Being Post-secular in the Social Sciences: Taylor's Social Imaginaries

David Lyon

Abstract

Following the fall of mainstream secularization paradigms, this article suggests opportunities arise for considering social and political life as 'religious' phenomena and, specifically, for using Taylor's pregnant notion of 'social imaginaries' as a bridge between 'secular' and 'post-secular' social science. Thus, themes implicit in *A Secular Age* are made explicit and used to challenge how social science is done in 'post-secular' times.

Keywords

individualism; post-secular; religion; secularization; sociology

Despite the difficulties associated with the prefix 'post' (in terms like 'postmodernity') the word has reappeared again in the early twenty-first century, now attached to 'secular'. The idea of the 'post'-anything signals uncertainty in the social sciences. In this case the common twentieth century assumption that modernity spells secularity has been radically questioned, but how to characterize this new state of affairs is very unclear. 'Post' does not connote an era of 'unsecularity' although it might query (with apologies to Bruno Latour 1993)[1] whether we have ever been secular. In general, the 'post' codes 'we're not sure what is going on but it is unquestionably significant'. The post-secular perspective accepts that the dominant secularization theses have been destabilized and that this means the role of religion in modernity may have to be rethought, sometimes substantially.

In what follows, aspects of the post-secular debate are considered, in relation to the work of Charles Taylor, especially in *A Secular Age*. Taylor's particular focus, on the changing conditions for belief in modernity, is not only a welcome departure from some of the more

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[1] Bruno Latour, *We have never been modern* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

cavalier versions of the secularization story, but it also offers new ways of thinking about how the same changing conditions may also affect the ways that the social sciences are conducted. Specifically, Taylor's discussion of 'social imaginaries' is explored as a fresh way of considering how what might be called unavoidable background beliefs are the context for social theory and analysis. Just as Taylor's own social and political analysis is clearly influenced by the social imaginaries that have shaped him, so his ideas offer new openings for a variety of perspectives that have at best been muffled by modern social science.

Charles Taylor's capacious canvas, *A Secular Age*, may be examined for many purposes. Among the significant themes - paradoxically in view of the book's title - is the question of post-secularity. While Taylor offers a marvelously rich and nuanced description of the 'secular age', he does so from a position critical of some of its basic tenets. Undoubtedly, he is an anti-secular*ist*. But one could argue that part of his thesis also questions how 'secular' western civilization really has become and what are the prospects for life beyond the 'secular age'? Among the implications of this, hinted at but never really worked out in the book, are that the social sciences themselves could be rethought in post-secular ways.

Taylor rightly insists that debates over secularity, secularism and secularization suffer from a relative neglect of examining the very conditions of belief in a given society. He says that in contrast with times when belief in God was axiomatic in the western world, the present age is one in which it is all too often taken for granted that belief in God or simply 'faith', is merely one position among others. This is one of three senses, he avers, in which many moderns inhabit a 'secular age'. The other two are the progressive splitting apart of church and state and - in some countries at least - the statistical falling off of religious belief and practice. The latter two, he notes, describe the more common understandings of secularity, while the former, he insists, needs foregrounding.

His task in the book is to explore how those conditions for faith emerged, what their consequences are, and, interestingly, how those who continue to profess faith might meet and deal with those consequences. Going against the stream, Taylor considers the possible futures of an alternative supposition to the idea that religious views have no plausible grounds; that in 'our religious lives we are responding to a transcendent reality' (768). Others may recognize some aspects of this in a quest for what Taylor calls 'fullness' but, he insists, they shut out crucial features of it. This, one might say, is an aspect of Taylor's version of post-secularity. Despite the best efforts of those whose work explicitly (or implicitly, for that matter) denies it, mere secularity is hard to maintain.

What Taylor does not focus on, however, is how his own work is situated within what might loosely be called the debate over post-secular society. And he certainly does not explicitly extend his analysis into a discussion of how we think systematically about social relationships or societies of any kind. The need to situate Taylor springs partly from the fact that Taylor himself seems to depend on a context of thought, that sometimes, he alludes to or even affirms, but does not elaborate. And the logical extension is particularly important in the social sciences. While Taylor comments on the implications of his thesis for mutual respect and recognition within multicultural societies, he says little about its impact in the actual conduct of sociology or political studies.

Yet much social science scholarship, especially when discussing such issues as pro-life movements, politicized denominational pronouncements or wearing the hijab, springs from sceptical sources. A kind of Weberian sigh over the ultimately "irrational" orientation of religiously-based practices and beliefs is the key signature of many such analyses. But, I shall argue, sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander. If in matters of public policy and politics - including pro-life/pro-choice, denominational policy statements and hijab-wearing - mutual recognition and respect is the desirable order of the day, then so also in the social sciences. After all, Marx, Weber, Durkheim and other social science founders acknowledged, even if they did not applaud, the central role of religion in social life.

In what follows I do three things. First, I briefly retrace the course of social studies of religion in recent times, from the decline of what might be called the secularization paradigm to the overt recognition of religious themes in public life. Secondly, from examining possibly reductionist themes of 'religion in social life' I turn to examining how, equally, one could examine social and political life as "religious" phenomena, concluding with a comment on the inversion of Kant's 'religion within the bounds of religion'. Thirdly, I suggest how Taylor's exploration of 'social imaginaries' could be used as a bridge between what might be called 'secular' and 'post secular' social science, and conclude with some ideas on doing social science in post-secular times.

From religion in social life...

Let me cut through the undergrowth of debate over secularization by asserting that it's most common meanings involve at least three assumptions: first, the rise of science and technology in the West helped to produce an anthropocentric world view and a state of general disenchantment as everything became in principle explicable on rational grounds. Secondly, various institutional areas of life become split off from one another to specialize in one function, sometimes

referred to as laicization.[2] Within this, religion was relegated to a private sphere of providing salvation and progressively lost its public influence. Thirdly, the development of systems - such as health care, welfare provision, civil liberties - that offer some security from the worst contingencies reduce the riskiness of life and undermine trust in God for protection and hope.

By the 1990s, the secularization paradigm was in trouble in ways that are now fairly well known. While laicization demonstrably occurs, for instance, its significance can easily be overstated. José Casanova has done more than most to show how our understanding of one area can be over-inflated into one master trend.[3] Not only are institutional religious groups evident on the public political stage in many countries - Brazil, Poland and the USA to name three - but the supposed privatization of religion is also moot in many places too. At the same time, bureaucratic agencies frequently find the language of secular expertise inadequate for the issues with which they have to deal.[4] James Beckford pointedly asks 'whether the separation of religion from the apparatus of social control and legitimation necessarily means that religion's significance is in decline?'[5]

While Casanova's work offers one take on the ways in which religions are still very much 'public' in the modern world it is worth noting that of course *A Secular Age* itself provides some sophisticated analysis of this theme. Like David Martin,[6] Taylor also insists on the variety of paths to and out-workings of modernity, with equally varied consequences for what might be called secularity. As he says, while some forms of religious life have been dissolved or destabilized, all sorts of other options, whether explicitly religious or spiritual - or, for that matter, anti-religious or unspiritual - have sprouted or sprung up. What history and sociology do best is to examine the conditions fostering or inhibiting one and another development, in particular times and places. Casanova has provided such analysis, particularly at an institutional level.

Organizationally, too, some older secularization arguments have worn rather thin. Max Weber, and to an extent Dobbelaere, detect some "secularization from within" in the ways in which religious

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[2] See Karl Dobbelaere, 'Western European Catholic societies', in Mark Jurgensmeyer, ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Global Religions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 255–264 and Peter Beyer, 'Secularization from the perspective of globalization: A response to Dobbelaere', *Sociology of Religion*, 60 (3), 1999, pp. 289–301.

[3] José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

[4] See Richard Fenn, *Liturgies and Trials* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982).

[5] James Beckford, *Religion in Advanced Industrial Society* (London: Unwin-Hyman, 1989), p. 110.

[6] David Martin, *On Secularization: Towards a Revised General Theory* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005).

groups in the twentieth century West sometimes allowed bureaucratic structures to smother spiritual life within the churches. Peter Berger once argued that a key dilemma of contemporary churches was seen in the nature of their pact with modernity; to adapt to the modern world and see their distinctive practices fade or to refuse modernity and risk irrelevance.[7] But evidence from the intervening decades shows conclusively that at least many Western, Christian churches have found new ways of coping with this dilemma (perhaps even as a reflexive result of reading Berger!). One may cite studies by Grace Davie in the UK, Danièle Hervieu-Léger in France, John Stackhouse in Canada and Robert Wuthnow or Nancy Ammerman in the USA to see that creative and imaginative pathways are being taken out of what Berger described as a zero-sum impasse.[8]

In a third dimension, that might be thought of as 'personal' or 'cultural', earlier secularization theorists discussed what amounted to a 'secularization of consciousness' and this also resonates with some of Taylor's proposals about the changing conditions of belief in a secular age. While contemporary communications media and the growth of consumerism may well galvanize certain fragmentations of faith,[9] however, it is far from clear that "consciousness" has ever become secularized in the West in as thoroughgoing manner as the secularization paradigm would have it. True, both expressive and acquisitive individualism may have taken root in some religious spheres but while Bruce concludes that this confirms his steady decline argument - 'from cathedrals to cults'[10] - Martin insisted that in Latin American contexts at least, churches succeed in both incorporating and containing such shifts.[11] In all these cases, religion is viewed less as being fatefully tied to the fortunes of modernity (or even modernities) and more as a dynamic 'cultural resource', to use Beckford's term.

[7] Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (New York: Anchor-Doubleday, 1967).

[8] See: Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing without Belonging* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994); Grace Davie, *Religion in Modern Europe. A Memory Mutates* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Danièle Hervieu-Léger, *Vers un nouveau christianisme* (Paris: Cerf, 1986); John Stackhouse, *Canadian Evangelicalism in the Twentieth Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993); Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith since World War II* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988); Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Pillars of Faith: American Congregations and their Partners* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

[9] David Lyon, *Jesus in Disneyland: Religion in Postmodern Times* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000).

[10] Steve Bruce, *Religion in the Modern World: From Cathedrals to Cults* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

[11] David Martin, 'Religion, secularization and postmodernity: lessons from the Latin American case', in Pål Repstad, ed., *Religion and Modernity: Modes of Co-existence* (Oxford: Scandinavian University Press, 1996), pp. 35–43.

Space does not allow for proper treatment of examples of religion and of faith as cultural resources, although much work has been done on the 'resurgence' of religion in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. (I put quotation marks around 'resurgence' because viewing it as such may say as much about the analyst as the empirical reality. On the other hand, 'resurgence' or revival does seem to be a good word for much of what is happening, for instance, in Brazil or South Korea.) Part of this relies on rethinking the modern(ist) categories bequeathed to us by the Enlightenment and by some sociologies. Talal Asad, for instance, takes a genealogical approach that allows him to question the background assumptions - such as, significantly, the downgrading of the knowing subject - of much Western scholarship regarding religion.[12] Equally, someone like Saba Mahmood uses a genealogical method to track contemporary religious expression, this time in the case of Islamic women whose daily practices of the body, such as prayer and weeping, she says, gives rise to a distinctive ethics. It is the practices that count, she indicates, not merely some (Western) notion of belief or, worse, ideology.[13] Resonances with this reappear below.

. . . to social life in religion

Even if sociology acknowledges flaws in the old secularization paradigm and recognizes the resilience of religious commitments, activities and institutions in the modern world, this may still occur in a secular frame. That is, the empirical evidence may still be viewed on an entirely horizontal level, leaving basic naturalistic assumptions intact. Religious phenomena remain in a compartment as just one aspect of life. The study of religion is still circumscribed by the limits originally imposed by Kant.

While there is nothing necessarily wrong with such studies, which may be perfectly legitimate on their own terms, and may be highly illuminative of the social life of modernity, other approaches are conceivable. These need not stray from the discipline of sociology into religious studies or even theology, but they start from different bases. They may query the foundationalism of empiricist accounts[14] or join what were once called postmodern critiques of the unwarranted certainties of post-Enlightenment (social) sciences. Or they may actually

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[12] Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

[13] Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

[14] David Lyon, 'Valuing in Social Theory: post-empiricism and Christian responses', *Christian Scholars' Review*, XII (v), 1983, pp. 324–38.

propose new ways forward for epistemological openness and variety in sociology, that would affect not only sociologies of religion but also sociologies of anything.

One way to approach these other alternatives would be through studies of 'implicit' religion[15] or the kinds of analyses prompted by Luckmann's venerable work on 'invisible' religion.[16] This phenomenological approach begins not with accounts of formal religion such as that of the institutional church but with the idea that the problem of the individual human life is basically religious. To create a moral universe of meaning is to transcend the biological basis of life and to exhibit humanness. In non-specific ways, religion is a fundamental dimension of human life, and whatever specific forms it takes is amenable to empirical discovery. Part of Luckmann's collaboration with Peter Berger revolved around such empirical specifications. Such perspectives also underlie, for example, the work of the journal, *Implicit Religion.*

Moving completely out of the realm of the sociology of religion, however, one can find many social scientists, with or without a particular interest in religion as such, offering 'religious' explanations for the presence of persistent problems in the modern world. Anthony Smith, for example, widely recognized as the doyen of studies of nationalism, suggests that the key to understanding why ordinary people cling to and self-identify in relation to notions of 'nation' lies in the basically 'sacred' features of these institutions.[17] Over against the 'instrumentalist' views that see the nation and a product of modernity (since the French Revolution) and of specifically modern conditions of capitalism, industrialism, bureaucracy, mass communications and secularism, Smith makes room for his version of 'primordialism' in which distinct cultural identities - *ethnies* as he calls them - have much deeper roots in human society and history than those allowed within the 'modernist fallacy'.[18]

So, what then is the alternative 'ethnosymbolic' approach to nations proposed by Smith? In short, Smith offers a quite different approach that takes seriously not only the modern dimensions of the nation and of nationalism, but also the deeper roots of these animating social realities. His critique of other approaches starts by noting that the religious roots of nationhood have been neglected in ways detrimental to their serious study. The problem lies in the 'general

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[15] Edward Bailey, *Implicit Religion in Contemporary Society* (Leuven: Peeters, 1997).

[16] Thomas Luckmann, *The Invisible Religion: The Problem of Religion in Modern Society* (New York: Macmillan, 1967).

[17] Anthony D. Smith, *Chosen Peoples: Sacred Sources of National Identity* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

[18] Anthony D. Smith, *Nations and Nationalism in a Global Era* (Cambridge: Polity, 1995) p. 31.

trend to dismiss the role of religion and tradition in a globalizing world, and to downplay the persistence of nationalism in a "post-national" global order'.[19]

These kinds of approaches, the phenomenological and what might be called the anthropological, open doors for a reconsideration of 'religion in the modern world'. It is a reconsideration because it raises questions for the dominant perspective seen above all in the work of Immanuel Kant. Now Kant's task in *Religion within the Bounds of Reason Alone* was not to denounce the church (although he was, naturally, censured for it) so much as to say that genuinely moral lives do not necessarily need the ministrations of church or its rituals. Religious traditions can trap the unsuspecting into thinking they have no moral opinions of their own. Yet he also argued that reason should itself be used critically; his was not an Enlightenment position that placed reason on an impossible pedestal. But he left the door open for the modern position to develop in which, as Taylor shows, reason is too often the arbiter of ideas and practices religious.

Against this, more recent scholarship has asked if the equation could meaningfully be reversed? What would the world of academe look like, if instead, reason was itself seen in the context of religion, or perhaps, following Taylor, of religious practices and their accompanying imaginaries? John Milbank, who attempts something like this in his *Theology and Social Theory*, traces a fateful line from Kant's radical separation of empirical understanding and the religious sublime to the sociology of religion that he says 'polices the sublime'.[20] For him, the sociology of religion only exists in drawing and guarding rational boundaries around all religious phenomena. His alternative is to position theology itself as a social science (and indeed for the inhabitants of the *altera civitas*) as the queen of the sciences.

A different - and less totalizing, in my view - approach was taken a few years earlier in a little tract that simply inverted Kant in its title: *Reason within the Bounds of Religion*.[21] Wolterstorff grapples with many of the same Enlightenment authors arguing that in the end nothing can save Enlightenment foundationalism. For him, the hopelessly flawed idea is that empiricism provides a firm base for doing science. Not so. Facts are discovered within theoretical frames, and theoretical frames, if they explain anything, inevitably draw on assumptions beyond the accumulation of relevant facts. An alternative, for Christian believers (but it could equally apply to others), is to allow the belief content of one's authentic commitments to act

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[19] *Chosen Peoples,* op.cit., p. ix.
[20] John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), see 101ff.
[21] Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Reason within the Bounds of Religion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976).

as a control - a guide - in the devising and weighing of theory. This does not simply place all in the "secular reason" category but calls for a nuanced assessment, in this case a Christian one, of all theory. This assumes, of course, that theory, understood in this post-empiricist fashion, cannot but call on some items beyond itself in order to explain anything.

But Wolterstorff still hovers, in my view, between the somewhat cognitive ideas of 'control beliefs' and those of 'authentic commitments'. The former could be read in a propositional or even 'doctrinal' way. Wolterstorff clearly does not mean it that way but the argument could loop back to the rational realm in which social science thought police patrol the sublime. What if the balance were allowed to shift towards those "commitments," towards an affective realm of the 'heart' and to tilt away from 'beliefs' understood as propositions? This, I propose, is what Taylor achieves with his notion of 'social imaginaries'.

Taylor's social imaginaries

For Taylor, a social imaginary is a shared sense of how things work, and how they should work, in community life. A social imaginary enables and makes sense of social practices, and in *Modern Social Imaginaries* the idea is applied to various instantiations of Western modernity.[22] (And this echoes, of course, what was hinted at above in the work of Asad and Mahmood in non-western contexts.) While what Taylor calls the "moral order" is an explicit set of expectations and rules about how we ought to act, and why the social world is established in the way it is, the social imaginary has to do with how we understand ourselves, what we expect of each other and what background practices inform our social behaviour. Modernity, as known in the West, created a 'direct access society', claims Taylor, based on new notions of the economy, the public sphere and popular sovereignty, that usurped the earlier 'hierarchical complementarity' of pre-modernity.

Now, *Modern Social Imaginaries* was written as part of *A Secular Age* but was published as a kind of demo-disk or trailer for the larger work. In the context of the latter book, some of Taylor's purposes in the earlier one become clearer. In particular, he sets modern social imaginaries in the context of secularity and as an aspect of the changed conditions for belief in the modern period. Without going as far as Jürgen Habermas, who argues that key dimensions of Western

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[22] Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

modernity find their roots in Jewish and Christian ideas.[23] Taylor is really saying that modernity, paradoxically, is religious.

The idea of social imaginaries is not necessarily new. Similar usages by others exist. One thinks of Marx's *praxis*, Heidegger's distinction between *Wissenschaft* (knowledge) and *Verstehen* (understanding), Wittgenstein's 'forms of life' or even Foucault's *technique*. But Taylor's specific task is to show how general understandings of moral order, that began in the West with Grotius in particular, gradually suffuse a society and indeed many societies, as a social imaginary. So Grotius' idea of humans as 'rational, sociable agents who are meant to collaborate in peace to their mutual benefit' in time becomes the background to 'the way in which our contemporaries imagine the societies they inhabit and sustain' (159, 161). And while breakdown may occur, as Taylor's own work on individualism attests, 'modernity is also the rise of new principles of sociality' (169).

Taylor distinguishes the social theory of the few from the social imaginary of the many even though, as he argues, the modern social imaginary had theoretical antecedents. So a social imaginary may also be thought of as 'that largely unstructured and inarticulate understanding of our whole situation, within which particular features of our world show up for us in the sense they have' (173). It is unlimited and indefinite. The understanding may make practices possible, but equally the practices carry the understanding. Thus for instance voting in an election or organizing a protest demonstration are practices for which a whole background understanding - the social imaginary - is present. And in each case, it is likely that participants have understood that certain norms may be realizable, which is why they engage in them but also why they do so in specific ways.

Once he has discussed the imaginaries of 'economy', 'public sphere' and 'sovereign people', existing in secular time, with no sense of the transcendent, Taylor turns to a more recent dimension of the modern social imaginary, spilling over from these, the 'direct access society'. Although it is clear that Judeo-Christian apocalyptic informs key aspects of the modern imaginary, the idea, spelled out first by Benedict Anderson that society consists as the sum of myriad events in the lives of all its members, sees time as exclusively secular.[24] Society may be imagined 'horizontally' unrelated to when 'the ordinary sequences of events touches higher time' or to those

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[23] Jürgen Habermas, 'Notes on a post secular society', available at www.signandsight.com/features/1714.html/ This text originally appeared in German in *Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik*, in April 2008. See also: Austin Harrington, 'Habermas and the 'post secular society', *European Journal of Social Theory*, vol.10, no.4, 2007, pp. 543–60 and Craig Calhoun, *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1993).

[24] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1991).

mediators, such as kings and priests, who might stand between the two, such that each member of society is immediate to the whole. Thus, says Taylor, '[we] have moved from a hierarchical order of personalized links to an impersonal egalitarian one; from a vertical world of mediated-access to horizontal, direct-access societies' (209). This means that modern individualism means not non-belonging, but belonging to increasingly impersonal entities; the shift, in Calhoun's words, from 'relational' to 'categorical' identities.[25] Through this process, the social imaginaries of different social classes come closer together, a state of affairs, avers Taylor that first came fully to the fore in post-Revolutionary France.

So how might the notion of a social imaginary help in the quest of a non-foundational, post-empiricist social science, open to all kinds of 'confessional' positions? James Smith has started to sketch how this might happen in regard to particular Christian attempts to 'integrate faith and learning'.[26] This very cognitive endeavour, he says, seems to accept the canons of secular scholarship, allowing little scope for radical Christian approaches that could in principle start from very different premises. Smith applauds Taylor's focus on imaginaries for their affective (hearts and desires are significant here) and bodily dimensions (recall that this mode of understanding is 'implicit in practices') and its narrative (stories, images, legends) rather than propositional bent. The key analogy in Taylor is the contrast between knowing how to get to one's own house (imaginary) and being given a map to follow (theory). For Smith, Christian approaches to the world should approximate to the imaginary, with its stories, its (liturgical) practices. These yield the necessary background to living everyday life as believers, and cannot be reduced to 'beliefs' or 'doctrine',' any more than artistic or musical expressions can be so reduced. Indeed, they go beyond the cognitive to offer what mere theory never can.[27]

Thus, according to Taylor, the social imaginary is 'much broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they *think* about social reality in a disengaged mode'.[28] It shifts the centre of gravity closer to the heart than the head, the body than the brain. The imaginary, says Smith, is fuelled by 'images' provided by the senses.[29] And the senses resonate with those practices of which Taylor speaks, practices in which understandings are implicit,

[25] Craig Calhoun, ed., *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).

[26] James Smith, 'Beyond integration: Re-narrating Christian scholarship in postmodernity', in Todd Ream ed., *Beyond Integration: Interdisciplinary possibilities for the future of Christian Higher Education* (forthcoming).

[27] Jeremy Begbie, *Theology, Music and Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000).

[28] *Modern Social Imaginaries*, op.cit. 23.

[29] 'Beyond Integration', op. cit., p. 21.

practices that preceded, historically, the development of theoretical thinking. Back to Smith again: he suggests that 'stories, narratives, myths and icons are the visions that capture hearts and form the "lining" of human imagination, the frameworks of meaning by which we make sense of the world'.[30]

And staying with Smith for a moment longer, he argues that (in his case Christian) social imaginaries are formed through the practices of religious worship and devotion. These precede whatever doctrines may be discussed as theoretical elaborations of what happens in prayer, communion or singing. For him, Christians working in intellectual callings would do well to revise their use of notions like 'world view' that tend all too easily to be used in an overly cognitive fashion. A much more grounded approach to thinking about how to engage the academic world could emerge from this (re)appropriation of Taylor's imaginaries. One that would take seriously the affective and the emotional, the heart and the body; literally, one that is more incarnational.

Doing social science in post-secular times

If the condition of post-secularity has to do with recognizing on the one hand the limits of the main secularization paradigms, and on the other the ways in which religious or spiritual practices and motifs are basic to many ongoing social processes then this immediately has a bearing on doing social science. Indeed, while the idea of post-secularity does have some salience for understanding everyday life in today's world, it is in a sense a peculiarly social scientific way of describing that world. It almost apologetically acknowledges that monolithic notions of modernity are mistaken and diffidently admits uncertainty about the future with the prefix, "post."

Thus the notion of post-secularity fits well with the critiques of modernity that have been mounted almost unrelentingly since the 1980s and even before. The Enlightenment project has been radically questioned by numerous and diverse groups for its over-cognitive approach to knowledge and understanding, for its association with male privilege and with colonial perspectives. But if the Enlightenment enthroned what Milbank calls secular reason as the sole arbiter of intellectual disputes it was only a matter of time before not only post-structuralists, environmentalists or feminists would question this but people working in religious studies would as well. This has taken the form of both radical critiques that accept no middle ground, such as with Milbank,[31] or more nuanced studies that attempt to

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[30] Ibid., p. 23.
[31] *Theology and Social Theory,* op.cit.

acknowledge some insights of "secular reason" but try to indicate its grave shortcomings.[32]

A post-secular strategy might also offer the chance for theorists to *contribute* alongside others, rather than merely *defend* their positions. Taylor himself provides a model for this kind of engagement.[33] He does give reasons for his position but, in his major work such as *Sources of the Self* and in *A Secular Age*, places his work unapologetically in the academic *agora* to be viewed alongside the offerings of others. Someone else who has achieved this splendidly in the sociology of religion is David Martin - another major intellectual who both spent many decades grappling with the secularization problematic and someone who allows his own commitments unashamedly to colour his judgments. Martin's work is shot through with assumptions that are as grounded in bodily practices of ritual and worship as any, but which are at the same time highly provocative in the very best academic sense.[34]

Rather than simply being sucked back into the gravitational pull of explicit studies of the religious and the secular, however, consider the ways in which these orientations might be manifest in other areas of social science. In my own work in surveillance studies I have concluded that one of the most pressing issues is the way in which information - especially personal information - is construed within computing and policy disciplines.[35] It is a pressing issue because, since the later part of the twentieth century, information increasingly came to be viewed as a quantifiable commodity and as something separate from the meanings that may or may not be attached to it. This move was enacted in debates of the so-called Macey Conferences (that sought a general science of the workings of the human mind) in the 1950s and 1960s, where the British school tried to assert meaning as a vital characteristic of information over against the American insistence that this was superfluous, at least for nascent communication theory.

The upshot, put pithily by N. Katherine Hayles, is that during the rapid rise of information infrastructures, guided by these ideas, information 'lost its body'.[36] This could be read (correctly) as a feminist critique of information studies but it is much more. Hayles observes that the way information was (and is) treated by some

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[32] John Caputo, *On Religion* (New York and London: Routledge, 2001). See also William Connolly, *Why I am not a secularist* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

[33] David Lyon, 'Possibilities for post-secular sociology', (essay review on Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*), *Canadian Journal of Sociology*, vol. 33 no.3, 2008, pp. 693–696.

[34] *On Secularization*, op.cit.

[35] David Lyon, *Surveillance Studies: An Overview* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007).

[36] N. Katherine Hayles, *How we became posthuman: Virtual bodies in literature, cybernetics and informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

male writers ignored the very materials conditions that produce it, such that thinking information is immaterial is a peculiarly sexist trait. It becomes very clear in the world of *personal* information, however, that although data collected and processed by large brokers, police forces, security agencies or government departments may be thought of as trivial or technical, if it refers to humans it is peculiarly personal, material. The consequences for life-chances and for choices are far from trivial or technical when the data are the means of sorting between categorized groups in order to determine differential outcomes.[37]

Working with a social imaginary that privileges personhood and relationality, but simultaneously aspires to realism about the wrenching and wretched inequities and injustices of the world one might adopt some distinctive starting points for considering the significance of personal data for social ordering today. Rather than work within theories that downplay the materiality or 'bodiliness' of information, or those that assume all perceived problems associated with personal data may be overcome by attending to "privacy" especially in its legalistic and individualistic modes[38] such an imaginary would, for example, try to reconnect 'body' and 'information' and to develop new theories of social visibilities and an ethics of care (see Stoddart, forthcoming)[39] consonant with that position.

In conclusion, let me simply suggest three reasons among many why Taylor's argument, embedded in the somewhat unwieldy *A Secular Age*, is important for how the social sciences are done. First, as I have suggested, his notion of social imaginaries takes us beyond the mere Kantian assertions about the gulf between 'religion' and 'reason'. It allows scholars to stand back and to grasp the significance of emotion and embodiment that lie behind the abstract and the cerebral that too frequently mars social science analyses, including especially those of 'religion'. Secondly, Taylor's emphasis on social practices leads him to lean explicitly not merely towards Catholicism but in particular to Ivan Illich's understanding of the church as a 'way of living together' as opposed to an organizational code of rules (737). The church, for Illich, is a 'skein of relations which link particular, unique, enfleshed people to each other' says Taylor, not a group who happen, à la modernity, to share certain properties (739). Taylor takes this as a kind of parable for thinking about western civilization in more general terms.

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[37] Oscar Gandy, *Coming to Terms with Chance: Engaging Rational Discrimination and Cumulative Disadvantage* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009) and *Surveillance Studies*, op.cit.

[38] See for example: Priscilla Regan, *Legislating Privacy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995) and Daniel Solove, *The Digital Person: Technology and Privacy in the Information Age* (New York: New York University Press, 2004).

[39] Eric Stoddart (forthcoming) *Surveillance and an Ethics of Care* (Aldershot: Ashgate).

But not only 'more general'. He also insists, thirdly, that the way in which the debate is undertaken is crucial. Similarly to Habermas, who pleads for mutual understanding between secular moderns and faith-oriented believers, Taylor's work is thoroughly irenic in spirit. The social imaginary informing his theory and theory assessment is one that cares deeply about relationality and about making space for the Other. Indeed, what he does not state explicitly comes out resoundingly in his practice - writing - namely that recognition and respect are of the essence. The believer who dares to enter the social science *agora* guided by a Christian social imaginary would do well to follow Taylor's example of *agape*.

David Lyon
Department of Sociology
D431 Mackintosh-Corry
Queen's University
Kingston
Ontario
Canada K7L 3N6
Email: Lyond@queensu.ca

Charles Taylor replies:

Several very interesting ideas emerge for social science from David Lyon's paper. One touches on the nature of the 'religious'. Is there still an 'implicit religion' in many contemporary social practices and institutions? Lyon mentions modern nationalism, the formation and reproduction of national identities, and their often frightening ascendancy over those who live by them. For anyone who operates with a simple binary, between faith nourished by (often bodily) practices and narratives, on one hand, and cool secular reason generating moral principles and instrumental scenarios, on the other, the importance of nationalism today can only encourage the Bruno Latour-like idea that 'we have never been secular'. This may be one of the facts about our world which has been nourishing the idea that we live in a post-secular world.

But it is not just nationalism. Our lives are shot through with rituals, which connect us in some or other way with the immemorial past of the human species. Some of these are self-consciously designed to separate us from this, mostly religious, past; but it remains a puzzling question how much they succeed in this attempt.

Rituals have a performative dimension. 'I pronounce you man and wife' *makes* a couple married. They *effect* an order of things, or alter our relation to an order we belong to. But what is the nature of the order which is implied here. When it comes to the Mass, it is clear