Learning from Secularism

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The Uniting Church lives within a world-wide fellowship of Churches in which it will learn to sharpen its understanding of the will and purpose of God by contact with contemporary thought. Within that fellowship the Uniting Church also stands in relation to contemporary societies in ways which will help it to understand its own nature and mission.[1]

Arguably the most immediate context in which the Uniting Church lives, together with all other Churches in Australia, is the secular society. However, as far as I am aware, there is not much serious engagement with this—indeed, one hears all sorts of statements made about the secular or 'postmodern' society in Church circles, at presbyteries and synods, board and commission meetings and in everyday talk among Church people. Usually these are woefully ill-informed and rarely rise above the cliché.

Yes, it is true that people tend not to go to church, that they are suspicious of organised forms of religion, that they are individualistic, often consumerist and do not like to commit to anything. However, these are only superficial observations that do not engage with the phenomenon of secularity at any depth. Yet once we do engage with secular society at a more profound level, we will gain important insight into the nature of this society, its weaknesses and inner contradictions, which, as Christians, we need to identify and expose. This is an important starting point for mission in our age. At the same time, we will also find important strengths, and good reasons for the rejection of many forms of religion. This needs to be the starting point for critical self-reflection within the Church.

All this certainly presupposes that we want to engage with our surrounding culture critically. The Christian religion is remarkably good at adapting itself to new environments, and thus we see Christian Churches that have embraced modernity[2] lock, stock and barrel, and become very successful. Micklethwait and Woolridge's recent book *God is Back* describes what thoroughly modern Christianity looks like, which is the American style Pentecostal Church, led by an entrepreneurial pastor and catering for a congregation of individualistic adherents.[3]

However, I believe that we are called to be critical of our modern secular society and of its roots, because the Gospel needs to transform society. We are called to test everything and only hold on to what is good. Besides, I always find it deeply embarrassing when I see congregations trying to emulate Pentecostal elements in their worship. This hardly goes beyond badly played rock music with appalling lyrics and a dumbing down of the Christian Gospel.

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[1] *Basis of Union,* §11

[2] I use this term in the temporal sense—for the purposes of this paper I am not distinguishing between modernity and so-called 'post-modernity'.

[3] John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, *God Is Back, How the Global Revival of Faith Is Changing the World,* New York, Penguin Press, 2009.

In this paper, I shall present an outline of a possible critical engagement with modern secular culture. This will be, obviously, far from complete, and merely raise questions and point in the direction of possible discussions. So, first I shall ask what we actually mean by 'secularisation' and by 'secular society'. This will give us an entry point into the fascinating discussion of secularisation that has been taking place in philosophy, law and theology since the early twentieth century. Second, I shall describe some features of secularisation which have been identified in this debate. This will be followed by an outline of possible consequences for Church and theology, both in relation to society and to the Church's self-criticism and ongoing reformation. Finally, I shall describe possible responses to the phenomenon of modern secular society.

The Secularisation Debate

The notion that the world is moving in the direction of an increasingly secular society is as old as the enlightenment. Social, scientific and philosophical progress was supposed to enable humankind to be released from its self-imposed tutelage.[4] In the early twentieth century the awareness grew that the relation between the older religious world view and features of modern society was more complex. For example Max Weber argued famously that modern capitalist economy had its origin in the Protestant work ethic.[5]

A new dimension of understanding secular society was opened by the German legal scholar Carl Schmitt. In 1922, Schmitt published a short book called *Political Theology* in which he developed his understanding of sovereignty. In this text he suggested that the modern state is a secularised version of the mediaeval concept of the omnipotent God. In fact, Schmitt argued that 'all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts.'[6] Consequently, he implied that secular society actually contained in itself a vital remnant of religious thinking. Some twenty-seven years later, Karl Löwith broadened this thesis and argued that modernity was in fact the secularisation of Christian ideals.[7] Instead of being something new that had completely replaced the old religious world view, modernity was seen as the illegitimate heir to theology's intellectual property. Consequently, it was argued that secular society was not quite as secular as its proponents thought, for at its very heart religion lurked unrecognised.

Martin Heidegger added an important dimension to this debate when, in his writings on Nietzsche, he argued that there was a deep flaw within Western theological thinking since Plato and Aristotle, namely the shift towards onto-theological understanding of being, which led inevitably to atheism and nihilism.[8]

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4   Immanuel Kant, 'What Is Enlightenment?' in *Philosophical Writings*, ed. Ernst Behler, New York, Continuum, 1986, p. 263.

5   Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, London, Unwin Hyman, 1989.

6   Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology, Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2005, p. 36.

7   In particular in Karl Lowith, *Meaning in History*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1949.

8   Martin Heidegger, 'Nietzsche's Word: "God Is Dead"', in *Off the Beaten Track*, Cambridge; New York, Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Thus secular society (which Heidegger links with atheism and nihilism), far from being an advance over against earlier world views, is in fact the result of a wrong development, of an intellectual deviation.

This view of modernity has become very influential, with the one difference that the deviation is most often located in late mediaeval Nominalism. This view was introduced into the discussion by the German philosopher Hans Blumenberg in his *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*. First of all, Blumenberg put forward a way of understanding what constituted secularisation and, consequently, of the relation between religious and secular concepts. He suggested that

> what mainly occurred in the process that is interpreted as secularisation ... should be described not as the transposition of authentically theological contents into secularized alienation from their origin, but rather as the reoccupation of answer positions that have become vacant and whose corresponding questions could not be eliminated.[9]

In other words, far from being the illegitimate heir to theology's intellectual property, as implied by Schmitt's and Löwith's theories, the secular age has provided new answers for questions that humankind has always asked, and for which mediaeval theological answers did not carry weight any longer. In particular, Blumenberg identified late mediaeval Nominalism as the driving force behind this change—unwittingly, obviously. Against the mediaeval consensus that God's actions were always guided by reason, the Nominalists insisted on the absolute freedom of God.[10] This insistence on the unfettered absolute power of God undermined the notion of the world as cosmos which is governed by reason and created and designed for the benefit of humankind, because to insist that God must be guided by reason and human flourishing would limit God's freedom—why should God be bound by such considerations? Consequently, God had to be seen as radically free, even on the danger that God could become potentially capricious and unreliable. The basic question, 'How can we make sense of the world in which we live?' remained, but the earlier mediaeval answer that a rational God was the guarantor of a rational universe and of a hospitable world order was not an option any longer. To fill this vacuum—or, in Blumenberg's terminology, the 'vacant answer position'—humankind had to find a new way of asserting its position in a potentially hostile universe.[11] Blumenberg traced this development and argued that the Baconian programme of scientific advance and the Cartesian grounding of certain knowledge in the autonomous human reason filled this gap.[12]

Blumenberg's argument is more nuanced and balanced than this simplified summary, but this will suffice to convey an idea of the direction of his thinking. At any rate, the notion of Christian theology rejecting the possibility of any rational explanation of the world as a major contributing factor in the

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[9] Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert M. Wallace, Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1983, p. 65.

[10] Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, pp. 171–179. See also David Knowles, *The Evolution of Medieval Thought*, 2 ed., London; New York, Longman, 1988, pp. 328–29. I use 'Nominalism' in the wider sense, synonymous with Okhamism and *via moderna*.

[11] Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, pp. 138, 151.

[12] For Francis Bacon see Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, pp. 383–90. For René Descartes see pp. 181–203.

rise of secular modernity is remarkable and we will need to keep this in mind for later.

More recently, Michael Gillespie presented an analysis leading to similar conclusions in his work *The Theological Origins of Modernity*,[13] in which he argues with Blumenberg that modernity is the result of the collapse of mediaeval philosophy and theology as a result of Nominalism, but also, against Blumenberg, that modernity does not exist by its own right, but remains parasitical on the theology from which it originated. Unfortunately, there is no space to include a discussion of his perspective in this paper.

The next author whom I would like to discuss in detail is Charles Taylor and his recent seminal work *A Secular Age*. There are three elements of Taylor's argument which we need to discuss. First, Taylor defines what 'secular society' actually means in a simple and useful way. Then, he describes the genesis of secular society, focussing not on the 'intellectual deviation story' (this is actually Taylor's phrase[14]) on which I have focussed so far, but the 'reform master narrative'. Finally, I shall describe Taylor's understanding of the legitimacy of secular society. I shall present a brief outline of these three elements here and return to them in the discussion of the next section.

First, Taylor proposes three different definitions of secular society, which, in their difference, complement one another and can be applied in different circumstances. The most potent, which is the main focus of Taylor's study, is that 'secular' means the change 'which takes us from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others.'[15]

Taylor goes on to describe the genesis of this society in terms of the religious reform narrative. He summarises this with admirable clarity and brevity:

> Briefly summed up, the Reform demanded that everyone be a *real, 100 percent* Christian. Reform not only disenchants, but disciplines and re-orders life and society. Along with civility, this makes for a notion of moral order which gives a new sense to Christianity, and the demands of faith. This collapses the distance of faith from Christendom. It introduces an anthropocentric shift, and hence a break-out from the monopoly Christian faith.[16]

In other words, the religious reform movement, the beginning of which he locates in the demand by the fourth Lateran Council of 1215 that every Christian should go to confession at least once a year,[17] attempted to impose greater commitment of all members of the Church, stronger religious devotion, improved piety and stricter Christian morality.[18] In addition, this movement tried to suppress superstition

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[13] Michael Allen Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2009.

[14] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Cambridge, Mass., Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007, p. 774.

[15] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 3.

[16] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 774. Italics and capitalisation of 'Reform' in the original,

[17] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 64.

[18] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 63.

and folk religion, thus contributing significantly to the disenchantment of the world. This reform movement continued, in only slightly different forms, in the three main streams of the Reformation, i.e. the Lutheran, Calvinist and Roman Catholic Reformations, and then, within these traditions, into the modern age.

Taylor traces the genesis of this society, its features, and the contradictions and cross pressures that its members face (I shall discuss Taylor's notion of 'cross pressures' below.) He contends that the development towards secularism was by no means inevitable, and that at many junctions a different turn could have been taken, which would have led to a very different society.[19]

Finally, Taylor also agrees with Blumenberg (although hardly mentioning him at all) that modern secular society is not merely living from the spoils of the demise of Christendom, but that something genuinely new and legitimate evolved, which, eventually, replaced the old world order. However, because of the cross pressures which the modern secular self faces, he believes that secular modernity is by far not as powerful and pervasive as it is commonly assumed.

This description consists, obviously, only of sketches of the profound contributions to the debate about the origin and nature of secular modernity. However, they point, I hope, to the complexity of the various contributors to the development of modern secular society.

What is Secular Society?

In this section, I will discuss the key elements of secular society. In this, I will address the three areas under which I have summarised Taylor's proposal, but in slightly different order—I shall discuss the origin first, then the features of secular society and then its legitimacy and limitations. Although Taylor will feature prominently in this section, I will not restrict myself to him but also engage other authors where appropriate.

Origins of Secular Modernity

First of all, the roots of modern secular society are theological, in particular drawing on the western Christian tradition. In fact, it is a phenomenon that could only arise within the context of western Christianity. I have already mentioned above the theory that it was the insistence on God's radical freedom that undermined the mediaeval understanding of a cosmos ruled and governed by God's reason. In response to this crisis of late mediaeval thought certain modern positions developed, such as the primacy of the autonomous rational self (Descartes) and the need for a systematic programme of technological progress (Bacon). In short, the theological absolutism of Nominalist theology led to human self-assertion, to use Blumenberg's terminology.

Another important factor is the shift from analogical to univocal language in relation to the divine.

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[19] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, pp. 20–22. See also p. 95.

In short, equivocal and analogical language in relation to God's being expresses that God is qualitatively different from any other being, to the extent that one even has to say that God is not a being at all, rather beyond being and, at the same time, the source of all being. Duns Scotus shifted theological language and introduced univocal language in relation to God's being.[20] This means that 'being' means that same when applied to God as when applied to Socrates (or any other creature). The difference between God's and Socrates' being is that Socrates is a finite being, while God is an infinite being. The distinction between finite and infinite being, however, does not invalidate the univocal attribution. The same applies to transcendental terms, such as 'God is good'. This means that God is good in the same sense as Socrates is good, however God much more so than Socrates or any other creature.[21] This move was followed by William of Ockham and with him by the largest part of the late mediaeval and modern theological tradition. This move meant that God's being is not totally different from the being of anything else that exists. God may be the highest and infinite being, but God is still a being, that is one thing that exists. Consequently, God's transcendence is severely diminished, because God is one being, albeit an infinite being, among beings. This makes it easier and potentially even necessary to deny the existence of God. For example, and I put the argument deliberately crudely here, if we take seriously Ockham's razor, i.e. the notion that 'entities [beings] are not be multiplied beyond necessity',[22] and God is a being as any other being, then we must admit that, if the universe can be explained without God, God's existence must not be assumed.

It is likely, although I do not have the space to discuss this at this point, that this concept of God's existence led to the 'God of the gaps', who is used to explain what cannot otherwise be explained, until this gap is closed by scientific progress and another gap has to be found. The intelligent design debate, which we witnessed a few years ago, is an excellent example. However, this leads to a permanent retreat from formerly held positions and the search for a new fallback position. This is neither a stable position nor intellectually satisfying.

These two moves, together with a number of other factors which are beyond the scope of this paper, led to the development of secularism and to atheism becoming a viable alternative to belief in God. It must also be noted, though, that these developments were not inevitable or linear. On the contrary, as Taylor points out, they were contingent and could have moved into a different direction at every turn. Consequently, Taylor concludes that the master narrative of modern secularism is deeply flawed. In short, this narrative assumes that religion, which is by definition obscure, sectarian and superstitious, has been gradually pushed out of Western society by scientific and social advance.[23] This narrative is widely believed, but highly inaccurate. The secular narrative ignores, Taylor argues, the contingency of these developments, and also that religion has shown itself to be highly adaptable to change in the social

[20] Stephen P. Menn, 'Metaphysics: God and Being', in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Philosophy*, ed. Arthur Stephen McGrade, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 163.

[21] John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, Signposts in Theology, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1990, pp. 302–3.

[22] Alan Baker, 'Simplicity', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosphy*, ed Edward N. Zalta. (2010), http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2010/entries/simplicity/.

[23] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, pp. 530–34.

and intellectual climate—the many revivals of the ninetieth century, both evangelical and Catholic, bear witness to this. And the enormous growth of Pentecostal religion world-wide demonstrates this in our own time.

In sum, secularity and atheism are by far not the natural human attitude. On the contrary, they developed on the basis of theological presuppositions and were never able to shed their theological inheritance, as Gillespie argued in his *The Theological Origins of Modernity*.[24] If we scratch secular thought at the surface, we will find theological motifs and thought forms. Consequently, secular modernity is unthinkable without specific western Christian theological presuppositions. Against the notion that secularity and atheism are inevitable and natural stands Taylor's strong argument that its development was by no means necessary, but the result of contingent developments, which therefore could also have moved into a different direction. And the fact that religion is on the rise everywhere except Western Europe and Australia makes this assumption even more implausible.

Features of Secular Modernity

The society that has grown out of these developments displays certain distinct features, which are not all necessarily obvious. One of the more obvious ones is that the denial of the existence of God has not only become a viable viewpoint, but also one which is considered superior to its alternatives. Other features include the development of the 'buffered self' and the reduction of the purpose of human society to the mutual benefit of its members.

Taylor uses the term 'buffered self' in order to describe what he sees as the condition of modern human existence. The 'buffered self' goes hand in hand with the disenchantment of the world. In the old enchanted world the human person was subject to all kinds of supernatural influences—demons, angels and saints, to name but a few.[25] Praying to the good forces would help in adversity, while offending them or coming in contact with evil forces would bring calamity. Illness could be the result of demon possession, a spell cast by a witch, or the result of God's anger because of a hidden sin. For example, melancholy and depression were seen as the result of a *spiritus tristitiae*, a spirit of sadness that possesses the depressed person.[26] Consequently, the boundary between the 'inner self' and the outside was porous, as outside agencies could influence the inner quite profoundly. Because of this porous boundary, Taylor calls this attitude the 'porous self'.[27] Within the framework of the porous self, meanings and power do not exclusively reside in the mind, but also in things or objects.[28]

The modern disenchanted world does not know any such supernatural agency. Innerworldly events are usually attributed to natural causes. Illness is an organic phenomenon. And if my inner self is affected

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[24] Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity*, pp. 278–87.

[25] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 32.

[26] So states Martin Luther in a letter to Hieronymus Weller in 1530. See Martin Luther, *Luthers Werke*, ed. Otto Clemen, Berlin, De Gruyter, 1966, Vol. 6, pp. 283–85.

[27] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 38.

[28] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 33.

by something that happens outside, then this is my reaction to the hurt, not the power of an external force, that causes this.[29] In other words, the boundary between the external world and the inner self is not porous anymore, but closed. Taylor calls this the 'buffered self'. This 'buffered self' can distance itself from everything outside the human mind, i.e. from forces that might affect the self. All that counts is from within the self—purposes and meanings arise from within the self, not external agents.[30] Taylor offers a perceptive genealogy of the buffered self, along the lines of the 'Reform Narrative' which I introduced earlier.[31] The 'buffered self' brings with it a very different attitude to the sacred—religion is now internalised, independent of places, times, practices and so forth. An interesting change is, for example, that sin is not an objective reality any longer, but arises within the self.[32]

Taylor defines the purpose of modern secular society as the provision of 'mutual benefit'. In this society, individuals come together (behind this stands the social contract theory of society) in order to secure life, the means to life and freedom for its members, and that these benefits are secured for all members equally.[33] This society requires a certain amount of self-discipline of its members, so that they can be productive and non-disruptive.[34]

In sum, modern secular society is based on an important shift in human self-understanding, the emergence of the 'buffered self', which sees itself as apart from creation and not influenced by supernatural powers. This new self is primarily an individual and only secondly a member of a society. Society exists exclusively for the mutual benefit of its members, without reference to any higher spiritual reality. Obviously, this description of the modern self in modern secular society is sketchy to the extreme. However, it will suffice to give an impression of Taylor's interpretation of the secular society in which we live. It is important to note that these features, which we usually take for granted, are not the natural human state, but the result of historically contingent developments. To recognise this means that one is able to recognise the limits and contradictions within secular modernity.

Legitimacy and Limits of Secular Modernity

This brings us to the discussion of the legitimacy and limits of modern secular society and the 'buffered self'. I am going to focus first on the legitimacy of modern society, using the so-called 'Böckenförde-dictum' about the deep contradiction at the heart of liberal society as the starting point. I will then discuss briefly some of the dilemmas which the modern self faces.

In an essay first published in 1967 the German legal scholar and judge Ernst Wolfgang Böckenförde identified a deep contradiction at the very heart of the modern secular state:

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[29] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 33.

[30] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 38.

[31] See above p. 25.

[32] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 39.

[33] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 171.

[34] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 301.

the liberal secular state lives on premises that it cannot itself guarantee. ... On the one hand, it can only survive as a liberal state if the liberty it allows its citizens regulates itself from within on the basis of the moral substance of the individual and the homogeneity of society. On the other hand, it cannot attempt to guarantee those inner regulatory forces by its own efforts ... without abandoning its liberalness[35]

Or, to put is as a question, 'How far can nations united in states live by the guaranteed provision of individual liberty alone, without a unifying bond antecedent to that liberty?'[36] This common bond used to be provided by a sacral and religious view of society, and later by the nation. The modern liberal state does not have any of these common bonds at its disposal. So the state depends on these common bonds and common values, but cannot install or enforce them within its citizens. This is 'the great gamble' that Western society has made for liberty's sake. Böckenförde holds that this gamble is successful. And many agree. Jürgen Habermas, for example, believes that the secular liberal society is so attractive that it will, in the end, win over everyone by its promise of freedom and prosperity for all.[37] However, I do not believe that this is borne out by experience. Increasing disengagement from the political process shows, in my opinion, that the benefits are taken for granted, while the cost of liberty is ignored. At the same time, the liberal state is under pressure from religious fundamentalists, not only of the Islamist variety. I am not predicting the decline and fall of Western civilisation—I think it is far too resilient for this. Instead, these observations could be the starting point for a critical engagement with the society in which the Churches find themselves.

Let us continue with the dilemmas within which the modern self finds itself. I cannot mention all those that Taylor lists in two major chapters. So I shall restrict myself to two points: first, there is a conflict between the felt need for transcendence, not necessarily of a religious kind, and the needs of a society governed by instrumental reason. This goes together with dissatisfaction with the levelling down of emotions, heroism, sexuality and other elementary aspects of human existence.[38] Second, I shall discuss briefly the problem of the foundation of secular morality.

On the one hand, as Taylor points out, modern secular society is necessarily governed by instrumental reason, which is the way of acting that 'works the system' effectively in order to bring about a desired result, that is, human flourishing.[39] Taylor contends that in the activity of human reason '... the modern image of human flourishing incorporates an activist, interventionist stance, both towards nature and to human society. Both are to be re-ordered, in the light of instrumental reason, to suit human purposes.'[40]

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[35] Ernst Wolfgang Böckenförde, *State, Society, and Liberty: Studies in Political Theory and Constitutional Law*, New York, Berg, 1991, p. 45.

[36] Böckenförde, *State, Society, and Liberty*, p. 44.

[37] Jürgen Habermas and Benedict VI, *Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion*, San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 2006, pp. 31–32. See also Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 507.

[38] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, pp. 184–85, 414, 771.

[39] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, pp. 98, 230.

[40] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 246.

Thus society is merely a means to an end, without any intrinsic value. To live and to operate within this society requires the use of instrumental reason, which takes everything as an object in order to enhance human flourishing.

On the other hand, Taylor identifies a deep need to seek deeper meaning in life, and to find this meaning elsewhere than in reason alone. Many 'are seeking a kind of unity and wholeness of the self, a reclaiming of the place of feeling, against the one-sided pre-eminence of reason, and reclaiming the body and its pleasures from the inferior and often guilt-ridden place it has been allowed in the disciplined, instrumental identity.'[41] Consequently, the secular order of the world is not able to provide the depth which many people are seeking in life.

Related to this are the cross pressures from which the modern self suffers. Taylor argues, and illustrates with many examples, that a majority of people inhabit a middle position between full acceptance of a transcendent reality and a purely immanent frame of mind. This position is, however, hotly contested by both religion and atheism. On the one hand, strident secularists claim that this middle position is intellectually untenable, while, on the other hand, resurgent conservative and fundamentalist religion claims that this position is infidelity. Consequently, the modern individual finds him- or herself under serious cross pressures.[42]

Second, Taylor points out the problem of the foundation of morality, in particular in cases where self-sacrifice is required. The immanent frame, according to Taylor, cannot maintain this. There may be a certain heroism in the stance of Dr Rieux of Albert Camus' *La Peste*, who, 'acts for the good of his fellow creatures, in spite of the absurd, even in the last instance, the ultimate futility of all such action,' and we may admire this.[43] However, Taylor asks if the humanist heroism of Dr Rieux is enough of a source for genuinely altruistic work for the fellow creature.[44]

Even in the short and superficial description of only a few points made by scholars studying secular society we find a whole host of starting points for a critical engagement with our immediate context, which we too often take for granted.

Responses

Consequently, if we take the notion seriously that we learn by contact with contemporary thought and need to develop the understanding of our nature and mission in relation to contemporary societies, then an in-depth engagement with secular society and the wide range of literature on this is imperative

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[41] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 507.
[42] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, pp. 594–618.
[43] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 600.
[44] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 695.

for the Uniting Church. Otherwise, our responses to secularism will be ill informed and not be able to move beyond stereotypes and prejudices, such as the uncritical acceptance of the secular master narrative. As a result, our mission to this society will be misdirected.

Eberhard Jüngel pointedly formulated the response required of the Christian: we must understand the secular age better than it understands itself.[45] This means that we must go beyond the received wisdom and question the secular narratives if we want to formulate a meaningful response to modern secularity. There are many possible areas of engagement for this. I have to restrict myself to two areas that arise from the paper. First, I am going to address the issue of the way in which our language relates to God. This will lead to surprising applications. Second, I shall address the issue of modern self-assertion as identified by Hans Bumenberg. This, too, has interesting implication for the Church's response to contemporary debates.

If we take seriously the implication of the shift towards univocal language with regard to God's being, then we will need to address the potential inadequacy of our theological modes of speech, in particular the univocal mode which reduces God to a being among beings. I don't believe that a return to a repristinated Thomist analogical understanding of religious language, as it is attempted by a group of theologians known as Radical Orthodoxy,[46] is helpful here—this denies important other elements of the modern self-understanding, in particular with regard to the relation between faith and knowledge. In contrast, Schleiermacher's grounding of religious knowledge in experience is much more helpful here, or Bonhoeffer's grounding of theology in the experience of the presence of Christ in the Church.[47] The precise shape of the response does not matter here, as it is the interaction with secular thought that is important. However, I believe, that a consistently trinitarian theology, including a strong sense of the presence of Christ in the Church, should be the foundation of a genuinely Christian response. This would also address the often heard observation that worship, in order to be meaningful for the current generation, needs to be experientially based. A theology of the presence of Christ, together with a liturgy that expresses this, would go a long way to address this.

With regard to Blumenberg's identification of theological absolutism that led to the need for human self-assertion, a possible response could be to develop a theology of creation that allows for divine providence and divine maintenance of creation in a meaningful manner—the focus exclusively on human responsibility in contemporary ecological thinking is precisely a continuation of the movement toward human self-affirmation that Blumenberg describes—but which also allows for human cooperation and responsibility, within a framework of confidence in God's creative and maintaining action.

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[45] Michael Murrmann–Kahl ("Mysterium Trinitatis"? Fallstudien zur Trinitätslehre in der Evangelischen Dogmatik des 20. Jahrhunderts, Berlin; New York, De Gruyter, 1997, p. 109) quotes Jüngel as saying this. I have heard Jüngel saying during a lecture course in 1993, but have not been able to find it in his writings.

[46] John Milbank et al., Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology, London, Routledge, 1999.

[47] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Christology, London, Collins, 1966. The recent critical edition is Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 'Lectures on Christology', in Berlin, 1932–1933, ed. Larry L. Rasmussen, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Minneapolis, MN, Fortress Press, 2009.

Without such in-depth engagement, the temptation is great either to use our good works in the area of social justice as the justification for our existence, or to follow the winning formula of contemporary Pentecostalism. However, neither route enables us to bear that witness to which we are bound by our inheritance, not least as it is expressed in the *Basis of Union*. Consequently, if we want to be true to ourselves, we must take the long and difficult route of critical engagement with our contemporary society and culture. In doing so, we will discover resources and riches within our inheritance of which we otherwise would have been unaware.