registers for postsecular theopolitics and the literary strategies employed. These theopolitical articulations, from Moltmann to Žižek, described in ideal-typical fashion exhibit an element of self-negation in their notions of the kingdom of God. In absence of any political program, they offer apolitical imperatives for alternative socialities. Such ‘alternative socialities’ would go beyond unities characterized by state, national, or global political identities as well as their economic and legal frameworks to articulate forms of being-together that are united in pursuit of a *theo*-political vision, namely: a vision for an ultimately unrealizable social embodiment of the kingdom of God.

In part C, Charles Taylor’s later works—leading with *A Secular Age*—are read from within this frame of apophatic theopolitics. Seen in the context of the theological-political discursive field of part B, it should become clear that Taylor’s theological language not only articulates a certain theopolitics with lines of continuity and discontinuity to strands in contemporary political-theological thought, but that

the apophatic rhetorical strategy with which he chooses to articulate his theopolitics provides an alternative to those adopted by contemporary political theologians; a mode that is perhaps uniquely suited to the conditions of life in 'a secular age'. In the end, the modified Taylorian suggestion is that a best-case 'earthly kingdom' is grounded in a common story-ing, in which a deep recovery and explication of our more-or-less tacit theopolitical visions are the central focus of vigorous, non-relativist, public discourse.

## A.2 Theopolitical Vision

This dissertation intends to reconstruct the *theopolitical* element in Taylor's moral vision and then to show how in his dialogical style he attempts to negotiate, bifocally, from the orienting point of his particular, theopolitical vision to polity-building in modern, North Atlantic liberal democracies. The use throughout of the potentially unwieldy term 'theopolitics' (and the adjective 'theopolitical') requires explanation here at the outset. What can it mean that a 'moral vision' is 'theopolitical', and how might this be useful to our investigation? Here, I want to define 'theopolitics' as the social element of a theologically-sourced moral vision. Below I note how the term 'moral vision' is seen by Taylor and others as containing such a social component, even if the term 'theopolitics' does not appear there. After identifying *theopolitics* as an apt way of understanding that social component, I will go on to relate this term to other contemporary uses of 'theopolitics' and then draw a contrast with an analogous concept of the 'social imaginary'—a term that has found currency not only in Taylor but also in contemporary political theologies.

'Moral vision' in recent moral-philosophical literature denotes the framework through which a person or group perceives the world or the self as having moral significance.<sup>19</sup> The term appears several times in the work of Charles Taylor and is often interchangeable with his more common term 'moral source', a key feature

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. David McNaughton, *Moral Vision: An Introduction to Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988). McNaughton is employing the term in a similar way. For a sociological look at moral vision as a trans-institutional framework, see Robert Bellah's description of Abraham Lincoln's use of biblical texts and rhythms to articulate a compelling 'moral vision', despite his own skepticism about the institutional church. Bellah, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 225; Cf. Bellah, et al., *The Good Society* (New York: Knopf, 1991), 215.

of which is its expression or ‘articulation’ in language.<sup>20</sup> A moral vision, or a ‘vision of the Good’, as Taylor writes, “becomes available for the people of a given culture through being given expression in some manner.”<sup>21</sup> The contents of religion, liturgies, scriptural narratives, or non-religious philosophical sources, may all contribute to the articulation of a moral vision. A moral vision may also be held implicitly or may be unacknowledged by those who are driven by it; it is nevertheless something everyone has and is—for Taylor—a condition for one’s sense of self.<sup>22</sup>

Moral vision is also described as a ‘background’ in the sense of a tacit assumption about the way things are, which makes moral agency—or our morality-infused perception of the world—possible in the first place.<sup>23</sup> Moral vision may perhaps

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 144, “Plato’s theory of the Ideas involved a very close relation between scientific explanation and moral vision. One has the correct understanding of both together, one might say, or of neither. If we destroy this vision of the ontic logos and substitute a very different theory of scientific explanation, the entire account of moral virtue and self-mastery has to be transformed as well.” Cf. pages 203, 511, 553.

<sup>21</sup> Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 91.

<sup>22</sup> “Selfhood and the good, or in another way selfhood and morality, turn out to be inextricably intertwined” (*Sources of the Self*, 3); “...it is hard to see how one could have a moral theory at all or, indeed, be a self, without some such adherence” (*Sources*, 93). One of the recurring problems in Taylor’s depiction of the emergence of modern naturalism is that ‘moral vision’ becomes occluded, or suppressed as irrelevant to serious intellectual discourse. In a succinct footnote on John Locke’s moral sources he writes: “Disengagement brings about an objectification of self and world, which presents them as neutral domains open to control. But the more they appear in this light, the more we occlude the constitutive goods that provide our moral sources. This process of occlusion will be taken much further by the thinkers of the naturalist Enlightenment in the next century. The moral vision powering the movement ends up being virtually unexpressed in the body of doctrine. It is embedded implicitly in the rhetorical appeal and in the polemics” (*Sources*, 553, fn. 30, emphasis mine).

<sup>23</sup> In this sense, ‘background’ approximates Wittgenstein’s reflection on tacit assumptions. See, Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, eds., G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1977). Taylor draws on this notion in *Sources of the Self*. See especially, *Sources of the Self*, 25-7, 491. I am also indebted here to Jochen Schmidt’s helpful analysis on moral vision. In an essay on ‘Moral Vision’ he distinguishes between three modes: Moral vision 1, the abstract moral background, characterized by narrative, propositionally construed belief, liturgy (*Tiefengrammatik*, a term closely related to the notion of ‘background’); moral vision 2, the particular *Lebensform*, or cultural-religious style that concretizes moral vision 1; moral vision 3, moral ‘seeing’, or how an individual (given the conditions of moral visions 1 and 2) concretely views his or her world as moral. Given this analysis, one might place Charles Taylor’s use of ‘moral vision/source’ with Schmidt’s ‘moral vision 1’. See, Jochen Schmidt, “Moral Vision: Skizze

best be described then as a background picture of the good or full life. Such a background, as mentioned, is articulable and makes sense of our moral intuitions. That is, included in a moral vision, would not only be the usual list of moral imperatives, definitions of right, or even the principles behind such definitions, but it would include images of what human beings are, or what the self is, a sense of the good and its source, the type of grand narratives of history, e.g., as progress, unity, or spiral.<sup>24</sup> And they ‘make sense’ of our intuitions by giving an account, or an ‘ontology’ of the human and the world.<sup>25</sup> Respect for human life, for example, may be something like a universal moral intuition, and this may be articulated, as in Christian traditions as deriving from the notion of man-as-creature in the image of God. Other images, narratives, liturgical and theological formulations may point toward relation to the world or the cosmos generally and man’s place in it. Or, it may point to a form of sociality itself. Man, made in the image of God, was—as it says in Genesis—not made to be alone; and from the starting image of Edenic harmony to the eschatological ends of the kingdom of God, Christian moral visions include an ideal form of being-together.<sup>26</sup> The Christian ideal sociality is

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einer skeptischen Tugendethik,” in *Moralische Vortrefflichkeit in der pluralen Gesellschaft*, vol. 25 of *Beiträge zur Komparativen Theology*, eds. Idris Nassery and Jochen Schmidt (Paderborn, 2017), 153-166.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 105. These roughly follow Taylor’s list of what makes up a ‘moral topography’. There he lists notions of the good, understands of self, kinds of narratives, and conceptions of society.

<sup>25</sup> Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 8-11. For Taylor’s early use of ‘ontology’, see his essay by the same name, “Ontology,” *Philosophy* 34, no. 129 (1959), 125-41. In this essay, Taylor showed that ontological questions betray various strata in language, and we are - to our detriment - made unaware of this by a modern tendency to conflate the difference between material language (M) and language about people (P). ‘To our detriment’ because P language is necessarily packed full of ‘ontological commitments’. These we pick up, just as we learn any language: in a non-logical way, as a way of seeing a thing; getting a new picture. All our languages about things and behavior are contingent and can be helpful for understanding what the human is; but there is no one ‘real’ language.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Richard B. Hays, *Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation* (San Francisco: Harper, 1996). Hays argues similarly that in approaching ethics in the New Testament, it is not enough to look at moral teachings; a proper hermeneutic would take account of the

embedded in liturgical practice, but it also makes up pictures of the church itself as a symbol or participant in such sociality, reflecting the sublime harmony of the three-in-one God.<sup>27</sup> It is this ideal-social feature of moral vision that I want to call ‘theopolitical’.<sup>28</sup>

Insofar as the theopolitical is an ideal sociality and part of a background moral vision, is it conceptually related to Benedict Anderson’s ‘imagined community’, which appears in Charles Taylor’s work as the ‘social imaginary’ and relates to political-theological adoptions of the term as in the work of William Cavanaugh.<sup>29</sup> Both theopolitical visions and social imaginaries, as normative moral background, play a role in conditioning practices of sociality. And yet descriptions of the social and theological ‘imagination’ tend to emphasize the historical contingency of living political forms. Neither the *social* nor the *theological* imaginary are the unquestionably true and unalterable pictures for social being this side of *Parousia*.<sup>30</sup> The social imaginary is analogous but is significantly different from

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whole ‘moral world’. With Pauline writings as his primary case, Hays argues that Paul’s moral vision is shaped by his eschatology, the cross, and the new community in Christ (p. 19).

<sup>27</sup> See the related discussion in, Terence Cuneo, *Ritualized Faith: Essays on the Philosophy of Liturgy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 80-86. Cuneo provides a notion of ‘liturgical immersion’ in which participants locate themselves within the space of the Christian narrative of God’s engagement with humanity.

<sup>28</sup> The Wipf and Stock series “Theopolitical Visions” by editors Thomas Heilke, D. Stephen Long, and Debra Murphy collects works around this same theme and deploys a similar definition. See for example, Daniel M. Bell, *Divinations: Theopolitics in an Age of Terror*, vol. 22 of *Theopolitical Visions* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2017), 74ff. In this book Bell discusses contrasting moral ontologies as ‘theo-political’. There’s also a conceptual affinity here to the Cultural Liturgies series by James K. A. Smith. See, Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works*, vol. 2 in *Cultural Liturgies* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013).

<sup>29</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983); William T. Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination*, 1-3. Cavanaugh seems to equate the concept of the ‘imagined community’ and theopolitics in his book *Theopolitical Imagination*. He goes on, however, to elaborate a Christian theological imaginary, calling this a ‘different kind of political imagination’. Without specifying just how these terms may be considered different kinds of political imagination, it seems evident from his definition of ‘theopolitical imagination’ that he would be largely in agreement with the distinction sketched here. What I am calling ‘theopolitical vision’, Cavanaugh labels ‘theopolitical imagination’.

<sup>30</sup> Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination*, 3-5. This puts the political and theological ‘on an equal footing’. This appears ‘unquestioningly true’ because the ‘social’ in the modern social imaginary



‘theopolitics’ as defined here.<sup>31</sup> Making this distinction will be useful, because it would not be an accurate description of Taylor’s theopolitics to conflate the two. Taylor himself hints at such a distinction even if he does not use the term ‘theopolitical vision’. There are two important ways in which these concepts contrast: (1) in their proximity to articulated religious belief or doctrine and (2) in the relation between the vision and its political realizability. As we will see below, theopolitical visions are an articulation of belief, while social imaginaries remain tacit; and often what theopolitical visions articulate is an unrealizable ‘polity’, whereas social imaginaries obtain by their manifestation in practice, i.e., their ‘realization’.

Firstly, a theopolitical vision is more narrowly and directly an articulation of religious belief or doctrine, while the social imaginary is the tacit collective imaging of the social. As an articulation of belief, for Taylor, a theopolitical vision would be considered a ‘constitutive good’ (a goal and motivation for acting); a social imaginary, on the other hand, while it contains a normative component, refers to the tacit way people of sometimes vastly different religious/cultural backgrounds coalesce in their spontaneous (unreflective) imagining of society. Modern social imaginaries, as Taylor tells it, emerge from intellectual gestation in networks of elite theoreticians, but then become sharable by large groups of

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are understood as just the way things are; Cavanaugh’s purpose in *Theopolitical Imagination* is to supplant the ‘false theology’ of modern politics with the ‘true theology’ and thus truly social image of the church.

<sup>31</sup> Taylor locates the concept of ‘social imaginary’ within the Kantian notion of transcendental schemes, which get applied to practice in space and time (ASA, 176); cf., Zemmin, “Introduction,” *Working with A Secular Age*, 3-4. Zemmin emphasizes that the difference lies with Taylor’s use of the concept to describe historically a phenomenology of human experiences; see also, Zemmin, “A Secular Age and Islamic Modernism,” *Working with A Secular Age*, 308-11. Zemmin maintains the fruitfulness of this notion as a ‘heuristic tool’, despite its vagueness and problems in relating abstract cultural entities to elite social theory.

people through changes in practice.<sup>32</sup> *A Secular Age* could, in fact, be partially read as the story of how Lockean/Grotian social-political theory grew to become the wide-reaching, background pictures of the social. Modern social imaginaries listed by Taylor include: the 'economy as objectified reality' the 'public sphere', 'sovereign people,' and the 'direct access' society. These imaginaries include not only 'immediate background understandings' which make particular practices like voting, reasonable public debate, protest, etc., intelligible, but also, such understandings are themselves set in contexts of broader backgrounds, an important part of which is a sense of 'moral order'.<sup>33</sup>

But moral order in this tacit, unarticulated and lived sense of the imaginary is different from a moral vision, which is a non-ubiquitous and articulated vision of the Good. Theopolitical visions may benignly inhabit, overlap, or contradict social imaginaries, political bodies and their framing moral order.<sup>34</sup> While in the post-Christendom West, 'the social' has drifted beyond the bounds of the institutional church, the theopolitical element of Christianity's moral vision continues to inform its own cultic practice. Its theopolitical vision may, as with social imaginaries, begin with theological theory or doctrinal formulation and then trickle down into practice, but in the case of theopolitics, 'practice' is yet linked to the liturgical space of its community in the eucharist, offerings, hymns, and

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<sup>32</sup> Taylor, *Secular Age*, 172-73, 325. The social imaginary is understood as the spontaneous way one's social world fits together, and it embraces whole societies.

<sup>33</sup> Taylor, *Secular Age*, 175. An 'immediate background understanding' of what makes a fair election, for instance, would include the notion of individual choice, free of external pressure, coercion, or 'electioneering'.

<sup>34</sup> The process which is analogous to the theory-social imaginary relationship is similar, again, to what Terence Cuneo calls 'liturgical immersion'. See especially, Cuneo, *Ritualized Faith*, chs. 4-5.

prayers.<sup>35</sup> For instance, how one understands how to relate to someone else as ‘neighbor’ could be informed by the parable of the Good Samaritan or what one understands as ‘fair’ and ‘just’ will be theorized in doctrine and theological theory and embedded in practices of charity, etc. Thus, theopolitical vision informs moral code, but it reaches beyond that as well, namely, as a picture of what social being is. If humans reflect the image of a triune God, for instance, then—as is argued by those in the Radical Orthodox camp below—humans are in a fundamental sense in their original, ‘natural state’ socially harmonious and not competing, violent individuals, as in the Lockean/Grotian-derived social imaginary noted above.

Secondly, in contrast to theopolitical visions, social imaginaries are *realizable*. Modern western democracies depend, for instance, on the sense its citizens have of being able to realize the goal of being a ‘sovereign people’ unfettered by anything but its own (collective) legislative ‘will’ or of making financial exchanges in a market that operates according to its own internal laws. Taylor writes regarding the practice of protest, “People don’t demonstrate for the impossible, for the utopic—or if they do, then this becomes *ipso facto* a rather different action.”<sup>36</sup> The difference in realizability between a social imaginary and theopolitical vision, however, must be one of scope, since theopolitical visions

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<sup>35</sup> The close relationship between the practice of communion and social harmony is evident in the biblical narrative of the upper room discourse (John 15) as well as in Paul’s injunction for the people of God to make peace with one another before coming to the table (1 Cor. 11:23-33). For more on the Eucharist as central to the Christian theopolitical vision, see the chapter “The World in a Wafer,” in Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination*, 112-16.

<sup>36</sup> Taylor, *Secular Age*, 175. Without explicitly addressing the dissimilarity in their uses of the term ‘imaginary’, Randall Rosenberg’s comparison of Cavanaugh’s ‘theopolitical imagination’ with Charles Taylor’s ‘social imagination’ also bears out that Cavanaugh employs the term to describe a corrective belief, such as transformative potential of the Eucharist, for the worst effects of modern social imaginaries. See his essay, “The Catholic Imagination and Modernity: William Cavanaugh’s Theopolitical Imagination and Charles Taylor’s Modern Social Imagination” *Heythrop Journal* XLVIII (Blackwell: 2007), 911-31.

must be realizable to a degree. As mentioned, the vision of divine harmony impacts social practice within the church and such practice can have political consequences that reach outside the church's own polity.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, in most eschatological formulations, there is a paradoxical sense that the kingdom of God is *already* realized, and this realized state is born out in the church's liturgical life, despite the fact that all creation has *not yet* fully caught up with the vision.<sup>38</sup> The vision is already realized, but this is only evident to those with sensitivity to the church's liturgical life. And it is a ubiquitous vision that embraces all of social life, but only in an eschatological sense as a comprehensive framework. It is particular to the Christian moral vision, not necessarily shared by those others who make up the church's social-political world of commonly-imagined, sovereign nation states. Theopolitical vision, as the social element of moral vision, always exceeds any form of sociality within the church and outside it since it is an *ideal* polity. It is therefore utopian and not something that can be mobilized into political reality.<sup>39</sup> Historic theological images of the ideal being-together, the 'city of God'-as-'pilgrim' (Augustine) and the 'invisible church' (Calvin) are suggestive of the unrealizability of theopolitical vision as mundane socio-political place.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Examples here abound, but the history of the German *Rettungshausbewegung* as the seed of the modern welfare state may serve as an apt illustration, or on the side of the United States, one might think of the example of the Congregationalist ecclesiology's role in the reinforcement of the picture of socio-political structure as flat, direct-access for all members to the center.

<sup>38</sup> See below, B.1.1.

<sup>39</sup> Historic theological images of the ideal being-together, the 'city of God'-as-pilgrim (Augustine) and the 'invisible church' (Calvin) are suggestive of the unrealizability of theopolitical vision as a mundane socio-political place. More will be said about this below in B.1. This is not to suggest that attempts at mobilizing a Christian theocracy have not been made, and the history of the West is replete with examples, or one might even say, the history of the West is indistinguishable from the attempt at mobilizing the kingdom of God into our earthly sphere. More will be said about this 'corruption of Christianity' in C.2.1.

<sup>40</sup> William Babcock, trans. *The City of God (De Civitate Dei) Books I-X and XI-XXIII* (New York: New City, 2013), I, 18, 35; XIV, 28; Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1:7, *Christian Classics Ethereal Library*, <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/institutes.vi.ii.html>.

One potential problem with a characterization of Taylor's vision as *theo*-political is that, while Taylor is forthright about his theological inclinations and Catholic background, his work also—as the commentary has suggested—is conspicuously lacking in theological definition and content.<sup>41</sup> There is a certain inconclusive vagueness in his theological formulations of 'eucharist', 'communion', 'spirit', 'agape', etc. So, to describe his work as intentionally theological might have the effect of poisoning the well for an inevitable evaluation of his work as bad theology.<sup>42</sup> Throughout this study, therefore, the use of the term 'theopolitics' is partly intended for its contrast with the related notion of 'political theology'; the latter representing that family of theoretical reflection, which typically trains its gaze on the classic dichotomies of politics/religion, state/church, city of man/city of God as a 'formal', i.e., intentionally systematic, theological enterprise. 'Theopolitics', as the ideal sociality within a moral vision, functions more as a theological orientation—a kind of 'informal' political theology. Under this definition, political-philosophical work may expressly presuppose theopolitical content without seeking to engage in the formal field of political theology.

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<sup>41</sup> This was in fact (Protestant historian) George Marsden's concern in his critique in "Matteo Ricci," *A Catholic Modernity?*, 85.

<sup>42</sup> See, from a theological perspective, Matt Rose, "Tyloring Christianity: Charles Taylor is a Theologian of the Secular Status Quo," *First Things* (December 2014); and for a political-theoretical perspective, see, Kristina Stoekl, "The Theology Blindspot," *The Immanent Frame*, an *Sources of the Self*, SSRC blog, <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2014/02/13/the-theology-blind-spot/>; D. Stephen Long, "How to Read Charles Taylor: The Theological Significance of A Secular Age," *Pro Ecclesia* 18, no. 1 (February 2009).

### A.3 'Apophatic'

If building common polity requires dialog with others of differing theopolitical visions, then the question of *articulation* of moral sources is inescapably important, and not only for Taylor's project.<sup>43</sup> But the object of articulation—as described above—is an ideal sociality. That is, it is a utopia or a no-place in the sense of its unrealizability as political project.<sup>44</sup> But it is also, as the 'kingdom of God', a social and political ideal that is ultimately ineffable, or always out of reach like a conceptual vanishing point. This way of describing the kingdom of God as an ineffable goal of human sociality is not new,<sup>45</sup> but in certain contemporary corners of political theology there has been an explicit resuscitation of themes and sources that parallel those found in the apophatic theological tradition. The term 'apophatic' will be used throughout to designate the range of unique ways that postliberal, postmodern, and postsecular political theologies exhibit negative articulations of the kingdom of God.<sup>46</sup> This section provides some justification for

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<sup>43</sup> 'Articulation' of the good is not only worth pursuing as an exercise in moral philosophy, but it is essential to self-hood according to Taylor (cf. *Sources*, 95-8). The question in addressing this tension is: what can be articulated? This tension between articulacy of moral sources and the apparent inarticulacy of the apophatic method will be further addressed in part C. While 'articulation of moral sources' is a very Taylorian concept, if we follow the definition of 'theopolitical vision' above, each of the political theologians analyzed in this paper exhibit such an attempt at articulation of the theopolitical vision, and—indeed—the same could be said for any work of political theology, since it is the systematic explication of theological sources as these relate to social-political being.

<sup>44</sup> 'Unrealizable political project' anticipates the term 'mobilization' below. An unrealizable political project, for the purposes of this thesis, is the same as a 'non-mobilizable' one.

<sup>45</sup> See discussion above, B.1.1-2.

<sup>46</sup> The goal here is not to argue that post-liberal/modern/secular (abbreviated 'post'-X') theologies draw on the apophatic tradition in the formulation of their political theologies (although some explicitly do, as depicted in the analysis of the Milbank-Žižek exchange below, cf. B.3), but rather to simply draw a connection between the apophatic theological tradition and analogous elements in post-X political theologies in moments where these theologies attempt to articulate the relation between ultimate harmonic sociality of the kingdom of God and the realm of the socio-political kingdom of man in a negative fashion. The relation is not exclusive or unique to even this large family of theological thought. In fact, one could argue that all political theologies that hold to something like a two-kingdoms view, must have some element of the apophatic as described here, since what is at stake in a two-kingdoms dichotomy is always something like a transcendence-immanence dialectic.

applying the term ‘apophatic’ to the theopolitical thinkers analyzed in part B, even if they reject the ‘negative theologian’ epithet for themselves. It does so, first, by highlighting common themes in apophatic theology, which will allow for a series of parallels in B.1.2, which will become the rubric for understanding common threads in the discursive field of the ‘post’-prefixed political theologies listed above.

‘Apophatic’ is the Latinized synonym for the Greek term *apophasis* which translates as ‘negation’ or ‘denial’.<sup>47</sup> The apophatic theological tradition is thus characterized by its mode of speaking about God without direct reference or attribution of qualities. It has been, in other words, the paradoxical and sometimes mystifying attempt to ‘say the unsayable’.<sup>48</sup> Central to traditional forms of apophatic theology is the notion that an infinite and transcendent God is categorically ‘beyond’ or ‘other’ to anything in the known universe, and so it is impossible to capture any characteristic or attribute of God in language that does not by definition fall short of its transcendent referent. In fact, the attempt to speak of God is itself a demonstration of the inadequacy of language to reference the

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Perhaps not insignificantly, post-X political theologies are indeed known for their contrasting, negative relation to liberalism, modernism, and secularism (suggested in the common pre-fix ‘post’) rather than by their constructive alternatives, and so it may be the case that these theologies are more explicit in their development of an apophatic strand, but it is not the intension to make such a case here. For a look at how one might argue for a stronger derivation from the apophatic tradition in postsecular theology, see William Franke, “Apophasis as the Common Root.” According to Franke, “...the common root—indeed the radicality—of both radical secular theology and Radical Orthodoxy is a not full acknowledged apophaticism” (“Apophasis as the Common Root,” 59).

<sup>47</sup> Apo- ‘other than’; -phanai ‘to speak’.

<sup>48</sup>For similar uses of this phrase, cf. William Franke, *A Philosophy of the Unsayable* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014); *On What Cannot Be Said: Apophatic Discourses in Philosophy, Religion, Literature, and the Arts*, 2 vols., (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007). I’ve gained insight here on this theme from the fruitful, symbiotic investigation into negative theology and Kierkegaard in, Jochen Schmidt, *Vielstimmige Rede vom Unsagbaren: Dekonstruktion, Glaube und Kierkegaards Pseudonyme Literatur*, Kierkegaard Studies Monograph Series (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2006).

divine, and in some apophatic formulations is intrinsically a kind of transgression, in the way an idol may be seen as a finite, and thus counterfeit, infinite. Accordingly, the only way to speak about God is really to speak about what God is *not*.<sup>49</sup> In this way, a conceptual borderline is drawn that preserves a distinction between that which is known and can be talked about and that which is beyond, or wholly other. Ernesto Laclau, in his essay “On the Names of God,” elaborates on the strategy of Dionysius, who understood that “there is no name we can give God so that it might seem that we have praised on honored him enough, since God is ‘above names’ and is ineffable” and is ineffably simple, or One. Thus, any attribution such as ‘Lord’, ‘father’, ‘good’, etc., implies a differentiation and thus ‘dishonors’ Him. The way forward for theological speech is the *via negativa*, which Laclau describes as a kind of manipulation of language that reflects this ultimate, ineffable, unnamable simplicity by negation of all predicates.

not soul, not intellect,  
not imagination, opinion, reason and not understanding,  
not logos, not intellection,  
not spoken, not thought,  
not number, not order,  
not greatness, not smallness,  
not equality, not inequality,  
not likeness, not unlikeness,  
not having stood, not moved, not at rest.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Denys expresses the negative method in these terms, based in the notion that ‘pre-eminent Cause’ is not anything that can be intelligibly perceived. See, especially chapter 5 in Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite, “Mystical Theology,” in *The Divine Names and Mystical Theology*, trans. John D. Jones (Milwaukee, Wisc.: Marquette University Press, 1980).

<sup>50</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite, “Mystical Theology,” 221. Quoted in, Ernesto Laclau, “Names of God,” in *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World*, 138.



Laclau's claim is that the listing, this non-exhaustive enumeration, is intended to express the ineffable. It is a "distortion of language that deprives it of all representative function ... the way to point to something that is beyond all representation."<sup>51</sup> It does this by relating things as 'equivalencies' in a chain of items that all equally fall short of their transcendent referent; in this way, the language of Dionysius intends to break out beyond itself. Denys Turner argues that the apophatic strategy demonstrates the ultimate failure of human language to describe the divine by bending language toward an absolute 'beyondness' or a kind of 'hyper-reality'.<sup>52</sup> In Augustine's treatise on the Trinity, we find, "God is wise without wisdom, good without goodness, powerful without power."<sup>53</sup> And we can see an example of this notion of beyondness in Meister Eckhart's *Predigt 9*:

Was Sein hat, Zeit oder Statt, das rührt nicht an Gott; er ist darüber. Gott ist (zwar) in allen Kreaturen, sofern sie Sein haben, und ist doch darüber. Mit eben dem, was er in allen Kreaturen ist, ist er doch darüber; was da in vielen Dingen Eins ist, das muß notwendig über den Dingen sein.<sup>54</sup>

Later on in this sermon we also find two closely-connected, characteristic features of apophatic thought, which address the problems of recognition of the divine, on the one hand, and response on the other. In other words, what effect should this negating method have on one's way of life? One response in the apophatic tradition is that after the ultimate failure of language, the way toward such

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<sup>51</sup> Laclau, "Names of God," 138.

<sup>52</sup> Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God*, 69, 171, 191. Augustine's language surrounding the trinity shares this feature. He wrote in *de Trinitate*, "God is wise without wisdom, good without goodness, powerful without power." Augustine, *de Trinitate* 5.1. This statement is picked up by Eckhart in Sermon 67, Walshe / Predigt 9.

<sup>53</sup> Augustine, *de Trinitate* 5.1. Quoted by Eckhart in Sermon 67, Walshe / Predigt 9.

<sup>54</sup> Eckhart, "Quasi stella matutina," 195.9-195.33.

recognition is transformational; that is, one's *vision* shifts to view things inwardly. This is where the apophatic tradition can be linked with mysticism. Once again in *Predigt 9*, Eckhart writes,

Nun nehmen wir's (= das Erkennen), wie's in der Seele ist, die ein Tröpflein Vernunft, ein 'Funklein', einen 'Zweig' besitzt. Sie (= die Seele) hat Kräfte, die im Leibe wirken. Da ist eine Kraft, mit Hilfe derer der Mensch verdaut; die wirkt mehr in der Nacht als am Tag; kraft derer nimmt der Mensch zu und wächst ... Diese Kraft stellt in sich die Dinge vor, die nicht gegenwärtig sind, so daß ich diese Dinge ebenso gut erkenne, als ob ich sie mit den Augen sähe, ja, noch besser – ich kann mir eine Rose sehr wohl (auch) im Winter denkend vorstellen - , und mit dieser Kraft wirkt die Seele im Nichtsein und folgt darin Gott, der im Nichtsein wirkt.<sup>55</sup>

The passivity in the recognition one finds here is key. It is an inward, imaginative power of the soul, "which has a tiny drop of intellect, a little spark," by which one 'remembers' or 'recognizes' things that are not present. The human soul here is an analogy of God, who likewise 'works in nonbeing', but it is also reason that "takes off the covering," of goodness and being and of all names,<sup>56</sup> and by this inward gaze *beholds* this 'beatific vision' (to use the Augustinian phrase).<sup>57</sup> It is important to point out here that this mystical mode is often explicitly opposed to a way of life that absconds from the quotidian. The altered vision appears to allow one to see in any material object—rocks, trees, and neighbors—something that exceeds the object itself, since everything is an indirect reference to the transcendent God from

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<sup>55</sup> Eckhart, "Quasi stella matutina" *Predigt 9*, 111.3 – 111.23.

<sup>56</sup> Eckhart, "Quasi stella matutina," *Predigt 9*, 111.30-111.31.

<sup>57</sup> Cf. Augustine, Chapter 29, "Of the Beatific Vision," in *The City of God*.

which all derives.<sup>58</sup> For Eckhart, “all creatures have no being, for their being consists in the presence of God.”<sup>59</sup>

Vision so altered can then drive toward a kind of practice that emerges from the transformed vision, but it is a practice that resists codification. Notions of silence and receptive openness are thus closely tied with the apophatic tradition. In Eckhart, for instance, we have the picture of an ethical life that cannot be articulated in the language of moral maxims, nor yet by contemplation or any ‘way’, but rather only by a kind of ‘detachment’, whereby we can “become free of ourselves and of all things” in order to “be in-formed back into the simple good which is God.”<sup>60</sup> The Christian should be driven by the basic, immanent subject of the stranger, or whatever quotidian thing; it is that “feeling I have in common with beasts and life even with trees.”<sup>61</sup> The goal is thus to become a moral-spiritual empty receptacle. As Eckhart provocatively puts it: In this way God is “birthed in man.”<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Cf. Dorothee Sölle, *Mystik und Widerstand: “du stilles Geschrei,”* (Munich: Piper, 2006). Sölle makes the connection between mystical and negative theology.

<sup>59</sup> Sermon 40, p. 225. In the thought of Nicholas of Cusa the notion of the ‘coincidence of opposites’ attempts just this kind of paradoxical juxtaposition of immanence and the Absolute.

<sup>60</sup> Eckhart, *Sermon 22*. Sermon 13 echoes a similar sentiment: “Here [in the inmost recesses of the spirit] God’s ground is my ground and my ground is God’s ground. Here I live from my own as God lives from His own ... Out of this inmost ground, all your works should be wrought without Why. I say truly, as long as you do works for the sake of heaven or God or eternal bliss from without, you are at fault ... Indeed, if a man thinks he will get more of God by meditation, by devotion, by ecstasies, or by special infusion of grace than by the fireside or in the stable—that is nothing but taking God, wrapping a cloak round His head and shoving Him under a bench. For whoever seeks God in a special way gets the way and misses God, who lies hidden in it” (pp. 109-10). For a helpful description of the ‘no way’ of true apophatic detachment as recommended Eckhart, see Turner, *The Darkness of God*, 185, 210.

<sup>61</sup> Eckhart, Sermon 40, *Complete Mystical Works*, p. 225.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. Eckhart, Sermons 29 and 53, *Complete Mystical Works*, pages 177 and 282 respectively.

So out of the vast corpus we have selected three typical characteristics of apophatic theology, with Meister Eckhart as our paradigmatic example above. These are: (1) Apophatic theology is a mode of speaking about God by *not* speaking about God and it presumes the 'beyondness' of any such transcendent referent. (2) Apophatic theology specializes in a kind of performative ('manipulative') use of language for the purpose of transforming the reader's vision. (3) The ethical practice that emerges from 'detachment' is one that resists codification and highlights a basic solidarity or a feeling of commonality with all things. As we will see below, the political theologies of post-modern, liberal, and secular share in these features, specifically in their attempts at articulating a theopolitical vision.

## B. Apophatic Theopolitics

Our concept of apophatic theopolitics is developed in three steps. First, we contextualize the investigation by mapping out a two-kingdom dichotomy as it relates to the vast and varied landscape of twentieth-century political theology and then providing a grid for viewing apophatic parallels in contemporary theopolitics. Second, we look at two political theologians who have inventively deployed a theopolitical framework that at times bends into apophatic registers in their descriptions of the theopolitical. First, Jürgen Moltmann's 'new political theology' is an early and representative articulation of a post-WWII and 'post-Christendom' theological-political project, which embraces the pluralized position of Christianity of late modernity, viewing the church in negative terms as the 'contrast community'. Then this project is carried forward and contrasted in the post-metaphysical theopolitical articulations of John Caputo, which equates the 'weak' enactment of the kingdom with an aesthetic practice of the 'poetic community'.

The analysis of these two theopolitical approaches is followed by another analysis of 'radical postsecular' theopolitical forms (B.3). The theopolitics of Slavoj Žižek and John Milbank provide 'radical' amplifications beyond 'weak' postmodernism onto an ontologized plane. In a dialog between Milbank and Žižek in *The Monstrosity of Christ* we see how the articulation of the theopolitical can become more fully pressed into apophatic registers, especially when theopolitical language is developed with ultimately liberal and democratic goals of uncoerced

political unity amidst conditions of diverse plurality. In this way, the framework is cast for the ultimate end of reading Charles Taylor's work (C) as an apophatic theopolitical intervention.

In selecting these three steps we have a manageable discursive field within which we may compare, contrast, and synthesize the theme of the apophatic in both the conceptual articulation of and argumentation for the respective theopolitical visions. While by no means enumerating the entire field, these theopolitical thinkers are chosen since they each represent a theological mode that has had significant influence in contemporary German and Anglo-American political theology. And, in addition, each also represents a point of reaction against perceived collusion or corruption of a truer theopolitical vision with modern formulations of the political; that is, they exhibit a force-less force of what I have just hinted as a 'post-Christendom' or synonymously 'post-Constantinian' model of theopolitics. It is in dialog *against* forms of collusion that these political theologies tend to frame the theopolitical vision in the topoi of the apophatic. Consequently, they make ideal subjects for both tracing themes of an un-colluded kingdom of God as well as investigating rhetorical strategies of conveying the ineffable theopolitical vision.

In the postsecular exchange we observe the full pattern of approaches for apophatic articulation, as according to the markers of apophatic method outlined in B.1.2. Both radical postsecular theopolitical articulations by Žižek and Milbank emerge after (1) a critique of corrupted theopolitical forms. This prepares the reader (2) for the theopolitical alternative, so that (3) the theopolitical vision may

be narrated descriptively and less with propositional argumentation. Here we suggest that the motivation for ‘narration’ appears to be that the theopolitical vision can only emerge as plausible to the reader if it appears indirectly; that is, more from the aesthetics of its description than from direct, positive argumentation. This not to suggest the absence of argumentation; the dialog is in fact very dense with philosophically abstract reasoning. My point is more that both thinkers also aim to compellingly *describe* very different ‘strong’ ontological settings that suggest whether, for instance, materiality somehow expresses a transcendent reality, or not—and this moves the discourse into the realm of faith; it theoretically eventuates a kind of ‘leap’.

Having thus traced the theme of the apophatic through these political theologies, first by locating them in their theopolitical descriptions and then by reconstructing their strategies for conveying the ineffable vision, the analysis below constructs the conceptual framework for describing the task of expressing the theopolitical vision—the movement of the ineffable kingdom of God on earth. Before moving to our initial test cases that launch the analysis, however, it will be useful to open the political-theological map for the conceptual context of the ‘two kingdoms’.

## B.1 Politico-Theological Context

### B.1.1 'Two Kingdoms' as an Organizing Theopolitical Motif

Political theology in the Western Christian thought tradition has been broadly understood as reflection on the relation between two orders. Augustine's early and lasting metaphor of the two cities reflected two kinds of societies (*civitas*)—one shaped by disordered (self)love and one ordered by the love of God in *de civitate Dei* (426 A.D.).<sup>63</sup> The later, non-identical yet overlapping metaphor of the 'two kingdoms' tends to conceptualize distinct orders of authority; the 'kingdom of man' referring to the temporal, material order of civil rule, and the inner, spiritual order of faith in the kingdom of God. In this dissertation, the 'two kingdoms' motif similarly connotes the relation between two 'orders'; however, the intention throughout is to use the motif as a heuristic tool that more broadly refers to a dialectic between the ideal sociality (kingdom of God) of a *theo*-political vision and its construction of the political (kingdom of man) that contrasts it. That is, the two-kingdoms motif provides a kind of meta-structure for the descriptive types that follow inasmuch as each theopolitical type images the ideal 'kingdom' in relation to an earthly political context.

For context, in what follows, my dialectic is situated in relation to the 'two kingdoms' tradition, which finds one of its most influential expressions for modern Europe and North America in Martin Luther. From there, we skip to twentieth-century German reception and reactions against the two-kingdoms

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<sup>63</sup> Oliver O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, 82-3, 196. See also, C.C. Pecknold, *Christianity and Politics: A Brief Guide to the History* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2010).



doctrine within the ‘confessing’ context of Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer—an influential context for the postliberal strand which is analyzed later in this section.

In his “Letter to the Christian Nobility” (1520) Martin Luther argues that all Christians are of the ‘spiritual estate’ by faith, and thus enjoy membership in the ‘priesthood of all believers’.<sup>64</sup> The medieval notion of the ‘two estates’, embodied in the Holy Roman Empire, is the object of his critique, which may be summed up as follows: the ‘Romanists’ should be disempowered from political authority, while the nobility—just as much of the priestly order by virtue of their baptism as are the Roman bishops and priests—should be empowered to reign in injustices even within the church.<sup>65</sup> This view was later developed in the language of two kingdoms in *Secular Authority* (1523). Here Luther develops further the two realms’ mutual co-existence.<sup>66</sup> The kingdom of God represents the *inner* association by faith in the rule of Christ, as announced in the gospel, and it cannot be controlled by any external power. As Luther writes,

Christ Himself made this nice distinction and summed it all up briefly when He said, “Give unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and unto God the things that are God’s.” If, then, imperial power extended to God’s kingdom and power, and were not something by itself, He would not thus have made it a separate thing. For, as was said, the soul is not under Caesar’s power;

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<sup>64</sup> Luther, “Letter to the Christian Nobility,” *Works of Martin Luther*, 63.

<sup>65</sup> Luther wrote his *Letter to the Christian Nobility* in 1520, shortly after Leo X issued the papal bull *Exsurge Domine*, which officially rejected Luther’s reforms. The ‘temporal powers’ of the princes are asserted as a check against the misplaced powers of the papacy; as part of the priesthood of believers with the legitimate authority to exercise power over others, they are authorized in Luther’s view to punish “the whole body of Christendom ... without respect of persons, whether it affect pope, bishops, priests, monks, nuns or anybody else.” Martin Luther, *Letter to the Christian Nobility*, 101.

<sup>66</sup> *Secular Authority* was written shortly after George Duke of Saxony issued an edict (1522) against the dissemination of Luther’s New Testament.

he can neither teach nor guide it, neither kill it nor make it alive, neither bind nor loose it, neither judge it nor condemn it, neither hold it nor release it, which he must do had the power to command it and impose laws upon it; but over life, goods and honor he indeed has this right, for such things are under his authority.<sup>67</sup>

Here the kingdom of God is depicted as not of the world. It is a sinless ideal sociality where there is no need for law or punishment. And yet without exception, all are sinners who may only approximate the goal. The kingdom of man, on the other hand, is the outward, coercive and 'temporal' power that exists to sustain order and restrain evil.<sup>68</sup>

Luther's doctrine exemplifies the core dyadic relation between realms that operate according to fundamentally different socio-political logics, which despite important differences, we also find in its original articulation in Augustine's notion of the 'two cities'.<sup>69</sup> The kingdom of God and the city of God operate by a harmony of wills, obedience under the lordship of Christ, characterized by love and selflessness; the kingdom of man and city of man by contrast are broadly concerned with self-love and self-preservation; its earthly governance may have a unifying effect, but only by force and the rule of law and punishment and not by transformed souls. Luther's doctrine in *On Secular Authority*, however, innovates

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<sup>67</sup> Luther, "Secular Authority," *Works of Martin Luther*, vol. 3, p. 256.

<sup>68</sup> This two-kingdoms or 'two rules' doctrine is, of course, not unique to Luther. One finds a repetition of the notion that secular rule is a calling—for example—in John Calvin's *Institutes*, cf. Book IV.XX.4.

<sup>69</sup> It has been well noted that the two-kingdoms doctrine is importantly different from Augustine's 'two cities' idea, even if these terms are used interchangeably in much contemporary political theology. See, Elizabeth Phillips, *Political Theology: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2012); Nicholas Wolterstorff, *The Mighty and the Almighty: An Essay in Political Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 35ff.

on Augustine's two-cities notion by migrating it toward an inward/outward dichotomy of two authorities; that is, the kingdom of God relates to inward faith and devotion under Christ's jurisdiction whereas the kingdom of man relates to political authority and power. And, in fact, it was the inner/outer distinction that became a central critique of Luther's two-kingdoms doctrine in two prominent, mid-twentieth-century Protestant German theologians of the Confessing Church, namely: Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The *Barmen Declaration*, penned by Barth and frequently echoed by Bonhoeffer, emphasized that all of life—and not only the inward life of faith—subsists under the lordship of Christ.<sup>70</sup> In both thinkers there is a public, outward effect of the church as an embodiment of the kingdom of God. In Bonhoeffer's view, Luther's migration of the kingdom of God to the inner life of faith, tends toward a collusion of the two kingdoms:

Luther confirms Constantine's covenant with the church [...] the existence of the Christian became the existence of the citizen. The nature of the church vanished into the invisible realm ... According to the witness of the New Testament, the church is the city on the hill.<sup>71</sup>

For Bonhoeffer as well as Barth, the governing state relates to the kingdom of man as a mechanism for restraining evil, preserving order and liberty; and yet, the church may interfere between the two realms. It is called to bring the state to a self-realization of its own failures, and where necessary to even 'put a spoke' in its wheel. The movement away from identification of the kingdom of God/kingdom of man with an inner/outer distinction, may also be seen as a movement toward a

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<sup>70</sup> Cf. Karl Barth, "Church and State," *Community, State, and Church* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, Doubleday & Co., 1960), 101-48. Barth's central argument here is that divine justification is importantly connected with human justice.

<sup>71</sup> Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, "The Interpretation of the New Testament," *No Rusty Swords: Letters, Lectures and Notes, 1928-1936, from the Collected Works of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, vol. 1, ed. Edwin H. Robertson, trans. Edwin H. Robertson and John Bowden (London: Collins, 1965), 324, Quoted in, Phillips, *Political Theology: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 68.

kind of retrieval of Augustine, since the inner/outer relation is not what characterizes the two-cities paradigm. Along Augustinian lines, the two realms intermingle, both simultaneously public and private; oriented not by whatever structure of authority, but rather by two opposed loves.<sup>72</sup> This is not to suggest, however, that Luther's inner/outer distinction must necessarily lead to quietism, or an irrelevance of the kingdom of God to the kingdom of man.<sup>73</sup> Even in those later political-theological articulations that carry forward a Lutheran two-realms dichotomy as an inner/outer dyad—as perhaps most influentially exemplified in the United States in the works of the Niebuhr brothers—the church remains as a point of contact between the two kingdoms.<sup>74</sup> It is often positioned as suspended between the two kingdoms and functions variously as prophetic critique, source of protest, and moral-motivational force.<sup>75</sup> As a sign of never-fully-realizable

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<sup>72</sup> *de civitate Dei*, XIV.28. "Two cities ... have been created by two loves, the earthly by love of self extending even to contemplation of God, and the heavenly by love of God extending to contempt of self".

<sup>73</sup> Luther himself later revised this stricter mutual exclusivity when he declared that the state must intervene to clamp down on ('heretical') Anabaptist uprisings.

<sup>74</sup> For the paradigmatic example in North American theological iterations of the Lutheran two-kingdoms doctrine which also explicitly take up Augustine, see Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, and *Love and Justice*. In these texts, Niebuhr articulates a strong contrast between love as the agape of the gospels, which is always directed toward the benefit of others, and justice, which is enforcement and operates according to the self-preservation of liberty and equality. According to his 'Christian realism' the life and teachings of Jesus cannot be applied to the political. Jean Bethke Elshtain elaborates on this position as it applies to the field of just war theory in, Elshtain, *Just War Against Terror: The Burden of American Power in a Violent World* (New York: Basic Books, 2003). Reinhold Niebuhr and H. Richard Niebuhr both model a political theology that attempts to mediate Christianity to the political; the former viewing the kingdom of God as a regulative ethical principle for skeptical critique; the latter viewing the kingdom of God as a site of cultural transformation. Cf. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny of Man* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1996) and H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985).

<sup>75</sup> The analysis below of post-X theologies will take up some of these modes of 'interference' in the realm of political theology. For a classic social-anthropological perspective on the duality of kingdom of God/ kingdom of man, described functionally in terms of religious communities 'attesting', 'condensing', or 'protesting' depending on their form of integration in their broader socio-political context, see Henri Desroche, *Jacob and the Angel: An Essay in Sociologies of Religion* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1973). And for a more recent look at specifically Evangelism modes, see Melani McAlister, *The kingdom of God has no Borders: A Global History of American Evangelicals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). And for an analysis using this scheme in an interpretation of American Protestant theopolitics, see Martin Marty, "The

perfect sociality in its symbolic heritage, it yet touches ground in community-shaping works of social justice, welfare, charity, and solidarity.

While this bracingly short sketch cannot nearly capture the vast range even of German *Zwei-Reiche-Lehre* alone, it suffices for the suggestion that political-theological reflection in the West normally operates in some form of Lutheran-Augustinian framework of a two-realm dichotomy.<sup>76</sup> It will be helpful here to provide a categorization of various modes of contemporary political theologies, which derive from this same two-kingdom notion. In fact, drawing on this same distinction, William Cavanaugh and Peter Scott define ‘political theology’ broadly as “the explicit attempt to relate discourse about God to the organization of bodies in space and time.”<sup>77</sup> They suggest three categories for construing the contemporary task of political theology. First, political theology may view politics as its own separate arena of human activity, operating according to patterns and within structures that can be theoretically parsed from any religious belongings. The task of political theology here, as they suggest, is to relate symbols of the faith

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Protestant Principle,” in *Cities of Gods: Faith, Politics and Pluralism*, eds. Jamie S. Scott, Nigel Biggar, and William Schweiker (United Kingdom: Greenwood-Heinemann, 1986), 101 - 116.

<sup>76</sup> The earliest use of the term ‘political theology’ goes back to the lost work of Marcus Terentius Varro (116-27 BC), *Antiquitates rerum humanarum et divinarum* as one of three types of theologies along with natural theology for philosophers and political theology for citizens. Christian political theology was formed in conversation and contrast with this Roman-Stoic distinction, Augustine in *The City of God*, but the term then falls out of currency. The dialectic, however, carries on through the middle ages, as recounted in Ernst Kantorowicz’s *The King’s Two Bodies* and then re-appears in the mid-1600s with Morhof, Hennvliedt and Spinoza. Hent de Vries argues as much when he writes that the dialectic between the two kingdoms marks all theological reflection on the political, persisting to Adorno’s famous essay “Progress”. Hent de Vries, “Introduction.” *Political Theologies: Public Religion in a Post-Secular World*, 25-6.

<sup>77</sup> “Theology is broadly understood as discourse about God, and human persons as they relate to God. The political is broadly understood as the use of structural power to organize a society or community of people ... Political theology is, then, the analysis and criticism of political arrangements (including cultural-psychological, social and economic aspects) from the perspective of differing interpretation of God’s ways with the world.” Scott and Cavanaugh, *The Blackwell Companion*, 2-3.

to matters of public (or broader socio-political) concern. The term ‘correlation’ has also been used to describe this framing of the task of political theology, which may sometimes overlap with the concept of ‘public theology’.<sup>78</sup> Second, political theology may take a critical-theoretical approach, which seeks to expose structures of power underlying theological or philosophical positions. And therefore, political theology would be the attempt to reconstruct theology for the service of justice, equality, etc. The emphasis here is on exposing the political behind all theology.<sup>79</sup> In this constellation, Marx is a key touchstone, as in the liberation theologies of Juan Luis Segundo and Gustavo Gutiérrez, or feminist political theologians such as Fiorenza Schussler.<sup>80</sup> Relating to this family of reflection are political theologians Johann Baptist Metz, Dorothee Sölle, and the first plot on our mini-map of the terrain below, Jürgen Moltmann.<sup>81</sup> In their third category, both politics and theology are viewed as dealing in the same material inasmuch as “both are constituted in the production of metaphysical images around which communities are organized.”<sup>82</sup> The point of these approaches is to

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<sup>78</sup> See note 74 on the Niebuhr brothers; the works of Martin Marty or David Tracy would also fit this scheme as correlationist, and one might also place here an influential contemporary figure of German articulations of “*Öffentliche Theologie*” in Heinrich Bedford-Strohm. Cf., *Liberation Theology for a Democratic Society: Essays in Public Theology* (LIT Verlag: Münster, 2018). Bedford-Strohm, in his essay “Public Theology and Political Ethics,” writes, “If theology is not understood as the internal sign system for a closed religious community but as Public Theology, that is, as a theology which addresses the world as a whole, it has a natural closeness to questions of politics; that is, to the search of binding rules for living together in this world ... Churches need Public Theology in order that they make an impact on politics, contributing moral expertise” (pp. 5-6).

<sup>79</sup> See, Marsha Aileen Hewitt, “Critical Theory,” in: Scott and Cavanaugh, *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, 455–68.

<sup>80</sup> Representative texts include: Juan Luis Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology*, trans. John Drury (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1976); Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation*, trans. Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1977); Fiorenza Schussler, *In Memory of Her* (New York: Crossroad, 1984).

<sup>81</sup> Representative texts include: Johann Baptist Metz, *Theology of the World*, trans. James W. Leitch (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), Dorothee Sölle, *Political Theology*, trans. John Shelley (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974); Early Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, trans. James W. Leitch (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), see also B.2.1 below.

<sup>82</sup> Scott and Cavanaugh, *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, 3.

shore up implicit (false) theologies underlying politics to propose a truer politics. In a way, this might be seen as flipping the second ‘critical-theoretical’ approach, since its emphasis is not on exposing the politics underlying theology, but on exposing the theology underlying politics. This third category can be split into two categories, including those that operate with ‘metaphysical images’ that entail divine transcendence as in the postliberal theology of George Lindbeck and Stanley Hauerwas and those working within a deconstructive (and death-of-God) framework of materialist imminence, such as John Caputo and Gianni Vattimo.

Nuancing this scheme a bit further, we might expand this third strand to include more ‘radical’ movements within these metaphysical frameworks, as in the ‘postsecular’ political theologies of John Milbank and Slavoj Žižek.<sup>83</sup> From the perspective of postsecular theologies like these, both postmodern theology and postliberal theology has precluded the possibility of ontological thinking altogether. This is symptomatic in postmodernism in an emphasis on ‘weak thought’ (e.g., Caputo), in which language becomes an ultimate, internally-referential horizon. Creston Davis puts it succinctly in his introduction to the dialog between Milbank and Žižek in *The Monstrosity of Christ*:

The atheist and the theist may be absolutely opposed, but in a more fundamental sense, they operate on a logic of the unsurprising, eternal return of the same linguistic and concomitant conceptual and practical structure. In other words, the linguistic horizon (in the Heideggerian sense) becomes the transcendental *a priori* that is always assumed but never questioned. This is an

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<sup>83</sup> For more on ‘postsecular’, see my discussion below in

internally self-referential structure: another way of saying that it is a self-mediating process (Hegel's 'In-Itself'). And, insofar as there is a self-mediation process in the heart of their discourses, then these structures of thought really are unrescuably idealistic.<sup>84</sup>

Davis makes the case here that the discourse in *Monstrosity* attempts a move beyond this framework in a re-adaptation of 'stronger' ontologies. So, since these theologies are concerned to go to the (ontological) 'root', I am following Milbank, Graham Ward, and Catherine Pickstock's modifier 'radical'.<sup>85</sup> Postliberalism, again from the perspective of such postsecular theologies, treat theological reflection in a neo-Wittgenstein-Barthian mode as a language game, operating by the grammatical rules generated in the canon of the Bible.<sup>86</sup> By contrast, radical political theologies are articulated in 'strong' ontological terms in, for example, their return to grand narratives. In reinterpreting the political back into theological terms, the kingdom of God may be described in stronger ontological terms as the future community of those who live in light of the ultimate irreconcilability of the wholly immanent Real (Žižek) or in light of the ultimately reconcilable future community of a harmonious Whole (Milbank).

The locus of the descriptive analysis that follows is not on providing a

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<sup>84</sup> Creston Davis, "Introduction: Holy Saturday or Resurrection Sunday? Staging an Unlikely Debate," *Monstrosity*, 7. Cf. Denys Turner, *Marxism and Christianity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), 171ff.

<sup>85</sup> Cf. John Milbank, et al., *Radical Orthodoxy*, 1-2.

<sup>86</sup> Foundational 'postliberal' texts which articulate the task of theology along these lines include: Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974); and George Linbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1984). Graham Ward argued along these lines that there is a close proximity between the theology of Karl Barth and postmodern language philosophy. See, Ward, *Barth, Derrida, and the Language of Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); also cf. Ernspteter Maurer, "Biblisches Reden von Gott—ein Sprachspiel?" *Evangelische Theologie*, 50 (1990), 71-82.



comprehensive survey of theopolitical visions, but rather to show in ideal-typical fashion the characteristic differences in post-Christendom theopolitics from mid-twentieth century continental political theology to postmodern, and then ultimately postsecular political theologies. The analysis is constrained to focus on their method and critique of forms of political and theological liberalism, attendant negations of 'Christendom', and the role of the church in society (two-kingdoms relation).

### B.1.2 Apophatic Parallels

Out of this constellation of theopolitics, one can discern distinct parallels to the three movements in apophatic theology spotted above (A.3), even where we might find resistance in applying the terms 'apophatic' or 'negative theology' to their own work.<sup>87</sup> Caputo sums up a basic irony felt among some of them in his off-hand dismissal of negative theologians, who would "present a long, verbose, and particularly perplexing discourse on behalf of silence." Perhaps doubly ironic, however, is the fact that this dismissal sits in the context of a passage introducing his book *The Weakness of God*, wherein Caputo prays for the success of the theology of event in apophatic terms, since it is a "nightmare [to imagine] a definitive proper name for the event, one that would be accompanied by the strong force to enforce it."<sup>88</sup> Likewise, the introduction to *Radical Orthodoxy* distances its theological project from contemporary misconstruals of negative theology as 'nihilism', even while resting its theology on the apophatic trope of the

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<sup>87</sup> Cf. Žižek, "Fear of Four Words," *Monstrosity*, 33.

<sup>88</sup> Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event*, 10-11.

hyper-real beyondness of being.<sup>89</sup> This demonstrates only that one can deploy apophatic strategy even while rejecting negative theology, and it is the general thrust of this strategy that unites the four theopolitical articulations described in B.2., as they attempt to relate the vision for the kingdom of God with movement in the kingdom of man.<sup>90</sup> is characteristic to these forms of political theological relations of the two-kingdoms.

What we find below are distinctly negative ways to articulate the relationship of the two realms in such a way that—paralleling the first theme above—the kingdom of God demarcates an ineffable ‘beyondness’ as an unrealizable (utopic) goal of an ultimate sociality. The two realms thus connect only indirectly. The kingdom of God seen below as a ‘hyper-reality’ prevents a positive, direct relation of the theopolitical vision with the political. Secondly, the way to gesture at the kingdom of God includes a *performative* use of language through narrative or poetics, which builds a contextual framework for a transformed ‘vision’ or picture for keeping open the negative space of the kingdom of God.<sup>91</sup> And, finally, at the same time, each formulation articulates some hoped-for residual socio-political agency, as though the emanation of the practiced theopolitical vision would attract and bend the kingdom of man to some positive social effect without a direct

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<sup>89</sup> John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward, eds., *Radical Orthodoxy*, p. 1.

<sup>90</sup> To be clear, the link that I am drawing here between the two-kingdoms dichotomy and apophatic theology is merely conceptual. I do not wish to argue for their historical or genetic relationship, since—as far as I am aware—the two-kingdoms theory did not emerge out of the tradition of apophatic theology.

<sup>91</sup> The sense of ‘performative’ is close to the concept of the performative as the pragmatic force of language (i.e., illocutionary force), which is found in J. L. Austin’s *How to Do Things with Words*, Book 5, The Williams James Lectures (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975).

moment of identification with it. ‘Substantial negation’ will be our term to characterize such negative theopolitical forms of agency.

### **The Kingdom of God as Hyper-Reality**

First, an emphasis on the unrealizability of the kingdom of God parallels the ineffability, beyondness, or hyper-reality of God in apophatic theology. The kingdom of God is in an analogous way ‘unrealizable’, which means that ultimate socio-political harmony is an ever-elusive and ungraspable goal. The specific ways in which the kingdom of God may appear as elusive and ungraspable will be further detailed in the next section, but what unites each theopolitical point below is a repetition of the indelible gap fundamental to the Augustinian-Lutheran two-kingdoms metaphor in a post-Christendom framework.

The kingdom of God is ‘beyond’ in each of the theopolitical projects below inasmuch as it appears as a kind of social harmony without enforcement of social code, contract, or institutionalization, but rather by something more like a spontaneous connectedness of individuals, that derives from, or is motivated by an awareness of the ineffable kingdom of God.<sup>92</sup> As in Bonhoeffer’s model of the kingdom of God above, these are characterized by a non-identity with national or state structures. The kingdom of God is articulated in *contrast* to ‘Christendom’ models, wherein the senses of belonging as citizen, part of a nation, and a parish

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<sup>92</sup> Cf. William Franke on this point; what Radical Orthodoxy shares in common with postmodern and postsecular theology is “...a radical insight into the structural negativity of the human experience—and especially of all its expressions in language—as turned toward and dependent on an Other, on something that or something who the human mind cannot comprehend or say” (Franke, “Apophasis,” 60).

are ‘bundled’ together, as Taylor would say.<sup>93</sup> This separating out of belongings, which is characteristic of the theopolitical visions described below may be thus aptly described as ‘post-Christendom’ or ‘post-Constantinian’ (shortened to post-X below). The ‘kingdom of God’, whatever it is (or will be), is fundamentally not the kingdom of man.<sup>94</sup>

National political structures are not the only forms of ‘instrumentalized’ sociality that are problematic from post-X perspective. Certain forms of Christianity, too, may be criticized for organizing around us/them dichotomies that appear foreign to the radical inclusiveness captured in the Gospels, as in the parable of the Good Samaritan, the notion of the neighbor, and so forth.<sup>95</sup> These forms can then appear—from an apophatic theopolitical perspective—in the polemic as ‘positive’ theopolitical types that articulate a conflation of the two kingdoms, since the kingdom of God is formulated as something that may be ‘realized’, or ‘mobilized’ into reality.<sup>96</sup> That latter term ‘mobilization’ will be used throughout a descriptor

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<sup>93</sup> Cf. Taylor, “The Life of the Church in a Secular Age,” also *A Secular Age*, etc.

<sup>94</sup> The kingdom of man, on the other hand, tends to apply in these political theologies to any instrumentalized sociality, structured by relations of power. As such, the kingdom of man may be variously identified with exploitative economic and state structures. Global neo-capitalism, for one, is a common target across each political theology below, in which interpersonal community relations are depicted as reduced to rationalized ends of abstract growth.

<sup>95</sup> One might expand on the kingdom of God logic located here in ‘negative’ critiques of theopolitical collusion by looking internally, for instance, at the rhetoric of evil in the exclusion of heretics as a contradiction to this logic and an accommodation to the world/wordly powers (as in René Girard’s analysis of the scapegoat phenomenon). Cf. Johannes Zachhuber, “The Rhetoric of Evil and the Definition of Christian Identity,” *Rhetorik des Bösen - The Rhetoric of Evil. Studien des Bonner Zentrums für Religion und Gesellschaft*, Vol. 9, (Würzburg: Ergon, 2013), 192-217.

<sup>96</sup> The sense of term ‘mobilize’ used here connects to Charles Taylor’s work on the ‘Age of Mobilization’ in *A Secular Age*, p. 423ff. There, Taylor makes the case that modern political religion, no longer perceived as intrinsically part of the surrounding society as in the French Counter-Reformation, English Reformation, and medieval Christendom. As he writes, “It becomes clearer and clearer that whatever political, social, ecclesial structures we aspire to have to be mobilized into existence” (p. 445).

for coercive, instrumental or strategic political action that attempts implementation of a moral- or theo-political vision.<sup>97</sup>

What I am calling (following Taylor's term) 'mobilization forms' of political theology would tend to relate the two kingdoms 'positively' by connecting political communities (states, nations, etc.) with a Christian moral vision by seeking to transform the broader political body so that it is comprehensively characterized by the Christian vision. In this case, it is not merely that the church is seen as having a beneficial effect on the surrounding society or culture—as in Christian philanthropy—but is more direct in that it is also in a significant way constitutive of the surrounding society/culture/political structures. Where it is perceived as waning in influence, or its dominant position is threatened, these may be pursued as political projects. These political theologies articulate the goal of gaining, preserving, or re-gaining ground for its theopolitical vision for the purpose of directly forming the broader society and political culture according to its own theopolitical vision. When Moltmann critiques 'political religion' or Caputo critiques US Evangelical, right-wing Christianity, the critique falls along these lines, namely: such forms are illicit attempts at realizing the ineffable. In other words, they are so many false versions of genuine 'kingdoms of God', 'corruptions' or 'betrayals'.<sup>98</sup> It is this same confusion of the two-kingdoms that is frequently

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<sup>97</sup> Some 'negative' political theologians would extend this to argue that political action itself is a self-negating corruption. Such a position may be seen as a more extreme version of a negative theopolitical position in the matrix of positions. See, for example, Terry Eagleton, "Tragedy and Revolution," *Theology and the Political*, 7ff.

<sup>98</sup> Corruption is the term used by Illich; for a similar notion in 'betrayals' which "occur whenever [cultural or ritual 'borrowings' from imperial and/or other monarchical symbols and organizations] are pressed into the service of, or identified with [the kingdom of God]," see Matthew Lamb's essay, "Political Dialectics of Community and Empire," in *Cities of Gods: Faith, Politics and Pluralism in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, eds. Nigel Biggar, Jamie S. Scott, William Schweiker (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2009), 92.

behind post-X uses of the term ‘Christendom’ or ‘Constantinianism’, a charge that connotes a kind of regression to an earlier—irretrievable and normatively undesirable—state of medieval or pre-medieval Christian empire, when church and government were conceived as inseparable facets of the social order.<sup>99</sup> ‘Positive’ forms are illicit overreaches; short-circuited attempts to force the earthly kingdom into identification with the always grander, higher, and more perfect kingdom of God.<sup>100</sup>

The problem emerges at the outset that the task of relating the two kingdoms seems to invite, at least in part, the articulation of what should be in-articulable. It calls to mind Wittgenstein’s statement from the *Tractatus*, “What can be said at all can be said clearly; and whereof one cannot speak thereof one must be silent.”<sup>101</sup> Is the investigation at hand, then, one into various forms of (theopolitical) obscurity?<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Each in the variety of negative positions are also just as susceptible to the charge of ‘Constantinianism’ from other positions that migrate a sense for what counts as collusion between political power and theopolitical vision. From Caputo’s perspective, for instance, Hauerwas’s ecclesial enactment can be criticized as a re-upped form of Constantinianism. Thus what is in view here is not a hard and fast categorization, but rather a characterization of theopolitical perspectives in a matrix of ways the two kingdoms are related and kept apart. That each of these may at times accuse one or the other of committing some new form of Christendom by their particular mode of theopolitics only highlights the importance of the ‘good’ of non-collusion with political power. It should be noted that there are some we could identify as postsecular who take a more optimistic view of Christendom, like Oliver O’Donovan in *Desire of the Nations*. Even there, O’Donovan’s work, which articulates a thoroughly Augustinian two-kingdoms political theology, draws a stark contrast between the enactment of the kingdom of God on the one hand, and the ‘civil authority’ which it may at times confront. See, O’Donovan, *Desire of Nations*, 217.

<sup>100</sup> From another angle, one might say that it is through the very displacement of the vision from the locus of political power which signals the boundary between the two kingdoms. This boundary marks the split space, then, for the believer’s identification or virtual habitation of both kingdoms.

<sup>101</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co, 1922), 27. Taylor preemptively addresses the same objection in *Sources of the Self*, 91, 97. Articulation, he argues, is an inescapable necessity nevertheless.

<sup>102</sup> cf. Pickstock, “Postmodernism,” *Blackwell Companion to Political Theology* (483-4). Pickstock argues that postmodern thinkers including Derrida, Badiou and Levinas are, in the end, unable to hold together the *via negativa* with grace—as in her view would be possible within an ontological

## Performative Language: Narrative & Poetics

A second hallmark of apophatic theopolitics is its performative use of language to produce a shift in vision. Analogous to the ‘manipulation’ of language in the non-exhaustive enumeration in Dionysius’s *via negativa* (*not* good, *not* father, etc.), these post-X political theologies articulate what is *not* the kingdom of God, but they also gesture toward the kingdom of God by setting a scene through ‘narration’ or poetic expression—a “metaphysical poetic expression that undercuts itself as realist.”<sup>103</sup> In this way, the figure of the kingdom of God, which is always elusive and outstripping the kingdom of man, appears to retain a virtual, imaginative habitation for those compelled by its expression. That is, while the kingdom of God is *non-institutionalized*, *non-codified*, *non-mobilizable*, it should normatively inform a practice of a counter-sociality, embodied by its virtual citizenry of believers. One thus finds in post-X political theology alongside negations of ‘positive’ forms also politically constructive recoveries of biblical notions of love, *agape* and *eros*, hospitality toward the stranger and neighbor, etc.

To arrive at such a reframing without coercion has meant for post-X political theologians that a key characteristic of articulation and argumentation of the kingdom of God contrast society is in its aesthetic expression. Political *theology*,

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scheme of ‘participation’—and therefore rely on obscure negative theological equivalents (Levinas, Derrida) or on a secular account of grace (Badiou).

<sup>103</sup> In a discussion on Caputo’s rejection of negative theology as implicitly metaphysical, Franke makes the following observation: “Negative theology can appear in a metaphysical guise, but only when metaphysics has been transformed from a dogmatics to a poetics, from a dogmatic system of doctrine claiming to describe how things really are—which apophatics renounces—to a metaphysical poetic expression in a language that undercuts itself as realist description and rather endeavors to open into a transformative event in which the unsayable and unthinkable can become astonishingly manifest” (Franke, “Apophasis,” p. 66).

then, focuses its second-order reflection on liturgical enactments and practices reflecting the kingdom of God. But at times the theological reflection itself is indicative of expressive performance. Where the theology is viewed as attempts at 'narration' or 'poetics', the political theological expression itself does the work of conditioning a possible transformation of vision.<sup>104</sup> With regard to theopolitical enactment more will be said below, but to provide some orientation to this point, the following examples from the post-X constellation will suffice.<sup>105</sup>

'Narrative' functions broadly in this constellation of post-X theology both to a non-foundationalist condition for theological knowledge and to the identity formation of Christians in community.<sup>106</sup> Narrative contrasts 'propositional argumentation' as the background or 'grammar' for understanding and practice, so that in order for a theological argument to make sense, one presupposes a background narrative. It is at any rate integrally related to practice or 'performance' and dogmatic tradition and innovation.<sup>107</sup> The epicenter for uses of narrative in

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<sup>104</sup> Franke puts it this way: "In either case [Radical Orthodoxy and postsecular theologies], theology opens the space of desire to embrace in faith and love of what infinitely surpasses us. What narratives we choose to interpret this space is a contingent matter and depends on personal choice" (Franke, "Apophysis," 74). Cf. Rowan Williams, "Introducing the Debate: Theology and the Political," *Theology and the Political*, 1-3.

<sup>105</sup> Here comments are limited to descriptions of the task of theology in relation to liturgy and narration.

<sup>106</sup> For a comprehensive account of the kind of relation between narrative and theology Hauerwas has in mind, see Michael Goldberg, *Theology and Narrative: A Critical Introduction* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982).

<sup>107</sup> David Ford, a student of Hans Frei at Yale, argues along postliberal lines that story and performance, while different from the work of systematic theology, must be in constant, critical connection with it. As he writes, "Yet both 'system' and 'performance' must be in continual, critical interaction with 'story' if it is to maintain its rational, moral, and spiritual integrity, and in this exchange apologetics takes place. The 'performance', at the cutting edge of the story, has three main dynamics: praise and prayer; community life; and prophecy in word and action. [...] Systematic theology tries to take account of all this in focusing on the traditional 'loci' of theology, in which it seeks to arrive at a systematic particularity of the story—past, present, future." Ford, "'The Best Apologetics Is Good Systematics.' A Proposal about the Place of Narrative in Christian Systematic Theology," *Anglican Theological Review* Summer 2018, Vol. 100. Issue 3, p. 533-559. Here, Ford is drawing on the work of Peregrine Horden, "Philosophical Fictions," Introduction to



postliberal theology is in the late twentieth-century work of Hans Frei and George Lindbeck,<sup>108</sup> but it is Stanley Hauerwas, who most influentially adopts the category of narrative in service of a postliberal political theology, and so his work can serve as a kind of paradigmatic type. A brief excursus here on Hauerwas's use of 'narrative' will be useful, since it overlaps with the rhetorical purposes with what I'm calling 'radical' postsecular theopolitical expression inasmuch as Hauerwas expects narrative—specifically the narrative of scripture—to circumvent an apologetic mode of propositional argumentation for its vision to tell a story that the reader, or community of readers, may be immersed within. The radicals will go a step beyond, as we will see, and so Hauerwas's notion will serve also as a point of contrast.

A key marker for Hauerwas's political theology is the insight that scriptural narrative expresses a moral vision that is uniquely picked up and practiced in a community—one that is in turn distinctly shaped by its attention to this

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*The Novelist as Philosopher: Modern Fiction and the History of Ideas*. Ed. Peregrine Horden, Chichele Lectures 1982 (Oxford: All Souls College, 1983), xi.

<sup>108</sup> George Lindbeck and Hans Frei ask the historicist question: if the Christian tradition itself is not impassable or itself to an ontological superstructure, then, where to find its normative core? Or, what maintains a cohesive Christian community's identity, especially in a contemporary pluralist context of many compelling narratives? Lindbeck argued for a 'cultural-linguistic' interpretation of religion, whereby its doctrinal and theological developments and their operation as authoritative in the life of faith communities is self-sustaining within the communities practice as a kind of language game. Lindbeck and also Hans Frei saw the scriptural genre of realistic narrative as a key to providing this internal grammar of faith and so one adopts this perspective by immersing oneself within the world of scripture; according to its description of the way things are, its ethical injunctions, etc. This process Lindbeck referred to as 'world-absorption'; as in, the believer reads himself into the church's liturgical world structured by the biblical text. See primarily, Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1984) and Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

narrative.<sup>109</sup> The Christian community's narrative is handed down insofar as it continues to make sense of human situations, and this sense-making function of narrative is—for Hauerwas—the most fundamental condition of the community's sense of the truthfulness of its scripture and tradition. Hauerwas argues:

Narrative provides the conceptual means to suggest how the stories of Israel and Jesus are a 'morality' for the formation of Christian community and character ... Just as scientific theories are partially judged by the fruitfulness of the activities they generate, so narratives can and should be judged by the richness of moral character and activity they generate ... so significant narratives are at once the result of and continuation of moral communities and character that form nothing less than a tradition. And without tradition we have no means to ask questions of truth and falsity.<sup>110</sup>

Hauerwas does not propose narrative as a 'soft-headed' (read: relativist) apologetic, but it is clear that persuasiveness depends on the performance of character, informed by scriptural narrative.<sup>111</sup> In fact, for Hauerwas, the first task of the church is one of discernment and then of descriptive expression. As he writes, its first task is not to "make the world more just," but to "*recognize what the world is,*"<sup>112</sup> and so its role—in a liberal democracy like the United States—is to express its critique in description consonant with its uniquely-inherited narrative. "As Christians we have a language to describe the problems of

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<sup>109</sup> In, *Against the Nations*, Hauerwas aligns his work with George Lindbeck and Hans Frei (pp. 1-9). Hauerwas likewise calls himself antifoundationalist and historicist, but not relativist or fidiest (*Against the Nations*, 1-9).

<sup>110</sup> Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, 95.

<sup>111</sup> Hauerwas rebutted concerns that his narrative-based theology was also a 'soft-headed' sort of apologetic, which encourages "the attitude that every community—and worse, every individual—has their own story and there is no means for deciding that one story can be preferred to another" (cf. *Community of Character*, 94).

<sup>112</sup> Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 74.

liberalism...."<sup>113</sup> It is furthermore only as narrative, and not as proposition, that one can understand the particular and contingent connections between actions and their responses over time.<sup>114</sup> And so for Hauerwas, Christian character and community-identity formation requires this sort of regional and time-bound storying, which repeats and extends its morphologies of the scriptural narrative. Human situations are, after all, incomprehensibly multifarious, and 'handing down' assumes a 'change of hands' in a temporal flow. This variety of story along with "the crucial interaction of story and community for the formation of truthful lives is an indication that there exists no 'story of stories' from which the many stories of our existence can be analyzed and evaluated."<sup>115</sup> And yet having a sense for truthfulness is a matter of developing the moral and intellectual skills that a community acquires by conforming its life to the stories of God.

There is a kind of virtuous circle here: the community receives the story, shaping its life according to it, learning how to discern its truthfulness, making sense of its

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<sup>113</sup> Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, 85-6. An additional evidence of Hauerwas's descriptive, narrative mode of persuasion can be found in the opening chapter of *A Community of Character*, where he retells Richard Adams's fictional novel, *Watership Down*, in lieu of 'discursive argument' in support of his theses regarding the church's moral vision, character-formation, and relation to state power (p. 12).

<sup>114</sup> Cf. note 73, Hauerwas, *Truthfulness*, 75. Here, as well, the difference between propositions and narratives becomes an important distinction. Cf. Hauerwas and David Burrell argue for the narrative condition for rationality and moral deliberation further in, "From System to Story: An Alternative Pattern for Rationality in Ethics," *Why Narrative?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989). Rufus Black, *Christian Moral Realism: Natural Law, Narrative Virtue, and the Gospel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, 198-9). Commenting on this distinction, Black writes that a proposition can make a connection between character and action, but it cannot "describe what it means for a person to become kind through consistently kind actions because a proposition cannot display the changes that occur in a person as his kind actions transform him into a kind person. A proposition can predict that a transformation of character will occur, it can claim that one is occurring or that one has occurred, but it cannot provide knowledge of the transformation itself." For a critique of Hauerwas's narrative ethics, see Stout (*Democracy and Tradition*, 2009) who argues that all ethics boils down to buying into the internal grammar of some religion or perspective.

<sup>115</sup> Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, 96.

practiced moral vision, which builds plausibility for the story, which can be sustained only in such a community. Hauerwas' political theology is thus singularly focused on the distinct sociality of the church, or the 'community of character', which is like an alternative polis that is shaped by its 'virtuous vision'.<sup>116</sup> Hauerwas is thus understandably leery of doing 'metaphysics', emphasizing instead the parochial nature of ethical inculcation. For Hauerwas, whatever is really real, at its ontological base, can only be tentatively and indirectly gestured at.<sup>117</sup>

I simply do not believe ... that there is any mode of analysis called metaphysics with its own peculiar subject called being, actuality, and so on. I do not doubt for a minute that the Gospel entails claims that may properly be called 'metaphysical', but I do not believe they are known or best

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<sup>116</sup> John Milbank, in a review of *Against the Nations*, comments that Hauerwas's work goes beyond Lindbeck's fixed structuralism and hence slightly closer to radical orthodoxy: "Hauerwas allies himself with Hans Frei and George Lindbeck's theological post-modernism, which seeks to perpetuate Barth's understanding of theology as 'explication' in a narrativist and (tentatively) semiotic mode. Yet there are two senses in which Hauerwas's post-modernism is the more thoroughgoing: first of all, his implicit notions of textuality are less statically structuralist than Lindbeck's. While Lindbeck quite correctly wants to place 'the world in the text' (the Bible), rather than 'the text in the world' he reduces the Bible and doctrine respectively, to a set of fixed narrative structures and instantive rules for performative practice which allows Christianity to remain always 'essentially' the same in a series of different 'translations' to meet the terms of varying historical contexts." Milbank, "Review *Against the Nations: War and Survival in a Liberal Society*," *Modern Theology* 4:2 1988, 212.

<sup>117</sup> Hauerwas, "Why the Truth Demands Truthfulness," *Why Narrative?*, 303. "...I think the metaphysical issues are more appropriately dealt with indirectly." What Hauerwas is calling here 'metaphysical issues', 'actuality', 'reality' (after Julian Hartt's critique of Hauerwas, which demands an "imperious engagement with reality," but does not find it) is synonymous with his own and my use here of the term 'ontology'. In this 'post-foundationalism', Hauerwas retains ties to Lindbeck in *The Nature of Doctrine* explicitly critiquing forms of 'foundationalist' theology in both fundamentalist theologies as well as modern liberal theologies that take as their 'foundation' an anthropological constant, e.g., Schleiermacher's notion of absolute dependence. Lindbeck contrasts these approaches with his 'cultural-linguistic' form of theology. Cf. Bell, "Postliberalism and Radical Orthodoxy," *Cambridge Companion*, 110ff.

'Foundationalism' here refers to an epistemological view, often linked to Enlightenment thought (Descartes, Locke, etc.) that all knowledge can be broken into basic 'foundational' elements, and that rational argumentation proceeds via a 'clear and distinct' process of thought that is cognitively accessible to anyone in their right mind. It is this mode of epistemology that is the center of critique in Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).

displayed by a clearly defined activity called ‘metaphysics’. ...the emphasis on narrative is but the means to note the kind of actuality we believe has grasped us in Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>118</sup>

So, in at least two relevant senses, postliberal uses of ‘narrative’ are performative. On the one hand, a community enacts the repeated narrative and, in this way, performs its distinct sociality. And on the other hand, narrative—over against a propositional discursive argument—displays descriptively the moral vision behind the enactment. In this way, the clearer, more coherent, better-told narrative builds plausibility for theological claims concerning the gospel, Jesus’s identity, the church, its eschatological meaning and its relation to the world, and so on, even though, as Hauerwas claims, there is no ‘story of stories’.<sup>119</sup>

John Milbank’s ‘radical orthodoxy’ shares an affinity with Hauerwas’s virtue ethics and narrative method, but there is an important contrast. Milbank’s may be seen as an amplification toward a full-throated replacement narrative; depicting more explicitly *the* ‘story of stories’; a grand narrative. For instance, taking a cue from Jean-François Lyotard, Milbank and the authors of *Radical Orthodoxy* read the postmodern moment as “the secular demise of truth,” and this presents an opportunity for the re-articulation of the Christian metanarrative.<sup>120</sup> Accordingly

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<sup>118</sup> Hauerwas, “Why the Truth Demands Truthfulness,” 308.

<sup>119</sup> “There is no ‘story of stories’, but only particular stories which more or less adequately enable us to know and face the truth of our existence” (Hauerwas, *Community*, 149). Johann Baptist Metz puts it succinctly: “Narrative is unpretentious in its effect. It does not have, even from God, the dialectical key which will open every door and throw light on the dark passages of history before they have been trodden. It is not, however, without light itself.” Metz, “A Short Apology of Narrative,” *Why Narrative?*, p. 259. In this same essay, Metz likewise connects the ‘performative’ expression of sacramental ‘story’ with the ‘story-telling’ (not primarily argumentative and reasoning) community’ of Christians (cf. pp. 254-5).

<sup>120</sup> “Introduction,” *Radical Orthodoxy*, 1. Hauerwas, for his part, wonders, “Does [Milbank] reproduce exactly the violence of liberalism by trying to write such grand narrative?” Hauerwas,

the project seeks to situate human sociality, polity, language, aesthetics, gender, etc., all within a metanarrative that reframes these aspects of the material in light of ineffable, transcendent being. As Milbank notes elsewhere, the goal of theology is to provide ‘the more compelling story’—i.e., that it should ‘out-narrate’—other accounts, in the presentation of its stronger ontological account. In this way, they expect, “there can be again a cosmos, a psyche, a polis...”<sup>121</sup> For Milbank, “narrative is simply the mode in which the entirety of reality presents itself to us...”<sup>122</sup>

Interestingly, the metanarrative project of radical orthodoxy is tied in the introduction to its manifesto to negative theology, first to distance its agenda from what its author’s view as the nihilism implicit in ‘negative theologies’, but then in a somewhat ironic expression of its contrasting view in highly negative terms. On the one hand the project “refuses a reduction of the *indeterminate*,” and yet it wants to avoid nihilism by proposing “the rational possibility, and the *faithfully-perceived* actuality, of an *indeterminacy* that is not impersonal chaos but infinite interpersonal harmonious order, in which time participates.”<sup>123</sup> The question then for the radical perspective is not whether to avoid the indeterminacy of its

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“Creation, Contingency, and Truthful Non-Violence”, 15 n. 7. Cited in Rasmusson, *The Church as Polis*, 177.

<sup>121</sup> “Introduction,” *Radical Orthodoxy*, 20. Following this line of thought, Milbank’s *Theology and Social Theory* articulates a ‘metanarrative realism’ in which Christ is the most fundamental event, by which all other events may be interpreted. “And it is *most especially* a social event, able to interpret other social formations, because it compares them with its own new social practice.” Milbank, John, *Theology and Social Theory*, 390.

<sup>122</sup> Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 362.

<sup>123</sup> “Introduction,” *Radical Orthodoxy*, 2. Emphasis mine. In this way, *Radical Orthodoxy* keeps continuity with postliberal (also ‘narrative’) theology finds its originating articulations in works like Hans Frei’s *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, which seeks to reorient theology according to the primacy of scripture’s narrative structure, and also George Lindbeck’s *The Nature of Doctrine*, which likewise takes the structure of scripture’s narrative as theology’s starting point for an ethnographic, second-order reflection on the evolution of Christian doctrine as a kind of language game (following Wittgenstein’s phrase) that emerges out of, or must interact with, scripture’s narrative.

ontological vision, but whether that ontological description expresses a void or harmonious (transcendent) order. So, it is true that in both postliberal and radical orthodoxy, narrative displays a picture of 'the way things are' by providing a background for a practice, a way of life, and in particular a sociality that reinforces and is reinforced by the narration. For the former, this takes the form of an intra-grammatical account, whereas radical orthodoxy's is ontological and expressed in an indeterminate 'beyondness' of a hyper-reality.

There is a kind of convergence here between postliberal-radical orthodox narration and postmodern political-theological 'poetics'. While a fuller discussion on John Caputo's 'poetics of the impossible' awaits in B.2.2, we observe here the overlapping features of this performative theopolitical language. 'Poetics' like narration above, is a way (1) of indirectly gesturing at an ontological background to moral vision via description and ostensive depiction, rather than relying merely on discursive argumentation as in analytic-philosophical modes. The project of conveying a theopolitical vision is, in other words, primarily an aesthetic endeavor. Caputo will describe poetics as a multivalent patchwork of expressive cultural artifacts, grammar, and even argumentation that directs one towards that ontological background, expressed as the hyper-reality of God or the kingdom of God.<sup>124</sup> And this use of 'poetics' is not entirely idiosyncratic to Caputo, but extends further into postmodern thought. His description also parallels an early and decisive thesis by Vattimo in *Art's Claim to Truth*. For Vattimo, poetic discourse

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<sup>124</sup> Cf. Caputo, "The Poetics of the Impossible and the kingdom of God," *Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology*, 470. See also the discussion below, B.2.2.

becomes the condition for truth,<sup>125</sup> since it can disrupt paradigms and install new ‘worlds’:

...there is a type of discourse that is radically new and that does not allow itself to be reduced to what already exists. It is the discourse of poetry or, more generally, the language of art as setting-to-work of truth. In the genuine work of art a language is born that was never spoken before, heralding a general reordering of the world. If the artwork is genuine—and we experience this all the time—it does not install itself peacefully into the world but rather reorganizes it and puts it in question. In this sense, a new language and a new world are born by virtue of poetry.<sup>126</sup>

Poetics thus has a revelatory and constructive function along Caputo-Vattimo lines, in its expressive and affective mode, which ‘sets-to-work’ on truth. And, like art generally, there is an attraction that takes place.<sup>127</sup> In its attraction, poetics relays a ‘truth’; it is like a ‘dwelling’ in which man’s entire existence is measured; it is, in fact, “the manner in which the god that remains hidden reveals himself...”<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Inasmuch as it expresses the ontological meaning of an event at the level of Being, and not merely at the level of the existent. See, Vattimo, *Art’s Claim to Truth*, 66. Vattimo is drawing here on Heidegger’s aesthetics, where his thought converges in *Being and Time* and his essays on Hölderlin, to make conclusions about the world-constitutive (and not merely emotive) nature of poetic discourse.

<sup>126</sup> Vattimo, *Art’s Claim to Truth*, 67.

<sup>127</sup> Filippo Costa in *Weak Thought*, puts it succinctly: “What is worthy of attention, poetic discourse, is constituted by similitudes which attract and capture the mode of being or the ‘truth’ of whoever runs into it.” Costa, “Franz Kafka’s Man Without Identity,” *Weak Thought*, 240.

<sup>128</sup> Amoroso, Leonardo, *Weak Thought*, 164. In this passage, Amoroso is discussing Heidegger’s notion of *Lichtung*, in which this ‘revealing’ of Being happens in its withdrawal from being. That is, since the facility for grasping Being is already mixed in with Being, the revealing is another ‘concealment’. Man dwells in the *Lichtung*. Cf. Vattimo, *Weak Thought*, 164-5.



And (2) the theopolitical picture makes sense of some communal practice that, in turn, reinforces the poetics. Caputo's notion, for instance, of the 'poetics of the impossible' attracts toward a different mode of sociality. Caputo's 'poetics' emerges in the broader context of 'weak thought', which for its post-metaphysical position, nevertheless expresses an aesthetics for motivating a particular way of life, and—I'd argue—an alternative sociality.<sup>129</sup> Filippo Costa describes the condition of weak thought as beyond Nietzsche's 'last man'. That is, after the human being reaches her limit in post-WWII existentialist thinking, the question now as Costa describes it, is to:

...consider existing *in the fall*, in the supposition that there will be a someplace, a something, below, an elsewhere, an anywhere. From here perhaps we gain access to the place and time where a sense can be reactivated, where a meaning can be demanded ... having learned to coexist with nothingness, the 'last man' must chance the next—indeed any—step, and that is preliminarily a daring venture ... The postmetaphysical man acknowledges a 'condition' or 'destiny', that of being 'forever set on a path tortuous and irregular, extremely long and tiring'.<sup>130</sup>

This metaphorical language, which avoids 'technical metalanguages', displays for Gianni Vattimo, "the figurative power of discourse," which articulates a path, or a way of being. Such a path opens for Vattimo in art: "...this is precisely the *Stoss* (shock) of the artwork: in encountering a great artwork, the world I was accustomed to seeing becomes strange, is put into crisis in its totality, because the work proposal as a new general reorganization of the world, a new historical

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<sup>129</sup> See my discussion below in B.2.2.

<sup>130</sup> Peter Carravetta, "What is 'Weak Thought'? The Original Theses and Context of *il pensiero debole*," *Weak Thought*, 12.

epoch.”<sup>131</sup> In another essay, Vattimo brings out the connection between the ‘weak’ mode of thought—which we will see aligns with Caputo—and a mode of sociality in the notion of friendship. Friendship, for Vattimo, only can become “the principle, the factor of truth, if thought has abandoned any claim to an objective, universal and and apodictic foundation.”<sup>132</sup>

And thus whether by way of (postliberal) narrativity or (postmodern) poetics, we can read the concomitant movement in these political theologies as from the expressed theopolitical picture to a kind of self-distancing of the authors from their own positions that leaving the reader with an option. This appears in one of several ways in the theologies examined below. For instance, in Caputo’s approach, we find a self-distancing in an emphasis on doubt in a ‘poetics of the impossible’ and undecidability in the theology of ‘perhaps’. And in postsecular theopolitical descriptions we find the framing of an ontology of the political, which clears the ground for a ‘leap of faith’.<sup>133</sup> In each case, the expressive, theopolitical picture is drawn, and one is either pulled toward it or not; that is, either the reader’s vision is reframed, or it is not, but the author backs away. And that is

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<sup>131</sup> Vattimo, *Art’s Claim to Truth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 70. Earlier, in a passage that explores Heidegger’s aesthetics, contains a notion of poetry’s ‘objectivity’

<sup>132</sup> Vattimo, “Christianity and Metaphysics,” *Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology*, Graham Ward, ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 465. Here Vattimo sees the will, ‘reasons of the heart’ and charity as the real alternative to violent nihilism: “Without a genuine opening to Being as an event, the other of Levinas always risks being seen as deposed by the Other (with a capital O) – which this time is a truth which ‘justifies’ friendship for Plato only by eliminating the other as a historic individual.” (465); Vattimo sees in the death of Christ, the end of metaphysics (i.e., truth as correspondence to objective external reality); for Vattimo’s understanding of Christianity, truth is of the subject.

<sup>133</sup> Kathryn Ludwig points out a connection between the ‘prophetic’ voice in postsecular novelists (e.g., Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead*) that parallels the description here of post-X scene setting. “An examination of the postsecular lends insight to the project, as Susan Felch articulates it, of ‘balancing the delicate registers of belief and unbelief’, because the work of postsecular writers provides a site in which sacred and secular perspectives may meet” (Ludwig, “Postsecularism and a Prophetic Sensibility,” *A Seminar on Christian Scholarship*, p. 231).

because there is, in each of these forms, no way to prove for any unconfused mind the indubitable soundness of the narrated, or poetically expressed kingdom of God. In these ways, we find a rather explicit non-coercion in the performative political theological expressions.

The question arises: what forms of sociality can be recommended that retain their contrast to 'positive' theopolitical forms? Or, in other words, what interference can the kingdom of God have in the kingdom of man given the impossible gap between them? I suggest that what remains for (post-x) negative theopolitics is a kind of 'weak' mobilization in an unforced-force of the theopolitical vision.

### **Substantial Negation**

As mentioned above, a form of practice that emerges in the apophatic tradition echoes the fundamental paradox of saying the unsayable. Recalling the notion of detachment in Eckhart above; beholding of the vision drives toward solidarity with every created thing, but this is not primarily written and transmitted moral code; or, rather its codification in writing would be impossible and contradicts the *via negativa*. In a similar way, despite the negative, indirect relation or deflection of any attempt at mobilizing the theopolitical vision, there remains some diffuse and elusive, non-codifiable social ethic. The expressive enactments of narration or poetics, which condition the potential re-framing, are for the transformation of vision, and as such they are not designed for an echo chamber. Rather they should break out into constructive practice.

In other words, apophatic theopolitics articulates a negative and yet constructive relation between the two kingdoms, which I want to call a ‘substantial negation’.<sup>134</sup> The apophatic theopolitical relation is ‘substantial’ since the dissonance between kingdom of God and kingdom of man opens up a field of possible action in which one may really enact social-political agency; it is a ‘negation’ inasmuch as this kingdom of God-inspired agency can never be identified as even a partial realization of the kingdom of God on pain of its own corruption as a colluding Constantinian form of action, where ‘Constantinian’ refers metonymically to the merger of state and church power.<sup>135</sup>

The term ‘substantial negation’ comes near to what Ernesto Laclau in his essay “Names of God” refers to as an ‘absent fullness’. Laclau argues that ‘order’ should not have positive content but should rather be conceived as the lack of political disorder or anomie. A negative, or ‘mystical’ approach following Laclau, would do whatever it can to reduce positive content as much as possible; even while the normal operation in politics, however, is to give that order a name (e.g., ‘market

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<sup>134</sup> A literary parallel to this concept would be Kafka’s reading of Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous works as exhibiting a ‘constructive deconstruction’ Cf. Jochen Schmidt, “Neither/Nor: The Mutual Negation of Søren Kierkegaard’s Early Pseudonymous Writings,” *JCRT* 8, no. 1 (Winter 2006), 70-71; See also, Franz Kafka, *Wedding Preparations in the Country and Other Posthumous Prose Writings*. With notes by Max Brod, trans. E. Kaiser and E. Wilkins (London: Secker and Warburg, 1954), 118. The term ‘substantial negation’ does appear elsewhere, as in the political-philosophical work of Roy Bhaskar. While I’ve not drawn on Bhaskar’s work in developing the term, there is at least a broadly overlapping connotation here inasmuch as Bhaskar uses the phrase to relate a paradoxical notion of the ‘presence’ of an ‘absence’ in his description of ‘determinate non-being’ (which contrasts ‘nothingness’. Example: a stapler missing from a desk drawer). Cf. Bhaskar, *Dialectic: The Pulse of Freedom* (London: Routledge, 2008), 35.

<sup>135</sup> ‘Constantinian’ is a term shared across the political theologies listed above (but especially Hauerwas and Moltmann). Cf. Hauerwas, “Critique of Christian America,” *Nomos* 30 (1988): 110-33. Here he picks the term up from John Howard Yoder. The term ‘Constantinian’ is also deployed synonymously, albeit in a discursive (not strictly political) context, in commentary on Charles Taylor. Cf. Carlos Colorado, “Transcendent Sources and the Dispossession of the Self,” *Aspiring to Fullness*, 91ff.

economy').<sup>136</sup> While Laclau is addressing contemporary political communities, the post-x negative political theologies below all likewise 'reduce positive content' and at the same time distance their own positions from sectarian retreat from the political.<sup>137</sup> That is, even while they retain a strong sense of separation between the theopolitical vision and the political, they distinguish their work from efforts to reform (or mobilize) the kingdom of God into political reality, which would be the counter-productive attempt to reinstall Christendom.<sup>138</sup>

Therefore, given the normative and conceptual separateness of the two kingdoms, they are nevertheless indirectly re-joined through the expression of some 'substantial' social ethic. Such an 'alternative form of being-together' is enacted through a commonly-held theopolitical *vision*; an utterly non-violent, powerless anti-Christendom. If 'mobilization' forms of kingdom of God view its growth through the force of Christendom's institutional expansion, post-X models view the growth of kingdom of God through an altered way of *seeing* others through its aesthetic and imaginative effect.

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<sup>136</sup> Laclau, "Names of God," in *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World*, 145-6.

<sup>137</sup> Post-liberal approached, in particular, are not infrequently critiqued as 'sectarian'. Cf. Gustafson, James M. "The Sectarian Temptation: Reflections on Theology, the Church and the University." *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 40 (1985): 83-94. Even where 'social sectarianism' is explicitly recommended, it is couched as a communitarian suggestion for relating theopolitical vision to the broader democratic society. Cf. Lindbeck, George, *The Church in a Postliberal Age* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 93-95, 97, 100-105. See also, Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, 147-8.

<sup>138</sup> For example, D. Stephen Long (critiqued as sectarian) cf. "What Makes Theology 'Political'?" *Political Theology* 5, no. 4 (2004): 393-409.

## B.2 Alternative Socialities in Moltmann and Caputo

Below, Moltmann's work provides a prototypical apophatic theopolitics within a mediating framework. In post-WWII, 1960's Tübingen, Moltmann began to articulate the 'post-Constantinian' position from within the horizon of understanding political agency in the historical and economic framework of Frankfurt School Marxism. So, he deployed dogmatic symbolism for theopolitical imagination and activism in the latter half of the twentieth century.<sup>139</sup> Caputo in some respects overlaps Moltmann's theopolitical apophaticism, and yet he departs from the mediating mode. In contrast, we can situate Caputo in the third category of 'meta-critical' political theologies above.<sup>140</sup> His theopolitical project seeks to expose (false) theologies underlying politics, thus questioning their ontological foundations by spotlighting the linguistic-cultural constructedness of social reality and more specifically the 'metaphysical images' around which communities are organized.

The guiding questions for these two test cases will be the following: (1) What is the theopolitical vision behind his approach? (2) What is the method and practice of a political theology for articulating such a theopolitical vision to others who are not already guided by the same utopic star and yet by this articulation seek to shape political community toward that ideal community of the kingdom of God? By drawing out this dilemma in their approaches, we get a sense for the conditions and limitations that push their forms toward an apophatic expression that

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<sup>139</sup> The second 'critical-theoretical' category listed above in B.1 (p. 35).

<sup>140</sup> The third 'meta-critical' deconstructive category above in B.1 (p. 36).

appears especially intended for articulating a theopolitical vision in the context of pluralist, liberal democratic regimes. Partly launching from an observation of the failure of an official two-kingdoms theory in German pre-war church-state relations, Moltmann contrasts the cosmos-embracing notion of the *Königsherrschaft Christi*. This, however, requires a non-totalizing (ie., not political-religious, or non-Constantinian) articulation, and so Moltmann supplies our prototypical example of an ‘apophatic theopolitical vision’. Caputo’s, on the other hand, adds an aesthetic dimension of ‘poetics’ from within a (weak-ontological) deconstructive context of postmodernism, which prepares us for the radical articulations of Milbank and Žižek, as a kind of (admittedly eclectic and ecumenical) synthesis which draws together an alternative sociality, performative narrations, within a stronger-ontological postsecular context. While Charles Taylor’s ontic commitments reside primarily in the background of his own work, I hope to show that he relates to this discursive map with proximity to the postsecular mode, albeit with deconstructive and poetic tendencies.

### B.2.1 Jürgen Moltmann: Contrast Community

If his theopolitical vision is the social aspect of a Christian moral vision, what we are seeking to describe here is how Moltmann sees the kingdom of God impinging on the social-political ‘world’. So, what is Moltmann’s theopolitical vision? Although critical of the *Zwei-Reiche-Lehre* framework along Barmen-confessional lines, Moltmann nevertheless images an ideal sociality that signals the eschatological reality of the kingdom of God and which should motivate action as

a kind of participation in the history of that unfolding greater polity. Moltmann articulates this theopolitical vision as the ‘contrast society’, which is characterized as a parabolic and negative sign that gestures toward the kingdom of God in its practice of solidarity with victims, the voiceless, suffering, and openness to the stranger. Below we will see how Moltmann’s ‘contrast society’ as depicted in *The Way of Jesus Christ* fits in the context of his broader political theological project and then highlight how he images the possibility of the contrast society expanding its influence without collusion with state power or theocratic—or ‘Constantinian’—corruption.

Moltmann was witness to the horrifying failures of what he interpreted as the ‘political religion’ of Weimar and the incapacity of the institutional church to resist violence.<sup>141</sup> The *Volkskirche* context of early twentieth-century Germany had become for him a reiteration of ‘Constantinianism’ in which the church colluded with state power in support of self-preservation and expansion.<sup>142</sup> Moltmann described the historical shift to the Constantinian era in these terms:

The gospel witness became an official proclamation handed down from higher authorities. With this came also the deterioration of Christian diakonia practiced by the congregation. It was replaced by public welfare and private charity [...] The sacramental life signs of the Holy Spirit in the koinonia (communion) with Christ were turned into the sacraments of the

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<sup>141</sup> cf. Moltmann, *Politische Theologie – Politische Ethik* (Chr. Kaiser Verlag, München, 1984), p. 13-21. For an autobiographical account of Moltmann’s experience in post-war Germany and for positioning his ‘new’ political theology in an anti-Constantinian mode opposed to Schmittian versions of political theology, see Moltmann, *A Broad Place*, p. 147 – 185.

<sup>142</sup> With this term, Moltmann draws a line to the shift of Christianity into a Roman imperial church. Cf. Moltmann, *Hope for the Church*, 39; and Moltmann, “European Political Theology,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Political Theology*, 10-15.



church and understood to be official prerogatives and duties of the spiritual leaders.<sup>143</sup>

The 'Constantinian' collusion of mid-twentieth century Germany, in Moltmann's thought, carries several of these same features. Social welfare is a matter of the state and church-belonging is a matter of moral and cultural formation to the ends of *Bürgerlichkeit*. Yet even while serving the public ends of moral formation, religion is privatized and the church's scope of influence is reduced to the exclusion of any possible resistance to the state that it serves. This, Moltmann argues, is the social-historical embodiment of Luther's *Zwei-Reiche-Lehre*, which was imbibed in state churches where the believer is 'free in faith, but obedient to powers'.<sup>144</sup> This ultimately hindered resistance in the Nazi-years, since under this conception, political-ethical questions are considered non-theological.

Against the two-kingdoms doctrine, Moltmann contrasts the Reformed *Königsherrschaft-Christi-Lehre*.<sup>145</sup> The notion here is that lordship of Christ entails all of life and therefore cannot be divided up in mutually exclusive spheres of human activity. That means that even while the *Gemeinde* of Christ-followers orients itself eschatologically beyond the state—and rejects collusion with it—it nevertheless must participate in historical-political processes in the wake of its

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<sup>143</sup> Cf. Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, 135.

<sup>144</sup> Moltmann, "European Political Religion." p. 9. Moltmann reports, on the Catholic end of political theology, that Johan Baptist Metz went a step farther in his *Theology of the World* (90) than Rahner's existential-anthropological theology, which was in danger of becoming isolated from the world. For Metz, quotes Moltmann, "Only in the eschatological horizon of hope does the world appear as history" (9, *Theology of the World*, 90).

<sup>145</sup> Moltman, *Politische Theologie – Politische Ethik*, 123. On the point of the lordship of Christ, Moltmann parts with Karl Barth, who saw the church's participation already in the lordship of Christ over everything—what he called Barth's 'Christological Eschatology'—, thus in Moltmann's view forgetting the crucified Christ and the historical nature of reality.

incarnate, crucified, and resurrected Lord. What emerges is Moltmann's 'political hermeneutics', which may be summed up in this passage from *Politische Theologie-Politische Ethik*:

Eine Theologie, die sich darauf einläßt, muß darum zusammen mit ihrer Sache immer zugleich auch ihre praktischen Funktionen kritisch reflektieren. Eine Kirche, die sich darauf einläßt, darf nicht mehr abstrakt nach dem Verhältnis von Kirche und Politik fragen, so als wären das zwei getrennte Größen, die man zusammensetzen könnte, sie muß mit dem kritischen Bewußtmachen ihrer eigenen politischen Existenz und ihren faktischen sozialen Funktionen beginnen.<sup>146</sup>

Moltmann was accordingly critical of theologians like Rudolf Bultmann, whose view of the life of faith and the church through a de-mythologized, pietistic lens appeared to support the squeezing of faith to an inward, ineffable experience—again, a private matter of 'values' inculcated by the church.<sup>147</sup> In order to get beyond what he saw as the social-bankruptcy of individualist theological liberalism, Moltmann—rather than extrapolating generalized values from a de-mythologized text<sup>148</sup>—read traditional theological categories afresh in the light of his political hermeneutic, the primary purpose of which was to inquire into the social-political value of dogmatic symbolism and in this way recapture political agency within the church after Auschwitz. The 'mediating' function of this hermeneutic was to survey the historical-political impact of Christian doctrine, isolate moments of 'theocraticizing' and then on the basis of the grand

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<sup>146</sup> Moltmann, *Politische Theologie - politische Ethik*, 13. The Marxian critique of religion here is in the background. Moltmann emphasizes that there is no such thing as an a-political church; dogmatic theology thus should not be replaced with political theory, but political theology should rather reflect on the political function of dogmatics.

<sup>147</sup> Cf. Scott Paeth, *Exodus Church and Civil Society: Public Theology and Social Theory in the Work of Jürgen Moltmann* (London: Routledge, 2008), 22.

<sup>148</sup> Cf. John Robinson, *Honest to God* (London: SCM Press, 2001).

eschatological reversals (power-in-powerlessness/wealth-in-poverty, characteristic of Jesus' sermon on the mount), effect a critique of the 'idols' of political religion (within and outside the church) which unwittingly buttress unjust power structures. In his attempt, Moltmann correlated themes of eschatology and then Christology for social and political agency, and in so doing he was instrumental in helping to re-invigorate the terms of discourse represented in the 'New Political Theology' of the late twentieth century.<sup>149</sup> We will take each of these loci in turn below as the context for Moltmann's theopolitical vision of the contrast society.

According to Moltmann, Christianity's early distortion into political religion in the Constantinian era came with a shift of its eschatology, in which, "The originally critical Christian eschatology was changed into the political ideology of the Christian Empire: the kingdom of Christ has no end."<sup>150</sup> His *Theology of Hope* seeks to recover an eschatology with a notion of hope that disrupts present socialities by reframing such experience in an anticipation of a mode that always exceeds them. 'Hope' reframes by anticipating the whole of history in a way analogous to the way a reader anticipates wholeness in starting to understand a text.<sup>151</sup> He viewed his work as paralleling Ernst Bloch,<sup>152</sup> except that Israel's sense of promise

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<sup>149</sup> Moltmann, "European Political Religion." Cambridge Companion to Political Theology, 8ff. Cf. Moltmann, *A Broad Place*, 156.

<sup>150</sup> Moltmann, "European Political Religion," 5-7. Here Moltmann follows Erik Peterson's *Monotheismus als politisches Problem* (1935) in arguing that the doctrine of the trinity and the transcendent character of Christian eschatology made divinely-justified monarchy highly problematic.

<sup>151</sup> However, for Moltmann, notes Adams, "the eschatological horizon of the Christian narrative 'is not a closed system, but includes also open questions...'" Adams, Nicholas, 'Moltmann', *Blackwell* (p. 229-30); cf. *Theology of Hope*, 1967: 191

<sup>152</sup> Analogous to Bloch, the project of the *Theology of Hope* was to mediate the promises of Judaism and Christianity by translating them into Marxist terms. For more on the influence of Bloch on Moltmann's thought, cf. Moltmann, *A Broad Place: An Autobiography* (Fotress Press,

is transposed by Christianity in the resurrection.<sup>153</sup> Such a hope interrupts and starkly contrasts our current experience of the world, and so eschatology for Moltmann is not about an eternal present (“the kingdom of Christ has no end”), but the breaking-in of eternity into the present, which suspends the experience of Christ-followers—and by extension the sociality of the church—in a persisting ideal/real tension. One could argue this is the theopolitical payoff of the work of de-theocraticization (*Enttheokratisierung*, following Bloch) in biblical exegesis.<sup>154</sup> Christianity’s own internal logic by its socially motivating anticipation of the coming of God and his kingdom, opens the way for social practice that already signals a better justice and liberation, as well as the limitedness of unjust and exploitative socialites of the present.

The optimism and abstractness of Moltmann’s eschatology was eventually counter-balanced by his Christology in *The Crucified God* (1974).<sup>155</sup> There the cross of Christ is pictured as the embodiment of suffering, which resists all conceptualizations, including the concept of ‘anticipation’.<sup>156</sup> In *Crucified*,

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Minneapolis: 2008), 78-81, 113-18. on Moltmann’s use of Bloch: Bauckman, *The Theology of Jürgen Moltmann* (44-5), Matic, *Jürgen Moltmanns Theologie in Auseinandersetzung mit Ernst Bloch*; Spencer, “Marx, Bloch and Moltmann”, O’Collins, “The Principle and Theology of Hope.”

<sup>153</sup> Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed., 21, 40-1.

<sup>154</sup> Moltmann, “Theologische Kritik der Politischen Religion,” p. 49 n. 72.

<sup>155</sup> At this point in Moltmann’s career, the philosophical climate had shifted to the Frankfurt school of Adorno and Horkheimer’s ‘negative dialectics’. Cf. Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 5; “Theologische Kritik der politischen Religion,” *Kirche im Prozess der Aufklärung; On Human Dignity: Political Theology and Ethics* (1984).

<sup>156</sup> “Theological science’ extrapolates a positive, ‘pure’ theory of Christianity (*a la* Hegel, Schleiermacher). Such a mode might follow Hegel in seeing the task of its true philosophy to acquire knowledge of being in the rational unfolding of world history. A theory of Christianity along these lines is scrambled by the ‘dialectic of Enlightenment’ (Adorno and Horkheimer); stability of modern society must be an illusion after the horrors of Auschwitz. Or, reduce the cross to the ‘wisdom’ of Christianity, but this misses the ‘alien’ nature of the cross. “But in the crucified Christ, abandoned by God and cursed, faith can find no equivalents of this kind which provide it with an indirect, analogical knowledge of God, but encounters the very contrary” (Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 68). Adams points out that in *The Crucified God* Moltmann moves beyond philosophical hermeneutics by appealing to scripture and that he also diverges from Ernst Bloch in appealing to Christology rather than Bloch’s immanentist teleology, in which men are solely responsible for guiding the world in a good way (Adams, ‘Moltmann’, 230). See also,

Moltmann deploys Theodor Adorno's concept of 'negation' for its attention to life's damage as a way of perceiving the good by way of negation.<sup>157</sup> Moltmann ultimately abandons the full materialist thrust of Adorno's reasonings, which appeared to him to have minimal concrete political implications, but he did find a language for exploring the ways in which Christ's suffering "spoils the neat and tidy thinking so characteristic of human attempts to ignore or deny suffering."<sup>158</sup> The outcome of the conceptual elusiveness of the cross is that a theology which takes it seriously must "right down to its method and practice, can only be polemical, dialectical, antithetical and critical theory."<sup>159</sup> Therefore the import of negation appropriately turns, for Moltmann, on the eschatological reversals of power-in-powerlessness.<sup>160</sup> And it is this theme that becomes the center of his *Politische Theologie – Politische Ethik* in which triumphalism and theocracy (also read: Constantinianism) are ironically nullified by the victory of Christ, as we find here in a brief interaction with Barth on the 'Herrschaft Christi':

Die Christen haben in der Gegenwart unmittelbar am Kreuz, nicht aber schon unmittelbar an der Auferstehungsherrlichkeit Christi Anteil. Die Siegesgewißheit des Glaubens ist eine Gewissheit nur *unter* dem Kreuz,

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Hudson, *The Marxist Philosophy of Ernst Bloch* (Springer, 1982), p. 116. Cf. Moltmann, *The Coming of God* (1995).

<sup>157</sup> Moltmann, *Crucified God*, 171.

<sup>158</sup> Adams, "Moltmann," *Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, 232.

<sup>159</sup> Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 69.

<sup>160</sup> Already in *Crucified God*, Moltmann draws the connection between the 'negative theologies' of Adorno and Horkheimer and their own materialist version of a negative theopolitics. Horkheimer in *Die Sehnsucht* and Adorno in *Negative Dialektik*—not wanting to commit idolatry whereby in displacing religious images of resurrection and other dogmas—the desire for eternal happiness is manifested and 'contrasts the conditions on earth' (Horkheimer, *Kritische Theorie* I, 371; quoted in *Crucified God*, *ibid.* fn. 66, 283) opening the possibility of a non-idolatrous solidarity with sufferers. This appears to demand in Horkheimer and Adorno that our longing for justice and righteousness also contradict the notion of a just God; however, Moltmann extrapolates from this that theology itself must become materialistic: "Theology which does not take up the truth of negative theology by knowledge of the cross can hardly become a theology of the crucified God. Here it must become 'materialistic'" (fn. 66, p. 283-4, *Crucified God*).

nirgendwo sonst. Zwar spricht Barth selten von einer 'Königs'herrschaft Christi. Er beschränkt sich auf die Rede von der 'Herrschaft Christi'. Es muss aber gegen die Rede seiner Schüler und zum Teil auch gegen ihn selbst betont werden, daß die Herrschaft Christi nicht derjenigen eines *Königs* gleicht, sondern durch seine Schwachheit siegt und durch sein stellvertretendes Leiden am Kreuz regiert. Ohne die lebendige Erinnerung des Leidens und des Kreuzes Christi wird die Lehre von der Königsherrschaft Christi *triumphalisch und theokratisch*. <sup>161</sup>

From this Christological background, Moltmann's work proceeds to focus its attention on the church. In his "The Church in the Power of the Spirit" (English 1977, German 1975), Moltmann pulls together themes from *Hope* and *Crucified* to argue that point of the church is to recognize Christ as the *logos* of God; the broken and kenotic Christ; and *in this light*, hope for eschatological fulfillment and the future end of injustice. Moltmann thus nuances the task of political theology as "a designation for theological reflection on the *concrete political practice of Christianity*. Christians participate in the public affairs of their societies and the world because they hope for the kingdom of God and anticipate the justice and peace of the new earth as much as they can."<sup>162</sup> In other words, since Christ is not a mere moral exemplar but a sign of the kingdom of God's already/not-yet presence, the subject of political theology becomes "the church and Christian community."<sup>163</sup> The *solus Christus* of discipleship, for Moltmann, must therefore

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<sup>161</sup> Moltmann, *Politische Theologie – Politische Ethik*, 149-50. This is a consistent thread for Moltmann. As he recounts in a recent reflection, "the resurrection of the powerless Jesus shows that God's weakness is stronger than 'all rule, authority and power' of this world (1 Cor. 15:24). Following the crucified one is the power of the powerless." Moltmann, "European Political Religion" *Cambridge Companion*, 11.

<sup>162</sup> Moltmann, "European Political Religion," 14 (emphasis mine).

<sup>163</sup> Moltmann, "European Political Religion," 9.

involve more than a doctrine of faith.<sup>164</sup> It involves a distinct ethic shaped by the ‘*totus Christus*’—the whole of Christ for the whole of life—and so the horizon of discipleship is eschatological.<sup>165</sup> This is what leads Moltmann to the conclusion that the Gospel is universal, in fact, “to the degree in which the eschatological horizon begins to shape the history of humanity.”<sup>166</sup> In this line, the theopolitical vision incorporates a horizon *beyond* this age and any given national identity, and yet because of this orientation beyond, expects the work of political discipleship to bend history toward the kingdom of God. If this is the case, then the political life of the church is accordingly a matter of the earthy impact of its own theopolitical vision.<sup>167</sup> As he writes in his latter memoir,

The *promissio*, the promise which God’s future opens up to us, gives rise to the *missio*, the mission into history, so that this future can be anticipated in the context of the possibilities open to us ... As Zwingli and Calvin already said, human justice and righteousness ought to correspond to the divine justice and righteousness. Karl Barth also sought for ‘correspondences’ of this kind in culture, economics, and politics, and called them ‘parables’ of the coming kingdom. But if the kingdom of God is in the process of its

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<sup>164</sup> Moltmann muses here that perhaps we are under the illusion “since Constantine—that we live already in a ‘Christian’ world, in which these ethics have developed” (*The Way*, 117-8), but if this were the case, there would be no specifically Christian ethic. Natural law ethics or the ‘secular ethics’ of the Lutheran two-kingdom doctrine are, for Moltmann, under just such an illusion, since both are bereft of the robust Christology of the gospel accounts, relegate the Christian’s relation to Christ to private religious affection. Furthermore, against the Lutheran perspective, Moltmann references the anabaptist tradition. For more on Moltmann’s relation to the radical reformation, cf. Rasmussen, *The Church as Polis*, 84-5.

<sup>165</sup> As echoed in the second thesis of the Barmen Declaration (1934), Moltmann, *The Way*, 118.

<sup>166</sup> Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, 119. In his earlier “Theologische Kritik der Politischen Religion,” Moltmann argues that it is the goal of church of Christ, which cannot be identified with any one particular people (*Volksgemeinschaft*), to realize community with the ‘other’; this releasement from the idol of the state, is made possible by the Christian belief in the crucified God (*Deus crucifixus*), a condition of the Kingdom’s universalism. He writes, “Die Befreiung vom Götzendienst der politischen Religion eines bestimmten Volkes hat das Ziel, die Menschen dieses Volkes für den Universalismus des Reiches Gottes in der Gemeinschaft mit den ‘anderen’ zu öffnen.”

<sup>167</sup> Nicholas Adams comments: “It concerns a promised future which changes the present. Put differently: imagination is real. Politics, for Moltmann, is the art of the imagination just as much the art of the real.” Adams, “Moltmann,” *Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, 230.

‘coming’, correspondences of this kind are then temporal beginnings of that coming and forms of its arrival in this time.<sup>168</sup>

So, how has Moltmann articulated this vision which amounts to “the temporal beginnings of that coming”? In his 1989 *The Way of Jesus Christ* (English 1993, German: 1989), Moltmann provides a sustained account of his reading of Christianity’s theopolitical vision and its socio-political implications. Given the analysis above, we should expect this account to correlate with the ‘powerless power’ of Christ’s lordship, such that it avoids any overtones of theocracy or Constantinian collusion. And in fact, Moltmann’s account in *The Way of Jesus Christ* is a non-triumphalist, non-theocratic one in which the kingdom of God impresses its own positive power through political discipleship that is performative of its vision and by non-violent action. The kingdom of God appears vague with no ‘social program’, writes Moltmann,<sup>169</sup> and yet in this performative and negative way the church participates in the eschatological peace of the kingdom of God while working toward a more inclusive and more universalist sociality.

Moltmann finds a term that, for him, nicely captures the non-individualist, comprehensive social ethic, and performative embodiment of kingdom of God in Gerhard Lohfink’s portrayal of the community of Jesus’ disciples as a ‘contrast community’.<sup>170</sup> Looking at chapter ten of the Gospel of Mark, Moltmann articulates this contrast as one of service and not domination; of love and not violence.<sup>171</sup> It

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<sup>168</sup> Moltmann, *A Broad Place*, 104.

<sup>169</sup> Moltmann, *The Way*, 119.

<sup>170</sup> Cf. Gerhard Lohfink, *Wie hat Jesus Gemeinde gewollt?*, 7<sup>th</sup> Ed. Freiburg 1987; *Jesus and Community: The Social Dimensions of Christian Faith*, trans. John P. Galvin (Philadelphia and London, 1985) as well as Lohfink, *Wem gilt die Bergpredigt?* (Herder: Freiburg, 1988).

<sup>171</sup> Moltmann, *The Way*, 125



parallels Jesus' ministry that embodied Isaiah's vision of the Lord's 'year of Jubilee', which announces liberty for the oppressed, freedom from indebtedness, and limited exploitation of the earth.<sup>172</sup> The contrast community is uniquely linked to this particular message of Jesus as the 'Wisdom of life', but also in communicating this wisdom, it offers a "public alternative to the ethics of the world."<sup>173</sup> How does Moltmann image the universal scope and non-theocratic expansion of this particular vision in a post-Constantinian mode for modern, democratic societies?

Moltmann is certainly keen to avoid the charge. And, in fact, the primary mode we find in Moltmann's work—including in *The Way*—is apophatic, in the sense given above (A.3). The inclusive, universal scope of the kingdom of God is clear in a discussion regarding the political nature of Jesus' teachings and in his demonstration of the kingdom of God in Gospel accounts of his life together with his disciples. Here he highlights in particular Jesus' dealings with social outcasts, the poor, the sick, and tax collectors, on whom he imparts 'dignity' and for whom he signals the end of 'religious and civic discrimination' as they dine together.<sup>174</sup> These cornerstone values for modern democratic societies of 'dignity' and 'non-discrimination' appear morally buttressed by the work of the contrast community. In celebratory meals—culminating in the last supper—Jesus performs his reconciliatory work among social outcasts while signaling forward to the future joyful banquet of all nations. Moltmann points out that Jesus' disciples are

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<sup>172</sup> Moltmann, *The Way*, 120-1.

<sup>173</sup> Moltmann, *The Way*, 126. With the term 'Wisdom' here, Moltmann is connoting the metaphor of Christ as the same divine Wisdom who is the "creator-mediator... beside God before the creation of this world" (281, cf. 71, 89), which he uses to highlight the universal scope of Jesus' ethic for reconciliation among humans but also with the earth.

<sup>174</sup> Moltmann, *The Way*, 115.

constantly invited to active participation in these symbolic, almost subversive, events.<sup>175</sup> Political discipleship that follows ‘the messianic path’ has a performative and symbolic purpose, and yet must likewise drive toward earthly political effects in imparting ‘dignity’ to the socially-excluded.

So far, the work of the contrast community has been described as performative and symbolic, but Moltmann becomes more concrete with respect to political practice in a short passage in *The Way*, entitled “The Messianic Peace.” Here the non-theocratic, and kenotic impulse of Moltmann’s politic is evident in that the peace of the messiah is ‘powerless power’. ‘Kenotic’ here connotes self-emptying on analogy to Christ’s self-emptying as depicted in the Epistles (cf. Phil. 2:7). It is a kind of denial of a claim to authoritative power; the messianic peace comes by way of humiliation and ‘condescension’ in solidarity with outcasts and otherwise rejected. This is an element of negative speech about God, and here the ‘theopolitical’, which is closely related and yet differs the ‘apophatic’. Whereas ‘kenosis’ approximates the reversed structures of power or authority, ‘apophasis’ denotes the mode of talking about the kingdom of God in non-actualizing terms (i.e., as hyper-reality beyond actualization).

The kenotic mode of powerless power is evident in two ways. First, the messianic peace (of the contrast community) is evidenced in non-violent action. Violence operates cyclically, so that an initial violence is met with counter-violence, which retroactively strengthens the justification of the initial violent act, and so forth. Non-violent action, rather than counter-violence, is better and far more effective

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<sup>175</sup> Moltmann, *The Way*, 115. For more on Moltmann’s view of the political significance of the Lord’s Supper, cf. *Politische Theologie – politische Ethik*, 124ff.

for the reason that it nullifies rather than refuels that cycle: “It is only the non-violent reaction which robs evil of every legitimation and puts the perpetrator of violence in the wrong, ‘heaping burning coals’ on his head (Rom. 12.20).”<sup>176</sup>

Relatedly, the second way messianic peace is practiced is in love for one’s enemies. ‘Love’ is read by Moltmann as ‘responsibility’ for broader spheres of people than one’s own local or national community, thus countering ‘friend-enemy thinking’ and returning hostility with good. This becomes very practical and specific for Moltmann, who is writing at the end of the cold war era, when he argues that Christians must resist nuclear armament. And this too is not a simple renunciation of violence, but rather a powerful action that negates:

What is in question is rather the intelligent conquest of the hostility. In loving one’s enemies one no longer asks: how can I protect myself, and deter my enemies from attacking me? The question is then: *how can I deprive my enemy of his hostility?* Through love, we draw our enemies into our own sphere of responsibility, and extend our responsibility to them.<sup>177</sup>

For Moltmann, political discipleship that forms the contrast community does not materialize institution or expand the church’s political or geographic domination as in ‘Constantinian’ forms. Rather by its contrast, in non-violent action, returning evil with good, and trading friendship for hostility, the community in effect sucks away exploitative power and violence. And in this way, the people of God, “already walk in the way of the Lord” as a model, so that the messianic peace is not only

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<sup>176</sup> Moltmann, *The Way*, 129. Here Moltmann alludes to historical examples of (1) the spread of Christianity, which did not abolish the culture of violence but did force accountability to law and the public justification of violence and (2) the many examples of multiple nations’ solidarity against military dictatorships which have led to bloodless transitions of power (p. 130).

<sup>177</sup> Moltmann, *The Way*, 131 (emphasis mine).

proclaimed but practiced.<sup>178</sup> This dynamic of attraction and action as a present expression of an eschatological reality becomes explicit in a short passage on messianic prophecy in Isaiah:

This peace spreads through ‘fascination’, as Lohfink says, not through compulsion, not even through teaching. The light of peace-giving righteousness shines so brightly on Zion that the nations will come of themselves. But on the other hand the law ‘goes *forth*’ from Zion and then spreads to all nations. This then, according to Isaiah, is a double movement of attraction and dissemination [...] It is future, but in its future existence it already determines the present of the people who walk in this way of the Lord.<sup>179</sup>

In sum, Moltmann’s theopolitical imagination sees the kingdom of God impinging on real political-historical life under the inspiration of the messianic peace. And the recurring language in his description of this effect is telling: Political disciples participate in the universal, historical-political movement of the Lordship of Christ over all things. This movement is toward the hope of lasting peace among people (the end of discrimination and exploitation) and between people and creation, and between people and God. Neighborly love is the only “practical way to permanent peace.”<sup>180</sup> The community’s political practice is a symbolic, negative gesture toward that ultimate peace, since it is primarily not a positive ‘social program’ but rather the power of attraction by celebration as well as the nullifying power of returning violence with love.

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<sup>178</sup> Moltmann, *The Way*, 132-3. Here he expands on this in a succeeding discussion on the prophetic vision of Isaiah 2:5 and Micah 4:1-5, in which swords are turned into ploughshares.

<sup>179</sup> Moltmann *The Way*, 134.

<sup>180</sup> Moltmann, *The Way*, 132.

This descriptive analysis of Moltmann's theopolitical vision has provided a first case for an apophatic theopolitical strategy. As we saw, Moltmann's mode is mediating in that it recovers biblical-theological themes for the extension of modern freedoms, non-discrimination, etc. Within Moltmann's apophatic mode, part of the theopolitical path has been through a notion of the crucified God. The contrast community works in a parallel, cruciform and kenotic mode, extends these freedoms negatively and non-coercively. Such a community is perceptible, for Moltmann, by its difference—embodying the singular rule of Christ (Königsherrschaft Christi)—with unjust social and exclusionary practices.

However, in contrast with the political theologians which follow, while contrasting current unjust social forms, Moltmann also accepted these forms as given historical-political realities. One could argue, in other words, that the 'kingdom of man'—as that realm impinged upon by those kenotically embodying the rule of Christ—is still viewed through the lens of materialist social theory. Arne Rasmusson argues as much when he concludes that "...Moltmann makes God's activity in the world, understood as the political struggle for emancipation, the horizon in which the church's theology and practice are interpreted."<sup>181</sup> In the section that follows, we will see how the kingdom of God and man relation is transposed in the theopolitics of Caputo. Both approaches retain a 'contrast society' element in their theopolitics, but the latter calls into question the

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<sup>181</sup> Rasmusson, *Church as Polis*, 188. Cf. Graham Ward, sees this as well when he writes that "Moltmann's theology, endorsing a certain interpretation of Hegel's, radicalizes God being with us, compromising God's transcendence" (Ward, citing *Crucified God* in *Blackwell Companion*, 201).

givenness of the political horizon, emphasizing instead the deconstructability of such forms.<sup>182</sup>

### B.2.2 John Caputo: Poetic Community

John D. Caputo's theopolitics envisions a poetic community. As with Moltmann, there obtains in Caputo's work a prescriptive sociality that contrasts violent structures of power, but the concept of 'Christendom'—as that confusion of the kingdom of God and man—in Caputo migrates onto the plain of postmodern philosophical hermeneutics.<sup>183</sup> For Caputo deconstruction becomes 'the hermeneutics of the kingdom of God' which seeks to break 'idols' of onto-theology in polity in order to clear the field for reconstructive openness toward a more expansive and inclusive sociality. Such an openness is enacted in a 'poetics' that does not spell out clear formulas for social action, but rather a disposition of openness toward the stranger (social-political-religious other). Below, Caputo's theopolitical vision will be set in the context of his postmodern theological project in order to ultimately read his notion of 'poetics' as an apophatic instantiation of the kingdom of God on earth.

Following Jacques Derrida, Caputo agrees that one of the greatest and perhaps most dangerous red herrings of Western thought is its fascination with the

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<sup>182</sup> What Rasmusson writes about Hauerwas here might then apply to the theopolitical visions of both thinkers, who make "the church's story the 'counter story' that interprets the world's politics," Rasmusson, *Church as Polis*, 188.

<sup>183</sup> Caputo, like Moltmann and Hauerwas, decries 'Constantinianism' of the collusion of Christianity and unjust state powers, providing at least one example in 'just war' theory. Cf. *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, 100.

metaphysics of presence, or the *onto*-theological question of Being.<sup>184</sup> Its problem, in brief, is that it tends to assume the possibility of positive knowledge of something that is ultimately unknowable and unspeakable, since it is beyond the world of the text. One salient facet in Derrida's line that "there is nothing outside the text"<sup>185</sup> is that there is an ultimately unbridgeable distance (*différence*) between a sign like 'God' or 'justice' and its ultimate reality. Caputo's work emphasizes that all earthly concepts like 'God', laws, churchly identities, and dogmatic formulas are constructed things that are situated in regions and particular times. As such they are contingent and not necessary; in other words, they are necessarily 'deconstructable'. Caputo appropriates deconstruction for theology by showing, for a start, that in its most pivotal moment Christianity effects its own deconstruction in the 'death of the transcendental signified' on the cross.<sup>186</sup>

The affinity with negative theology is palpable in Caputo's adoption of deconstruction. For Caputo's postmodern theology, the task is clearly not to attempt representations of transcendental realities, but it is also not to acquiesce to the non-reality of God. Tellingly positioned *after* the 'death of God', the work of deconstructive theology is to express the hyper-reality or 'beyondness' of God and by extension the kingdom of God. So he praises negative theology—as for instance

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<sup>184</sup> Caputo is considered one of the foremost theological appropriators of the thought of Jacques Derrida. For his most passionate tribute, see his *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*. For an example Caputo's critique of *onto*-theology as dangerous and support of violent structures of power, see his brief discussion on the 'Christian Right's' propensity to encourage unjust policies with respect to capital punishment, 'just war', anti-immigration in *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*

<sup>185</sup> Quoted in *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?* p. 38 from Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* tr. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Johns Hopkins University Press Baltimore, 1976, 159.

<sup>186</sup> For more on the theme of the death of God, see: John Caputo, Gianni Vattimo, *After the Death of God*, ed. Jeffrey W. Robbins (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

in *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*—for its recognition that the relation between self and other is constituted in part by distance. Such a relation, whether between people or the self and God, is a relation ‘without relation’. He writes, “The other person is really encountered but the true reality of the other is a hyper-reality to which we never gain access.”<sup>187</sup>

In grappling with the inevitable conundrum here of speaking of the ineffable—Caputo deploys the notion of ‘weakness’, which contrasts the ‘strong’ force of ontotheology, which in the end—for Caputo—diminishes God. By contrast, God’s power is displayed in the *absence* of force. God is thus ‘known’ by the deletion of falsified divine images via their deconstruction as idols and by the indirect, non-compulsory solicitation.<sup>188</sup> More like art, and less like a social ethic or a ‘church dogmatics’,<sup>189</sup> there is a poetic effect of theology that can transform the *affected* individual whose desires and love are ‘awakened’. In a passage from the *Weakness of God*, we notice how the ‘weak’ call of God is an *attractive* force:

The weak force of God is to lay *claim* upon us—*uns in Anspruch nehmen*, as Heidegger would say—but not the way a sovereign power in the domain of

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<sup>187</sup> Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, 44, cf. 54. In another passage, Caputo’s proximity to negative theology’s knowing the divine ‘without knowing’ becomes explicit: “I cannot discern the event that concerns me ultimately, and that failure is my success, my most vital sign, my passion, the passion of my non-knowing (*passion du non savoir*), my prayer” (*Weakness of God*, 294-95). It should be noted that Caputo’s own relation to negative theology is equivocal. He is also critical of negative theology inasmuch as it tends to (secretly) support a notion of transcendence. See his, *Weakness of God*, 11. Franke, in his commentary, notices Caputo’s ambivalent relation to negative theology, when he writes that in Caputo’s work, “We open to this beyond by negating whatever is possible for us to imagine and conceive.” 67)

<sup>188</sup> Franke makes the connection here to the notion of ‘weakness’ in Caputo, in which God’s power is “apprehended and experienced by us only as a ‘weak force’ (Caputo’s term), one that lays claim on us—without enforcement—in the name of God or Justice” (Franke, “Apophysis,” 66). This connection is directly made in Girard’s dialogue with Gianni Vattimo in, René Girard and Gianni Vattimo, *Christianity, Truth, and Weakening Faith: A Dialogue*. Ed. Pierpaolo Antonello, Trans. William McCuaig (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University, 2010).

<sup>189</sup> Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, 57.



being invades and then lays claim to territory, overpowers its native population and plants a foreign flag, but in the way of a summons that calls and provokes, an appeal that incites or invites us, a promise that awakens our love.<sup>190</sup>

What follows for Caputo's postmodern political-theological project is that political and ethical values are turned into aesthetic ones. Graham Ward's account of de Certeau's 1968 essay, which described the Paris riots as a 'symbolic revolution', could apply equally to Caputo's project: "Speech itself is transformative event."<sup>191</sup> The kingdom of God likewise is the ineffable-other sociality that cannot be theocratically mobilized into reality. Instead, it 'makes its claim' on us by invitation, and it alters desire in 'awakening our love'. And so the work of political theology is the deconstruction of the ways in which the other is distorted by the prejudices of onto-theological carry-overs. The stability and presence of Being—its measurability and its calculated nature—gives way in Caputo's poetics of the impossible kingdom of God to the ephemeral. "'Ousiology' gives way to 'epiousiology' (*epiousios*), which means the rule of God over the 'quotidian' (*quotidie*) day-to-day time of the fleeting day-lily."<sup>192</sup> And 'when God rules' it ruptures stable patterns and concepts and leads to transformation. Thus uncovering these distortions effects a more radical openness to the uncontrollable and unpredictable 'event' of the other and better prepares one for her utter singularity and uniqueness, which is why, for Caputo, "...what happens in deconstruction has an inner sympathy with the very kingdom of God Jesus calls

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<sup>190</sup> Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 38.

<sup>191</sup> Ward, "Introduction," *Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology*, xv. Ward adds that in postmodern theology, it is through the absence of power that a "virtual triumph is fashioned which, for the moment, curtains the void" (xv).

<sup>192</sup> Caputo, "Poetics of the Impossible," 473.

for.”<sup>193</sup> And this is Caputo’s ground zero for re-constructive sociality—a postmodern theopolitical vision, which by removing these ‘idols’ of thought clears the way for a renewed ‘poetic making’.

Already in Caputo’s *Weakness of God* the kingdom of God is depicted as a ‘weak force’ that impinges itself on the kingdom of man through the double movement of the deconstruction of idols and the reconstruction (‘poetic making’) of a transformed mode of sociality enacted by those attracted by its call. Hence my label of Caputo’s own theopolitical vision as the ‘poetic community’.<sup>194</sup> Its ‘call’ for Caputo describes the external pull from the kingdom of God, which is also apparently a call toward something, namely: a fuller mode of being-together that is always ‘to come’ in a theology of the event.<sup>195</sup> To grasp Caputo’s theopolitical vision, we will look more closely at the notions of ‘poetics’ and how the kingdom of God impinges negatively as a weak force on the kingdom of man in the hospitality of the poetic community.

‘Poetics’ connotes the original Greek *poietikos* (lit. ‘creative’, ‘productive’), and this is picked up in Caputo’s postmodern emphasis on the constructedness of things. But the term also has emotional import. That is, it includes a vocative sense of

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<sup>193</sup> Caputo, John D. *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, 33, 58. In “The Poetics of the Impossible,” Caputo writes, “I am, to the great scandal of deconstructors and the ‘Christian Right’ alike, contending that the way the kingdom contests the mundane powers that pretend to be and to have presence goes hand in hand with the notorious critique of the ‘metaphysics of presence’ (*ousia*) in deconstruction” (478).

<sup>194</sup> Caputo, *The Weakness of God*. In this text, Caputo provides a sustained, deconstructive theological ‘system’, giving attention to several traditional dogmatic categories, including ecclesiology and eschatology, all under the framework of the notion of ‘Event’.

<sup>195</sup> In the introduction to Caputo’s *Weakness of God*, the ‘Event’ is explicitly connected with ‘hyper-realism’. Cf. p. 9, ff, and *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, 39.

expression of longing and desire for a different state of things. In “The Poetics of the Impossible and the kingdom of God,” Caputo writes:

By a poetics I mean a constellation of strategies, arguments, tropes, paradigms, and metaphors, a style and a tone, as well as a grammar and a vocabulary, all of which, collectively, like a great army on the move, is aimed at making a point. We might say that a poetics is a logic with a heart, not a simple or bare bones logic but a logic with *pathos*, with a passion and desire, with an imagination and a flare, a mad logic, perhaps a patho-logic, but one that is healing and salvific. <sup>196</sup>

The poetics of this community is characterized by its open-endedness and ‘logic’ that counters the logic of the ‘world’. The deconstructive work of Jesus’ followers is to unleash the ‘event’ of the kingdom of God, where ‘event’ refers to the potential within the name of the kingdom of God, but not the name itself. That is, the kingdom of God has an aporetic character, just like—for Derrida in his 1989 essay “Force of Law”—‘democracy’ does not exist. Instead, and here we see an important line to Caputo, Derrida writes democracy ‘remains to come’.<sup>197</sup> Caputo references this connection and re-quotes Montaigne: “Oh my fellow democrats, there are no democrats.”<sup>198</sup> In the same way, for Caputo there are no kingdom-dwellers (no ‘Christians’), but only those who seek the kingdom and pray for it to come.<sup>199</sup> Identifying the event of democracy with its present would be ‘idolatrous’, just like

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<sup>196</sup> Caputo, “The Poetics of the Impossible and the kingdom of God,” *Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology*, 470.

<sup>197</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority,” *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld, David Gray Carlson, eds. (New York: Routledge, 1992), 46.

<sup>198</sup> Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, 59. Cf. Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (New York, Verso, 1997).

<sup>199</sup> Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, 35.

identifying the kingdom of God with the church would be idolatrous. "...the church is 'deconstructable', but the kingdom of God, if there is such a thing, is not."<sup>200</sup>

In its auto-deconstruction, the church provides no clear and ubiquitously applicable social program. Rather than force the kingdom of God into some colluding political form, for Caputo, the church should passively let the kingdom of God come on its own by taking a posture of openness to the hyper-reality of the kingdom beyond. "For the idea behind the church is to give way to the kingdom, to proclaim and enact and finally disappear into the kingdom that Jesus called for, all while resisting the temptation of confusing itself with the kingdom."<sup>201</sup> To understand what such an openness entails, we could highlight a few analogies in Caputo's description. First, the church poses the *question*—rather than the answer—of an always-better polity, enacting a longing for a better, all-embracing justice, and continually calling for renewal.<sup>202</sup> Secondly, following Jesus is like a journey on a 'counter path', which is a play on the French *pas* meaning both 'path' and 'not'. The felicitous undecidability in the (French) term articulates a useful tension, in which one must take a single path, but that path is always one among many other viable paths and as such is necessarily revisable.<sup>203</sup> Thirdly, openness

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<sup>200</sup> Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, 35, cf. 60.

<sup>201</sup> Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, 35. For the church as a 'call for renewal' that seeks to bring the kingdom about 'in itself', see, p. 35. In its 'auto-deconstruction' it does the best it can to bring the kingdom about on earth without "setting itself up as a bunch of kings or princes" (p. 35).

<sup>202</sup> Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, 34. The church's 'question' concerns how the irreducible distance between ourselves and Jesus's second coming be made creative. Caputo "The church is not the answer. The church is the question, this question, the gathering of people who are called together by the memory of Jesus and who ask this question, who stand accused, under the call, interrogated and unable to recuse themselves from this question, and who come to understand that there are no easy, ready-made, prepackaged answers" (p. 34)

<sup>203</sup> Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, 54-55. Caputo explicitly links this with the *via negativa*, since any 'real journey' is an open-ended step-beyond.

takes the posture of prayer, in an unsettled exposure to the wholly other, as in the possibility of the impossible God.<sup>204</sup> And finally, it embraces the flux and variety of being in its attention to particulars over ‘Greek’ universals. All together these analogies depict a posture of expectation and a way of seeing things more tentatively. In longing for the coming kingdom of God, it anticipates the upsetting of stable frameworks and exposes the fragility (deconstructability) of dogmatic systems, prejudices, laws, and the like.<sup>205</sup>

This deconstructive openness clears the field, for Caputo, for reconstructive, poetic making, which—as with Moltmann above—is far from non-action, nor yet counter-action. “Deconstruction is a way to dream...” but it’s not only a hope for the future. As a ‘call’, the event of the kingdom of God is also a memory that recalls the event of Christ’s death, and followers in the ‘undecidable’ middle oscillate in the in-between in the (not-)path to respond in particular situations in the present.<sup>206</sup> To be sure, Caputo is critical of ‘negative theology’, which he connects directly with onto-theology. He writes, for instance, that “The God of negative theology is a transcendental signified, the dream of being without difference.”<sup>207</sup> And yet, I would argue that Caputo retains an element of the apophatic in his own

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<sup>204</sup> Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, 55.

<sup>205</sup> Caputo, “Poetics of the Impossible,” 476-7. Here, Caputo also relates this back to the distorting effect of onto-theology and imagines how this may contrast a notion of the kingdom of God: “The Greeks were scandalized by the idea that being would come from non-being, that knowledge could come from ignorance, that any business at all could be transacted between non-being and being, two parties that must be rigorously prevented from making contact with each other. They wanted to subordinate the changing things that just happen to a thing subordinate the changing things that just happen to a thing (*symbebekos*) to what that thing steadily and permanently is (*ousia*). Necessity ruled in all things, which is what they would have meant by the ‘kingdom’ of what they called ‘*theos*’, had anyone coined such an expression among them. Which nobody did.”

<sup>206</sup> Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, 61.

<sup>207</sup> Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 11; see also, 3, 32, 46.

ontic-indeterminacy, as well as in the non-actualizability of the (substantially negative) poetic community, which is evident in the subtitle of his *Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion*. What might it mean for kingdom-seekers when they are doing the 'truth in deed', as Caputo writes, bringing (the kingdom) about as an event?<sup>208</sup> I would submit that the practice of this community follows the weak-force pattern of the kingdom of God's original provocation.

This desire for the kingdom of God is transformative, and it is in fact a centerpiece of Caputo's soteriology, which interprets *metanoia*, not as repentance, but a transformation of a form of life; a different way of being-in-the-world. The poetic making of the kingdom thus demands the impossible; its imperatives to, for instance, love one's enemy, are counter the logic of the 'world'. The term 'world' appears in quotes in the "Poetics of the Impossible" and it is used in ways familiar to the traditional notion of the 'kingdom of man'.<sup>209</sup> That is, the ethical and economic calculations of the world make sense and they include retribution, debt repayment, profitable business practices. The 'aneconomy of the kingdom' on the other hand, includes excessive forgiveness (for seven offenses times seventy) and prefers one lost sheep over ninety-nine others, and so on.

In the kingdom there is an odd predilection for reversals: the last shall be first, sinners are preferred to the righteous, the stranger is the neighbor,

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<sup>208</sup> Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 268.

<sup>209</sup> The 'world' is further associated by Caputo with Being and the 'powers that be', "...the powers that have prestige and presence and all the weightiness of being (*ousia*). The reign of God challenges the rule of the men of means, the men of substance, and the pomp of this world, by exposing them to the power and sovereignty of God, for there is no *ousia* and no *exousia* except from God (Rom. 13.1)," ("Poetics of the Impossible," 742).

the insiders are out. That makes for the astonishing hospitality portrayed in the story of the wedding banquet in which the guests are casual passers-by who are dragged in off the street while the invited guests snub the host ... In general, in the kingdom, the general rule is the rule of the unruly, the possibility of the impossible.<sup>210</sup>

In performing such action, kingdom-seekers are practicing things that have no economic value, make little ethical sense, and appear unreasonable. Paul called this foolishness; Caputo adds that it's a joke.<sup>211</sup> The 'poetics of the impossible' refers to radical practices of charity and inclusiveness, but it can also include modes of theological argumentation. In Caputo's *The Weakness of God* we find such an example in the eleventh-century nominalist monk, Peter Damian. Damian believed that according to the goodness of God and his omnipotence, God effected redemption by bending time to un-do past transgression and make them as though they never happened. Caputo claims that he saw this possibility, since "for Damian a body is less an extended mass ruled by laws of gravity and displacement than a field of happenings in which one event can overtake another."<sup>212</sup> The argument defies reasonableness, but the primacy of controlled, lawful, and comprehensible Being is overridden by God's goodness, which reverses the irreversible. Thus Damian's proposal embodies the 'poetics of the impossible'.<sup>213</sup>

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<sup>210</sup> Caputo, "Poetics of the Impossible," 471.

<sup>211</sup> This contrasts not only the economies of the world, but also ontotheological systems, in that it confounds the philosophers, "who are accustomed to arrange things according to the 'principles' of being, reason, order, possibility, presence, sense, and meaning ... To that is opposed a kingdom which is foolishness, a joke, a kingdom *ironice*, where the last are the first, the weak are strong, the out are in, the crooked are straight, the nobodies and nothings are preferred..." Caputo, "Poetics of the Impossible," 477.

<sup>212</sup> Caputo, *Weakness*, 204.

<sup>213</sup> In addressing this same argument in "Poetics of the Impossible" he elaborates, "Damian is one of the great theoreticians of *the* impossible and this because he has a keen sense for the difference between the world's time and the time in which God rules. Like Kierkegaard and like Levinas later on, he is a philosopher with a biblical ear, with an ear tuned to the divine rhythms..." (Caputo, "Poetics of the Impossible," 474).

Caputo comments, “To have the time of a grievous mistake *back*—is that not our desire beyond desire, our hope against hope? If that were not possible, if the impossible were not possible, if we could not repair the irreparable, ‘how then can we live’?”<sup>214</sup>

Beyond ‘forgiveness’ Caputo likewise signals other potent concepts in his elaboration on deconstruction and renewal in the poetic community.<sup>215</sup> In a passage on ‘justice’, he recounts that Derrida argued for the undeconstructable nature of the term in “Force of Law”.<sup>216</sup> Caputo comments that this is because justice *calls* but strictly speaking, it does not exist. It is a dream (like ‘democracy’) that is never fully realized, and it can never be realized, since realization would require accounting in advance for each anomalous other, her contexts, motives, and the morphological impact she might make on a given legal framework. In fact, vocative justice demands the continual deconstruction of law for the sake of an ever-more-comprehensive justice,<sup>217</sup> and what this amounts to is another resistance to universal formulae, beginning instead with the singular individual.<sup>218</sup>

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<sup>214</sup> Caputo, “The Poetics of the Impossible,” 475. We also notice here that the language Caputo uses here of ‘beyondness’ is unmistakably akin to the ‘hyper-realism’ of negative theology.

<sup>215</sup> Along with these terms, one also finds ‘gift’ and ‘love’ in *WWJD?*. For the sake of brevity here, we will highlight only justice and hospitality.

<sup>216</sup> Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, 63.

<sup>217</sup> “Laws exist under real and determinate circumstances, under definite conditions that vary from time to time and place to place, while the demand for justice is unconditional. Laws are real but justice is like a ‘ghost’, a specter, that haunts the laws, a good ghost ... whispering words of justice in the ears of the law, incessantly calling for what is yet to be.” Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, 65.

<sup>218</sup> As Caputo writes in *Weakness*: “Justice in itself is not an overarching eternal Platonic form but the unique and particular justice that is cut to fit the *Augenblick*, the particular needs of the individual, that is subtly suited and sculpted to the most secret singularity of each individual ... The knowledge of such secrets is what is signified by the name of God, whether or not one rightly passes for an atheist” (*The Weakness of God*, 140). Regarding that attention to the individual in the *Augenblick* he elaborates in *WWJD?* that when the time for decision and action comes, it takes the form of Kierkegaard’s ‘leap’. “That does not mean the simple absence of knowledge and



'Hospitality' in Caputo's work takes a broad meaning as openness to the insistence of the 'event of God', and so it is less a virtue than "the field in which everything we do transpires."<sup>219</sup> But is also a prescription within that field to love, to prefer the stranger and the outcast. He notes in *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?* that 'hospitality' contains the same undecidability (as 'path' above) between the first sense of power (*posse*) over the host's own space and the second sense of welcoming the *hostis*, which in Latin is the stranger-guest but also stranger who is alien, hostile, and this highlights again the counter-logic of the poetic community.<sup>220</sup> The stranger, the one most unlike your group, is precisely the one invited in an authentic act of hospitality. Caputo is not unaware that this necessarily exposes a home to risk and uncertainties, but this is just as one might expect on the open (non)path of following Jesus in the poetic community. The openness of hospitality blurs distinctions between insider/outside, friend/enemy:

I am very interested in the question of the borders of the kingdom, of its inside and outside, and its politics, a question that also spills over into other important questions about the borders that divide the 'religions of the Book', or the borders between orthodoxy and heterodoxy, between the community and the excommunicated, between theism and atheism, theology and atheology, and in general between religion and what has been

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rule, thus insuring a blind and wild choice, but rather the necessity to act inventively, to make a judgement where there are no guard rails or clear precedents..." (69).

<sup>219</sup> Caputo, 43. See also *The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps*. In his chapter on the 'insistence of hospitality', Caputo encapsulates his thesis in this way: "The trouble with hospitality, the trouble that is hospitality, is its commerce with the possible, and the trouble with the possible is its commerce with the impossible. To say 'come' to the ('merely') possible is to play with dice loaded in our favor. Things only get interesting when we come up against the insistence of the impossible" (p. 41).

<sup>220</sup> Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, 76.

called in a devilishly delicious phrase ‘religion without religion’. Are there rigorous walls around the kingdom? Do they have border patrols there? Do they have a problem with illegal immigrants? The guidance we get from the story is that the insiders are out, and the outsiders are in. That, I readily agree, is perfectly mad—it makes perfect sense or non-sense, is in perfect compliance with the poetics of the impossible, with the sort of goings on you come to expect when the kingdom comes.<sup>221</sup>

Like a prayer for the impossible, the poetic community seeks the ‘undeconstructable’ kingdom of God, rendering parochial and contingent all other aspirations for just legal frameworks and hospitable polity. As such they are deconstructable and thus open for re-making a more inclusive, more just society. In this way, we might enact and thus somehow participate in a movement of the kingdom of God. “If no one has seen God and lived, we just might be able to hear God playing sweetly in time, and dance to God’s own good time.”<sup>222</sup> Caputo’s political theology is thus ‘post-Christendom’, not only in an obvious historical-political sense for pluralist, north Atlantic societies, but now also in a sense beyond the longer-lasting ‘unthought’ of onto-theology, which may contribute to a better, more inclusive polity.

### B.2.3 Summary & Implications

The political theologies outlined above all display apophatic theopolitical tendencies that posture the kingdom of God vision as beyond apprehension or mobilization, express the kingdom narratively or poetically, and articulate the

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<sup>221</sup> Caputo, “Poetics of the Impossible,” 480.

<sup>222</sup> Caputo, “Poetics of the Impossible,” 743.

emerging practice of sociality as a kind of substantial negation. In relating the kingdoms of God to man, Moltmann depicted the contrast society that follows the pattern of the kenotic, self-emptying crucified God. For Caputo, on the other hand, the relation is one of poetics of the kingdom in the mood of undecidability and doubt that characterizes the weak force of hospitality. In either case, if the kingdom of God should touch the kingdom of man, it does so apophatically, enacting and expressing an alternative, contrasting sociality. Also common to these otherwise very different perspectives, however, is that the kingdom of God remains at the conceptual level of self-enclosed religious discourse that only tentatively, or weakly, refers to an ultimate social harmony.<sup>223</sup> Alternative polities may develop as cultural-linguistic enactments of the kingdom of God, and these may thrive alongside and perhaps even subvert hegemonic structures of power, but as we saw, practices of sociality, democratic inclusiveness and a kind of love of the other was even justified *on the basis of* the tentativeness of their theopolitics. The indirect inculcation of the political practice of inclusion—this inscrutable bond across epistemological or ‘cultural-linguistic’ chasms—we designated as their substantially negative effect.

This look at postmodern theopolitics prepares us for the radical postsecular theological materialisms of Milbank and Žižek which seek to move beyond ‘weak’ thought, returning to ontological foundation along the lines of the third category of political theology, which seeks to uncover the theology implicit in constructions

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<sup>223</sup> Creston Davis describes the postliberal/postmodern framework that Žižek and Milbank are trying to overcome as a notion of an internally self-referential linguistic horizon, which becomes the new transcendental a priori. Davis (*Monstrosity*, p. 9).

of the political.<sup>224</sup> Radical orthodoxy as well as radical materialism will serve as paradigmatic theopolitical positions that articulate their theopolitical vision in either an 'orthodox' Christian framework of transcendence or in a 'heterodox' framework of bare materialist immanence minus transcendence. The postsecular apophatic impulse will be extrapolated from a discourse analysis of the exchange between John Milbank and Slavoj Žižek in *The Monstrosity of Christ*. Before coming to that analysis, however, it will be instructive to briefly set their theopolitical projects in the context of this broader *ontological* turn and provide a brief introduction to Milbank and Žižek.

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<sup>224</sup> To clarify a potential point of confusion here, the actual difference between the positions Hauerwas and Milbank is of minimal degree. As mentioned earlier in B.1.1., Hauerwas may be seen as a connecting point between the originating postliberal thinkers Hans Frei and George Lindbeck and radical orthodoxy. Nevertheless, both Hauerwas and Milbank have suggested differences at just this point.

### B.3 Postsecular Theopolitics

We saw the theopolitical vision of Moltmann as a discursively potent, social critique as ‘contrast society’ and Caputo’s as the ‘poetic community’. What unites these two metaphors is the kind of transformative vision they seek to articulate: the divine polity is not imposed, no one is coerced inside, but individuals are connected to it by their own re-oriented desire, according to a higher way of being/seeing. One may be drawn to it, as one is drawn towards a compelling performance, and one may come to feel that life is better lived according to its practices once its experienced first-hand in a ‘web’ of relationships. Moreover, this utopian vision of perfect sociality in the kingdom, is not merely an expression of a better ethical code for a fuller human existence. It is also anticipatory in its expectation of fulfillment; that is, it is eschatological in nature. The partial nature of the city’s appearance/performance on earth is a temporary movement, or one might even say propaedeutic habituation, toward some anticipated fulfillment (Caputo would add, ‘perhaps’). And yet, it is also present as a motivating source in the here and now. These theologies see the role of the church, not in its capacity for political agency, but rather in its discursive engagement—as a social critique, witnessing to how things are and how they should be and in this way gesturing towards a place-less, powerless instantiation of the city.

To get beyond postmodern discourses of the ‘language game’ (e.g., Lindbeck) and ‘weak thought’ (e.g., Caputo, Vattimo), radical postsecularisms articulate an ontologically robust theopolitical vision; that is, those theopolitical visions which seek in their own very different ways, to ‘re-mythologize’ the political in a kind of

‘theological materialism’.<sup>225</sup> My purpose here is to provide an orientation for the analysis that follows in pointing out how postsecular theopolitics (1) relates as an amplification of postliberal and postmodern theopolitics and (2) extends the apophatic theme to an ontological dimension within their own political theologies. Describing this ‘amplification’ into an ontological account of the theopolitical will be important for the analysis that follows, since its constellation comes nearest to Taylor’s own apophatic theopolitical articulation.

The term ‘postsecular’ has been used to describe a shift from the dominance of a narrative of religion as an appendix to the history of mankind’s progress, to one which is open to seeing, not only religion’s persistence (or recalcitrance), but also its potential to perform an integrative as well as disintegrative function in contemporary social and political life.<sup>226</sup> Deployed in this way ‘postsecular’ may serve as an appellation for critical theorists as wide-ranging as Jürgen Habermas and his philosophical *bête noir* Jacques Derrida.<sup>227</sup> Phillip Blond’s early use of the term in *Post-Secular Philosophy* (1998), however, points more specifically to a constructive intellectual endeavor to regain (western Christian) theology as a driving meta-discourse in light of an apparent implosion of post-Enlightenment

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<sup>225</sup> For Caputo’s critique of radical orthodoxy, see, “What do I love when I love my God? Deconstruction and Radical Orthodoxy,” in *Questioning God*, Caputo, Dooley, and Scanlon, eds. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).

<sup>226</sup> Such a definition is used by Hent de Vries, “Introduction,” *XX* and is also echoed in Hans Joas’s argument that the term ‘postsecular’ is better understood as a problematic than a historical period. I retain the term postsecular here, likewise not for its sociological explanatory purchase (of which I think there is little), but for its usefulness in grouping theoreticians who have positioned themselves for some form of self-conscious, positive ‘retrieval’ of religion and its sources. For an early description of ‘postsecular thinkers’ as I group them here, see Blond, *Post-Secular Philosophy*. For a systematic treatment of the term, see William Barbieri, “The Post-Secular Problematic,” in *At the Limits of the Secular: Reflections on Faith and Public Life*, Barbieri, ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2014), 129ff.

<sup>227</sup> Cf. Habermas, “Notes on a Post-Secular Society,” *New Perspectives Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (October 2008), 17-29; Lasse Thomassen, ed., *The Derrida-Habermas Reader* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

philosophical discourse in postmodernity. Along these lines, I wish to define the 'postsecular' theopolitical problematic as the distinct recovery of 'strong' theological language in the construction of political theology in *ontological* terms. By way of introduction to the Milbank/Žižek amplification of theopolitics, it will be useful to underline a few relevant points in Blond's narrative of the end of 'secular' philosophy as such.

Blond begins by tracing the origins of modern, secularist philosophy to thirteenth-century Britain in the thought of Henry of Ghent (1217-93) and Duns Scotus (1266-1308).<sup>228</sup> Scotus's universal science of metaphysics (*De Metaphysica*) posited being as prior to 'God' as a mode of infinite being and 'creation' as a mode of finite being. His concept of being is thus 'univocal' in as much as it is common to both God and creation alike. And this contrasted the earlier Thomist vision of a 'analogical' or 'participatory' ontology, whereby created being may particulate analogically in any predicate/effect from its divine, donating source. Blond writes,

Ontologically this means that entities are not self-subsistent, simply existent objective things ... for the things themselves belong to God; they are utterly donated givens, gifts whose phenomenology is saturated with their origin in God.<sup>229</sup>

The framework, for Blond, thus becomes available for thinking through reality

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<sup>228</sup> Here, Blond echoes the origin narrative also found in Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory*, "Against Secular Order," Introduction to *Radical Orthodoxy*, etc.

<sup>229</sup> Blond, Introduction: *Post-Secular Philosophy*, 7. One picks up here, as well, an influence of another postsecular thinker, French phenomenologist Jean-Luc Marion, whose work also features in the compilation of essays, both in his own essay on Decartes and Onto-theology as well as in an essay by Graham Ward on Marion's contribution to postsecular thinking.

apart from God and (leaping ahead from medieval Scholasticism) eventually makes possible the Kantian-Enlightenment sense that all that can be known is conditioned by the structure of human subjectivity. Hence the relegation of God to the ethical and to pragmatic questions of moral motivation.<sup>230</sup> 'Late moderns' who follow this trajectory have a range of options between two extreme paths, drawn by Blond as following either the 'transcendental method' (or, 'transcendental hope') or the 'path of immanence' (or 'immanentist conjecture'). The former develops its moral vision from a kind of universal anthropological or biological constant, and the latter is destructive of any stable, unifying moral vision.<sup>231</sup> It is here in his description of the two paths of late modernity that Blond asks the relevant question: "Yet is there not now a common feeling that these resources alone [i.e., deconstructive strategies] are still too weak a force to confront the present with its ownmost possibilities?"<sup>232</sup> Whatever one thinks of the details of this narrative, its general contours are certainly paralleled among postsecular thinkers like Milbank and Žižek. The cultural effects he describes concerning 'weak' thought also significantly overlap inasmuch as he anticipates an endless moral skepticism that "warps human life" and ends in despair. The way out, in light of this prognosis, is to recover a 'stronger' theological vision. "Theology," Blond writes, "must be braver than this."<sup>233</sup>

Despite the reaction some would have against the self-identification 'postsecular', it remains the case that these theopolitical visions emerge as various contrasts to

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<sup>230</sup> Blond, "Introduction," *Post-Secular Philosophy*, 2.

<sup>231</sup> Blond has in mind here is a deconstructive, neo-Nietzschean perspective. Cf., "Introduction," *Post-Secular Philosophy*, 2-5.

<sup>232</sup> Blond, "Introduction," *Post-Secular Philosophy*, 4.

<sup>233</sup> Blond, "Introduction," *Post-Secular Philosophy*, 5.



secularist conceptions of the political.<sup>234</sup> Whereas modern political theology operated with social-scientific understandings of the political as secular, neutral, ‘natural’ space, disconnected from religious or mythical ontologies—that is, a space not of itself imbued with meaning—postsecular political theologies are characterized by their various efforts to expose the presupposed ontological scheme. The reason for this recovery of the ontological over against post-liberal/modern political theologies, is that each sees the necessity of treading into the ‘hinterlands’ for clairvoyance, self-understanding, retrieval of moral sources to give an adequate account of the political.<sup>235</sup> That is, in order to understand political agency as ‘intelligible action’ and not the mere brute force of will against will, as presupposed both by popular liberalism and postmodern Nietzscheism, is that there must be a back-story to discourses around the political, justice, peace, and that human political action *as* intelligible action engages in symbolic exchange, dialog with the past, etc. This partially explains why Carl Schmitt’s work has recently resurfaced as a reference point in this political-theological mode, since his work likewise sought to demonstrate ‘the political’, not in terms of party politics, but rather in terms of the existential condition of sociality.<sup>236</sup> In Schmitt’s *Politische Theologie* a parallel genealogical link is also made between the modern

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<sup>234</sup> Cf. Žižek and Milbank, *Monstrosity of Christ*, 94, 255. One of the difficulties here is in pinpointing what is actually being contrasted in each of these visions; sometimes ‘liberal’ is used here also as a synonym for ‘secularist’. Milbank, for instance, more recently in, Milbank and Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue: Postliberalism and the Human Future* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016) equivocates from slight optimism about ‘liberalism’ to utter despair about ‘liberalism’. Part of the reason for this, I’d suggest, is that there are two uses of the term, which overlap but are distinct. On the one hand, ‘liberal’ can refer to a form of politics that prizes inclusion, non-discrimination, individual freedoms of belief, etc., and on the other hand, ‘liberal’ refers to a secularist, atomist vision of the human and social.

<sup>235</sup> ‘Hinterlands’ is Rowan Williams’s description of the common project for the same collection of thinkers. See his introduction to *Theology and the Political* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 1-3.

<sup>236</sup> Cf. *Der Begriff des Politischen*. Schmitt’s thought has been picked up more explicitly, for example, in the postsecular political theologies of Jacques Derrida and Giorgio Agamben.

construction of the political and its implicit theological ground. This is displayed in chapter three where he famously asserts that “All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts.”<sup>237</sup>

Similarly, in depicting an ontology of the political, postsecular theopolitics returns to the ‘mythical’ behind constructions of the political.<sup>238</sup> Already implicit here in a recovery of the motif of the ‘mythical’ is a critical stance against a form of ‘Enlightenment’ epistemology that would separate reason from myth. This is not seen as a rejection of reason. As Creston Davis writes in his introduction to *The Monstrosity of Christ*, what its authors reject is a certain kind of “self-repeating ideological reason that only reproduces the economic status quo.”<sup>239</sup> In its place, Žižek and Milbank both narrate an *ontological* account of the political; that is, by positing one myth over others as the narration of the Real.

Both Žižek and Milbank are criticized as hyperbolic in their political theory, speaking too loudly and immodestly in their ontological formulations.<sup>240</sup> They are, moreover, worrisome to ‘weak’ and liberal theologians alike, who go so far to

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<sup>237</sup> Schmitt, Carl. *Politische Theologie* (1922); *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

<sup>238</sup> Carl Schmitt developed an explicit connection between myth and the political in his literary-critical piece, *Hamlet or Hebuca: The Intrusion of the Time into the Play*.

<sup>239</sup> Creston Davis, *Monstrosity*, 19. Davis also highlights in his introduction to *Monstrosity* that the logical relation of myth and reason, along with the breakdown of philosophical thought in the wake of the ‘linguistic turn’ of postmodern philosophy (pp. 5-7). “The return to the theological in our time may be a call, once again, to strike a balance between reason and myth, between faith and belief, between political struggle and the secular state, and between the diving and the human” (5).

<sup>240</sup> In addition to my discussion above on the term ‘postsecular’ (B.3), see also postsecular senses three and four in William Barbieri’s helpful differentiation of the term in “The Postsecular Problematic,” *At the Limits of the Secular: Reflections of Faith and Public Life*, Barbieri, ed., (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 142-47.

suggest their rhetoric may—in the wrong hands—incite physical violence.<sup>241</sup> They fear ‘violence’ because at a minimum their political theory appears as the ‘totalizing’, discursive equivalent of a revived Christendom (or anti-Christendom). After all, both thinkers claim the absoluteness of a Christian theopolitical vision. Whether or not one agrees with these critics, they do spotlight a dilemma for their projects. The theopolitical polity from either perspective is both universally inclusive—as a stronger ontology the vision embraces and is available to everyone—and yet exclusively apparent to those who see it and are captured by the picture of the ineffable ‘political’.

As with the postliberal and postmodern theopolitical pictures above, and yet from a different angle, this appears to be resolved by the notion that any political transformation under their banner would happen via an altered vision and not by force; in their cases, either by a Lacanian ‘short-circuit’ or by capturing the imagination doxologically, and not by force. Political prescriptions are hence shaped by radical de-centeredness, powerlessness. This comes across in both Milbank and Žižek in their rejection of ‘utopianism’ and even in their rejection of each other’s vision as ‘utopic’.<sup>242</sup> Their positions are, however, aptly ‘utopian’ in the etymologically original sense of ‘no-place’. The pejorative of that term in their discourse might be explained ironically by the generally negative connotation of the term as referring to ideal political programs that were actually attempted, but failed, as in the grand twentieth-century failures of global idiocrasies like Marxism and Communism. Their visions, to the contrary, forestall the tragedy of political

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<sup>241</sup> Cf. Caputo, “Review: Monstrosity of Christ,” *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* (2009), posted at [ndpr.nd.edu/reviews/the-monstrosity-of-christ-paradox-or-dialectic](http://ndpr.nd.edu/reviews/the-monstrosity-of-christ-paradox-or-dialectic).

<sup>242</sup> Cf. Žižek, “Dialectical Clarity versus the Misty Conceit of Paradox,” *Monstrosity*, 234ff.

revolution, by building tragedy into the theopolitical vision itself. Postsecular theopolitics in this mode continues the thread of apophaticism since the vision is *performed* and never-fully-actualized as political program.

Below I perform a discourse analysis in the exchange between the two 'ontologized' versions of the kingdom of God/kingdom of man dyadic relation.<sup>243</sup> The analysis begins with a description of their own narrations of modernity, contrasting Žižek's Marxist-Hegelian 'Protestant' narrative with the 'alternative Catholic humanism' of Milbank's 'Catholic' narrative. The former depicts an inevitable death of God once the 'singular universal' is finally posited in Protestantism, the final self-alienation of humanity; the latter depicts the (also inevitable) disaster of the heterodox turn of Protestantism—more specifically, late medieval nominalism. Milbank's narrative is thus the story of 'what might have been' and, also, what might be, given the twin conditions of pre-modern source recovery and the failure of modern thought to provide an adequate alternative moral vision.

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<sup>243</sup> 'Discourse analysis' is a wide-ranging term for methodologies found in many fields of research (e.g., linguistics, philosophy, sociology, history, politics). As used here, the term refers to the analysis of vocabulary and terms of debate as they appear and alter in a network of contemporary theopolitical conversation. Broadly it follows Jürgen Habermas's basic assumptions regarding the act of argumentation in his '*Diskurstheorie*' in *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* (1981: 48). That is, insofar as that this group of thinkers constitutes participants in a mutual (asynchronous) conversation, they hold a common understanding of what counts as rational discourse; ideally convinced/convincible by the strength of argumentation regarding the 'problematic' of theologically picturing and applying the ideal sociality. The focus of this analysis, then, is on argumentation in Moltman, Hauerwas and Caputo for the proper language/metaphor for the 'city of God' and secondly on Milbank's and Žižek's meta-linguistic '*Unterbrechung*' that pushes the framework for argumentation toward a discussion on ultimate Being, thus altering the sense of the same metaphors (of 'weakness', 'contrast', 'alternate'). For a helpful intro to discourse analysis, see Thomas Niehr, *Einführung in die linguistische Diskursanalyse* (Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft: Darmstadt, 2014), cf. pages 7-26.

The effect of offering re-narrations of the modern political is to level the options; that is, by offering an alternative to the implicit ‘unthought’ (Foucault) of the masternarrative, the intension by either author is to open a space for the insertion of an alternative sociality; in this case, a theopolitical vision and metaphysics of the political. In other words, their narrations frame the articulation of what will appear in the next section in (1) their own ontological presuppositions that (2) disrupt the characteristically modern distinction between the *matter* of political life and processes and *form* of our narratives/performances/vision about the political. These ontological articulations are characterized as ‘univocal’ and ‘participatory’; respectively, they relate the poles of transcendence/immanence in terms of—as the subtitle of the book anticipates—a (Hegelian) *dialectic* or (Thomist) *paradox*. Both narrations attempt, in this way, a ‘serious fiction’ to disrupt the assumed background picture of the modern, secular (democratic) political. This disruption is a re-posing of the question: what is *the political*?

The analysis moves finally from descriptions of the authors’ narrations of modernity and ontologies of the political to focus on the imperative in the call for particular political enactments. Both theopolitical imperatives, I argue, are *substantial negations* in the way we’ve defined the term above.<sup>244</sup> Here we find that the imperative is toward subterranean network forms of sociality—alien forms of togetherness resident in the familiar pluralist, democratic orders. These are ‘alien’ in the sense that they are in some sense strange or foreign to the background framework of these orders. The apophatic theopolitical vision

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<sup>244</sup> See my discussion above, on page 58. This refers to a negative and yet constructive relation between the ‘two kingdoms’, or between the theopolitical vision and the ‘political’.

remains in both thinkers an ineffability—a non-actualizable polity that nonetheless indirectly motivates distinct forms of being-together. Both exhibit a paradox of unforced force of the power-less polity, and this is an important justification of their claim to a theopolitical vision that is at once more embracing of otherness and grounded in an exclusive notion of (the Real) polity. That is, from their amplified (‘strong’) ontologized register, both claim to justify an even more thoroughgoing pluralism and generosity that regards the other in non-patronizing distinctness.<sup>245</sup>

### B.3.1 Introductory Notes: Slavoj Žižek & John Milbank

#### B.3.1.1 Slavoj Žižek

Slavoj Žižek (1949-) is a Slovenian political philosopher and critical theorist. He is the author of numerous provocative publications that mount a critique of ideology and build a speculative-philosophical framework for thinking of the political beyond liberalism and late modern capitalism. From 1981 to 1985, having specialized in German idealism for his first PhD, he began studying the work of Jacques Lacan under Lacan’s son-in-law, Jacques-Alain Miller at the University of Paris VIII. What he produced during this time was a famously idiosyncratic theoretical-critical apparatus deriving from his interactions with Marxism, German idealism (primarily Hegel), and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. In these notes below, I provide an abbreviated description of the core points in Žižek’s

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<sup>245</sup> This is one of the central, common critiques of Milbank and Žižek against Derridean/Levinasian ethics.

political philosophy as shaped by these interactions, beginning with his critique of ideology and ending with a preliminary note on Žižek's ontological framework. This will also provide an opportunity for defining some of Žižek's idiosyncratic terminology, which will be used throughout the analysis which follows.<sup>246</sup>

If the traditional goal of a Marxist critique of ideology is to expose the reigning ideology as a distortion of reality—where overcoming such distortions, or 'false consciousness', is a condition for the liberation of the proletariat—, then 'ideology' here has the negative connotation of a strategy for concealing the real. However, in his early book *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989), Žižek begins to re-articulate the notion of ideology as any polity's defense of its own existence as a unified community.<sup>247</sup> It does so, for example, by narrating the legality of its own origins, which—according to Žižek—is always a gloss over its own lawless overturning of whatever order proceeded it. Furthermore, ideologies function by identifying subjects with some extra-political reality, which Žižek calls the 'sublime object' (or 'big Other', following Lacan) such as 'God' (theocracy), 'the people' (democracy), or 'the Party' (communism). No one ever really sees such objects, but by them societies substantiate their allegiances and individuals may

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<sup>246</sup> For more thorough introductions to Žižek's thought, begin with Matthew Sharpe, "Slavoj Žižek," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, [www.iep.utm.edu/zizek/](http://www.iep.utm.edu/zizek/). See also: Sharpe, *Slavoj Žižek: A Little Piece of the Real* (Hants: Ashgate, 2004); Parker, Iain, *Slavoj Žižek: A Critical Introduction* (London: Pluto Press, 2004); Butler, Rex, *Slavoj Žižek: Live Theory* (London: Continuum, 2004); Kay, Sarah, *Žižek: A Critical Introduction* (London: Polity, 2003); Myers, Tony, *Slavoj Žižek, Routledge Critical Thinkers* (London: Routledge, 2003); Pound, Marcus, *Žižek: A (Very) Critical Introduction* (Eerdmans, 2008).

<sup>247</sup> Žižek further distinguishes his notion of ideology from Marx's in *Capital* by arguing that the model of ideology critiqued in earlier Marxist models is no longer relevant in late modern capitalist societies. In the previous model, accordingly, subjects could be described as "They do not know [the fakeness of the object of ideology], but they are doing it." But now, argues Žižek, the structure follows a kind of double illusion such that "They know very well how things really are, but they are still doing it as if they did not know." Such, for Žižek, is the 'post-ideological' illusion: "For example, they know that their idea of freedom is masking a particular form of exploitation, but they still continue to follow this idea of Freedom" (Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 33).

come to terms with their location in the social whole.<sup>248</sup> In structuralist terms, the most politically important terms are the sublime objects of ideology inasmuch as they are 'signifiers without a signified'.<sup>249</sup>

Žižek builds his critique of ideology on an account of subjectivity that combines German idealism with Lacanian psychoanalysis. He draws, for instance, on Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, where the subject's identity is challenged in the experience of an incapacity to perceive the sublime object. Reflected here, for Žižek, is the gap that structures subjectivity generally; that is, the 'insurmountable gap' between phenomenal empirical objects and the 'Thing-in-itself'. But with respect to the sublime object, the experience of the gap itself becomes a mode of negatively presenting the sublime.<sup>250</sup> Reading this (subject-Sublime object) dialectic through a Lacanian lens, Žižek describes subjects as 'split' between conscious and unconscious; that is between unconsciously held belief and what is consciously known. In psychoanalysis, the analysand initially believes that the analyst (the Other) already understands the meaning of their symptom—that his 'free associations' will have some kind of meaning. The subject (analysand), in other words, posits the Other's special knowledge, to which the subject has no conscious

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<sup>248</sup> Žižek, Slavoj, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London; Verso, 1989). Žižek reads these sublime objects, following Lacanian structuralism, as 'master signifiers'.

<sup>249</sup> This is another Lacanian, structuralist concept. Cf. Žižek, Slavoj, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology*, 79.

<sup>250</sup> Žižek writes, "The paradox of the Sublime is as follows: in principle, the gap separating phenomenal, empirical objects of experience from the Thing-in-itself is insurmountable—that is, no empirical object, no representation [*Vorstellung*] of it can adequately present [*darstellen*] the Thing (the suprasensible Idea); but the Sublime is an object in which we can experience this very impossibility, this this permanent failure of the representation to reach after the Thing. Thus, by means of the very failure of representation, we can have a presentiment of the true dimension of the Thing" (*Sublime Object of Ideology*, 203).



access.<sup>251</sup> Then the function of the analyst, according to Žižek, in taking a 'passive' or 'neutral' stance, is to frustrate the subject's desire for resolution, or for making sense of the symptom. In this way, he writes, "the analyst forces the analysand to confront *his own act of presupposing the Other*."<sup>252</sup>

The psychoanalytic problem parallels the problem of ideology. Just as the analyst's purpose is to assist in the subject's realization of their fantasy *qua* *fantasy* by demonstrating the subject's active participation in its construction, so the political subject may traverse the fantasy of capitalism, for instance, by understanding her own agency in fetishizing its 'sublime object'. This structure of the subject 'positing her own presupposition' is the cornerstone of Žižek's reading of Hegel's claim in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* that "The Substance is Subject." "The 'transcendent' character of the Substance, its surplus eluding the Subject's grasp, results from a kind of illusion of perspective: from the Subject's forgetting to include his own gaze in the picture."<sup>253</sup>

This is about more than a simple reflective determination, as in Marx's figure of the king in a footnote of *Capital*. There Marx notes that individuals think they treat someone as a king because he is king in himself, whereas in reality he is only king because individuals treat him as though he were a king. This is obviously the case,

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<sup>251</sup> Žižek describes two kinds of illusion, which have this same structure of 'positing the presupposition': (1) the 'Althusserian' illusion of 'interpellation' whereby the subject, in the act of recognizing himself as the addressee of the Other (Society, etc.), presupposes the Other as the agency concerning meaning on the Real, and (2) the 'Kafkaesque' illusion of the subject perceiving himself as the impotent, insignificant bystander, who in the act of witnessing the spectacle of the mysterious Other actually constitutes its transcendent nature. See, Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do*, 109.

<sup>252</sup> Žižek, *For They Know Not what They Do*, 109.

<sup>253</sup> Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do*, 107.

for Žižek, but it misses the fact that what sustains the ‘fetishist illusion’ is that (in the example of an hereditary monarchy) the state only holds together if there is a king—“*the very unity of our state, that which the king ‘embodies’, actualizes itself only in the person of a king.*”<sup>254</sup> The king is that ‘miserable’ individual who is neither the king *in himself* nor the state (drawing on Hegel’s example of the ‘logical necessity of hereditary monarchy’, the king who is born into his role, is not needed for his intelligence, skill in diplomacy, etc., but exists merely as the embodiment of the state to ‘dot the i’ of legislation and so represent the state back to its citizens, who are the actual origin and end of that legislation); thus he is an in-between Thing, a ‘vanishing mediator’ between particular individual and social Whole. In other words, he is a ‘monster’.

What is affected in a ‘traversing’ of the fantasy, which for Žižek (following Lacan) is the really authentic experience, is a realization that the fetish-*ist* subject of ideology is a concomitant of the fetishized ‘substance’ of the social whole. And if ‘substance is subject’, according to Žižek, this is also a recognition that there is nothing ‘beyond’ the symbolic order; no big Other that guarantees meaning for the subject’s contingent experience.<sup>255</sup> This transfer of the sublime object to the subject’s own making inflicts Žižek’s characteristic ‘dialectical inversion’ of transcendence into immanence, which is referred to below as ‘negative dialectic’. In the standard reading of the Hegelian dialectic, the thesis is negated/preserved

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<sup>254</sup> Žižek, *Monstrosity*, 80 (emphasis in original).

<sup>255</sup> “For Lacan, the ultimate authentic experience (“traversing the fantasy”) is that of fully confronting the fundamental impasse of the symbolic order; this tragic encounter with the impossible Real is the limit-experience of a human being” (Žižek, *For They Know Not what They Do*, lxxxix). This is why, for Žižek, the end of Lacanian psychoanalytic treatment “equals the acceptance of the radical atheist closure,” that there is no (divine) big Other (Ibid., lxxxix). See also, Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 65.

(sublated, *aufgehoben*) into its antithesis, which is then unified in a positive-rationalized synthesis. So, for instance, the 'Universal' is *aufgehoben* in the 'Particular', which moves toward the synthesized 'Singular'. In Žižek's ontological reading, however, dialectic is the mode of the lack of a beyond or Other representing itself.<sup>256</sup> This lack that represents itself is referred to by Žižek variously as 'Nothingness', 'Void', 'non-All', or 'unGod' as we find in the theopolitical topic of *Monstrosity*.<sup>257</sup>

Žižek's philosophical-critical framework includes a 'death of God' Christology.<sup>258</sup> In short, for Žižek, Christianity is the theopolitical equivalent of the Lacanian psychoanalytic process of traversing the fantasy, since it is the sole religion that articulates the 'death of God' as the big Other. It does so, following Hegel, in a triadic movement from transcendent/universal God the Father, through the incarnation of God the Son and hence particularization of God in Christ. In the moment of the death of Christ, God is virtualized in the community of believers. Thus, for instance the statement, "Where two or three gather in my name, there I am with you" (Matt. 18:20) is taken literally to mean that God 'exists' now only in the community of believers.

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<sup>256</sup> In this way, Žižek's 'negative dialectic' is a radicalization of 'negative dialectics' in Adorno and Horkheimer, which links the development of Enlightenment reason with capitalism, but assumes the Marxist dialectic without the ontological (Hegelian) implications Žižek wants to draw. As such, Adorno takes what Žižek refers to as a naïve 'post-ideological' position. Cf. Davis, *Monstrosity*, 10. For an alternative view, that Žižek and Adorno are in fact more similar than Žižek assumes, see, Bogdan, Ciprian, "The Sublime Gesture of Ideology. An Adornian Response to Žižek," *International Journal of Žižek Studies* Vol. 10, No. 3 (2016).

<sup>257</sup> Žižek, "Fear of Four Words," *Monstrosity*, 34, 36.

<sup>258</sup> Žižek joins other postsecular retrievals of Christian theological language to articulate a theological materialism. His work, for instance, frequently draws on Alain Badiou, whose work has taken up the Pauline corpus. Cf. Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*. Trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

Following Caputo and Vattimo's death-of-God theology, the event of Christ opens the (philosophical) possibility of the end of a transcendent ('onto-theological') notion of God. And yet Žižek rejects 'weak thought', which in his view will not commit to the negative ontology it implies, leaving it substantively useless for the revolutionary socialism he seeks to reinvigorate.<sup>259</sup> The postmodern deconstruction of religion retains the sense for 'beyondness' of being in the notion of the Event. The 'event' in Caputo is an ineffable becoming of things; 'God' is a historical, contingent signifier, but the 'event' cannot be contained in language.<sup>260</sup> And in this way, for Žižek the ineffable Other is preserved. What is missed in a postmodern death-of-God theology of the event is the apocalyptic force of Christianity's notion of the death of God in Christ.<sup>261</sup>

A notion of 'weakness' is retained Žižek, but not as a postmodern strategy for theological, but rather as an ontological articulation; that is, Žižek wishes to articulate not a 'weak theology', but a 'weak God', who realizes himself in humanity as humanity's own subjectivity via the 'vanishing mediator' of the God-man Christ. According to his telling, God is not exposed as a projection and thus found to be illusory (*à la* Feuerbach). On the contrary, God reveals *himself* as the

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<sup>259</sup> Caputo, "Review: Monstrosity of Christ," *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* 9 (2009). In his review of the debate between Milbank and Žižek in *Monstrosity of Christ*, Caputo reacts against both perspectives as totalizing and potentially politically dangerous.

<sup>260</sup> Cf. Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 2-9.

<sup>261</sup> Here Žižek's perspective on the 'death of God' aligns with Thomas Altizer over against the postmodern 'soft' death-of-God of Caputo. He makes the following comparison in *Monstrosity*, "Caputo's reading of the death of God reduces it to a happy 'deconstructive' event: the God who dies is the onto-theological Master of creation, the supreme Entity, and the field is thereby open for the (re)assertion of the true abyss of Divinity as a spectral Promise—to a death like this, one can only say 'Good riddance!' For Altizer, on the contrary, what 'dies' on the Cross is not just the false (positive, ontic) envelope of Divinity, which was obfuscating its eventual core; what dies is God himself, the structuring principle of our entire universe, its life-giving force, the guarantee of its meaning. The death of God thus equals the end of the world, the experience of 'darkness at noon'" (Žižek, *Monstrosity*, 260). Cf. Altizer, *Godhead and the Nothing* (2012) *The Apocalyptic Trinity* (2012), *The Call to Radical Theology* (2013).

projected, (un)dead God, a zombie divinity. In other words, the Void presents itself. So for Žižek, Christianity is the absolute religion, insofar as it alone cuts through the illusion of the existence of a 'big Other', revealing that the metaphysical superstructure, the 'Substance', is produced by the 'Subject' in a virtual community of believers. Just like the Lacanian 'cure' of having no cure, Žižek calls his readers to sober acceptance of what is lacking, and hence to a new kind of solidarity.

#### B.3.1.2 John Milbank

John Milbank is a British theologian, Emeritus Professor of Religion, Politics, and Ethics at the University of Nottingham. Milbank studied modern history at Oxford, theology at Cambridge, and philosophy at the University of Birmingham where he studied under Leon Pompa and dissertated on *The Priority of the Made: Giambattista Vico and the Analogy of Creation*. During his time at Cambridge, he studied under Rowan Williams and began collaborating with others of a similar theological disposition like Graham Ward and Catherine Pickstock, with whom he edited and contributed to the series of essays entitled *Radical Orthodoxy* in 1999. In the introduction to that collection, the theological sensibility now known by the same name is characterized by two foundational claims: first, modern secularism is premised on a theological aberration, or corruption that is ultimately nihilistic and second, the material and temporal realms can only adequately be upheld if it is viewed as 'participating' in transcendence. Hence the project begins with exposing the ontological root (*radix*) of secularism and then articulates the return to an 'orthodox' Christian ontological account of things as a more viable

alternative. Milbank's work generally, but most prominently *Theology and Social Theory* (1991) may be credited with laying much of the contemporary intellectual scaffolding behind these claims. In this brief introduction to Milbank's thought, it will be useful to address these two themes as they interact with Milbank's method and at-times idiosyncratic terminology, which will appear throughout the analysis that follows.

Taking the first theme above, Milbank's work aims to expose the ontology that is implicit in secularism. 'Secularism' here is understood somewhat loosely as a *Weltanschauung* that interprets the world, human behavior, morality, sexuality, art, in short, everything, on its own immanent terms, without reference to an 'ultimate' transcendent 'ground' (God). For Milbank, when the material and temporal cease to reference transcendence, as it has in modern secularism, it will ineluctably slide into nihilism, since it is simply and straightforwardly grounded in nothing. Milbank's critique of secularism is sprawling and dense, but it should be useful to briefly highlight at least the aspect of its genealogical account.

Milbank's genealogical account reads the origins of modern secularism as derivative of a theologically heterodox aberration in late-medieval nominalism represented in the thought of Duns Scotus and William of Ockham. The nominalists, he argues, traded a metaphysics of participation for a univocal notion of being, which drove the initial wedge in what becomes the modern dualisms of sacred/secular, faith/reason.<sup>262</sup> Milbank's narrative, in brief, begins with the nominalist conception of divine will as having created everything according to its

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<sup>262</sup> See, John Milbank, *Word Made Strange* (New York: Blackwell, 1997), 44

own inscrutable, arbitrary pleasure, leaving behind a material sphere of objects and observable patterns. Humans thus come to know God's will by extrapolating it from its revelation in scripture or from patterns of design in the created, natural order. It is this theological epistemology that leads Scotus and others to posit a 'univocal' notion of being, which—rather than viewing God as the source of being who is at once also beyond being—posits being prior to God and creation. God expresses an infinite mode of being, while creation expresses the finite mode.

For Milbank, what begins to fade from view in the nominalist metaphysic is the patristic (and Platonic) expression that humanity and the rest of creation participate in that being which is its transcendent source. An important theological expression of the ontology of participation, to which Milbank returns, is the scholastic notion of the 'analogy of being' as associated with the thought of Thomas Aquinas. When the analogical/participatory framework is eclipsed,<sup>263</sup> the material and temporal cease to reference their transcendent source, and the way is opened toward the ultimately alienated dualisms of faith/reason and sacred/secular. These alienations, for Milbank, and the carving out of distinct, immanentized 'secular order' necessarily expresses what he calls an ontology of violence, which pictures the social as a field of competition in an agonist struggle for hegemony and power.<sup>264</sup>

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<sup>263</sup> The terms 'participatory' and 'analogical' (and 'paradoxical' in *Monstrosity*) are interchangeable in Milbank's writing as descriptors of an 'orthodox' ontological framework.

<sup>264</sup> Cf. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*; as well as in his earlier essay "Against Secular Order," *Word Made Strange*, and "Materialism and Transcendence," *Theology and the Political*. He likewise draws the conclusion 'against' Hegel that the 'ahistorical' dialectic is premised on a 'heretical' idea that the existence of things is grounded in Being's self-alienation, a notion Milbank links to the thought of Jacob Böhme (Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 172)

In agreement with Phillip Blond's estimation (see B.3), radical orthodoxy generally and Milbank in particular see the 'nihilistic drift' in the postmodern collapse of meaning as the unsurprising demise of Enlightened 'self-sufficient' reason. *Radical Orthodoxy* is introduced as a theological response to this context, described in these stark terms:

And yet in its early manifestations secular modernity exhibited anxiety concerning its own lack of ultimate ground—the skepticism of Descartes, the cynicism Hobbes, the circularities of Spinoza all testify to this. And today the logic of secularism is imploding. Speaking with a microphoned and digitally simulated voice, it proclaims—uneasily, or else increasingly unashamedly—its own lack of values and lack of meaning. In its cyberspaces and theme-parks it promotes a materialism which is soulless, aggressive, nonchalant and nihilistic.<sup>265</sup>

Postmodernism's explicit 'unashamed proclamation' of the end of truth,<sup>266</sup> meaning and 'meta-narrative' for Milbank, also has the concomitant and happy effect of exposing the end of secularism as the singularly unquestionable meta-narrative. Hence the late modern self-realization of secularism's groundlessness provides an opportunity for theology's re-assertion as 'meta-discourse'. Accordingly, radical orthodoxy is nothing less than the attempt "to reclaim the world by situating its concerns and activities within a theological framework."<sup>267</sup>

Milbank follows what he calls the 'meta-critique' of Enlightened (i.e., Kantian and Cartesian) reason which found its early articulation in Hamann, Jacobi, Schelling,

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<sup>265</sup> Milbank, et al., *Radical Orthodoxy*, 1.

<sup>266</sup> Radical orthodoxy points to Lyotard, Foucault, Derrida. Cf. Catherin Pickstock, "Justice and Prudence: Principles of Order in the Platonic City," in *The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology*. Edited by Graham Ward (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 163-73.

<sup>267</sup> Milbank, et al., *Radical Orthodoxy*, 1.



Herder, whose fundamental insight was that there could be no clear grounding for thought outside of language. In a chapter entitled “For and Against Hegel”, Milbank draws attention to the fact that Hegel follows this German romantic critique (of Kant) but then went too far in attempting to explain the particular, contingent relations of things as rationally necessary in the dialectical unfolding of Being. Milbank’s theological project, in fact, takes up Hegel’s genealogy—in which the particular/contingent fragments of history are synthesized in the Whole—since this reflects an essentially Christian sense of ultimately ‘reconciled Being’.<sup>268</sup> But he rejects Hegel’s ‘pure dialectical method’ since it is too ahistorical. The reconciliation of being is not something rationally deduced as the logical end of all things but is rather ‘faithfully’ perceived, suggested in symbols and in the givenness of the material.

Theology’s re-assertation *à la* Milbank entails the effort to recover and extend a ‘fully Christianized ontology’ in which the *material*—from geological matter and biological life to human cultural production and sociality—signals an excess beyond itself. If the ontology behind modern secularism structures the material in an entirely immanent frame, then Milbank’s counter ontology ‘participates’ in or is ‘suspended’ by transcendence.<sup>269</sup> Milbank’s replacement articulates the ‘orthodox’ counter-ontology, which fundamentally entails a retrieval of medieval

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<sup>268</sup> Milbank, *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon* (London: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>269</sup> This ‘recovery’ and ‘extension’ Milbank writes as the characteristic feature of ‘radical orthodoxy’. In his introduction to its early collection *Radical Orthodoxy* called “Suspending the Material: the turn of radical orthodoxy” he writes: “For several centuries now, secularism has been defining and constructing the world [...] where radical orthodoxy wishes to reach further [than *nouvelle théologie*] is in recovering and extending a fully Christianised ontology and practical philosophy.” Milbank, *Radical Orthodoxy*, 1-2. The phrase in radical orthodoxy “suspension of the material” here derives from Kierkegaard.

and Patristic sources, particularly the works of Augustine and Aquinas. Milbank seeks to ‘reclaim the world’ by going to the ontological root (*radix*) to recover the framework of a ‘participatory ontology’—the starting point for a postsecular theopolitical (re)vision.<sup>270</sup> By contrast, the older ‘participatory’ metaphysic viewed the material ‘book of nature’ as so many signs of the divine, however difficult to decipher. The divine creative act on this reading is not separate from creation itself but is intimately constitutive of its materiality. The material ‘participates’ in its transcendent origin by reflecting its trace.<sup>271</sup>

This is elaborated in the language of ‘analogy’ as it came to be known in the thought of Aquinas. This is further equated with ‘paradox’. Such an ontological frame makes sense of the phenomenality we experience of the simultaneous unity and diversity of a scene. Thus to really see things just as they are in their commonsense form and relation to everything else, one must—according to Milbank—take the paradoxical view, one which embraces a ‘supernaturalizing of

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<sup>270</sup> In taking this turn, Milbank and radical orthodoxy generally resembles that movement in French theology in the era of Vatican II known as *nouvelle Theologie*. Hans Urs von Balthasar, for example, following his teacher Henri de Lubac, saw the urgent task of twentieth century theology as recovering the church fathers’ paradoxical sense of both the distinctness and unity of beauty and sensual perception (*eros*) or, that is, of the world and God.

In contrasting ‘Gnostic myth’—whose re-emergence he also traces from Böhme to Schelling and Bader, Lessing, Idealism, Marxism and Hegel—with God’s ‘Word’, Balthasar writes: “Myth seeks the ascent of man to spirit; the Word of God seeks descent into flesh and blood. Myth wants power; revelation reveals the true power of God in the most extreme powerlessness. Myth wants knowledge; the Word of God asks for constant faith and, only within that faith, a growing, reverent understanding ... Myth tears God and world apart by trying to force them into a magical unity; the revelation of God’s Word unites God and world by sealing the distance between them in the very intimacy of their communion.” Here we see a strong affinity with Milbank’s project; not only in its parallel critique of dialectical ontologies whose notion of ‘magical’ unity places antagonism (between myth and tragic existence) at its core, but there is also a parallel contrasting notion of the ‘paradoxical’ unity of creator and created, sacred and secular (Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Introduction,” *The Scandal of the Incarnation: Irenaeus Against the Heresies*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (Ignatius Press: San Francisco, 1990).

<sup>271</sup> The connection here between this ‘participatory’ framework and German romantic notion of the symbol is evident throughout Milbank’s work. See, Milbank, “The Theological Critique of Philosophy in Hamann and Jacobi,” *Radical Orthodoxy*, 21ff.

the natural'.<sup>272</sup>

In fleshing out what this means, it will be useful to map out radical orthodoxy's own contrast to other forms of modern theology. If radical orthodoxy is not—according to Milbank—an attempt at a return to pre-modernity, then it is also not an attempt to re-establish universal accounts of reason, human value, etc. Milbank rejects, for instance, the 'transcendental Thomism' of Karl Rahner but also Paul Tillich's 'correlation', Dietrich Bonhoeffer's 'dialectic of secularization', liberation theologies, or the New Political Theology.<sup>273</sup> The goal of theology, on radical orthodoxy's reading, is not to 'correlate' theological values with secular thought worlds. Modes of such 'correlational' theologies tend, on the radical orthodoxy reading, to naturalize the supernatural.<sup>274</sup> to correlate Christian faith/tradition/values with contemporary political life, but rather to see contemporary political life as grounded on a false ontology, where at its foundation is the individual's will competing with others ("ontology of violence").<sup>275</sup> This is to be replaced with an ontology of peace, grounded in the harmonious plenitude of being, as reflected in the life of the Trinity.

On the other hand, it seeks to also go beyond Barthian neo-orthodoxy, which renders 'mediation' altogether impossible and thus tends to segment theology and

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<sup>272</sup> This phrase comes from Daniel M. Bell's helpful analysis in "Postliberalism and Radical Orthodoxy," *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Political Theology*. Craig Hovey and Elizabeth Phillips, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

<sup>273</sup> For Milbank's critique of Metz (and by extension, early Moltmann), see *Theology and Social Theory*, 244 ff.; accepting the secularization thesis of Gogarten and Cox, sees the desacralizing effect of Christianity as part of a history of increasing emancipation.

<sup>274</sup> Daniel Bell, "Postliberalism and Radical Orthodoxy," *The Cambridge Companion*, 114-15.

<sup>275</sup> Daniel Bell makes the point about correlation in his "Postliberalism and Radical Orthodoxy," (110). For an in-depth look at Milbank's description of the 'ontology of violence', see his *Theology and Social Theory*.

knowledge of God from other spheres of knowledge.<sup>276</sup> Both positions, from Milbank's perspective, rely too heavily on modern dualisms of faith/reason, etc., and in the end fail to overcome secular reason's univocity.<sup>277</sup> For instance, Lindbeck's Postliberal theology, the Yale-school expression of 'Barthianism'—tends to see religion operating like a cultural-linguistic system, and so the 'world' is seen as an autonomous sphere that believers must work to 'absorb' by developing communal, scripturally intra-textual reading habits.<sup>278</sup> For Milbank, this positing of the external category of 'context' and the effort to show how an entire scriptural 'world' can become our 'world' in any context by applying his regulative methodological principles, collapses back into the presumed modern-liberal ontology of an imminent reality describable without reference to transcendence.<sup>279</sup>

Radical orthodoxy, to the contrary, views the 'world' itself as a cultural-religiously mediated phenomenon, always already imbued with meaning. Materiality itself signals transcendence, and hence we might say that utopia comingles with the world. In his own words, Milbank's radical orthodoxy seeks to "supernaturalize the natural" by seeking to show—in a more comprehensive sense than

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<sup>276</sup> For more on the difference between 'correlating' and 'mediating' theologies, cf. Bell, "Postliberalism and Radical Orthodoxy," Hovey and Phillips, Eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Political Theology*, 112.

<sup>277</sup> Bell refers to radical orthodox theology as a 'critical mediation'. Bell, "Postliberalism and Radical Orthodoxy," *The Cambridge Companion*, 123.

<sup>278</sup> cf. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*. Milbank describes the point of the metanarrative he writes in *Theology and Social Theory* as to avoid the kind of 'narrative essentialism' that, in his view, measures the church by pre-established standards (Milbank, "Enclaves, or Where Is the Church?," 342). By contrast, Milbank seeks to engage in 'judicious narrative' (a term from Rowan Williams), where the point is not to construct an ethics, but to describe a "supra-ethical religious affirmation which recasts the ethical field in terms of a religious hope" (Milbank, "Enclaves," 343).

<sup>279</sup> See note 2 in Milbank, "An Essay against Secular Order," 221.

postliberalisms—materiality and alterity itself displays the divine.<sup>280</sup> Mirroring the arbitrary force of the divine will, the argument which unites most thinkers under the umbrella of ‘radical orthodoxy’ is that the orthodox ‘participatory ontology’ was replaced via the late medieval translation by a background picture of the social as a space for and constructed by competing individual wills—assuming conflict and violence as basic.<sup>281</sup> Thus, rather than ‘correlate’ Christian ethics to the political world, radical orthodoxy performs what Bell names ‘critical mediation’ which seeks to identify and explicate “the encounter with grace in the political configurations of material reality.”<sup>282</sup> The better polity becomes visible in the life of the church, not as a return to Christendom or the establishment of a theocratic regime, but as the truer city, the pilgrim, co-mingling with the earthly city as in Augustine. The vision articulates, as Bell describes, an “ever-expansive web of sociality spun by an array of intermediate associations and relations.” However, following Augustine, the *societas perfecta* is an *invisible* church, which is “neither a program, nor a ‘real’ society, but instead an enacted, serious fiction.”<sup>283</sup>

Milbank articulates an ‘ecclesial history’ as the story of the ‘Catholic humanism’ that might have held if nominalism had not become the metaphysical vernacular. Milbank’s narrative is plausibly read as an update to Augustine’s *City of God*. There, Augustine reveals that peace of Rome is illusory by retelling its own myth origin

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<sup>280</sup> Milbank, “Introduction,” *Radical Orthodoxy*, 1-20.

<sup>281</sup> James William McClendon (1924-2000) concurring with a central observation already being articulated in that time in Milbank and others in *Radical Orthodoxy* rejected Troeltsch and Niebuhr, for the similar reason that they assume the political as necessarily violent. McClendon, *Systematic Theology: Ethics* (1986). On this connection, cf. Long, “Protestant Social Ethic,” *Cambridge Companion to Christian Political Theology*, 100.

<sup>282</sup> Bell, “Postliberalism and Radical Orthodoxy,” *Cambridge Companion to Christian Political Theology*, 123.

<sup>283</sup> Milbank, “Enclaves, or Where Is the Church?,” 342.

in the murder of Remus by his brother Romulus. The city of God, by contrast, does not begin with violence, but with an erotic, peaceful, mutual self-giving. Milbank's twenty-first century update attempts to expose the illusory peace of modern polities likewise by showing how its own myth of a self-enclosed nature where the world is understandable in its own immanent terms, had its beginning as a theological aberration. The argument goes that with this kind of ontology there can be no genuine vision of peace as modern secularity promised, but rather only endless conflict and no harmony of differences.

Milbank shares with Žižek the sense that the alternatives between secularist liberalism and the postmodern self-annihilation in deconstructive critique are not useful for the task of re-shaping the political, since both pictures reduce to a mere brute will-against-will. For Milbank, there is a common sense that the Enlightenment and modern political thought generally has failed to cultivate the ground for sustainable life-together. Of course, in stark contrast to Žižek, Milbank sees the genuine alternative as embodied in rituals like the Eucharist. The ideal sociality is *agapaic*, selfless yet self-fulfilling, non-violent order. This analogous life of the church (imperfectly), as a 'distinct society' or 'alternative polis', reflects the life of the Trinity on earth.<sup>284</sup> In writing his genealogy, Milbank seeks to expose secular modernity as a 'construct'; one contingent framework among others, one with particularly pernicious qualities, all enabled by the foundational disconnect between the sacred and the secular.

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<sup>284</sup> Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 381.

To this point we have reconstructed the salient theoretical impulses and background of Žižek and Milbank, including their views of modernity, and their critical-genealogical ‘radical’ postsecular projects for the disruption of tacit ontological frameworks of secular modernity. These are informed of course by their own frameworks of materialist Protestantism and an orthodox Anglicanism. Our goal in this chapter has been simply to gain some of the necessary context for understanding the rather *sui generis* nature of their discourse in *The Monstrosity of Christ*. We now turn to the analysis of their dialog in that text to reconstruct in more detail their theopolitical visions and then see how their (apophatic) rhetorical mode prepares for the (substantially negative) imperative.

### B.3.2 Competing Narrations of Christianity in *The Monstrosity of Christ*

The goal of this section is to reconstruct their narrations of Christianity and modernity that frame their ontologies of the political. The latter will be explored in B.3.3 and confirmed in the broader corpus of their writings. We return finally in B.3.4 to Milbank and Žižek's contrasting theopolitical visions—respectively, the negative 'spectral society' and the 'societas perfecta'—which emerge as alternative socialities within the framework of their narrations of Christianity. We look at the theopolitical imperative toward the practice of such sociality, which only makes sense against the backdrop of their different ontological pictures. In the end we find, I argue, that both theopolitical imperatives have the character of a 'substantially negative' political enactment. In this way, they exhibit a radical postsecular version of apophatic theopolitics.

#### B.3.2.1 Negative Dialectics and the Death of God

"Fear of Four Words" in the title is a reference to G.K. Chesterton's *Orthodoxy*.<sup>285</sup> There, Chesterton chides modern philosophy for its fear of the radical implications of these four words from the Gospel of John: "he was made man."<sup>286</sup> Žižek's essay reads these four words in terms of the literal anthropomorphization and subsequent death of God, providing a 'Hegelian' negative dialectical reading of Christianity.<sup>287</sup> Negative dialectics, for Žižek, is a way of exposing—and even

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<sup>285</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), originally published in 1908 by the John Lane Company.

<sup>286</sup> Žižek, "Fear of Four Words," *Monstrosity*, 26.

<sup>287</sup> Žižek's notion of negative dialectics is distinguished from Adorno's, according to which thesis and antithesis do not synthesize but rather dissolve (*Aufhebung*) in (e.g., class struggle only resolves with the obliteration of the term into some other term). For Žižek this approach promotes a defeatist cynical reason (or consciousness), thus sharing resemblances with deconstruction. By contrast, for Žižek, negative dialectics moves from a kind of superficial



coming psycho-analytically to terms with—the surface appearance of things as the thing itself. As such it is a ‘negation of negation’.<sup>288</sup> This is like the ontological scaffolding for Žižek’s theopolitics. After describing this dialectic, we can then reconstruct Žižek’s death-of-God narrative of Christianity against the backdrop of the dialectic. The narration, we come to find, intends to subvert not only orthodox Christian doctrine, but also Western, democratic constructions of the political; in other words, it should clear the ground to reveal a replacement ‘austere political’ theopolitical picture.

The first thing to notice about Žižek’s ontology is that it is ‘radically materialist’.<sup>289</sup> In contrast to the ‘theological materialism’ of Milbank, Žižek assumes the lack of any transcendental reality beyond the immanent. But it is ‘radical’ in its materialism in the way it goes beyond naturalist, scientistic forms of materialism. The latter materialisms, in the end, retain a picture of a Whole that operates according to static ‘laws’ of nature. Žižek’s radical materialism asserts that reality is fundamentally Void, or the absence of any over-arching metaphysical principle. This is what Žižek articulates elsewhere as the ‘parallax’ view.<sup>290</sup> Žižek finds this

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impression of something, to the correction toward of an ‘essence’ behind the surface, only to return to find that the Real has only ever consisted at the level of the surface impression. Cf. Matthew Flisfeder, “Conditions of Possibility: Jameson, Žižek and the Persistence of the Dialectic,” *Socialist Studies: The Journal of the Society for Socialist Studies* 6, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 164; cf. Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 2007). However, for a critique of Žižek on his view of Adorno on this point, see Ciprian Calin Bogdan, “The Sublime Gesture of Ideology: An Adornian Response to Žižek,” *International Journal of Žižek Studies* 10, no. 3 (2016).

<sup>288</sup> Žižek, *Monstrosity*, 70-71. Žižek writes regarding the negative Hegelian dialectic, “That is to say, what is ‘Spirit’ at its most elementary? The ‘wound’ of nature: the subject is the immense—absolute—power of negativity, of introducing a gap/cut into the given-immediate substantial unity, the power of *differentiating*, of ‘abstracting’, of tearing apart and treating as self-standing what in reality is part of an organic unity” (71).

<sup>289</sup> Cf. Adam Kotsko, *Žižek and Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 120-23.

<sup>290</sup> Cf. Žižek, *The Parallax View*. The method he’s outlined in that text is applied throughout his corpus. William Franke notes that the ‘parallax gap’ is an exemplary figure in apophatic rhetoric (Franke, “Apophysis,” 70). Clayton Crockett, also specifically applies Žižek’s notion to radical

core antagonism reflected in an array of phenomena, including: the information and biogenetic revolutions, quantum physics. The material in manifold patterns thus expresses the lack of coherence so that the most adequate description of reality will prioritize non-reconciliation, contradiction, annihilation, enigma.<sup>291</sup> In the final section of his essay, “Toward a Materialist Theology?” he follows Alain Badiou, in asserting that “reality is a multiplicity in which the void and the multiple coincide, i.e., the multiple is not composed of ‘ones’, but is primordial.”<sup>292</sup>

In this way, Žižek’s ‘idea’ collapses into the ‘real’—or transcendence into immanence—and its within this framework that Žižek returns Marxist theory to Hegelian idealism in a manner squarely in a tradition of Hegelian thought following Kojève,<sup>293</sup> and which is *en vogue* with other postsecular thinkers like Alain Badiou, Gilles Deleuze, *et al.*<sup>294</sup> Hegelian idealism is read in this tradition in materialist terms, whereby the dialectical procession of reality occurs in an entirely immanent framework. The force of material human history is the fundamental conflict between classes. While retaining the Marxian insight concerning the contingent evolution of human history via conflict, the materialism is read back on to Hegel to show that the idealist progression toward autonomy

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political theology in, Crockett, *Radical Political Theology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 41.

<sup>291</sup> Žižek, “Fear of Four Words,” *Monstrosity*, 91

<sup>292</sup> Žižek, “Fear of Four Words,” *Monstrosity*, 91.

<sup>293</sup> This reading of history harkens back to the French Marxist revival of Hegel one finds originally in Alexandre Kojève’s Marxist-Heideggarian reading of Hegel; a significant influence for his student, Jacques Lacan. Cf., Fabio Vighi, *On Žižek’s Dialectics: Surplus, Subtraction, Sublimation*, Continuum Studies in Continental Philosophy (London: Continuum International, 2010), 51, 60. See also, Alexandar Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1980).

<sup>294</sup> For a classic Marxist treatise on Capitalism’s totalizing reification of culture, see, György Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone, in *Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1972).

and freedom is still an autotelic process; an inescapable and necessary dialectic. Where they part from Hegel is in their common assumption of the inevitable lack of reconciliation or synthesis.

Where Žižek's contribution extends this Hegelian-Marxist tradition is in his incorporation (and popularization) of Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, particularly in the methodological approach to his critique of ideology. The method of critique is to take a minority, parallel reading of some phenomenon and set it against the majority reading of that same phenomenon, to affect what he refers to as a 'short circuit'.<sup>295</sup> Short circuiting is intended as a direct disruption, or 'decentering' of the major interpretation for the purpose of exposing the 'unthought' subliminally supporting it.<sup>296</sup> The object of critique, furthermore—whether a political or economic framework or religion-symbolic structure—read through the minor author, text, 'intellectual apparatus', becomes the fictive illusion that negates itself. Žižek's Lacanian psychoanalytic concern here is to overcome the (normally socio-political) illusion by leading one to the realization that there is no cure.

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<sup>295</sup> 'Short circuit' is also the title of the series in which *Monstrosity of Christ* appears. In his series forward, he elaborates a 'short-circuit', as follows: "Is not one of the most effective critical procedures to cross wires that do not usually touch: to take a major class (text, author, notion) and read it in a short-circuiting way, through the lens of a 'minor' author, text, or conceptual apparatus...? [...] This is what Marx, among others, did with philosophy and religion (short-circuiting philosophical speculation through the lens of political economy, that is to say, economic speculation). [...] The aim of such an approach is, rather, the inherent decentering of the interpreted text, which brings to light its 'unthought', its disavowed presuppositions and consequences." He goes on to suggest that Lacanian psychoanalysis is a "privileged instrument" of such an approach (Žižek, "Series Forward," *Monstrosity*, 1).

<sup>296</sup> 'Unthought' is a Foucaultian term, which refers to the often un-explicated, and so unjustified assumptions about the way things are; the ontological presuppositions that are the background for ideology. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994 [1970]).

When Žižek narrates the death-of-God, it is to effect the same sort of ‘short-circuit’. By reading the history of Christianity through the lens of Lacanian psychoanalysis and Marxist-Hegelian political-economic critique—ironically in *Monstrosity* with the help of twentieth-century Catholic thinker, G. K. Chesterton—the goal is a decentering of orthodox Christological doctrine, a subversion of its traditional reading, which should expose how the narrative in this different, obscure light, might justify a very different social ontology than the divine order normally supposed in a more traditional Christian reading.<sup>297</sup>

Through this lens, Žižek ‘short-circuits’ the standard orthodox reading of the church, the doctrine of the Trinity, the Pauline corpus and, centrally for “Fear of Four Words,” G.K. Chesterton novels, theological writings and commentaries, which are read essentially as a haplessly misunderstood forerunner of the radical, negative dialectical-Hegelian reading of Christianity. In this light, each of these sources are marshalled in support of a death-of-God narrative whereby the ‘big Other’ collapses into humankind as subjectivity which emerges through self-alienation; in theopolitical terms, the city of God collapses into the city of man. Jesus’s promise to his disciples, “Where two or more gather in my name, there I am with you,” (Matt: 18:20) becomes thus for Žižek, in a hyper-literal sense, a statement concerning the actual location of Christ, that is, namely: nowhere but in the (virtual) community of believers. The dialectic that emerges here, on Žižek’s reading, is the inner, concrete development of the universal ‘Notion’, which fully

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<sup>297</sup> John Caputo, in his review of *Monstrosity*, draws the apt comparison of a psychoanalyst going along with the illusion of the patient for the purpose of strategically, at points, breaking up the narrative of the illusion. Caputo, “Review: *The Monstrosity of Christ*, Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews (2009), posted at [ndpr.nd.edu/reviews/the-monstrosity-of-christ-paradox-or-dialectic/](http://ndpr.nd.edu/reviews/the-monstrosity-of-christ-paradox-or-dialectic/).

flowers in modernity to make way for a virtual community of ‘unbelievers’. This must be recounted as a *historical-material process*, since Christianity’s universalism is the concrete, “‘inner development’ of the universal notion itself, its ‘self-determination’.”<sup>298</sup> It is in this way that Žižek, following Hegel, proposes Christianity as the absolute religion insofar as it alone accounts for the utter humanization of God through Christ and the Holy Ghost as the virtual community of (un)believers.<sup>299</sup> The reconstruction below takes account of three moments in “Fear of Four Words” where this negative dialectical pattern appears: (1) the trifold church as historical embodiment, (2) the Trinity as an inner-doctrinal movement, and (3) the figure of the ‘monster’ Christ and king.

Three successive forms of Christianity relate dialectically, as a triad: In Orthodoxy the “substance of religious life is the Christian community.” Believers in the Orthodox tradition can interpret the sacred text, and in this way, Orthodox Christianity represents unity.<sup>300</sup> The believer is synonymous with the community of believers. Catholicism, on the other hand, represents an alienation. The church mediates grace to the individual and interprets the text for her, highlighting the particularity of the individual. In Protestantism, the mediator is finally displaced, and the individual becomes synonymous with the universal, what Žižek following Hegel calls the ‘universal Singular’. The believer is now in direct contact with the universal. Protestantism’s starting point however—the supposed condition for

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<sup>298</sup> Žižek, “Fear of Four Words,” *Monstrosity*, 27. Žižek argues that the absolute idealism often attributed to Hegel is a mistake in interpretation. Accordingly, Hegel’s ‘idealism’ should be read in fully immanent terms as one facet of the Whole in its totally contingent unfolding.

<sup>299</sup> Such a ‘concrete’ universality contrasts the ‘abstract’ universality of ‘borderless Buddhism’, which becomes a popular form of spirituality in late Western modernity, for Žižek, since it is for him, “the ideology best suited to today’s global capitalism” (“Fear of Four Words,” 28).

<sup>300</sup> Žižek, “Fear of Four Words,” *Monstrosity*, 28.

universal singularity—is a distant God who shares nothing in common with humanity.

In its conclusion, the re-narration opens the door for an articulation of the ontological conditions a materialist, agonist form of sociality. Once we come to realize that there is really no ‘big Other’, that God himself has become man and annihilated himself in the form of his son, and has imparted his Holy Spirit as the ‘virtual’ (imaginary) community of believers, then we have the Lacanian ‘cure’ of having no cure; a starting place to create forms of life and togetherness that are not beholden to current structures (of Capitalist hegemony) and accept the priority of the contingent over the necessary, and the outcast over those in power. What remains in modernity the possibility of a virtual community of ‘unbelief’—the form of belief without any reference to God. The virtual community of unbelief dawns upon humanity, through the struggle of the church from Orthodoxy to Catholicism and finally Protestantism and atheism.

### B.3.2.2 Paradox and Reenchanting Humanism: Milbank

Milbank in “The Double Glory, or Paradox versus Dialectics: On Not Quite Agreeing with Slavoj Žižek,” offers a Catholic historiography to rival Žižek’s death-of-God narrative. *Contra* Žižek’s reversal of orthodoxy, for Milbank, an orthodoxy premised on a paradoxical (‘metaxological’) ontology offers an actual alternative socio-political order. At the base of this re-telling is the notion that the finite material realm and all material processes derive from and participate in their

infinite, transcendent source. Milbank's narrative imagines a modernity in which sacred and secular might not have become an externally dyadic relation; such that the material of the social-political would not be understandable on its own immanent terms. Such a modernity, he argues, would be more pluralist, corporatist, more humanist. To understand Milbank's contribution in *Monstrosity* it will be useful to articulate Milbank's ontological starting point and then describe the sources of his radically orthodox narrative to see how an alternative Catholic humanism might have emerged (and thus, implicitly, how it may be recovered). We then get a sense how the contingent material processes of history, in Milbank's view, inflect transcendence, and in effect re-internalize the sacred-secular dyad. This re-internalization forms the basis for a theopolitical vision of an enchanted, 'radical Catholic' humanism.<sup>301</sup>

1.

'Materiality' in Milbank's 'theological materialism' refers broadly to all finite reality, from quanta and microbes to planetary revolutions, to the biological and psychogeographical of human life. In other words, it is that physical and psychic world describable in the languages of the natural and human sciences. But for Milbank the material also *exceeds* itself. Here he draws on a neo-Platonic metaphysical framework of 'participation', which he traces from Augustine, Aquinas, Nicholas of Cusa, Meister Eckhart. Accordingly, the material is viewed as expressed form, and this form derives from the divine *esse*.<sup>302</sup> The material

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<sup>301</sup> Milbank's intention in his essay "Against Secular Order" is to disrupt the metanarrative (here: "metacritical schema," 201) of the autonomy of the secular order and supply a 'more real' picture of the social.

<sup>302</sup> Milbank, "Double Glory," *Monstrosity*, 205.

‘participates’ in its source, even while remaining distinct from it, insofar as it exists as so many parts that integrally constitute the Whole.

For Milbank, if all there is, is inert *hyle* expanding ‘trans-finitely’, as in the negative dialectical ontology, then each thing exists self-referentially as matter, which becomes a kind of idealized, quasi-form. He suggests a ‘joyful’ alternative: all materiality emerges from transcendence and is inscrutably—but necessarily—related to the harmonic Whole.<sup>303</sup> As he writes, matter ‘matters’; that is, the material world, bodies and desires, have sense only if we see that there is a link between matter and spirit. In this way we recognize the neo-Aristotelean insight, “that the human being is an integrally ‘eroto-linguistic’ animal.”<sup>304</sup>

“...the humanly erotic is not obliterated by the relationship to the ‘divine’ but is, rather, able to participate in it, since this relationship also analogically and paradoxically conserves the personhood of the one who is in mystical ecstasy. Just as we must imagine the other in order to be united to her and yet conserve mutual distance, so also we must analogically imagine the infinite God to the same ends. Since the latter relationship may be taken as the ultimate ontological scenario, the interplay between real corporeal desire, the signifying, and the imaginary can be taken as more than the site of perennial human illusion.”<sup>305</sup>

Hence, ‘paradox’ and not ‘negative dialectic’ becomes the driving metaphor for describing fundamental reality. In ‘Double Glory’ Milbank describes a scene of a town partially hidden in mist. The unified blending of the town in a haze marks a

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<sup>303</sup> Cf. Milbank, “Materialism and Transcendence,” 395.

<sup>304</sup> Milbank, “Double Glory,” *Monstrosity*, 125.

<sup>305</sup> Milbank, “Double Glory,” *Monstrosity*, 126.



kind of ‘univocal’ picture; a landscape dominated by a single undifferentiating grayness. And, at the same time, certain elements of the town peak out, like church spires, which punctuate the landscape, creating points of difference. As the only (partially) visible objects are differentiating, the dominating understanding of the scene could also appear to be difference/‘equivocity’, rather than univocity. The negative dialectical ontology that Milbank finds in Žižek mutually abolishes both poles as driving schemes, leaving nothing, as in Void, as the ‘constitutive relation’ of the two competing views. In a similar way, Hegel’s ‘Now’ is the negation of both Day and Night or ‘There’ is the negation of place.<sup>306</sup> By contrast, for Milbank, the landscape may just as well hold together as the paradoxical both/and interplay of univocity and equivocity; indeed, the beauty of the scene consists for Milbank in the relation between its unity as one misty town and the difference of its constitutive parts as they appear and disappear in the fog. Such an ontological frame makes sense of the phenomenality we experience of the simultaneous unity and diversity of a scene. Thus to really see things just as they are in their commonsense form and relation to everything else, one must—according to Milbank—take the paradoxical view, one which embraces a ‘supernaturalizing of the natural’.<sup>307</sup>

The perception of a landscape is therefore a ‘coincidence of opposites’, which is the notion that the infinite and finite do not relate as mutually exclusive, and thus do not violate the law of non-contradiction; rather, the infinite and finite express

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<sup>306</sup> Milbank, “Double Glory,” *Monstrosity*, 137.

<sup>307</sup> This phrase comes from Daniel M. Bell’s helpful analysis in “Postliberalism and Radical Orthodoxy,” *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Political Theology*. Craig Hovey and Elizabeth Phillips, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

different 'logics': one finite thing cannot also be its opposite, but for an 'infinite' this cannot apply. A particular instance of courage, for instance, is indistinct from courage on an infinite plane, but infinite courage blends into all the virtues, since the end of courage will also be ultimately just, compassionate, generous, etc.<sup>308</sup>

If to be hidden is to be shown (against the background of 'mist', as including a misty density proper to the thing itself), and therefore to be shown is to be hidden, then this implies not an impossible contradiction that must be overcome (dialectics) but rather an outright impossible *coincidence of opposites* that can somehow, but we know not how) be persisted with. This is the Catholic logic of *paradox*—of an 'overwhelming glory' (*para-doxa*) which nonetheless saturates our everyday reality." (163)

It is in this way that the finite 'suspended' material may take on infinitely disclosive significance. This non-identical relation of the material-finite with the infinite is elaborated further by Milbank in the terms of gift exchange. Things appear as given, and not self-generated, and are therefore intrinsically connected to that which is not itself, the Other; life processes, cultural-political production, linguistic expression all participate in the divine life of the Other as received and returned gift.

...a genuine giver gives something of himself, and yet something that he 'has' only in the act of giving. The true giver, therefore, both causes to participate and establishes a relationship which is initially asymmetrical. In the case of God it remains absolutely so, and yet by this very circumstance it is paradoxically the case that the recipient, dependent even for her very self upon the giver, must be in herself all gratitude without remainder, on pain of ceasing to be, and therefore makes a ceaseless return to the giver (which he nonetheless does not 'need'—because this return is only the return that he makes to himself) to the maximum degree

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<sup>308</sup> Milbank, "Double Glory," 167-9.

conceivable. In giving a gift to something which is that gift, God ensures that the most fundamental property of the creature is latently reflexive—only the giving of this gift to oneself establishes any substance...The cosmos, since it exists only as gratitude, must render its return to God as a conscious return. Therefore spiritual creatures crown the creation not by arbitrary *fiat*, but as a necessary part of the logical (paradoxically logical) structure of creation itself.<sup>309</sup>

This exchange, however, for Milbank, does not lead necessarily to a determinist position, whereby the material may really be reduced to the emanation of ethereal, ideal form, as in German Idealism.<sup>310</sup> In *Monstrosity* and elsewhere, this paradoxical transcendence-immanence relation highlights the utter contingency of the material, its processes, and creativity.<sup>311</sup> In this way, one can make sense of the claim: “materialist materialism is simply not as materialist as theological materialism.”<sup>312</sup> And if this is the case, then the two poles of sacred and secular, or the two ‘polises’, are able to be re-imagined as a complexly, internally-related dyad

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<sup>309</sup> Milbank, “Double Glory,” *Monstrosity*, 201.

<sup>310</sup> Žižek’s implicitly idealist, ‘Protestant’ reading of modernity, argues Milbank, views the unfolding of the Absolute as an utterly finite, random, contingent process. But this preference for finitude turns it into a transcendental principle, and thus Žižek unwittingly repeats—albeit in a more explicitly nihilistic way—a notion of “the fated logical necessity of the real.” As such, Milbank argues that Žižek is taking on “Protestant, Behmenist, and Idealist spectacles” and (mis)reading Occam and Scotus back into Eckhart, etc. Milbank, “Double Glory,” *Monstrosity*, 113.

<sup>311</sup> Milbank elaborates this alternative further as a commitment to ‘incarnational paradox’ (“Double Glory,” *Monstrosity*, 117). In a discussion on Badiou’s notion of the event of ‘grace’ in Milbank’s essay “Materialism and Transcendence,” we see that the universal, for Milbank, must emerge in a particular historical circumstance, and that such a logic must actually be implied by Badiou’s ‘grace’. For Badiou, the weak subjective witness of any truth, is what makes it universal (408-9). But, Milbank asks how can the event actively affirm its own value without becoming Kantian autonomy (which Badiou rejects, 409), which contrasts material potential and categorical ideas and so becomes another kind of idealism? “[Badiou] needs to recognize beyond this that the value of the new event can be upheld only if really and truly one regards it as an arrival from a plenitudinous and not empty eternity” (409). Badiou wants a rationalized Christianity (logos over mythos); Milbank argues that stripping the event of mythos and history forfeits its universality. By Badiou’s own logic, he should—according to Milbank—accept “the givenness of ideas as the arrival in time of a participation in Platonic forms” and since universality arrives as an event in time, he should need to accept the incarnation of Logos.” Milbank, “Materialism and Transcendence,” *Theology and the Political*, 411.

<sup>312</sup> Milbank, “Double Glory,” *Monstrosity*, 240.

(like left-right, up-down; and unlike black-white). It is through this lens that G.K. Chesterton, Meister Eckhart, the Apostle Paul, Thomas Aquinas and Nicholas of Cusa are all witness to an alternative. Milbank's narrative filters out the paradoxical in each.

2.

According to this narrative, the salient turn to secular modernity was a theological aberration.<sup>313</sup> Late medieval nominalism represented by the thought of Duns Scotus and William of Ockham, he argues, traded a metaphysics of participation for a univocal notion of being.<sup>314</sup> The innovation of nominalism was to replace the medieval cosmology whereby the created order participates analogically in divine being with the view that the material realm is the outcome of a divine will that had created everything according to its own inscrutable, arbitrary pleasure. Knowledge of God, then, is only attainable in tracing observable patterns in the material sphere of objects, but these in themselves are not signals of the divine. This separation between divine designer and designed opens a set of dualities: matter and spirit, immanent and transcendent. Medieval nominalism thus cuts the foundational dualities for modernity. Where sacred/secular was formerly understood as an internally-related dyad, for which it would be inconceivable to understand one without the other—just as one cannot think an 'up' without a 'down'—these realms become conceivable as disparate, spatial spheres of human activity. The paradoxical coincidence of higher (sacred) and lower (secular) time is likewise transposed to a single, flattened notion of punctilinear time. Being is

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<sup>313</sup> The narrative here is recapitulated throughout Milbank's corpus and appears in its fullest articulation in *Theology and Social Theory*.

<sup>314</sup> See, John Milbank, *Word Made Strange* (New York: Blackwell, 1997), 44.

thus drawn ‘univocally’ as an independent, objective material sphere. On this univocal mode, the way was paved for entirely immanentist, naturalist pictures of reality. The dualist frame posits the world as an autonomous immanent sphere, so that materiality, including material processes and the political, are not driven by their *telos* toward harmony, but remain as unmediated *hyle*. Accordingly, social harmony must be something that needs to be constructed and enforced, and it is thus not viewed as more fundamental, but rather as a way of coping with the more basic conflict of individual interests.

For Milbank, this is the background for a progressivist, ‘Protestant’ reading of history, which has tended to see each stage as an inevitable progression toward disenchantment, atomistic individualism, and capitalism. In “Double Glory” Milbank wants to show that Žižek’s leftist narrative is essentially one such ‘Protestant’ reading of history, and that—despite its presumed preservation of contingency’s priority over necessity—neo-Catholic historiography demonstrates the non-inevitability of history’s progression toward capitalism.<sup>315</sup> Milbank’s argument turns here on the following conditional: “...if capitalism is a religion, as Walter Benjamin taught, it is definitely a mode of Protestant religion. Furthermore, one can argue that it is also a species of specifically *Anglo-Saxon* Protestant religion.”<sup>316</sup> That is, capitalism, following Robert Brenner and a revised Weber-Tawney theory, was less an inevitable culmination of class (etc.) tension at the heart of human sociality or a facet of the human subject’s ‘symptomatic fetishism’, and more that the specific order and its ‘liberal market freedom’ was

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<sup>315</sup> For more on the Catholic revisionism Milbank has in mind, cf. Edwin Morgan, *The English Nation: The Great Myth* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1998).

<sup>316</sup> Milbank, “Double Glory,” 127.

contingently supported by and constructed within an environment of English Protestantism and Calvinism.<sup>317</sup>

The ‘modern’ elements of the middle ages might as well have provided a stronger corporatism, greater lay-religious potential, as well as—and this becomes the key moral-political contrast in Milbank’s narrative in “Double Glory”—human rights may have enjoyed an entirely different framework. Following Aquinas, rights might not have been seen, along Kantian lines, as ‘natural’ and yet contractually guaranteed; rather, humans might have been seen as in-nature, telically oriented toward freedom, justice, harmony of difference.<sup>318</sup> Such a route side-steps a ‘Protestant pessimism’ with respect to desire and the possibility of good works; rather than (as with Žižek) deny desire’s fulfillment altogether, the Thomist line (with Cusa and Eckhart in “Double Glory”) instead affirms the possibility of a transformation of desire. Humans become more fully themselves the more they enact justice, become more harmonious, since there is a mediation here which is not possible on the univocal/dualist picture. The argument goes, as we will see below, that a univocal ontology cannot sustain a genuine vision of peace as modern secularity had promised, but rather supports only endless conflict.

The bracketed, autonomous immanentism typical of modern social-political theory, is therefore opposed to the narrative of the church, which is the *societas*

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<sup>317</sup> Žižek’s argument, according to Milbank, “sustains a Marxist inevitabilism by arguing (for Hegelian reasons) that alienated bourgeois abstract freedom is the only means by which we can invoke the idea of true freedom, just as the constitutive fetishism of capital (which is not ‘ideological’, as Žižek rightly points out) appears to concur with the symptomatic fetishism that the human subject requires (...) in order to be a subject at all.” (Milbank, “Double Glory,” 127).

<sup>318</sup> Milbank, “Double Glory,” *Monstrosity*, 130.

*perfecta*, originating in communion with the suffering endurance of power-less Christ. Original peace and harmony of difference is at its foundation and is its goal, so that 'salvation' is the ultimate overcoming of the 'original sin' of autonomous, violent, human order with its endless 'necessary' conflict.

### B.3.2.3 Synthesis

In *Monstrosity* the fundamental difference between Milbank and Žižek turns on their interpretation of Christianity. Either Christianity reflects a negative (Hegelian) dialectic in the death of God, or else it narrates incarnational paradox, and is therefore on either view the 'absolute' religion.<sup>319</sup> In terms of the transcendence-immanence dyad, Žižek articulates the negation of the first into the second; whereas Milbank sees the immanent-material suspended in transcendence.

The first implication of this difference in "Double Glory" is historiographical. As a material process, history is a fully contingent one. Both accounts reject the idealist rendering of history, which they view as a common misreading of Hegel—as the unfolding of a self-enclosed teleological or rational process.<sup>320</sup> For Milbank history has an ecstatic quality; that is, it transcends itself just as all materiality does (see above); however, the self-transcending of history is its own ineffable, contingent realization. For Žižek, history contingently undoes itself as the progressive

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<sup>319</sup> Cf. "Double Glory," *Monstrosity*, 116-7.

<sup>320</sup> Although, of course, Milbank argues that Žižek's account is really idealist. See fn. 310. Also, Milbank, "Double Glory," *Monstrosity*, 113.

revelation of the non-All; in other words, the apparent teleology of history, dialectically reveals itself as contingent and constructed, and hence as the lack of *telos* (for him, the more accurate reading of Hegel). Both pictures portray material history as bald, self-evident processes—“things are just what they are, not bearers of hidden mystical meanings”<sup>321</sup>—but for Milbank, ‘what things are’ is a gift, saturated with transcendence; and for Žizek, the random proliferation of the material, ‘diagonalizing’ out from no-thing. From either reading, “the Christian miracle of Incarnation is the exception that guarantees and sustains this common reality.”<sup>322</sup>

These narrations intend to expose the contingency of contemporary liberal democratic socio-political configurations. Žizek ‘short-circuits’ these by describing Christianity as the end of unifying, transcendental schemes and thus also the possibility of hegemonic and utopic statecraft. Milbank reads these as conditioned by late medieval theological aberrations and describes how an ‘alternative Catholic humanism’ that may have otherwise reigned. But the central thing to note for their theopolitical implications (analyzed below) is how both narrations either collapse or re-configure transcendence and imminence and, in consequence, the matter/form (or, fact/value, is/ought) distinction as operative in social-political theory from which these radical postsecular approaches distinguish themselves. Along these lines, the *material* of our political lives is less distinguishable from the *form* of our narratives or enactments of the political. What *is* the political, in short, is what it pretends to be.

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<sup>321</sup> Žizek, “Fear of Four Words,” *Monstrosity*, 25.

<sup>322</sup> Žizek, “Fear of Four Words,” *Monstrosity*, 25.





### B.3.3 The 'Political'

*Monstrosity*, as we saw, juxtaposes two very different interpretations of Christianity with historiographical implications. Most of the dialog, however, is directed toward articulating both what 'the political' is and what it ought to be in light of either the death of God or an alternative Catholic humanism. Both in explicating the ontological conditions of sociality and the person, and in its normative trajectory, calling for one form over another, it is an intrinsically theopolitical project. B.2.3 will provide an analysis of the imperative strategy employed in each essay, but first, this section's concern is to trace the anthropological and socio-political implications for Milbank and Žižek in *Monstrosity*.

The notion of 'the political' extends beyond any particular practice that may be considered political as against other types of action.<sup>323</sup> Campaigning, voting, posturing, protesting are in the conventional sense, 'political' actions. But 'the political' is also inclusive of those background pictures, which make such practices intelligible in the first place; just as, for instance, the imaginaries of a people's 'will', the 'public sphere', 'free-market economy' constitute what Žižek and Milbank both describe as the collective 'fictional' house of modern liberal democracy. As we saw above, for both Žižek and Milbank, getting at 'what the political *is*' will be a matter of re-narrating the relation between transcendence

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<sup>323</sup> See my discussion in B.1 above.

and immanence. These narrations then reframe that other relation, typically manifest in political theologies, between the city of God and the city of man.

The analysis below elaborates their basic ontological commitments as two ways of construing the two-cities relation, either from the perspective of an internal (Milbank) or external (Žižek) immanent-transcendent dyad. For Žižek this serious fiction is the posited illusion; and the city of God is a 'spectral society'. For Milbank, the serious fiction is the imagined community; the city of God is a '*societas perfecta*'.<sup>324</sup>

#### B.3.3.1 Žižek's Spectral Sociality

Žižek's ontological picture, as we saw, is the obliteration of transcendence in the *longue durée* of the self-annihilation of an illusory divinity. Transcendence thus collapses into immanence as the apotheosis of a dialectical process whereby humankind becomes aware that presupposed reality, including the cosmos but also political reality, had been subjectively posited. Žižek will call for the sober acceptance of this vision and propose an artificial self-imposition of order, which recognizes the impossibility of self-fulfillment in society. On that basis the 'city of God' becomes a polity of un-believers, a virtual community that commonly recognizes the impossibility of wholeness. This is what may be called the 'spectral' sociality, and it is fundamentally characterized in Žižek's theopolitical vision by willful, austere love over-against the void. First, we look at the personal and

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<sup>324</sup> The city is semantic reality, an 'infinite relay of signs'; however, for Milbank these must refer to an 'plenitudinous infinite of realization' since, "Such a mediation will ensure that our 'imaginings' of the finally signified (the infinite) are not just illusions." Milbank, "Double Glory," *Monstrosity*, 125.

political implications of the negative dialectical picture which forms the basis of this fictional two-city relation.

### (1) Person

In “The Fear of Four Words,” Žižek offers an ontological narration that depicts only immanence, or more accurately the ‘trans-finitude’ of the non-All. The pattern of negative dialectics displayed in the movement of the ideal-typical history of Christianity above is repeated in the historical formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity, which likewise reflects Orthodox universality, Catholic particularity and finally Protestant ‘universal-singularity’.<sup>325</sup> The Pauline-Protestant moment of sublation in this Hegelian triad consists of the individual’s direct contact (“reconciliation”) with the universal/divine, and for Žižek this becomes the condition of a radically materialist notion of the self. After a brief excursus into Žižek’s interpretation of Christology in Orthodoxy and mysticism, we will look at his anthropology, which he articulates in a Hegelian-Lacanian reading of the Incarnation via the Apostle Paul and Jacob Böhme.

The “trouble with Christ in Orthodoxy,” it turns out for Žižek, is ultimately that Christ lacks a real mediatory role so Orthodoxy cannot conceive of the material, and thus the human person, on its own immanent terms. Taking Vladimir Lossky as paradigmatic for Eastern Orthodox theology, he observes that the Orthodox Trinity depends on a ‘real difference’ between essence and persons (hypostases). The persons of Son and Holy Spirit both originate in and process from the person

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<sup>325</sup> Cf. Žižek, “Fear of Four Words,” *Monstrosity*, 28-29.

of the Father; the three united mystically in essence. There is also a further distinction between essence and energies; each Person is only known in the expression of their energies (e.g., “the glory of the Father,” the glory of the Son,” and so forth). Christ’s humanity is thus de-emphasized in Orthodox worship. Thus according to Žižek, the formulation misses the mediating process opened up in Western Trinitarian formulations.<sup>326</sup>

The difference between essence and person also becomes important in the Orthodox notion of the human person. Humans share their nature in common but are individual ‘persons’ insofar as they are made “in the image of God,” which means that what really distinguishes one as an individual—their personhood—is a mystical, ‘unfathomable abyss’, neither accessible in language nor conceivable as a property. Reunion with God, or man’s ‘deification’ thus entails an ultimate return of the creature to the transcendent Source, God the Father. For Žižek, Christ’s incarnation loses significance in this scheme; or rather only plays a negative role in ending death and destroying the devil. Irenaeus’s dictum, “Christ became man so that man can become God,” misses for Žižek the entire point of the incarnation, which is to demonstrate the utter sacrifice of the transcendent God

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<sup>326</sup> Since Latin/Protestant formulations view the Holy Spirit as proceeding through the Son, Western trinitarian thought Christ in a mediating role between the Father and Spirit. Žižek points out the Hegelian reflex against the Orthodox formulation, insofar as Hegel had mistakenly written that the East-West filioque controversy entailed whether “the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Son, or from the Father and the Son.” Žižek: “For Hegel, it is thus not even thinkable for the Holy Spirit to proceed from the Father alone—and my point is that there is a truth in this slip of the tongue. Hegel’s underlying premise is that what dies on the Cross is not only God’s earthly representative-incarnation, but the God of beyond itself: Christ is the ‘vanishing mediator’ between the substantial transcendent God-in-itself and God qua virtual spiritual community. This ‘shift from subject to predicate’ is avoided in Orthodoxy, where God-Father continues to pull the strings, is not really caught in the process.” Žižek, “Fear of Four Words,” 29; quote from Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, vol. 3 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 84.

via the ‘vanishing mediator’ Christ, to impart the ‘Holy Spirit’ in the virtual community of believers.

In Meister Eckhart, Žižek finds an analog to this process, since for Eckhart, God is ‘nothing’ without man. Quoting Eckhart: “[God] was big with nothingness as a woman is with a child. In this nothingness God was born. He was the fruit of nothingness. God was born in nothingness.”<sup>327</sup> The ‘nothingness’, however, to which Eckhart’s claim refers is distinguished as ‘Godhead’, or ‘pure potentiality’. At the level of the Godhead, the difference between God and man is erased; God and man are, with respect to pure potentiality, identical. Eckhart in this way preserves the aseity and transcendence of God by distinguishing between Godhead as pure potentiality and God as *substance*; the substantial difference is maintained between God, as perfect, infinite, uncreated and man as imperfect, finite, created. And since God is the only substance, all things take place in Him. This is the primary insight behind the notion that anyone who would ‘receive’ God must become an empty receptacle, and thus ‘give birth’ to him.<sup>328</sup> This is also the notion behind theological *via negativa* by which all predicates accessible to us are negated, but for the purpose of asserting the absolute transcendence of God.<sup>329</sup> Žižek sees negative theology as a strategy to conceal the reality of absolute immanence. In the end, this again misses the point for Žižek, since “from the strict standpoint of Christianity” the incarnation implies that when God became man there was no God to return to or become. He offers a gloss on the Irenaeus

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<sup>327</sup> Žižek, “Fear of Four Words,” *Monstrosity*, 36.

<sup>328</sup> Žižek, “Fear of Four Words,” *Monstrosity*, 36.

<sup>329</sup> Žižek, “Fear of Four Words,” *Monstrosity*, 33.

formulation: “Christ becomes man, so that man can become God *who made Himself man*.”<sup>330</sup>

Žižek thus departs from Eckhart’s paradoxical account, by which humanity is coincidental with God in substance *and yet* God transcends. There is a kind of procession in Eckhart’s mystical way to the Godhead that Žižek notices, which prioritizes union with Christ, where love entails union, attraction, harmony, *eros* as Milbank will emphasize in his exegesis of Eckhart. The gloss on Irenaeus, to the contrary, implies a split—in Lacanian nomenclature, a ‘cut’—between God the transcendent notion and its end in human form (spirit, community of believers). And it is precisely in this separation of man from God, as in creation, but also God from himself, that makes human freedom and thus love possible. <sup>331</sup> Otherness/strangeness within God is a pre-condition for ‘truly Christian’ love because in the Lacanian sense love is always “love for the other insofar as he is lacking.”<sup>332</sup>

Žižek supports his Hegelian reading of the trinity and the human person in the work of Jacob Böhme. In Böhme, before there can be a differentiation in creation, there must be a void in God. Žižek reads this in connection with Deleuze’s notion of ‘pure difference’, which denotes a state of zero distinction in qualities. The example he gives of the phenomenology of love bears this out: in love, something happens so that nothing appears the same, but everything empirically is exactly

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<sup>330</sup> Žižek, “Fear of Four Words,” *Monstrosity*, 30.

<sup>331</sup> Žižek, “Fear of Four Words,” *Monstrosity*, 82.

<sup>332</sup> Žižek, “Fear of Four Words,” *Monstrosity*, 39. For Žižek, for God to be loved, he has to be incomplete within himself; God is a ‘traumatic Thing’. Only such strife, as in Kierkegaardian angst, personalizes God (cf. Žižek, “Dialectical Clarity,” *Monstrosity*, 253).

the same. Apparent differentiation in creation (where nothing is the same) is like the self-revelation of the void (everything is the same). Individuation and self, under this Böhmesque ontological scheme, is the result of the eternal birth of God, the Absolute, in creation. The image is of a sought-for desire in something external, but since there is nothing external to the Absolute, the desire cannot be fulfilled. What is differentiated are so many disparate, finite objects, like the individuated human. Žižek interprets this as a moment of Schellingian ‘contraction’, whereby the void, nothingness, is expressed in self-contained atoms, the “punctuality of the self.”<sup>333</sup> Creation, in this sense, is the cosmic failed attempt at divine self-fulfillment. Creation and fall are closely linked in Böhme.

The background depicted above encapsulates the double self-alienation of God and also of man in the incarnation.<sup>334</sup> This lends to a flipped reading of Chesterton’s claim in *Orthodoxy* that only in Christianity does God actually doubt himself. Chesterton’s allusion here is that moment in the Gospels where Jesus is dying on the cross and crying “why have you forsaken me?” In this separation, for Žižek, God is not only revealed as human to mankind, but, also revealed to himself as human. Again with reference to Chesterton’s commentary on *Job*, Žižek imagines an impotent God, looking at himself and all creation with wonder and *Job* foresees the eventual meaningless suffering and death of God.”<sup>335</sup>

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<sup>333</sup> Žižek, “Fear of Four Words,” *Monstrosity*, 37

<sup>334</sup> Žižek, “Fear of Four Words,” *Monstrosity*, 82.

<sup>335</sup> Žižek, “Fear of Four Words,” *Monstrosity*, 52ff. Cf. G.K. Chesterton, “Introduction to the Book of *Job*,” posted by the Society of G.K. Chesterton, [www.chesterton.org/introduction-to-job/](http://www.chesterton.org/introduction-to-job/).



The picture of the human person that follows is likewise self-alienated and unreconciled to one another, which is—in the dialectical picture—made evident in the historical disintegration of the binding metaphysical Whole.<sup>336</sup> That disintegration was conditioned by Christianity's account that God displays himself as non-God, in Christianity. Human persons become free as individuals when they confront Christ, because in Christ's death we recognize that there is nothing (transcendent) that binds together. The movement is indeed, as it was for Hegel, coextensive with the birth of human subjectivity and hence freedom for self-determination and political re-organization / revolution.<sup>337</sup>

If 'the person' at the end of the process of dialectical trinity is the self-alienated, punctuated individual, then there is an immediate implication for the notion of the political which emerges from this. In fact it appears to follow for Žižek from this picture of personhood that sociality is intrinsically agonistic; polity justified through consensus building, for example, would be a kind of farce. In negative-dialectical terms, this is like the surface-level impression of democratic practice, negated by an 'essential' self-interest, which could return us back to a practice of consensus-building as a kind of necessary fiction.

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<sup>336</sup> Žižek, "Fear of Four Words," 76. "Christianity is the 'absolute religion' only and precisely insofar as, in it, the distance that separates God from man separates God from himself (and man from man, from the 'inhuman' in him)."

<sup>337</sup> Subjectivity and freedom are possible only when there is no Whole of reality. "There are only two options here: either subjectivity is an illusion, or reality is in itself (not only epistemologically) non-All" (Žižek, "Fear of Four Words," 100). Cf. 57, 61. From this perspective it follows for Žižek, as it followed for Badiou and Lacan, et al. of a radical materialist/postsecular stance, that subjectivity is the only excess beyond the material. Subjectivity is generated by symbolic expression. Since there is nothing except linguistic construction and the transfinite relay of signs, we take on our personal fiction of the other, maintain distance and engage on the basis of the 'serious fiction' of the other person. In this way, a kind of willful austere love is possible, but erotic, romantic love is not.

## (2) The Political

Recalling the full sweep of the negative dialectical movement in the death-of-God narrative, God—the substantial ‘notion’ of a transcendent, creator-being—is eventually recognized in a virtual community as a construct of their own subjectivity, their own ‘self-positing presupposition’. Christ as God-man is the simply the first to reveal this to the rest of humanity as the ‘vanishing mediator’. But why the need for mediation, or rather, the ‘monstrosity’? Answering this question sheds light on the nature of the political for Žižek, since it is by this process that the ‘virtual community’ emerges in the first place. Here we see that the political is something intersubjectively posited by atomic individuals.

Žižek recalls that the answer for why there must be mediation, and why there is no direct passage from substantial God to virtual community, resides in the dialectic of positing and presupposing. What is presupposed is the unity of subject and object. And in Christianity, Christ represents that externally presupposed unity. This unity, or the reconciliation of subject and object, cannot happen directly (following Hegel), but can only appear initially as a ‘monster’, the startling appellation for Christ found in Hegel lectures on the philosophy of religion.<sup>338</sup> There is a contrast here with Marxian-Feuerbachian thought, which sees the subject as overcoming alienation directly, as it were, through the agent’s recognition of itself as the acting agent which posits the very thing that appears as its ‘substantial presupposition’; that is, God, the reification of collective action.<sup>339</sup> It is not enough to say (with Feuerbach) that people organize themselves in fealty

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<sup>338</sup> Žižek, “Fear of Four Words,” *Monstrosity*, 74.

<sup>339</sup> Žižek, “Fear of Four Words,” *Monstrosity*, 74.

to a projected divinity. For Žižek, “In humanity, a transsubjective ‘it’ organizes itself.”<sup>340</sup> In Hegel’s *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* the mediation is between the substantial notion of God and the virtual community of believers; that is, between the *In-Itself* (substantial God) and *For-Itself* (spiritual community). In this way, transcendence is seen as internal to, collapses into, immanence; necessity as internal to contingency.

This recognition by the agent arises through a rational process; God simply becomes less and less plausible as a transcendent other. For Hegel, such recognition necessitates a mediator, or there would be no recognition at all.

For Žižek, this misses ‘the properly Christian gesture’ whereby God overcomes himself as subjectively posited:

In order to posit the presupposition (to ‘humanize’ God, reduce him to an expression/result of human activity), the (human-subjective) *positing itself should be ‘presupposed’, located in God as the substantial ground-presupposition of man, as its own becoming-human/finite.*<sup>341</sup>

In a hereditary monarchy, the figure of the king is monstrous for Hegel in a parallel way. The monarch’s identity is located in a middle position between the citizen and the totality of the state. Somehow he is both, and this strictly contingent, apparently arbitrary arrangement is entirely necessary,<sup>342</sup> for in order for such a totality to actualize itself, it must exist as an “immediate ‘natural’ singularity.”

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<sup>340</sup> Žižek, “Fear of Four Words,” *Monstrosity*, 76.

<sup>341</sup> Žižek, “Fear of Four Words,” *Monstrosity*, 75.

<sup>342</sup> Žižek, “Fear of Four Words,” *Monstrosity*, 78. In the same way that Hegel in his *Logic* articulates the ‘contingency of necessity’ where, “the very ‘return’ to the lost hidden Ground produces what it returns to” ... “the very process through which necessity arises out of necessity is a contingent process.” Cf. G.W.F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, para. 279.

Just as, at the end of the Logic, the Idea's completed self-mediation releases from itself nature, collapses into the external immediacy of nature, the State's rational self-mediation has to acquire actual existence in a will which is determined as directly natural, unmediated, *stricto sensu* 'irrational'.<sup>343</sup>

In this way, the king, appointed in a hereditary line, becomes the natural embodiment of the unity of the state.<sup>344</sup> Just as the particular king sublates the whole state in the will of one man ("to say 'yes' and dot the 'i'"), in such a way that the Whole becomes the king and so the person of the king fades into obscurity as a 'vanishing mediator', so it is with Christ, who conducts the passage from transcendent other to the community of faith. He 'vanishes' too, as an embodiment of the Whole. There is a kind of theopolitical core, then, which we arrive at by following the dialectical emergence of a sociality revealed as grounded in nothing else but the sprawling diversity of non-All—the inevitable procession of the death of God. Such a dialectical reversal is uniquely latent in Christianity.

What, then, is 'sublated' in the case of Christianity? It is not the finite reality which is sublated (negated—maintained—elevated) into a moment of ideal totality; it is, *on the contrary, the divine Substance itself (God as a Thing-in-itself) which is sublated: negated (what dies on the Cross is the substantial figure of the transcendent God), but simultaneously maintained in the transubstantiated form of the Holy Spirit, the community of believers which exists only as the virtual presupposition of the activity of finite individuals.*<sup>345</sup>

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<sup>343</sup> Žižek, "Fear of Four Words," *Monstrosity*, 79.

<sup>344</sup> Žižek, "Fear of Four Words," *Monstrosity*, 80.

<sup>345</sup> Žižek, "Fear of Four Words," *Monstrosity*, 61.

The central theopolitical inference to draw here, which is pertinent to our investigation, is that the city of God collapses into the material, since the utopic polity turns out really to be—after Christ the mediator vanishes—the most mundane political reality characterized fundamentally by a common awareness that there is nothing more. Here the picture of the Whole entails a built-in antagonism, so that the city of God (or, more precisely, ‘unGod’)—that is, the orienting ontological picture of the political that simultaneously informs and motivates practice—is the *virtual community* of belief. It is a serious fiction. The city of God is populated by the virtual community of (un)belief that is self-reflectively aware of the impossibility of self-other harmony.

The city of man, however, is driven ideologically under an illusory notion of harmony. The illusion covers over the dialectic intrinsic to polity. Examples for this abound in “Fear of Four Words,” all of which begin with the short-circuited reading of Chesterton’s claim that order (orthodoxy) is the greatest rebellion. Chesterton’s example of this in *Orthodoxy* is that immorality, theft, adultery, etc., signal desire for the goals inscribed in the notion of order behind property and marriage. Hence crime, the antithesis of law, is internal to order encoded by the law. Žižek extends this further so that any order is simply a universalized disorder. “The antagonism between law and crime reveals itself to be inherent to crime, the antagonism between universal and particular crime.”<sup>346</sup> Modifying Chesterton, Žižek follows the nineteenth century notion that ‘property is theft’. In this way, too, states are seen by Žižek as various attempts at resolving the irresolvable

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<sup>346</sup> Žižek, “Fear of Four Words,” *Monstrosity*, 45.

(class) conflict that is inscribed in the very notion of the Whole, the ideal State.<sup>347</sup>

So, in this way, the city of man in Žižek may be defined as the unwitting polis; formed around a collective fiction of order.

There is an apparent tension here in Žižek's theopolitics, since the parallax ontology above seems to undermine any notion of order and yet there is a preferred picture of sociality, the city of (un)God.<sup>348</sup> Is this theopolitical order simply another 'rebellion' open to its own overturning? When read as a two-city relation, whose contrast is not at the level of actualizable social-political configurations, but rather at the contrast between social-political configurations against the ideal sociality, which is the theopolitical (utopic) background picture, then the tension appears analogous to that which we also find in the tradition familiar, Augustinian two-cities formulations: the city of God is the non-actualized polity that informs social enactment, as in the church, even while its performance remains partial and fragmentary. Rather than appearing in the church as a body of believers, however, Žižek imagines the virtual community of belief on an entirely different meaning. 'Belief' is construed on the immanentist framework of the death of God, articulating the *form* (i.e., practice) of belief without any transcendent content.

The theopolitical vision is of a spectral city, which is the seriously fictional reality of the non-All, to which the self-aware (the citizens of the city of un-God, virtual community of 'unbelievers') bind themselves in an austere act of solidarity. For

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<sup>347</sup> Žižek, "Fear of Four Words," *Monstrosity*, 49.

<sup>348</sup> This is also a central critical point for of Milbank's in *Monstrosity*.

Žižek, this is the Pauline-Protestant notion of *agape*, which he defines as political love.<sup>349</sup> Such a solidarity is grounded in something like the Lacanian notion of love, which is to say, a love premised on the recognition of what lacks in the other and suffers the other all the same without hope for self-fulfillment, and thus some consummate harmonious state. Such a vision preserves difference and does not see these resolved in an indefinite future. Its moral vision is weighty in that it does not pretend to hold to some notion of equality but maintains distance, like the street in Israel/Palestine, both sides across from each other, not meaningfully connected, but in isolation co-habiting.

### B.3.3.2 Milbank's *Societas Perfecta*

Milbank depicts a fictional sociality of the church as the city of God, whereby its liturgical-theopolitical vision—including its paradoxical language of kingdom—blurs the transcendent/immanent dichotomy. Milbank's earthly polities, as with other material manifestations, participate in divine, harmonic being as analogies of a truer, peaceful order enacted liturgically (the city of God). While these polities gesture only obscurely at their *telos*, they are partial realizations of a more fundamental peace and the fullness of individual desire with sociality.

Milbank's alternative narrative is grounded in the assumption of the analogical picture of 'participatory ontology', recovered from Aquinas and Nicholas of Cusa as described above.<sup>350</sup> Here the analysis focuses first on the implications of this

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<sup>349</sup> Žižek, "Fear of Four Words," 246.

<sup>350</sup> See my introduction to Milbank in B.3.1.2. Cf. Nicholas of Cusa, *The Catholic Concordance*, trans. Paul E. Sigmund (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Cf. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, XXVIIIff; and e.g., Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Q. 18.

ontology for Milbank's notions of the personal and the political before describing the two-cities relation.

### (1) Person

Contra Žižek's philosophical anthropology that depicts a self-alienated individual, whose only 'cure' is the realization that there is no possibility for reconciliation, Milbank opens his response in *Monstrosity* by depicting the person as an *eroto-linguistic* animal. The hyphen is significant in this contraction. Transposing the collapsed immanent/transcendent dichotomy to the level of the person, it connects the body and sensuality with cultural-linguistic production such that the 'matter' of emotion, sensuality, sociality, *et cetera* operates more symbiotically—presuming eventual reconciliation—with the 'form' of cultural-linguistic construction. In the essay we see this pattern in his interpretation of Pauline *agape*, his account of human subjectivity and freedom, and the self-other relation, and following the theme of *Monstrosity*, there is a Christological rendering central to his elaboration.

The incarnational paradox at the heart of orthodox Christianity becomes a pattern for thinking of the human person. Rather than inferring self-alienation, however, under which scheme Christ as mediator is *neither* God *nor* man, the mediator in Milbank's account is *both* God *and* man. This both/and relation implies that the Christ figure is complex but not self-alienated; that is, he is not an isolated monad, but rather a being-in-relation. Freedom and autonomy is heteronomous. That God



took on human nature, and didn't merely inhabit *a* human, points to the paradox that the most truly human being was in fact God.<sup>351</sup>

The person reflects this divine self-relation insofar as the self is likewise not monadic but also being-in-relation. This patterning of the incarnational paradox with the phenomenology of human selfhood resonates with the standard reading of Chesterton.

Such a view of the person allows for both an inward and outward mediation of, respectively, self to self and self to other. It may, argues Milbank, leave behind the notion of a necessary separation between desire and obedience to law, or will/morality, freedom/constraint, spirit/matter. In Žižek's reading of Paul, the law was overcome inasmuch as it became the self-inhibition of freedom as against the heteronomous inhibition of freedom by obedience to an external (not self-generated) law. Austere political *agape* is sundered from *eros*. For Milbank such oppositions, which he sees as essential to Žižek's recuperation of Kantian moral philosophy, collapse.<sup>352</sup> Paul, therefore, should not be read as opposing desire and law; rather the apostle envisions the overcoming of law by the transfiguration of desire, its reorientation to the source of its flourishing. In the same way, there must, for Milbank, be a mediating link between matter and spirit ("for matter to 'matter'" at all). Such is the neo-Aristotelean filter he employs in developing the notion of the person as an integral eroto-linguistic animal.<sup>353</sup>

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<sup>351</sup> Milbank, "Double Glory," *Monstrosity*, 211.

<sup>352</sup> Milbank, "Double Glory," *Monstrosity*, 121.

<sup>353</sup> This notion of mediation between matter and spirit is, for Milbank, only tenable in a cosmos seen as enchanted, or in other words, where the sacred/secular dyad is re-internalized. That the opposite claim is implied from the externalized and collapsed dyad in Žižek is evident. As

If the mediation between 'spirit and matter' analogically reflects that other mediation between immanence and transcendence, then it becomes possible to see how imaging the other is not necessarily 'idolatry', a false and alienating picture of the other, but rather a tactile sense of the other who is simultaneously present and distant.

Bringing the mediations between spirit and matter, the (actual, positive) infinite and the finite together, such that the first mediation always mediates the second, it then becomes possible to understand how the 'imagining' of the other is not always and necessarily idolatry (not always a matter of *objet petit a*) but rather respects at once her given presence and her withheld distance.<sup>354</sup>

Spirit and matter mediation is perceptible in any self-other relation. The appearance of the other is a public display, exposed to the responses of perception and interpretation. The surface of the other does not expose the entirety of the person, it is thus a 'veil', but it is also not for that reason a barrier to relation. It is, in fact, also the very revelation of the person, however obscure. The imaging projected on to the other is, in Žižek's Lacanian perspective, the reason for the impossibility of real relationality, or erotic love.<sup>355</sup> What Milbank calls the 'poetic imagining' of the other is a point of access, a way toward mutual self-giving. "And if in publicly clothing or veiling herself, she thereby presents herself for public negotiation, then it is also the case that my poetic imagining of the other, while

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Milbank notes, Lacan had claimed that "reciprocity in love is impossible within a disenchanted cosmos," (Milbank, "Double Glory," 123).

<sup>354</sup> Milbank, "Double Glory," *Monstrosity*, 125.

<sup>355</sup> Milbank notes, ironically, "Unlike the Catholic Church, therefore, Lacan and Žižek recommend the total abandonment of sex for the cause of religion" (Milbank, "Double Glory," *Monstrosity*, 122).

being a great risk, may also provide for the other a further expressive habitation which she can appropriate as authentic. And all the same in reverse, naturally.”<sup>356</sup>

## (2) The Political

Such a vision of mediation and exchange is rendered possible only under the condition of an enchanted cosmos. Once again, the doctrine of the trinity is not only a mental model of divine relationality but also the ontological condition for human sociality and hence also for a notion of the political. The trinity rather than disclosing the self-alienation of God, conveys the paradox of Godself as ‘pure relationship’. As opposed to the tragic image of God’s death, the trinity, for Milbank evokes the ‘self-joying’ of the divine. This joyful self-as-in-relation is gestured at analogically in human relationship; an insight that can for Milbank anchor a “human joy that arises to think that there is indeed first of all and finally such joy, even if it is for us now in time almost totally concealed.”<sup>357</sup> The political by extension can be seen as that imaginary site, an ‘imaged habitation’, that mediates the self and the social for the end of union, peaceful/joyful harmony, which is the donated origin of human beings as well as their goal.

In other words, Milbank’s political is, as for Žižek, a serious fiction. But rather than referring to an ultimate ontological separation, and non-mediation of parallax reality, it refers—obscurely and analogically, but finally—to that harmonic self-other relation.

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<sup>356</sup> Milbank, “Double Glory,” *Monstrosity*, 125.

<sup>357</sup> Milbank, “Double Glory,” *Monstrosity*, 186.

The State, like the capitalist commodity, is a fiction—yet as Žižek rightly notes, it is not thereby an *illusion concealing a deeper truth*: rather it is a fiction necessary to human civil existence. The only collective house which humans can inhabit is a pretend one.<sup>358</sup>

Milbank refers here to earthly polity, but it also goes for that other collective house inhabited by humans—the city of God. On the one hand, earthly polities as so many forms of statecraft and the latter as the church. Both polities are fictions; both obscure symbols ‘in time’ concealing as much as they reveal, but one concealment is deconstructed as nihilist illusion and one is the concealment of paradoxical mystery.

Already in Milbank’s essay “Against Secular Order” we find this pattern of contrast between two cities.<sup>359</sup> The ‘earthly city’ becomes the immanent, material sphere of modern social theory. The human person becomes an atomized individual and the political is fundamentally the mediation of conflicting wills; modern political theory assumes this basic violence and is constructed—in the context of the growing modern state, which is market-driven, etc.—as a pacific sphere for trade and mutual political benefit. As in Augustine’s Rome, the celebrated peace and freedom has a dark side; is sustained with force and violence, since it is ultimately grounded in a univocal ontology; will against will.

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<sup>358</sup> Milbank, “Double Glory,” *Monstrosity*, 179.

<sup>359</sup> Milbank, “An Essay Against Secular Order,” *Journal of Religious Ethics*. Vol, 15 (Fall 1987), 208-210.

On the univocal picture, derivative of Scotus, there was a 'democracy' that levels the hierarchy between infinite and finite, form and matter. The effect, Milbank writes, is that this "... ushers in a new class of more willful hierarchs, and ensures the dominance of sheer size (the infinite) and might (the power to sunder and rearrange any apparent integrity)."<sup>360</sup> Order, on this picture, can become another kind of disorder, as exemplified in Žižek's retrieval of Böhme (e.g., "property is theft"). By contrast, on the analogical understanding of the political, for Milbank, there is a transcendent order *beyond order*. The material political simultaneously exceeds itself since it participates (analogically) in this beyond-order. We might say that in the same way a stone inflects the divine so that the empty receptacle of given things is a starting point on the way of mystical apprehension of the divine, so the particular political inflects its source. Taking justice as the primary example, as a universal category justice is meaningless unless it is recognized in just practice (i.e., justice must be 'expressed justice'); God is compared to justice and Christ to the just man: if they are the same in nature, then "the just man is equal to, not less than, justice, and similarly with the Son in relation to the Father."<sup>361</sup> Furthermore, in the image of the Trinity, the Son and Spirit are generated from the Father as eternally begetting source, but—according to Milbank—this does not entail ontological priority in orthodox Christianity, since the Father is also not Himself without the Son and the Spirit. Eckhart's political thus contains the possibility of a different democracy in which hierarchy is (paradoxically) retained.

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<sup>360</sup> Milbank, "Double Glory," 206.

<sup>361</sup> Milbank, "Double Glory," 187. Quoted from: Eckhart, "Commentary on the Gospel According to St. John," in *Meister Eckhart: Selected Treatises and Sermons*.

From this view, Milbank points to other possibilities for a form of life and polity that, one might say, self-consciously analogizes the city of God; a sociality without the sacred horizon wiped away in which the ‘modern’ aspects of the middle ages might have produced, not as with Marx a fetishized Capitalism, but “a more pluralist, more corporatist, more distributist, more lay-religious potential which refuses the modern duality of secular and sacred.”<sup>362</sup> Milbank’s theopolitical vision transposes the two-cities relationship within the paradoxical coincidence of sacred and secular.<sup>363</sup> The earthly (secular) city is indeed already enchanted since it participates, indirectly and analogically, in the whole being of God. And so, the city of God is—as for Augustine—simultaneously the fullness of individuality in peaceful sociality; an ultimate polity, which exists both now and not yet, appearing as telic signs pointed toward the fullness of all particular materiality in Triune, harmonic Being.

Milbank’s goal is not to confuse the human social as an actual, utopic harmony, the pursuit of which for Milbank (as for Žižek) is an impossible and self-defeating project. Recovering the possibility of a re-enchanted mode of sociality does not entail the re-installation of medieval Christianity or Christendom. Rather, the concern is to articulate that ‘order beyond order’ that contrasts all human polities. The theopolitical vision that emerges depicts a de-localized sociality that is neither confined to geographical location, nor located in any specific group of people, including the lives of parish communities. It is signaled, however, wherever it is enacted in practices that repeat the paradoxical New Testament anti-law of love,

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<sup>362</sup> Milbank, “Double Glory,” *Monstrosity*, 130.

<sup>363</sup> Since ‘paradox’ refers to an apparent contradiction between two terms, I read this as equivalent to Milbank’s adoption of the notion of a coincidence of opposites.

which is agapaic, but also embodied.<sup>364</sup> In this non-identical, liturgical repetition, the city of God is not a purely future reality, historically pulling everything toward itself. The city of God, rather, is present, running concurrently alongside the city of man, as a counter-polity. Expressed this way, the image is of an ecclesial and ‘invisible’ order. In its historically contingent permutations and liturgical enactments it is not merely itself. Although it is a ‘fiction’, it is not merely illusion, but reveals obscurely to some ultimate realization.

For Milbank, the performance of the theopolitical vision of being-together appears as contrast and alterity, not because it is incompatible with the rest of materiality (and other mutually incompatible narrations of it) but because everything only partially and inscrutably reflects its transcendent source.<sup>365</sup> This move takes Milbank’s radical orthodoxy beyond Hauerwas’s construction of the church as a polity that counters the material political, since for him Christianity is the most apt narration of materiality itself, since it is a narration of its analogous relation to the real-relationality, the hyper-materiality of the harmonic, divine Whole. As such, it is *the* religion that alone inaugurates the logic of universalism.<sup>366</sup>

This ecclesial theopolitical vision is marked by the decentering of the self. Even as the notion of the Trinity pictures the locus of Godself as decentered in the relation between divine persons, humankind likewise finds its true self, not as dissociated individuals, but as *in-relation-to* others.

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<sup>364</sup> Milbank draws on Kierkegaard for his notion of repetition as non-identical.

<sup>365</sup> ‘Materiality’ has an expansive meaning in Milbank; it refers not merely to physical objects but also sociality and psychic phenomena. It may be read, in fact, as a synonym for immanence or finitude.

<sup>366</sup> Milbank, “Materialism and Transcendence,” *Theology and the Political*, 400.

### B.3.3.3 Synthesis

Milbank and Žižek give shape to their theopolitical visions in *The Monstrosity of Christ* by articulating an ontological and Christological account of the political. In this section, the goal was to compare the personal and political implications for their ontological accounts, which helped to reveal a differentiation between two fictional socialities present in both theopolitical visions. To put this back in the two-kingdoms framework above, the kingdom of man is like the form of unwitting earthly utopic failure and the kingdom of God is like the imperative of an impossible polity. We can now summarize the salient points of their convergence.

Their accounts of the person and the political redeploy theological language for the purpose of articulating ‘strong’ ontological foundations and thereby substantiating their critique of modern liberal myths of polity. In this task they are both radically postsecular, as defined above. Additionally, Žižek and Milbank, in articulating strong accounts, have a common critique of postmodern political theologians. Both assume that as linguistic animals, humans construct imaginary collectives which form the political. That is, there is no ‘political’ beyond our speech about it; is a web of signs among others in an infinite relay. Where they innovate on the poststructuralist-social constructivist account, is in their explanation of this cultural-linguistic production in ontological terms. And these accounts are fundamentally opposed.



In Žižek's account, such constructs of the political are machinations that are grounded in a Void. Self-other harmony is illusory, since reality itself is characterized by disunity, patterned in the cosmos, but also in interpersonal relationship. *Eros* cannot be reconciled with *agape*. The Trinity is only the Christian narration of this negative dialectical movement, which is the illusion of a unifying Whole, breaking itself in human inter-subjectivity. In *Monstrosity*, Žižek thus gives the Trinitarian take on parallax reality, expressed as: the big Other (Father) sublating into the virtual community (Spirit) through the vanishing mediator (Christ). In this way, the dyadic relationship between transcendence and immanence is externalized and then collapsed. In Milbank's account, however, the political-as-semiotic-web refers ultimately, in some inscrutable way, to a plenitudinous Whole. Interpersonal harmony, and not conflict, is ontologically basic. Thus *Agape* is related to *eros* as its proper orientation. And the Trinity is the Christian account of paradoxical self-fulfillment in relationship to another. In this way, transcendence and immanence are re-related for Milbank as an internal dyad, whereby being-together analogically reflects the interpersonal nature of Godhead.

The term 'serious fiction' was an attempt to capture the notion common to both that the political is a constructed thing, but also that they are not for that reason less real. For Žižek, this was described in the Hegelian language of posited presupposition, and for Milbank this was expressed in the Kierkegaardian language of non-identical repetition. We saw above that the theopolitical visions imply two fictions in this sense: the fictional city of man (state) and the city of God (spectral society or *societas perfecta*). Žižek's theopolitical picture embraces the

fact that harmony and fulfillment are chimeric and forms a subversive virtual sociality based on Pauline-Protestant, political *agape*. Human desires are not ultimately fulfilled in this city, but we are—in adopting this narrative—served the Lacanian cure that there is no ultimate fulfillment. This is the reverse of Milbank's Augustinian city of God. The 'perfect society' of the invisible church, is the location of the reconciliation of self and other, *eros* and *agape*. Such harmony is analogically and obscurely gestured at in the liturgical enactments of the church.

Both describe alien forms of togetherness resident in familiar pluralist, democratic orders. And it is the re-narration of the political in light of this twin theopolitical reality that clears the space for new forms of being-together. If the city of man is a kind of delusion and the cities of God are serious fictions, then how might those latter fictions manifest themselves without devolving into other utopic failures? Both admit that adoption of one vision over another is a matter of faith, or more precisely 'unbelief' for Žižek. The point in re-narrating the political has thus been not to argue propositionally for any one ontological view, but rather to out-narrate the other perspective by providing a better account for the phenomenon of life-together. Below, we see how the reader is enjoined, in the imperative mood, to form the second sociality, the city of God.

#### B.3.4 Substantial Negation in Žižek and Milbank: The Theopolitical Imperative

The display of the theopolitical was a re-narration of an ontology of the political, and this articulated a background for delivering the theopolitical imperative. These radical postsecular strategies hence exhibit characteristics of an apophatic theopolitics rendered on an ontological plane. What of the virtual communities of belief or unbelief? Below we analyze the imperative for particular political enactments, in the radically postsecular, anti-Christendom framework. Both theopolitical imperatives are demonstrated as strategies of *substantial negation* if (1) it aims at an imaginative shift characterized in the form of a 'leap', (2) political mobilization of the theopolitical vision is seen as self-defeating—as in, corrupting the political into a new kind of imposed code—and therefore the theopolitical is necessarily unrealizable as political program. This consequently (3) leaves only a weak mobilization, namely: the 'unforced-force' of the theopolitical vision embodied in practice. I argue below that we find, in fact, in each author a call, not for strategies of statecraft, but rather parodies of the political, in the form of subterranean networks of love. Indeed, anything other would be considered 'utopic' fantasy.

In order to bring their particular versions of substantial negation into focus, it will be important to highlight two features of the character of the leap. These include: (1) The theopolitical picture itself is foregrounded, or it emerges out of the context of their grand narratives and not deduced propositionally, so that it appears more as an invitation to try an alternative reading of the political. And (2) the leap, as in

Kierkegaard, is conditioned by the paradoxical and inscrutable relation between the material and that which exceeds it.

Taking the latter characteristic of the leap first, the salient theme implied by their theological materialisms is that things are just as themselves. The stone declares an ‘overwhelming glory’ or an underwhelming illusion, but in either case, it appears as a gray, weighty chunk of amalgamated sediment. Milbank’s theopolitical vision of paradox thus expresses the ‘impossible coincidence’ of time and eternity, particular and whole, matter and spirit. On the other hand, for Žižek the negative-dialectical relation forecloses the possibility of such a ‘coincidence’ and any mediation between immanence and transcendence, since all is—again, inscrutably—immanent. As we saw, the city of God on either view, is that form of the political that is virtual community, enacting a form of being-together that has recognized and imbibed the narrative of one or the other vision.

It is a leap, furthermore, since the picture *itself* may grab the viewer, conditioning the choice.<sup>367</sup> The theopolitical imperative is not argued for propositionally by either author, since in relating finite material with the infinite, as Milbank writes, “No one can decide by reason alone (as Badiou concedes) whether this infinite is an empty void or a plenitude.”<sup>368</sup> Either the Christian orthodox or Hegelian-Christian atheist picture offers a more clairvoyant ontology for engaging the

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<sup>367</sup> The choice of such an ontological picture becomes validated as one gains purchase on phenomena and practice; it builds on itself, that is, it justifies itself as it expands in its explanatory power. As we saw above, the negative dialectical picture is justified for Žižek not only in phenomena of the political, but also physics, etc.

<sup>368</sup> Milbank, “Double Glory, 168.

material processes of polity (and revolution).<sup>369</sup> This ontological foregrounding leads to a theopolitical imperative, according to which a form of being-together is normatively pitched for practice as alternative, subterranean polities.

Both thinkers, however, are critical of a postmodern ‘free play of endless difference’ and ‘pseudo-activism’ or ‘Buddhist quietism’ and so the question facing each thinker is how to avoid what Milbank calls, the “uninterrupted pursuit of the impossible.” Both thinkers submit versions of a theopolitical imperative that exhibit a paradox of unforced-force of a polity minus power. By this I mean that a form of being-together is recommended within each theopolitical vision, which is described in the language of polity, but which is not a recommendation to a particular form of statecraft or ‘earthly’ political order. It may (and should) impinge upon and inform statecraft, and these forms—as with contemporary liberal democracies—are indeed evaluated and critiqued in the light of their proximity to the theopolitical vision. The city of God, then, once more takes—even in its embodied practice of polity—an essentially critical-rhetorical and prophetic role.

#### B.3.4.1 Substantial Negation in Žižek

At the disillusion of the big Other in modernity what can remain is a community of believers, conjoined by a spirit of solidarity over against the void. This turning away of God from himself has political (revolutionary) consequences, as he

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<sup>369</sup> Cf. Milbank, “Double Glory,” *Monstrosity*, 117.

argues.<sup>370</sup> In this section Žižek's theopolitical vision is characterized in terms of a substantial negation first by seeing Žižek's imperative as to a form of belief characterized by a 'leap', but then secondly the city of unGod undoes itself from the outset in Žižek as political program, and then finally we look at moments in *Monstrosity* where a kind of weak mobilization, or unforced force in the subterranean enactment of the spectral city which is characterized by agonist solidarity.

### (1) Leap

In his follow-up response to Milbank, Žižek writes that in a debate between two thinkers like himself and Milbank, the most one usually expects is a stalemate, but the Hegelian way forward—which he then proceeds to undertake—is to demonstrate that the opponent's position is not really a position at all. He also successfully goes on to show that Milbank has attempted the same in the elaborate argument mounted earlier against Žižek's position.<sup>371</sup> The implication here is that one may come to a point of decision between either position and the choice cannot be conditioned on rational justification, since from either position the other is excluded as a non-position, hence without proper justification whatsoever. This is because each 'position' articulates an ontological setting which comprehensively lets the theopolitical emerge. An individual's movement toward one or the other is a reorientation to a different ontological picture and thus it takes the character

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<sup>370</sup> Žižek, "Fear of Four Words," *Monstrosity*, 237.

<sup>371</sup> Cf. Žižek, "Fear of Four Words," *Monstrosity*, 247. Žižek writes, after clarifying what Milbank saw as an abstraction (in his historical narrative) too far from concrete complexities of Christianity's development, he writes, "However, to pursue this line of argumentation is a futile scoring of points. I should focus on the level at which things are really decided—what I am tempted to call, in the old language, the basic metaphysical vision of reality that serves as the background of our argumentation."

of a Kierkegaardian 'leap'. That Žižek's condition for access into this mode of polity, agonist solidarity, is a non-rational, ontological leap, appears evident in his own definition of that 'leap' and in the connected notion of 'belief'. Elsewhere, this pattern is picked up in his description of 'true ethics'.

In epistemological congruence with the negative dialectics Žižek has articulated, any grasp of reality will entail the recognition that the particular and material is the appearance of the non-reconciliation of the Real to itself; i.e., the appearance of the Void. It follows for Žižek that the central insight of Kierkegaard is in the particular, material appearance of universal Truth, captured by the notion of the 'leap' in *Philosophical Fragments*. He writes:

The properly Christian choice is the 'leap of faith' by means of which we take the risk to fully engage in a singular instantiation as the Truth embodied, with no ironic distance, no fingers crossed ... eternity is accessible only through time, through the belief in Christ's Incarnation as a temporal event.<sup>372</sup>

The Christian choice is thus a leap insofar as it is a 'risk' to 'full engagement' in a particular ontological picture; the implication is that such a cognitive assent cannot be fully calculated or rationalized in advance.<sup>373</sup> If it could, then there must be some criteria for externally justifying the assent. But the thought figure of the

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<sup>372</sup> Žižek, "Dialectical Clarity," *Monstrosity*, 258.

<sup>373</sup> When one looks at Žižek's reading of Kierkegaard, it's also clear that this is the kind of experience he assumes as background for the potential buy-in to the spectral city. Kierkegaard should be read along with other post-Hegelians as a "desperate attempt to reinstall metaphysics, albeit in the inverted form of the primacy of concrete reality." (27) Habermas avoids 'ontological commitment'; naturalism (Darwinianism, etc) is the 'obscure secret' not to be admitted, but this secret covers up the real ontological commitment which is idealist "the a priori transcendental of communication that cannot be deduced from natural being." (26)

leap is part of a narration of the impossibility of just such an external reality (and hence, external criteria) apart from the singular, embodied appearance of it. Such an assent is structured by Žižek in way similar to ‘True love’ and ‘true ethics’ (and ‘true belief’ below): they are always spontaneous, inarticulate, and prior to rational reflection about their object.<sup>374</sup> As this passage suggests, the ‘leap’ is further specified so that not only is such risk a condition for any comprehensive belief, but that Christianity is precisely the condition of any actual ‘leap’, since Christ’s incarnation is the singular instantiation/embodiment of Truth.

Žižek concludes his reflections in response to Milbank by answering: what would the “ethical stance [he implies] actually look like?”<sup>375</sup> He then immediately emphasizes that it is not enough to say that his ‘*materialist* ethics’ does not rely on religious belief. If the ‘leap of faith’ is the act of risking to assent, ‘belief’ in “Fear of Four Words” and “Dialectical Clarity Versus the Misty Conceit of Paradox” denotes the commitment itself to the ontological view. And in believing, for Žižek, what is ‘in view’ is not immediately ascertained (‘actualized’), but is virtual, so that when one believes, it is not as a direct access to the reality of the object but rather to the mediating imaging of the object. Direct apprehension, undercuts the character of belief.

“...what do we really believe when we believe? Is it not that, even when our belief is sincere and intimate, we do not simply believe in the direct reality

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<sup>374</sup> Another examples Žižek gives derives from his observation of an advertisement for a matchmaking service which offered to outsource the ‘fall’ from love. True love, for Žižek, must include a ‘fall’, since any accounting of a partner’s traits in the act of choosing them (as the commodification of oneself for the matchmaking service seemed to demand) precludes the possibility of a serendipitous connection that is prior to any rational reflection on the object of love. (Žižek: “Vote: For Hegel,” posted on YouTube). He finds a parallel of this turn in the shift from Einstein’s general to special theory of relativity. Matter is not the thing that bends space, but it is rather an effect of the bentness of space. Cf., *Monstrosity*, 99.

<sup>375</sup> Žižek, “Dialectical Clarity,” *Monstrosity*, 297.



of the object of our belief; in a much more refined way, we cling to a vision whose status is very fragile, virtual, so that its direct actualization would somehow betray the sublime character of the belief.”<sup>376</sup>

Žižek, earlier in the text, distinguishes ‘true’ from ‘false’ belief. False belief holds that apprehension of the object is simply as yet incomplete. The metaphor which encapsulates ‘false belief’ is that of the stained tapestry which looks beautiful but only when grasped from a distance; human history likewise may appear brutal as events happen, but from the perspective of eternity all is resolved in beauty and goodness.<sup>377</sup> ‘True belief’, by contrast, does not depend on this guarantee of resolve; no assurance that the virtual imaging of belief is even obscurely gesturing at its object. Since that is the case, true belief must be (counter-intuitively) atheist, but an atheism that is not simply anti-theism or belief in the non-existence of God. Rather it takes the form of belief minus any transcendent Other; any guarantee of an ultimate fulfillment. False belief skips the mediating moment of believing in the virtual imaging.<sup>378</sup> It thus retains the mystifying, ‘sublime object of ideology’.<sup>379</sup>

This contrasts that other form of belief associated with the postsecular theological turn, which finds expression in Caputo and Vattimo. There, religion is an ‘auratic’ belief; ‘God-is-dead’ equals the end of metanarrative. Science, by this view,

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<sup>376</sup> Žižek, “Fear of Four Words,” 297.

<sup>377</sup> Žižek, “Fear of Four Words,” 49. The picture of God objected to here is that of the ‘unity of opposites,’ in the sense of a “frame containing worldly antagonisms, guaranteeing their final reconciliation, so that, from the standpoint of divine eternity, all moments are of a higher Whole, their apparent cacophony a subordinate aspect of the all-encompassing harmony...”

<sup>378</sup> Creston Davis, in his introduction to *Monstrosity*, cites another moment in Žižek’s writing where a sign in Chicago read, “We Don’t Believe [in God], We Know God.” “Introduction,” p. 9. Quote from, Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 40. For his use of the stain metaphor, see, Žižek, “Dialectical Clarity,” 265.

<sup>379</sup> Just as in Žižek’s Marxist critique of capitalism, the object of desire is shrouded in mystery.

represents one among many comprehensive interpretations of reality that must be discarded as an ultimate, unifying principle. Religion thereby enters back in postmodernism as a kind of postmetaphysical openness to the Other.<sup>380</sup> For Žižek, deconstruction is only the newest attempt to retain the gap between “the spectral unconditional Event and its contingent instantiation,” and thus it repeats the error Žižek locates in Eckhart’s negative theology. Postmodern theology misses the Kierkegaardian insight.

Thus the atheist form of belief Žižek recommends is ‘un-belief’: the form of belief, but one in which ‘Truth’ is embodied and dies (Christ), so that the virtual community of belief (Spirit) might continue, dis-illusioned, prepared for a radical openness to the traumatic encounter with the other, neighbors and enemies alike. The primary mode of entry into the spectral city from Žižek’s perspective is a leap toward this form of true belief.

## (2) Self-defeating political program and agonist solidarity

The political import of unbelief, or the substance of Žižek’s theopolitical substantial negation, is precisely in its demand for radical openness to the other; it is ‘radically open’ in its denial of any reconciliation under an overarching

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<sup>380</sup> “It is at this point that I should reiterate the shift from Judaism to Christianity: to assert the moment of closure, the dogma that sustains openness, the brutal and violent cut, rupture, that sustains reconciliation, or, more radically, is reconciliation. The ‘truth’ of Christianity is that, in our earthly universe, things have to appear, to reveal themselves, as (in the guise of) their opposite: eternity is an ecstatic moment that cuts into the temporal flow; the work of love is ruthless struggle;; our rise to divine eternity is God’s Incarnation ... When, in a postmodern mode, we ignore this ‘truth’, we cannot but reject the death-of-God theologies as all to Christian...” Žižek, “Fear of Four Words,” 255. Cf. Caputo and Vattimo, *After the Death of God*, 133, and Caputo, *On Religion*.

transcendent scheme or totality.<sup>381</sup> That is, it becomes apparent in Žižek's theopolitical vision, that it is in the very negation of such a totality that the picture of a truer political, of an 'agonist solidarity' can emerge. This problematic aligns in Žižek's work as an anti-codification and mobilization.

Take Žižek's example of the state. The state addresses the problem of how to contain class struggle. And states fail, not so much because they are unable to realize their particular, ideal solution to this struggle, but that "[states are] so many attempts to actualize an ideal (model) that would resolve the antagonism inscribed into the very notion of the State."<sup>382</sup>

Just like the codification of an ethical act would make it a false ethical act, so the imposition of an 'ideal model' of the political makes it a false political; in the latter case, it ignores the fundamental/ontological rift. Žižek's critique suggests that any attempt to actualize unification under a single vision of the harmonious political will always devolve into a kind of 'fascism'. That is to say, the mobilized political becomes a self-annihilating mode of the political, since the harmonious political presumes the possibility of a unification of free individuals, but such a unification must be artificial and forced. This is the political implication of the negative dialectics described above with relation to the human and the political.

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<sup>381</sup> This analysis sets aside the theoretical problem, which is apparent here, of the figure of the non-All as a 'comprehensive ontological setting' that is somehow also not another version of a 'totalist' picture.

<sup>382</sup> Žižek, "Fear of For Words," *Monstrosity*, 49.

Is there any political form that escapes the problem of codification/mobilization? Just like the cure for the psychoanalytic patient is to experience the self-annihilation of the personal fiction, so the way beyond the hegemony of ideology is to see the fetishized object of desire as nothing: the Lacanian cure of no-cure. Attempts at harmonizing the struggle fail to recognize the ‘parallax’ nature of the political (let alone selfhood, love, physics, etc.) and are thus always ideological screens for covering up that intrinsic (and cosmic) struggle.

### (3) Imperative to *Leitkultur* of agonist solidarity

The implicit imperative, then, to enact a spectral city is first of all an imperative to adopt the new picture and then let it be generative of practice in the formation of a parallel, subterranean (alternative) polity—a substantial negation of the theopolitical vision. Like the dark web, it is meant to exist conterminously and subversively alongside so many formations of the state in public space. We might approximate this theopolitical vision to a *Leitkultur*.

In a critique of politically correct forms multiculturalism, Žižek claims counterintuitively that a kind of *Leitkultur* is necessary for solidarity in pluralist societies, but that such a leading-culture must remain unarticulated as a set of unspoken dogmas.<sup>383</sup> In the same way, he quips that racist jokes are the best guarantee for a truer solidarity in pluralist societies. The personal example he gives is of his former life in a profoundly divisive Yugoslavia, where stereotypes were often articulated in crude caricatures of the various ethnic and religious

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<sup>383</sup> Žižek, Recorded Lecture, posted at <https://youtu.be/oK7WbOIJKM4>.

groups that lived together. Where individuals could laugh at one another under the absurdity of these caricatures, a kind of friendship and solidarity was possible; what unified, in other words, was the unspoken remainder at which the ridiculous caricatures negatively gestured. In the same way, whatever connects disparate groups, it cannot be an articulated, codified or legalized acceptance of the other, because in the moment it is codified in a set of rules for politically correct engagement, the potency for solidarity vanishes.

Such an unarticulated and negative cultural polity, would—one assumes—open space for a more thorough embrace of otherness and plurality, while yet grounded in an exclusive vision of reality. And this is precisely because, it is the only non-legal, uncoded form of being-together. Žižek's 'Pauline-Protestant', radical postsecular theopolitical vision rejects the domain of law as sufficient for solidarity among free individuals, since it is "by definition caught in a self-propelling vicious cycle with crime..." Rather, Žižek's (social) good, and the motivating source of solidarity, is in love: "not in sentimental love, but in love on account of which, as Kierkegaard put it with matchless radicality, I am ready to kill my neighbor."<sup>384</sup>

#### B.3.4.2 Substantial Negation in Milbank

Milbank's narration articulates the harmonious polity; and it is effective inasmuch as it imaginatively envelopes the reader in an alternative ontological picture of the political. As he writes, the goal of a discourse like the one he's engaged with Žižek

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<sup>384</sup> Žižek, "Dialectical Clarity," *Monstrosity*, 254.

is not so much to argue propositionally for the correctness of the radically orthodox view, but rather to ‘out-narrate’—in this case—the negative-dialectical ontological polity. Thus, for Milbank as well, the goal is to stage the conditions for a ‘leap of faith’. Once articulated, the attentive reader may be captivated, if it makes better sense of the foregrounded phenomenal and material pursuit of being-together. First, we take a look at the nature of this ‘leap’ in Milbank and then see how from the radically orthodox perspective, codification and mobilization of polity is likewise self-undoing, so that the theopolitical imperative becomes another substantial negation; in Milbank’s case, however, such a substantial negation takes the form of a ‘politics of virtue’.

### (1) Leap

Paradox is one ontological lens among others for viewing the landscape, and the approach to one’s adoption of the lens takes the character of another ‘leap of faith’.<sup>385</sup> In Milbank’s essay, Kierkegaard emerges, *contra* Hegel, as the thinker of paradox *par excellence*, but there is a contrast in Milbank’s view of the leap over Žižek’s. With Žižek’s Kierkegaardian insight, Milbank likewise holds that the infinite must necessarily appear in the finite instance, but not because this is the way ‘nothing’ becomes apparent; rather, because—as recounted above—the finite participates in, or is ‘suspended’ by the transcendent. For Kierkegaard, notes Milbank, faith just as much as reason, presupposes an ungrounded ‘truth’ as the

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<sup>385</sup> Milbank, “Double Glory,” *Monstrosity*, 170. The question is whether paradox is the (ontological) key that fits the lock of (phenomenal) reality; whether it provides for a better account of the world.

coincidence of time and eternity.<sup>386</sup> There is a kind of faith necessary in making this connection, since the infinite is, in fact, only known *via negativa*.<sup>387</sup>

## (2) Problems of codification & mobilization of the theopolitical

Adoption of the radical orthodox theopolitical vision is an imaginative reorientation to the 'landscape' of the political as the paradoxical coincidence of transcendence and immanence. And there is a kind of prescribed practice in view here, by which this theopolitical vision may be enacted; but the material/political only analogically participates in divine/transcendent harmonic sociality (i.e., we can only know such paradisaal unity in difference, etc.) negatively, by faith in the infinite disclosiveness of the finite.<sup>388</sup> This connects to 'repetition forward' (Kierkegaard)—as opposed to (Platonic) 'recollection backward'—since one gains knowledge of the universal and timeless only in the particular and in moments, in-time, expansions/progressions (non-identical repetitions) of the Truth. The 'logic' therefore that can ground the integrity of the scene and 'establish reality', as against that of negative dialectics, "is that of 'nonidentical repetition', as setting up an ungrounded *habitus*."<sup>389</sup>

This implies that truly one begins not with alienating negation but with mediation, and that one is bound to remain with mediation, such that truth (if it be possible at all) can arrive only as trust in the possibility of

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<sup>386</sup> Milbank, "Double Glory," *Monstrosity*, 169.

<sup>387</sup> Milbank, "Double Glory," *Monstrosity*, 169.

<sup>388</sup> Univocal order (Scotus) and the 'democracy' between infinite/finite, etc. leads to a political vision of domination; whatever forceful re-ordering takes place, is the order of the day; the overturning of order is just another order (see quote from R. Williams: political critique that is constructive assumes an order 'as such') (~197)

<sup>389</sup> Milbank, "Double Glory," *Monstrosity*, 159.

subjective discernment of the participation of the finite in the infinite through ‘momentary’ disclosures. And the ‘consistent’ identity of a repetition with that which went before, and of the coincidence of a moment with time and eternity, requires a faith in the absolute ‘paradoxical’ unity of same with different in either case, as Kierkegaard taught.<sup>390</sup>

We can see how this works in Milbank’s example of Eckhart’s commentary on the Gospel of John, where the Trinity is explained in terms of particular/universal justice, in which the ‘just man’ (Christ) is the presence of Justice. That is, Justice is known by witnessing it in some particular embodied form, lived out. “Justice must be expressed justice.” This also suggests how it can be that, for Eckhart, we may ‘give birth to God’ in our souls; God—as the one who begets the Son, as the image of the Father—also begets ourselves. “Our identity with divine generation is accorded by grace, and results from the ‘nullity’ of the image of God in us insofar as it resides in an alien vessel ... the image of God in us resides paradoxically in the ‘imageless’ depth of the soul...”<sup>391</sup> Insofar as one may ‘die to oneself’ and become an empty receptacle of grace, one allows for the generative, creative work of God.

Connected to this is Eckhart’s resistance to the codification of practice. While the finite expresses the divine, an ethical act must always retain a kind of non-explicated spontaneity. Thus, instead of articulating a set of moral disciplines, he recommends a disposition, a contemplative attitude. In the authentically Eckhartian mode of mysticism, one’s journey inward is always intended to push

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<sup>390</sup> Milbank, “Double Glory,” *Monstrosity*, 160. Milbank adds, “instead of the merely particular disclosing the truth as only the particular, one has this extraordinary yet ordinary particularity coinciding with a truth that is still an infinite universal plenitude. The former rendering suggests that the divine is ‘only humanity’, as if we could ever know what that was, but the latter rendering suggests that true humanity is paradoxically more than humanity” (170).

<sup>391</sup> Milbank, “Double Glory,” *Monstrosity*, 190.



out into practice.<sup>392</sup> Detachment allows divine love to “come into constant new birth on one’s soul, and so of proceeding ecstatically outward toward others.”<sup>393</sup>

Paul’s notion of *agape*, is likewise interpreted by Milbank to draw a parallel conclusion. This ‘counter law’ of love is described by Milbank as the New Testament moral vision of an ‘order beyond order’.<sup>394</sup> Here, established notions of social-hierarchical order are viewed as upended and radicalized. Since everything derives from the ‘ontological summit’—that ‘topmost source’ and ‘inconceivable height’—all things are equal; the divine monarch is “elevated out of sight.”<sup>395</sup> As regards participation of the individual in this Whole, the vision of *agape* here entails, not an ascetic alienation of one’s self from her desire, but rather the eventual, now-elusive fulfillment of desire in relation to the other and ultimately to God.

Following this theopolitical impulse, ‘enactment’ could not be identified with *theocratic* mobilization, since the latter would be a conflation of the contingent, human political, with non-contingent, infinite relationality. Thus indeed, for Milbank as well, theopolitical enactment resists instantiation in legal code or state-political formation; that is, Christendom remains a non-option, for the very reason that mobilization or institutionalization of such into statecraft, etc., would inevitably entail a kind of corruption.<sup>396</sup> At the end of *Theology and Social Theory*,

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<sup>392</sup> Milbank, “Double Glory,” *Monstrosity*, 207.

<sup>393</sup> Milbank, “Double Glory,” *Monstrosity*, 207.

<sup>394</sup> Milbank, “Double Glory,” 197.

<sup>395</sup> Milbank, “Double Glory,” 206.

<sup>396</sup> Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 442. Elsewhere Milbank also leans on Ivan Illich’s notion of corruption. Cf. Milbank’s lecture posted: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=kPORlaXlvzY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kPORlaXlvzY).

Milbank writes: "In the midst of history, the judgement of God has already happened. And either the Church enacts the vision of paradisaal community which this judgement opens out, or else it promotes a hellish society beyond any terrors known to antiquity: *corruptio optima pessima...*"<sup>397</sup>

### (3) Substantial negation in practice

What is left for the theopolitical remainder for Milbank? How might it be conceptualized as an 'enactment', with socio-political import but without sliding into a revived Christendom? The concern here is what practice Milbank has in mind in his promotion of the theopolitical vision.

Specifically in the "Double Glory" essay, the theopolitical imperative corresponds to the 'authentically Christian mystic" tradition. A 'detached' attitude becomes one of justice as equal concern for others and an imperative to love everyone. Excepting God, this is an "impossible imperative," but the identification amounts to a "commitment to change in anticipation of the eschaton,"<sup>398</sup> and so the political vision that emerges is nevertheless revisionary, and not quietist. The imperative, identified in "Double Glory" is the non-identical repetition of the personality of Christ; the resuming of harmony, since "it repeats a life in whom has always been recognized not simply 'any old finite human life' but the very pattern of justice for both time and eternity."<sup>399</sup>

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<sup>397</sup> Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 442.

<sup>398</sup> Milbank, "Double Glory," *Monstrosity*, 208.

<sup>399</sup> Milbank, "Double Glory," *Monstrosity*, 216.

The theopolitical vision is seen a better, parallel polity characterized by quality, justice, solidarity, because it envisions an “order beyond order” that is at once ineffably other and yet intimately related to the material and political. The important observation to make here is that it is this very ineffable, paradoxical relation (the ‘misty conceit’) that, all at once, precludes the possibility of mobilizing statecraft while also justifying the enculturation of a deeply democratic, egalitarian attitude. In Milbank’s words, it “does not make the ‘ontologizing’ mistake of imagining that the divine perspective can be utopically put into practice all at once, or can ever be entirely displayed within finite structures.”<sup>400</sup> This substantially negative mode is positioned, at one point, as a fourth way beyond Kantianism, utilitarianism and theocratic totalitarianism:

“Equality requires relationship with God; in a way that is untrue for Kant. If we just submit to the imperative, it remains a regulative ideal that we can’t realize; practical vacuum filled with utilitarian calculations, or one has the ‘utopian endeavour to realize the divine imperative here on earth in the name of some human group; an attempt which will always result in a terroristic attempt to realize the impossible through infinitely detailed enforcement...”<sup>401</sup>

Elsewhere, we see the kind of post-liberal polity envisioned, which may flow from such a repetition. In *The Politics of Virtue*, Milbank seeks to elaborate something like localized sites of resistance to the exploitative, amoral, political-economic orders of late modernity. Within these sites of resistance, it is key that none crystalize to form exclusivist alternative polities but that impinge on broader political structures through its own prophetic critique. Unlike Rod Dreher’s

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<sup>400</sup> Milbank, “Double Glory,” *Monstrosity*, 208.

<sup>401</sup> Milbank, “Double Glory,” *Monstrosity*, 209.

‘Benedict option’,<sup>402</sup> Milbank is looking not for cloisters of Christianity, but rather something more permeable, comprehensive while also more elusive and open. Included here is a recollection of trade guilds, which he envisions as alternative economic models that infuse moral purpose into market activity, etc.

#### B.3.4.3 Synthesis

The analysis above sought to justify a description of the imperative which emerges from the radically postsecular, apophatic theopolitical visions of Milbank and Žižek, as substantially negative. And it pointed out the three following characteristics of their mode of ‘substantial negation’: (1) the imperative is an invitation to ‘leap’; (2) mobilization of a theopolitical vision is self-destructive; (3) the form of being-together, as the city of God/unGod, is positioned as an alternative, subterranean polity of love that may impinge upon the earthly city in the form of prophetic critique.

For both Žižek and Milbank, assent to the ontological—and hence also to the theopolitical vision—is a leap insofar as it entails a pre-rational moment, a ‘risk’ on the part of the viewer to adopt a construal of the material as more than itself. For Žižek, the genuinely Kierkegaardian leap is understood specifically as a moment of recognition that the ‘universal’ only appears in the particular, because there is only the particular. For Milbank, the leap is faith in the ‘ungrounded’ truth

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<sup>402</sup> In a May 26, 2018 tweet, Milbank writes, “Not the Benedict Option. But a double strategy of alternatives to and permeation of mainstream secular culture. Above all offering everyone something more meaningful and attractive they will want to join...” @johnmilbank3, posted at <https://twitter.com/johnmilbank3>.

of the paradoxical coincidence of finite and infinite. The authors' strategy of *narratively* depicting the theopolitical vision is concomitant with either notion of the leap, since the ontological setting is presented; the author then moves aside in claiming that there is no conclusive argument, so that the reader is left with the risky choice of adopting the view of the material as either an instantiation of the non-All or as a material participation of the finite in infinite, inscrutable harmony.

Both views hold to the 'absoluteness' of Christianity, and yet their theopolitical imperative remains in a post-Christendom bend. The presumption here was that an instantiation or mobilization of such a vision would, on the one hand, be an exercise in utopic fantasy and, on the other, subject to the same corruptions as any historical-political statecraft. For Žižek, attempts to mobilize an ideal political model ignore the fundamental rift in the Real and so simply replace one false vision with another; that is, there can be no political order patterned on the ultimate harmony of the Whole, since there is only rift, alienation, etc. Therefore, mobilization of a theopolitical vision would be intrinsically authoritarian. For Milbank, however, the ideal of political harmony is the elusive transcendent order, analogically participated in by the material, and yet mobilization and political institutionalization of the theopolitical vision is impossible without corruption,

Regardless, there are 'revolutionary' consequences to both theopolitical visions. On either perspective there is an imperative to embody in an alternative form of being-together. For Žižek this form is the 'virtual community' of unbelief, which remains suspended in austere, 'agonist solidarity' of self over against the other. *Pauline-Agapaic* togetherness for Žižek refers to the austere acceptance of the lack

of fulfillment in the other; and in spite of this fact, retaining concern and acceptance. For Milbank an ultimately *agapaic*, harmonious order—while inflected in a fragmented way in liturgical enactments, ‘sites of resistance’, etc.—is the elusive ‘order beyond order’, which one participates in inasmuch as the self’s *de sire* is transformed. The *societas perfecta*, in *The Politics of Virtue*, may find moments of disclosure in the lives of virtuous aristocrats, habituated in the practice of *agape*.

### B.3.5 Summary and Outcomes

It was the design of section B to introduce a framework of apophatic theopolitics as a late stage in the evolution of political-theological thought. It plotted markers in this constellation from Moltmann's 'New Political Theology' to the postliberal vision of Hauerwas and Caputo's post-modern vision. These three markers, in turn, were points of contrast to the 'radical postsecular' theopolitics of Žižek and Milbank as described and synthesized in a discourse analysis of their debate in *The Monstrosity of Christ*. In each case, what unites these visions is that they operate self-consciously as post-Christendom theopolitical visions, and yet through their various iterations, each articulates a 'substantially negative' mode of political import.

The radical postsecular visions provided two contrasting models for viewing the apophatic-theopolitical on an ontological plane. Different than the 'postliberal' and 'postmodern' approaches, these visions sought a narration of the ontological setting of the political, either in terms of negative dialectics or the paradox. These were seen as re-workings of the immanent/transcendent dyad, which on the one hand, played out as the 'transfinitude' of the Void, or on the other, as the suspension of the material in relation to a plenitudinous Whole. The argument at the end was that their narrations conditioned a Kierkegaardian leap toward the particular theopolitical vision (according to whichever pre-rational urgings one may have), and that this, in turn, provided the opportunity for the 'theopolitical imperative' to either agonist solidarity or an embodied *societas perfecta* inflected in a politics of virtue. Since the imperative was to a leap, and thus a transformation

of vision, the case was made for a description of this imperative as a form of substantial negation, which is not ontologically 'weak'.

The analysis depicted two very different paths for apophatic theopolitics beyond postliberalism and postmodernism by articulating an account of ontologies of the political, inclusive of background theopolitical visions. They are retrievals of Christian, two-kingdoms theopolitical visions, which nevertheless in their call for political enactment, suggest a rather modern, one might preliminarily suggest 'epiphanic', mode of indirect realization by initiation into some vision of reality. This suggests a framework for apophatic theopolitics, which is self-aware of its ontological articulation, and which will form the basis of the thesis that Charles Taylor's work not only operates self-consciously in the space of theopolitics, but also develops a discursive, apophatic strategy for a parallel imperative for believers to form subterranean socialities, 'networks of *agape*'.

It should become evident in part C that it is this later, radical postsecular framework, that most closely parallels the theopolitical vision and approach of Charles Taylor. It will be argued below, however, that rather than adopt a strategy of narrating the ontological setting, Taylor embeds the apophatic within his dialogical writing, in a way analogous to the modern epiphanic poets he draws on in *Sources of the Self* and *A Secular Age*.



## B.4 Synthesis & Summary

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## C. Charles Taylor's Apophatic Theopolitics

In a 2015 lecture at the Pontifical Gregorian University entitled “The Life of the Church in a Secular Age,” Charles Taylor asks the following question: In a ‘post-Christendom’ era in which peoples’ sense of belonging to a society are no longer integrated bundles of citizenship and church membership, “How do people imagine how the kingdom of God grows?”<sup>403</sup> What he begins to articulate—in a rare moment of normative theological explication—is a notion of the growth of the kingdom of God (kingdom of God), not as a political, institutional, or ecclesial expansion, but rather as a kenotic mode of ‘un-selfing’ that continually disrupts such structures. He draws on the parable of the mustard seed to elaborate. As the parable goes, the mustard seed is a very small seed, and when it is planted it grows to become a large-enough tree that birds can even nest in its branches.<sup>404</sup> Taylor emphasizes that there is a discontinuity between the planting and the growth of the tree, such that it bursts out in unexpected ways. And this he reads as a very different version of the kingdom of God than we find in ‘Christendom’; one that, in fact, defies lasting structures. “The great tree,” he says, “is the very mysterious growth of human consciousness and human moral aspiration.” We can recognize the growth of the kingdom, he says, even in the lives of those not identified with the church in profound moments of self-sacrificial love. Thus, the kingdom is like a surprising event, unbound to ecclesial-institutional form, and evidenced in actions of self-giving.

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<sup>403</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=152Ng0qYRIM>. Posted by The World Conference of Catholic University Institutions of Philosophy, April 30, 2015.

<sup>404</sup> Cf. the Gospels of Matthew (ch. 13), Mark (ch. 4), and Luke (ch. 13).

The mustard seed parable highlights some important features of what we can call—following the analysis above—Taylor’s own theopolitical vision. The kingdom of God does not forcefully impress itself on others by attempting an all-encompassing embrace of society. Nor is it ultimately concerned with defending its own borders, geographical, cultural, or otherwise. It grows rather by an uncalculated, spontaneous response by those whose imaginations are captured by, for instance, the inspired lives of Saint Francis of Assisi to Martin Luther King Jr. In the last thirty years of Taylor’s writings, we read self-critique and re-appraisal for the Catholic church’s self-understanding in relation to post-Christendom conditions of late modernity.<sup>405</sup> He recommends models like L’Arche, Médecins Sans Frontières, and Taizé which demonstrate a practice that exceeds institutional and confessional boundaries in service of and with religious, political, and cultural others for common flourishing. In these later works Taylor develops theologically normative language for talking about the social and political dimensions of Christian practice, and he gives a name to that vision of the growing kingdom of God, namely: the ‘network of agape’.<sup>406</sup> It is the primary purpose of this thesis to locate the network of agape in Taylor’s narrative, see how it functions in his writing, and then to make the case that he, perhaps inadvertently, communicates this vision in an apophatic mode.

The brief case I’ve just made is that in Taylor’s writings there is a positive picture

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<sup>405</sup> Cf. Taylor, *A Catholic Modernity?* (1996); and *Avenues of Faith* (2020).

<sup>406</sup> By ‘other’ I am referring broadly to any person or group that would be perceived in a given discursive exchange as operating under a self-understanding, religiously, culturally, etc., that differs from one’s own. Taylor, as a Catholic, for example, might consider a Buddhist compatriot as an ‘other’.

and ostensive modeling about what the kingdom of God might be, and its key features include a solidarity across cultural, political, or religious lines and the absence of coercion or force. We could argue further that the kingdom metaphor, otherwise expressed as communion, is a core expression of Taylor's own religious source and motivation.

Taylor's own background is within French-speaking Quebec, which underwent in the last century a transition from confessional-style 'bundling'—as Taylor calls it—of state and church. That is, his original context was within a closely-tied set of belongings to Catholic parish and political structures, which in the 1960s dissolved (he refers to this shift as the break-up of a 'Christendom' model). As a student at McGill University and then at Oxford, while wrestling with the analytical-philosophical tradition and encountering Merleau-Ponty's *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Taylor was also engaging in ecumenical dialog and was particularly inspired by the writings of theologians who shaped Vatican II, namely, Yves Congar, Henri de Lubac, and Marie-Dominique Chenu.<sup>407</sup> These writers, as he notes in a published interview with Jonathan Guilbault, circumvented the prohibitions applied to modernist thought by recovering early church fathers, not to substantiate arguments, but to find models for theological

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<sup>407</sup> Taylor and Smith, "'Why Do I See the World So Differently?' How existential questions of faith compelled philosopher Charles Taylor to write *A Secular Age*," *Comment Magazine* online. Posted August 2014, <https://comment.org/why-do-i-see-the-world-so-differently/>. In this interview with James K. A. Smith, Taylor talks about these tensions, not only between Anglophone and Francophone intellectual traditions, but also between his own faith and the surrounding tacit rejection of religion. This passage from *A Secular Age* likewise articulates the poles—of rationalism and hardened orthodox Catholicism—that he situates himself between: "We are in fact all acting, thinking, and feeling out of backgrounds and frameworks which we do not fully understand. To ascribe total personal responsibility to us for these is to want to leap out of the human condition. At the same time, no background leaves us utterly without room for movement and change. The realities of human life are messier than is dreamed of by dogmatic rationalists, or in the Manichean rigidities of embattled orthodoxy." Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 387.

engagement in new historical, cultural contexts.<sup>408</sup> What they were not doing, in other words, was generating a new code for identification with the church over against late modernity. Especially in the sixties, the temptation Taylor noticed was to form a bullwork against the sexual revolution, threats to ‘family values’, and so on, and for Taylor, this approach only worked to nullify the voice of the church in modernity.<sup>409</sup> As he writes,

Any church which has so many pat and ready-made answers, and so little sense of the enigmas of existence is not likely to appear plausible to seekers today; unless, that is, they get beyond the surface experience and frequent the saints and mystics who have constantly been nourishing this faith. The pity is that surface appearances deflect too many people before this deeper perception can dawn on them.<sup>410</sup>

And so Taylor, not unlike Congar, found himself at times at odds with the institutional church.<sup>411</sup> Primarily in interviews, but also at certain points in his published works, Taylor’s Catholicism appears—as in the quote above—as ecumenical, contemplative, and searching.<sup>412</sup> Taylor talks about an ‘ecumenicism

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<sup>408</sup> Taylor, *Avenues of Faith*, 80. One might see, in a perhaps indirect way, their influence even on Taylor’s later philosophical-historical projects in *Sources of the Self*, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, and *A Secular Age*, which likewise engage in moral source recovery for the purpose of renewed articulation.

<sup>409</sup> Cf. Taylor, “The Church Speaks—To Whom?” 17ff.

<sup>410</sup> Taylor, “The Church Speaks—To Whom?” 19.

<sup>411</sup> Taylor, *Avenues of Faith*, 79ff. Elsewhere, Taylor has described his own faith as a kind of ‘believing again’. After periods of alienation, not to mention the disruption of Quebecois ‘Christendom’, Taylor continued to find inspiration in models of faith, poetic expression, etc. This contrasts those who ‘believe still’, who perhaps less reflexively carry on the faith as handed down to them in their traditional modes. See Taylor’s discussion with Fr. Robert Imbelli at Boston College’s The Church in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, posted January 2014, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=8rllQDvVSso](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8rllQDvVSso). Taylor refers here to the account by Roger Lundin in *Believing Again: Doubt and Faith in a Secular Age* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009).

<sup>412</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 10-11. “What does it mean to say that for me the fullness comes from a power which is beyond me, that I have to receive it, etc.? Today, it is likely to mean something like this: the best sense I can make of my conflicting moral and spiritual experience is captured by a theological view of this kind. That is, in my own experience, in prayer, in moments of

of friendship' as a fitting model for viewing contemporary seekers, banding together with those on very different spiritual itineraries in a kind of solidarity as co-sojourners, an idea which links up with Taylor's mustard seed depiction above.<sup>413</sup> He is inspired by models from St. Theresa to Jean Vanier and artistic expression, and a vision for the manifold ways of expressing Christian faith; a catholicity that merges indecipherably from different starting points. Taylor talks about this process as the 'communion of saints' expanding moral consciousness—Jasper's 'axial revolution' and the life of Jesus are key moments of such expansion for Taylor—in a nonlinear 'gathering of time' as he glosses the *Parousia* (to contrast linear narratives of Progress, which are not coincidentally rejected in *A Secular Age*<sup>414</sup>).

One sees Taylor's contemplative, ecumenical impulse, for instance, on a practical level in his engagement with the Taizé community, but one also sees this where his work resonates with Catholic theologian Ivan Illich. And it's where Taylor resonates with Illich that his work becomes most explicitly apophatic.<sup>415</sup> For it's Illich's spiritualized reading of the Good Samaritan that recurs as a theme in *A Secular Age*, both as a signal of the elusive communal ethic of agape—as way of

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fullness, in experiences of exile overcome, in what I seem to observe around me in other people's lives—lives of exceptional spiritual fullness, or lives of maximum self-enclosedness, lives of demonic evil, etc.—this seems to be the picture which emerges. But I am never, or only rarely, really sure, free of all doubt untroubled by some objection—by some experience which won't fit, some lives which exhibit fullness on another basis, some alternative mode of fullness which sometimes draws me, etc." This particular passage is ambiguous as to whether Taylor is giving a first-person autobiographical account, or whether he is—as he often does—putting the position of a broad cultural milieu in the first-person voice. That said, this articulation mirrors statements from other interviews, which suggest the position is his own, whether or not he means it to be here. See fn 411.

<sup>413</sup> Cf. Taylor's discussion 'Meditation and the Lives of Faith Today,' posted April 2015 by the Berkley Center, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=-PpxppiucC8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-PpxppiucC8).

<sup>414</sup> Cf. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 387.

<sup>415</sup> See below, p. 257.

being and not a set of universal rules—and also in the subsequent assertion that modern secularity is “neither the fulfillment nor the antithesis of Christianity, but its *perversion*.”<sup>416</sup> This affords reflection on an obvious question to my thesis: if Taylor explicitly and positively articulates (and names) his theopolitical vision as the agapeic network, why would he engage in an apophatic mode?

The short answer might be that even a mystic like Eckhart had to rely on the contents of positive religion to make possible the negating gesture at infinitude.<sup>417</sup> The longer answer will, I hope, be borne out in the analysis below, but to generalize at the start: Taylor toggles between positive description of the theopolitical and ‘ontic-indefiniteness’ when the network of agape enters, for instance, in his portrayals of modern moral dilemma. His work in *A Secular Age*, which is the primary text of my exegesis below, is thus sketchy as he admits in the preface. The grand narrative he’s telling skims through broad swathes of intellectual history to give a sense for the ‘North Atlantic’ condition of belief and the competing varieties of spiritual itineraries, and he often admits the limitations of his lens from within Catholic, French-speaking Quebec. Much of the critical response to *A Secular Age* expands and corrects his descriptions of those trajectories and the generalities or over-simplifications he submits as part of his

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<sup>416</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 738; and Taylor, “Preface,” *The Rivers North of the Future*, ix. See also the helpful, parallel discussion comparing Illich and Taylor on the parable of the Good Samaritan in Gregory and Hunt-Hendrix, “Enfleshment and the Time of Ethics,” *Aspiring to Fullness*, 217-237. The authors also note the spiritualized reading of the parable, which bypasses historical-critical commentary on the parable, viewing instead as a continuing speech-act.

<sup>417</sup> Ernesto Laclau, “On the Names of God,” *Political Theologies*, 145. Laclau writes, “...mystical experience, left to itself, is incapable of providing the differential remainders that are, nonetheless, its condition of possibility.” This, of course, is not to suggest that Taylor or his approach is mystical, but inasmuch as the Eckhartian apophatic mode maps on to Taylor’s, we have something like a family resemblance.



revised secularization narrative.<sup>418</sup> There is also critique that revolves around the explicit assumption that the mainline secularization theory concerning the inevitable end of religion appears *prima facie* mistaken, since as he writes, “In our religious lives we are responding to a transcendent reality.”<sup>419</sup> My angle on the text differs from much of this (fruitful) critical commentary, since it traces the agapeic network throughout his narrative to show how it functions in the narrative as a negative foil (i.e., the thing corrupted upon) and then how it appears to emerge indirectly in Taylor’s portrayals of modern moral-spiritual dilemma. Thus, while for Taylor there is a positive theological description of the kingdom of God as the network of *agape*, I will seek to show that it is formulated as an unrealizable sociality and furthermore that there is an apparent philosophical-literary mode of negating options in dialog and genealogy to let a third option emerge, as it were, without explicitly arguing for it. For example, there are moments in Taylor’s writing in which he gestures negatively at the network of agape by situating two or three social-utopic visions in dialog, problematizing

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<sup>418</sup> Two extensive annotated bibliographies may be useful to map out these critiques. One was produced by Florian Zemmin in *Working With A Secular Age* (pp. 387-416) collects works up to 2014, and there is also an extensive online bibliography maintained by Brad Thames at charlestaylor.net. For the kind of critique I have in mind here, see especially, Michael Warner, et al., eds., *Varieties of Secularism in A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2010); for an example of a particular theological critique, expanding on Calvin, see James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) to be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2014), 32-39.

<sup>419</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 768. Taylor goes on here, “We all have some sense of this [transcendent reality], which emerges in our identifying and recognizing some mode of what I have called fullness, and seeking to attain it. Modes of fullness recognized by exclusive humanism, and others that remain within the immanent frame, are therefore responding to a transcendent reality, but misrecognizing it.” For an earlier theological critique of the use of transcendence in *A Secular Age*, see, Stanley Hauerwas and Romand Coles, “Long Live the Weeds and the Wilderness Yet’: Reflections on *A Secular Age*,” *Modern Theology* 26, no. 3 (July 2010). cf. “Symposium on Charles Taylor with his Responses,” *New Blackfriars* 91, no. 1036 (2010). In this collection, see especially, Gregor McLennan, “Uplifting Unbelief,” 627-45; cf. Peter E. Gordon, “The Place of the Sacred in the Absence of God: Charles Taylor’s ‘A Secular Age’,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 69 no. 4 (2008), 647-73. Gordon is likewise critical of Taylor’s (he argues implicit) assumption about ahistorical transcendent reality.

their internal dilemmas, and leaving the negative theopolitical vision as one way beyond the fray. For example, we will notice a caricatured discourse in *A Secular Age* between secular humanist and Nietzsche-inspired anti-humanist social-political visions.<sup>420</sup> Both address social transformation, and both appear caught in their own dilemmas. The third option of thinking of utopia in terms of the kingdom of God is offered as one plausible approach, but Taylor does not directly argue for it. He simply leaves the impression of a third way and moves on.

It is this doubly negative movement—both the unrealizability or non-codifiability of the (positive) network of *agape* as well as the implicit performative negation—in Taylor’s writing that I would like to identify as his ‘apophatic theopolitics’. I will make the case for Taylor’s vision as apophatic-theopolitical by reading his work through the apophatic parallels grid of B.1.2. Following that scheme, the kingdom of God as the ‘network of *agape*’ is (1) a ‘hyper-reality’, (2) the rhetorical strategy in conveying the third way is a performative use of language, and (3) the imperative to constructive practice follows a characteristic ‘substantial negation’. To be clear, my case is not that Taylor is consciously deploying an apophatic strategy in his writings, but that these nevertheless push into apophatic registers given Taylor’s own contemplative style of faith, his moral ontology, and language philosophy. That means my thesis takes on the risk of building an argument from silence, though I hope to demonstrate from impulses within his own Catholic and philosophical constructions, along with my exegesis of his text, that such an apophatic mode is nevertheless apparent and perhaps helpful for understanding

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<sup>420</sup> *A Secular Age*, 636-38.

Taylor's own 'silence' in argumentation at the ontic-theopolitical level.

The section begins with an investigation into why, for Taylor, the kingdom of God cannot be coerced or 'Reformed' into human social life without experiencing its own self-negation. We see this play out in Taylor's genealogy of the modern North Atlantic social imaginaries, which centers on the corruptions of Reform—the capitalized 'R' signals a longer process that only accelerated in the European Reformations—and the pursuit of recovery from it in the form of a tragic, post-Hegelian dialectic.<sup>421</sup> In *A Secular Age*, any attempt to actualize such a theopolitical vision on earth through Reform or codification can only result in its 'corruption'. This should provide sufficient context for a description of the network of agape kingdom of God as a 'hyper-reality' inasmuch as it can be indirectly gestured at, and communities can perhaps analogically participate in it, but the kingdom of God cannot be mobilized into reality.

Part C builds toward a discourse analysis, out of which I argue that Taylor offers his own theopolitical vision apophatically in the 'subtler language' of his polyphonic style. The rhetorical 'performance' is a mode in which the kingdom of God may emerge as a compelling moral-spiritual option for individuals living in the cross-pressures of a secular age. That is, it's one way that Taylor may be letting the 'Church speak' to contemporary spiritual practice. Taylor's vision is reflected at times *indirectly*; it emerges in 'moments of insight' in his grand narrative of

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<sup>421</sup> Cf. Taylor's Hegel for why Hegel's ontology is no longer possible, and yet something of the dialectic remains: individual fulfillment in belonging. The capitalization in 'Reform' is Taylor's, and it refers to the long movement in Latin Christendom to mobilize the Christian moral vision globally into all strata of individual and social life. Cf. *A Secular Age*, 62.

modernity's becoming, and it also 'triangulates' towards an ultimately ineffable transcendent point from his personally-indexed vision in way strikingly analogous to the 'epiphanic' poetry of Pound and Eliot as described in *Sources of the Self*.<sup>422</sup> I make the case that, for Taylor, any participation in the 'growth of the kingdom' happens not via propositional argumentation for the correctness of the vision, but instead by a series of authentic encounters with others, even those outside the usual fold.<sup>423</sup>

The suggestion that follows is that the non-codifiable theopolitical vision nevertheless drives towards an imperative. When one is affected by this vision of the kingdom of God it should inspire action, but what kind of action can avoid the corruptions of Reform? We see Taylor's answer in models of constructive practice in the form of 'substantial negation' in organizations like *Taizé* and the missionary life of Matteo Ricci. These examples demonstrate an impulse to build ties across cultural and religious boundaries—practicing a posture of 'ethical search'. This becomes a point of connection between the two kingdoms, as it were, as we see how Taylor's theopolitical vision images its relation to formations of contemporary liberal democracies.

The thesis concludes (part D) with a suggestion that Taylor's mode of apophatic theopolitics may offer something like an intercommunicative bridge between

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<sup>422</sup> Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 472-75, 491-92.

<sup>423</sup> Meili Steele describes such a non-propositional mode of reasoning (*à la* Rawls or Habermas) as a "complex engagement with the worldhood that informs normative judgements." This is a kind of 'reasoning through social imaginaries' in the vein of Charles Taylor (and Marcel Gauchet). Steele, "Social Imaginaries and the Theory of the Normative Utterance," *Philosophical and Social Criticism* (July 14, 2017).

theopolitical visions, which attempts to avoid the twin dangers of moral skepticism or relativism on the one hand, and on the other, a distorting multiculturalism. There is a persuasive function in his (non)articulation, since the network of *agapé* is what emerges (tentatively) as the most trustworthy guidepost for political life, but there is also an attendant implication about dialog in general, namely: if the theopolitical is an inevitable part of our 'inescapable moral frameworks', one might fruitfully take a cue from apophatic expression to engage the plethora of strongly held utopian visions in earnest as a starting point to undertaking the difficult effort of authentic mutual understanding.

## C.1 The Network of Agape as a Theopolitical Vision

We defined ‘theopolitical vision’ above as the social-ideal facet of multifaceted ‘moral vision’.<sup>424</sup> If a moral vision is a background picture of the good or full life—including an account of what fundamentally the world and humans are, the grand narratives they’re ensconced within, and a sense for the ‘constitutive good’ in a moral source as the goal and motive for acting—then the theopolitical aspect is that form of sociality that sits within the moral vision as a mode of being-together that matches the anthropological and cosmological picture. I’m submitting here that Charles Taylor’s notion of the ‘network of agape’ is a theopolitical vision since it articulates a social-political ideal, or a form of being-together, which has both its source and goal in the harmony of God’s own triune sociality as depicted in the New Testament. In the network, humans participate with that harmonic goal in responses of compassion and communion.

Before we isolate a description of his theopolitical vision, let’s contextualize it in the discursive field mapped out in section B. Although Taylor would neither call himself ‘postsecular’ nor a ‘theologian’, there are significant affinities in Taylor’s theopolitics and, in particular, the postsecular political-theological impulse described above.<sup>425</sup> Taylor mentions at the end of *A Secular Age* that his ‘Reform

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<sup>424</sup> See section A.2.

<sup>425</sup> Cf. Guido Vanheeswijck, “The Ambiguity of ‘Post-Secular’ and ‘Post-Metaphysical’ Stories: On the Place of Religion and Deep Commitments in a Secular Society, *Working with A Secular Age*, 95ff. Vanheeswijck examines the difference between Habermas and Taylor on these terms, and he argues that this difference essentially lies in their varying take on ‘deep (metaphysical) commitments’ in the discussion around the place of religion in the public sphere. In basic agreement with Vanheeswijck, my analysis emphasizes the role of explicating and articulating such commitments (which Taylor does himself) in genuinely coming to something like an ‘overlapping consensus’.

Master Narrative' may be seen as complimentary to the narrative as told by Radical Orthodoxy, which puts more emphasis on the nominalist turn in late-medieval theology as the key moment in modernity's emergence.<sup>426</sup> But as a political-theological thinker Charles Taylor is not easily placed on this map (see B1). His own political career and support of a kind of civic republicanism/humanist tradition and texts like "A Catholic Modernity" might put him in the correlationist camp (1).<sup>427</sup> And yet, he draws on methods (such as genealogy) and shares some of the central insights of the critical theorist (2).<sup>428</sup> Furthermore, he generally sees modernity as the confluence of changing social worlds grounded in ontologies of the person and society that drift from their theological origins. There are, for Taylor, implicit theologies (he'd say, more broadly 'moral sources') that should therefore be exposed and corrected (3). Thus, one might engage in something like 'exposing false theologies' (as we'll see he does with 'exclusive humanism') to promote a truer politics.

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<sup>426</sup> See the epilogue, "The Many Stories," *A Secular Age*, p. 775. And conversely, radically orthodox thinkers have also engaged Taylor's thought on related themes. See, for example, John Milbank's "A Closer Walk on the Wild Side." In *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*. Michael Warner, Jonathan VanAntwerpen and Craig Calhoun, eds. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010); and Graham Ward's "History, Belief and Imagination in Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*." *Modern Theology* 26, no. 3 (2010): 337-348.

Cf., connections to Catherine Pickstock's "Justice and Prudence: Principles of Order in the Platonic City," *The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. Graham Ward (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001). Here 'civility' replaces 'liturgy, in an analogous way that for Taylor epistemology comes to trump ontology, and morality occludes ethics. And, perhaps, as in the introduction to *Radical Orthodoxy*, Transcendence suspends the material, such that aesthetic experience, political community, etc.,—the and phenomenological descriptions of such experiences—also call out for Taylor the (possible) necessity for transcendent ontological frames. In this way, Taylor's 'negativity' would differ dramatically from the materialist postsecular negativity (Žižek, Badiou, et al.), which imagine the more absolute negation within a univocal ontology.

<sup>427</sup> See page 34 above.

<sup>428</sup> Others have noted his proximity to Horkheimer, for instance. See, Bohman, Ulf, *Charles Taylor's Landkarte*.

And yet Taylor's approach is significantly unlike his radically orthodox counterparts, since his is an unrealizable theopolitical vision, and plausible *on the basis of* its unrealizability. And this might seem to land him back at (1), but it would be difficult to suggest that Taylor holds to a view of private religion as opposed to public life, as though these are autonomous and mutually exclusive realms. Thus in the political-theological landscape above, we might place Taylor somewhere between Moltmann and Milbank, since he at once accepts an unresolvable dialectic of secularization (as we'll see below in the 'corruption narrative') and something akin to Moltmann's cruciform, kenotic, social-critical practice, while also accepting the radical orthodox narration of the key ontological shift toward the immanent frame. However, Taylor's apophaticism would disallow both Milbank's reenchancing impulse and—as I hope to sketch in the conclusion—the adoption of a 'post-liberal' wholesale rejection of Liberalism, and so here, as well as in his notion of the 'poetics' of the kingdom of God, his apophatic theopolitics approximates Caputo. Now with this map in mind, let's look at how Taylor's notion of the network of agape carves its own unique and yet co-mingling theopolitical vision.

When Taylor sets moral-political visions together in dialog and asks "which is right?" he proposes (without answering the question) that we look at which account makes better sense of the phenomena, or better sense of the lives that people actually live.<sup>429</sup> So, to take the case of universal human rights, for instance,

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<sup>429</sup> Cf. *Sources of the Self*, 5-8, 58, 69. This question runs throughout Taylor's work, and one could argue it begins his entire academic trajectory. In an interview with James K. A. Smith, Taylor says that his quest that developed into *Explanation and Human Behavior* and then *Sources of the Self* began with consternation at the fact the PPE program at Oxford, its starting assumptions about human behavior, etc.—and thus also their explanations—were entirely different from his own.



Taylor asks whether it makes better sense that we connect with others on the basis of an innate tendency to sympathy (*à la* Hume's *Enquiries*)—more recent sociobiological accounts may read this as a tendency to expand the 'in-group' for its survival value—or whether some other transcendent source might better account for such a border-crossing disposition of compassion. From a theistic view, baked-in sympathy can miss the sense for the qualitative difference that greater circles of inclusion imply 'higher' ways of being. When it comes to Taylor's own account, he'll leave the reader to decide. He writes, "The issue of what causes, or lies behind, or (if this is possible) justifies these qualitative shifts in the space of solidarity, together with the sense of moral ascent, remains unresolved to general satisfaction (though I have my own—theistic—hunches)." <sup>430</sup> As we'll see, leaving this un-argued could well be the point. The dialogical portrayal may just set up a leap toward a newly expanded moral (agapeic) horizon. Though we'll not find an extended account in his corpus, we turn the question here nevertheless back to Taylor: what is his own account of the human and sociality? What *are people as social*, and what's the goal of human sociality?

In asking for an account of the human and sociality we are searching in part for some basic assumptions behind Taylor's philosophical anthropology, and in a more recent title we find a succinct twist on Aristotle's definition, which can serve here as a useful starting point: humans are, fundamentally, *The Language Animal*. In marking it this way, Taylor draws a line of contrast. Other 'designative' theories of language highlight its instrumental uses, but Taylor wants to locate language as

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<sup>430</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 609. Cf. 607

core to the nature of being human inasmuch as it 'constitutes' the self.<sup>431</sup> For one, the self is dialogical. The main idea here is that people start off in a non-neutral world of meanings; beginning as addressees in a conversation about who they are, why they are here, how they relate to others, elders, their environment, the state, and so on.<sup>432</sup> They grow and change, gain insight, feel compelled to go in a particular direction, adopt a new outlook or lifestyle, and that can contradict upbringing, but it cannot entirely evacuate the conversation. "To be inducted into a language is to be in a relation of potential communion with others."<sup>433</sup> And relatedly, language constitutes the self in that it articulates moral sources that form the essential background against which our reflexive selves can make sense of moral aspirations in the first place. The 'dialog' in that sense extends beyond

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<sup>431</sup> More below on Taylor's contrast between 'constitutive' and 'designative' theories in C.3.

<sup>432</sup> Cf. Taylor, *The Language Animal*, pp. 53-55, 90-91. The ontogenesis of language depends on 'communion', as observed in the fact that children become speakers by being taught in families; contrast the monological picture of language (pp. 108-9). What Taylor calls 'metabiological' meanings extend beyond the realm of instrumental / technological extensions of language, which exemplifies for Taylor the view of language that begins in thinkers such as Hobbes, Locke, and Condillac (the 'HLC' model); such metabiological meanings "...concern goals, purposes, and discriminations of better or worse, which can't be defined in terms of objectively recognizable states or patterns" (p. 91). Cf. Taylor, "The Dialogical Self," in *The Interpretive Turn*. Taylor may take some inspiration here—or his thought is at least very similar—to Bakhtin in his exposition on Dostoevsky: "A character's self-consciousness in Dostoevsky is thoroughly dialogized: in its every aspect it is turned outward, intensely addressing itself, another, a third person. Outside this living addressivity toward itself and toward the other it does not exist, even for itself. In this sense it could be said that the person in Dostoevsky is the subject of an address. One cannot talk about him; one can only address oneself to him. Those 'depths of the human soul,' whose representation Dostoevsky considered the main task of his realism "in a higher sense," are revealed only in an intense act of address. It is impossible to master the inner man, to see and understand him by making him into an. object of indifferent neutral analysis; it is also impossible to master him by merging with him, by empathizing with him. No, one can approach him and reveal him—or more precisely, force him to reveal himself—only by addressing him dialogically. And to portray the inner man, as Dostoevsky understood it, was possible only by portraying his communion with another. Only in communion, in the interaction of one person with another, can the 'man in man' be revealed, for others as well as for oneself" (Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, p. 251-2). The relevance of this connection to Dostoevsky should become apparent in our discussion to follow on narrative (C32), but it suffices here to note that the 'dialogical self' arrives at new perspectives through a transformative re-framing of experience, in 'conversation' with oneself, others, tradition, etc.

<sup>433</sup> Taylor, *The Language Animal*, p. 90. He goes on, "To possess language is to be, and to be aware that one is, in social space. [...] From the very beginning we seek communion, intimacy, love, and we never grow beyond this need..." (90-91).

autobiography to encounters with moral sources themselves.<sup>434</sup> These constitutions of the self via language in communion are primary reasons that appear throughout Taylor's critique of modern epistemology, 'computer-struck' theories of behavior and cognition, but most importantly 'atomist individualism'. To the latter, when he addresses these theories, it's clear: Humans are fundamentally social, they seek fulness in relation to the whole (from local groupings to global horizons of humanity), and these things are indubitably linked to our being language animals. But can we go a step further and look into Taylor's own 'ontological account' of the social? Are we all also addressees of something larger? Do we reflect sociality ultimately because of this? In trying to answer this question, we approximate the theopolitical background in Taylor's own moral vision.

Part of the task of C2 below is to extract this theopolitical background and to show how it can appear within moments of Taylor's grand narrative in *A Secular Age*, so we'll return to the fuller analysis. For now, since Taylor's most poignant formulations are only found in the context of his social-historical account, let's let one example from that same narrative suffice. In his early discussion in *A Secular Age* on the festival, Carnival, and other 'rituals of reversal', in which he is differentiating his multiperspectival, philosophical-anthropological approach over against influential 'functionalist' or 'naturalist' accounts of the social that are methodologically predisposed to exclude intuitions of transcendence. Such accounts focus on the material benefits of Carnival, namely that it serves as an

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<sup>434</sup> In fact, it is the burden of the first half of *Sources of the Self* to explain the inescapability of these moral frameworks and the place of the Good. In *A Secular Age*, 'fulness' is the gloss for that general category of human moral aspiration.

effective pressure valve release that ultimately supports fealty to authorities like church and crown. Accepting the functional aspects, Taylor inserts that there may be something more interesting going on.<sup>435</sup> Here he draws on Victor Turner's account to elaborate on the gravitational effect of 'communitas' which may help explain the first-person moral-motivational staying power of the festival:

The sense of 'communitas' is the intuition we all share that, beyond the way we relate to each other through our diversified coded roles, we also are a community of many-sided human beings, fundamentally equal, who are associated together. It is this underlying community which breaks out in moments of reversal or transgression, and which gives legitimacy to the power of the weak.<sup>436</sup>

So, it's not merely that the frustrations of the weak or otherwise disenfranchised were pacified in a temporary societal reversal, but rather that in these moments of the ritual reversal, a feeling of connection could find expression beyond given encoded social structures.<sup>437</sup> 'Communitas' is portrayed here as a vague and mysterious sort of social bond, like an intuited anti-polity that temporarily unifies disparate individuals on the basis of some more subterranean commonality prior to encoded hierarchical structure—like a brotherhood or sisterhood,

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<sup>435</sup> This openness to transcendence is a mooring throughout Taylor's alternative secularization narrative, and he makes his first bet that this is a sense most of us feel lingering on in *A Secular Age* with the quoted refrain from a popular Peggie Lee song, "Is that all there is?"

<sup>436</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 49. Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969), and *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978).

<sup>437</sup> "What all these situations [Carnival, feasts of misrule, rites of passage, etc., with analogies over a wide range of times and locations] have in common is that there is a play of structure and anti-structure, code and anti-code; this either takes the form of the code's being momentarily suspended or transgressed; or else, as with the relation between conquerors and autochthonous above, the code itself allows for a counter-principle to the dominant source of power; it opens space for a complementary 'power of the weak'. It's as though there were a felt need to complement the structure of power with its opposite. Otherwise ... what?" (*A Secular Age*, 48-49).

‘fundamentally equal’, ‘associated together’. And ‘communitas’ in this sense is not unique to pre-modern settings in Taylor’s account. The modalities and media have shifted, and the place of the sacred as well, but the capacity for human connection across divisions of culture, ethnicity, religion, and language remain. In *A Secular Age* one finds examples of it erupting in modern contexts like royal weddings, Di’s funeral, May ’68 Paris, Olympics, rock concerts, etc.<sup>438</sup> An important difference, however, in modern contexts is that such moments of communitas can become part of replacement movements, or revolutions, since the modern cosmic imaginary envisions all authority and social hierarchy established by contract, and not simply part of the furniture of the cosmos.<sup>439</sup> So much for Taylor’s phenomenological account of the capacity for human cross-bordered social bonding, which is open to something beyond functional explanations. Humans can collect spontaneously, intuiting their belonging-together without rational reflection on the value of doing so; the bond is prior to reflection and appears to hover just beyond codified relations; and for Taylor this can at least partly explain certain phenomena from Carnival to rock concerts.<sup>440</sup>

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<sup>438</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 50ff.

<sup>439</sup> Another important difference in cosmic imaginary in this discussion of the festival in *A Secular Age* is that the ancient dyads of order/chaos, code/anti-code are likewise no longer part of the furniture of things, in ‘complimentary’ relationship. By contrast the cosmic—let alone social—imaginary for moderns will view chaos and less-desirable social codes as projects to overcome and replace. Modern negations of the code, Taylor writes, are “drawn on as a source for utopias, and new projects, which are meant to replace the existing society [...] Carnival and Revolution can never coincide [...] It mines previous anti-structures to design a new code of freedom, community, radical fraternity. It is the birthplace of a new and perfect code, one that will need no moral boundaries, that will brook no anti-structure. It is the anti-structure to end all anti-structure. The dream if carried through (which fortunately it wasn’t in ’68) turns into a nightmare” (p. 53).

<sup>440</sup> Of course, there are manifold ways of explaining social bonds like this, from group selection, genetic forces, etc.; part of the burden of Taylor’s larger philosophical project is to unsettle these explanations and widen the scope of what may be going on here. Cf. *Sources of the Self*, *A Secular Age*, and *The Explanation of Behavior*.

Taylor's reading of the kingdom of God in the New Testament has clear parallels to 'communitas'. It disrupts and transcends encoded social order, extending beyond group borders, albeit wildly so, and beyond the neighbor to even a love for enemies. The 'network of agape' depicts authentic self-realization, via myriad spiritual itineraries, merging in a community bound by unconditional love for the other. We find an affinity here between the anti-code, mysterious 'communitas' of the festival and the New Testament notion of 'communion'—now left behind in 17<sup>th</sup> century social-political theory. And if we've accurately identified this affinity, then it is also plausible that this 'network of agape' provides at least a sketch of Taylor's ontological account for the mysterious and fundamental social bond of 'communitas', inasmuch as it links the experience of desiring to connect to the 'whole' with the being of God in his ultimately harmonic, triune, and absolute sociality. Read this way, Taylor's notion of 'communion' provides a theopolitical vision, complete with an account (i.e., moral source and motivation) for a higher mode of being-together, otherwise referred to in the terms of a network of agape.<sup>441</sup>

The vision of social harmonic perfection is utopian, but it is not a utopic program. As we'll see below, the theopolitical vision gains plausibility for Taylor to the same extent that it also resists attempts at forced realization or 'mobilization'; in fact, it is an important source of resistance to such efforts in modern political contexts. That is, its explicit unrealizability is partly what makes it all the more plausible.

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<sup>441</sup> Cf. Herdt, "The Authentic Individual in the Network of Agape"; and Gregory and Hunt-Hendrix, "Enfleshment and the Time of Ethics: Taylor and Illich on the Parable of the Good Samaritan," in *Aspiring to Fullness in A Secular Age*. These two essays provide helpful parallel accounts of Charles Taylor's ethics as it relates to embodiment and have been helpful to my analysis in this section.

The network of agape is therefore a theopolitical vision that is also something like a 'hyper-reality', a polity beyond polity. In C2 below we therefore begin to connect Taylor's theopolitical vision to the apophatic where the kingdom of God is depicted in the network is a 'hyper-reality', beyond grasping. In his *longue durée* narrative this comes through in a series of corruptions on 'communion'. That is, we learn *what the kingdom of God is* by witnessing historically *what it is not*. My argument throughout will be not only that Taylor's account of the network of agape resists utopic program, but also that Taylor's rhetorical mode of portraying this vision is likewise force-less, and that is the topic of C.3.<sup>442</sup>

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<sup>442</sup> This counters a typical view of Taylor that he's too Catholic and knows too much and talks too loudly; but actually he talks apophatically. Taylor's essay 'Ontology' argues that there is no one 'real' language. Peter Gordon's as well as Iain Fraser's analysis, which criticizes him on this point, is thus problematic. See Gordon, "The Place of the Sacred in the Absence of God: Charles Taylor's 'A Secular Age'." *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 69 no. 4 (2008): 647-673. Cf. Ian Fraser, "Charles Taylor on Transcendence: Benjamin, Bloch and Beyond," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 23, no. 3 (2003): 297-314. See Colorado's defense in, "Transcendence, Kenosis and Enfleshment: Charles Taylor's Religious Thought," 71-98.

## C.2 ‘Network of Agape’ as Hyper-reality

In the apophatic framework outlined at the beginning, we glimpsed in the tradition a way of speaking about God by *not* speaking about God. To recall, the apophatic strategy—speaking of God as *not-soul*, *not-intellect*, etc.—presumes the inadequacy of human language to circumscribe divine reality, so it resorts to ‘bending’ language to indirectly gesture at that being-beyond-description; ‘hyper-reality’ was Turner’s term, which I’m adopting here.<sup>443</sup> I then described the kingdom of God as a parallel kind of hyper-reality in certain political-theological expressions, in which the kingdom of God itself is never fully realized by the church on this side of *parousia*. We noticed then that the term ‘Christendom’ can become glossed in more recent political theologies to describe illicit attempts—from medieval forms to today’s ‘religious Right’—to force a fusion of the kingdom of God and kingdom of man to realize the ineffable.<sup>444</sup> The primary goal of the present section is to read Taylor’s theopolitical vision as a hyper-reality.<sup>445</sup>

The first two chapters (C.2.1-2) reconstruct Taylor’s ‘corruption narrative’ of Reform in *A Secular Age* to demonstrate how efforts to codify communion and compassion ultimately undo themselves. After elaborating on its core features in an initial account of its corruption (C.2.1), the network of agape becomes a kind of negative foil throughout the substitute secularization narrative of *A Secular Age* (C.2.2) in which various corruptions demonstrate what the kingdom of God is not.

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<sup>443</sup> See my discussion in A.3.

<sup>444</sup> See B.1.2 above.

<sup>445</sup> It’s worth noting that Taylor’s own descriptions of language about God already pick up on these same apophatic themes. In *Sources of the Self*, for example, Taylor argues we are ‘clutching an idol’ if we ever feel we got God right (pp. 754, 769).



In the *longue durée* these corruptions happen along lines of discontinuity between mind/body and individual/community that run throughout Taylor's narrative which sweeps from early Christian recuperations of the body and community in trinitarian formulae to failed modern utopias. Then in C.2.3 we look back into Taylor's philosophical-anthropological substrata to answer why, for Taylor, code itself stifles the soul. We'll see that this stifling-effect parallels reductive aberrations in modern moral theory, which by his account, occlude both moral sources (read: ontological accounts) and the 'Good' as a hyper-reality.

### C.2.1 The First Corruption

*A Secular Age* offered an alternative to popular master narratives of secularization that announce the eventual and necessary end of faith and base their expectation on a reductive view of 'religion' as—for instance—synonymous with church membership or political-institutional forms of religion. Fewer people in pews or waning influence of religious institutions on public life signal the imminent end of religion while the growing explanatory range of natural and human sciences eclipses any conceivable plausibility of cosmologies with tinctures of otherworldly transcendence. A central burden of the book is to complexify that picture—in fact, 'the picture holding us captive'—and to submit an alternative story, which he calls the 'Reform Master Narrative'.<sup>446</sup> This enterprise is a philosophical-anthropological-historical narrative, which arcs from pre-modern

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<sup>446</sup> Taylor contrasts his Reform Master Narrative with the Intellectual Deviation story of Radical Orthodoxy, which compliments Taylor's narrative (cf. "The Many Stories," *A Secular Age*). For Wittgenstein's 'picture holding captive', cf. p. 549.

unquestioned belief to an age in which unbelief is not only an available option for the intelligentsia, but it is one that appears to many as the only livable one. In contrast to earlier imaginaries, moderns experience the world and themselves in it as part of an 'immanent frame' where natural and social environments, agents, relations and moral order are understandable without reference beyond themselves. There also emerge new compelling ways of pursuing 'fullness' that likewise reject transcendent ends,<sup>447</sup> but modernity is not therefore characterized by an inevitable death of God; rather what emerges is a 'supernova' of options ranging from conservative orthodox religious forms to materialist atheisms and many more in-between. The salient shifts—in the way we imagine the world, society, ourselves as agents within them, and the explosion of options in the pursuit of fullness—are made possible in Taylor's narrative through a long process of 'Reform'. To summarize, the Reform Master Narrative entails an original, ancient disassociation of (1) mind from body and (2) the individual from community and then the making-over of people and whole societies to re-associate (1) and (2) along the lines of 'higher' religious (and then areligious, ethical) forms.

The Reform Master Narrative winds through several failed attempts throughout Western history to re-associate the self and community in a manner reminiscent of a Hegelian dialectic, except that where Hegel's narration lands in the eventual modern synthesis of Enlightenment rationalism and expressive Romanticism, Taylor's narrative expects a perpetual antithesis.<sup>448</sup> He submits instead a hoped-

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<sup>447</sup> Cf. Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, part 1.

<sup>448</sup> For more on the relation of Hegel's and Taylor's narratives in the next section.

for synthesis, but only through an eschatological anticipation of the kingdom of God. Below, we look at two moments in the Reform Master Narrative, in which Taylor articulates this contrasting New Testament anticipatory synthesis in the network of agape: first, in the ancient setting of post-Axial revolution and ‘the great disembedding’ of human agency and sociality from an enchanted cosmos, and second, in the setting of the post-reformation slide toward deism and an immanent ‘impersonal order’.

### **The Ancient Contrast**

In Taylor’s narrative, historical efforts to short-circuit the anticipated kingdom of God and actualize the synthesis—or ‘wholeness’ in Taylor’s terminology<sup>449</sup>—within Christendom are negatively glossed as ‘corruptions’ or ‘deviations’. These negative terms suggest a slide away from an ideal and thus frame the key question for our investigation on the potential ‘hyper-reality’ of Taylor’s theopolitical vision: What is *corrupted*? Or, where is the starting point that gets deviated from in processes of Reform? Below we trace the Reform Master Narrative to see that the original corruption is in the very attempt to codify and mobilize the kingdom of God as recounted in the Gospels. In its corruption, ‘compassion’ migrates away from agapeic ‘communion’ into moral-political code like an aberrant, eschatologically short-circuited connection of the kingdom of God and the kingdom of man. What emerges as the foil, then, which trickles through the entire Reform Master Narrative is the non-codifiable, non-realizable theopolitical vision of the network of agape.

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<sup>449</sup> According to Taylor, this understanding ‘wholeness’ is part of the Christian legacy, which is not conceivable in the late Hellenic or Roman civilization. Cf. *ASecular Age*, p. 610-11, ff.

The *longue durée* in the Reform Master Narrative reaches back to ‘pre-Axial’ embeddedness. Before about the first millennium BCE, the self is characterized as embedded in layers of religious life in a way that widely differs from modern individualist faith-commitments, ‘belief’, ‘opinion’, or association on those bases. ‘Religious’ life and ritual is not a matter of a theistic cognitive commitment, but it is inseparable with social life. The pre-Axial world is an enchanted cosmos saturated with beneficent or capricious spirits and human identity is inseparable with its relation to a divinely-instituted social hierarchy. Humans relate to the divine, not through practices of personal devotion and faith-commitment, but rather through the social whole, mediated via tribal authority. The pre-Axial self is thus ‘embedded’ in the social whole and ‘porous’, or penetrable by otherworldly beings and forces.<sup>450</sup> So embedded is the self that in some cases, departing from a place meant nothing less than departing from life itself. Dualities of body and mind/spirit, self and social—let alone order and chaos or good and evil—are like

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<sup>450</sup> ‘Embeddedness’ ... “is both a matter of identity—the contextual limits to the imagination of the self—and of the social imaginary: the ways we are able to think or imagine the whole of society” (*Secular Age*, 156).

Taylor points out that pre-axial agency was embedded in three ways: in society, cosmos, and in the pursuit of flourishing. The agent is embedded in (paleolithic and neolithic) society in that sense religious life is inseparable with social life. Each small-scale society had its own original and idiosyncratic articulation of ‘some common human capacity’, but what was ubiquitous was some relation to higher-beings, spirits, or forces; all with different capacities/experiences—drawing on available vocabularies—including trance-like possession, dreams, shamans who could be transported to a higher world and who performed miraculous cures. The agent was also socially embedded in the sense that they related to God as a social whole, or through a representative of that whole. Examples here include the Dinka’s ‘master of the fishing spear’; the entire group had to be in united for effective supplication. Functionaries in other societies included priests, shamans, chiefs, etc. (*Secular Age*, 148).

The pre-axial agent was, secondly, embedded in an enchanted cosmos, filled with spirits and forces. This included a multivalent experience of geography, non-human agency and time. ‘Higher times’ connect to origins and relate to ancestors through the landscape, sacred places, features of the world. Totemism identified them with animals, etc. And thirdly, in contrast to later ‘higher religions’, what one strives for in relating to the divine are strictly the goods of ordinary flourishing: strength, harvest, long-life, etc. A pursuit of a good that transcends the ordinary is not yet on the scene.

two sides of the same cosmic reality. These are not yet conceivable as sites for projects of transformation.

But then, almost all at once, routes for transformation appear in the ‘axial revolution’ when towering figures like Confucius, Gautama, Socrates, and the Hebrew prophets appear to disrupt the embeddedness with notions of transcendence.<sup>451</sup> The common thread in the axial revolution is the notion of an order beyond the cosmos, e.g., the Creator of Genesis, Nirvana in Buddhism, ‘heaven’ as guarantor of justice in Chinese thought, or Plato’s Good.<sup>452</sup> These transcendent sources revise the mixed cosmos of spirits and gods who are both good and evil by affirming the source’s unequivocal goodness. Evil is no longer just a part of the order of things,<sup>453</sup> and the rift between God/divine order and the material human world becomes something to repair or to escape through self-transformation. Along with that, the highest human goal becomes more than mere ordinary flourishing when the new goal of salvation appears on the scene. Practice shifts, too. Individual religious ‘virtuosi’ (Taylor deploys the Weberian term) begin breaking out on their own as monks, devotees, initiation groups, and sects in socially-separated monastic orders where these possibilities can be lived out. Self-reform by these pioneers is sought apart from the social whole, and this opens the possibility—in Taylor’s narrative—for the disembedding of human agency and for

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<sup>451</sup> See *A Secular Age*, 151. The reference here to ‘Axial’ (*Achsenzeit*) is to Karl Jaspers *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte* (Zürich: Artemis, 1949).

<sup>452</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 152

<sup>453</sup> The example given here is W.E.H. Stanner’s work on aboriginal religion: ‘mood of assent’; no quarrel with life. Through ritual one recovers the original Dream Time—time out of mind—in which there is no sense analogous to the higher religions of repairing the rift in the cosmos. In Genesis there is a struggle between good and evil, but evil will be overcome; the rift separates us from God, but for the aboriginals, the rift appears simply as a feature of the order they are trying to get in touch within ritual. Cf. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 153.

the disciplined reform of behavior. The self and its social world may now eventually be transformed in the attempt to make over society according to a higher set of rules that can eventually 'sideline the body' and atomize the social into a set of individuals.<sup>454</sup>

But when Taylor reference the New Testament within his Reform Master Narrative something anomalous happens along the dissociative lines of post-axial virtuosi-religion. Post-axial religions, we recall, aspired to a higher, transcendent good and were therefore variously expressed in self- and world-renunciating practices, which can then migrate in Christian contexts of, for example, monastic movements, but the church can also operate like other Axial spiritualities in its attempts to make-over not only the individual, but also the community as a whole on the basis of committed, disciplined individuals (e.g., in Christian-Stoic strains).<sup>455</sup> However, Taylor also inserts that there is a unique paradoxical feature present in New Testament and early Christian formulations. Rather than merely renounce the body and the goods of ordinary flourishing, Christianity simultaneously asserts the unequivocal benevolence of God and the good of the

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<sup>454</sup> Taylor contrasts the identity picture of the pre-Axial 'embedded' self with the 'buffered' identity that typifies a modern sense of the individualist self. As he describes in his chapter on the 'great disembedding', "...the new buffered identity, with its insistence on personal devotion and discipline, increased the distance, the disidentification, even the hostility to the older forms of collective ritual and belonging; *while the drive to Reform came to envisage their abolition*" (*A Secular Age* 156, italics mine); cf. p. 611.

<sup>455</sup> This project, Taylor elaborates as "... the attempt to make over society in a thoroughgoing way according to the demands of a Christian order, while purging it of its connection to an enchanted cosmos, and removing all vestiges of the old complementarities, between spiritual and temporal, between life devoted to God and life in the 'world', between order and the chaos on which it draws." (*A Secular Age*, 155). Taylor refers to stoicism *en bloc* along major schools (e.g., "Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics..." p. 112.) but he does make reference to Seneca, especially for the purpose of describing neo-stoicism's sixteenth-century development (e.g., Justus Lipsius, cf. 115-17).

ordinary while also defining the human end beyond ordinary flourishing.<sup>456</sup> The pinnacle expression of this is Jesus the incarnated-God who at once affirms a self-renunciating life beyond the ordinary—including his mission among his disciples to overcome degenerative evil in the restorative work of salvation—but also embraces the good of ordinary flourishing, relationship, and emotional life. The same flesh and spirit infected by distorted desires and machinations of evil are also the same flesh and spirit that are recuperated in the resurrection; and this flesh/spirit unity found in the New Testament writings is also of a piece with the unity of the individual and the whole.<sup>457</sup>

The paradigmatic example that is recalled here in his account of the ‘great disembedding’—and which is also repeated at several points in the Reform Master Narrative in reference to the original NT wholeness—is the parable of the Good Samaritan. The parable, along Taylor’s reading, dislocates the accepted moral models of religious-legal authority of Jesus’s day and relativizes the established social order with its embedded solidarities, since the Samaritan—from the position of the cultural-religious out-group—nevertheless acts from the feeling of

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<sup>456</sup> One finds this recuperation of spirit-flesh in Taylor’s account of the early church fathers, but it also appears in his account of asceticism. And just as one expects the mystical approach of Pseudo-Dionysius to exemplify detachment from the world, in fact we find the opposite. The apophatic is thoroughly invested in bodily, physical experience. In *A Secular Age*, mystic asceticism was not for getting beyond the material, but it was rather for a deep embrace of physicality of the world, and an almost empathetic unity with it, and for at least two reasons. First, it has been comprehensively affirmed (‘baptized’) in the incarnation (*A Secular Age*, p. 276). And second, creation *ex nihilo* formally necessitates the contingency of the world; this may be expressed in terms of reality as ‘gift’ (*A Secular Age* 742; These ideas bear a strong resemblance to Ivan Illich’s account of reality as contingent gift, cf. *Rivers North of the Future*, 65, 74).

<sup>457</sup> Another significant expression of this connection between the whole self and connection to others is the idea of humanity as made in the image of God. “Our being in the image of God is also our standing among others in the stream of love which is that facet of God’s life we try to grasp, very inadequately, in speaking of the Trinity” (*A Secular Age*, 701).

compassion (ἐσπλαγγνίσθη) that compelled him to care for the stranger.<sup>458</sup> In Taylor's (as in Ivan Illich's) spiritual interpretation of the text, one's 'enfleshed' sense of being exemplified in the parable, whereby social connections are forged in the immediacy of relationships with other people, is the singular characteristic of the moral-social vision of the gospel.<sup>459</sup> So, the NT pursuit of new solidarities functionally empowers the disembedding of the individual from older forms, since *agapeic communion* is the spontaneous linking across boundaries that is to become the exemplary code-defying code.

But we also see at this juncture in the Reform Master Narrative how fragile and elusive this is, since the NT synthesis also becomes the framework for the original project for institutional Christianity to transform the world. That is, Christianity's effect in the 'great disembedding' also included a 'corruption' of it when laudable efforts to cultivate the higher spiritual discipline, or root out oppressive powers of the 'world'—as Hildebrand sought to wrest episcopal authority from dynastic power in the Investiture Controversy<sup>460</sup>—slide toward an institutionalized benevolence and kingdom-expansion by instrumental means for various forms of coerced communion. And this eventually and ironically migrates *agapeic*

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<sup>458</sup> See in *A Secular Age*, pp. 158, 246, 277, 576; cf. Illich on the Good Samaritan, pp. 737-739, 742. The parable itself is found in Luke 15:20.

<sup>459</sup> *A Secular Age*, 115, 741. Cf. Gregory and Hunt-Hendrix, "Enfleshment and the Time of Ethics: Taylor and Illich on the Parable of the Good Samaritan," *Aspiring to Fullness*, 217ff. Gregory and Hunt-Hendrix observe the spiritualized interpretation of Taylor on this passage and make the connection to Illich. They claim rightly that Taylor is not concerned in his biblical exegesis with historical-critical method, authorship questions, etc. Rather, he is concerned with the parable as speech-act, in which he finds unique resonances for today's context, especially in relation to religious expression that seeks to 'recover the body'. For an alternative reading of the parable, especially on the point of the Priest and Levite's rejection, cf. Wolter, Michael, *Das Lukasevangelium*, Vol. 5 in *Handbuch zum Neuen Testament* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008).

<sup>460</sup> Thus began the final phase in this process of the 'great disembedding' in the European Reformations.



wholeness (understood as communion) toward a disciplined society where ‘categorical relations’ have primacy again.<sup>461</sup>

The irony is that it somehow turned into something quite different; in another, rather different sense, the ‘world’ won after all. Perhaps the contradiction lay in the very idea of a disciplined imposition of the kingdom of God. The temptation of power was after all, too strong, as Dostoevsky saw in the Legend of the Grand Inquisitor. Here lay the corruption.<sup>462</sup>

In Taylor’s view the church fails to live up to the model of an agapeic network when it gives way to a temptation to short-circuit and impose communion, reforming it into existence, rather than letting it emerge from spontaneous connections in Good-Samaritan-like encounters. Taylor’s notion of ‘corruption’ here takes another cue from Ivan Illich, who located the genesis of modern Western ‘institutions of benevolence’ in early Christian practices of hospitality and neighbor-care that eventually migrate from the context of particular moments of communion and are off-loaded to the work of specialized organizations. That shift represents a ‘corruption’—just as for Taylor—in that it dissociates or ‘excarnates’ the self, since what binds the individual to the other is less a matter of spontaneous connection of *agapeic* communion—the boundary-upsetting, free

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<sup>461</sup> *A Secular Age*, 158. Of course, as Taylor points out elsewhere, historical traces of agape continue on, as in the emergence of ‘exclusive humanism’ and its drive to universal beneficence, but these come to appear in the framework of immanent ‘natural’ relations and ‘sentiment’ *à la* Hume or Gibbon, and as Taylor notes, “The successor to agape was to be held strictly within the bounds of measure, instrumental reason, and perhaps also good taste” (*A Secular Age*, 247), and outside the context of “the super-community of all the children of God” (p. 246). This all, he says later in *A Secular Age*, “worked to sideline the body again” (p. 611).

<sup>462</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 158.

gift of God—and more a matter of affinity groupings, efficient production, and contractual relations.<sup>463</sup>

It becomes the great irony throughout the Reform Master Narrative that all attempts to codify and actualize the agapeic ethic and harmonic communion—making the piety of the religious elite a norm for everyone—and then to ‘discipline’ those members to form a unified, peaceable social whole, are like the twin engines that push societies of the ‘North Atlantic’ (Europe and North America) toward an imaginary of the modern individualist and atomist self that relates to the whole as a matter of choice in what gets theorized, for example, in the original social contract in Grotius, Locke, and Rousseau, but then also becomes the way we all spontaneously imagine the social to be ‘naturally’.<sup>464</sup>

### **The Post-reformation Contrast**

The next look we get at the network of agape happens in part II of *A Secular Age*, which is the ‘Turning Point’ in the narrative in which the cosmos—material, social, and moral order—can now become widely imaginable in entirely immanent terms. It begins in a slide to ‘providential Deism’ which entails an anthropocentric

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<sup>463</sup> In his essay ‘Gospel’ after a discussion on the parable of the Good Samaritan, Illich elaborates on this principle: “Christian Europe is unimaginable without its deep concern about building institutions that take care of different types of people in need. So there is no question that modern service society is an attempt to establish and extend Christian hospitality. On the other hand, we have immediately perverted it. The personal freedom to choose who will be my other has been transformed into the use of power and money to provide a service. This not only deprives the idea of the neighbour of the quality of freedom implied in the story of the Good Samaritan. It also creates an impersonal view of how a good society ought to work ... A modern person finds nothing more irksome, more disgusting than having to leave this pining woman or that suffering man unattended. So, as *homo technologicus*, we create agencies for that purpose. This is what I call the *perversio optimi quae est pessima*...” Illich, Ivan, “Gospel,” in *The Rivers North of the Future: The Testament of Ivan Illich as Told to David Cayley* (Anansi: Toronto, 2005, p. 56). Cf., Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 741.

<sup>464</sup> The irony for Taylor’s secularization narrative is that efforts to force mass piety all but engineer mass exoduses from the institutional church.

turn in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries of the orthodox idea that the cosmos is a product of divine design. It's a mediating point, which opens the possibility for 'the impersonal order' which images the social whole not as a set of divinely-instituted relations—"lordship, fealty, tenure"—but rather as an order of mutual benefit and the free consent to associate as a body of autonomous individuals.<sup>465</sup> The operations of this new benevolent order may still be seen as a product of divine design, but for the pioneering theorists and elite classes at the time, God becomes seen as a powerful, benign, creative intellect that generates humanity's moral and social blueprint; codes for living that can be rationally discerned apart from revelatory sources.<sup>466</sup> Important for our purposes here is that the shift toward Deism and the impersonal order is demarcated along certain points of tension or 'axes of change'—the body, history, individuality, contingency/providence, emotions—that replay the historically deeper struggle of Patristic thought with Greek philosophy; we see at each of these points the repetition of the attempt to resynthesize mind/body, individual/community in the

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<sup>465</sup> It's the emergence of modern social imaginaries like this that help accredit the prevailing sense in the eighteenth century that a new age (of the 'impersonal order') was replacing the old religion. Taylor describes this social imaginary here as a "categorical, egalitarian order, in which we are all related in the same direct-access way to the society, which itself must be understood also objectively, as well as being the product of our coming together. Modern society is a united we/they of similar units, equal citizens; something utterly different from a tissue of feudal relations. The transition from one to the other was going on in the eighteenth century, and was taking place slowly in the (sometimes accelerated) social imaginary of élites" (*A Secular Age*, 281).

<sup>466</sup> In his chapter on 'providential deism' Taylor explains that the process of Reform drives the collapse of the sacred and secular spheres (the 'two cities') in part on a moral plane of disenchantment. Demanding mass adoption of Christian life as code is the first step toward a naturalized code: "There is no more separate sphere of the 'spiritual' where one may go to pursue a life of prayer outside the saeculum; and nor is there the other alternation, between order and anti-order, which Carnival represented. There is just this one relentless order of right thought and action, which must occupy all social and personal space. How then does this break-out occur? Because the very attempt to express what the Christian life means in terms of a code of action in the saeculum opens the possibility of devising a code whose main aim is to encompass the basic goods of life in the saeculum: life, prosperity, peace, mutual benefit" (*A Secular Age*, 266).

new framework of the impersonal order. These axes, along that deeper struggle, offer a framework of contrasting failed syntheses, so a (partially consolidated) recapitulation here should be useful context.

First, the body and emotion stand in stark contrast as imaged in Platonist (Plotinus is Taylor's key example) and early Christian thought. For Platonists incarnation is a kind of hindrance; the goal is to control the body by discipline; whereas the general thrust of the early Christian contrast—Taylor loosely ties together the Gospels, Augustine, Athanasius, and the Cappadocian Fathers in his constellation of 'early Christian' thought—the contrast is not intellect/body, but rather the orientation of the 'heart' as the whole person toward or away from God (e.g., Augustine's 'two loves').<sup>467</sup> Closely linked with this is the contrasting importance of emotion—the example given is also Augustine—versus the Plotinian/Stoic ideal of *apatheia*.<sup>468</sup>

Second, the Patristic recuperation of the body also entails a new significance of history. In contrast to the Plotinian ascent to timelessness, for example, the biblical picture is one of "a gathering of all time"; hence the importance of particular stories of transformation in the disciples and the saints. *Individuality* is an end in these stories, unlike the final negation of individuation imaged in the

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<sup>467</sup> *A Secular Age*, 276. One could argue on this point, that Taylor's implicit contrast between Augustine on the point of emotions does not take enough account of Augustine's own neo-Platonism. Cf. Catherine Oppel, "Why, my soul, are you sad?: Augustine's Opinion on Sadness in the *City of God* and an Interpretation of His Tears in the *Confessions*," *Augustinian Studies* 35, no. 2 (2004), 199-236. Taylor relies here on Peter Brown's for the contrast between early Christian thought on the body and the first century philosophical context. See, Peter Brown, *The Body and Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988). Taylor also references on this point Kallistos Ware, *The Kingdom of the Heart*, the John Main Lectures 2002, published by the World Community for Christian Meditation (London, 2002).

<sup>468</sup> *A Secular Age*, 278.

Plotinian vision or even Aristotle at the level of Forms.<sup>469</sup> But the contingent, individual stories on the biblical picture are part of God's surprising response. Taylor repeats the parable of the Good Samaritan:

The question it is supposed to answer is: who is my neighbour? The answer surprises, in part because it takes us out of the skein of social relations in which we're embedded, and we're told of a Samaritan who rescues a Jew. But it also takes us beyond any established relation into the domain of accident or contingency: my neighbour is someone I come across, bleeding in the road. It was sheer accident that I came along in just that time; but this accident can be the occasion for rebuilding a skein of human relations animated by agape. The Samaritan's action is part of God's response to the skewed serve the robbers have lobbed into history.<sup>470</sup>

Taylor's elaboration on the parable here is that the entire 'Christian package' made sense in the context of 'communion' with God (278-9, 288); the notion of God as personal being, capable of communion (*Koinonia*) rings through Athanasius and the Cappadocian Fathers. Our 'deification' (*theosis*) is effected by our participation in that communion.<sup>471</sup> And here we get a potent expression of a self-whole synthesis of communion, and by extension the network of agape:

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<sup>469</sup> *A Secular Age*, 277.

<sup>470</sup> *A Secular Age*, 277. Taylor contrasts here the "model [of contingency] suggested by the Bible" with the temptation also in the Christian theological tradition to capture the "Total Plan"—the more Stoic take on Providence—one finds in Calvin and Janssen, "who produced such repulsive results, that the main claimants to the Total Picture are now atheists, wielding theodicy like a club" (p. 278).

<sup>471</sup> That is, Taylor writes, "being in communion with God through the community of humans in communion, viz., the church" (*A Secular Age*, 279, cf., 278, 288). Taylor draws rather ecumenically here on the work of Peter Brown, Kallistos Ware, R. F. Capon, John Zizioulas, and Ivan Illich. Brown, *The Body and Society*; Ware, *The Kingdom of the Heart*, John Main lectures 2002, published by the World Community for Christian Meditation (London, 2002); Capon, *An Offering of Uncles: The Priesthood of Adam and the Shape of the World* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1967); Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985); Illich, *The Corruption of Christianity* (CBC, "Ideas" series, Jan 2000); *The Rivers North of the Future: The Testament of Ivan Illich* (Toronto: Anansi, 2005).

...communion has to integrate persons in their true identities, as bodily beings who establish their identities in their histories, in which contingency has a place. In this way, *the central concept which makes sense of the whole is communion, or love*, defining both the nature of God, and our relation to him.<sup>472</sup>

What I want to highlight again, even though it's peripheral to Taylor's point here, is the elusiveness and fragility of the synthesis (or here 'integration'), and as such it is part of an important subtheme in Taylor's apophatic theopolitical picture—a subtheme that resides in the penumbra throughout *A Secular Age*. What's going on here in the Reform Master Narrative is the continuation of the agape-ethic outside the originating context of 'communion', and is a key move in the development of the impersonal order, which eventually becomes the 'natural' picture of the cosmos, society, and morality. There is an 'agape-surrogate' in benevolence, "but communion itself has little or no place in the picture: little enough even on the human level—the hegemony of atomist pictures of agency in modern culture militates against this; and no place at all for communion with God as a transforming relation."<sup>473</sup> That is, what was originally conceived in the New Testament as an agapeic communion is lifted from that context and drifts toward an individualist picture of the agent as free and unconstrained by authority while social-political theories begin to codify and naturalize the mutually-beneficent

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<sup>472</sup> *A Secular Age*, 279.

<sup>473</sup> *A Secular Age*, 280. And later, "Indeed, this last [communion] is so far off the map that it is rarely mentioned, even to be argued against. The main attack against orthodoxy concerns the agency of God, as wielder of extra-systemic causal power, bringing about miracles, special providences, acts of favour and punishments, and the like. Hence as we saw above, the 'refutation' of orthodox religion barely notices the Loyolas, Ste. Teresas, or St. François de Sales; or when it does, can only see them as 'enthusiastic' claimants to special revelations or divine commands. The grid that Deism, and its successors, operate with blanks out communion almost totally" (p. 280)."

order, replacing personal communion with other impersonal categorical relations.

The 'communion' of the network of agape is elusive, since what happens in-history like the Samaritan experience arises from the surprising work of people and God's free response of grace, and as soon as this is schematized in a moral code or becomes enframed in categorical relations, it migrates or 'corrupts' into something else. It's here that the network of agape appears at the Turning Point to function as a contrast:

At the heart of orthodox Christianity, seen in terms of communion, is the coming of God through Christ into a personal relation with disciples, and beyond them others, eventually ramifying through the church to humanity as a whole. God establishes the new relationship with us by loving us, in a way we cannot unaided love each other. (John 15: God loved us first.) The lifeblood of this new relation is agape, which can't ever be understood simply in terms of a set of rules, but rather as the extension of a certain kind of relation, spreading out in a network. The church is in this sense a quintessentially network society, even though of an utterly unparalleled kind, in that the relations are not mediated by any of the historical forms of relatedness: kinship, fealty to a chief, or whatever. It transcends all these, but not into a categorical society based on similarity of members, like citizenship; but rather into a network of ever different relations of agape. Of course, *the church lamentably and spectacularly fails to live up to this model; but this is the kind of society that it is meant to be*.<sup>474</sup>

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<sup>474</sup> *A Secular Age*, 282, italics are mine, cf. 158. In a discussion on the demands of the moral order of modern social imaginaries, in which society comes to be imagined as an association of consenting individuals, Taylor describes the 'moral order' of the Gospel in this way, echoing the same Johannine theme: "...the Gospel generates the idea of a community of saints, inspired by love for God for each other, and for humankind, whose members were devoid of rivalry, mutual resentment, love of gain, ambition to rule, and the like. The general expectation in the Middle Ages was that only a minority of saints really aspired to this, and that they had to live in a world which heavily deviated from this ideal. But in the fullness of time, this would be the order of those gathered around God in the final dispensation. We can speak of a moral order here, and not

Note the contours of the ‘network of agape’; it contrasts relation as defined by a set of rules or other ‘historical forms of relatedness’. The network metaphor connotes expansion; it ‘spreads out’, implying that the familiar forms of human relation are more closed from extension to out-groups. This gospel, by contrast, can disrupt boundaries of established solidarities of family and clan.<sup>475</sup> And, importantly for an apophatic theopolitics, the church ‘fails to live up to the model’. Taylor’s definition of *agape* thus is glossed as an elusive, transcendent sociality. As such, it is unrealizable in the familiar forms even while the network grows in organic and unpredictable directions.

Taylor switches back from the picture of the transcendent network sociality to the newly-emerging seventeenth and eighteenth-century ‘categorical society’ as a collection of disciplined individuals, bound by code. The emerging “categorical societies are bound together by codes; law codes in the first instance. But to the extent that an ethic springs up which is congruent with, inspired by or modeled on categorical society, it will similarly be one of rules, of do’s and don’ts, as we can see in the history of modern ethics...”<sup>476</sup> Morality comes to be seen as “revealed to us by Reason, a result of a study of reality, or else of the very structure of Reason itself.”<sup>477</sup> A dilemma ensues here between a rationalist placement of morality in

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just a gratuitous ideal, because it is thought to be in the process of full realization, but the time for this is not yet” (p. 161). Cf. Ivan Illich’s analogous notion of communion in *The Corruption of Christianity*.

<sup>475</sup> *A Secular Age*, 158, cf. 739.

<sup>476</sup> *A Secular Age*, 282. Taylor goes on here to describe the benefit of freedom in the new understanding as championed in Utilitarian forms, Kant and Rousseau. Law constrains, but it is something self-imposed.

<sup>477</sup> *A Secular Age*, 288.



the mind—at the expense of the body—and a naturalist placement of morality in the body—to the diminishment of mind:

So we gravitate towards two possible positions; one tells us that we have to factor out our embodied feeling, our ‘gut reactions’ in determining what is right, even set aside our desires and emotions. This move finds a paradigm statement in the work of Kant. Or else, we turn against the excessive claims of reason, and base morality on emotions, as we find with Hume. But just for that reason we undercut the aura of the higher that usually surrounds these feelings, giving them a purely naturalistic explanation. Embodied feeling is no longer a medium in which we relate to what we recognize as rightly bearing an aura of the higher; either we do recognize something like this and we see reason as our unique access to it; or we tend to reject this kind of higher altogether... This is the move which I want to call ‘excarnation’.<sup>478</sup>

These two positions function like broad ideal-typical poles—in which Kant and Hume are primary originating figures—that demarcate the major antitheses and dilemmas which carry through modernity, and not only in moral (and political) philosophy, but also eventually find articulation in revolutionary utopian movements and popular culture which in varieties of ways attempt—and fail—to strike new syntheses, like ‘communion’-surrogates. This is the direction Taylor takes the latter sections of *A Secular Age*, to which I will return in the sections below. Here we see that, at the start, both ideal-typical positions exemplified by Kant and Hume ‘excarnate’. This is shorthand for failed syntheses of the self and community that contrast the more paradoxical, and eschatological synthesis of the ‘incarnated’ form modeled in the network of agape. And similar to Milbank’s

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<sup>478</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 288.

‘paradoxical’ framework above, Taylor’s own descriptions of Christian transformation (toward communion) mark as central the apparent contradiction the notion of *agape* in that a full acceptance of the material (including the body, family, production, friendship) can also entail the disrupting negation of these things.<sup>479</sup> Thus, Taylor points out later that the Christian faith partly recovers an aspiration to wholeness, along the lines of recuperation of the significance of the body, and also in establishing new lines of social solidarity. But it only ‘partly’ recovers it, since ‘early Christian’ wholeness is only realized in a tentative and partial way that reflects an eschatological expectation of fulfillment in the resurrection.<sup>480</sup> It is something “to be built, an eschatological concept” which is exemplified in the free gift of the self-giving God.<sup>481</sup>

So, as modern social imaginaries and immanentist pictures of the cosmos gain traction by providing compelling new accounts of social order, human impulses toward benevolence, and historical agency and progression, the orthodox Christian notion of sociality as an agapeic network slides from view.<sup>482</sup> To put a

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<sup>479</sup> See my discussion above on Milbank’s ‘paradox’: B.3.2.2 Paradox and Reenchanting Humanism: Milbank.

<sup>480</sup> Cf. *A Secular Age*, 161.

<sup>481</sup> *A Secular Age*, 246.

<sup>482</sup> And thus the groundwork is laid here for an objectified and mechanized picture of the social and political order imaginable on entirely immanent terms—a picture that then gets reinforced in emerging social-political practice. Cf. *A Secular Age*, p. 283-4. This sort of transition requires a couple necessary conditions: first, the picture is efficacious. Like a Kuhnian paradigm shift, the image of the social and political as individuals collecting contractually must appear to really function on the model. When it does it can become the tacit background understanding such that humans just ‘naturally’ are this way. And second, there needs to be a moral motivational force. There is now a “moral distaste for the old religion that sees God as an agent in history” (*A Secular Age*, 274). The really mature person is the enlightened elite, who can engage in ‘public’ debate in the salon, the ‘public house’, and in transnational discourse in print, namely: the ‘Republic of Letters’ as was the common term at the end of the seventeenth century. Taylor uses this latter example to demonstrate the new imaginary of the political as an instrumentalized and objectified system that ‘the people’ can shape by debate and common consent, and form association beyond national borders (*A Secular Age*, 191-2).

point on the trade-off for Taylor, the code of compassion gets extracted from this communion, and this is one of the main tributaries in the historical flow to modern secularity. The new moral order then, we could say, is at least partly a product of codified and excarnated agapeic communion.<sup>483</sup> In the next chapter we pinpoint two historical repetitions and extensions of this corruption-toward-excarnation in the Reform Master Narrative of *A Secular Age*. These are what Taylor calls the ‘age of mobilization’ and the following 1960’s age of ‘authenticity’. Both work in the narrative of *A Secular Age* as engines pushing toward a post-Christendom North Atlantic. Building on themes in his lectures on William James, he introduces a metaphor to describe the sense for religious experience in the subsequent fragilized pluralist setting—the ‘Jamesian open space’.<sup>484</sup> We’ll see that, in Taylor’s telling, institutionalized Christian faith corrupts itself out of the picture by losing plausibility through attempts to mobilize ‘communion’, but that this negation prepares for a contemporary resonance with apophatic theopolitics, which—according to the narrative—resists conformity to institution and code.

### C.2.2 Failed Syntheses of ‘Mobilization’ and the Jamesian Open Space

Like the work as a whole, the Reform Master Narrative within *A Secular Age* is vast, so I will select here two moments that exemplify a corruption-to-excarnation, where again ‘excarnation’ refers to a separation of reason or cognitive assent from bodily emotion as the basis of morality.<sup>485</sup> These moments are selected because

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<sup>483</sup> *A Secular Age*, 290-1.

<sup>484</sup> Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2002).

<sup>485</sup> See quote on page 228.

within their description the network of agape functions as a contrast or negative foil in the narrative's arc. As the uncorrupted theopolitical vision, the network portrays a standard that is deviated from in early to late modern movements to enforce a kind of communion. Where the first example of the institutional (primarily Catholic) church in the setting of the age of mobilization represents a post-*ancien regime* repetition of the 'disciplined imposition' of the kingdom of God, the second example is what Taylor calls the 'expressivist' revolution of the 1960's student movements in Berkley and Paris and it suggests an analogous imposition, although beyond the context of the institutional church in a modern utopic movement.<sup>486</sup>

At either turn, the attempt by churches, states, and revolutionary movements to impose a higher way of being along personal and social lines undercuts and works against the goals of inculcating piety (in the first instance) and achieving maximal individual freedom and expression (in the second) along with a sustained harmonic communion. These two examples thus achieve two things for us. First, they highlight an apparent theopolitical failure to short-circuit the realization of communion. And, second, what stands in relief against these failures is Taylor's insertion of the network of agape as the truer (because unrealizable) hyper-real communion. At the end, we will look at the upshot of these failed impositions in Taylor's characterizations of religion today. There we will find that the narrative ends, not in a new utopian synthesis, but rather in an agonism and antithesis that

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<sup>486</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 220. Taylor discusses here the 'disciplined imposition' of the kingdom of God in the context of the Hildebrandian Reform. Looking ahead, I am also selecting these moments since each of them contain what I'll refer to as 'moments of insight' in which the network of agape makes significant appearances. These are evidences of Taylor's 'performative' use of narrative in his repertoire of apophatic rhetorical modes.

obtains perpetually in the ‘cross-pressures’ of Jamesian ‘open space’ where currents of religious, areligious, or spiritual modes exist together as competing or synergizing options.

Themes of code and excarnation as facets of the Reform Master Narrative strengthen again in Taylor’s account of nineteenth-century syntheses and reactions against those syntheses; it then gets recapitulated and amplified in the overlapping era between the French and American revolutions and the two world wars when Taylor’s focus shifts to efforts by churches to reconstitute themselves along modern national, democratic and free-church lines in what he demarcates as the ‘age of mobilization’. Here in the story, we see how the church’s own efforts at expansion, piety inculcation—what we might call ‘disciplined syntheses’—ultimately undermine themselves.

### **Mobilization**

Beginning in the unsettled syntheses of the nineteenth century, we note Taylor’s example of the ‘Victorian Christianity of self-discipline’—a sensibility that bundled together Britishness, law, decency, civilization, and religion. In Taylor’s alternative secularization story, this bundle works as a kind of mediating point toward a post-Christian ‘humanism of duty, will, and altruism’. This is observed, for instance, in nineteenth-century England when manliness and loyalty become a significant part of school reform, highlighting sport, etc.<sup>487</sup> There are challenges to this bundled synthesis of national and religious belonging with personal

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<sup>487</sup> *A Secular Age*, 398-9.

discipline; “...a protest against a narrowing of the ends of life to a code of conduct: This ethic of discipline, in both believing and unbelieving variants, was a moralism.”<sup>488</sup> The protest against this moralism, Taylor says, comes from Evangelical and ‘Romantic’ sources; Taylor highlights Schiller’s *Aesthetic Education* as one particularly important statement of protest against the new moralism and ossifying synthesis of self and community along the lines of ‘duty’ to country.<sup>489</sup> In Schiller’s treatise the experience of beauty can break one out of a narrow anthropocentrism; this provided a path for new modes of unbelief for something beyond.

Here, overtly, Taylor is building a case that the ‘super nova’ of moral-spiritual options that characterizes the contemporary landscape begins in the dialectic between the turn to ‘exclusive’ (read: atheist) humanism and reactions against the felt restrictions of its narrower moralism and atomizing individualism. However, more covertly—yet nevertheless palpable in the narrative here—is a return to the theme of failed communion-surrogates. At the end of his chapter on ‘nineteenth-century trajectories’, we witness the impending tragedy of attempts to impose various new lines of individual/community synthesis along nationalist lines that are part of the ideological context for World-War I. Among the possible replacement utopian reactions to these shattered nationalist syntheses, Taylor includes: renewed synthesis without patriotism, internationalist liberalism, communism and fascism, a radical re-ordering of societies into left or right.<sup>490</sup> What Taylor provides, leading up to his description of the age of ‘mobilization’ is

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<sup>488</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 399.

<sup>489</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 400.

<sup>490</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 409

thus a picture of an initial branching of (theopolitical) options, and these are seen as the byproduct (at least in part) of new failed syntheses which were themselves produced in the miasmic constellation of tensions triggered by the new ‘moralism’ of exclusive humanism of ‘duty’ and counter-reactions to it (e.g., Romanticism).<sup>491</sup> The focus shifts then toward failures by the church in this post-WWI context to impose and thus short-circuit the kingdom.

Taylor’s account of the overlapping ‘Age of Mobilization’ (1800-1950) focuses on efforts—especially by churches—to realize its own synthesis or regain ground that was perceived as lost in the wake of secularizing revolutions. Here again the broader scope for Taylor is to explain how unbelief—as ‘exclusive humanism’—becomes a livable option for the masses and not just the elite in the twentieth-century.<sup>492</sup> And as elsewhere in *A Secular Age* there are functionalist explanations at play that appear in the explananda of secularization theories. Urbanization and industrialization dislocate people from parish settings and organize individuals in frameworks of production, which is concomitant with class conflict. Medical advances—while objectifying the body—come to explain more and more of human experience, and alternative compelling naturalist theories of human origin enter the scene with Darwin, etc.<sup>493</sup> And, importantly for Taylor’s philosophical anthropology, a new compelling moral vision becomes perceptible as more mature and proper to the autonomous, rational, independent-thinking and

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<sup>491</sup> It may or may not be coincidental to my thesis, but it is worth pointing out that it’s in the narration of these ‘shattered orders’ that Taylor highlights the opening of a new poetics. In the apparent breakdown of a common cosmos of meaning, T.S. Eliot is found, triangulating a transcendent order from the vantage of personalized meaning in the *Wasteland* (1922). Cf. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 409.

<sup>492</sup> *A Secular Age*, 423

<sup>493</sup> *A Secular Age*, 443.

‘modern’ self that is no longer dependent on religious authority, superstition, and a local parish culture that might ‘beat the bounds’ or ring the clarion bell to keep bad weather from ruining the harvest.<sup>494</sup>

But beyond the functional accounts and moral frameworks, Taylor situates the age in the long sweep of the ‘drive to Reform’ to show how the very locus of the religious or spiritual in social life shifted.<sup>495</sup> As in the local parish, the world itself is no longer imbued with spiritual significance and one’s social location is no longer a feature of divine intention, and so religious authority and especially that of the institutional church ceases to be a tacit feature of the way things are. Top-down reform campaigns enter here again in Taylor’s explanation as major drivers of this shift. For one, they had put an (often brutal) end to the popular, sometimes riotous religion of the masses, by, e.g., taming festivals and re-figuring places by burning statues, relics, temples, etc.<sup>496</sup> But then these campaigns could also be recycled in various forms. In the French context, for example, Jansenist counter-reformers (17<sup>th</sup> century) repeated the demolition of popular practice, which are targeted again during the revolution and dechristianization of the Jacobin period (18<sup>th</sup> century). The church adapts and slowly trades the *ancien regime* imaginary for one in which people are recruited into organization; that is, churches begin in the nineteenth century to take on ‘mobilization’ forms.<sup>497</sup> Earlier enchanted *ancien régime* forms presumed an intertwined church and society and “presented us as living in a hierarchical order, which had divine

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<sup>494</sup> *A Secular Age*, 443.

<sup>495</sup> *A Secular Age*, 423-4.

<sup>496</sup> *A Secular Age*, 441.

<sup>497</sup> *A Secular Age*, 445.



endorsement. In societies on this model, the presence of God was unavoidable; authority itself was bound up with the divine, and various invocations of God were inseparable from public life.”<sup>498</sup> By contrast, various ‘mobilization’ models may continue to hold to a strong integration of church and state, but these are situated in a disenchanted, post-Newtonian cosmos. Meanings are no longer “expressed in the universe around us,” and nevertheless a notion of providential design, for instance, may be retained as the only legitimate pattern for society. John Locke is highlighted by Taylor as one of the original articulators of such a view, but this original philosophical articulation has its analogies at the more popular level in the evangelicalism that grew during the British and American Great Awakenings, which produced a vision of order that prized self-discipline, ‘respectability’, ‘decency’.<sup>499</sup> We find a US counterpart in the same era in burgeoning ‘civil religion’, which combines state and church belonging.

Taylor begins to call this combination the ‘neo-Durkheimian’ imaginary. As others

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<sup>498</sup> *A Secular Age*, 446.

<sup>499</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 451-459. Cf. Callum Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain* (London: Routledge, 2001). David Martin, *Dilemmas of Contemporary Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978). These Protestant forms have their analogies in Catholicism in nineteenth-century Europe in post-revolution, French Catholic Restoration, but also in Poland and Ireland, where national identity can be deeply bound up with religion. This description also extends further to what Taylor calls “confessional mobilization” that does not seek independent nationhood, but aims rather at political impact. Examples here include Catholics in Germany during the Kulturkampf and Dutch pillarization. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 459.

In the twentieth century, some political theologies retains the notion, reflecting the feeling of much of post-war suburban United States, that only a sufficiently well-churched society and a close alliance of church-family-state can sustain a genuine liberal democracy. Temperance movements in 19<sup>th</sup> century United States are only the earliest forms of Evangelical expressions of this alliance. One thinks also of recurring campaigns supporting traditional definitions of marriage, pro-life movements, and in public education with defenses of prayer in schools and natural science curriculums that include creation as at least an alternative explanation of the origin of biological life. The most extreme theological-political articulation for this in the United States is ‘Dominianism’, which has often become the caricature of politically-conservative Evangelicalism. (see H. Cox article on Pat Robertson’s Regent University), [www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1995/11/the-warring-visions-of-the-religious-right/376472/](http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1995/11/the-warring-visions-of-the-religious-right/376472/). For Taylor’s discussion on this more recent phenomenon of ‘neo-Durkheimian’ religious forms, see *A Secular Age*, p. 505ff.

have noted, the term ‘Durkheimian’ here is fraught, but the basic idea for Taylor is to characterize various ways of spontaneously experiencing a type of sacred-social synthesis.<sup>500</sup> To contrast, in the earlier ‘paleo-Durkheimian’ imaginary, the social order is an ongoing divinely instantiated and sanctioned order. This was the order of the *ancien régime*. In the neo-Durkheimian imaginary, however, the social order may ultimately refer back to a divine design, but it is the task of humans to discern, constitute, and maintain it. Church and state authority may intermingle—‘bundled’ as Taylor would say about his own Quebec—but these relations increasingly need justifications and are no longer part of the tacit picture of the cosmos.

In fact, if churches are to exist, they are on the hook to provide arguments. People increasingly need to be convinced to join, while churches compete for membership with other newer forms of association, social clubs, and lobby groups.<sup>501</sup> Taylor provides the examples of Restoration French Catholicism, the Evangelical movements of late-eighteenth century England, and Thomas Chalmers in Scotland. Organizations like Catholic Action are born.<sup>502</sup> The arguments that

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<sup>500</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 455. Taylor writes, “The [paleo-]Durkheimian phase corresponds to a situation in which a sense of the ontic dependence of the state on God and higher times is still alive, even though it may be weakened by disenchantment and an instrumental spirit; whereas in ‘neo’ societies, God is present because it is his Design around which society is organized”. For a critical appraisal of the concept, see Matthias Koenig, “Beyond the Paradigm of Secularization?” *Working With A Secular Age*, 34. Koenig takes issue with Taylor’s opposition of church and state as his misreading of Durkheim, since Durkheim was concerned with church as a form of ‘moral community’. Taylor would likely not disagree, though he has focused the use of this term to describe in part, a way of imagining how church (as a perhaps ‘moral community’) and political authority relate. Cf. Hans Joas, *Braucht der Mensch Religion?* (Freiburg: Herder, 2004), 96ff.

<sup>501</sup> “In the British and French cases, one clear aim of those who sponsored these missions in, roughly, the nineteenth century was to prevent the diffusion of the fractured metaphysical-religious culture of the upper crust and intelligentsia, for whom unbelief was a real option” (*A Secular Age*, 425).

<sup>502</sup> ‘Restoration Catholicism’ in the nineteenth century sought to take back the land lost under Napoleon after his fall (cf. *A Secular Age*, 442); the Jacobin secular calendar is not adopted and the revolution fails. During this time something of the old order is brought back in an attempt to re-

circulate, for instance, attempt to demonstrate the foundational role of the church in maintaining moral and social order in democratic societies or about the divine design of traditional family structure and human sexuality.<sup>503</sup> And just like their secular counterparts, churches begin to self-organize for membership, for inward devotion and communion. Taylor talks about the Catholic clergy's movement in his era in terms of 'coercion' and points out an expressed 'pastoral policy of fear' and in/out group policing, where 'in' gets defined by one's adoption of a rigid moral code, sexual ethic, and so on.

In Taylor's picture, these mobilizing campaigns breached into the social-religious penumbra—continuing a long thread of Reform—to redefine membership by life according to the code. And though there were colossal successes in the era, mobilization ultimately undercuts itself. We find in this era, for instance, efforts to disengage 'proper' religious significance from the riotous community celebrations—effectively ending the culture of the feast.<sup>504</sup> Note in the passage below, the clear line of continuity with the long drive to Reform and its counter-effect:

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establish 'Christendom', but now preserving the church has a more democratic tone, and this is the background for 'Christian Democracy' which exists by its claim that the order imparted by the church is good for society. In the German pietist context, one could add German socialist roots in Zinzendorf the *Rettungshausbewegung* to Taylor's account of mobilization forms.

<sup>503</sup> Taylor adds this quote from the Duke of Devonshire: "Can you imagine for one moment what England would have been like to today without those churches and all that those churches mean? ... Certainly it would not have been safe to walk the streets. All respect, decency, all those things which tend to make modern civilization what it is would not have been in existence. You can imagine what we should have had to pay for our police, for lunatic asylums, for criminal asylums ... The charges would have been increased hundredfold if it had not been for the work of the church as done and is doing today" (*A Secular Age*, 472), originally quoted in Jeffrey Cox, *The English Churches in a Secular Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 109-10.

<sup>504</sup> *A Secular Age*, 464-5.

The very attempt of the clergy to make their people over, and raise their level of practice and morality, meant that that they were constantly pushing, reprimanding, demanding that some cabaret or dance hall be closed, that money be spent on a new church. Conflicts inevitably arose between priests and communities. At first these revolts were quite independent of any philosophical foundation. But through them, a new outlook, denouncing clerical power, and exalting the moral independence of the laity could enter [...] The pathos of *this self-defeating action shows with hindsight that the Catholic Church was engaged in a mission impossible*. But this is of wider significance than just the contradictions of Pious IX and the ultramontane Church in the nineteenth century. In a way it shows up the tensions in the whole project of Reform [...] But the whole drive of the Reform movement, from high Middle Ages, right through Reformation and counter-Reformation, right up through evangelical renewal and the post-Reformation Church, was to make Christians with a strong personal and devotional commitment to God and the faith. *But strong personal faith and all-powerful community consensus can't ultimately consist together.*<sup>505</sup>

These tensions of Reform, once again, appear as both the moral make-over of the self by subscription to moral code and also the connection of the individual—by 'devotional commitment to the faith'—to the believing community. This is no longer the spontaneous agapeic network that explodes boundaries from the gut-wrenching movement of compassion; rather it is the repetition of excarnating, boundary-line-drawing force. And all efforts to mobilize defeat themselves, since as Taylor sums it up, faith cannot be forced.<sup>506</sup>

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<sup>505</sup> *A Secular Age*, 466, italics mine.

<sup>506</sup> *A Secular Age*, 499.

## The Jamesian Open Space

Just as the Schillerian reaction followed Victorian moralism, what follows the moralism of mobilization is another 'Romantic' reaction in 1960s and 1970s North America and Europe, which inaugurates another age, namely: the 'age of authenticity'. In immediate post-War America, patriotism, religion, and family support each other. Suburban prosperity went together with an American way of life, in which religion could be a central feature. In the 'neo-Durkheimian' mode, the state protects against things like godless Communism, religion supports faithful citizenship, and families raise children animated by these values.<sup>507</sup> But then there is a kind of hinge moment in the 1960s that could read the 1950s era as 'conformist' and in-authentic. The 1960's student movements in Berkley and Paris resonate transnationally to rally against divisions and dualities of mind/body and individual/community (e.g., between students and workers), and this repeats and extends the earlier developments in eighteenth-century Herder, Schiller, and Rousseau. A key defining component of this movement in Taylor's account is the sexual revolution, which sought to recover the body and affirmations of (sexual) desire—as against the rigid sexual ethic of the established church—which was not only a site for one's own self-exploration and expression (repression of these signals a denial a fundamental good), but it was expected that the unleashing of sexual passion would also form stronger social bonds.<sup>508</sup>

The point to be made here ultimately is that the path to the open space—of

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<sup>507</sup> *A Secular Age*, 506.

<sup>508</sup> *A Secular Age*, 477.

mutually fragilizing spiritual options—runs partly through the ‘expressivist’ reaction to moralist code; a new attempt at re-integrating human life toward a picture of wholeness.<sup>509</sup> And when ‘expressivism’ movements spin into utopianism, it too can corrupt.

Utopianism has its costs. To the extent that the goals of integral self-expression, sensual release, equal relations, and social bonding cannot be easily realized together—and it seems that they can only be united with difficulty, and for a time, in small communities at best—the attempt to realize them will involve sacrificing some elements of the package for others.<sup>510</sup>

It corrupts along the now-familiar lines of tension. The hoped-for wholeness can end up, for instance, burrowing morality into a facet of human nature, so that the need for character formation recedes into the background, “as though the morality of mutual respect were embedded in the dial of authentic self-fulfillment itself.”<sup>511</sup> And this is how many people experience it today, Taylor warns, “oblivious of how the terrible twentieth-century aberrations of Fascism and extreme nationalism have also drunk at the expressivist source.”<sup>512</sup> So we have a new repetition on the temptation to actualize the utopian (theopolitical) vision; and its context is the replacement of the mobilization dispensation of the individualist ideal, socially

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<sup>509</sup> Taylor characterizes the age of authenticity as an inheritor of the Romantic expressivism, which had its original philosophical articulation in Herder and Humboldt, et al. One important difference from previous ‘ages’, which characterizes the Romantic-expressivist connection, is the emerging social imaginary of the space of fashion and mutual display that ‘hover between solitude and togetherness’ (*A Secular Age*, 482) and can flip over into powerful moments of collective action (e.g., Di’s funeral, Olympics, rock concerts, sports). Cf. *A Secular Age*, 481-3.

<sup>510</sup> *A Secular Age*, 477.

<sup>511</sup> *A Secular Age*, 487.

<sup>512</sup> *A Secular Age*, 487. Taylor is not making the slippery slope argument that Romantic expressivist will inevitably lead to extreme nationalism. He believes that, on balance, the shift to an age of authenticity has been positive (*A Secular Age*, 480), but any such transformation comes with costs.

united in a bond of citizenship and church-belonging (the 'neo-Durkheimian' ideal-type) with the expressivist dispensation in which the individual forges her own path, and only belongs to broader socialities or religious tradition or organization when it personally resonates (the 'post-Durkheimian' type).<sup>513</sup> Thus in a revised repetition of strands in Romantic thought, the body and emotional life are recuperated as critical sites for aspirations to wholeness. It becomes increasingly difficult during the age of authenticity to simply ascribe to either a particular moral-religious code or religious institution without also *feeling* that it's right. In contrast to earlier prevailing frameworks, now most people only sense they can connect with a higher power via their passion.<sup>514</sup> This is explicitly linked to a reaction to code:

"...desiccated reason cannot reach the ultimate truth in any form. What is needed is a subtler language which can make manifest the higher or the divine. Getting assent to some formula is not the main thing, but being able to generate the moving insight into higher reality is what is important. Deeply felt personal insight now becomes our most precious spiritual resources. For Schleiermacher, the crucial thing to explore is the powerful feeling of dependence on something greater. To give reign and voice in oneself is more crucial than getting the right formula."<sup>515</sup>

So now the church can find it hard to speak: "The attachment to a rigid code, as well as the sense of being an embattled band of the faithful, developed through the defensive postures of the last two centuries, makes it almost impossible to find the

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<sup>513</sup> "In the new expressionist dispensation, there is no necessary embedding of our link to the sacred in any particular broader framework, whether 'church' or state" (Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 487).

<sup>514</sup> *A Secular Age*, 488.

<sup>515</sup> *A Secular Age*, 489.

language.”<sup>516</sup> The kind of patriotic religion of ‘the Age of Mobilization’ can still exist, but only on a precarious footing, since we no longer live in societies where the broad sense is that faith in God is central to the ordered life we all enjoy.<sup>517</sup> So, in one sense, the church retreats from the public square, moves back to a more equidistant relation to state authority.<sup>518</sup> The days of a unified Christendom are unequivocally over; its ‘ambition is unrealizable.’<sup>519</sup> And yet, as José Casanova argued, in another sense religious discourse can also simultaneously become very much public, but it will become less common for people to be drawn into Christianity via political or group identity or by a sense of sustaining a social ethic.<sup>520</sup> In hyper-pluralized settings like most contemporary North Atlantic societies, the prevailing characteristic of spiritualities and religious belonging is fragility (or fragilization, also following Casanova). New forms have emerged, along with revived spiritual practices that engage the individual’s quest for meaning and authentic expression in meditation, charity, pilgrimages, prayer, etc.

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<sup>516</sup> *A Secular Age*, 494. Taylor engages in a lengthy discussion in this section on the (Catholic) church’s moralist responses in clerical reform, which doubled down on the repression of sexuality and authentic self-fulfillment, which in the end repelled many from organized religion. For Taylor, the problem was not the spirituality of the church, aspiration to full devotion to God and sexual purity. The problem, or the ‘deviation’ was “... to make this take on sexuality mandatory for everyone, through a moralistic code which made a certain kind of purity a base condition for relating to God through the sacraments. What Vatican rule-makers and secularist ideologies unite in not being able to see, is that there are more ways of being a Catholic Christian than either have yet imagined. And yet this shouldn’t be so hard to grasp. Even during those centuries when the Reform-clerical outlook has dominated pastoral policy, there were always other paths present, represented sometimes by the most prominent figures, including (to remain with the French Catholic Reformation) St. François de Sales and Fénelon, not to speak of Pascal, who though he gave comfort to the fear-mongers, offered an incomparably deeper vision” (*A Secular Age*, 504).

<sup>517</sup> *A Secular Age*. 531-2.

<sup>518</sup> Taylor notes, positively, that we live now in an ‘overlapping consensus’ à la John Rawls, “The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus,” *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies* 7, no. 1 (Spring 1987), 1-25.

<sup>519</sup> *A Secular Age*, 514. ‘Christendom’ here is defined as “a civilization where society and culture are profoundly informed by Christian faith.” The goal in these terms has been “to provide a common religious home for the whole society” (*A Secular Age*, 514), as the Catholic church sought in the seventeenth-century counter-reformations to win back ground lost to the Reformed churches, and as it sought to do in the nineteenth century to make up ground after the revolution, and then again in the twentieth-century missionizing of *Action Catholique*.

<sup>520</sup> Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*; *A Secular Age*, 514.



New forms of collective expression with an ambivalent relationship to institution have resonated in this new landscape like World Youth Day, Taizé, renewed emphasis on the festive, new forms of ecumenism.<sup>521</sup> As Taylor describes, today's spiritualities and religious forms tend to lie in the middle ground, between 'dwelling' in traditional forms and 'seeking' unique, individual paths.<sup>522</sup> And against the standard secularization thesis, we witness not only the mutual fragilization of traditional forms, but also of forms of unbelief, as in the post-atheist 'minimal religion' described by Epstein in a study on post-Soviet Russia.<sup>523</sup>

So, the age of authenticity re-shapes the moral-spiritual landscape. What resonates now depends more on the 'powerful intuitions of individuals, radiating out to others' and less on subscription to dogmatic formulation or church membership. This is the day for the 'pilgrim-seeker', in the 'wilderness', who in the absence of Christendom's framing of reality, pursues meaning and God in rather negative ways:

To some, including many believers, this epochal development will seem like a regression of Christianity. To others, the retreat of Christendom

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<sup>521</sup> *A Secular Age*, 515, 534.

<sup>522</sup> *A Secular Age*, 515-17. Taylor evokes the work of Wuthnow to describe the new spiritual stances that take shape after the age of authenticity as between 'dwellers' (within traditional religious settings) and 'seekers' (those attempting to forge their own authentic path in a search for meaning). Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Taylor adds that there is a fluid relation between these stances and much of religious experience is in the middle (*A Secular Age*, 510). He also makes use of Grace Davie's notion of 'believing without belonging' and 'belonging without believing' to show more specifically how collective Christian life can remain as a reference point, even in this new dispensation. Cf. Davie, *Believing without Belonging* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).

<sup>523</sup> *A Secular Age*, 534, 5, "These people who have found God in the wilderness feel that the walls of the existing temples are too narrow for them and should be expanded." Mikhail Epstein, "Minimal Religion," and "Post-Atheism: From Apophatic Theology to 'Minimal Religion'," in Mikhail Epstein, Alexander Genis, and Slobodanka Vladiv-Glover, *Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives in Post-Soviet Culture* (New York/Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1999).

involves both loss and gain. Some great realizations of collective life are lost, but other facets of our predicament in relation to God come to the fore; for instance what Isaiah meant when he talked of a ‘hidden God’. In the seventeenth century, you had to be a Pascal to appreciate that. Now we live it daily.”<sup>524</sup>

He writes further about ‘nagging dissatisfactions’ with the modern moral order and its (moralizing) disciplines, as well as “the rapid wearing out of its Utopian versions,” which leaves the sense that there is something more.<sup>525</sup> Taylor explores this zone of absence and theological resonance and wants to even protect it from the reactionary tendencies he frequently observes in his own tradition.<sup>526</sup> Thus again, on this new plane, Taylor imagines the perpetual antithesis.<sup>527</sup> Where the hoped-for synthesis of NT agape is encoded, mechanized, and forced, it must distort and ultimately disappoint aspirations to fullness. Thus, the outcome in this era: In the wake of WWI—and all hopes of utopian synthesis dashed—‘established

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<sup>524</sup> *A Secular Age*, 532.

<sup>525</sup> *A Secular Age*, 533. At the start of *A Secular Age*, Taylor cites the Peggy Lee song, “Is that all there is?” as an entry point into this sense.

<sup>526</sup> As we sense in this description of the new age: “...hardened by various doctrines which make them polar opposites, and have the obfuscatory effect of forcing people to the extremes, to peremptory authority on one side, and self-sufficiency the other, either utter self-suspicion or total self-trust. This is, of course, in keeping with the long-standing obsession in Latin Christendom to nail down with ultimate, unattainable and finally self-destructive precision the bases of final, unchallengeable, inerrant authority, be it in a certain form of Papal decision, or a literal reading of the Bible” (*A Secular Age*, 512).

Taylor adds a note here about the ‘cost of conformity’ in conservative critiques of those ‘seekers’ beyond the fold. “[Conservatives] should ask themselves two questions: First, is it conceivable that one could return to a paleo- or even neo-Durkheimian dispensation? And second, and more profoundly, doesn’t every dispensation have its own favoured forms of deviation? If ours tends to multiply the somewhat shallow and undemanding spiritual options, we shouldn’t forget the spiritual costs of various kinds of forces conformity: hypocrisy, spiritual stultification, inner revolt against the Gospel, the confusion of faith and power, and even worse. Even if we had a choice, I’m not sure we wouldn’t be wiser to stick with the present dispensation” (*A Secular Age*, 513).

<sup>527</sup> We find an earlier approach to this theme of a perpetual antithesis in Taylor’s *Hegel*. See also his discussion in *Sources of the Self* on millenarianism within the French revolution (*Sources of the Self*, 387-8). There is a strong connection here between a philosophy of history—transposed from the Christian variation—and political vision. Humankind is to awaken after a period of struggle into an era of the unity of human desire and freedom, as a kind of individual-community sublation.

faith' also severely declines. The upshot of this corruption narrative in the confluence of fragilized syntheses, which are shaped by varieties of moralism and repeated reactions against them, is the ultimate break up of neo-Durkheimian imaginary, and the end of viable utopias. Taylor's sense is that this creates the possibility for more people to experience the wilderness, or what he comes to call the 'Jamesian open space'.<sup>528</sup> And he is explicit as he moves into his discussion on 'the immanent frame', that his narrative is intended to disrupt the illusion of the rational obviousness of a 'closed' reading of reality that would foreclose an 'openness' to transcendence.<sup>529</sup> In fact, he intends to provoke the more 'Jamesian' understanding:

I think that which way we go ultimately comes down to our answer to this question [i.e., whether one sees transcendence as a threat and obstacle or as answering our deepest longings]. But this doesn't mean that everyone who goes one way or the other, even everyone who makes some kind of crucial turning in life in one direction or the other, has faced this issue in its clearest and starkest way. They have not necessarily stood in that open space where you can feel the winds pulling you, now to belief, now to unbelief, which I described in my lectures on William James."<sup>530</sup>

In the open space, one feels the mutual fragilization described above. But what do we gain in adopting such an understanding? This is where Taylor's narrative takes

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<sup>528</sup> Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited*. David Hollinger's review rightly suggests that Taylor's use of William James, is not so much drawing on James's work as it is taking the work as a launching point for meditations on contemporary religious experience. Hollinger, "Review: Varieties," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 72, no. 1 (March 2004), 281-83. Cf. William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience* (Collier-MacMillan, 1961 [1902]).

<sup>529</sup> The 'immanent frame' is shorthand for Taylor's phenomenological description of that background picture for the modern self and society that is made up of the 'buffered self', individualism, 'natural' social, economic, political order.

<sup>530</sup> *A Secular Age*, 549.

a reflective turn for the reader, since ostensibly for Taylor, when one finds herself in the open space, she's ready to take a 'leap of faith':

By contrast, [here, contrasting Weber's 'closed' anti-faith] my understanding of the immanent frame is that, properly understood, it allows of both readings, without compelling us to either. If you grasp our predicament without ideological distortion, and without blinders, then you see that going one way or another requires what is often called a 'leap of faith'.<sup>531</sup>

The genealogy thus appears to have been intended to led the reader to the edge for a leap; the 'immanent frame'—far from articulating the end of faith in a transcendent source—only opens new modes of belief/unbelief minus (if one follows Taylor) a sense for an epistemological high-ground for one position over another. From a broad view of the text of *A Secular Age* this comes just prior to Taylor's own performance of an apophatic poetics in his depictions of modern moral-spiritual dilemma in the final section. Of course, to return to the leap, there are a host of considerations for a person in taking a particular stance over another but leaping implies a step beyond reasoning. That is, according to Taylor, "our over-all sense of things anticipates or leaps ahead of the reasons we can muster for it. It is something in the nature of a hunch; perhaps we might better speak here of 'anticipatory confidence'."<sup>532</sup> Was the reader helped by Taylor to 'grasp our predicament without ideological distortion, and without blinders'? In Taylor's philosophical hermeneutics, this is the whole point of 'telling a better story', which

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<sup>531</sup> *A Secular Age*, 550.

<sup>532</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 550.

in turn is the whole point of *A Secular Age*. It's the primary burden of C3 below to explain how Taylor's narrative can perform this function and then to show how staged dialog within his work might effect an almost poetic opening toward an agapeic theopolitical vision. But at this point in the corruption narrative, it's enough to observe that Taylor's brought us to the clearing—the cross-pressured open space.

Here in the open space it's not only religious forms of belonging that are challenged. Taylor's picture of modernity is a pockmarked landscape of a variety of failed attempts to actualize wholeness along the axes of mind / body and individual / social whole.<sup>533</sup> We saw above that 'mobilized' Christian faith in the neo-Durkheimian dispensation aspired to unify disparate individuals by doubling down on discipline and piety-inculcation, but its coercive strategies for extending the communion—and binding itself to modern statecraft—dissolved into an untenable moralism and resulted in an exodus from the institutional church. Romantic-expressivist counter-reactions in the 1960s and 70s likewise sought a renewed wholeness of the self and unrestricted solidarity, but this too sat uneasily in the cross-pressures, since it also could draw new lines of exclusion and—lacking the horizon of transcendence—naturalized its ethical vision, which could fuse it into a reductive emotivism. And, finally, there are also the myriad utopianisms that rise and fall in the twentieth century.

*A Secular Age* is of course primarily concerned to explain afresh how modern

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<sup>533</sup> These are my summary axes which really collect a set of Taylor's thematic dichotomies between 'expressivism' and 'rationalism', 'Romanticism' and 'Enlightenment rationalism', 'emotion' and 'intellect', the 'porous' and 'buffered' (self).

North-Atlantic secularity comes into being and what this means for twenty-first century spiritual itineraries and faith practices. Having circumvented many of the however interesting critical discussions of that genealogy's explanatory value,<sup>534</sup> the analysis in this chapter has focused simply on those threads of corruption-by-codification in Taylor's Reform narrative. Along with this narrative, we notice the vanishing, apophatic nature of the *agapeic* network as it appeared in Taylor's genealogy of Reform. The network of agape is that 'ultimate self-fulfillment in communion'; which is the synthesis—sought for, for instance, in Hegel between Romanticism and Enlightenment rationalism—but which can never be realized. Taylor's corruption narrative leaves the strong impression that when we try to realize a new form of wholeness, we are all prone to 'corruption' by falling on one side of a dilemma (e.g., moralism) or another (e.g., emotivism). The kingdom of God, expressed as the network, is perhaps Taylor's way of remaining at the knife's edge to hold the tension. This anyway is how I want to understand the 'negative capability' below (C4).

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<sup>534</sup> To list only a few earlier contributions engaging with Taylor's revisions on the theory of secularization, cf.: Dean, Kenneth and Peter Van der Veer, eds. *The Secular in the South, East, and Southeast Asia*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019. Paolo Costa, "Beiträge Der Erneuerung – Taylor Als Theoretiker Des Historischen Wandels." *Transit* 49 (2016). Charles Larmore, "How Much Can We Stand?," *The New Republic* (April 9, 2008) <https://newrepublic.com/article/63415/how-much-can-we-stand>, Martin Jay, "Faith-Based History," *History and Theory* 48, no. 1 (2009), 76-84; Saba Mahmood, "Can Secularism be Otherwise? (A Critique of Charles Taylor's A Secular Age)," in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, ed. M. Warner, J. VanAntwerpen, and C. Calhoun (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010). Hent de Vries, "The Deep Conditions of Secularity," *Modern Theology* 26, no. 3 (2010), 382-403; Peter Woodford, "Specters of the Nineteenth Century: Charles Taylor and the Problem of Historicism," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 40, no. 1 (2012), 171-192; Peter E. Gordon, "The Place of the Sacred in the Absence of God: Charles Taylor's A Secular Age," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 69, no. 4 (2008), 647-673; Gordon, "Must the Sacred be Transcendent?" *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy* 54, no. 2 (2011), 126-139; Jonathan Sheehan, "When Was Disenchantment? History and the Secular Age," in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, ed. M. Warner, J. VanAntwerpen, and C. Calhoun (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

Below I argue that the vanishing nature of Taylor's theopolitical vision is consistent with his notion of 'moral sources' and, in particular, his critique of strands in modern moral philosophy that can 'stifle the spirit'.

### C.2.3 No Code: On (Not) Approaching a Moral Source

In the ideal-historical narrative of *A Secular Age* an important origin point of corruption is in the unconscious eclipsing of beneficent, compassionate order over the original context of communion (*Koinonia*). When the church mobilizes communion or reformers coerce compassion, this ultimately pressures a migration of the authentic network of agape toward moralism, more sinister political forms, and mass exodus from an institutional church. And we also saw that the migration moved beyond church-national forms into other materialist or immanent secular humanist / anti-humanist utopic revolutionary—frequently violent totalitarian—forms. The whole sweep of the narrative was encapsulated in Illich's formulation: *corruptio optimi pessima*.<sup>535</sup> Of course, in *A Secular Age*, codification-toward-corruption functions primarily as an engine that moves history toward the genesis of modern secularity. Recalling, for instance, the discussion about festival and anti-structure, Taylor pinpoints that "the *temptation to put into effect a code* which brooks no limit ... is what helped bring modern secularity, in all its senses, into being."<sup>536</sup> I argued that the ensuing corruption was

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<sup>535</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 741.

<sup>536</sup> *A Secular Age*, 51. And prior to that he writes, "... it was the eclipse of this sense of necessary complementarity, of the need for anti-structure, which preceded and helped to bring about the secularization of public space" (p. 50).

visible along lines of antithesis in the self (mind/body) and the social (individual/community). 'Reform' corrupts whether in various ecclesial programs or secularist revolutionary societal reversals insofar as it attempts and fails in these syntheses. The network of agape by contrast is a 'hyper-reality' because it cannot take the form of a rational, ethical project, or a comprehensive utopian program. In this chapter, we target the concept of moral code itself to see how it functions in Taylor's moral philosophy and to see how—apart from the corruption narrative—code will stifle the soul in any case. To make the case, I will unfold the following of his theses: (1) The moral source (i.e., 'the Good' following Murdoch) structures moral agency as a hyper-reality, which means we must intuit our way towards it, often leaping ahead of our reasons. Moral code, or schemes of obligatory action, are thus downstream and secondary in a process of feeling-toward-articulation. (2) The modern 'spirit' is prone to narrowings and is 'stifled' when either (a) that order is reversed and codes of obligatory action become primary or (b) the possibility of ethical vision is jettisoned altogether, biologized, and reduced to instinct. Taylor's third way between 'excarnated' code and reductive biologized ethics recommends (3) an unending interpretative practice that aims at expanding the moral agent's vision.

The case has been made for the elusive nature of Taylor's theopolitical vision, but since we defined 'theopolitical vision' as the social aspect of 'moral vision' or 'source' (A.2), it's our task now to see how the broader category of moral source operates as a hyper-reality. If it does, then Taylor's anti-codification flows logically from his moral-philosophical substratum and it is not just a feature of his theopolitics. Our cue to start is in Taylor's invocation of Wittgenstein's



recommendation to remain silent on the things, about which we cannot speak. In a discussion on identity and the Good in *Sources of the Self* he writes,

There are good reasons to keep silent. But they cannot be valid across the board. Without any articulation at all, we would lose contact with the good, however conceived. We would cease to be human. The severest injunctions to silence can only be directed to certain classes of articulation, and must spare others. The issue is to define which ones.<sup>537</sup>

The interpretivist injunction comes through here that articulation of a moral source is a fraught enterprise, but also that we are nevertheless bound to the task. Taylor's project is to retrieve the pursuit of articulacy without foreclosing the fraught hermeneutical path. We have already noticed (A.2) that moral sources (or visions) entail an ontological account of the world, the self, and the social, and it resides mostly in the background, prior to cognitive assertion.<sup>538</sup> It is one of the major tasks of *Sources of the Self* to demonstrate the inescapable nature of these frameworks in a phenomenology of selfhood. He points out, for instance, that it is impossible to talk about the experience of the self without recourse to language that reflects inner depths, growth, failures, and transformation, in short, all things that people tend to consider meaningful when we make, what Taylor calls, 'strong evaluations'. Strong evaluations are based on our overall, background sense of

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<sup>537</sup> *Sources of the Self*, 97.

<sup>538</sup> Taylor, "Ontology," *Philosophy* 34, no. 129 (1959), 125-141. Taylor shows in his essay that ontological questions betray various strata in language, and we are (to our detriment) made unaware of this by a modern tendency to conflate the difference between material language (M) and language about people (P). 'To our detriment' because P language is necessarily packed full of 'ontological commitments'. These we pick up, just as we learn any language: in a non-logical way, as a way of seeing a thing; getting a new picture.

Also see his more recent *Dilemmas and Connections* where he uses 'ontology' (p. 334) to signify the 'ontic' background for identifying features of the world that make norms realizable. This makes up Taylor's 'realist' ethics, which is ostensibly not about getting to things as they are in themselves as having meaning, but as the world and its meanings are open to us as perceiving beings (Heidegger 'clearing'), cf. *Sources of the Self*, p. 257.

things (our ‘best account’) of the ‘Good’, as in the Platonist-inspired understanding of that term one finds in the moral philosophy of Iris Murdoch. And, as in Murdoch, the Good structures moral agency as an ever-elusive goal. It’s a ubiquitous condition for self-understanding as one progresses and transcends lesser modes or declines and falls afoul of higher goods, however defined.<sup>539</sup> This is a core anthropological insight not only behind Taylor’s genealogies of modern selfhood or unbelief, but it’s also behind his basic critique of contemporary moral and political philosophy, since the latter tend to draw a—from his view—false dichotomy between the ‘right’ and the ‘good’ or between ‘morality’ and ‘ethics’.<sup>540</sup> What’s important to note here is that moral sources are part of an inescapable framework of the self, and at the same time, they are not fully accessible to us. That is, the moral source is not utterly graspable in the way we seek finally clear and universally translatable understandings as we find in laws of physics or mathematics, or as one might hope for in ‘procedural’ ethics. It is a *human* good, and just as in the fields of human sciences, understanding will always progress and change as new circumstances alter our view on the thing. Thus, we pursue ‘articulacy’ but, for Taylor, articulacy can never exhaust or out-pace the Good. In this way there remains forever a margin for the inarticulable.<sup>541</sup>

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<sup>539</sup> Self-transcendence is not only a religious mode. There are, for example, immanent formulations of self-transcendence as in Martha Nussbaum (see Taylor’s discussion on Nussbaum in *A Secular Age*, pp. 625-27. The ‘Good’ however defined is part of an inescapable framework, which includes an ontological background. This is the nature of Taylor’s ethical realism.

<sup>540</sup> Contemporary moral philosophy typically distinguishes ‘morality’ as obligatory action and ‘ethics’ as a particular view of the good life (as in forms of ‘virtue ethics’), where morality “can be defined independently of any particular view of the good life”... but this seems false, since to understand what something like ‘an infringement on liberty’ entails requires a sense for what is really important in human life (e.g., is a law enforcing seatbelts an infringement?). If access to meaning is through feeling, then some folks have epistemological worries. Cf., Taylor, *Language Animal*, 202.

<sup>541</sup> Of course, for Taylor, moral reasoning remains possible even if total perspicuity is a red herring—and in fact, *the* red herring he identifies in modern moral philosophy—which suffers

Approaching a moral source therefore cannot primarily mean a progression from initial cognitive ascent down into personal motivation and experience. In Taylor's moral philosophy, it goes the other direction. First, we are activated by the source. It engages our emotion, in a compelling imperative mood. And then, downstream from whatever calls to us, we can come to articulate descriptively—in the subjunctive mood in which codes are inscribed. This is what's behind Taylor's claim that moral reason passes through feeling: "...if 'reason' weren't grounded here on some felt sense of right, if the 'right' thing was just read off some code which had been handed to me, then it wouldn't be moral reason which was guiding me."<sup>542</sup> And yet, as we'll see, 'reading off some code' is an apt phrase for what might be described as the perennial temptation exposed in Taylor's depiction of modern moral philosophy, namely: moralism.

'Moralism' reverses the order and prioritizes cognitive ascent. The genealogical context for this displacement ties back to the excarnating forces of Reform, as we can see in *A Secular Age* when 'official' (institutional) Christianity along with 'enlightened' ethics continue in their dualist separation, despite popular reactions to more embodied forms and 'corporal works of mercy' in contemporary Christian practice.<sup>543</sup> The issue at stake returns us to the contrast of agape, and that is,

...whether our relation to the highest—God for believers, general morality for unbelieving Aufklärer—is mediated in embodied form, as was plainly the case

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from an over-extension of science-inspired theories of epistemology. Cf. Taylor, "Overcoming Epistemology," *Philosophical Arguments*.

<sup>542</sup> Taylor, *The Language Animal*, 183.

<sup>543</sup> *A Secular Age*, 554.

for parishioners ‘creeping to the Cross’ of Good Friday in pre-Reformation England. Or looking to what moves us towards the highest, the issue is to what degree our highest desires, those which allow us to discern the highest, are embodied, as the pity captured in the New Testament verb ‘splangnizesthai’ plainly is.<sup>544</sup>

That agape is an embodied moral vision means that, for Taylor, the Christian faith properly understood can never be “decanted into a fixed code,” as he writes in his later essay “Perils of Moralism.”<sup>545</sup> In that essay he depicts two dimensions that get dropped from view in moralism: right action and eschatology, where the former—relation to others—is made possible by the transformation of desire, framed in the vertical transcendent plain of the latter.<sup>546</sup> But modern Christianity had tended to moralism—“We tend to live in our heads,” he writes—and the Reform Master Narrative as we saw, trailed the uniquely Western path toward excarnation: “We can’t accept that part of being good is opening ourselves to certain feelings; either the horror of infanticide, or agape as a gut feeling. But the effect of Reform has been that much of modern Western Christianity has been following the same path.”<sup>547</sup>

At one point in *A Secular Age*, he looks at this same shift toward moralism from the angle of human-linguistic activity. If there are three levels of language—(1) bodily habitus and mimicry, (2) symbolic expression and art, and (3) descriptive language—then religion in Western Reform, he claims, has abandoned the first

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<sup>544</sup> *A Secular Age*, 554.

<sup>545</sup> “Perils of Moralism,” *Dilemmas and Connections*, 350.

<sup>546</sup> New Testament examples here include the parable of same wages for different hours of work from Matt. 20 (*A Secular Age*, 350-1); cf. note 1, Paul Thibaud on the Good Samaritan (p. 402).

<sup>547</sup> *A Secular Age*, 555.

two and fixated on the third, which parallels, “...what modern disengaged reason has done to morality,” namely:

In both cases, the key is to grasp correct propositional truth—about God and his Christ in one case, about correct action in the other. In the first case, right worship follows, but the forms that it takes are secondary, and can be varied at will. In the second case, a successful imposition of reason brings about right action, but what this amounts to is to be known purely by reason—either the calculation of utility consequences, or the universalizability of the maxim. In no case, is a paradigm bodily emotion seen as *criterial* for right action—as in the case of New Testament agape.<sup>548</sup>

And so we come to the contrast of the ‘Aufklärer’ in the two dominant moral-philosophical constellations from the Enlightenment: Enlightenment rationalism and romantic expressivism. The former—glossed as ‘disengaged reason’—is an important footing in the account of modern code-fetishism, and it gets one of its more potent expressions in the neo-Kantian procedural ethics of John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas. In fact, Taylor addresses several uniquely modern impulses to reduce morality to code, including: modern epistemology, liberal visions for pacific political-morality, and reductive theories of meaning.<sup>549</sup> The modern moral and political philosophies accounted for here have bracketed out the emotional dimension from morality, but of course there are other strands—Hume is the primary sparring partner here, as he is an originator—in which morality is reduced to something like emotion-instinct. But these Humean and Kantian

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<sup>548</sup> *A Secular Age*, 615.

<sup>549</sup> Cf. the ‘hydra’ of modern epistemology as the overextension of natural science models of thought in the preface of Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments*, vii.

tributaries in modern moral philosophy return to the same theme of the eclipse of the vertical plane, reducing moral and political thought to description and codification of right action and thus ultimately trading the question of ‘what is it good to be’ for ‘what is good to do’. On the other hand, Romanticism and its descendants react against disengaged reason and its disembodiment effects. One finds an originating articulation of the critique against naturalism to Rousseau, which becomes important for expressivism but also for more nefarious collectivities—as Taylor reminds, modern nationalisms also drank from the expressivist well.<sup>550</sup>

So, the horns of the dilemma for modern moral philosophy take the shape of two paths, which parallel what I called the lines of discontinuity within the corruption narrative. Take the rationalist route, and we’re dissociated bodies; take the emotivist route and we risk subjectivism, moral obscurity, or worse. And when we look at what ‘stifles the modern soul’ at the conclusion of *Sources of the Self*, we find what’s described as a kind of narrowing of vision, which conditions these two broad paths. Along the first—which is the focus of the statement in *Sources*—moral sources are either jettisoned altogether, biologized, and reduced to instinct, or they are abstracted into apparent universal maxims that are abstracted from the language of those sources, which function to satisfy disengaged reason.<sup>551</sup> As such, it reverses the order and prioritizes codes of obligatory action, which removes the kinds of motivational source that in practice really moves people to action—the pitfall for those who ‘live in their heads’. And to this, we must add the

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<sup>550</sup> *Sources of the Self*, 356-7.

<sup>551</sup> See, *Sources of the Self*, 520.

‘narrowing’ that is peculiar to the second path, which has tended to construct its solidarities on grounds of ethnicity, language, sexuality, etc. These strands can prioritize code as well, or shirk code altogether perhaps as the 1960s expressivist revolution, but these cases, the movement can draw new borders that can exclude others, occluding them from view as roadblocks to progress.

To put it another way, we are stifling the spirit when we bury the deepest sources of our inspiration and let either cognitive assent to codes of obligatory action or codes of strictly-bounded social solidarities define the limit of moral-spiritual progression.<sup>552</sup> Thus whether we adopt the emotivist or rationalist picture, we lose the resources to transform.<sup>553</sup> To this, Taylor inserts a mediating point, rife with tension and paradox, familiar to our agapeic form above: integral emotion and the rational possibility of improvement and correction by allowing for intuition and ‘ethical search’ as he comes to call it.

In his chapter ‘Conversions’ Taylor draws on Ivan Illich to make the explicit connection between the perennial, illicit identification between Christian faith and civilizational order and ‘Christendom’. The codes which take root in such contexts are ‘idolatrous’ traps that can tempt to violence:

Codes, even the best codes, can become idolotrous traps, which tempt us to complicity in violence. Illich can remind us not to become totally invested in the code, even the best code of a peace-loving, egalitarian, liberalism. We should find the centre of our spiritual lives beyond the code, deeper than

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<sup>552</sup> Since such sources are ‘buried’, Taylor describes his approach as one of ‘retrieval’; cf. *Sources of the Self*

<sup>553</sup> Taylor, “Perils of Moralism,” 351.

the code, in networks of living concern, which are not to be sacrificed to the code, which must even from time to time subvert it. This message comes out of a certain theology, but it could be heard with profit by everybody.”<sup>554</sup>

Here we notice that, for Taylor, the collusion of Christendom (or ‘Constantinianism’)—that vision of society as grounded in particular religion—and its ‘idolatry’ stifles the movement of an agapeic network, which is does not pre-define its own elusive borders. In not articulating the code, and in maintaining ‘the crucial critical distance’ from Christendom, there is supposed freedom for an other-centered ethic, just as Illich and then Taylor expound on with reference to the Good Samaritan.

But this still leaves us with another question: if we need to—as we saw earlier—‘leap’ ahead of our reasoning, what hope is there for conveying a theopolitical vision in a non-coercive way at the level of intuition? In the next section, we look at how Taylor performs this ‘subtler language’ of indirect apophatic setting-up of a field of experience, that may just move the needle on one’s moral intuition.

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<sup>554</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 743.



### C.3 Performative Subtler Language of Apophatic Theopolitics

Within Taylor's work the question periodically arises in various forms: In a 'secularized' and cross-pressured discursive context, what would it take to communicate a message with a transcendent referent? And, more specifically, what does it take to communicate a theopolitical vision? While we never find a sustained political-theological argument in Taylor's work, we can find, I argue, a rhetorical attempt to articulate the network of agape to his audience of the North Atlantic academe.<sup>555</sup> What I am seeking to identify in these chapters is an implicit performative layer in Taylor's otherwise explicit philosophical-critical discourse.

Our first step (C31) will be to provide an account within Taylor's own philosophy of language, which defends a wide functional range for language and even pushes the limit of the symbol toward a 'mysterious' margin. Following what he calls the 'constitutive' model of language derived from Hamann, Herder, and Humboldt, language has not only a descriptive, referential function, but it can also open new human possibilities. For the purposes of our thesis, narrative and poetics will be the primary examples of such constitutive language, since these are the two modes that function analogously, first in Taylor's corruption narrative (C32), and second in Taylor's dialogical portrayal of modern moral-spiritual debate (C33).

My case will be that the corruption narrative outlined in C1—while doing the

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<sup>555</sup> Others have noticed the connection between Taylor's language theory and his own style. Hans Joas, for example, notes, "Taylor's style of writing .... Corresponds to his theory of articulation, according to which our thoughts do not always move within the bright light of propositional assessments, but rather must often first discover and bring to light those pre-reflective contents we perceive as truths..." Joas, "Charles Taylor as Polemicist," *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, vol. 44, no. 7 (2018), 756.

explicit work of destabilizing ‘standard’ secularization narratives—also periodically displays moments of insight that let the network of agape emerge without argument, in the way that the progressive experiences of a character in a Thomas Mann or Dostoyevsky novel leads toward a re-framing moment of insight. Then, beyond narration, Taylor’s depiction of contemporary moral-spiritual debate sets a discursive field that can similarly let the vision emerge by negation in dialog. Already in *Sources of the Self*, Taylor submits the ‘epiphanic’ poetry of Keats, Eliot, and Pound as case studies in poetic ‘subtler language’, which circumvents direct, positive reference to God for an indirect inflection of a reality beyond mundane natural order in a way that is also indexed to personal experience.<sup>556</sup> Taylor, I argue, has adopted the broad outlines of this approach and yet in the style of dialogical philosophical prose that nevertheless indirectly and negatively (‘apophatically’) conveys its theopolitical vision, letting it emerge in dialog with other theopolitical-utopic options.<sup>557</sup>

This sense is added to ‘apophatic’, which is further ‘de-centered’ in the following way: as a philosophical-literary style, the social ideal arises out of dialog with others of different theopolitical ideals and is therefore essentially polyphonic. It is, in other words, a strategy for inter-faith/cultural dialog, where the interchange in dialog itself is seen as the primary medium whereby the author’s own particular

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<sup>556</sup> ‘Subtler language’ is not the direct, positive referencing of the divine, which could assume the ontological background of Christendom. The contrasting poetic example here is Alexander Pope, who could still write in the symbolic framework of a ‘great chain of being’ (*A Secular Age*, 180-81).

<sup>557</sup> Cf. Courtney Bender, “‘Every Meaning Will have its Homecoming Festival’: *A Secular Age* and the Senses of Modern Spirituality,” *Working with A Secular Age*, 283-4. Bender makes the interesting comparison between Taylor and William James’ *The Varieties of Religious Experience* inasmuch as the latter was written, not merely as scientific observation, but also in part to affect an emotional response, “in which listeners and readers encounter the residue of other people’s strongly resonant, singularly authoritative experiences.”

vision may emerge. Taylor's theopolitical position is read as 'indexed' to his own personal religious experience as one voice in a web of positions in dialog and emerging indirectly from it, occasionally, throughout his work. And since Taylor would not be looking for cognitive assent to a propositional argument, but rather something more like a reframed intuition, what his approach apparently effects is a kind of condition for 'the leap' as I describe below (C.3.4).

### C.3.1 Mysterious Language

In C.2.3 we saw why from Taylor's vantage point, code stifles the soul and why a clarified and ultimate ontological grasp is impossible. Articulation of a moral source in Taylor's thought does not mean finally-comprehensive understanding; instead it's a fraught, circuitous, and never-fully-completed movement toward understanding—to the point, one might say, of nearly following Wittgenstein's injunction to 'pass over it in silence'.<sup>558</sup> Still language is the only available medium for the approach, and if we follow Taylor, we are in fact doomed to the approach, whether or not we accept it. Apart from practical-moral reasoning outlined above, how are we vulnerable to transformation? Or, what does Taylor say about the possibility of transformation through articulation? How does a new direct insight come about?

Our cue for asking whether Taylor might deploy an apophatic rhetorical strategy to convey a theopolitical vision may come directly from elements of his own

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<sup>558</sup> Taylor uses this phrase from Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* to talk about how fraught the project is. See page 44 above.

philosophy of language. Within it he seeks to supplant a certain powerful and reductive model of language with a more ‘mysterious’ account of language as also a vista for re-framing and expanding moral-spiritual vision. If the reader accepts the model, then we get a plausible Taylorian justification for his narrative and dialogical triangulation that I am attempting to reconstruct later in this chapter where narrative and poetics appear as key modes for negative, indirect articulation that can affect transformed vision. We will look at each of these elements in Taylor’s account of language, but first, what is the contrasted ‘reductive’ model?

In *The Language Animal* Taylor wraps his philosophy of language around an ideal-typical characterization of two powerful modern models of language; both flower in the Enlightenment and develop in their contrast to each other, and these tie back to the two major branches of modern moral philosophy depicted above. The first is the rationalist and naturalist model, which pictures language as having a more narrowly ‘designative’ function. As an ideal-typical sort of characterization there is a lot of variety among even the actual theorists in question—Hobbes, Locke, Condillac are the figureheads of the model (abbreviated ‘HLC’)—but the common feature among them is that the origin and function of language is located in the need to name objects.<sup>559</sup> The model is inspired and reinforced by successes and then, again, over-extensions of natural scientific frameworks on understandings of human behavior and meanings. Contrasting the ‘HLC’ model is the romantic model, which depicts a more expansive range for language and its

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<sup>559</sup> Taylor uses Hobbes, Locke, and Condillac as originating theorists of the designative (or ‘HLC’) model.

functions. Beyond the merely instrumental and designative function, the opposing model originally articulated by theorists like Hamann, Herder, and Humboldt (HHH), held that language also has a ‘constitutive’ effect. Down to our very faculty as perceiving agents, the worlds humans inhabit are constituted in part by their cultural-linguistic inheritance. We get a clearer sense of these contrasting models in *The Language Animal* where they intersect the moral models outlined above.

We saw there that the modern philosophical reduction of morality to code entails the bracketing out of what I’ve just called the ‘cultural-linguistic inheritance’ of moral source backgrounds for the clarified, universally acceptable ethic we can find in contemporary procedural ethics, and we also noted the repeated counter-reactions for the recovery of the body and emotion. In *The Language Animal*, Taylor suggests that, since the designative model was built for natural-scientific description, it is woefully inadequate in its account of the *meta*-biological meanings which permeate human experience. ‘Metabiological’ meanings are those that “couldn’t exist for us without the affect, that is, without (in the normal case) our experiencing the affect, or (where we’re dealing with others) our coming to grasp what it is to experience it.”<sup>560</sup> Taylor’s claim is that it is impossible to know whether something like a lived-life or a moral action like generosity or even a single gesture like bowing to an elder is admirable without having some feeling toward it, e.g., of lifting us up or devastating us. This ‘affect’ is our immediate emotional response—or ‘felt intuition’—that we have about the thing. Moral reasoning—to elaborate on a point above (C.2.3)—depends on this felt intuition

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<sup>560</sup> Taylor, *Language Animal*, 181-2.

of rightness: "... if 'reason' weren't grounded here on some felt sense of right, if the 'right' thing was just read of some code which had been handed to me, then it wouldn't be moral reason which was guiding me."<sup>561</sup> A fuller account of language, then, must notice its 'constitutive' nature. Language can not only describe what's 'out there', but it is also creative and can articulate frames for understanding, including scientific paradigms let alone moral codes, ethical visions, and ways of being. The model reverses the direction for understanding, since—with metabiological meanings—we are not first confronted by some object with meaning intrinsic to itself, upon which we can designate a term that represents the meaning of that thing. In the utilitarian mode, one can develop a set of rules that, e.g., prevent harm or maximize happiness, which can accrue after experiences and then analyses of the same. Instead, we come first with meaning and language and then locate the object in a particular frame, so the articulation of a rule and moral theory comes after an intuition about the thing; any articulation of a code that comes into use will need to first feel like it properly 'fits'.<sup>562</sup> That is, our language constitutes the meaning of the object, and not vice versa. So, as with human meta-biological meanings, these differ in that they are not describing independent objects; since they are *dependent* on our experience of them and can only exist for us through some form of expression.

To take a recurring theme in Taylor's work as an example, the sense that someone might have of needing to break out of traditional, religious, or familial norms and find their own life-path has a strong gravitational pull for most of us at least in the

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<sup>561</sup> Taylor, *Language Animal*, 183.

<sup>562</sup> Cf. Taylor's discussion of 'figuring' and 'fitting' in, *Language Animal*, 137-140.

North Atlantic. That felt sense can get enacted in myriad ways: leaving home, obtaining a degree, leaving or joining a church, adopting a new style, etc. The sense, whatever the path, is meant to be unique to the person; it gets described as living ‘authentically’; an inauthentic life—to put it negatively—is one not worth living.<sup>563</sup> When the new or newly-revised term like ‘authenticity’ is discovered, it clarifies the sense for what one is striving after, and that clarification articulates a change in the object. It also gives it a motivational force. In this way, “The new enacted and/or verbal expressions open up new ways of being in the world”<sup>564</sup> So, the authentic life is enacted, described, and gets portrayed in literature, art, and pop culture. Taylor’s point is that a human meaning like ‘authenticity’ is not intelligible without enactment and expression. The meaning has a reciprocal dependency on its expression. On the other hand, meanings like these can be critiqued, and our experience of them can be called into question: “is that choice *really* an authentic one or a parroting of trends in pop culture?” And, of course, the whole way of being can be questioned: “is an ethic of authenticity too pedestrian a vision for a really good life?” In that way, such a meaning also has an ‘independent’ dimension in that it can be scrutinized and evaluated, and theoretical accounts can be given for why humans may be beings that strive to live authentically (the Christian version, e.g., might take into its account the notion of the image of God or something like an Augustinian pursuit of the fulfillment of desire) but unlike in a designative picture of language, the fact that these meanings are dependent on experience and expression necessitates a hermeneutical

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<sup>563</sup> The ‘ethic’ hinted at here is what Taylor has described as the ‘ethic of authenticity’, which features in several works, including *Sources of the Self*, *Ethics of Authenticity*, and recurs as an example here in chapter 6 of *The Language Animal* (p. 191).

<sup>564</sup> Taylor, *The Language Animal*, 189.

engagement that can never be fully closed. There is a ‘landscape’ of skeins of meaning that we can always get clearer on.<sup>565</sup> If language is merely designative, there’s no account for movement into new frames of being, but if language has a constitutive nature, it’s an obscure kind of lens, but Taylor’s point seems to be throughout that a foggy lens is better than none at all.

We have a final observation to make here regarding the mysterious margin in Taylor’s language philosophy, regarding paths of assent to higher modes. How does he imagine people adopting new accounts, or ‘intuitions’ at the level of moral vision? We saw earlier that Taylor has a model of language about ethical vision that is ‘never closed’; it is ‘mysterious’ in that way and it’s bound to the experience of the thing. This is important to consider as we think about the possibility for language to open up ‘new realms of the sayable’ as in the example of authenticity above. And this would also go for something like faith.<sup>566</sup> Taylor does not expect an articulation of (e.g., a theopolitical vision) to fully encapsulate the object—like the kingdom of God—in a systematic, social-ethical code. The nature of such an articulation is fluidity. It exists only in-dialog-with-others,<sup>567</sup> and since it depends on expression and enactment, it will always open out in various contexts toward surprising new forms. At the same time, however, he presents—sometimes against anticipated suspicions of relativism—the capacity to challenge and reason about moral frameworks. That is, there is an element of persuasion and making rational gains in argument, as we saw with ‘arguments from transition’ in which

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<sup>565</sup> Taylor, *The Language Animal*, 196.

<sup>566</sup> Cf. Taylor, “Reason, Faith, and Meaning,” *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers* 28, no. 1 (January 2011).

<sup>567</sup> Taylor makes this point in “Reason, Faith, and Meaning,” as he contrasts the non-dialogical notion of reason he extracts from Descartes.



the interlocutor moves through a process of reinterpretation and re-framing to arrive at a more clarified position or, e.g., the sense that one mode of life is higher than another. Taylor introduces in *The Language Animal* a distinction between such a ‘direct’ experience of a new-found clarity from transition and the ‘indirect’ experience of, say, an etiological story that can challenge a faulty narrative. Via the direct route, we arrive at a better position by resolving a confusion, giving weight to new compelling considerations, experiencing another facet of what we valued that forces an altered take.<sup>568</sup> Indirect arguments can then reinforce or challenge those experiences. As he writes, “New convincing intuitions can only come through the direct route, but arguments of the indirect kind, about sensemaking in general, can raise challenges that we have to meet.”<sup>569</sup>

Thus one arrives at a ‘new convincing intuition’ through a kind of re-interpretation or re-*gestaltung*. That event, of coming to a new convincing intuition, Taylor sometimes refers to as an ‘illumination’. And this can take place in the context of an argument from transition as above, but this is not the only site. Narrative and poetics are also important examples of the constitutive possibilities of language that can also work—by setting up a field of meaning—to affect an illumination. This can happen, for instance, in the interstices of a novel’s progression when a character has her own re-framing experience.<sup>570</sup> Or, it may

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<sup>568</sup> Taylor, *Language Animal*, 197-99.

<sup>569</sup> Taylor, *Language Animal*, 216.

<sup>570</sup> Taylor gives the following example for how a character’s illumination progresses through a kind of re-*gestaltung* with respect to narrative: “Perhaps my conviction that my present ethical outlook represents a gain on my past commitments is based on the sense that it resolves, or at least makes sense of, a dilemma or tension that has long doubled me. Perhaps I felt all along that my commitment to disengaged rationality was at war with some of my ‘gut feelings’ about right and wrong or what is valuable in life; and now that I’ve read more Goethe (or Schelling, or Hegel), I have a different understanding of reason and instinct which reconciles the two. You can’t get what the solution is all about without grasping the terms of the problem. The triad forms a

also be evidenced in a modern ‘epiphanic’ poetic work that subtly triangulates toward a transcendent source. I’d like to make use of Taylor’s term ‘illumination’ to hypothetical goal of Taylor’s rhetorical apophaticism; that is, his narrative descriptions and dialogical portrayals non-assertively portray the network of agape in a frame where other positions would appear destabilized or less plausible in the given context. And so, just as in Taylor’s description of the two genres below, an ‘illumination’ would be the moment the network emerges as the most-plausible thing in the given field. Before looking at either genre, I will start by looking at Taylor’s description of the genre and then compare these with examples from the text where his writing most closely parallels in structure and ‘illumination’.

### C.3.2 Narrative and Corruption

Story plays a critical role in Taylor’s philosophy. Any reader of *Sources of the Self* or *A Secular Age* knows this at a visceral level since these tomes in particular read like long historical-philosophical narratives that develop the characters of the modern self and social. For him, stories are unavoidable for conveying a wide range of human meanings, including those epochal characterizations of ‘modernity’ and ‘secularization’ that are the burden of his bigger books.<sup>571</sup> We’ll look below at why, for Taylor, certain things necessitate narration, but at the center of my argument here is the notion that narration can establish a field of meaning, within which a particular way of being may be portrayed, so that the

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gestalt where the meanings can’t be dissociated from each other.” (Taylor, *Language Animal*, 311).

<sup>571</sup> For Taylor’s related discussion on narrative as part of the necessary background for self-understanding in relation to moral sources, see especially, *Sources of the Self*, p. 97.

reader is left a context for the possibility of experiencing a leap into an insight. That is so, because within the field, the reader can witness 'moments of insight' during which characters themselves come to some realization, whereby some reframing takes place. Since in these narrative portrayals of illumination contain, for Taylor, the convincing force of the insight, we can extrapolate an expectation for the sensitive reader to experience in an ecstatic way the reframing. So, with narrative we have an example of a '*non-assertive portrayal*' absent propositional argumentation that can nevertheless persuade by a kind of illumination. The case to make here, again, is that the 'narrative' Taylor writes in *A Secular Age* is in some ways structurally parallel to the novels he describes in the *Language Animal* inasmuch as his narrative likewise establishes a field of meaning within which 'moments of insight' occur, whereby the network of agape emerges in a non-assertive portrayal.

In chapter eight of *The Language Animal* Taylor gives a sustained account of narrative as one large example of the constitutive powers of language. The onus of Taylor's argument there is to demonstrate that there are things that can only be conveyed *in narrative* and cannot be translated into other media (e.g., of science, generalized principles) without sliding into another sense altogether. The contrasting 'designative' model of language—Hume and Viennese positivists—would tend to argue that in order to attribute a causal relation, one must go beyond the diachronic correlation and provide a general principle or 'covering law'. So, a historical account of the cause of the Terror, for example, would look for like-things that would under the same conditions lead to such a violent outbreak. But in Taylor's view, the situations to be accounted for in causal

attributions are too unique; they can incorporate in general principles, but they also need to take in other factors like human motivation and first-person understandings, and so there is an intrinsic hermeneutical task that is always open to correction.<sup>572</sup>

Taylor writes of a similar problem with distilling a ‘moral of the story’ from novels. From the designative picture of language, one can assume that the moral import of a story could be abstracted into general principles. And, of course, literary criticism can have this related function of seeing a principle in a story, but Taylor wants to emphasize that a principle is more closely intertwined with its ensconcing narrative setting. He writes, “What we grasp as an important truth through a story ... is so bound up with how we got there ... that [the story] can’t be hived off.”<sup>573</sup> The story constitutes the insight. In the case of literary criticism, he notes further, we are dealing with interpretive judgments that become important for grappling with a text, but rather than replace the text, they work along with it in a kind of dialog—a ‘duality of reference points’—that refines understanding, perhaps destabilizes the traditional but insufficient account, adjusts the view of the work that can then change the idea of the central truth in the text. But the diachronic narrative supplies the necessary context that can put the reader in a

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<sup>572</sup> Taylor, *Language Animal*, 219-20.

<sup>573</sup> Taylor, *Language Animal*, 300. He is making the point throughout that the novel is a kind of necessary medium for portrayal, which is distinct from a distillation to principle as we find in criticism about novels. He writes earlier, “The example I want to look at here is the story—the telling of people and events and their complex relations, bound as they are inside a narrative ... stories give us an understanding of life, people, and what happens to them which is peculiar (i.e., distinct from what other forms, like works of science and philosophy, can give us, and also unsubstitutable (i.e., what they show us can’t be translated without remainder into other media). Taylor, *Language Animal*, 291.

better position to more clearly see the matter at hand and, importantly, to then *feel the force* of the convincing power of the truth conveyed.<sup>574</sup>

To convey the insight, we can't rely simply on the formulation, but must somehow convey the experience, the felt intuition. This throws us back into narrative: the narrating, first, of the episode; but then also of the key features of our preceding life against whose background the episode had the meaning and the impact that it did.<sup>575</sup>

It is this structuring of the background, which I'm also describing as the setting up of a field of meaning, that delivers not only the moral import, but also a vicarious sense for the experience of the new intuition. So the reader may, for Taylor, feel the convincing power of the new intuition through the non-assertive portrayal; minus argumentation about the same intuition. Taylor writes earlier in his chapter on how narrative makes meaning:

A novel, as a work of art, doesn't assert anything about life. It is made up of assertions, but these are about the world of the novel. Nevertheless there emerges what I called a nonassertive portrayal of human life, of its choices,

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<sup>574</sup> Taylor, *Language Animal*, 309ff. In his discussion of how a story can put the reader in a better position to see the matter, he uses an example of straightening a picture on a wall. You first put yourself in a position to see how it's crooked, maybe squint your eyes and look at how it relates to lines around it, and then make a judgement about its straightness. Here Taylor is drawing on a familiar notion in Merleau-Ponty, which also comes to play in Taylor's "Explanation and Practical Reason"; you have to feel you are in a good position to know whether you have a good grasp on a thing, and that is essential to an 'argument from transition'. You can confidence in the insight you arrive at because the route you too to get there is one that cleared a confusion; you experience a new clarity (*Language Animal*, 301; "Explanation and Practical Reason," in *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995, 51-53). Cf. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *La Phénoménologie de la Perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945).

<sup>575</sup> Taylor, *Language Animal*, 302. Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain* (New York: Vintage, 1996).

issues, travails, fulfillments; and this can open new horizons for the reader.<sup>576</sup>

Taylor's key examples of moments of insight in the *Language Animal* take the *Bildungsroman* form.<sup>577</sup> In the "Snow" chapter of Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain* the hero Han Castorp undergoes a transformative moment when a hypothermia-induced nightmare helps him to see beyond powers of death and destruction—which were overpowering in his mountain sanatorium—and the rational liberal humanism of his earlier professional life that had since been upended—to view himself as a possible agent for good and beauty despite all.<sup>578</sup> As Taylor deploys the example, he points out that this was a progression Mann himself had gone through and was at least in part conveying the force of his own transition to a better view through the experience of his protagonist:

And this insight in the context comes through as a discovery, with the ring of newly grasped truth. The supposition I'm presenting here is that the author of *The Magic Mountain* had himself gone through a similar shift, to a new position which could find expression in the thoughts of his character at this crucial juncture: "grant death no dominion". He then skillfully crafts a description of a defining moment for his character in which this thought convincingly emerges as an undeniable gain in insight.<sup>579</sup>

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<sup>576</sup> Taylor, *Language Animal*, 299.

<sup>577</sup> "The hero comes through this story to an understanding of his vocation, what his life should be about; and what this consists in can't just be detached from the story, and fully expressed in its ending. The insight emerges from the story itself." Taylor, *Language Animal*, 298.

<sup>578</sup> Taylor, *Language Animal*, 302, ff. This is distilled in the phrase: "Grant death no dominion," (p. 305) Der Mensch soll um der Güte und Liebe willen dem Tote keine Herrschaft einräumen über seine Gedanken. Mann, *Der Zauberberg* (Frankfurt: Fischer Verlag, 2012), 742-43.

<sup>579</sup> Taylor, *Language Animal*, 305-6.

Inasmuch as Mann's narration lets the thought 'convincingly emerge as a gain' in insight and presents the gain in the context of Castorp's struggle, it also appears for Taylor as an invitation to be convinced by participating (if vicariously) in the horizon-expanding transition.

And Dostoevsky's *The Devils* presents another moment of insight in a dialog scene with an atheist midwife at the scene of the birth of Shatov's son. While Orthodox Shatov is awestruck at the inexplicable mystery of new life, his midwife responds that the birth is simply another expansion of the human organism, and there is no mystery in it. In the same scene, however, Shatov witnesses a warmth in the care of the midwife for the baby, which causes his reflection on her—and then his own—capacity for practicing one thing and believing another. And this, in turn, forces the moment of insight: "Convictions and the person—it seems they're two different things in many ways. Maybe in many ways I'm guilty before them! ... We are all to blame, we're all to blame..."<sup>580</sup> At this point in the novel, Taylor writes, Shatov is at once implicitly criticizing both the reigning religious hierarchical Russian imperialism, which condemns the destructive materialist revolutionaries and also the revolutionaries themselves, who *morally* condemn the imperialists for their resistance to change, despite their own philosophical rejection of the category of guilt.

The (very Dostoevskyan, and also Christian) vision comes about in a moment of insight, through a rejection of the other reigning views, and is triggered off as a reaction to the dogmatic expression of the polar-opposite

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<sup>580</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Devils*, trans. David Magarshack (London: Penguin Classics, 1954), 589. Quoted in Taylor, *Language Animal*, 306.

slogan of the materialists: 'no one is to blame'. Its convincing power comes from Shatov suddenly recognizing the universal grip of the same blind spot, in the various parties in conflict, which prevents them seeing their own part in the tragedy, and reflects their need to project evil onto others so as to protect the purity of their own intentions.<sup>581</sup>

We simply observe here that Shatov's counter-slogan "We are all to blame" again emerges as an illumination over-against two negated views. It also becomes especially clear in *The Devils* example, even while it also appears in *Magic Mountain*, that the illumination in a narrative emerges in dialog. It was Bakhtin who referred to this dialogical progression as the 'polyphony' in Dostoevsky's poetics.<sup>582</sup> Taylor cites Bakhtin at this point, and doesn't expand on it here, but the reference of Bakhtin is significant since it was Bakhtin's insight in his *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1984) that Dostoevsky portrayed depth and transformations of his heroes in the interplay of a multiplicity of voices in dialog.<sup>583</sup> We could perhaps add to Taylor's point above, that one can get the fuller sense of the hero's problem (and hence also 'experience' the resolution of insight) not only in the contextualization of the diachronic telling of the narrative, but also in the polyphonic nature of the telling. This would not be far afield from both Bakhtin's claim that, for Dostoevsky it is 'only in communion' with one another that the 'man in man' can be revealed.<sup>584</sup> This matches Taylor's own account of the

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<sup>581</sup> Taylor, *Language Animal*, 307.

<sup>582</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*; cf. Taylor, *Language Animal*, 306.

<sup>583</sup> Again here, Bakhtin writes, "Those 'depths of the human soul,' whose representation Dostoevsky considered the main task of his realism "in a higher sense," are revealed only in an intense act of address. It is impossible to master the inner man, to see and understand him by making him into an object of indifferent neutral analysis; it is also impossible to master him by merging with him, by empathizing with him. No, one can approach him and reveal him—or more precisely, force him to reveal himself—only by addressing him dialogically" (*Problems*, p. 251).

<sup>584</sup> The parallels to Bakhtin and Dostoevsky appear much stronger than I have had time to explore here. For one, the higher order of 'communion' itself appears to be the deeper point of



‘dialogical self’ which is a central concept in Taylor’s ‘Politics of Recognition’ and *Sources of the Self*.<sup>585</sup> If it is a convincing intuition that’s to be relayed, indexed to the experience of the individual, it would be appropriate that it should come in narrative via polyphonic exchange. And in either literary example—Mann and Dostoevsky—the illumination emerges in a polyphonic non-portrayal of a moment of insight; and in both the reader is invited to experience something of it as well,<sup>586</sup> yet without assertion or argumentation.

Our primary interest now is to ask whether Taylor’s own historical-philosophical narrative might develop analogous moments of insight through non-assertive, multivocal portrayals.<sup>587</sup> In fact, we do find that when Taylor reflects on his purposes in writing ‘philosophy-inflected history’ he talks about ‘recovering’ an

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the dialogical relay. Bakhtin writes, Dostoevsky’s heroes are heroes of accidental families and accidental collectives ... This communion has been transformed for them from an indispensable prerequisite for life into a postulate; it has become the utopian goal of all their aspirations. And Dostoevsky’s heroes are indeed motivated by the utopian dream of creating some sort of human community that lies beyond existing social forms. To create a human community in the world, to join several people together outside the framework of available social forms, is the goal of Myshkin, of Alyosha, and in a less conscious and clear-cut form of all Dostoevsky’s other heroes.” Bakhtin, *Problems*, 280.

And earlier in his analysis on dialog he makes explicit the connection between the never-final revelatory function of dialog and its opening out toward transcendence: “...dialogue, by its very essence, cannot and must not come to an end. At the level of his religious-utopian worldview Dostoevsky carries dialogue into eternity, conceiving of it as eternal co-rejoicing, co-admiration, con-cord. At the level of the novel, it is presented as the unfinalizability of dialogue, although originally as dialogue’s vicious circle.” Bakhtin, *Problems*, 252

<sup>585</sup> Cf. Taylor, “The Dialogical Self,” 304-314. Taylor argues in this essay that understanding human life requires the dialogical sense; that the self is importantly shaped in conversation with others, parents, tradition, and in practices as well. He writes, “...a great deal of human action happens only insofar as the agent understands and constitutes himself or herself as integrally part of a ‘we’” (p. 311). He also cites Bakhtin here on this point.

<sup>586</sup> In Thomas Mann’s case there is an autobiographical background to his hero’s insight; in the sublation of form and destruction Mann wrestled with in his own intellectual development (p. 305)

<sup>587</sup> Such a story should, accordingly, “offer insight into what this terminal phase is like: we can perhaps now appreciate more its fragility or permanence, or its value or drawbacks, and the like. The story can also give us a more vivid sense of the alternative course not taken, and so how chancy, either lucky or unlucky, the outcome was. And it can also open out alternatives in a wider sense; it can lay out a gamut of different ways of being human, different paths or characters which interact in the story, and those offer insights about human life in general.” Taylor, *Language Animal*, 291-2.

articulacy of buried moral sources.<sup>588</sup> Once genealogically excavated, these motivation-driving intuitions are then brought by Taylor back into the grand caricatured dialogs he portrays alongside the narrative. While, for example, Taylor's Reform ('Corruption') Master Narrative in *A Secular Age* primarily exists to challenge the standard secularization narratives, and as such it is an 'indirect' etiological challenge, my argument is that we can trace something like 'moments of insight' within the setting of the narrative for a horizon-opening illumination. To make this case, I'll return to the corruption narrative reconstructed above (C.2.1) to identify two possible moments of insight, in which the theopolitical vision of the network of agape emerges in a nonassertive portrayal. It is this indirect, nonassertive relay that I want to identify with his apophatic mode.

First, returning to the 'slide to deism' and the genesis of an impersonal order (C.2.1), we recall the lines of tension between Platonist and early Christian notions of the body, history, individuality, and emotion. The shift toward Deism was not simply the result of the triumph of 'science' or 'reason'; there was something else working like a moral distaste for personal divine agency.<sup>589</sup> This is especially clear

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<sup>588</sup> Taylor says that part of his purpose in writing philosophical histories has been to improve an understanding of how certain modes of belief have become possible, and this required getting clearer on the story of western modernity. As he writes, "We need to recur to past views for a model of the sense of the good that was avowed and then suppressed ... also to raise the question to what degree it is still living from the spiritual insights of his predecessor which it claims to have utterly repudiated. For it draws on a somewhat similar spiritual energy of which it nevertheless has no account itself" [...] "The path to articulacy has to be a historical one" (*Sources of the Self*, 104). As an aside, this is also why a large commentary on Hegel comes before Taylor's later genealogies of modernity (*Hegel*, 1975). See Taylor's interview with James K.A. Smith, "'Why I See the World So Differently' How Existential Questions of Faith Compelled Philosopher Charles Taylor to write *A Secular Age*." *Comment Magazine*. Aug. 14, 2014. Link: <https://www.cardus.ca/comment/article/4270/why-do-i-see-the-world-so-differently/>

<sup>589</sup> Edward Gibbon and Spinoza are examples here. The former "seems to have attributed his shuffling off of his early adherence to Rome to the effect that the 'universal instrument' (Lockean epistemology) exercised 'on my catholic opinions'." J.G.A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, Vol. I (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 75; quotes from *A Secular Age*, p. 274.

in the description of the indictment from eighteenth-century Deists against the 'enthusiasts' who make claims to divine inspiration, in a way analogous to current-day American secularists who judge 'religion' by its expressions in figures like Jerry Falwell or Pat Robertson.<sup>590</sup> Taylor's case is that there is a pre-existing framework for 'religion' working in the background, a grid that blocks out other possibilities. And just before that discussion on the repetition of the deep history of the tensions between Christian faith and its conflicted articulation in (Greek) philosophical terms, he gives us a view into the occluded spiritual range:

But of course, what doesn't feature in this kind of indictment is the (alleged) interventions spoken of in the autobiography of Santa Teresa, or the writings of John Wesley, nor a fortiori the myriad of unknown, less awe-inspiring acts and experiences of ordinary people which they have understood as related to God. Presumably the people who nod in agreement with Spinoza's analysis either don't believe these accounts, or reinterpret them in a derogatory light. But that's just the point: their stance is not forced on them by the 'facts', but flows from a certain interpretive grid.<sup>591</sup>

We notice a 'dialog' opening here between the Deists (we might say, our proto-secularist) and 'enthusiasts' (the proto-American Evangelical). Both positions are negated as suffering a blockage of vision. On the one hand, Deists are portrayed as believing their view of 'religion' is empirically justified when in fact it only appears so from within a too-narrow interpretive framework. On the other hand, 'self-assured' access to divine inspiration or religiously-inspired aggression is

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<sup>590</sup> *A Secular Age*, 274.

<sup>591</sup> *A Secular Age*, 275.

dismissed as self-evident nonsense.<sup>592</sup> The dialog here forms a triadic field into which enters a third position (Santa Theresa, John Wesley, countless unknowns) like an anomalous, unaccounted for phenomenon. The anomaly flashes on the screen just before Taylor returns to the genealogical shaping of the interpretive framework in the contrasting pictures of agency and sociality between Patristic theology and Greek philosophy.<sup>593</sup> In Taylor's account of the modern period, the whole interpretive package of Christian order is taken up, but what gets lost from view is 'communion' as the integrating agapeic relation of the person with God and also with others.<sup>594</sup> That is, what absconds is the network of agape. To quote it again:

At the heart of orthodoxy Christianity, seen in terms of communion, is the coming of God through Christ into a personal relation with disciples, and beyond them others, eventually ramifying through the church to humanity as a whole ... the lifeblood of this new relation is agape...<sup>595</sup>

How does the grid that occludes communion attract? What lures is the same excarnating force that, in Taylor's narrative, drives toward communion surrogates

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<sup>592</sup> It is worth pointing out here that Taylor's American Evangelical examples of Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell represent for him the particularly pernicious strand of contemporary Christian faith—the 'moral majority' or 'religious right'—which are a more recent expression of the 'neo-Durkheimian' confusion of political identity and a Christian moral vision.

<sup>593</sup> The 'axes of change' we recall were: (1) body as the full person ('heart') versus intellect/body dualism, (2) significance of history as gathering time rather than ending in a point of timelessness, (3) individuation obtains to immortality rather than being indistinguishable at the level of intellect, (4) the biblical significance of contingency and accident as integral to God's action (no 'Total Plan'), (5) importance of emotion, and finally (6) the belief that God is a personal being, capable of 'communion' and that an individual's transformation ('deification') hinges on that belief. Cf. *A Secular Age*, pp. 275-78.

<sup>594</sup> Taylor sums it up this way: "They [modern understandings of order] offer a picture of human order, either as normative, or as the end-point of historical development, or both which sees us as historical agents, bodies in material world, which move towards modes of common life in which our individuality is respected (at first as free rights-bearers, then later there are versions which want to make place for individual, original identities). The emotions are held under a rather tight rein in the earlier variants (neo-Stoicism, Locke), but then can take on a greater and greater role in the post-Rousseauian, post-Romantic era" (*A Secular Age*, 279).

<sup>595</sup> *A Secular Age*, 282.

and failed syntheses of mind/body and self/other. Taylor does posit a few explanations here, such as: the conscious sense of the disenchanted naturalized cosmos as a progression from earlier ages, and the rise of modern social imaginaries of equal contractual relations. But most importantly for our investigation, the benefits of ‘code’ in modern ethics.<sup>596</sup> When the “Christian conception, where the highest way of life can’t be explained in terms of rules, but rather is rooted in a certain relation to God, is entirely off the screen...” what’s attractive about society “bound together by code”, he suggests, is that “it can offer a view of the agent as entirely free, unconstrained by authority.”<sup>597</sup> So, in the ‘dialog’ here we have Deists who exemplify the codification (and thus excarnation) of Christian faith and then the ‘enthusiasts’, who in their aggression are like obscurantist ‘Constantinians’ that short-circuit by imposition of the kingdom of God. And in the discursive field of their mutual negation—that is, in the very judgment of these positions—the contrasting picture of Santa Teresa, John Wesley, and countless unknowns. It’s this mutual negation and the presentation of the third option that I want to identify as our first ‘moment of insight’, or illumination. There are two layers here to observe. The first surface-level illumination is that we witness an important crux in the genesis of secularism, namely: the drained ‘ontic logos’ of orthodox Christian order gives way here to an objectified, ‘mechanized’, ‘disengaged’ and meaning-deprived order which becomes the impersonal order of the ‘imminent frame’.<sup>598</sup> The loss of agapeic

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<sup>596</sup> *A Secular Age*, 280-1.

<sup>597</sup> *A Secular Age*, 282-3. Also, he adds that ‘human dignity’—as, e.g., as the self-imposing law-givers of the Rousseauian or Kantian pictures—can be hard to square with the orthodoxy Christian sense that we are in need of rescue.

<sup>598</sup> Taylor adds as one outcome of this flow the reduced capacity for understanding others, given the power of the emerging ‘disengaged’ stance. Cf. *A Secular Age*, 285-6.

communion is thus a key driver in the progression toward secular modernity. This is explicitly the point of the passage. But there is a second, more subterranean layer in the moment of illumination. When the agapeic communion absconds, producing code and illicit caricatured versions of kingdom of God, the ‘orthodox Christian’ agapeic network carries on, unnoticed in the day’s elite moral-social theory, and enacted by Teresa and Wesley but also the unnamed myriad. This moment appears to draw on the subtheme of code-toward-exarnation, which is present throughout *A Secular Age* and a kernel of the ‘drive to Reform’.<sup>599</sup> The passage refers back to that original hyper-real, anti-code theopolitical vision. So, in this way, the unargued-for agapeic relation briefly returns as a point of contrast—here as an increasingly-occluded, presumably non-codifying, incarnated mode of being-together. And then it recedes just as quickly, as though it were an only partially-relevant aside, as Taylor moves forward in his description of deism’s mutation toward a secularized variant.

Our second example of a ‘moment of insight’ occurs in Taylor’s description of contemporary conditions of belief. After the corrupting forms of ‘Christendom’ have retreated, and the ambition of providing “a common religious home for the whole society” have proven unrealizable, we saw that forms of collective Christian life can remain as a reference point, but belief and belonging look rather different.<sup>600</sup> What remains in the experience of many at the end of this epochal development is the ‘hidden God’:

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<sup>599</sup> Cf. *A Secular Age*, p. 288.

<sup>600</sup> See my discussion in C.2.2. Cf. *A Secular Age*, 514-17. Taylor draws on Grace Davie’s notion of ‘believing without belonging’ / ‘belonging without believing’; cf. also the work of Danièle Hervieu-Léger. See fn. 522 above.

This is a world in which the fate of belief depends much more than before on powerful intuitions of individuals, radiating out to others. And these intuitions will be far from self-evident to others again. To some, including many believers, this epochal development will seem like a regression of Christianity. To others, the retreat of Christendom involves both loss and gain. Some great realizations of collective life are lost, but other facets of our predicament in relation to God come to the fore; for instance what Isaiah meant when he talked of a 'hidden God'. In the seventeenth century, you had to be a Pascal to appreciate that. Now we live it daily.<sup>601</sup>

It is in the context, now beyond disenchantment and the introduction of an impersonal order, and also after the 'age of authenticity' and the uniquely modern failures to synthesize an integral wholeness of the autonomous self and unified social,<sup>602</sup> that we see another discursive field open between polar opposite religious sensibilities. On the one hand, there are those who remain strongly connected to the hierarchical authority of the church and, on the other, those who find themselves on a personal quest for meaning.<sup>603</sup> These are the 'dwellers' and 'seekers' described by Wuthnow. The future of North Atlantic religion, Taylor writes, depends on "the concatenated outcomes of a whole host of such quests; and for another, on the relations, hostile, indifferent, or (hopefully) symbiotic, which will develop between modes of quest and centers of traditional religious

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<sup>601</sup> *A Secular Age*, 532.

<sup>602</sup> *A Secular Age*, 477.

<sup>603</sup> These options are "...hardened by various doctrines which make them polar opposites, and have the obfuscatory effect of forcing people to the extremes, to peremptory authority on one side, and self-sufficiency the other, either utter self-suspicion or total self-trust. This is, of course, in keeping with the long-standing obsession in Latin Christendom to nail down with ultimate, unattainable and finally self-destructive precision the bases of final, unchallengeable, inerrant authority, be it in a certain form of Papal decision, or a literal reading of the Bible" (*A Secular Age*, 512).

authority..."<sup>604</sup> And here in the narrative Taylor places most of contemporary spiritual life—and by extension his reader—in the middle of this field between dwellers and seekers. What shapes the quest? and might draw us is exactly the vacuum of unrealized integral communion.

Characterizing the middle, he writes that there are, "...nagging dissatisfactions with the modern moral order, and its attendant disciplines, the rapid wearing out of its Utopian versions, the continuing sense that there is something more."<sup>605</sup> The 'nagging dissatisfactions', in other words, are of the immanent frame on the one hand with its categorial societies bound by code and failed utopic syntheses on the other, and this can send people in a number of directions—new forms of belief as well as forms of unbelief that descend from the immanent counter-Enlightenment (*à la* Nietzsche)—but now that faith forms are "no longer in true" with the spirit of the age, "a spirit in which people can be imprisoned, and feel the need to break out; the fact that faith connects us to so many spiritual avenues across different ages; this can over time draw people towards it. *La lotta continua*."<sup>606</sup> If the analogy is permitted, the 'moment of insight' in his description of religion today occurs in the context of the vacuum left by both the retreat of modern Christendoms (like 'bundled' Quebec Catholicism) and the 'wasteland' of unrealized secularist utopias. Unlike the example above, this is an 'illumination' of historical progression; the non-viability of such forced forms of wholeness—like

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<sup>604</sup> *A Secular Age*, 533.

<sup>605</sup> *A Secular Age*, 533. Taylor opens *A Secular Age* with a description of that nagging feeling of needing to move beyond, as it was embodied in a 1969 hit song by Peggie Lee: "Is that all there is?" Thus already at the start, we are primed and invited to the cross-pressured open space with this resonating question.

<sup>606</sup> *A Secular Age*, 533.



the broad self-defeating impositions of the kingdom since Hildebrand—has in Taylor's narrative exposed itself. And in the void, what remains? A 'diffuse ecumenical sense'.<sup>607</sup>

Taylor describes the widening experience of the 'pilgrim-seeker', the man or woman on a quest, who navigates between ancient faith forms and new collectives. Such a mode wouldn't fit the 'categorical' relations of the earlier modes. In fact, the word 'pilgrim-seeker' connotes openness, surprise, and solidarity in the journey with the stranger; not defensive fortification with exclusive dogmatic formula, institutional structure, or otherwise 'dwelling' in traditional forms. Even if Taylor is not intentionally referring back to the agapeic network, it is so near conceptually to the unpredictable outbreak of this 'ecumenical sense', that at a minimum we can say that Taylor's description of 'religion today' is a new day for agapeic theopolitical vision.

We have isolated just two possible moments of insight, though we might have added others in which the network of agape is set in a descriptive portrayal minus argumentation. In fact, the term 'agape' is used fifty times in *A Secular Age*, and one could argue that we have a 'non-assertive portrayal' in each instance, since Taylor does not attempt a theological case for agape as the center of 'orthodox' Christian faith. He simply lets it stand. 'Agape' is shorthand for a Christian vision of transformation that aims beyond a way of life concerned merely with 'ordinary human flourishing' as Taylor calls it—and by 'flourishing' he means goals like

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<sup>607</sup> *A Secular Age*, 535.

survival, production, family, civic duty, peaceable social belonging, etc.<sup>608</sup> ‘Agape’ by contrast is “...the love which God has for us, and which we can partake of through his power [...] a possibility of transformation is offered, which takes us beyond merely human perfection.”<sup>609</sup> And yet it paradoxically affirms the ordinary as well, as Taylor brings out in his contrast with the *apatheia*-ideal in stoicism; Jesus’ passion and being moved ‘from the gut’ as portrayed in the Gospels, Taylor writes, means that there has always been a tension at the heart of Christianity. It is a motivational and empowering source for Taylor and as such—for those familiar with *Sources of the Self*—agape reads as Taylor’s version of the Christian ‘constitutive good’. And following our theme of Taylor’s apophatic mode, such a Good (see also my discussion in C.2.3) is an elusive hyper-reality. The elusiveness of agape bears out in other locations—that is, not only in the two examples above. In several instances, in fact, we find agape contrasting historic failures to hold the paradox of affirming ordinary life while also going beyond it. For instance, Calvinism, ‘Radical Protestantism’, Puritanism—and Taylor points out lines of continuity with Catholic reform in the Middle Ages—are all depicted as moving within a dilemma between renunciative practice and ordinary flourishing; constructing the right social discipline and inner attitudes to spread piety among all lay becomes, for Taylor, the ‘order-building’ that makes it possible for agape-as-source to ultimately recede from the picture.<sup>610</sup> ‘Agape’, in other words, is what

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<sup>608</sup> This goes together with Taylor’s ‘secularity 3’ as the primary interest of his revisionist secularization narrative. Here’s his main point in bringing in the distinction of such goals of human transformation: “I would like to claim that the coming of modern secularity in my sense has been coterminous with the rise of a society in which for the first time in history a purely self-sufficient humanism came to be a widely available option. I mean by this a humanism accepting no final goals beyond human flourishing, nor any allegiance to anything else beyond this flourishing. Of no previous society was this true” (*A Secular Age*, p. 18; cf. p. 20).

<sup>609</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 20.

<sup>610</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 81-84.

drops from view with the rise of a society disciplined by the codes that emerge in the drives to Reform. Or, yet again, we find it emerging in the interplay between structure and anti-structure, for instance, in the closely-related concept of ‘*communitas*’—that spontaneous social binding, not by rules or collection by the usual lines of fealty—found in the example of Carnival.<sup>611</sup> In each instance, within the discursive interplay in the corruption narrative within *A Secular Age*, these emerge from absences of failed forms and effect a kind of re-framing of possible life-paths beyond the imminent frame.

Our second ‘moment of insight’ above, brought us to the location in Taylor’s narrative where he describes religious experience today. Interestingly, he moves from narration here to digress on ‘closed world structures’, which are ways of looking at the world that foreclose transcendence outright. These have, he argues, given a special force to the (previously) mainstream secularization narrative. Not that he argues directly for or against a ‘closed’ or ‘open’ reading; as he says, he is “just trying to dissipate the false aura of the obvious that surrounds [the closed reading].”<sup>612</sup> Presumably, if he’s succeeded in dissipating the rational obviousness of the closed reading, then he will have in some way prepared his reader for the cross-pressured ‘Jamesian open space’ that follows. In the open space neither a

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<sup>611</sup> See, Taylor’s discussion on festivals, where we also find a brief cameo of Bakhtin’s notion of laughter as a utopic moment of *Parousia*: “Laughter as the solvent of all boundaries; the body which connects us to everyone and everything; these are celebrated in Carnival. A kind of carnal *Parousia* is adumbrated” (*A Secular Age*, 47). The pull of *communitas* is an experience intrinsically prior to code and anti-categorical relation. The pull to anti-structure can come from beyond the society, and even from beyond humanity. From this point of view, it would be legitimate to see the first tension I mentioned above, that between ordinary flourishing and the higher, renunciative vocations, as another example of structure versus anti-structure. The structures of power, property, warrior dominance, are challenged by a life which claims to be higher, and yet which couldn’t simply replace the established order. They are forced into co-existence, and hence some kind of complementarity” (p. 49) Cf. my discussion in C1.

<sup>612</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 551.

‘closed’ nor ‘open’ reading of the cosmos would have finally-clear, rationally obvious ontological picture. Then, in the succeeding chapters, Taylor places his multivocal portrayal of more specific dilemmas between the various moral-spiritual character-types vying for adoption—the dilemmas that, I will argue, indirectly relay the network of agape. In the next chapter, we’ll look at this facet of Taylor’s performative subtler language in the ‘poetic’ triangulation of his theopolitical vision.

### C.3.3 Epiphanic Poetics

In *Sources of the Self* we locate our second constitutive mode of language that can open out toward a transcendent referent, albeit indirectly in the personally-indexed poetry of modern writers. The pivotal moment in Taylor's narrative in *A Secular Age* toward that defining characteristic of modern moral life he calls 'individualist expressivism' comes in the early nineteenth century, after we've careened over the edge of a Christian 'ontic logos'. With Victorian (and as we saw, Deist) moral sensibilities still intact, the original spiritual sources that grounded it, or gave it context, drops out. That is, in the nineteenth century, the days are gone when a poet like Alexander Pope could rely on 'publicly shared references' to God or the Good beyond our world in his Romantic descriptions of nature; the great 'Chain of Being' had irrevocably snapped.<sup>613</sup> To illustrate the shift, Taylor traces the evolution of epiphany in literature and painting as it emerges in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. My focus here will be on reconstructing Taylor's portrayal of epiphany as it appears in his description of twentieth-century poetry. With this structure in mind, I'll then move in a second step to a parallel rendering of Taylor's dialectical account of our 'cross-pressured' moral landscape to see whether this intra-textual analysis might make more explicit what seems to reside in the background of his dialogical method. We should see how Taylor deploys an analogous rhetorical mode to triangulate his own theopolitical vision in a partial, fragmented, multivocal, and apophatic way, and this is fitting if the individual/community sublation symbolized in the image of the ineffable Kingdom can only be gestured at negatively.

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<sup>613</sup> See fn. 556 above.

Epiphany in art is a moment of opening something hidden, which intends to transform one's view to see something more real, whether the vision is of *the Real*, God, the Good, or nothing but brute force or Dionysian will. As a disclosive act, it draws on the Romantic idea of the symbol, which—in its original iterations—is conceived as a translucent portal to numinal reality. And in later, even self-proclaimed anti-Romantic modernist movements, a transformation may be effected for clarity of vision.<sup>614</sup> By Taylor's account, it can have the effect of getting one in touch with a source for moral/spiritual life.<sup>615</sup> Twentieth century epiphany, however, differs from its forbears in its thoroughgoing break with nature as a site of meaning. The epiphanic in poetry is at this point no longer achievable in elevated descriptions of nature, so that the Real may shine through for any concerned pedestrians. On the contrary, it sees its possibility for disclosive epiphany in the juxtaposition of words and images. Such art can be 'auto-telic' with no referent external to the work itself, but as Taylor demonstrates with his paradigm cases, Hulme, Eliot, and Pound, this doesn't have to be the case. To see how, we can review three features of modernist epiphanic poetry as it appears for Taylor in the works of these poets, which include its (1) being indexed to a

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<sup>614</sup> "We cannot just detach the nugget of transcendent truth; it is inseparably imbedded in the work—this is the continuing relevance of the Romantic doctrine of the symbol." *Sources*, 492. Regarding this clarifying effect from anti-Romantic sources, one might consider Heidegger's notion of the 'clearing', cf. *Sources of the Self*, 482.

Marcel Proust's famous line from *À la recherche du temps perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*, v.5 The Captive) may serve as a banner here for the possibilities of great artists (i.e., the 'eyes of another'): "The only voyage of discovery ... would be not to visit strange lands but to possess other eyes, to see the universe through the eyes of another..." Trans. C.V. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin (Random House, 1993), p. 343. Taylor also draws periodically on Proust in this same constellation of post-Romantic art.

<sup>615</sup> *Sources*, 479-80: Epiphanies of being: (1) show some reality to be (2) an expression of something which is (3) an unambiguously good moral source. On the contrary, framing epiphanies may: negate (2), negate (3), as with Thomas Mann (post-Schopenhauerian), and negate (3) and (1) negated in expressionist painters (p. 480).

personal vision, (2) altered sense of time in narrativity, and (3) indirectness.

When Taylor describes an epiphany as 'indexed to a personal vision', he is relying on a contrast with earlier, Romantic modes of epiphanic poetry that could rely on shared reference to a transcendent reality as a guarantor of ultimate meaning and goodness. After the Romantic vision had, in the eyes of its critics, been co-opted and reduced to the personal fulfillment of the bourgeois (in light of the expanding naturalist worldview, wider-spread acceptance of nature as an amoral force), so that both the hoped-for synthesis between man and nature in Romanticism as well as the unity of the self of 'disengaged Reason' dissolves, the only authentic poetic move, was inward, personal experience. Once in, however, then de-centered, since the focus of epiphany shifts from the self to a reflexive take on the use of language and the constructive power of the creative imagination for effecting a transforming vision: "We unveil the power of language by turning back onto it from our ordinary unthinking focus on things."<sup>616</sup> For Taylor, this does not (as it might be assumed) entail subjectivism. In fact, what one finds in Pound and Eliot, is an awareness of "living on a transpersonal rhythm which is mutually irreducible in relation to the personal."<sup>617</sup> Epiphany thus can take one beyond the subjective, but only by passing "through heightened awareness of personal experience."<sup>618</sup>

Coupled with their orientation toward the transpersonal and in reaction against the flatness of time, or its spatialization, in mechanistic, naturalist views, the

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<sup>616</sup> *Sources of the Self*, 481. This is also the era when Phenomenology is born: Bergson, Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, influencing Hulme. The irony here is that the move inward was simultaneously a move against subjectivism.

<sup>617</sup> *Sources of the Self*, 481.

<sup>618</sup> *Sources of the Self*, 481.

modernist epiphanic poets sought to recover new modes of narrativity and a nonlinear sense of time. For instance, by juxtaposing historic images, Pound in his *Cantos* sought to re-enliven those sources now deadened. Resisting both a nostalgic narrative of decline and a Futurist or Surrealist unity of the self, Pound and Eliot, sought—along with Hans Castorp or Proust—a recovery of the past. But this was, as Taylor writes, not for nostalgia, but “because the fullness of meaning isn’t available within the resources of a single age.”<sup>619</sup> Now if a poem were to reach another realm, it could only do so in a ‘subtler language’, indirectly. Symbols are no longer seen as consubstantial with their transcendent referent (*à la* Coleridge), but now, in portraying the natural object clearly and coldly, in its flat superficiality, these authors project a frame of emotion and experience.<sup>620</sup> Taylor takes the following poem from Pound as an example:

IN A STATION OF THE METRO  
The apparition of these faces in the crowd;  
Petals on a wet, black bough.

One gets a sense here of the reflexivity of their writing: in writing there is an awareness of the act of projection, of the duality between agent and world.<sup>621</sup> It’s an attempt to uncover the ‘pre-objective’ (Merleau-Ponty), tacit ways we approach our world, or the ways the world *appears* to us. These poets are seeking to change our vision, in other words, not to see any particular object more clearly as it relates to a meaningful cosmos, but to project frames of experience onto

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<sup>619</sup> *Sources of the Self*, 464. “Pound and Eliot seem to hold that we *can* recapture the past or, rather, make the great moments and achievements of other times come alive again in ours, to bring the long-dead back to speech.” Goal: unity across persons/time; cf., 477; n. 65, 588.

<sup>620</sup> See Pound’s *Imagist Manifesto* (*Sources of the Self*, 467).

<sup>621</sup> *Sources of the Self*, 472. The modern, inward turn, means a reflexive turn: “we unveil the power of language by turning back onto it from our ordinary unthinking focus on things” (481); becoming aware of what we do with words.



reality that resonate at once with the author, and reader, and also some less-articulable, more ultimate source of that experience.<sup>622</sup> In contrast to Romantic ‘epiphanies of Being’, he calls these ‘epiphanies of interspaces’ or ‘epiphanies of framing’.<sup>623</sup>

Taylor rejects the interpretation of some critics, who suggest that Pound and Eliot were interested exclusively in merely relaying raw experience, despite some of Pounds own descriptions of his art. These reductive accounts, he suggests, cannot do justice to the patently epiphanic nature of their work. The poet, he says, is pointing to something (God, the tradition, etc.), which—and this is the crucial point—is there for everyone. The artist picks up, like Pound’s image of artists as antennae, transpersonal patterns and energies in scenes. “We cannot just detach the nugget of transcendent truth; it is inseparably imbedded in the work—this is the continuing relevance of the Romantic doctrine of the symbol.”<sup>624</sup> In the *exchange between* images, a space is opened up for some “nugget of transcendent truth” to emerge. Such poetry ‘triangulates’ to meaning.<sup>625</sup> Taylor himself links this indirect triangulation of transcendence to the apophatic theological tradition:

This negation borders on something else again, a purpose beyond stoic lucidity of vision. As with the *via negativa* in theology, the counter-epiphanic can be embraced not in order to deny epiphany altogether ... but rather to force us to

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<sup>622</sup> Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 469.

<sup>623</sup> *Sources of the Self*, 468,9, 476. Taylor’s discussion here also extends beyond poetry as he looks briefly at parallels in Saussurian theories of meaning and the philosophies of Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin (477-78).

<sup>624</sup> *Sources of the Self*, 492.

<sup>625</sup> ‘Triangulate’ (*Sources of the Self*, 466; *A Secular Age*, 352-3); Interestingly, Taylor draws an analogy between this kind of poetry, where what’s being approached can only be articulated by the movement in the language and kinds of religion, “in which the crucial definitions attach to the ritual rather than to the theology” (*Sources of the Self*, 493).

the verge of epiphany.<sup>626</sup>

Early twentieth-century poetics was thus still asking the question “What is the place of the Good, or the True, or the Beautiful, in a [materialist] world entirely determined mechanistically?” but now with a perception that the Romantic vision had been trivialized into Victorian sentimentality and irrelevance.<sup>627</sup> Taylor quotes Hulme on this point: “[Romanticism] failed ‘to realize that there is an absolute, and not a relative, difference between humanism (which we can take to be the highest expression of the vital) and the religious spirit. The *divine* is not *life* at its intensest. It contains in a way an almost anti-vital element’.”<sup>628</sup>

### Charles Taylor’s Counter-Epiphanic Triangulation

At the end of *Sources* Taylor compares contemporary philosophers to half-inept mechanics in a pit, supporting their drivers, the poets, with concepts for better (spiritual) clairvoyance. The terms he’s employed in his work, ‘sources’, ‘disengaged reason’, ‘subjective expression’, he says, might be used in an invocative, creative work that could bring one into contact with their own moral sources (Pound, Eliot, Kafka, etc.). His own work, however, he writes, doesn’t reach that epiphanic pitch. Presumably because of its nominative mood, or analytical mode, it’s bound to lack elevation. At the same time, he writes a few

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<sup>626</sup> *Sources of the Self*, 485.

<sup>627</sup> “[Romanticism] merely offered trivialized, ersatz, or inauthentic meanings to compensate for a meaningless world. For those who hungered after some purer, deeper, or stronger moral source that the world of disengaged reason couldn’t provide, the expression of simply personal emotion or the celebration or routinized fulfillments was a travesty” (*Sources of the Self*, p. 458).

<sup>628</sup> *Sources*, 459. Quoting T.E. Hulme, *Speculations*, ed. Herbert Read (London: K. Paul, 1924), p. 118. In *A Secular Age*, the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins is spotlighted for its expressed new itinerary in the post-Romantic literary attempt to recovering a fuller, enlivened, non-codified and authentic language for belief in God., pp. 755-67.

pages later, one of the central concerns of the book is to shed light on the whole complex of the modern identity in order to illuminate just how treacherous the project is and how easily our moral lives are stultified. Our own access to moral sources is often arbitrarily hindered by a commitment to morally reductive perspectives. And rather than merely leave us alone in the woods with the poets—although this may be encouraged—Taylor sketches a map of modernity’s major moral dilemmas. Drawing primarily on one chapter of *A Secular Age*, ‘Cross Pressures’, I’d like to suggest that it’s in the iteration of this map, in its method and intention, where we see certain conspicuous affinities with his depiction of counter-epiphany in modernist art, namely: it is (1) an exercise in retrieval of experience, it’s (2) indexed to a personal vision, and (3) it ‘triangulates’ in dialogical indirectness.<sup>629</sup> The claim is going to be that Taylor thereby offers his own theopolitical vision *via negativa*, but first we need a brief justification for 1-3.

That Taylor’s work can be seen as an exercise in retrieval of experience (1) is utterly non-controversial, as he quite openly takes his philosophical cue from the same polemical stance against ‘disengaged reason’ that he ascribes to the high modern poets.<sup>630</sup> This is a move, Taylor writes, “which brings philosophers together with artists and critics in an attempt to recover what has been

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<sup>629</sup> The goal here is not to conflate Taylor’s philosophical work with poetry, which is something he’d certainly reject out of hand, but rather to show how the ways in which epiphanic triangulation work in modern art (indirectness, etc.) are mappable on to his own philosophical method and intentions.

<sup>630</sup> In the intro to *Human Agency and Language* his hedgehog-ness is even ascribed to him in relation to his singular attention to this sort of retrieval of experience. True to his epithet, this theme recurs throughout his works... See, *Sources* Part I

I’ve selected the chapter ‘Cross Pressures’ since it appears in the crux between Taylor’s re-narration of secularization and depictions of modern moral-spiritual dilemmas. This chapter is thus a kind of starting point for the dilemmatic portrayals, but one finds these (periodically-triangulating) portrayals throughout the rest of *A Secular Age*, but especially in Dilemmas I and II.

suppressed and forgotten in the conditions of experience.”<sup>631</sup> We recall that for the modernist poets, something like Merleau-Ponty’s ‘pre-objective’ experience needed examination, and then—with a proper handle on the *conditions* of experience<sup>632</sup>—we are prepared for a transformation or a re-framing of vision. ‘Recovery’ in this sense is one of the primary purposes behind his genealogical method. History, as we saw for Taylor, is essential to self-understanding. Thus re-framing these narratives is a crucial element to his arguments concerning the modern identity and secularization, and this has deconstructive as well as constructive implications. On the one hand, with Foucault and other neo-Nietzscheans who’ve made use of the method, genealogy has the effect of shoring up implicit moral and spiritual assumptions behind our beliefs concerning ethics, epistemology, etc.<sup>633</sup> The effect is to uncover those moral goods to pit our phenomenologies against our various ontological explanations of them.

Of course, Taylor has his own ontological vision, too. And although he resists, at every stage, propositional argumentation for Christian theism or the theopolitical vision, he is compelled to let it out in moments in the story of modernity’s becoming, and particularly as he portrays our current moral landscape and its dilemmas, with Taylor’s theopolitical vision (his ‘theistic hunches’) fitting uneasily in the interspaces of the dilemma. In this way, the vision he offers may be seen, in a strong sense, as (2) ‘indexed to his personal vision’. In the case of *A Secular Age*,

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<sup>631</sup> Taylor goes on to link Hulme and Husserl and Bergson and related artistic movements inspired by Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Wittgenstein. Cf. *Sources of the Self*, 460.

<sup>632</sup> I.e., that art is an active framing of reality; an acknowledgement at once of our non-neutral stance towards things but also of the power of the creative imagination for epiphany.

<sup>633</sup> In *A Secular Age* the tacit ‘unthought’ that occludes is once again the dominance of disengaged reason (or, Enlightenment myth, etc.), in this case, (see, *A Secular Age* 427-8) ... And this levels the playing field, as it were, for each moral/spiritual family.

one central experience he's examining is the unanimous drive to seek fullness. Our various 'definitions of fullness', or otherwise stated, those ontologies operating in the background, should match the phenomenology of our striving for fullness; some of which include the goal of universal benevolence and unconditional love of our global 'other'. As we'll see in his dialectical work, this striving leads to some very difficult dilemmas, and when they do, our author shares his personal inclination that the ontology, which just may provide the most plausible way forward in meeting these dilemmas is Christian theism.<sup>634</sup>

The poetry of Pound and Eliot 'triangulates' insofar as it juxtaposes at times disparate images to lay a frame on reality. This uncovered a kind of force *between* these images, which as we saw can bring one into contact with a moral source.<sup>635</sup> I think (3) we see something similar happening in "Cross Pressures" and in other parallel accounts, which take shape as a broad-scale, 'three-cornered' debate.<sup>636</sup> However, rather than images juxtaposed as in poetry— the 'metro station'/ 'crowd'/ 'petals on a black bough' which captures an experience of beauty in Pound's *Metro*—we have disparate definitions of fullness. In the dialectical movement between these positions is, here too, a sort of uncovering of experience. The primary experience in the "Cross Pressures" chapter of *A Secular Age* we might call a 'longing for wholeness'.

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<sup>634</sup> In a similar description, Carlos Colorado (following ...) has referred to Taylor's 'weak ontology' in this context.

<sup>635</sup> By 'getting into contact with a moral source', Taylor seems to mean that one becomes aware of a given source and also motivated to respond to its transformational calling, Cf. *Sources of the Self*, 44, 425.

<sup>636</sup> Parallel accounts are given in *Sources*, and both "Iris Murdoch" and "A Catholic Modernity" in *Dilemmas and Connections*.

In 'Cross Pressures' (as in the follow 'Dilemma' chapters) we find three main moral/spiritual families in pursuit of wholeness: secular humanists, neo-Nietzscheans, and the otherwise religious. And the particular question that arises in this three-cornered battle is on the role of transcendence, or a potential good beyond life, in relation to this pursuit of wholeness. Taylor highlights that at various points, any two positions may concur to gang up on a third. Neo-Nietzscheans, for instance, concur with humanists in their rejection of religion but vehemently disagree on the question of whether there is any good beyond ordinary life and minimizing suffering. Also, universal benevolence and justice, which is central to fullness in a humanist perspective, is jettisoned by the neo-Nietzschean camp in favor of an affirmation of life in the will to power.<sup>637</sup>

The neo-Nietzschean perspective, however, agrees with religious perspectives that the secular humanist vision of life lacks dimension and depth. For humanists the way to truly love your neighbor is to cut off all delusions of life beyond the ordinary. And where (to use another Taylorian term) the 'affirmation of ordinary life' (family, production, etc.) is seen as the ultimate end, and good enough in itself to inspire a good life, these perspectives ask: "is that all there is?" On the other hand, humanists and believers alike reject the anti-humanism and benevolence that inheres in a neo-Nietzschean view. Christians may see the good in others in terms of the *imago dei* where they are called to view others *as* good, and furthermore simultaneously motivated by the ultimate source of goodness in the

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<sup>637</sup> A Secular Age, 636.

triumph God. In this case, the good that transcends life can ultimately affirm it. In each explanation of the human condition here, “who is right?” Taylor asks. “Well, who can make more sense of the life all of us are living?”<sup>638</sup>

The direction of argument is critical to catch here: first, we take in a phenomenology of defining moral/spiritual strivings, a mapping out of each node on this cross-pressured terrain with its complexities, differences, and maybe totally unresolvable conflicts, and only then, by a process of elimination, a gesture or a hint at that vision which our author’s been moved to hold. After a discussion on the more-than merely pathological nature of violence, for instance, Taylor writes that Christianity might bring one out of the dilemma, in which exclusive humanism finds itself. That is, by denying violence its numinous force and controlling violence, it can perpetuate violence. Christianity may strike the paradox, or... it may not. There is a fundamental ambivalence here. Transforming our view of violence as somehow part of ‘God’s pedagogy’, presents an opportunity for discriminating between violence that contributes to the expansion of agape (e.g., defending the innocent against attack, etc.) and violence that runs against it. The temptation to holy violence, however, remains. So, it can meet the challenge, but only on faith, in ‘anticipatory confidence’.<sup>639</sup> With that direction of argument in mind, we can turn to a crux moment in *A Secular Age* in which a phenomenology of cross-pressures transitions to dialogical portrayal.<sup>640</sup>

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<sup>638</sup> *A Secular Age*, 638.

<sup>639</sup> *A Secular Age*, 674.

<sup>640</sup> The analysis that follows covers only the initial fraction of the dilemmas portrayed in *A Secular Age*. One particularly interesting set of reflections, for instance, appears in “Dilemmas I” in which varieties of Christian faith itself are set in dialog with conflicting pictures of self-transformation, metaphors surrounding juridical-penal ‘atonement’ versus ‘redemption’, and

In part V we get an examination of the 'immanent frame' and the 'Jamesian open space' as key descriptions (and even aspirations) regarding the experience of contemporary un/belief. One earlier focal point in the section is a sustained deconstructive analysis of what Taylor call's 'closed world structures' (CWS), which may be summarized as the influencing ideology behind the 'subtraction (secularization) narrative' that Taylor has sought to replace throughout *A Secular Age*.<sup>641</sup> The intermediating conclusion here, as Taylor progresses to the open space, is that the CWS should not have the axiomatic status it has. Taylor asks, "...who has decreed that the transformations we can hope and strive for in human life are restricted to those which can be carried out in a meaningless universe without a transcendent source?"<sup>642</sup> Rather, the CWS 'spins' some toward immanent modes of belief or unbelief in the immanent frame that we all now share. If we follow the deconstruction of CWS and likewise accepts that religion always remains on the horizon of areligion and vice versa, then as he writes, "All this may perhaps give us a sense of what it can mean to stand in the Jamesian open space..."<sup>643</sup> Here one can feel the unsettling force of positions from directions of immanent materialisms and faith-forms, in which faith is a haunting struggle (e.g.,

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Platonist misprisions surrounding the dualism of body/mind and the sometimes-occluded biblical dichotomy, 'flesh/spirit' (pp. 642-56).

<sup>641</sup> Taylor summarizes the four facets of 'closed world structures' (CWS) as follows: (1) science shows that God cannot exist or is irrelevant to life, and so the morally 'mature' path is to reject theism, (2) theistic faith must wane in the wake of science and technological advancements, (3) modern political-moral spaces necessarily excludes religious admixture, and (4) values are only authorized by the autonomous self (cf. pp. 590-1).

As an aside, Taylor highlights the critical nature of approaching the narrative dimension here: The narrative dimension is extremely important, because the force of these CWS comes less from the supposed detailed argument (that science refutes religion, or that Christianity is incompatible with human rights), and much more from the general form of the narratives, to the effect that there was once a time when religion could flourish, but that this time is past" (p. 591).

<sup>642</sup> *A Secular Age*, 589.

<sup>643</sup> *A Secular Age*, 592.



Blake, Goethe, Dostoevsky) or non-faith can feel the loss of wonder (e.g., Hardy's poem *God's Funeral*).<sup>644</sup>

Here Taylor shifts from a narrative that lands us in the fragilized open space to an increasingly dialogical portrayal, in which the crosswinds of pluralization can send us in new directions. So released, for instance, from CWS or even the stronghold neo-Durkheimian identities, "or else a marriage of religion with civilizational order ... more and more people are in a space where they can be induced to reconsider whatever their position has been..."<sup>645</sup> In 'Cross Pressures' we find a set of dialogs—as a stylized portrayal of the pressures—between major moral-spiritual character-types that concatenate in big unresolved fields of debate regarding modern aspirations to 'fullness' worked out in our sense of creative agency, social-ethical vision, and aesthetic experience. These are like "three nodal points around which the swirling debates in our culture gather," which shape the 'nova' of middle positions between the poles of orthodox religion and materialist atheism. As he constructs the debate, he drives to a question regarding moral sources:

A major question for all positions which take their stand in immanence, whether materialistic or not, is: how can one account for the specific force of creative agency, or ethical demands, or for the power of artistic experience, without speaking in terms of some transcendent being or force which interpellates us?"<sup>646</sup>

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<sup>644</sup> *A Secular Age*, 594.

<sup>645</sup> *A Secular Age*, 604.

<sup>646</sup> *A Secular Age*, 597.

Each debate around these nodal points, as we'll see, dissolves the immanentist poles, and in the moment of their failure to resolve, that source question is posed which echoes the searching question at the start: "Is that all there is?" What's presented are sets of 'microdialogs' between pseudonymous voices in a way not dissimilar to the pseudonymous conflictual voices in Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*.<sup>647</sup> An analysis below of two debates in 'Cross Pressures' presents our 'poetic', counter-epiphanic reading of this similar rhetorical movement in Taylor's work.<sup>648</sup>

First, to the nodal point of moral agency, we have the question: "What ontology can underpin our moral commitments?" The commitment in question here is the drive to unbounded solidarities conceived as universal human rights.<sup>649</sup> The

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<sup>647</sup> Jochen Schmidt writes about a 'constructive deconstruction' (a term derived from Kafka) as the defining characteristic of these microdialogs in his analysis of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous writings in "Neither/Nor: The Mutual Negation of Søren Kierkegaard's Early Pseudonymous Voices," *JCRT* 8.1 Winter 2006, p. 58. What emerges, is a 'negative illumination of faith'. Cf. M. Holmes Hartshorne, *Kierkegaard: Godly Deceiver: The Nature and Meaning of his Pseudonymous Writings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), p.10; also Franz Kafka, *Wedding Preparations in the Country and Other Posthumous Prose Writings*. With notes by Max Brod, transl. E. Keiser, E. Wilkins (London: Secker and Warburg, 1954). For a sustained engagement on this topic, especially as it connects to themes in contemporary deconstructive philosophical approaches, see Jochen Schmidt, *Vielstimmige Rede vom Unsagbaren, Dekonstruktion, Glaube and Kierkegaards pseudonyme Literatur* (Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 2006).

<sup>648</sup> The third 'node' of aesthetic experience includes a portrayal of the position of twentieth-century materialisms as expressed in an interesting passage in Dawkin's obituary for his mentor William Hamilton. Noting the feeling and beauty of Hamilton's wish to be interred in the Amazon by beetles ("No worm for me, or sordid fly: rearranged and multiple, I will at last buzz from the soil like bees out of a nest—indeed, buzz louder than bees, almost like a swarm of motor bikes. I shall be borne, beetle by flying beetle, out into the Brazilian wilderness beneath the stars."), Taylor suggests: "...does not this example .... put paid to doubts about finding space for our aesthetic experience (of both beauty and the sublime) within an immanentist ontology?" (p. 606) Other examples of art, "...whose power seems inseparable from their epiphanic, transcendent reference" include Dante, Bach, Chartres Cathedral, but then there are also the post-Romantic 'counter-epiphanic' poets—Wordsworth, Eliot, Hardy— whose "subtler language allows us to manifest an order in things while leaving our ontological commitments relatively indeterminate" (P. 607). Taylor himself, he says, is not deciding the issue, "only to point out the considerations which weigh with each one of us, as we find ourselves leaning one way or another" (p. 607). 'Not deciding the issue', we might suggest here, aligns with Taylor's 'counter-epiphanic' dialogical portrayals to follow.

<sup>649</sup> "I want to understand this as stepping into wider, qualitatively different sense of inter-human solidarity. In this respect, the move is analogous to certain precedent ones in history,

Humean understanding of how we gained this crucial goal—having stepped out of earlier, narrower bonds into a ‘qualitatively different sense of inter-human solidarity’—is that humans begin with an innate sympathy, and this expands into larger circles of collaboration, first into ‘nations’ and ‘fraternité’ and then lands in globalization. As Taylor writes, “There is no sense of the qualitative break in this account, of the sense of acceding to the higher that we experience when we break from or relativize a narrower and lower belonging for a higher solidarity.”<sup>650</sup> The sense champions a notion of ordinary desire, and the longing for deeper metaphysical underpinnings is cast aside as farcical. Connections resonate from this Humean position with current sociobiological accounts. And, on the other hand, there is another immanent account from the Kantian tradition, which reacts against this bare naturalism to express moral motivation for such inter-human solidarity in an awe for the universalizing power of reason (*Achtung für das Gesetz*).

Then we have this quote from Hemingway and the anti-resolution:

“...a feeling of consecration to a duty toward all the oppressed of the world that would be as difficult and embarrassing to speak about as religious experience and yet it was as authentic as the feeling you had when you heard Bach, or stood in Chartres Cathedral or the Cathedral at Léon and saw the light coming through the great windows.”<sup>651</sup>

Taylor responds, “I don’t want to pursue this point to an utterly convincing

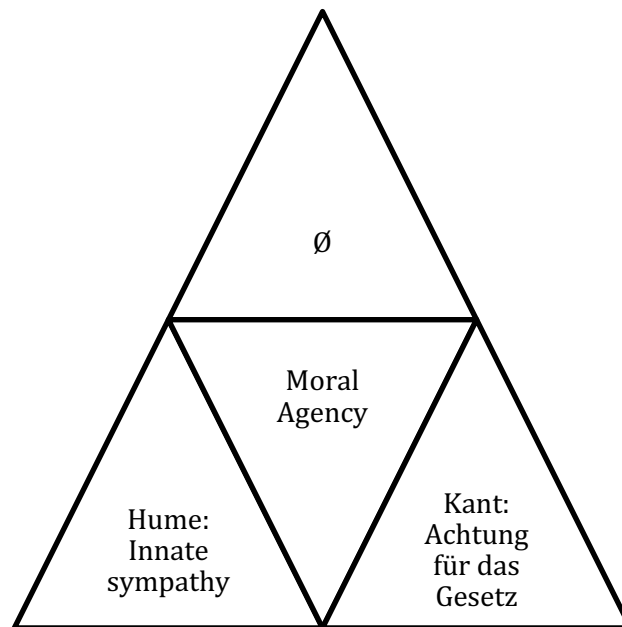
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inaugurated, for instance, by the Buddha, by Stoicism, by the New Testament preaching (‘In Christ is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female’), and by Muhammad.”

<sup>650</sup> *A Secular Age*, 608.

<sup>651</sup> *A Secular Age*, 608, quoted in Piers Brendon, *The Dark Valley* (New York: Knopf, 2000), p. 405

conclusion. More pertinently, I don't think I can. I just want to identify the kind of issue at stake here: whether our moral or ethical life, properly understood, can really be captured by the accounts which fit with our favoured ontology."<sup>652</sup> What, in the end, causes and then underpins the shift to such expanded rings of solidarity "remains unresolved to general satisfaction." So, at the nodal point of moral agency, in a dialogical movement from Hume (and sociobiological accounts) and to Kant, we have two points in a triangulation. We might represent them visually like this:



Both fail to fully satisfy, but the Hemingway quote is juxtaposed, pointing toward some source beyond ( $\emptyset$ ) for inter-human solidarity in the ontologically indeterminate register of an aesthetic experience of light in a cathedral. So, what's behind or what justifies this "qualitative shift in the space of solidarity, *together with the sense of moral ascent* remains unresolved...", Taylor parenthetically

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<sup>652</sup> *A Secular Age*, 608-9.

inserts, "(though I have my own—theistic—hunches)." <sup>653</sup>

The next nodal point around which the cross-pressured debates swirl is the aspiration to 'wholeness'. The legacy of the drive to Reform returns with its excarnating dualisms and repeated movements to re-synthesize. That is, the lines of synthesis between the 'double harmony' of mind/body and individual/social whole are drawn again here as Taylor sets disparate modern aspirations to 'wholeness' in dialog. This repetition manifests in two eras of the 'debate' in this section, first between the Radical Enlighteners and Romantics, and then analogous positions in the mid-twentieth century expressivist revolution.

Goethe and Schiller, as the metonymic interlocutors for Romanticism here, protested the 'disciplined, buffered self' as the ideal developed through the Enlightenment to foreground the formal powers of abstract thought, rule-positing, etc. The ideal appeared to the Romantics to dismiss the role of feeling and an experience of beauty, and their solution was not to negate formal Reason, but to move toward a higher stage, as Taylor describes Schiller, "in which the drive to form and the drive to content (*Stofftrieb*) are harmoniously united in 'Play'. And so the pursuit of human wholeness on this picture includes spontaneity, creativity, and the significance of bodily experience." <sup>654</sup>

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<sup>653</sup> *A Secular Age*, 609. We also find a parallel triangulation in his more recent *Language Animal*, pp. 204-212. He makes the point there that whatever ethical vision one adopts, it wants to transform toward higher levels of living it out (p. 213), and then he asks whether this pursuit of the moral source is just a trigger or whether one can actually get in touch with it. This is a question he leaves open: "The point is that we frequently have a sense, in recognizing these sources, of which it is" (e.g., the Christian can be motivated by the sense that she is loved by God, etc.). What might get to the source, Taylor suggests, is the post-Romantic epiphanic poetics ("...but this is often ontically very indefinite") and there is always doubt accompanied by faith (p. 214 ff).

<sup>654</sup> *A Secular Age*, 609.

The 'Radical Enlighteners'—à la Bentham, Helvétius, Holbach—also aspire to wholeness, but locates it in the fulfillment of ordinary human desire, sexual or otherwise. The 'higher drives', however, are dropped from view since they supplant the ordinary with fantastically elevated utopias. Supported by a picture of maximal instrumental ('disengaged') reason, the negative effects of the quotidian fulfillments can be overcome through the rational organization of society.<sup>655</sup>

For the Romantics, this simply leaves sensuality to debased forms, whereas they depict an undone dualism between mind and body or ethic and motivation in a deeper synthesis through a transformation of desire. Desire is thus infused with a higher meaning, and this yields beauty. For the Enlightenment, that pursuit is the dangerous archaic remnant of a pre-scientific era, which threatens to sideline the sensual in the name of 'higher' goals.<sup>656</sup> So to the question of wholeness, Taylor asks, who is right? The Radical Enlightenment accepts the reduction in their recovery of the body from the ethical suppression; the Romantics want to undo the disenchanting reduction altogether. It's Schiller's position, Taylor points out, that has repeatedly fueled protest movements, and yet the 'dashed hopes of wholeness' in, e.g., releasing widening spheres of solidarity through a recovery of sexual

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<sup>655</sup> *A Secular Age*, 610.

<sup>656</sup> Taylor reaches back at this point in the dialog to the *longue durée* context of Reform, to show how these two positions of modern unbelief repeat attempts to overcome the 'wounds' of post-Axial, ethical suppression of ordinary flourishing. On the one hand, the materialist-utilitarian view revokes the ethical suppression and reinforces the disenchantment (desire is just desire), whereas the Romantic tendency was to seek to undo the disenchantment and ethical suppression (p. 613). This is why, with respect to the latter, we find a nostalgia for pagan ritual and an introduction of the category of the 'Dionysian'. *A Secular Age*, pp. 611-13.

freedom have also become apparent.<sup>657</sup>

The two positions partially negate each other in dialog, but here the Christian theopolitical position enters as a kind of solvent, preventing short-circuited synthetic utopias from false fusions. Since, while the incarnating forces of Christian Reform 'sidelined the body', there also returns kernel of an agapeic network. Central to Christianity is also, he writes, "the hope of an ultimate reconciliation of humans to God, and that in the (resurrected) body," and he continues:

Each side thus turns around and makes the accusation of unrealizable utopia to the other. Unbelievers scoff at the Christian parousia as a pipe-dream. But as long as Enlighteners keep alive hopes of their own harmony, they will find Christians (and lots of others) warning them against unreal Utopianism.<sup>658</sup>

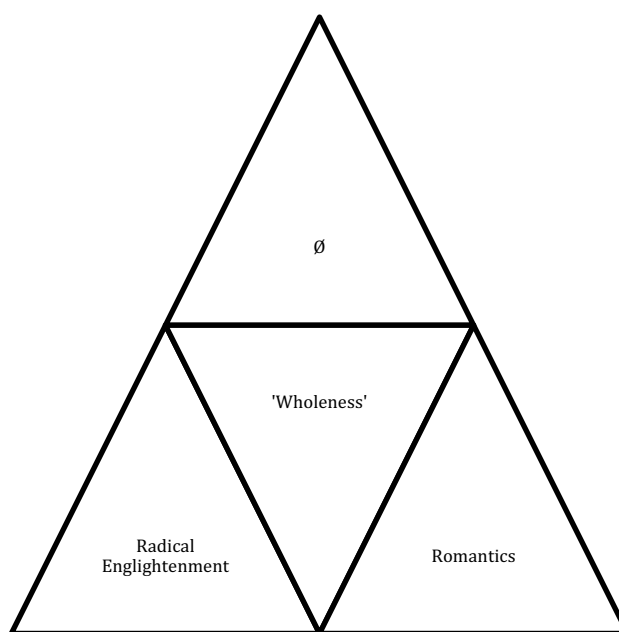
So for many today, the materialist-utilitarian picture lacks sufficient depth, and it's the felt-need for greater wholeness that has driven people to the streets in protest movements, and yet the double harmonies on this picture have also atrophied, returned in new forms, and failed again (sometimes on a colossal scale). The point here is not that these visions fail to entice today (they certainly do), but rather that each position presumes and fails to achieve a once-and-for-all harmonic state by their various routes. And in the destabilized in-between space of these two giant modern moral-spiritual families, the double-harmony of Christian *Parousia* as the yet-unrealized utopia appears in an unargued-for portrayal as a third way. Again,

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<sup>657</sup> *A Secular Age*, 616.

<sup>658</sup> *A Secular Age*, 616.

we could depict the discursive triangulation like so:



The null point ( $\emptyset$ ) of *Parousia* is the solvent force against unreal utopia in the presentation of its open-ended vision. And this interjected open-endedness is reinforced in a climactic series of searching rhetorical questions at the end of ‘Cross Pressures’ that—despite failed utopias—build plausibility for the perpetual aspiration to wholeness. To those, e.g., who might abandon hopes of harmony (like those following Freud and Schopenhauer): “What more modest hopes are left? And can one really bring oneself to abandon both these goals? Does not a great deal of our political activity take as its goal, if only as an idea of reason, a world order in which peoples live together in equality and justice? Does not a great deal of our efforts at healing take as a goal the wholeness of the person? How easily can we set these goals aside?”<sup>659</sup> If the aspiration to wholeness is hard to deny, and if

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<sup>659</sup> *A Secular Age*, 617. Taylor thus adds a fourth option here as well. The failure of syntheses also provokes some thinkers—Freud, following Schopenhauer—to the view that synthesis itself as psychic harmony is impossible, and only antithesis remains.



both the utilitarian and Romantic impulses fail to fully satisfy, then one remaining option is to reside in tension between current disunities and a mobilizing drive to realize a too-soon harmonic state. Herein lies perhaps, for Taylor, one of the most critical roles for sustained religious (theopolitical) visions in modernity, since it can uniquely source a practice of not-fully-realized hope in a future wholeness.

Granted, there is a significant difference between this analytical dialectic and the kind of poetic expression we can locate in Pound and Eliot. It is not necessarily intended, in the course of his dialogical portrayals, that we *feel* the longing for wholeness, but rather that we grasp this is *as* an experience, to which most North Atlantic people can relate. But if that's the case, can we say that it intends to bring us into contact with a moral source? My hypothesis is that it does, but perhaps we should distinguish between the kind of visceral 'of the gut' contact with a source and a contact of cognitive assent. These, in fact, may work in a complimentary way: remove barriers to seeing, create language for the appearance of 'new' things (or recovered old things), and you may be more likely to experience a change of heart. This seems to be the goal, in fact, when we read at the end of *Sources* that the language he's crafted may be used by poets and other visionaries racing ahead.<sup>660</sup> In the cross-pressures of *A Secular Age* we see how, for Taylor, this kind of triangulation fleshes itself out.

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<sup>660</sup> *Sources of the Self* also begins with a statement that there may be a way of arguing towards a source; his examples are Dostoyevsky and a discussion by Kolakowski in his *Religion*. "But," he writes, "this level of argument, concerning what our [moral ontological] commitments really amount to, is even more difficult ... I will probably not be able to venture very far out on this terrain in the following. It would be sufficient, and very valuable, to be able to show something about the tentative, hesitating, and fuzzy commitments that we moderns actually rely on. The map of our moral world, however full of gaps, erasures, and blurrings, is interesting enough" (*Sources of the Self*, p. 10-11). See Leszek Kołakowski, *Religion* (London: Fontana, 1982).

### C.3.4 Concluding Synthesis: The Leap

We've seen that the network of *agape* is one fragilized vision in a supernova of belief and unbelief, and yet it remains a potent metaphor for an ideal, unrealizable sociality. Then we saw how the network of *agape* can emerge indirectly over against other theopolitical options in a dialogical interplay as though it were Taylor's philosophical-poetic triangulation. But why this negating rhetorical strategy and not another more obvious path as one would find in the political-theological treatises cited in part B? Or, conversely, why not leave it to the poets and liturgists? It turned out that Taylor's language philosophy provided rationale at-length for this strategy, even though he never announces the connection between his own style and the depicted theopolitical vision. We've seen how narrative and poetics work in the discursive environment of his own corpus, and how Taylor's own philosophy of language might prescribe the strategy he performs. At the end of the last section, I recalled the idea of approaching a Source—or a new convincing intuition—through a removal of blockages of vision and a reframing, which is an important feature of narrative as well as poetics. Tying these observations together, I want to conclude briefly with a suggestion that the reframing and clarified vision establishes the space for a Kierkegaardian 'leap'.

Via the dismantling of 'closed world structures', the reader has been invited to an authentic Jamesian open space where one can sense (and less-easily foreclose) the various, cross-pressured forces of 'spin' toward positions grounded in immanence and/or in search of transcendence. In our second look at the corruption (Reform)

narrative, we located moments of insight in which the network of agape burst out indirectly in a set of non-assertive portrayals. Then, in a series of dilemmas beginning in ‘cross pressures’ we made the case that Taylor takes a cue from modernist, counter-epiphanic poets to generate a frame of experience—in these cases, the dilemmas surrounding aspirations to beauty, benevolence, and wholeness—and triangulate his personally-indexed theopolitical vision as a kind of null-point in the dialog.<sup>661</sup> If the analogy holds, then we should expect the possibility of re-framing and a ‘direct’ experience of a new convincing intuition, beyond argumentation for the theopolitical vision, and on the basis of the, e.g., rhetorical questions posed that provoke the search.

It’s the direct reframing experience, which we can identify with a ‘leap’ by which the reader may be compelled to adopt a new outlook or attitude. There is a clear conceptual affinity here—even if there is not an explicit citation—of Kierkegaard’s notion of the ‘leap’ as he articulated the concept in *Philosophical Fragments*.<sup>662</sup> The idea there is that you have to leap ahead of the reasons you can articulate.<sup>663</sup> The practice of a universal benevolence or an aspiration to wholeness (as above in

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<sup>661</sup> We’ve looked primarily Taylor’s particular rhetorical strategies in dialog, but deep in his philosophical anthropology ‘dialog’ is also a condition of the experience of identity (cf. my discussion in C.1). What we have therefore is a de-centered, apophatic approach for a de-centered notion of the self which is malleable to re-framed visions of the Good (the moral source). Taylor’s performative subtler language thus can expect transformation by re-framing experience, since humans are naturally de-centered ‘language animals’, fundamentally vulnerable to re-framing.

<sup>662</sup> We could also point to Kierkegaard’s definition of ‘truth’ and ‘faith’ in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. ‘Truth’ is “an objective uncertainty held fast in an appropriation process of the most passionate inwardness,” which is another way of saying ‘faith’ (p. 171). In this passage, Kierkegaard (akin to Taylor) makes the distinction between this inward adoption of the infinite (i.e., the embrace of “the objective uncertainty with all the passion of the infinite”) and the ‘indifferent’ objectivity of mathematical propositions. Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Crumbs*, trans. Alastair Hannay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

<sup>663</sup> Here we find, perhaps, a conceptual affinity with John Caputo who takes up Derrida’s iteration of the ‘leap’ in the theology of ‘perhaps’. (see my discussion on Caputo in B.2.2).

C33), for instance, may be access points to understanding one way this can happen. One can get attracted, viscerally, to models of a selfless life or harmonic sociality, and then overtime come to find the right language for the 'ontology' take that makes sense of the practice. What can happen then is a leap by an enactment; the same can be said for the network of agape—a potentially attractive sociality.<sup>664</sup>

To anticipate a relevant question, does Taylor receive the 'leap' as a fideistic acquiescence to subjectivity? If the fideism here is defined as accepting a proposition (e.g., the reality of an eschatological kingdom of heaven) on the basis of non-knowledge or an irrational impulse, then the answer is no. To see why, we could start to make the point by returning to the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*:

If I can grasp God objectively, then I do not have faith, but just because I cannot to this I must have faith. If I wish to stay in my faith, I must take constant care to keep hold of the objective uncertainty, to be 'on the 70,000 fathoms deep' but still have faith.<sup>665</sup>

The emphasis here, in fact, appears to be not the final adoption of particular dogma, but rather an appropriate *disposition* of openness. That is, the awareness of the cosmological scale and existence-grounding paradox of belief in God, presses one to a decision that must be very unlike the dispassionate acceptance of

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<sup>664</sup> Such a 'leap' comes through a 'seating', as Taylor describes in *The Language Animal*. The example he gives in this context is the language of 'cool' that can get ascribed to certain modes of life. See, p. 234.

Taylor also includes here an interesting discussion on Roger Scruton's depiction of 'absolute music' as an example of how we can be afforded a different attitude that can surprise and even shape us, and it may yet be very hard to know how and why (246) since some vision may be imparted or some emotion, but without intentional object of the usual semanticization.

<sup>665</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. and ed., Alastair Hannay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 172.

a mathematical proposition. The claim adopted in faith is about everything and therefore remains appropriately 'uncertain'. Holding a disposition of openness is a strong theme in *A Secular Age* and one also finds it in his writing more explicitly about the Catholic church in modernity, and it is the backbone of Taylor's recurring critique of moralism.<sup>666</sup> This is a practice of faith for one who dwells in the Jamesian open space. And this notion of faith, as Taylor argues in his essay "Reason, Faith, and Meaning" is not opposed to reason, but rather works with it, albeit holding the same open-endedness that is found in any hermeneutically-similar fusion of horizons. Furthermore, the *Fides quaerens intellectum* invoked here is not concerning merely theological enterprises, but rather in an analogous way extends in application to the creative component in all intellectual enterprises.<sup>667</sup>

And my argument here has been that, via moments of insight and dialogical triangulation, the reader is invited to its own (strange) vision. The *ideal* is ultimately indeterminate, but nevertheless *real* as well since it is (theoretically, eventually) graspable by everyone. Taylor's moral realism is often captured in metaphors of movement within moral 'maps', 'landscapes', or 'forests' containing more-or-less adequate signposts and guides. One's search or 'quest' (MacIntyre) for the ideal is made by feeling one's way around this landscape. With any ultimate

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<sup>666</sup> Cf. Taylor, *A Catholic Modernity?*

<sup>667</sup> With respect to the theoretical imagination evident, for example, in paradigm shifts (Kuhn), Taylor writes that we can speak of these as a kind of faith: "There is, in other words, a similarity of structure which can be discerned in all uses of the imagination which leap ahead of and set the path for more certain knowledge. Of course, this structure is visible in an impoverished mode in the scientific 'hunch'. The impoverishment resides in the fact that the act of faith is not in the general case in God, in the love and fidelity of one (a Being? But God is not really a Being) who is capable of these ... correspondingly, our faith emerges from an is nourished by our whole sense of what is of ultimate importance in life..." Taylor, "Reason, Faith, and Meaning," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers* Vol. 28, Iss. 1, Article 2 (2011).

choice, as Taylor writes, “our over-all sense of things anticipates or leaps ahead of the reasons we can muster for it.”<sup>668</sup> We ‘discover’ what the ideal is by feeling our way around; for moderns, epiphanic art is an important mode of ‘search’. With any ultimate choice, a kind of ‘leap of faith’ is required. Despite the ultimate indeterminacy of the self’s movement toward the Good in some moral vision.

The rhetorical practice which has come to the fore here in our examination of Taylor’s own ‘subtler language’ in narrative and poetics exhibits the character of performative uses of language that are analogous with the apophatic manipulation of language to refer beyond. It was via the indirect path of moments of insight or dialogical negation, which triangulates Taylor’s personal vision (the theistic ‘hunch’) of the network of agape, that the transcendent position may possibly open for others. Does Taylor succeed in his negation, or does he reintroduce a new codification and moralism? In the next section, we will address this by taking a look at the imperative. What might it look like to enact a network of agape?

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<sup>668</sup> *A Secular Age*, 550.

## C.4 The Practice of Agapeic Theopolitics

In our discussion above on ‘apophatic parallels’ (B12) I noted that an apophatic theopolitics would articulate a negative and yet constructive relation between the two kingdoms, which I referred to as a ‘substantial negation’. The apophatic theopolitical relation was ‘substantial’ since the dissonance between kingdom of man and God could open a field of possible action in which one may really enact social-political agency and yet it was a ‘negation’ inasmuch as this agency—the way of life inspired by the theopolitical vision—could never be identified with a realization of the vision on pain of its own corruption as a colluding Constantinian form of action. Along with the other post-X negative political theologies surveyed in part B, I want to argue here that the mystical aspect in Taylor’s approach is apparent in the imperative, in which he ‘reduces positive content’, and at the same time, he resists sectarian retreat from the political.

In *A Secular Age* and other later writings Taylor begins to describe a disposition of openness as an essential trait for those moderns who seek to overcome divisive forces ubiquitously at play in varieties of liberal democracy. It’s this trait, which he comes to equate with Keats’ ‘negative capability’, that can extend one’s vision, empathy, compassion toward others.<sup>669</sup> The capacity for extending vision—as in narrative and poetry—is isolated in C41 as the key transformative goal of Taylor’s ‘apophatic theopolitics’, that is, his substantially negative imperative. In C42, then, we detail what, according to Taylor, pockets of alternative sociality might look like as informed by the network of agape. We provide models of communion and

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<sup>669</sup> Cf. Taylor’s essay on William James, *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited*.

compassion—*L'Arche*, *Médecins Sans Frontières*, and *Taizé*, Matteo Ricci.—that demonstrate a practice of ‘substantial negation’.

#### C.4.1 The Negative Capability

In his Reform Master Narrative, power ultimately proves too tempting for the church, and so the history of the West is replete with ‘Constantinianism’ (or, ‘Christendom’) and the imposition of spiritual discipline on the individual/society in a process of ‘Reform’ rather than a seeking after the Kingdom.<sup>670</sup> But the vision of this Kingdom retains its force and it clearly has current, positive political implications for Taylor beyond being the origin from which our present social/political (not to mention moral/spiritual) lives descend. Such a conflation of the ‘two Kingdoms’ neglects the hyper-reality nature of the network of agape, which rejected codification and moralism (C23), in ways reminiscent of an Eckhartian ethic. Taylor’s twin injunctions—explored below—both to anti-code and expanded vision make up a substantially negative capability. Taylor’s suggestion for how to resist the temptation to code, or perhaps, the temptation to short-circuit the kingdom of God consists in the development of this capacity.

We return to the mustard seed parable, which Taylor commented on in his short

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<sup>670</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 735-36. Taylor invokes Augustine’s expressions of the city of God and the earthly city, and he writes that his story throughout the book has been about the ways in which the drive to Reform colluded those realms. “To carry through on this Reform required that one define a way of life open to everyone which would amount to such an integral fulfillment; and this couldn’t help but bring about a definition of the demands of Christian faith closer into line with what is attainable in this world, with what can be realized in history. The distance between the ultimate City of God and the properly Christian-conforming earthly one has to be reduced.”



essay, “Shapes of Faith Today,” as well as in other essays and lectures,<sup>671</sup> to recall his question: how should we imagine the ‘growth of the kingdom of God’? The answer Taylor submits entails the organic and spontaneous movement of the network of agape. The mustard plant bursts out in perhaps unsettling ways, very much unlike any ‘lasting structure’. Given the analysis above, we might elaborate that ‘lasting structure’ as both stultifying code and bordered sociality. In the place of code and borders, what Taylor offers is poetic attention (Keats’s ‘negative capability’) and *kenosis*.<sup>672</sup>

Codes are rigid, closed systems. They have a necessarily limited scope and thus fail to fully account for all varieties of human experience.<sup>673</sup> And since humans and their situations change, what’s needed—to combat the ‘code fetishism’ that permeates especially contemporary North Atlantic political culture—is an expansion of moral vision or attention. Taylor elaborates on this approach of openness to new, unforeseen situations with reference to Keats’s sparse and idiosyncratic notion of a ‘negative capability’:

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<sup>671</sup> Taylor, “Shapes of Faith Today,” *Renewing the Church in a Secular Age; Holistic Dialogue and Kenotic Vision*, ed. João J. Vila-Chã (Washington D.C.: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2016); cf. Taylor, “The Church Speaks – To Whom?” *Disjunctions in a Secular Age*; See also his lecture “The Life of the Church in a Secular Age,” presented by The World Conference of Catholic University Institutions of Philosophy, April 30, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=152Ng0qYRIM>.

<sup>672</sup> Regarding the fundamentally kenotic nature of Taylor’s notion of transcendence, as well as Taylor’s theological impulse from Ivan Illich, see Colorado, *Transcendence, Kenosis, and Enfleshment*.

<sup>673</sup> Cf. the discussion in C.2.3., and also, to elaborate on this rigidity on the moral-political plane, Taylor further discusses in ‘Dilemmas 2’ the ‘code-fixation’ (e.g., codes, institutions, rules) that crowds much of contemporary moral-political thought but which subtract from the discussion, the deeper moral motivations that may be needed to carry through such expansive humanist codes. Hence, the major battle in philosophy between utilitarians and (post)Kantians: they agree that there must be a single principle from which you can derive all obligatory actions, such as: via utility calculations, or universals as a collectively reasoned agreement about what’s right (Habermas), or what’s right is what could be justified to the affected (Scanlon), (*A Secular Age*, 704).

This means: not to let our own way of grasping and evaluating people and their situations, in which we are inevitably deeply invested, screen out the human reality of the other, and blind us to it. This capacity overlaps with the ‘negative capability’ of which Keats speaks...<sup>674</sup>

This capacity is a habituated skill, like a culturally-saturated reflex, embedded in an ethical vision, and not the natural emotive-instinct of the Humean paradigm. So, how can we expect to overcome our own blinders, adopt the negative capability, and get a better purchase on ‘the human reality of the other’? For Taylor, the approach toward (or ‘articulation’ of) moral sources might be metaphorically described as the pilgrim search and an openness to new horizons, necessarily in dialog with others; it cannot mean finally-comprehensive account, since it is an intrinsically fraught, circuitous, and never-fully-completed movement toward understanding. The break-out movement of agapeic network intrinsically incorporates a kind of solidarity-as-pilgrims. What we can aim for is expanded vision, and that looks like—in Taylor’s account of *ad hominem* moral reasoning—a Gadamerian fusion of horizons.<sup>675</sup> In this way moral code is not

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<sup>674</sup> LA, 202. Keats uses this term in a letter (1818) to his brothers to describe a quality he admired in Shakespeare. ‘Negative Capability’, he writes, is “when man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after the fact and reason—Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetrarium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half knowledge.” Sidney Colvin, Ed., “XXIV—To George and Thomas Keats,” *Letters of John Keats* (London, MacMillan and Co., 1891), p. 48.

For a helpful discussion on his concept, see David Parker, Sebastian Gardner, *Ethics, Theory and the Novel* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994), p 60-1. The authors make the point that whatever ‘univocal [moral] insights’ expressed in a Shakespeare play, for Keats, his greatness is in the fact that these are thoroughly dramatized; not “‘under erasure’ in a post-modernist sense, but because they are always being brought into a searching dialogic interrelationship with other dramatised insights and affirmations” (p. 60).

<sup>675</sup> In his essay, “Explanation and Practical Reason” Taylor addresses the context of persuasion now and the shallower relativisms inspired by modern models for moral reasoning across differences. The problem of bridging differences and persuasion amidst supernova-like diversity,

entirely jettisoned, but intuition and experience are primary, since the interplay between various human experiences, encounters with others, and traditions, and the never-ending hermeneutical process this entails, which can take any encoded path into new and surprising trajectories.<sup>676</sup> As Taylor reflects in *A Catholic Modernity?*, there is no “widening of the faith without an increase in the variety of devotions and spiritualities and liturgical forms and responses to Incarnation.”<sup>677</sup> This entails a simultaneous attention to the ways our vision can be blocked as well as an openness to self-transformation in the pursuit of understanding the other.<sup>678</sup>

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appears like an impossible task, and yet the imperative to bridge—that is, to morally deliberate across cultural, political, religious lines—remains for liberal democracy. This is a very difficult task, but it’s also compounded when you adopt models of modern moral philosophy.

Taylor’s suggestion is that we can in fact reason across deep boundaries, through what he calls ‘reasoning from transition’. Such arguments necessitate an empathetic pursuit of understanding the other (which is why this is ‘ad hominem’ reasoning), which can in turn change one’s starting self-understanding—as he also writes in an essay on Gadamer: “If understanding the other is to be construed as fusion of horizons and not as possessing a science of the object, then the slogan might be: no understanding the other without a changed understanding of the self.” (Taylor, “Understanding the Other,” *Dilemmas and Connections*, p. 37). From within one’s pursuit of understanding, certain inconsistencies or anomalies (to take the language of Kuhnian paradigm shift), can become apparent to both interlocutors and effect a movement toward better (though never final) clarity. This is a key difference between the explanatory language of natural science and the horizon-fusing pursuit of *Verständigung* in human affairs.

<sup>676</sup> And naturally, for Taylor, such an openness—holding the tension—and the essential place of dialog also obtains not only with respect to philosophically-opposed interlocutors, but also within intramural debates within Christianity itself. Trailing a portrayal of a dilemma surrounding competing notions of human transformation between humanists and the ‘immanent counter-Enlightenment’ (Nietzsche), Taylor asserts that the question remains open, which position can overcome the dilemma (in sum, of going beyond ordinary flourishing and self-mutilating, or lowering the bar for human transformation and missing other key human aspirations that can require self-sacrifice). Here in “Dilemmas I” as he asks whether the Christian faith, to which he subscribes, might have the solution, and he responds that the full transformation is never completed in history, “So, Christians don’t really ‘have the solution’ to the dilemma, in the sense that we usually take this, and that for two reasons: first, the direction they point to cannot be demonstrated as right; it must be taken on faith; and second, related to this, we can’t exhibit fully what it means, lay it out in a code or a fully-specified life form, but only point to the exemplary lives of certain trail-blazing people and communities [...] The wrong categories often come more ‘naturally’ to us. So we operate with a certain amount of unclarity and confusion. This is the condition of doing theology” (p. 642-3).

<sup>677</sup> Taylor, *A Catholic Modernity?*, 8.

<sup>678</sup> For a helpful theological (Augustinian) elaboration on Taylor’s idea of essential ‘diversity’ in self-understanding (as part of being in the image of God), see Jean Bethke Elshtain, “Augustine and Diversity,” *A Catholic Modernity? Charles Taylor’s Marianist Award Lectures* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.), 95-7.

‘Kenotic’ is one way to describe the move Taylor makes here, from both vertical and horizontal directions.<sup>679</sup> Vertically, it is the self-emptying of God in enfleshment and Incarnation that conditions the (horizontal) agapeic possibility of self-less communion. From both directions, then, the self is pictured as de-centered, or ‘dispossessed’ as Colorado describes it, since both the endless pursuit of transcendence and openness in interchange with others can effect a change of identity. So, kenosis here would refer to self-renunciation, or un-selfing, in a manner reminiscent of elements in Buddhist spirituality and also of the decentering, ego-losing function of the ‘Good’ in the philosophy of Iris Murdoch.<sup>680</sup> As Taylor tells it—to add detail to a point above about the hoped-for synthesis of self-other in the network of agape—the Christian account entails the paradoxical self-renunciation, or an ‘aiming beyond life’ that ultimately re-affirms human flourishing.<sup>681</sup> And the idea is that such a decentering Source, may be one way to remove the scales, and move towards getting a better purchase on our view of others and see people with clarity. This, Taylor argues, is the unique and necessary habit, which is the church’s responsibility to cultivate, and which our contemporary democracies desperately require. For while most moderns almost can’t help but intend maximal inclusion, equality, and philanthropy, we will always have blinders that exclude and limit our solidarities, unless—Taylor is

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<sup>679</sup> Cf. Carlos Colorado has made this connection in his PhD thesis, *Transcendence, Kenosis and Enfleshment* (2009) and also in his “Transcendent Sources and the Dispossession of the Self,” in Carlos D. Colorado and Justin D. Klassen, eds., *Aspiring to Fullness in a Secular Age* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2014), 73-92.

<sup>680</sup> Taylor makes an explicit connection here to insights in Buddhist teachings (*anatta*, ‘no-self’) in *A Catholic Modernity?* (p. 16), as well as in his reflection on the significance of Iris Murdoch’s thought on his own.

<sup>681</sup> Taylor, “Iris Murdoch and Moral Philosophy,” *Dilemmas and Connections*, 19. He writes, “Renouncing, aiming beyond life, not only takes you away but also brings you back to flourishing. In Christian terms, if renunciation decenters you in relation with God, God’s will is that humans flourish, and so you are taken back to an affirmation of this flourishing, which is biblically called *agape*.”

suggesting—we adopt practices that can help us open ourselves toward genuine mutual understanding.

In this way, the negative theological impulse might be seen as letting the object emerge out of this interplay, as though the author himself has minimal control over his own expressive act except as one participant in the polyphonic dialog. The de-centering is a kind of Eckhartian ‘detachment’, in which the object is seen as emerging out of the relationship in interspaces of tension. In contemporary forms of negative theology, categories of ‘gift’ (Derrida, Marion, Caputo), ‘event’, and ‘grace’ (Badiou) illustrate this point of self-emergence. While the object ‘emerges’, it’s never fully grasped. Where this meets apophatic *theopolitics*, in its non-obscurantist sense, is in the never-ending process of dialog. Whatever emerges does so by the discursive relationship of one position to another, namely: by the mutual negation of less-satisfying utopian visions. That said, as the chaff falls away in the negation, instead of revealing a kernel of the utopian ideal, only new layers of chaff appear. The dialog, in other words, is never-ceasing, even though the hope remains that there is an increase in understanding, or some closer approximation to the kernel.

For Taylor, the movement of the kingdom (mustard seed example) is not limited to self-giving; compassion powered by communion. It is also something like an un-selling that removes blockages of vision to see others with greater clarity for greater capacity for compassion. He argues ultimately that a secular age needs Christianity, or more specifically, the Gospel, because even the most just and fair societies are prone to blocks of vision, since they are bound to operate according

to ‘rules’ and ‘generalities’ that may exclude some person or group. The kingdom of God, for Taylor, is the breakthrough of structures for a better love of the stranger. An important point to grasp here at the end, for those critical of the preservation in his accounts of the lingering importance of religion (and especially Christian spirituality) in modernity, is that Taylor’s theopolitical vision is ostensibly not about a hermeneutical end-run around modernity; nor is it an open door for the recovery of Christendom or ‘political religion’.<sup>682</sup> Taylor’s apophatic theopolitics, as I’ve outlined it in this thesis, follows a thread he sees in Dostoyevsky’s as well as Kierkegaard’s vision. For Dostoevsky (as for Kierkegaard) “healing grace lies beyond the modern identity, not anterior to it.”<sup>683</sup> To complete our analysis of Taylor’s apophatic theopolitics, the following section provides an account of the models that are foregrounded in Taylor’s writings for their capacity toward a substantially negative practice.

#### C.4.2 Models

What might a substantially negative practice look like? If Christian spirituality can source such a thing, it should for Taylor apparently—given the above—embody a disposition of openness, something akin to Keats’s ‘negative capability’, and exhibit a recovery of pre-‘excarnated’ forms of an enfleshed practical ethic. At an endpoint in the Reform narrative, when ‘official Christianity’ is depicted as

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<sup>682</sup> In an early critique of *A Secular Age*, Stanley Hauerwas and Romand Coles argued that Taylor’s use of the transcendence / immanence distinction “may produce habits of a Christianity that still longs to be a civilizational order” in, “‘Long Live the Weeds and the Wilderness Yet’: Reflections on *A Secular Age*,” *Modern Theology* 26:3 (July 2010), 350. See also fn. 16.

<sup>683</sup> *A Secular Age*, 442, 451ff.

imbibing and practicing excarnated forms that locate religious life ‘in the head’, there are apparent in contemporary Christian practices lingering and sometimes hard-to-account-for returns to the festive, to pilgrimage, and “the continuing importance of ‘corporal works of mercy’”—all signs pointing to a kenotic, agapeic ethic, or of both communion and compassion.<sup>684</sup> To gain a sense for this, Taylor provides numerous contemporary examples throughout his later writings and lectures including *A Secular Age* a precursor lecture *A Catholic Modernity?*. We’ll sketch two of examples here: Matteo Ricci and the *Taizé* community.

In *A Catholic Modernity?* Taylor uses the example of Matteo Ricci to provide an analogy of how Catholics might envision an interpretive stance toward secular modernity, which may help avoid the twin pitfalls of either ‘boosting’ or ‘knocking’ the age *en bloc* and instead take on a hermeneutical sensibility, which I claim, is analogous to the ‘negative capability’.<sup>685</sup> The example, at first glance, may be counterintuitive. Matteo Ricci was a sixteenth-century Italian Jesuit who established, after decades of failed attempts, the first Jesuit mission in the China of the Ming dynasty.<sup>686</sup> Biographer Michela Fontana describes his work as

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<sup>684</sup> *A Secular Age*, 554. “The issue here is not how many positive invocations of the body we hear; these abound in many forms of atheist materialism, as also in more Liberal Christianity. The issue is whether our relation to the highest—God for believers, generally morality for unbelieving Aufklärer—is mediated in embodied form, as was plainly the case for parishioners ‘creeping to the Cross’ on Good Friday in pre-Reformation England. Or looking to what moves us towards the highest, the issue is to what degree our highest desires, those which allow us to discern the highest, are embodied, as the pity captured in the New Testament verb ‘splangnizesthai’ plainly is.”

<sup>685</sup> ‘Boosters’ of modernity adopt wholesale a progressive narrative, which submits innovations in the faith to the bar of ‘exclusive humanism’, while ‘knockers’ may accept certain fruits of modernity like human rights but then otherwise defensively reject the slide from Christendom. See, *A Catholic Modernity?*, 37.

<sup>686</sup> A popular portrait of Ricci depicts him in a Mandarin robe in a classroom, fan in one hand and almost spinning a globe with the other, with Chinese characters on the wall behind him. He was the first European, in 1601, to be invited to the Forbidden City of Beijing by the Wanli Emperor, in part, to share his mastery of astronomy and Euclidian mathematics.

marking “the beginning of one of the most significant periods in the history of cultural exchange between East and West.”<sup>687</sup> In this vein, as a kind of hero of the Catholic faith (a nearly-sainted ‘Servant of God’), Taylor takes up the model of Ricci’s capacity to adapt to the foreign cultural landscape, to see the ‘seeds’ of the kingdom there, and discern points of connection to the Gospel to fruitfully serve in that context. To succeed in this otherwise hostile foreign context, Ricci needed to achieve a kind of distance from his originating form, adopt the host mindset and expression, and work within it to refine his own understanding and communicate the Gospel in a Mandarin context. The Ricci account gives us a sense of what it took to bridge the Gospel into a foreign context and achieving such a distance. In the case of modern Catholics reflecting on how to live an authentically Catholic spirituality now, ‘post-Christendom’, Taylor offers a narrative for zoomed-out view of modernity, not as the mere waning of Christianity, but as its transformation into new, unsettled forms. With respect to this distance, achieved in mining and liberating the past, Taylor writes:

We always understand something through something else, and, for us, this something else will almost always include our own past. In this, we’re still like the people on Dover Beach. But the issues of the past will be different. We stop asking for a moment whether there has been progress or degeneration, and we look at these two civilizations—say, Latin Christendom of five hundred years ago, and the West today—each as it stands on its own, with its greatness and misery, as though we had made a long voyage over the sea, rather than living in struggle through every wrenching year, on one side or the other of the battlefield, fortifications, or

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<sup>687</sup> Michela Fontana, *Matteo Ricci: A Jesuit in the Ming Court*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011), xiv.



barricades.<sup>688</sup>

In the 'Ricci-voyage' account we find "another way of living in our age," as time travelers, fascinated by the past, and mining its sources, to sustain life in what Taylor comes to call later the 'cross-pressures'.<sup>689</sup> And just as he will articulate the negative capability, the interpretive stance he articulates here entails a steady 'bewilderment'—a sense of holding open strange new possibilities, even as such mined sources re-emerge in the context of today.<sup>690</sup> And the re-emergence of practices such as pilgrimage, as well as the explosion of Pentecostal forms, for instance, are in a way re-enlivening an 'enfleshed' spiritual practice.<sup>691</sup>

*Taizé* exemplifies such a mining, and provides a key example for Taylor of the kind of communal, network-like faith practice that appears uniquely fit for the age. *Taizé* was founded in the 1940's by Brother Roger as a kind of contemporary monastic community that explores prayers, songs, and contemplative practices

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<sup>688</sup> Taylor, *A Catholic Modernity?*, 107. The reference to Dover Beach is a poem by Matthew Arnold, who wrote longingly of the receding tide of faith in modernity. Taylor makes use of the image to refer to this position of 'subtraction' as the 'view from Dover Beach.

<sup>689</sup> Taylor, *A Catholic Modernity?*, 108.

<sup>690</sup> "Imitating Ricci would involve taking a distance from our time, feeling as strange in it as he was arriving in China. But what we saw as children of Christendom was first, something terribly familiar - certain intimations of the Gospel, carried to unprecedented lengths; and secondly, a flat negation of our faith - exclusive humanism. But still, like Ricci, we were bewildered by this. We had to struggle to make a discernment, as he did. He wanted to distinguish between those things in the new culture which came from the natural knowledge we all have of God, and should be affirmed and extended, on one hand; and those practices which were distortions and would have to be changed on the other. And similarly, we are challenged to a difficult discernment, trying to see what in modern culture reflects its furthering of the Gospel, and what its refusal of the transcendent.

The point of my Ricci image is that this is not easy. And the best way to try to achieve it is to take at least some relative distance, in history if not in geography. The danger is that we not be sufficiently bewildered..." (*A Catholic Modernity?* pp. 35-6).

<sup>691</sup> Marsden makes the additional observation in his response to *A Catholic Modernity?* that Taylor's work itself can be read as taking the Ricci voyage he prescribes. See, George Marsden, "Matteo Ricci and the Prodigal Culture," *A Catholic Modernity? Charles Taylor's Marianist Award Lecture*, James L. Heft, S.M., ed. (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 83ff.

from various languages, cultural origins, and early Christian liturgical sources. Jason Santos's account of the community describes its origins this way: "Brother Roger and the ordinary yet committed brothers who joined him were characterized by intentionality, determination and adaptability. Through their life together, they have aimed at unapologetically incarnating the gospel; their story is marked by their care for the poor and love for their neighbor."<sup>692</sup>

In the years following World War II, the community became a kind of haven for orphaned children and otherwise displaced or marginalized people, and it also became a site and model for trans-confessional reconciliation, crossing Protestant and Catholic lines.<sup>693</sup> As of 2008, the community has been made up of about one hundred brothers from both Catholic and various Protestant backgrounds from around thirty nations.<sup>694</sup> The community is thus emblematic, for Taylor, of a form of Christian spiritual practice that both embodies the kind of Ricci-voyage in its reiterated ancient expressions of piety and also in its way of life, centered on the 'corporal works of mercy', hospitality, and openness across confessional boundaries. In *A Secular Age*, Taylor submits that such a mode of communal, transnational, trans-confessional practice will be attractive to those who want to link up with a greater source, but who also react against 'code-fetishism'.<sup>695</sup>

*Taizé* is just one among several other examples—like *L'Arche*, *Médecins Sans Frontières*, Amnesty International, etc.—but this brief sketch can suffice to show

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<sup>692</sup> Jason Brian Santos, *A Community Called Taizé: A Story of Prayer, Worship and Reconciliation* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2008), 54.

<sup>693</sup> Santos, *A Community Called Taizé*, 62-7.

<sup>694</sup> This information was gathered from movement's website: [www.taize.fr/en\\_article6525.html](http://www.taize.fr/en_article6525.html)

<sup>695</sup> *A Secular Age*, 509.

what each demonstrates for Taylor. That is, they demonstrate what it may look like for a practice that retains an open center, in not only their trans-confessionalism and fluid institutional form, but also in that ‘incarnational’ embodiment of an agapeic ethic of compassion—the corporal works of mercy—define the community. *L’Arche*, for example, centers itself around a dignifying community life with people who have down syndrome; *Médecins Sans Frontières* and Amnesty International, collaborate across national boundaries and confessions to localize care for the dispossessed and suffering. In the interstices of complex organizational relations such as these, the ‘ethical search’ mentality, or the ‘negative capability’—living in tension with difference—would appear a naturally necessary quality and perhaps this is why they appear in the constellation of examples of communal faith form that appear uniquely fit for dwelling in pluralized secular modernity. Again, a clear common defining feature among these otherwise disparate examples is the centrality of compassion and communion—new network-like diverse set of bodies, which define inclusion to the group, less by subscription to doctrinal or moral formulae and more by hospitality, invitation, and common pursuit of the otherwise neglected. This is real catholicity, as Taylor puts it in *A Catholic Modernity*—both in the sense of its open, universal scope and in the sense of the pursuit of total ‘wholeness’ of self and diverse others.<sup>696</sup> Of course, biblical and traditional sources remain part of the fabric their identity, too, as explicitly in the liturgical expressions that emerge from *Taizé*, but the ‘positive content’ of doctrinal assent is reduced, at least as a measure for belonging, and so they may remain decentered along the same

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<sup>696</sup> Taylor, *A Catholic Modernity?*, 7-8.

vertical and horizontal lines noted above. Inasmuch as they achieve the ends, they enact pockets of alternative sociality and demonstrate a substantially negative, code-resistant theopolitical vision.

## D. Conclusion

Charles Taylor tells the story of how it became possible for North Atlantic moderns to conceive of ourselves as autonomous individuals with deep interiority and unique expressive potential; how we relate to others in frameworks of ‘the economy’ or as a collectively consenting ‘people’ of democratic nationhood; how the West’s processes of ‘secularization’ really land us in a fractured, pluralized setting of contrasting moral and spiritual options. He puts these contrasting moral-spiritual options—e.g., utilitarian, Kantian, Nietzschean—in conversation and, by placing them in the common horizon of the genealogy and the emergence of new constructions of selfhood, society, and the political, he shows that none of us are free from the dilemmas that migrate through that same genealogy. The dilemmas are many, but as we saw, they all centered for Taylor around the aspiration to fullness (or wholeness) for the autonomous and expressive self in contexts of broader social bodies where such free individuals can belong. What I argued is that Taylor’s narration in *A Secular Age* goes beyond genealogy and idea-historical explanation. He has a moral and political vision that is shaped by the background of his own Catholic tradition, which he abbreviates as the ‘network of agape’. This is what I identified as his ‘theopolitical vision’, and it appeared throughout his narrative. The main goal of this investigation was to see whether and how his work also drifts into an apophatic mode. I hope to have demonstrated that if Taylor indeed seeks to build plausibility for his theopolitical vision, then it would go together ironically with its un-realizability as political program. And then, further, I hope to have shown that Taylor’s kingdom of God tends to be

expressed indirectly, even poetically, in a manner akin to the performative uses of negating God-talk in the apophatic tradition. That is, Taylor's is doubly an 'apophatic' theopolitical vision.

After introducing the basic structure of my thesis in A.1, we begin in A.2 to lay the conceptual groundwork for a 'theopolitics' as a religious symbol-infused social facet of a moral vision, which can be, e.g., enacted liturgically. This is distinguishable from political structure, practice, and 'social imaginary' as the symbolic background to forms of sociality more specific to the 'cultic' setting. In A.3 we extracted three characteristics of 'apophatic' theology (to eventually modify theopolitics in part B). Apophatic theology is a mode of speaking about God by *not* speaking about God, presuming the 'beyondness' of its transcendent referent; it exhibits a kind of performative use of language for the purpose of transforming the reader's vision; and the ethical practice of 'detachment' resists codification and highlights a basic feeling of commonality with all things.

In part B, we sought to develop the framework of 'apophatic theopolitics', first by contextualizing the investigation in B.1.1 by briefly looking at the longer history of political-theological reflection as a reflection on the relation between two orders. The admittedly generalized notion of 'two kingdoms' thus became an organizing motif, which we then used throughout to refer to a dialectical relationship between the political and the *theo*-political, even where an official *Zweireichelehre* was not in view for the particular political theologian (e.g., Moltmann). B.1.2 drew parallels between the 'kingdom of God' and apophatic modes of articulation, looking at models of anti-collusion such as in Bonhoeffer

and then looking at narrativity in post-liberal Hauerwas (and then Milbank) as a non-propositional strategy for articulating the kingdom of God as equated with the non-coersive, anti-‘Constantinian’ mode. For Caputo (as well as Vattimo) this took the shape of the ‘shock’ of art or a poetics ‘of the impossible’. Then, I glossed the apophatic ‘detachment’ ethic for theopolitics as ‘substantial negation’, by which I meant that forms of sociality and being-together are thought to emerge from the revised way of seeing, effected by the aesthetic work.

In B.2 we looked at the pictures of ‘alternative socialities’ presented by Jürgen Moltmann (Contrast Community) and John Caputo (Poetic Community). The former was developed in contrast to the violent failures of political religion in Europe of the world wars and viewed the kingdom of God as, e.g., a disruption of ‘friend-enemy’ thinking by a repetition of the cruciform pattern (‘The Way of Jesus Christ’). The latter, Caputo, on the other hand, expressed the poetic community in terms of the ‘weak force’ of hospitality and places it in an anticipatory register; that is, it’s a being-together that is always ‘to come’ in the theology of the event.

These (for my project) ‘prototypical’ examples of alternative socialities provided a contrast for the section following (B.3) where I understood ‘postsecular’ theopolitics of John Milbank and Slavoj Žižek as going beyond postmodern discourses of the language game or weak thought in order to construct a ‘theological materialism’ that re-mythologizes the political with a ‘strong’ ontological account. My case was that, since both remain in some sense humanist and pluralist, their amplified ontological accounts push them into apophatic modes. To show this, I performed a discourse analysis on their co-authored text

*The Monstrosity of Christ* to compare their theopolitical visions and competing narrations (B.3.1-2) as well as their versions of ‘substantial negation’. In this way B.3 completed the conceptual framework for reading Taylor’s apophatic theopolitics, since while Taylor never explicitly attempts to argue for an ‘ontology of transcendence’, this element of his Catholic faith reverberates in the background of his work, and as such his work operates with a ‘robust’ ontology.<sup>697</sup> As such, given his aligning penchant for anti-code, Taylor’s work—and especially his theopolitical notion of the ‘network of agape’—likewise drifts into apophatic modes.

By looking at the eclectic group of contemporary political theologians in B—from German Protestant Moltmann to post-modernist Catholic John Caputo, to postsecular ‘Protestant atheist’ Slavoj Žižek and Anglican John Milbank—I wanted to demonstrate in part C that Taylor’s twin negations have ties to modes of apophaticism traceable in these political theologies. This, of course, was undertaken from within my decidedly Protestant lens, which related the ‘two-kingdoms’ framework to the apophatic tradition.

After a portrayal of Taylor’s Catholic background, in C.1, we began to describe Taylor’s notion of the ‘network of agape’ as his own articulation of a Catholic theopolitical vision, inspired by theologians such as Ivan Illich. Then in C.2 we reconstructed Taylor’s genealogy of secularity as a narrative of ‘corruption’, tracing the agapeic network as the negative foil for the emergence of secular

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<sup>697</sup> See fn. 419.



modernity. This highlighted the ‘hyper-realism’ in Taylor’s account of early Christian communal practice as shaped, in part, by an ‘enfleshed’ ethic encapsulated in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. At the end of C.2 (C.2.3), we saw how Taylor’s broader moral philosophy likewise supports an apophatic tendency to viewing ‘moral sources’ as ‘hyper-real’ (*à la* Iris Murdoch).

Subsequently, in C.3 we followed the apophatic-theopolitical framework and looked at the ‘performative use of language’ primarily in *A Secular Age* but other more recent works as well such as *The Language Animal*. The case to be made here was that Taylor—unwittingly—adopts an apophatic mode, both in moments within his grand narrative as well as in his dialogical portrayals of contemporary moral-spiritual debate. The ‘apophatic’ mode here was identified with patterns of some of the great modern novelists (e.g., Mann, Dostoyevsky) and counter-epiphanic poets (e.g., Keats, Eliot), whom he often cites, to indirectly triangulate his vision. The network of agape enters, but only as a moment of contrast in the narrative, or else it’s the un-argued-for third position in the grand debates. This was, adjusting Colorado’s phrase, Taylor’s ‘discursive non-Constantinianism’.<sup>698</sup>

Taylor never makes a political-theological argument, but the network of agape functions in the narrative as a contrast to other visions of wholeness that try, and fail, to strike a once-and-for-all synthesis for the self in community. We saw this especially in his elaboration on the parable of the Good Samaritan: the outsider was moved ‘from the gut’ to act in compassion toward the stranger. For Taylor,

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<sup>698</sup> Colorado, “Transcendent Sources and the Dispossession of the Self,” *Aspiring to Fullness*, 91.

this was a paradigmatic model of the kingdom of God since it was an embodied ethic of compassion grounded in communion with others, and not of one's own choosing, but rather on the basis of God's own incarnational communion with man. Since this sociality is necessarily ecstatic, it can erupt spontaneously, and crosses social/ethnic/religious boundaries, and it cannot be harnessed or controlled by human intervention. The church historically, Taylor recounts, has tried to harness it, but (following Illich) at every point it corrupts the agapeic communion. In fact, we saw that a major part of the explanatory framework in *A Secular Age* included the 'drive to Reform' that corrupts and distorts the original communion by coercing membership, thus short-circuiting the realization of the kingdom of God.

Thus there was a twin set of negations at play. First, Taylor's theopolitical vision can never be mobilized into actual political life (i.e., it is thoroughly non-theocratic). But second, Taylor's literary-philosophical style of narration and dialog effects a triangulation of this very vision, which may provide the setting for a possible 'leap' of belief toward the vision. And this can impinge, indirectly, on actual modes of sociality and belonging that can resemble the agapeic network.

Taylor's own 'substantial negation' was subsequently the focus of C.4. There we investigated Taylor's imperative toward a detachment-ethic, which we identified with his reference to Keat's 'negative capability'. This, for Taylor, hints at an iconoclastic mode of seeing beyond hurdles of traditional structures of belonging and forms of sociality (e.g., the 'bundled' belongings his is own experience of

Quebecois 'Christendom'),<sup>699</sup> which Taylor recommends, that may coincide, conceptually overlap, or otherwise be inspired by the borderless sociality of the network of agape. The end of C.4. delved into a few of the models, which Taylor draws on (e.g., Taizé) as fitting modes of communal faith that resemble the agapeic network.

Why was this investigation important? This work has added to a very large body of existing commentary on Charles Taylor by providing a novel internal critique of his work as theopolitical. And, in a context of often inchoate utopic opinion, Taylor's apophatic, dialogical mode could potentially offer a path for further development toward a conception of political dialog that is at once inclusive of plurality and respecting of moral sources—self-aware of varieties in theopolitical vision at play in contemporary liberal democracies and thus improved by this self-awareness in its intrinsically interpretive processes. So, to conclude this thesis, we could make a suggestion for further consideration that pulls together the thread of Taylor's apophatic theopolitics with another question that began our investigation: how might we negotiate particular theopolitical visions alongside other moral visions for pluralist polity-building?

The problem I have in mind is the (non)translatability of politically motivating sources; that is, the same problem that becomes even more apparent in the vociferous debates in the US around the hot-button issues like abortion, gun control, immigration, and ecological conservation.<sup>700</sup> Requesting rationale for

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<sup>699</sup> See my discussion in C above.

<sup>700</sup> For a parallel account of this concern, also as it impinges on the work of Habermas and their varying takes on the 'post-secular' condition, see Guido Vanheeswijck, "The Ambiguity of 'Post-

positions can appear hopeless, since these—like the divinely-imbued value of a fetus—are entrenched in idiosyncratic cultic practice and closed, self-referential symbolic systems. One live influential model for conceptualizing solidarity amidst difference is Habermas's *diskursethik*, which in the background for instance in his take on *Verfassungspatriatismus*.<sup>701</sup> The concept recommends (in a post-secular setting) a mutual learning process made possible by good faith efforts to translate cultic symbol into universally acceptable terms, and thus providing arguments that could be accepted by any rational mind.<sup>702</sup> For Taylor, the notion of translating sources in this way is not only misguided, but it also threatens to stifle the soul again, removing from the conversation the very motivating 'potencies' that Habermas appreciates in religion; such sources inspire some of the most admirable examples of modern political agency.<sup>703</sup> If we assume Taylor's model and there is no *Verfassungspatriatismus* that can be grounded in a rationalizing translation of sources, then might we go from here to conceptualize a modern, liberal democratic solidarity across (untranslatable) differences?<sup>704</sup> We could

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Secular' and 'Post-Metaphysical' Stories: On the Place of Religion and Deep Commitments in a Secular Society," *Working With A Secular Age*, 95-120.

<sup>701</sup> Cf. Habermas, "Religion in the Public Sphere: Cognitive Presuppositions for the 'Public Use of Reason' by Religious and Secular Citizens," *Between Naturalism and Religion*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), 136-39.

<sup>702</sup> For Habermas on secular (as opposed to religious discourse) reason as foundational for the state, see, Ratzinger, Joseph Cardinal and Jürgen Habermas, *Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion*. Ed. Florian Schuller. Trans. Brian McNeil. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006, pp. 27, 33, 42.

<sup>703</sup> The example Taylor gives in his response to Habermas in *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, is Martin Luther King, Jr., whose activism and influence was inseparable from the biblical symbolism he deployed in his speeches. For a parallel account to my own analysis and outcomes for approaching a 'situated inter-subjectivity' and 'pluralist robust realism' in current social-political conditions, see Vanheeswijck, "The Ambiguity of 'Post-Secular' and 'Post-Metaphysical' Stories," *Working with A Secular Age*, 112-20.

<sup>704</sup> In an earlier essay, "Cross-Purposes" Taylor analyzes Liberalism and Communitarianism as two prominent models for conceptualizing solidarity. The former he identifies with the proceduralism in neo-Kantian positions (John Rawls, Habermas) and contract theory in which individuals come together with certain self-interests, and when these all work together, society and economy functions (Adam Smith and J.S. Mill feature here). By contrast, the communitarian position (e.g., Michael Sandel, Alasdair MacIntyre), such a solidarity must be structured around a common sense of the good. If you take this route, a whole field of questions open that

start with a metaphor, briefly mentioned by Taylor, which might suggest an application of apophatic theopolitics to the broader level of the nation, namely: Claude Lefort's notion of a 'centerless center' to liberal democracy.<sup>705</sup>

Lefort in "The Permanence of the Theologico-Political" describes an *absence* of unifying ontic picture of social order in Western democracies.<sup>706</sup> The vacuum of authority, he argues, had been filled with a pseudo-religious image of 'the people' as the locus of authority and power. But this absence of a center does not entail emptiness or silence, as his politico-theological recuperation of negative theology suggests; for Lefort 'the people' should be seen as a kind of absent-presence.<sup>707</sup> So

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proceduralists are typically uncomfortable with when it comes to public discourse: what is the good life? How does the polis engender the good life? The objection is that the solidarity behind political order should not be attached to cultures, traditions, or languages (as e.g., Quebec); what about the 'establishment clause'? Taylor argues that the proceduralist ethics justifies its hiving off any reference to particular notions of the Good, because (1) it seems irrelevant for reflection on universalizable principles that transcend any local tradition or culture, (2) It fits the natural-science model of modern epistemology, and (3), the proceduralist model seems best fit to respect individual freedoms, and to be the only way to guard against 'enthusiastic' religion. However, Taylor shares with the Communitarians, the believe that one cannot have a notion of the right without some background idea of the Good. To take the example of freedom: what are the freedoms that we are attempting to achieve? It seems appropriate to limit our freedom when it comes to something like whether one should be allowed to wear a safety belt while driving a car, but once we limit someone's freedom of expression, entrance in the political debate, 'freedom of conscience', these freedoms are utterly crucial. And how do we come to understand the distinction between freedoms that we can legitimately limit and those we cannot touch? Taylor's point is that already when we talk about humans having an inalienable right to express themselves, we've already leapt into talking about the Good. It's inescapable to the project of common polity building in democratic-liberal frameworks. See, Taylor, "Cross-Purposes: The Liberal-Communitarian Debate," *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

<sup>705</sup> Taylor draws on this notion of a distinctly modern political norm, which is centerless, from the work of Claude Lefort in his essay "Why We Need a Radical Redefinition of Secularism," *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 47. A related image deployed by John Rawls (and also used by Taylor) is the 'overlapping consensus', in which public policy debate allows for a multiplicity of various justifications from religious or areligious perspectives but which can nevertheless agree the policy outcome.

<sup>706</sup> Lefort, "The Permanence of the Theologico-Political?" *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), pp. 137ff.

<sup>707</sup> Cf. Claude Lefort, "Lefort, Claude, "Démocratie et représentation," In *Métamorphoses de la représentation politique au Brésil et en Europe, Paris, 27-29 avril 1989* (1991), pp. 223-232; and Andrea Lanza, "Looking for a Sociology Worth of its Name: Claude LeFort and His Conception of Social Division," *Thesis Eleven*, Vol. 166, no. 1, 70-87. Lanza explores LeFort's introduction of reflection on 'the political' and necessary division into a French sociological approach (à la Durkheim). Lanza makes the observation that, for LeFort, democracy equates to representation

instead, perhaps the space may be seen as filled with colliding ‘substantial negations’. To put it another way, the center could be—following Schmidt’s reading of Derridian negativity<sup>708</sup>—characterized by a centrifugal force, the center (ineffability) deflecting any revolutionary coup towards political mobilization of a theopolitical vision, but may boldly state its own vision, perhaps inhabiting voluntarily now and then the visions of others around the cacophonous, bright center, only tenuously holding together.

In this way an apophatic theopolitics on the broader socio-political plane could be further explored as a revised model for solidarity and political identity formation that leaves room for a centrifugal conceptualization of democratic polity building. Regardless of one’s ultimate position (i.e., whatever ‘leap’ one is taking), ‘the political’ retains a margin of mystery and is authoritatively centerless—a non-neutral sphere where a form of being-together itself is constituted by the dark center or perhaps too-light cacophony as I’ve just suggested. The aesthetic dimension would come into play here, just as it does on the more particular theopolitical plane that was the level of focus in this investigation on Taylor. In an analogous way, Taylor’s own theopolitical vision is articulated as a de-centered ‘network of agape’. Dialog and engagement with the other is basic to this network, which is seen as always moving slowly upward in a never-fully-completed eschatological fusion of horizons.<sup>709</sup> The de-centered political sphere so-

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and so the locus of authority is in the ‘empty place’ (LeFort’s term) between the people and decision makers.

<sup>708</sup> For Schmidt’s distinction is between ‘centripetal’ and ‘centrifugal’ negativity, see *Vielstimmige Rede vom Unsagbaren: Dekonstruktion, Glaube und Kierkegaards pseudonym Literatur*, Kierkegaard Studies Monograph Series 14 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2006).

<sup>709</sup> We find in Taylor, that for the modern, de-centered state and a better politics of recognition, we pursue ‘articulacy’; that is, we strive for greater moral clairvoyance by retrieving the best of

conceived removes important blockages of vision for openness to the kind of transcendent vision present in Taylor's theopolitics. A common storying, for instance, of 'the political' as the liberal-democratic vision which emerges from the long history, could help achieve a kind of 'detachment' in a way analogous to Taylor's recommendation for seekers after a Catholic modernity (i.e., the 'negative capability').<sup>710</sup> Could that space—as a kind of '*Un-x-barkeit*'—be important condition for becoming a kind of empty receptacle of articulations of the sacred polity in modernity as they enter in political-deliberative processes; performing 'agonistic' religion; or more positively, '*versöhnte Verschiedenheit*'?<sup>711</sup> If political culture itself has an apophatic form, are there ways to gesture at the untouchable center that could help us achieve a substantially negative political ethic? One not characterized by struggle for hegemony by gaming collective codes or rights and privileges? We might see whether a conversation about being-together—grounded in very different ontologies/moral-theopolitical visions might not talk at cross-purposes but rather engage meaningfully from deep difference. That is,

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our moral sources that drive our political agency. As we saw throughout this thesis, Taylor is devoted to aiding the articulation, in this sense, of the contours of the modern moral order in *Sources of the Self*. But to move beyond the modern moral order and respond to a fundamental human paradox like the utter self-realization and self-less communion—envisioned by Taylor (following Illich) as the 'network of agape' in *A Secular Age*—we need 'inarticulacy' and 'ethical search'.

<sup>710</sup> The idea would be to open up space for these various spiritual itineraries to join in dialog, which is foundational to common political identity formation within a secular regime, where 'secular' is re-configured to no longer refer to an absence of religion, but rather to a dialogical space for a plurality of voices. Cf. Taylor's "Why We Need a Radical Redefinition of Secularism," *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere* (Columbia University Press: New York, 2011). Taylor himself, in recent years, has been lecturing and writing on democratic activism, and his emphasis on network relations—while not explored here—heads precisely in the direction of these reflections. See, Charles Taylor, Patrizia Nanz, Madeleine Beaubien Taylor, *Reconstructing Democracy: How Citizens are Building from the Ground Up* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020).

<sup>711</sup> Cf. J. Schmidt, "Kultur der Heiligkeit" *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* vol. 113, no. 3, (September 2016), 279-90. For the term 'agonist religion' as it applies to Taylor, see Connally's essay, "Catholicism and Philosophy: A Nontheistic Appreciation," in, Ruth Abbey, ed., *Charles Taylor*, 166ff.

an apophatic theopolitics might help display a kind of 'overlapping consensus' that emerges in an articulation of particular utopic visions as ineffable, ungraspable polities, like multiple 'cities of God' co-existing and enlivening Western democratic common city-building or being-together.



## Glossary

Code	Taylor's term for a rigid set of moral norms, rights and privileges that (especially) are detached from the subject's emotional life. Religion 'in the head' would be another Taylorian way of expressing the 'code'.
Constantinian	A mode of theopolitical vision, in which church and state power merge for the expansion of Christianity, in a sense theocratically, whether as a set of society-supporting moral norms, or as institution.
Correlationist	An approach to political theology, described by Cavanaugh as the relation of the contents of Christian faith to matters of public (or broader socio-political) concern. The term 'correlation' has also been used to describe this framing of the task of political theology.
Cross-pressure	Taylor's descriptive term for the experience of living in a modern pluralist society amidst other ways of life, religious belief, and unbelief, which deeply contrast one another. In his chapter 'Cross Pressures' in <i>A Secular Age</i> Taylor begins a dialogical portrayal of major competing positions (e.g., Kantian, Nietzschean, 'orthodox' Christian) on how to define a good ('full') human life. With the plethora of options (the proximity to Hans Joas' <i>Glaube als Option</i> here is apparent) people can feel suspended between positions, hesitant to fully adopt one against others.
Excarnate	A term used by both Ivan Illich and Charles Taylor to designate a moral life that emphasizes cognitive assent to ethical code; contrasts 'incarnate' forms that incorporate emotion as part of the higher mode of being (e.g., the Good Samaritan).
Hyper-reality	The first characteristic, which I draw out in A.3, from the apophatic tradition of thought. Hyper-reality refers to the 'beyondness' of being; i.e., that which cannot be positively

ascertained.

Negative dialectics	Slavoj Žižek's Hegelian approach to analysis, which moves from first impression, to its negation in pursuit of some essence beyond the impression, and finally lands not in synthesis, but in the negation of a supposed essence, which returns to the appearance of the thing as the real (or really false) thing. For instance, crime would be seen not a moment of the self-mediation of Law, but rather more like the appearance of an illicit imposed 'lawful' order. So, crime would appear in the first glance as transgression of law, and this law appears as the right natural order, but is itself exposed as a kind of criminal imposition.
Neo-Durkheimian	Taking off from Durkheim's insights into the relation between the sacred and social bonds, Taylor takes liberty with the name to mark stages in mentalities of church-state relations. The 'neo-Durkheimian' mentality
Orthodox	While this word can refer to a broad family of Christian churches (e.g., Greek, Russian, etc.), I use this term throughout to refer even more broadly to forms of Christian theology that more-or-less accept as axiomatic the tenants of the historic creeds (Nicene, Apostles', etc.). 'Radical Orthodoxy', for instance, aligns with this usage.
Parallax	A shift in view caused by a change in the viewer's position. In Žižek's use (cf. <i>Parallax View</i> ) this is not only subjective. The subject's view that shifts is also a shift in the 'ontology' of the object itself.
Postsecular	Following Philip Blonde's definition, postsecular theologies attempt a certain recovery of a stronger ontology (see the introduction to B.3).
Post-x	My own summary prefix as shorthand for post-liberal, post-modern, and post-secular thought.

## Reform

With connotations of the European Protestant Reformations, Taylor uses 'Reform' to refer more broadly as a mentality for making society over in the image of some ideal. Taylor talks about the 'drive to Reform' in this way, and as such it pre-dates the Reformations and includes movements within Catholicism as well as Protestantism. The Reform Master Narrative, then, runs throughout *A Secular Age* and is part of the explanation for the big transformation in the West toward the possibility of unbelief and secularism, since the operations and practices of Reform can—in Taylor's telling—drift from the more original context of early Christianity.

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