

Experiencing the Numinous: The Haunting Call of Modern Disenchantment

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Evolution of Modern Society (PARP-6286-01) Spring 2023

May 12, 2023

Awe is the best of man: howe'er the world's
 Misprizing of the feeling would prevent us,
 Deeply we feel, once gripped, the weird Portentous.¹
 ~ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

Charles Taylor in *A Secular Age* details the non-linear twists and turns of western civilization from a transcendent and enchanted primal realm to a believing and God-fearing world of the late Middle Ages to an immanent and disenchanting one by the late 19th-early 20th century. It is an intricate and complex transmigration from animism and polytheism, to monotheism, to deism, to *exclusive humanism*, onward to the current state of authenticity and expressive individualism.

In his exploration of the modern secular age, he focuses primarily on one of three facets of the secular²: the *conditions of belief* impacting western civilization from 1500 to 2000. He marvels at how western civilization has reached its current *pluralist* state “in which many forms of belief and unbelief jostle, and hence fragilize each other”³. The modern juncture is a significant departure from the universal, omnipresent belief in God and Christian Catholic hegemony of the pre-Reformation Middle Ages. He discounts the simplistic theories of linear subtractionists, and engages the reader with explanatory discussions of disenchantment, the Great Disembedding, social and cosmic imaginaries, and cross-tensions that breed new religious, social and political realities. He expounds upon the ever-changing interpretative permutations of the Godhead, as well as the accompanying re-interpretation of what constitutes good and evil, and what, if anything, needs to be done about it. (See Appendix I)

¹ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust*, Second Part, Act I, Scene v, quoted in Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino Publishing, 2010), 41.

² Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2007), 2-3. These three facets are: 1) removal of religion from public spaces 2) decline in practice of religion, and 3) the conditions of belief.

³ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 531.

Taylor also details the transformation that occurs post-Reformation whereby the Catholic hegemony is dislodged and religion of the everyday is procured in the proclamations of Luther. With the Reformational turn comes a further move away from primal enchantment. This disembedding had already begun with the dawn of the orthodox religions during the Axial age, whereby *the Church* (at least in the Western world) became the protector against dark forces and spirits that easily infiltrated the porous, embodied, and highly sentient nature of the vulnerable, just-stay-alive humans of the day. The Church was also a provider and transmitter — through its music, incense infused interior, color, and spired vaulted ceilings — of transcendence itself. Aldous Huxley describes the power of color alone during the Middle Ages:

But before every pair of eyes was only the dark squalor of the family hovel, the dust or mud of the village street, the dirty whites, the duns and goose-turd greens of ragged clothing. Hence a passionate, an almost desperate thirst for bright, pure colors; and hence the overpowering effect produced by such colors whenever, in church or at court, they were displayed.⁴

The Reformation so furthered the distancing from enchantment that eventually even the protective *white magic* of the Catholic church became suspect. Reliquaries, idols, and sacraments infused with the holy spirit became blasphemous and heretical; the priestcraft which had been selling keys to heaven became suspect; the hierarchical equilibrium of priest and laypeople, monarchy and subjects began to level; sacrifice for salvation was supplemented by every day flourishing of work, family, and homestead. Even Luther himself married a nun, Katharine von

⁴ Aldous Huxley, *Heaven and Hell* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1956), 115.

Bora, whom he helped to escape a nunnery, and then set about living the life of an ordinary family man.⁵

With the spread of Protestantism, the Scientific Revolution, and the Enlightenment came what Taylor refers to as the Age of Mobilization. There was no longer just one church or religious denomination that controlled the domain of God and the spiritual. A splintering had begun which yet contained an aura of one-ness within the Protestant realm. Methodists, Presbyterians, Lutherans all fell under a macro term of *church*. No matter the denomination, all were in service of ethical good and held a belief in a monotheistic God with his son, Jesus Christ, by his side.

Nonetheless, the nova-like splintering continued into what Taylor terms the *super nova* effect in which there appeared more and more ways of exploring and honoring the Godhead, as well as pulling away from it. The orthodox religious realm was set further asunder with the onset of the 1960s cultural revolution. In its fast-moving current and subsequent wake, additional super nova influences and factions of orthodox religious undermining come into play, such as psychedelics, new sexual mores, ecological awareness, Far Eastern philosophies and traditions, individualism, and individuation. There was a decline in orthodox religious observance (Appendix II) and a more pronounced and prevalent sentiment of *believing not belonging*.

When Taylor discusses *exclusive humanism*, an important phase in humans' disentangling from the Godhead that has led to the current expressive individualism of our modern times, he does not decry it as a loss or failure of the human project. Rather he admonishes that we *not* take it for granted but recognize it as an accomplishment, even one that can be felt as laudable. Humans' ability to answer a call that "goes beyond our narrower circles

⁵ "Katharina von Bora," Wikipedia, last modified September 2022, accessed May 11, 2023, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Katharina_von_Bora.

of solidarity”⁶ is an understated theme that nonetheless sets a precedent for such a turn in our current crisis-infused time. He writes:

It is an achievement, because getting to the point where we can be inspired and empowered to beneficence by an impartial view of things, or a sense of buried sympathy within, requires training, or inculcated insight, and frequently much work on ourselves.⁷

However, the shadow side of this distancing and *impartial view of things* — fed by disenchantment, the modern moral order, and the mechanistic and rationalistic gaze of science — was a sense of invulnerability and amplified authoritarian control over the supposedly *soul-less objects* that lay outside the buffered self. Akeel Bilgrami in his essay, *What Is Enchantment?*, starkly cites how the *buffered self* “is a self that is not open to normative demands from any site external to itself, an inevitable consequence of the fact that a world conceived as brute does not, in any case, contain anything that could make those demands.”⁸ Thus, all is of our own making including a world that inherently lacks meaning since it is littered with soul-less, atomistic objects and is cage-like in its shallow constraint. Taylor writes:

Although we respond to it very differently, everyone understands the complaint that our disenchanted world lacks meaning, that in this world, particularly youth suffer from a lack of strong purposes in their lives... But what you won’t hear at other times and places is one of the commonplaces of our day (right or wrong, that is beside my point), that our age suffers from a threatened loss of meaning. This malaise is specific to a buffered

⁶ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 255.

⁷ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 255.

⁸ Akeel Brigami, “What is Enchantment?,” in *Varieties of Secularism*, ed. Michael Warner, Johnathan VanAntwerpen, and Craig Calhoun (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 152.

identity, whose very invulnerability opens it to the danger that not just evil spirits, cosmic forces or gods won't 'get to 'it, but that nothing significant will stand out for it.⁹

Taylor leaves us at the doorstep of a fragmented world order of religious, societal, and political tensions and cross-tensions. He enumerates a believer-to-unbeliever spectrum where presumably few are concentrated at its polar ends and the many lies somewhere along its range with a conscious or unconscious sense of discomfort. There is an inherent fragility within the enmeshment of these cross-tensions where believers and unbelievers alike cannot find *terra firma* and resort to extremist polemics and dualistic stances to have some sense of security and stability.

What is left is a longing for and a haunting of the enchantment, transcendence, and sense of meaning and fullness that has become, for many, a distant vestige. Iain McGilchrist, looking through a neuroscience lens, attributes the source of this distancing and longing to an out-of-balance left-hemispheric rational dominance that annihilates and discounts all that is intuited, sensed, and felt: "The left hemisphere simply ignores, dismisses, and ultimately denies the existence of, anything it can't pin down and measure."¹⁰ Following the Enlightenment, this left hemispheric dominance took on greater prominence so that now, in modernity, we are faced with the full force of its utilitarianism, objectivity, ego supremacy, dualism, and verbal paramountcy. Its dominance has been coupled with an ever-growing number of specialties and an explosion of knowledge (not always wisdom-filled), which physicist David Bohm viewed as a type of *endarkenment*¹¹.

⁹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 303.

¹⁰ Iain McGilchrist, *The Matter with Things*, 2nd ed. (London: Perspectival Press, 2022), 295.

¹¹ David Bohm, "Knowledge as Endarkenment (1980)," in *The Essential David Bohm*, ed. Lee Nichol (London: Routledge, 2003), 261.

The lived background of the twenty-first century, or Wittgensteinian *picture* which holds us captive¹², seems at best to contain only a lingering scent or a mirage-like shimmer of earlier primal enchantment, right hemispheric knowing, access to transcendence, and porously enlivened realities. Iris Murdoch in her 1966 essay *On 'God' and 'Good'* asks: “Is there, however, any true transcendence, or is this idea always a consoling dream projected by human need on to an empty sky?”¹³ This seems a relevant and ongoing question for disenchanted believers and unbelievers of the twenty-first century caught up in the web of buffered immanence and capitalistic human flourishing.

Taylor summarizes two primary cross-tensions in which we find ourselves enmeshed in our current immanently framed reality:

1)...those who want to opt for the ordered, impersonal universe, whether its scientific-materialist form, or in a more spiritualized variant, feel the imminent loss of a world of beauty, meaning, warmth, as well as of the perspective of a self-transformation beyond the every day¹⁴, and 2)...what those experience whose strongest leanings move them toward at least some search for spiritual meaning, and often towards God. These are haunted by a sense that the universe might after all be as meaningless as the most reductive materialism describes. They feel that their vision has to struggle against this flat and empty world; they fear that their strong desire for God, or for eternity, might after all be the self-induced illusion that materialists claim it to be.¹⁵

It is upon this doorstep where Taylor has left us that there appears another potential opening. He describes it generally as a “a strong independent source of motivation in modernity”

¹² Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 549.

¹³ Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London and New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), 57.

¹⁴ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 592.

¹⁵ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 593.

that is a "...religious longing, the longing for and response to a more-than-immanent transformation perspective, what Chantal Milon-Delsol calls a 'désir d'éternité.'"¹⁶ It lures us to a reimagining of that which has transpired in our collective past without the desire or capability of literally returning to it.¹⁷ It acts as a catalyst for a number of theoretical and phenomenological sources of numinous experiencing which have contributed to what appears to be a newly forming *spiritual imaginary*. This nascent imaginary, that began with post-Enlightenment Romanticism, is catalyzing through our modern vacuousness and its search for meaning and fullness.

One could argue that it is multi-valiant in that it is *spiritual* and not religious, but also potentially religious. We can think of it in terms of William James's broad definition of religion that transcends the bounds of the orthodox:

Religion, therefore, as I now ask you arbitrarily to take it, shall mean for us *the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.*¹⁸

The *spiritual*, in this broader Jamesian religious sense, is analogous to the multi-denominational *church* of the Protestant expansion that Taylor refers to as the Age of Mobilization. It is not, however in this case, an aggregation of orthodox religious affiliations (although it does not exclude them) but is an active way of being and experiencing that is nourished by the expressive individualism that is part of Taylor's super nova fragmentation. It is led by the longing for something more...for there not to be an *empty sky*...and for the discovery

¹⁶ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 530."

¹⁷ Note: "The primitive has power, on which we need to draw, or before which we stand in awe, even as we may have to limit it, resist it." Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 672.

¹⁸ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (London and Bombay: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1902), 15. Note: And later he defines the divine to be "only such a primal reality as the individual feels impelled to respond to solemnly and gravely and neither by curse or jest." James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 17.

of unbuffered, enchanted windows to transcendence — with or without an ontological commitment.

Akeel Bilgrami, philosopher, and atheist, argues for the existence of a secular version of transcendence that supports this idea of a newly emerging spiritual imaginary. He posits that there are “external callings” that are not of our own human making. These callings imply there is life outside our human selves that is desirable to us and that has its own agency. Our recognition of, empathy for, and response to these external callings is in and of itself a form of transcendence and enchantment as it takes us outside of our ego selves. His one caveat is “that it does presuppose human perceptual sensitivity to the value elements that enchant the world independent of us, and it presupposes too human agency...that responds to their normative demands.”¹⁹

The emerging imaginary’s truest spirit is not about some momentary high or escapist dissociation, but an enriching encounter with the numinous or *mysterium tremendum*. Such an encounter can be both attracting and daunting²⁰, and yet also be felt to provide insight, healing, and connection, through which, an ongoing deeper meaning of life can be found.

Theologian Rudolf Otto, who first coined the term *numinous* in 1923²¹ discusses indirect means of associated awakenings of the numinous — without belief in a higher ontological source — through architecture, art, music, nature, *eros* and eroticism, Buddhist meditative practice, poetry, Shamanism, and all forms of mysticism. Access is not necessarily automatic, nor presumed, nor definite, nor instantaneous. There may be *unbuffering* accessibility conditions or initiatory pre-requisites in light of the confounding rational and immanent frame *trance* that is

¹⁹ Bilgrami, “What is Enchantment?,” 156-157.

²⁰ Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, trans. by John W. Harvey (Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino Publishing, 2010), 43.

²¹ Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 7.

the thrall of modern western civilization. Such conditions of accessibility open us to the newly emerging spiritual imaginary that is peeking through the all-pervasive Wittgensteinian picture of immanent frame.

One current example of such an imagining is the ability to consider and accept claims of *subaltern pasts* “about supernatural agencies, about gods and spirits acting to historical effect, about heterogeneous temporalities and non-ordinary forms of subjectivity and agency”²² where emic epistemologies are represented and at parity with the accepted western narrative. Another is to read Malidome Somé’s story of colonial abduction, tribal return, and grueling rites of adolescent passage and feel the truth of his unbuffered and enchanted autobiography. Another is expressed theoretically in Jacob Sherman’s *Partakers of the Divine*. He introduces us to the idea of the Platonic *meatxu* (“middle”) which is exemplified by Plato, through a conversation between Socrates and the priestess Diotima, as a tension that humans and *daimones* “sustain between heaven (transcendence) and earth (immanence).”²³ Sherman sees its modern implication as a living philosophy, or way of being in the world, whereby one foot is planted in cognition and the other in a numinously erotic desire for the Good. He writes:

For what Plato and Diotima describe is not in any way the reduction of knowledge to its performance, as must always be the case when the heavens are closed, but, rather, the way that a certain deployment of desire opens new possibilities of vision. There are no reified limits here, no epistemically and ontologically buffered selves; the Platonic

²² Jacob Holsinger Sherman, “Deprovincializing Philosophy of Religions: From ‘Faith and Reason’ to the Postcolonial Reevaluation of Religious Epistemologies,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 86, no. 2 (June 2018), 346.

²³ Jacob Holsinger Sherman, *Partakers of the Divine: Contemplation and the Practice of Philosophy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 235.

philosopher dwells in the middle but always reaches for that which is beyond and so always extends the bounds of his or her vision.²⁴

The undercurrent of access to the numinous, enchantment, and this erotic desire of the Good, with or without ontological commitment, seems embedded in three contours which Taylor discusses in the later chapters of the book and which, on judgment, help unlock the cage of buffered disengagement. These are:

- 1) Resonance or attunement that enables awareness of subtle language in all its forms, including symbolic meanings;
- 2) Incarnation that reverses the *excarnation* seeded by orthodox religion of the Middle Ages and later exacerbated by the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment; and
- 3) Participatory exchange that is a turn on early festivals, liturgical ritual, and community engagement whose demise tracks from the 15th and 16th century banishment of primal festivals...to the decline of church attendance...to the sequestering of the recent pandemic.

Resonance / Attunement

“...there was that simpler language which all Nature knows, which cannot lie because it is unconscious, and by which constellations converse with buttercups, and cedars with the flying drops of rain - there was gesture.²⁵

~ Algernon Blackwood

Prior to the modern secular age, subtle language — a term Taylor credits to Shelley and describes as a “cosmic syntax in the public domain” that guided people into the deeper realms of

²⁴ Sherman, *Partakers of the Divine*, 237.

²⁵ Algernon Blackwood, *The Algernon Blackwood Collection* (Algernon Blackwood, 2016), chap. 11, 1248, iBook.

mystery and the hidden — was found in the languages of theology and metaphysics.²⁶ Medieval art, poetry, and music gave access to these mystic sources through their memetic nature of universally known symbols. Passing from consciousness by the time of the Romantics, new forms of poetry, art, and music began to appear to fill the void. It was here that one facet of the new spiritual imaginary begins to unfold. The newly subtle language of art and aesthetics that came into being was one where “something is defined and created as well as manifested.”²⁷ These languages call to us and can elicit a deep and profound response unconnected to God, story, or object. To hear these languages requires a new register that lives outside the realm of pure rationality and analytics.

Henri Bergson acknowledged this new way of listening and knowing in *An Introduction to Metaphysics* where he wrote that some things cannot be truly known through description, history, and analysis alone. He was setting the stage for a *true empiricism*, intuition *sans* analysis, and a metaphysical transcendence where self and other are joined so that there is integral knowledge, and access to the absolute. He wrote:

Either there is no philosophy possible, and all knowledge of things is a practical knowledge aimed at the profit to be drawn from them, or else philosophy consists in placing oneself within the object itself by an effort of intuition.²⁸

Iain McGilchrist describes this language register as a type of resonance or attunement where we need to look and hear differently:

Some things can only be experienced or understood when they are not put to analysis.

This is not because analysis defeats them, but because they defeat analysis. The effect of

²⁶ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 357.

²⁷ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 353.

²⁸ Henri Bergson, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. T. E. Hulme (New York and London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1912), electronic reproduction PDF, 10.

the direct glare is to banish the penumbra of myriad delicate threads that make it what it is and connect whatever it is to what nourishes it and gives it life, like the roots of a plant or the vessels that feed the heart and which it feeds.²⁹

Such attunement and ability to see in new ways provides access both to something deep and profound within us while also simultaneously lifting us to something higher. It reminds of William Desmond's *metaxological* sense where *above* and *within* happen simultaneously, and we are taken outside of ourselves to a numinous moment of agape astonishment.³⁰ Iris Murdoch sees the numinous in nature and likens the mere "independent existence of animals, birds, stones and trees" as the mystical in and of itself.³¹

The mystery of nature has only deepened since Murdoch's writing. We have now become aware of the subtle language of trees who communicate with each other and with others in their ecosystems via scents, colors, sounds, and root wide transmissions facilitated by fungi networks.³² Mycorrhizal networks of fungal mycelium are "inventive, flexible, and collaborative" in addition to being survivors of ecological disruption.³³ We have only scratched the surface of their mystery and intelligence. And then there is the learned language of silence, another language facilitated by nature, which helps cut through the cacophony of "atonal banshee of emerging ego mania"³⁴ that is so germane at present.

²⁹ McGilchrist, *The Matter with Things*, 565.

³⁰ William Desmond, "Being, Determination, and Dialectic: On the Sources of Metaphysical Thinking," in *The Review of Metaphysics* 48, no. 4 (June 1995), 768.

³¹ Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 83.

³² Peter Wohlleben, *The Secret Life of Trees*, trans. Jane Billingham (Vancouver: Greystone Books, 2015), 6-13.

³³ Merlin Sheldrake, *Entangled Life: How Fungi Make Our Worlds, Change Our Minds and Shape Our Futures* (New York: Random House, 2021), 176.

³⁴ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 552.

Incarnation

Man has no Body distinct from his Soul. For that called Body is a portion of Soul discerned by the five senses, the chief inlets of Soul in this age.³⁵

William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

Stanford bioethicist Henry Greely recently projected that within the next twenty to forty years sex will no longer be the primary way that humans pro-create. In-vitro gametogenesis (I.V.G.), a method in which stem cells from blood cells or a skin biopsy are used to grow eggs, will be used instead. The stem-cell conceived eggs will then be implanted into a woman's womb, or perhaps even grown in some type of an artificial womb created scientifically.³⁶ Even though this technology could be viewed as miraculous, it is also a glaring example of how the disengaged "view from nowhere" of modern science further engenders the mind-body split initiated by orthodox religion in the post-Axial age. In this latest scenario, humans will have become so buffered that they will not even need to touch one another to create a new life.

The healing of this secular age *excarnation*, as Taylor refers to it³⁷, is an important undercurrent of the newly emerging spiritual imaginary. It began *en masse* in the 1960s, with the sexual revolution and the re-taking of one's own body and its desires. It was deepened through spiritual and body-mind traditions from outside the Western world. Yoga, *tai chi*, *qi gong*, meditation, breath work, and alternative medicine approaches, such as acupuncture,

³⁵ William Blake, "The Voice of the Devil," in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Copy H, Object 4 (1790), <https://blakearchive.org/copy/mhh.h?descId=mhh.h.illbk.04>.

³⁶ Emily Witt, "The Future of Fertility," *The New Yorker*, April 24 & May 1, 2023, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/04/24/the-future-of-fertility>.

³⁷ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 613.

were initially outliers relegated to the realm of hippies and New Agers but have now become mainstream in the modern era.

If one were to question the spiritual embedding within many of these Eastern traditions, one need only consider, for example, sources such as the *Neiye* 內業 *Inner Cultivation*, the earliest known meditation text dating back to 350-300 BC. It is the earliest Daoist received text (it preceded the *Dao De Jing*) and details breath work practices to vitalize the *qi* (energy) and *jing* (essence) of the body of which *shen* (spirit³⁸) is the resulting biproduct. It serves as the source for many of the macro-biotic hygiene practices (e.g., breath work, qi gong, tai chi) and alternative medicine traditions (e.g., acupuncture) in the centuries that followed and that have made their way to the Western world in modern times.³⁹ Another example is to consider the work of Sri Aurobindo who spoke about the importance of embodiment and movement through his belief that “the body is key” and that *Hatha yoga* is the “mystic bridge between the spiritual and the physical being...”⁴⁰ Another example is found in the work of Kalu Rinpoche whose Buddhist teachings prescribe the simultaneous practice of yoga, meditation, and toning.⁴¹

There have been, of course, sources in the western world that firmly avowed incarnation and the body-mind-spirit union. For example, William Joseph Schelling believed that empirical knowledge could only come through motion and movement.⁴² Nietzsche

³⁸ Note: Spirit, as used in this Daoist text, is of a pantheistic nature.

³⁹ Harold D. Roth, *Original Tao: Inward Training and the Foundations of Taoist Mysticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 6.

⁴⁰ Sri Aurobindo (Aurobindo Ghose), *The Synthesis of Yoga* (Twin Lakes, WI: Lotus Light Publications, 1996), 29-30.

⁴¹ Kalu Rinpoche, "Cultivating the Subtle Body Through Yogic Practices" (lecture and guided meditation, Tibet House, New York, NY, April 27, 2023), accessed May 11, 2023, <https://vimeo.com/822712473?share=copy>.

⁴² Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling, "Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature: Preface to the First Edition Introduction," trans. Errol E. Harris and Peter Heath, in *German Idealist Philosophy* (London: Penguin Books, 1978), 184-185.

expounded that “only those thoughts that come in walking have any value.”⁴³ And, Catherine Pickstock argues in *Aspects of Truth* that in pre-modern times, *truth*, through the gaze of Thomas Aquinas, was not mediated “between alien realms of physical unknowing and mental knowing, but rather between materialized and spiritualized formations, between which there is an assumed though perhaps unknown continuity”⁴⁴. Further, if we return to the writings of Rudolf Otto on the numinous, he makes clear that such an encounter is not of the mind alone. “The ‘mystery’ is for him [the person encountering the numinous] not merely something to be wondered at but something that entrances him; and beside that in it which bewilders and confounds, he feels a something that captivates and transports him with a strange ravishment, rising often enough to the pitch of dizzy intoxication; it is the Dionysiac-element in the numen.”⁴⁵

Participatory Exchange

In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go
to prepare a place for you.
~ John 14:2

Participatory exchange is an important facet of the emerging spiritual imaginary that seems to encompass a host of dimensions. These range from the formation of communal human fields of possibility for the numinous to be felt and experienced...to cosmic conversations and downloads facilitated by dream states, quietude, contemplation and entheogenic substances...to

⁴³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Die Götzen-Dämmerung - Twilight of the Idols*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale, 1889, accessed on May 11, 2023, <https://www.handprint.com/SC/NIE/GotDamer.html#sect1>.

⁴⁴ Catherine Pickstock, *Aspects of Truth: A New Religious Metaphysics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 31.

⁴⁵ Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 31.

specific *loci* known and visited for their energetic presence and sacredness where the numinous is more likely to be felt and make itself known.

In *A Secular Age*, Taylor discusses a type of modern-day re-enactment of the primal festivals that had been banished by orthodox religion and civil polity in the 15th and 16th centuries. Modern variants comprising pop-up “populations of wonder” include Burning Man, Beltane Fire Festival, Nowhere, and Kazantip to name a few.⁴⁶ Such festivals capture a facet of the newly emerging spiritual imaginary even though they are decisively non-religious. For example, Beltane Fire Festival is described as offering “a night of real community connection and a unique experience which might really impact you deeply” and as holding “a space for deep spirituality.”⁴⁷

A modern-day variant that Catherine Pickstock discusses is, by contrast, highly religious. She presents an orthodox religious view of Christian liturgy as a participatory enacted exchange between divine descent and human elevation through a simultaneous holding of the collective, the congregants, and the individual, its individual members. The collective action and sharing together of the worshippers is a crucial dimension as they perform a ritualist and serious “play”⁴⁸ and become a veritable collective “work of art”⁴⁹ through which the numinous is evoked and received. “One can in consequence observe in Christian practice a liturgical tension between the priority of a congregational construction of sensation, on the one hand, and a private sensory meditation, on the other. This tension is benign and perhaps never resolved, since it derives from

⁴⁶ David Garber, “Skip the Dust and Head to Five Burning Man-Inspired Festivals Instead,” *Vice*, April 19, 2018, accessed May 11, 2023, https://amuse.vice.com/en_us/article/pa94nm/alternative-summer-festivals.

⁴⁷ “Discussing the Beltane Fire Festival 2023 with The Blues by Beltane Fire Society,” Beltane, last modified April 27, 2023, accessed May 11, 2023, <https://beltane.org/2023/04/27/discussing-beltane-fire-festival-2023-with-the-blues/>.

⁴⁸ Pickstock, *Aspects of Truth*, 126.

⁴⁹ Pickstock, *Aspects of Truth*, 129.

the originally liminal and oneiric character of ritual action.”⁵⁰ It is through the communal enactment of the liturgical ritual across the entirety of a person’s life that one is “gradually inducted into the mystery of revelation and transformed by it.”⁵¹

The participatory exchange of the newly emerging spiritual imaginary is not a human project of creating enchantment but is rather one of opening oneself to enchantment and the numinous itself which is already present. This is clearly not a modern revelation, but its form has transformed relative to earlier times. Prophets in pre-modern times were relegated to saints and religious mystics. Today we have those walking among us who are scholars, artists, poets, musicians, statesmen, psychologists, and philosophers who are channeling prophetic insight and are contributors to the emerging spiritual imaginary.

One example is abstract artist and occultist Hilma af Klint (1862-1944). Her “commission” came from Amaliel of the spirit realm who “told her to paint on ‘an astral plane’ and represent the ‘immortal aspects of man.’”⁵² As dictated by her legal will, none of her art was made public until twenty years after her death. When it was finally shown in 1986 throngs came to view it, and people were reportedly so moved by the work that they wept without knowing why. Klint is said to have declared that “Life is a farce if a person does not serve truth.”⁵³ which, on judgment, seems to be Truth with a capital T.

Psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961) provides another vivid example. Jung received many of his insights about archetypes, the psyche, and consciousness through his prodigious dream work. In *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* he describes a dream

⁵⁰ Pickstock, *Aspects of Truth*, 139.

⁵¹ Pickstock, *Aspects of Truth*, 125.

⁵² Kate Kellaway, “Hilma af Klint: A Painter Possessed,” *Guardian*, February 21, 2016, accessed May 11, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/feb/21/hilma-af-klint-occult-spiritualism-abstract-serpentine-gallery>

⁵³ Kellaway, “Hilma af Klint.”

where he finds himself in a multi-level house that he infers as “a kind of image of the psyche.”⁵⁴ He concluded from these dream images that “there were further reaches to the state of consciousness” and that the levels of the house “signified past times and passed stages of consciousness.”⁵⁵ It was from these dream sources that he arrived at his discovery of the archetypes. He said toward the end of his life:

All my works, all my creative activity, has come from those initial fantasies and dreams which began in 1912, almost fifty years ago. Everything that I accomplished in later life was already contained in them, although at first only in the form of emotions and images.⁵⁶

Philosopher and mystic Jean Gebser (1905-1973) is another case in point. The inspiration for his epic work, *The Ever-Present Origin*, came while fleeing the Spanish Civil War, and then later, fleeing the German occupation of France during World War II. His former student, Rudolf Hämmerli, who at the close of Gebser’s life attended Sunday salons with he and his wife, Jo, has shared his impressions. According to Hämmerli, Gebser’s inspiration, which informed his later work, came like a *shakti* transmission during these difficult war-torn early years of his life.⁵⁷ Similar to Jung, Gebser spent the rest of his life unpacking them.

Cultural historian, astrologer, and founding director of the California Institute of Integral Studies’s graduate program in Philosophy, Cosmology, and Consciousness, Richard Tarnas provides the final example. He has shared in recent class lectures that inspiration for his epic work, *Cosmos and Psyche: Intimations of a New World View*, sourced from LSD infused

⁵⁴ Carl Gustave Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, ed. Aniela Jaffé, trans. Richard Winston and Clara Winston (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 160.

⁵⁵ Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, 161.

⁵⁶ Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, 192.

⁵⁷ Note: I had the honor of meeting and speaking with Rudolf Hämmerli about his personal experiences with Jean Gebser via an hour-long Zoom video call on April 21, 2021.

sessions with the cosmos at Esalen. For this transmission accompanied by his scholarship and unremitting hard work, we are all blessed.

An important vestige of the emerging spiritual imaginary which can also be considered a facet of participatory exchange is the erupting re-emergence of psychedelics. Particularly relevant are those that are organic in nature, such as hallucinogenic mushrooms, peyote, San Pedro, and ayahuasca. When ingested with considered intention and ritualistic containment, a numinous call and response exchange becomes possible with these wisdom-infused entheogens. In the words of psychedelic veteran William Richards, who is also a theologian and psychologist at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, “You go deep enough or far out enough in consciousness and you will bump into the sacred. It’s not something we generate; it’s something out there waiting to be discovered. And this reliably happens to nonbelievers as well as believers.”⁵⁸

These psychedelics which source from primal, enchanted times have a long history as catalysts for numinous awakening, deep insight, and transcendence. For example, San Pedro, or *achuma* cactus, has been used ceremonially in Peru for over 4,000 years. It is pictured in primitive drawings at ancient ceremonial sites dating as far back as 2000 B.C.⁵⁹ It came to be referred to as *San Pedro*—Saint Peter, because it is Saint Peter who holds the keys to heaven.

A somewhat more recent example of this access to transcendence via psychedelics is found in the infamous Good Friday Experiment conducted at Marsh Chapel in 1962. In a double-blind test, twenty divinity students were administered either psilocybin or an active placebo (niacin). Those given psilocybin all had mystical or numinous experiences. Follow up interviews

⁵⁸ Michael Pollan, *How to Change Your Mind* (New York: Penguin Press, 2018), 55.

⁵⁹ Mario Polia, *La Cosmovisión Religiosa Andina en los Documentos Inéditos del Archivo Romano de la Compañía de Jesús (1581-1752)* (Lima, Peru: Fondo Editorial, 1999), 137.

in 1986 with these former students revealed that most had found that this experience had reshaped their lives and work “in profound and enduring ways”⁶⁰.

Such entheogenic encounters of *mysterium tremendum* can act as initiatory experiences that enable one to see differently, facilitate unbuffering, and give access to ongoing glimpses outside the immanent frame picture. For many, they are not one-off, high experiences, but deep, higher time encounters that reverberate throughout a person’s lifetime.

~ ~ ~

In conclusion, Taylor in *A Secular Age*, has indeed left us at the doorstep of a fragmented world order of religious, societal, and political tensions and cross-tensions. Yet, as this paper has explored, the secular age in which we find ourselves is not definitively one in which we are entrapped in a desert of isolation and analytic, reductionist nihilism. The exalted “higher time” of the pre-modern age has not disappeared altogether and been replaced by monotonous and “homogenous vertical time slices.” The very existence of our deep longings at the edge of such emptiness makes apparent that enchantment and the numinous are calling us forth.

The newly emerging spiritual imaginary, discussed throughout, is multivalent. It is religious and not religious. It has numerous variations and dimensions. And perhaps, its multivalence may even eventually encompass a wide ecumenical reach as represented by the quote in Mikhaïl Epstein’s “Minimal Religion and Post Atheism”: “Knowledge, morality, art, government and the economy should become religious, but freely and from inside, not by compulsion from outside.”⁶¹

⁶⁰ Pollan, *How to Change Your Mind*, 46.

⁶¹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 535.

The emerging spiritual imaginary is a kind of comportment or way of being that is not relegated just inside the mind, and is not represented by a compartmentalized, weekly check box of “attended church” or “attended spiritual ceremony.” As discussed, it comprises an initiatory and ongoing cultivation of resonance, incarnation, and participatory exchange. It asks of us new ways of listening and seeing. It assumes that we are sensitive to the “value elements that enchant the world independent of us”⁶². It is a participatory exchange with other humans, with cosmic insights, with the subtle languages of nature, and the centuries’ long wisdom of primal sources. It is a first-person position that is not ego-centric and not human-centric but encompasses the wholeness of our entire being including our hearts and our ability to feel love, empathy and compassion. It is the erotic desire, in Sherman’s words, to always reach “for that which is beyond and so always extends the bounds of his or her [our] vision.”⁶³

⁶² Bilgrami, “What is Enchantment?,” 156.

⁶³ Sherman, *Partakers of the Divine*, 237.

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Appendix I Religious Belief and Unbelief

In concurrence with Taylor’s proposition that unbelief is increasing in our time, it is important to note that even in the United States, where religion and belief have more of a hold than in England or Europe (as well as other parts of the world, Figure 1.)⁶⁴, there has been a decline in religious affiliation and presumably, a rise in unbelief or in the practice of *believing without belonging*.

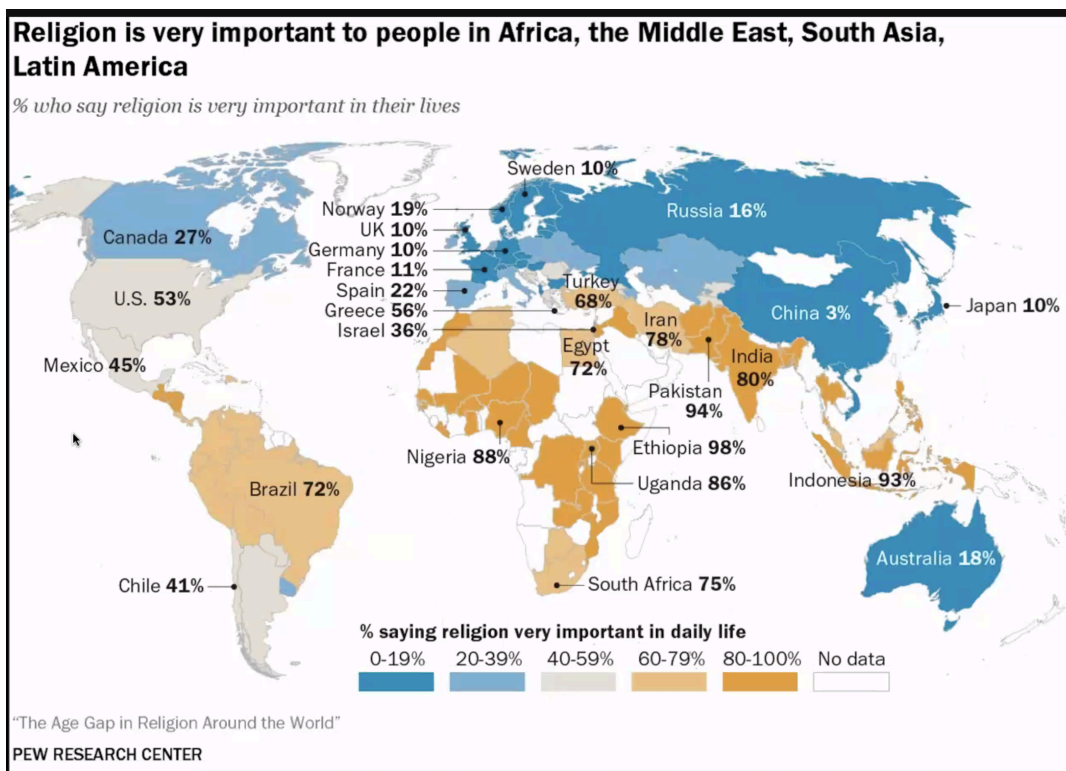


Figure 1.

⁶⁴ Conrad Hackett and Stephanie Kramer, *The Age Gap in Religion Around the World*, Pew Research Center, June 2018, 15.

The percentage of U.S. adults who are religiously unaffiliated has increased significantly over the past fifty years — from 5% in 1972 to 29% in 2021 (Figure 2.)⁶⁵. Even though the

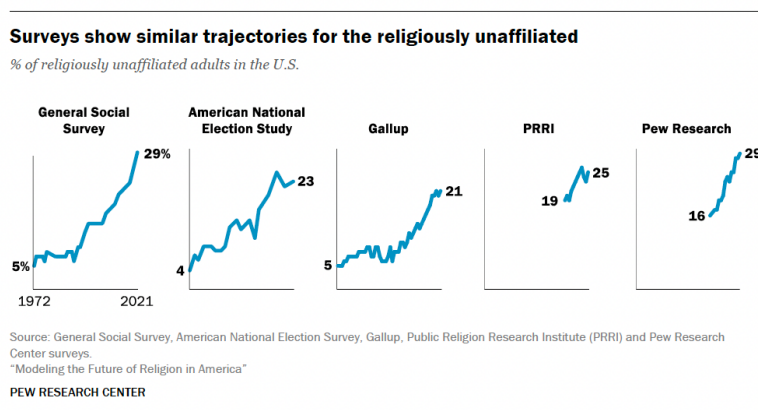


Figure 2.

religious unaffiliated currently make up only one-fifth to nearly one-third of the U.S. population, the *social imaginary* in the United States supports Taylor’s ideas about the current state of religious unbelief:

- Less than half (46%) of people with a religious affiliation in the U.S. attend their place of worship weekly⁶⁶.
- Sixty-two percent (62%) of adults expect those with no religious affiliation to increase by 2050⁶⁷.
- This belief about the growth of those with no religious affiliation is even more pervasive among younger adults: forty-six percent (46%) of 18- to 29-year-olds believe that people with no religion will be the largest group in 2050, compared to

⁶⁵ Stephanie Kramer and Conrad Hackett, *Modeling the Future of Religion in America*, Pew Research Center, September 2022, 61.

⁶⁶ Hackett and Kramer, *The Age Gap in Religion Around the World*, 65.

⁶⁷ Conrad Hackett and Alan Cooperman, *The Changing Global Religious Landscape*, Pew Research Center, April 2017, 20.

less than one-third holding this same view among the older populace (i.e., 30- to 49-year-olds, 32%; 50- to 64-year-olds, 28%; and 65 or older, 29%).⁶⁸

A recent Wall Street Journal and NORC at the University of Chicago poll indicates that in 2023, only 39% of U.S. adults find religion to be very important to them. This is a seismic decline versus 1998 when nearly two-thirds (62%) agreed that religion was very important.

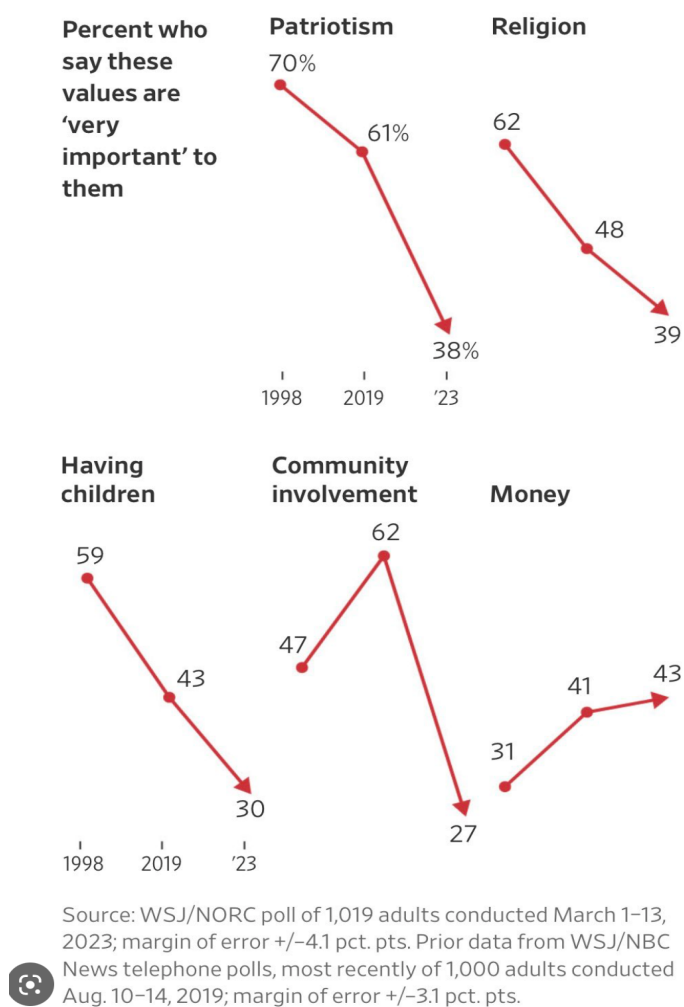


Figure 3.

⁶⁸Hackett and Cooperman, *The Changing Global Religious Landscape*, 21.

(Figure 3.) In a similar vein, a recent *New York Times* article reports that between 6,000 and 10,000 churches are closing each year in the U.S.⁶⁹

Thus, religion in the U.S. is on the wane both statistically and through its social imaginary just as it is in other parts of the western world. Although not Taylor's belief per se, he even posits, through the writings of Steve Bruce, that the issue of religion may fade away completely as more and more people become completely indifferent about it.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Jessica Grose, "Lots of Americans are Losing their Religion. Have You?," *The New York Times*, April 19, 2023, accessed May 11, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/19/opinion/religion-america.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share&referringSource=articleShare>.

⁷⁰ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 434.

Appendix II
Notes on *A Secular Age* Chronology

Figure 1.

	Pre-Axial	500 BC - 1199 AD	1200-1400	1500s
		Axial Age	Medieval	Renaissance
History			Black Death (1346-1353) Spanish Inquisition (1478-1834) Fourth Lateran Council (1215) - universal confession	Scientific Revolution (1543-1687) Council of Trent (1545-1563) "95 Thesis" 1517 /The Reformation
Movement/ Taylor's Labels	Primal Porous / exogenous meaning Unbuffered Enchantment Vulnerable to without Participatory - collective spiritual power Carnival Embeddedness (social order; cosmos, human good)	Axial Age Disembedding begins	Hierarchical equilibrium Great Chain of Being King's Two Bodies	Disenchantment Abolition of society based on Hierarchical equilibrium Civility = Piety Paganism condemned
Role / View of God(s)	Archaic Religion Pantheism / paganism Enchanted Anima Mundi Acts of God(s) Gods / spirits appeasement Stay alive Collective-participatory	Post-Axial religions 1000 AD from 'ascendentem' to 'pendentem' (Christ's ascension → suffering) Death = part of natural order Paganism Collective - Participatory Transcendent beyond or outside of the cosmos Beyond human flourishing	Catholic hegemony Acts of God Good magic of the church Fear of death, purgatory currency Still participatory, but Inner devotional life emerging (Eckhart) Only vestiges of paganism left Prescribed sacred places, times, people, actions Heretics/witches hunted Afterlife focus Vertical world of mediated access	Christian God Take 'everyone' higher Protestant ethic Rejection of church magic Salvation by faith - we are all sinners The sacred is broadened - God is sanctifying us everywhere
Time	kairotic time Higher time	Gathered time = Eternity Higher time	Plato Eternity God Eternity "time of origin"/"time out of mind" Horizontal & vertical time Founding moment Higher time	Higher time
The World	Bounded cosmos	Cosmos as a chain of being (Platonic)	Things in cosmos as loci of God's marvelous acts	Doctrine of correspondences (sky and earth) Infinite universe seeded
Themes/ Symbols	Correspondences Magic	Religious relics	Religious relics Icons	Printing press (1446, 1500 norm) Church loci itself Scripture

Figure 2.

	1600s	1700s	1800s	1900s →
	The Enlightenment	Revolution	Romanticism	Modernity
History	Edict of Nantes (1598) The Enlightenment (1637-1687) Galileo <i>Sidereus Nuncius</i> (1610)	Great Lisbon earthquake (1755) Industrial Revolution (1760-1840) American Revolution (1775-1764) French Revolution (1789-1799)	Spanish Inquisition ends (1834) Romanticism (1800-1850)	WWI / WWII Bloomsbury Group (1905) Revolution of the 1960s Sexual Revolution
Movement/ Taylor's Labels	Detachment; disengagement Productive material aspects of human activity emphasized Disembodied beings Natural Law Anger/hostility toward orthodox religion	Universe of natures they meet each other's needs Providential Deism -> Exclusive humanism Modern Moral Order polite society - taming of general society Economic prosperity & activity as proper Religion narrowed to moralism & ritual Disengaged reasons/impartial spectator (Age of the World Picture-Heidegger) Objectification Buffered identity buffered world "Excarnation" Anthropomorphism	Exclusive Humanism Age of Mobilization Rousseau self-love/love of others / "conscious" Move to 'depth' Immanent Counter-Enlightenment	Ethic of Authenticity Expressive Individualism Direct Access Society Immanent Order Anthropomorphism Sense of invulnerability Maximum homogeneity Fragilizing effect of pluralism Super Nova Lost age of certainty Harm principle 484 Post-Durkheimian
Role / View of God(s)	Nature as mechanism; intrinsic teleology expelled Nature is for humans to use Goal is to become excellent human beings-nothing more Descartes and the control of reason - the norm of detachment Free will exempts us from God It's purely 'natural' vs. transcendent Religion a matter of personal choice Decline in idea of hell	Work the system to bring about God's purposes We obey God in following the demands of his order-obliged to help him realize his plan (=our plan) The individual (I-It), Cogito Primacy of impersonal order No longer require God's grace to overcome the 'fall' Sense of mystery fades 'Theiosis' no longer part of human destiny Beyond human flourishing atrophies God as engineer absent from his design	Enchanted world fades To pursue our highest spiritual & moral aspirations we don't need God Human flourishing makes reference to nothing higher to revere love or acknowledge-ordinary life God is Dead (1882) to...Nature awakens us - the wilderness The sublime sourced from without The unconscious (Freud) Subtle language (art music, poetry) Language of symbols Stresses feeling, emotion, a living faith moving through us	Social imaginaries of different classes come closer together Horizontal, direct-access society Self worth / sense of achievement Loss of transcendence Threatened loss of meaning Atheism-unbelief comes of age Altruism Unthought of religion 428 Thirst for the absolute (post WWII) Civil religion (US) Church denominations Without God & salvation there is only immorality & disorder
Time		Secular time - temporal affairs of the world Time is homogenized Framework of time of the cosmos expands		Rejection of higher times Secular time only - homogenous and empty Vertical time slices
The World	Humans called to complete the world's shaping	Mechanization of the world World as field of mutually affecting parts Indifferent universe No higher meanings expressed in the universe around us	World designed by God Universe as cruel and malign Changed cosmic imaginary - scientific cosmology An evolving universe	Humans as Transcending the world
Themes/ Symbols	Books of etiquette Privacy	Miracles are out Secularization of public spaces		