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## The necessity of atheism: making sense of secularisation <sup>1</sup>

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Atheists tend not to feature in any large numbers in the historiography of secularisation. Aside from a few key philosophers, controversialists and scientists, the systematic study of atheists as a major demographic entity is not to be found within the narrative of the declining social significance of religion. This is a strange circumstance. By contrast, highly religious people feature a great deal in secularisation history, to exemplify both the religiously 'enchanted world' of medieval Europe that has been lost, and the modern religious resistance to secularity. But, notwithstanding either Shelley's tract of 1811, from which the main title of this article was unintentionally torn, or recent interest in 'new atheism', those who have lived their lives as if there is no god make a negligible appearance in the social history of religion and its decline in the west. Disregard of, disrespect for and denial of atheism dominate by turns. There is a need to assert the necessity of atheism to the historical narrative, not merely of secularisation but of religiosity too.

Why should atheism hold a very poor place in the scholarship on secularisation? On one level, the definition of atheism forestalls much consideration; if narrowly defined as self-identifiers with that particular term, it has often been less than 2 or 3 per cent of people in the west. But if the definition is widened to those who live their lives as if there is no god (which is likely to include some or all of those not identifying with a religion, not undertaking religious practice and not, as far as can be ascertained, believing in a god), then the proportions rise significantly - to as much as 30 to 50 per cent in some countries. Moreover, the historical trend is clear - these figures have been growing for half a century in most western nations, and are now growing in all of them.<sup>2</sup> In truth, no single metric exists for atheism; nor, as argued here, can it exist. Issues of defining who has and who has not got a faith are fraught with difficulties, but it is appropriate and important to include amongst nonbelievers those indifferent to religion as well as those having no association with it. It is

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<sup>1</sup> I received really invaluable comments on an earlier version of this article from Lynn Abrams, Stuart Airlie, John Arnold, Stephen Marritt, David Nash, Andrew Roach and Don Spaeth, and notably from three anonymous referees. What remains after corrections and additions is my responsibility.

<sup>2</sup> See the attempt to quantify atheists in detail across the world in A. Keysar and J. Navaro-Rivero, 'A world of atheism: global demographics', in Stephen Bullivant and Michael Ruse (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013), 553-86. Some of the historical data is discussed in C. G. Brown, 'The People of No Religion: the demographics of secularisation in the English-speaking world since c.1900', *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* vol. 51 (2011), 37-61.

surely no longer acceptable for the scholar to nod through the membership assertions of those churches which lay claim to these people by virtue of infant baptism.

There are other issues. Secularisation is becoming less accepted by religious scholars as a term denoting religious decline, with such decline being increasingly denied (for which see the Garnett *et al* collection).<sup>3</sup> But beyond this is a view that secularisation arose after a medieval and early modern world in which atheism was inconceivable. This is understood as 'the enchantment' (derived from Max Weber's reference to modernity becoming 'disenchanted'<sup>4</sup>), a period identified in western history when to not have a faith of some kind or other, characterised by literalness of belief and absence of scepticism, was impossible or effectively so, and all life and politics existed inside a framework of faith. Heresies of various sorts might exist within faith, but, broadly, disbelief could not exist outside of it. So, at the opposite ends of western religious history rest two foundational and, I propose, connectable propositions concerning unbelief: firstly, that between roughly 1000 and 1500, atheism was impossible; and secondly, in the contemporary era (from around 1950 to the present), secularisation is not founded on the growth of atheism but instead is either a transformation (and, Garnett *et al* propose, even 'revival') of religion into new forms, or, as Jeffrey Cox has argued, it is a 'rhetorical weapon' deployed by 'secular thinkers' in the 'grand struggle between science and religion'.<sup>5</sup> By these devices, denying atheism enables the denial of secularisation. Defending secularisation as a valid concept of the historical decline of religion in the west is for another article. The purpose here is to defend the place of atheism in the historical record.

As its sounding board, this article takes Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* (2007). Atheism has a rather underwhelming presence in his narrative, appearing on only 27 of the 776 pages of his text.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the character Taylor ascribes to it – at one moment idolatrous and communistic in a Cold War mode, at another 'hardline materialistic', and at every turn 'self-valorising' and exuding a 'dismissive attitude' to religion – makes clear its relegation in his recounting of either secularisation or the 'exclusive humanism' to which he

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<sup>3</sup> See for instance J. Garnett et al (eds.), *Redefining Christian Britain: Post 1945 Perspectives* (London, SCM, 2006). Tackling denial is S. Bruce, *Secularisation: In Defence of an Unfashionable Theory* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion* (London, Methuen, 1965), 125.

<sup>5</sup> Jeffrey Cox, 'Towards eliminating the concept of secularisation: a progress report, in C. Brown and M. Snape (eds.), *Secularisation in the Christian World: Essays in honour of Hugh McLeod* (Farnham, Ashgate, 20010), 13-26 at 15.

<sup>6</sup> That is the count from the book's index entry, all of them fleeting and usually pejorative dismissals.

attributes his version of modernity.<sup>7</sup> In truth, Taylor dismisses atheism as a misplaced philosophical idea, leaving his imagined secular age as quite a Christian one. His narrative owes more to Christian heroes of thought, and the search for eternity, transcendence and spirituality, than to rationality and living life as if there is no god. On the face of it, Taylor is not a secularisation denier as are some other Christian scholars, but he relegates atheism to a walk-on role.<sup>8</sup>

Taylor is honest in speaking of observing the issue from the point of view of a 'believer', a Canadian Catholic. Most western religious history of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is written by the religious, though this is much less true of the medieval and early modern periods. The contrasting paradox is that the history of the secular is of limited interest to the non-religious scholar, rarely featuring more than cursorily in general history text books of the late modern period. This results in the terms of research and debate tending to be defined by the religious. The scholar of secularisation is in debt constantly to concepts and measures of 'the religious', the religious interpretation of 'the spiritual', and the dichotomy between the sacred and the profane. There is, roughly speaking, no independent secular manner of speaking about the secular condition or secularisation, no well-developed unbelievers' language of unbelief in scholarship. This is a huge problem. As one scholar has written: 'Studying non-religion using tools developed to study religion effectively makes non-religiousness or atheism a religious position. This is surely not an acceptable state of affairs in academe.'<sup>9</sup>

To think of remedial action, this article focuses on three central problems in Taylor's book which reflect the whole field of study. First is his understanding of *the starting state of religion*, what Taylor describes at length as 'the enchanted world' of medieval and early modern Europe; second is his understanding of *the process of secularisation*, how the western world changed from being enchanted to being less enchanted, from unavoidably believing in god to unavoidably having doubts about god; and third, delineating *the contemporary secular condition* of the western world in terms of dependence on Christianity. In relation to the last of these, Taylor presents three stages of western secularity. The first stage was that carved out roughly in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century world – what he refers to as Secularity 1, the secularisation of public space. The second is that which took a hold from the middle of the eighteenth century and progressed into the nineteenth century, tagged as Secularity 2, the

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<sup>7</sup> C. Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge Mass., Belknap Press, 2007), 591, 676, 721, 769.

<sup>8</sup> Taylor, 429.

<sup>9</sup> This was a remark of an anonymous referee of this article.

decline of belief and religious practice. The third is that formed in the second half of the twentieth century, which he calls Secularity 3, a new condition of belief which ‘puts an end to the naïve acknowledgement of the transcendent, or of goals or claims which go beyond human flourishing.’<sup>10</sup> The net narrative he promulgates is an attempt to describe secularisation as not a ‘subtraction story’ and not as a linear story, but ‘a zig-zag account’ of the *conditions* of the self, rather than just about a loss of (religious) things.<sup>11</sup> Worthy as these aims may seem, the story Taylor tells starts from the wrong place, moves forward questionably, and finishes in a misunderstood present. An alternative way of imagining atheism across periods is required. Notwithstanding capitalism, secularisation is the greatest cultural shift of the western world. How we detect and conceptualise it should be central to the History discipline.

#### **(a) Disenchantment with the enchanted world**

In *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor sets up a polarity between, on the one hand, the medieval ‘enchanted world’ and, on the other, a modern condition in which religious belief is not only no longer normative, but also seemingly difficult for very large numbers of people to contemplate. This polarity is a quite traditional narrative of ‘otherness’ – between the naïve religiosity of the medieval and early modern periods, and the ‘knowing’ and naïveté-impossible belief condition of the present. Taylor founds the mediaeval belief condition on a notion of exclusive god-belief – the unavoidability of it, and the conformity of all people to this enchanted world (of which more in a moment). Characterising the period all the way down to 1500, though, is Taylor’s concept of ‘the porous self’ in which he claims there was a universal concept of possessability by demons and spirits. This, for Taylor, is not a matter of belief or a theory, but is ‘a fact of *experience*’ (italics original), unavoidable in a pre-modern world where ‘enchanted’ culture dominated to the exclusion of all else. He refers to the notion that ‘things and agencies which are clearly extra-human could alter or shape our spiritual or emotional condition’, and that ‘they helped to constitute us emotionally and spiritually’.<sup>12</sup> It seems difficult to avoid the conclusion that Taylor envisages the medieval human, certainly

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<sup>10</sup> Taylor, 21.

<sup>11</sup> Taylor, 95.

<sup>12</sup> Taylor, 39- 40.

of the peasantry, as entirely programmable by outside things. In this unavoidable terror of possession, 'disbelief is hard in the enchanted world'.<sup>13</sup>

Taylor is not of course original in all of this. The 'Age of Faith', once the basis of European religious historiography, survives in this volume when it has been under scrutiny for decades. Lucian Febvre's influential claim to the intellectual impossibility of atheism in early modern France<sup>14</sup> was carefully moderated in 1990 by John Edwards who, in examining evidence from Spain, argued that 'there was indeed genuine religious scepticism' in the late fifteenth century. He concluded: 'The Sorian evidence clearly shows that virtually every theological and philosophical option which has so far become available to humankind was espoused by someone in this region of Spain in the late fifteenth century.'<sup>15</sup> The 'enchanted world' was described by Peter Laslett in his 1966 book *The World We Have Lost*, where he counted the communicants in one English parish, that of Goodnestone in Kent, in 1676, showing that all but sixteen had showed up, and used this to sum up the religious condition of early modern England thus: 'All our ancestors were literal Christian believers, all of the time.' With every village meeting taking place in the church, religion was a definer of local society, so that Laslett asserted that 'their world was a Christian world and their religious activity was spontaneous, not forced on them from above.'<sup>16</sup> But this religiously homogenous view was tempered by Michael Hunter who, in his study of atheism in early modern England in 1985, found that, even though he might define atheism narrowly as being 'what a twentieth-century reader might expect "atheism" to imply, namely overt hostility to religion', seventeenth-century English rhetoric marshalled 'atheism' in various ways, ranging from the heretical, dangerous and polluting, to the mere 'godlessness' of the impious. He showed that atheist was a term, as a contemporary put it, 'of a very large extent', and not just a term of abuse, but of well-imagined freethinkers with resonance in our own age.<sup>17</sup>

A sophisticated historiography sceptical of enchantment has been developing since Keith Thomas' 1971 book on *Religion and the Decline of Magic* offered a broadly

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<sup>13</sup> Taylor, 41

<sup>14</sup> L. Febvre, *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century: The Religion of Rabelais* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1982), especially 16, 335-53, 455-64.

<sup>15</sup> J. Edwards, 'Religious faith and doubt in late medieval Spain: Sorio c. 1450-1500', *Past & Present* 120 (1988): 3-25 at 21, 24. See also J. Somerville, 'Debate: Religious faith, doubt and atheism' and J. Edwards 'Reply', in *Past & Present* 128 (1990): 152-161.

<sup>16</sup> P. Laslett, *The World We Have Lost* (London, Methuen, 1965), 71-2.

<sup>17</sup> M. Hunter, 'The problem of "atheism" in early modern England', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* vol. 35 (1985): 135-157 at 135, 142. For a vicar's 1670s' description of non-churchgoing as 'Aitheisme', see D. Spaeth, *The Church in An Age of Danger; Parsons and Parishioners, 1660-1740* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press), 180.

unconvinced view about the sincerity of early-modern peasant religiosity; he speaks of a ‘continuity of popular scepticism’ stretching from medieval to seventeenth centuries.<sup>18</sup> In the 1970s, Alexander Murray posited the idea of a ‘rationalist culture’ developing in European society between 1000 and the thirteenth century, evoking a rationalistic view of the way God worked in nature and society, giving birth in the European intellectual and merchant elites to an arithmetical mentality and the ‘art of number’. Pride in intellect, not faith, mattered most, leading to retreat from superstition and the rising ‘group-interest of the educated’ which, even when agents of religion, by the fifteenth century served two estates – church and *studium*. If you read Murray on the Middle Ages, the advance of reason, of understanding of ‘natural laws’, not of enchantment, contrasts starkly with Taylor’s naïve depiction of naïve medieval culture.<sup>19</sup>

Scholarship on medieval scepticism and unbelief has continued to grow. The tone was set by Susan Reynolds in 1991 who noted just how mistaken is the medieval historian who believes monks and priests on popular belief: ‘Taking their word as evidence of general belief is like taking television commercials as evidence of the public's preferences among pet-foods. The miracle stories are full of scoffers.’<sup>20</sup> Reynolds demolished the reasoning behind the enchanted world while more recent scholarship points to the chaos of belief in medieval Europe. It has been observed by some that the historian of the pre-modern period has too often tended to view the peasant people as pre-individuals, absorbing uncritically the dominant ideas of the group to which they belong.<sup>21</sup> Reynolds argued against the presumption of many historians that people in different societies think differently, including that medieval people are less rational and more naturally religious than modern people. ‘There seems to be no hard evidence that scepticism is unknown even in the most untouched and traditional societies.’ Scoffers were rife in medieval sources, and early-modern preachers were clearly reacting to the ‘atheists’ they regularly denounced.<sup>22</sup> What Taylor doesn’t permit is the possibility that fear of demons, attested to in different epochs, might be separate from

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<sup>18</sup> K. Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular beliefs in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-century England* (orig. 1971, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1978), 200.

<sup>19</sup> A. Murray, *Reason and Society in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1978), 110, 136-7, 209, 257, 260, 312.

<sup>20</sup> Reynolds, ‘Social mentalities’, 21 – 41 at 29.

<sup>21</sup> N. Partner, ‘The Hidden Self’, in N. Partner (ed.), *Writing Medieval History* (London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2005), 42. See also Christina Larner, *The Thinking Peasant: Popular and Educated Beliefs in Pre-Industrial Culture* (Glasgow, Pressgang, 1982).

<sup>22</sup> Susan Reynolds, ‘Social mentalities and the case of medieval scepticism’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* vol. 1 (1991): 21-41 at 21-4; K. Thomas, *The Ends of Life: Roads to Fulfilment in Early Modern England* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009), 233.

god-belief. In the same vein, Steven Justice, reacting to Taylor's passé vision of uniform literal belief, asked in an incredulous voice 'Did medieval people really believe all this?'. He has made a sophisticated case for understanding medieval accounts of miracles and belief as having demystification and scepticism built into their narratives, with a manner of storytelling that invites a silencing of scepticism: 'The miracle stories and saints' lives suggest the possibility that a deeper skepticism, tacit and pervasive and so diffuse as to elude useful formulation or response, may have attached itself routinely to other and still larger matters, like the reality of God.'<sup>23</sup> Religious stories, like others, contained messages and morals which invited to be taken anything but literally.

Enchantment scepticism has grown in various directions. Bruce Robbins has critiqued whether Weber really thought that disenchantment had happened in the way normally understood, and part of that question concerns whether the idealised community supposed to have supported it was a myth promulgated by the elites.<sup>24</sup> Questioning that myth is important, and it can be impeded when, as in the contemporary western world, the vast bulk of researching, writing and recording about religion has been undertaken by the religious scholar. The religious historian brings a special expertise, often theological and liturgical, to research, but, as John Arnold has shown, the atheist historian has a special role too in bringing sensitivity to ways in which the medieval inquisitor has, for instance, chosen to misinterpret disbelief as heresy, or, alternatively, has ignored the silent atheist when s/he is not a threat to power.<sup>25</sup> The number of references to unbelief was proportionately very small in the medieval period, but, as Reynolds says, this is not surprising given the serious consequences if the church found out about expressions of scepticism or unbelief.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, as Reynolds says, once it is admitted that medieval atheism was possible, a reassessment is required of evidence of heresy, impiety, indifference and anti-clericalism as signs of atheism.<sup>27</sup> Identifying who could be living a life without a god, whilst saying or doing little by way of self-identifying as a non-believer, requires acumen.

In relation to medieval Europe, the greatest evidential collecting and analysis of unbelief and atheism has been that by John Arnold who has delved deep in medieval sources for the sceptic, the unbeliever and the truculent ungodly. He is straightforward in his assault

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<sup>23</sup> S. Justice, 'Did the Middle Ages believe in their miracles', *Representations* vol. 103 (2008): 1-29 at 3, 17-18, 21.

<sup>24</sup> B. Robbins, 'Enchantment? No, Thank You!', in G. Levine (ed.), *The Joy of Secularism: 11 Essays for How We Live Now* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2011), 74-94 at 74, 81.

<sup>25</sup> J. H. Arnold, *Belief and Unbelief in Medieval Europe* (London, Bloomsbury Academic, orig. 2005, 2010), 7-8.

<sup>26</sup> Reynolds, 33-5; see also Arnold, *Belief*, 20-1.

<sup>27</sup> Reynolds, 36-8.



on the enchanted world thesis: ‘There has been a long-standing tradition that claims that unbelief, in the sense of cynicism, atheism, irreligion and so forth, was “impossible” in the pre-modern period; that prior to the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, nobody was mentally capable of thinking outside the accepted framework of religion. This is simply not true.’<sup>28</sup> He has studied belief and unbelief together, isolating indicators of ways of unbelief in the midst of apparent expressions of belief, and reassessing the judgements of church clergy and inquisitors in case they might have mistaken simple disbelief for heresy; and challenges to Christian hegemony of thought emerge from his study of the medieval concern for death and community. Arnold reflects on the limits of acculturation of medieval Christianity in Europe – of people, large numbers of them, having different layers of resistance, disinterest, and scepticism about the discursive power that reigns in a hegemonic culture. Much of the resistance to church doctrine of the Eucharist, he notes, was ‘rooted in cognition about the material experience of reality’, to the extent, he argues, that ‘materiality underlies unbelief’.<sup>29</sup> And the people’s link to the church was more about freedom and choice than a reading of Taylor would lead you to believe – a variegated spectrum that reached out to disbelief and beyond.<sup>30</sup> Also, Arnold is especially good at critiquing community that appears, as in Taylor, as an unalloyed good thing, when community was also oppressive, coercive and full of ecclesiastical violence and shaming in sexual policing and, later, in the witch-hunts.<sup>31</sup> Arnold is particularly persuasive on the complex way that medieval selfhood developed, and the tensions between group and personal pieties, and the socially-limited behavioural impact they had.<sup>32</sup> He concludes with an interesting and important observation on the long-term – that there was a flexibility and freedom to individual religious belief and unbelief in the medieval period which was ground down in later medieval, reformation and Counter-Reformation periods; that contrary to the notion of growing toleration, early-modern Europe brought ‘a tightening up of definition and control, and a closing down of certain fuzziness and room for manoeuvre’.<sup>33</sup> In this way, Arnold’s work challenges not just the enchanted world as the starting point for European Christian civilisation, but brings a welcome concern for religion as power, as a field of supremacy, involving church and lay leaders, who use it in Arnold’s

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<sup>28</sup> Arnold, *Belief*, 4.

<sup>29</sup> J. Arnold, ‘The materiality of unbelief in late medieval England’, in Sophie Page (ed.), *The Unorthodox Imagination in Late Medieval Britain* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2005), 65-95 at 76.

<sup>30</sup> Arnold, *Belief*, 27-68.

<sup>31</sup> Arnold, *Belief*, 105-142.

<sup>32</sup> Arnold, *Belief*, 143-190.

<sup>33</sup> Arnold, *Belief*, 191-231. For further evidence of unbelief and ecclesiastical concern with it, see J. Arnold, ‘Doomed or Disinterested? Did all medieval people believe in God’, *BBC History Magazine* (January 2009): 39-43.

words as ‘essentially a mulch within which other things occur’ – a perspective extended by R.I. Moore in his excoriating studies of heresy hunting as medieval religion and centralising government producing ‘the birth of a persecuting society’.<sup>34</sup>

To this work on medieval unbelief has been added recently Tim Whitmarsh’s magisterial study of atheism in ancient Greece and Rome, which not only shows the vigour of repudiation of deities but the inherent nature of unbelief as an element in intellectual and political culture. Atheism is not a modern invention of the Enlightenment, science and modern scepticism. He challenges the notion of Karen Armstrong and many others that supernatural belief is fundamental to humanity, or that it is hardwired in the individual. His work is so convincing as to suggest the central place of unbelief as a narrative possibility in ancient myth, as a building block of the human condition from the very birth of European organised religions.<sup>35</sup> Taken together with the evidence from the medieval period, we are surely in a position now to join the chronological dots and posit unbelief as a continuous and influential presence in both intellectual and popular culture throughout the recorded history of European civilisation.

Against this background of historical reconceptualization and empirical research, it is no longer possible to accept Taylor’s effusive position on medieval and early-modern religion: ‘it was virtually impossible not to believe in, say, 1500 in our Western society’; ‘in those days everyone believed’; features of ‘their world’ ‘made the presence of God seemingly undeniable’.<sup>36</sup> To understand unbelief, Taylor would have needed a meaningful discussion of protest to religion as power – of the parish turning into the surveillance society in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe (and much of colonial America too), with spreading laws against blasphemy, church controls (Protestant and Catholic), visitations, commissions and inquisitions.<sup>37</sup> Jon Butler excoriates Taylor for not being grounded in this amassed evidence, especially of ‘ordinary people’, and his reliance on ‘ideas’ to delineate the nature of religion upon the self. Belief, in Taylor’s hands, becomes disjoined from social forces, from peasant and everyday experience, and from the evidence of these. ‘One could not but encounter God everywhere’ is a splendid naivety.<sup>38</sup> The evidence shows that god was clearly not only not

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<sup>34</sup> Arnold, *Belief*, 6; R.I. Moore, *The War on Heresy: Faith and Power in Medieval Europe* (London, Profile, 2012).

<sup>35</sup> Tim Whitmarsh, *Battling the Gods: Atheism in the Ancient World* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2015), 4-7, 42-3.

<sup>36</sup> Taylor, 25.

<sup>37</sup> On the increasingly uniform introduction of blasphemy statutes from the late sixteenth century, see D.S. Nash, *Blasphemy in the Christian World* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007), 150-66.

<sup>38</sup> Taylor, 25.

encountered everywhere, but in very many pre-modern minds he was countered. The rhetoric of sceptical voices, heard faintly through the mediating minds of clerics and the faithful from the Plato and the ancients, and from the eleventh to seventeenth centuries, bears amazing similarities to the voices of today. Then as now, God was vilified by some, but in how many more was he simply ignored by busy people for whom, as John Arnold remarks, god belief was a low priority?<sup>39</sup> Keith Thomas has recently concluded that though the Christian religion's message of looking to the next world remained ascendant: 'In practice most of the population implicitly took a more secular view: they cherished life for its own sake, not merely as a preliminary to some future state.'<sup>40</sup>

### **(b) The process of secularising**

Charles Taylor describes secularisation between 1500 and 2000 as disenchantment, in which the European self changed from being conceived as 'porous' to the invasion of spirits and demons, to being 'buffered' or a protected individual, immune to possession.<sup>41</sup> This happened against a backdrop of secularisation acting as transition from uniformity to diversity of belief, through a 'nova effect' of exploding possibilities generated in the Enlightenment and its shadow. In this 'fractured culture of the nova', Taylor posits that unbelief became wholly possible and, gradually, has grown down to the present to be common and profound.<sup>42</sup> Of this story, Bruce Robbins has written that 'disenchantment seems to me one of the most disabling and sneakily misleading stories we are in the habit of telling ourselves regularly'.<sup>43</sup>

Taylor spends considerable time exploring the seventeenth and eighteenth century developments in society, thought and imagination, evidence from philosophers, theologians and his analysis of these, which he sees as facilitating the secularisation process, driving the western world through Secularities 1 and 2 – the secularisation of spaces and ideas respectively.<sup>44</sup> In the process of the nova effect, he notes: 'a generalized culture of "authenticity", or expressive individualism, in which people are encouraged to find their own way, discover their own fulfilment, "do their own thing"' – a process only reaching its

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<sup>39</sup> Arnold, *Belief*, 231.

<sup>40</sup> Thomas, *Ends of Life*, 266-7.

<sup>41</sup> Taylor, *Secular Age*, 27.

<sup>42</sup> Taylor, 299.

<sup>43</sup> Robbins, 74.

<sup>44</sup> Robbins, 146-58 at 156

apotheosis since the Second World War with Taylor's 'buffered self'.<sup>45</sup> He sees some positives in this world, but also a lot of negatives: 'a wide sense of malaise at the disenchanted world, a sense of it as flat, empty'.<sup>46</sup> This is all described as an elite process, with no mention of working-class atheism.<sup>47</sup> Taylor becomes concerned lest his conceptualisation of secularising is overly dependent on ideas, and elevates them rhetorically as 'the great connected chain of mutations in the social imaginary which have helped constitute modern society'.<sup>48</sup> He sees this as starting off as theory which 'then gradually infiltrates and transmutes social imaginaries'. This sounds, again, awfully like elites having tremendously good ideas which trickle down to the attentively-listening common man (and woman I suppose), and he seeks to corral this tendency in a short chapter entitled 'The Spectre of Idealism' – a thing he defines as 'the attributing to "ideas" of an independent force in history'<sup>49</sup> – but which spills out to permeate the book's whole story. If Taylor's universal enchanted pre-1500 world is untenable, so too become the medieval porous self, disenchantment, and the later buffered self, enwrapped in its 'new ethic of rational control'<sup>50</sup> of the self. It's a story in which modern man (and yes, judging by Taylor's sources, the story seems inviolably male), with his 'exclusive humanism', is rhetorically elevated by the end as an 'agent' in a narrative which, by a plethora of other supplementary stages of rhetorical change, diminishes further the preceding religious peasants. Susan Reynolds comments of late medieval France: 'One Montailou woman, when asked where she got her doubts about hell and the resurrection from, said that she got them from no one: she thought of them for herself.'<sup>51</sup> This neatly exposes the problem with Taylor-like ideas-driven secularisation narratives – they seem to be inescapably elitist, male-centred and ideas-dependent. They are also unsatisfyingly static in their conception of society, lacking a sense of the mobility of populations – through pilgrimages, economic migrations, simple journeys to markets, new lands and settlements, military service, swirling round the seas as well as the lands of Europe, and, by 1500, beyond. Taylor depicts the parish as a benign community prison of the parochial, the ignorant and universal demon-fearing.

Lastly, Taylor's vision of secularisation is a Christian's one. Taylor allows himself at many points to talk of his subject in religious terms which the secular social scientist has

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<sup>45</sup> Robbins, 300.

<sup>46</sup> Robbins, 302.

<sup>47</sup> Robbins, 322, 367.

<sup>48</sup> Robbins, 196.

<sup>49</sup> Robbins, 212.

<sup>50</sup> Robbins, 134.

<sup>51</sup> Reynolds, 36.

difficulty calibrating. His term ‘the sense of fullness’ is the most recurrent, within which he precludes the possibility of secularity in atheist terms: ‘We all see our lives, and/or the space wherein we live our lives, as having certain moral/spiritual shape.’ The ‘sense of fullness’, he says, ‘unsettles and breaks through our ordinary sense of being in the world’.<sup>52</sup> Perhaps for him and co-religionists it does, but this cannot be an inclusive ‘we’ of all humanity and scholarship. There are people – atheists, agnostics and humanists, the religiously disinterested and the otherwise preoccupied – who don’t feel this, or don’t express what they feel in this way. This is observable in Michael Hunter’s recent discovery of a remarkable atheist text from an early eighteenth-century Scot.<sup>53</sup> And from all this emerges slowly the core problem with the Taylorian narrative – its disregard towards, disrespect for, and perhaps denial of the atheist. I have been in debate with Christian preachers who deny atheism – its impossibility in the person. I ponder whether it is to this position that Taylor also tumbles, without thinking. If he does so, he does it in two stages. In the first, he misjudges his Secularity 3 as ‘exclusive humanism’ when it isn’t. In the second stage, he fails to consider a further stage, perhaps to be tagged as ‘Secularity 4’, of atheists whose disbelief becomes even more ‘real’ than he imagines.

### (c) **The problem with Secularity 3**

As well as its other problems, Bruce Robbins observes that ‘*A Secular Age* also presents secularism as a disguised form of Christianity, hiding theological content behind apparently secular concepts’.<sup>54</sup> Taylor paints secularity as a religious achievement, preserving Christianity devoid of demons and the most irrational of medieval beliefs. Likewise, Jon Butler opines that each of Taylor’s secularities 1, 2 and 3 are ‘problematic and probably wrong’,<sup>55</sup> but concludes, rightly in my view, that the most problematic is Secularity 3 upon which most attention has fallen, sending – if one American conference I attended is anything to go by – scores of young researchers to hunt in modern societies for the buffered self.

This is where Taylor is more wrong than anywhere in the book. It is here that the starkness of the contrast he draws between the enchanted and disenchanted worlds crashes down. Historians, sociologists and anthropologists have been researching the enchanted

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<sup>52</sup> Taylor, 5, 26.

<sup>53</sup> M. Hunter, *Pitcairneana: an atheist text by Archibald Pitcairne*, *Historical Journal* vol. 59 (2016), 595 – 621.

<sup>54</sup> Robbins, 87.

<sup>55</sup> J. Butler, ‘Disquieted history in *A Secular Age*’, in M. Warner, J. Vanantwerpen and C. Calhoun (eds.), *Varieties of Secularism in A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass, Harvard University Press, 2010), 193-216 at 195.

religious believers of the modern western world for more than half a century. Sarah Williams and others have shown, often using oral history, the survival of magical belief in folkloric religious culture, one rarely or only intermittently spoken of by clergy after 1700 as they grew disinterested in unofficial Christian beliefs.<sup>56</sup> Enchantment has been all around, but, in a millennial symmetry with atheism in the Middle Ages, was rarely heard though all around in 'secular' twentieth-century society.

Taylor drives home his polarity – the change from ‘a condition in which belief was the default option’ even ‘for those who knew, considered, talked about atheism’. In the present, he says, ‘the secular age’ is one in which ‘unbelief has become for many the major default option’.<sup>57</sup> ‘The coming of modern secularity,’ he goes on, ‘has been coterminous with the rise of a society in which for the first time in history a purely self-sufficient humanism came to be a widely available option’ – a humanism ‘accepting no final goals beyond human flourishing’. He adds: ‘Of no previous society was this true.’ Secularity 3 was made possible by this exclusive humanism, ending what he calls ‘the era of “naïve” religious faith”’.<sup>58</sup> And you might think that this sounds like a reasonable portrayal of ‘true secularity’. But the reader who flips into passages of this book might miss the religious, resting embedded in his Secularity 3. But it is there, especially at the start of the book where he talks of ‘fullness’, its spiritual quality, and how even agnostics and atheists must be chasing this. And here, you see at once, that religion has really not left Taylor’s ‘immanent frame’. This is a mindset thinking, seemingly, of the inevitability of religious things within the individual. Unlike Keith Thomas, who starts his study of ‘fulfilment’ in early modern England by noting the word did not exist in his period, Taylor is unconcerned with pinning down the genealogy of his ‘fullness’.<sup>59</sup> So, the polarity between medieval simple religious faith and contemporary rational secularity is essentially a wee fib. For Taylor is actually all the time envisioning the transcendent in modernity. He adds in a footnote as early as page 20 that rock concerts and football matches can have in Secularity 3 the same functions in terms of ‘transcendence’ as religion.<sup>60</sup> So, religion is back in the Taylor frame. It has never left. What is missing, of

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<sup>56</sup> S. Williams, *Religious Belief and Popular Culture in Southwark, c.1880-1939* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999); and M. Houlbrooke, *Rite out of Time: a Study of the Ancient Rite of Churching and its Survival in the Twentieth Century* (Donington, Shaun Tyas, 2011).

<sup>57</sup> Taylor, 12, 14.

<sup>58</sup> Taylor 19.

<sup>59</sup> Thomas, 8.

<sup>60</sup> Taylor, 20 fn19.

course, is the notion that, like other humans, those living life as if there is no god have sought meaning for life in places other than religion.<sup>61</sup>

Secularity 3 is his end point, but Taylor's concept never loses its tether to religion. Indeed, he makes plain in the centre of his book that his view of secularisation is that of 'a believer', and though he acknowledges decline of religion in the modern world, in a rather brief passage gives his game away by talking of 'a new placement of the sacred or spiritual in relation to individual and social life'.<sup>62</sup> For all his discussion over many pages of 'In the Age of Mobilization' during 1800-1950 or 1960, and the Second Confessional Age, and 'the age of authenticity' from 1960 to the present, his 'hinge moment'<sup>63</sup> in the sixties is actually a familiar story to those of us who have studied the sexual revolution, New Age religious explosion, and the vertiginous downfall of religiosity and church life in most of Europe. He offers no vision of a further state of secularity. Is it because he can't? In calibrating constantly from religion, Taylor continues to talk in the language of the religious philosopher - of immanence and transcendence, fullness, of New Age religions, and the search for the authentic self, all in terms strongly shaped by religious ideas. The hint, taken up I think by many of his readers in Religious Studies, is of 'spirituality', the post-1960s substitute for ecclesiastical religion.<sup>64</sup> Here is a book that defines, not a secular condition, but merely the latest manifestation of the religious one.

#### **(d) Finding Secularity 4 in the spectrum of atheism**

For, what Taylor fails to engage with is atheism in all its glorious diversity. It is a spectrum of attitudes – ranging from diffident perplexity, diverted priorities and silent scepticism, to speculative agnosticism, reasoned rationality, new emotional belonging, guttural scoffing, raging mockery and 'theomachy' – or 'battling the gods' in the Greek myths of cosmic war.<sup>65</sup> It is there, to be unearthed in the sources, in every period from the ancients to now, as a counterpoint to ecclesiastical authority and discursive religiosity.

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<sup>61</sup> Historians have not really explored this, but contemporary social science has; see for instance J.H. Hammer, R.T Cragun and K. Hwang, 'Measuring spiritual fitness: atheist military personnel, veterans, and civilians', *Military Psychology* vol. 25, (2013) 438-451. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this reference.

<sup>62</sup> Taylor, 437.

<sup>63</sup> Taylor, 473.

<sup>64</sup> P. Heelas and L. Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution* (Oxford, Blackwell, 2005).

<sup>65</sup> Whitmarsh, *Battling the Gods*, p. 44.

I want to explore what we might start to learn about atheism from atheist historians talking to atheists, unmediated through parish priests, inquisitors, church clerks and Christian historians. To begin, let me offer a series of basic principles about atheism across the last two millennia and likely more:

Principle I: Being an atheist, like being a Christian, a Muslim, a Jew or a Hindu, means belonging within often multi-faith western cultures to a spectrum – of natures of the self, of engagement in belief-non-belief issues, and of atheistical beliefs. This spectrum is extensive, highly variegated, culturally-influenced, and gendered; as Susan Reynolds wrote in 1991, ‘Unbelief, like belief, is socially conditioned.’<sup>66</sup> So, the atheist and the religionist have been hewn from the same stone, but come out as different shapes.

Principle II: What is generally shared by those on this spectrum is living life as if there is no god. This parallels the spectrum of those who self-describe as Christian, from the ardent and well-informed believer to the casual self-identifier who neither worships nor learns much about the features of the faith. However, atheism is not purely about ‘belief’, but may be strongly determined by materiality, life priorities or education.

Principle III: The atheist spectrum abuts, and in culturally-defined ways overlaps, the religious spectrum, encapsulating many positions between interest and indifference (and may even include the churchgoer).

Principle IV: The vast bulk of atheists in all societies tend to lack activities associated with their position, and this is not a sign of weakness but intrinsic to the condition. But, if free to do so, they may mark *rites de passage* in secular ways.

Principle V: Atheists may have distinctive moral and world outlooks, some of which may apply across cultures and eras, and some of which may not, but which, nonetheless, afford the scholar ways of identifying them in context.

I have expanded elsewhere on the nature of atheism, and of becoming an atheist, and reflected on the need to guzzle about in social-science research presumptions in order to get at the perplexing character of atheism.<sup>67</sup> Here, with those basic principles in mind, I use brief case studies from my interviews with 84 atheists and humanists raised in eighteen countries - interviews which highlight different forms of the atheist self and which, I would argue, may be traceable across millennia.

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<sup>66</sup> Reynolds, 35.

<sup>67</sup> C.G. Brown, *Becoming Atheist: Humanism and the Secular West* (London, Bloomsbury, 2017).



My first case study is Ernest Parker born in Washington DC in 1949. His testimony reflects the strength of African American religious culture upon his life.<sup>68</sup> When eight years old, his mother drew him into the Jehovah's Witnesses, where he quickly joined the Theocratic Ministry School, in which role, despite many religious doubts and questions, at the age of 15 he became a teacher. He harboured unhappiness with the Church, especially for how he was treated following a violent assault, and from his mid-teens drifted for ten years, pursued by the Church authorities, leading finally to elders, in a disturbing scene with his Mom, telling him he 'wasn't in good standing with the congregation'. He was encouraged to leave his mother's house, and, after rejecting bible instruction at the age of 25, he was finally 'disfellowshipped'. From there he started studying other religions. 'It was hard for me to look at other religions as having any more, as being any more true.' He checked them off:

With the Witnesses - it was like a bit like a big trash bin - the Baptists are in there, the Catholics are in there. I had some friends who were into Buddhism and other religions, and I always had this feeling in the back of my mind that at one time it's possible that there was some truth. And you know, maybe if you go back in time or something like that, and studying and looking at these things, that eventually you can find it. But I eventually reached a conclusion that either they're all right or they're all wrong. And there's no evidence that any of them are right. So they must be all wrong. And that was the day that it occurred to me that there was probably no god.

Trying other religions is a common initial step from faith, and through trying Mormonism and the New Age, Ernest became gradually more confirmed in a position of no religion. He was alienated by 'these folks, they were going at it full throttle emotional' to persuade and sustain faith in the African American community. There was no appeal to logic or reason or 'do you feel the loss of religion in your life?' Ernest said: 'They's just going full out with the music and the singin' and the dancin' and you know, "save your soul from hell" and all of that stuff.' For almost thirty years, he stood apart from religion, but without adopting a named identity:

Like most African American non-believers we think we're the only one. There are so few of us, the influence of the church in our community is so pervasive, that, we think

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<sup>68</sup> Ernest Parker, interviewed 6 December 2014.

'I'm the only one that feels this way, or thinks this way'. And uhm, quite frankly, until recently there's been little or no outreach into the African American community, because the assumption has been that all black people are religious.

He speaks with vigour on the context for ethnic minority unbelief – about the slave heritage, the segregation, discrimination, the denial of civil rights and justice under the law. And he speaks of being 'dirt poor', and the division between the black and white poor, and notes with fervour the resistance of the black churches in fighting for equality. He acknowledges that an African American who leaves religion is conflicted by that, and must remain living within the cultural framework.<sup>69</sup>

Ernest's example says much about Principles I and III – how the atheist spectrum closely abuts the religious, the shared cultural heritages, the common belonging. I found similar narratives amongst atheists and humanists I have interviewed who were former Hindus, Muslims, and from four secular Jews. He says much about Taylor's Secularity 2, as do many people I have interviewed – experiencing the personal loss of faith and religious observance. But this applies across time. It is not, as Taylor would have it, an epoch in the same way as Secularity 1 can legitimately be tagged. Like Secularity 3, it is a timeless condition.

My second case study is Mary Wallace who was born in Cheshire in England in 1960, and though her parents were socialists with little religious connection, she, like her peers, was exposed to a childhood infused with religion – morning assemblies in school, singing in an Anglican choir.<sup>70</sup> She was active in seeking religious experiences in her teens, reporting 'a little sort of phase at the age of 13, possibly 14, where a best friend at school went to a Pentecostal church, an Assembly of God, and I went along with her, I think, for only about perhaps about 6 months. But I was completely hooked for 6 months'. She was swept up by the sense of belonging, the drama of the worship (including speaking in tongues), until she just worked out that the whole thing 'was absolute gobbledegook'. She drifted without any active interest in religion for years until, after marriage and the traumatic loss of a young child, she realised in her bereavement that she was an atheist and became a full-time Humanist celebrant.

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<sup>69</sup> Observable also in the autobiography of a leading African American Humanist, A. Pinn, *Writing God's Obituary: How a Good Methodist Became a Better Atheist* (Amherst, NY, Prometheus, 2014).

<sup>70</sup> Mary Wallace, interviewed 16 July 2009.

There are features in Mary's testimony which are distinctive to the western European atheist and humanist – the brevity of the religious connection, a long period of disinterest in religion, often lasting decades, followed from the 1960s to 1990s by the rising principles of human rights, gay equality and feminism. In addition, in interview, the religious world is recalled and, with a swiftness and firmness, dispatched in such a manner as to deny it credence, with no lingering of faith over her life. There's a cultural sureness that the individual has moved on, contrasting with the testimony of non-white ethnic minorities in the west where a religious-cum-racial heritage endured in the atheist self. Furthermore, in her secular celebrancy, Mary demonstrates well Principles IV and V, including the eternal human desire for ritual marking of birth, marriage and death.

My last case study is of Christine Raulier who was born in Liege in Belgium in 1923. She explained to me that her parents were atheists: 'the switch, the conversion, if I may say, was a generation before me'. The rhetoric from the outset in Christine's testimony established that religion and religiosity were expired, creating a space in her life that had never been filled with any substitute or surrogate for religion. As with everyone I interviewed, the moral compass of her humanism was antecedent to her discovery of that rationale; humanism was not a faith that conferred goodness, it was the rationalisation of life's lessons, and affirmed many of her moral positions on equality, human rights and assisted dying. Christine is one example, though not the only form, of Secularity 4, embodying humanity beyond religion, transcendence, fullness, or other neo-religious characteristics wrongly attributed to the atheist self. Christine's narrative of her life was uncomplicated by the intrusion of religion at any stage from birth to old age; her mother, she remembers, told her to be 'certainly not afraid to say that I was not religious'. After the war she worked with an international team on the impact of radioactive substances on the food chain, and then travelled the world with her husband as a Belgian diplomat. Into their eighties, the pair joined the Humanists in large part to prepare for their own funerals, meeting the celebrants to leave texts and music choices.

Christine's is a life in which she was perfectly knowledgeable about world religions, encountering many during her overseas postings. But she was never in any stress or doubt about an atheism into which she grew as a child and teenager, comfortable to proclaim it in inter-war Belgium, and to have no participation in religion or its *rites de passage*. This was a twentieth-century woman from a family and educational heritage of atheism, in a society which, in Belgium, Netherlands and some other European nations, was modelled from the 1870s onwards on the basis of 'religious pillars', amongst which atheism and socialism was one, that conferred the possibility to live one's life without material, educational, medical,

cultural or even occupational encounter with religion. This presaged the wider possibilities for atheism in western societies after 1970, and one the historian might learn much from even in nations without such formal pillars. Christine exemplifies the atheist with no religion, living life without a god, that I met from several European nations where, as one Swede told me, to have a religion was regarded by the 1980s and 90s as ‘slightly weird’.<sup>71</sup>

These three examples each evoke Principle II, of living life as if there is no god, and display characteristics of the others. They hint at the ways in which we can formulate manners of thinking about atheists in the past. Sure, times were harder for nonbelievers before 1800, and the historian needs to factor in the infliction of extreme religious power, the self-preserving silence of the atheist, the warping of hostile reportage, the criminalisation of faithlessness, and the distress which having no faith might bring when all round was a vigorous normativity of belief. But there was, and is, a purity or essence to atheism to which the secular self can lead, and we can learn from the modern brethren about the possibilities for nonbelievers in the past.

### **The necessity of atheist scholarship**

Foucault argued that ‘The death of God is not merely an “event” that gave shape to contemporary culture as we now know it; it continues tracing indefinitely its great skeletal outline.’<sup>72</sup> Michael Lackey has written that we need to think not just about atheism but ‘genuine atheism’ – not godlessness in a negative sense, but in a ‘strict sense’. He writes: ‘Genuine atheism does not occur in a single moment; it is a process in which the culture eliminates from its consciousness the ontotheological assumptions that continue to inform its intellectual systems despite the apparent absence of the God concept.’<sup>73</sup>

The constant calibration from religion, usually Christianity, and, as in Taylor’s case, Catholicism, warps the possibility of envisioning secularity in anything like its potentials. Taylor actually half recognises this, admitting that his ‘is a very Christian formulation’, but his way getting round this is to invoke Buddhism, as he imagines that religion as a way to an appreciation of secularity. He does this because he discounts the ability of reason to make the secular. ‘Reason by itself is narrow, blind to the demands of fullness, will run on perhaps to destruction, human and ecological’. He continues: ‘[The] Rational mind has to open itself to something deeper and fuller.’ He later scoffs at those who argue for ‘the perpetual absence of

<sup>71</sup> Anders Östberg interviewed 4 February 2010.

<sup>72</sup> Quoted in M. Lackey, *African American Atheists and Political Liberation: A Study of the Sociocultural Dynamics of Faith* (Gainesville, FL, University Press of Florida, 2007), 49.

<sup>73</sup> Lackey, 50.

fullness' in modernity, ascribing this as 'at best a necessary dream'.<sup>74</sup> This is editorialising about non-religionists' scholarship, blatant and blunt, ethically questionable, and analytically arrested.

We don't understand belief and non-belief unless we admit the latter as a legitimate possibility and understand it properly. This is, as I said of Christine Raulier, an unfilled space where religion has evacuated the self, leaving no lingering 'fullness', spirituality or religion-substituting football matches. Though evidence for the atheism of Secularity 4 might be rare before 1900 or 1950, we need to include it in the study of societies of all epochs and cultures. We need an open and informed determination to insert atheism, in all its diverse social formations, into the narrative of religious history, and nowhere is it more vital than in talking about secularisation. We need to get beyond thinking of atheism as solely concerning Nietzsche and the 'new atheists' in philosophical and controversialist modes, and to consider subjectivities – those of atheists and historians too (just as oral historians are now expected to be reflexive). We need the atheist's appreciation of the social history of atheism, in all its flourishing diversity of character and its moral visions, to ensure that the academic study of secularisation is not just a project of Christian apologetics as the tide goes out.

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<sup>74</sup> Taylor, 8-10.