

# THE CONCEPT OF HUMAN FLOURISHING IN CHARLES TAYLOR

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1. 1. *Life*

CHARLES TAYLOR, a Canadian philosopher, was born in 1931 in the province of Quebec, the son of an English-speaking father and a francophone mother. He has taught in Oxford and in Montreal and has been politically active in the socialist New Democratic Party. Politically he stands for the cultural divergence of Quebec but for a united Canada.<sup>1</sup>

### 1. 2. *Works*

Taylor is a prolific writer, who has contributed to many aspects of philosophical thought, such as moral theory, theories of subjectivity, political theory, epistemology, hermeneutics, philosophy of mind, philosophy of language, aesthetics, philosophy of religion, and sociology of religion. His vast knowledge of literature, art, and history is conveyed through the brilliance and amenity of his writing.

His work is centered around two of his greatest compositions: *Sources of the*

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<sup>1</sup> Cfr. R. ABBEY, *Charles Taylor*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2004; cfr. I. BREUER, *Charles Taylor zur Einführung*, Junius, Hamburg 2000.

*Self*<sup>2</sup> and *A Secular Age*.<sup>3</sup> It is characteristic of Taylor that he prepared and anticipated his two *opera magna* in important essays before their appearance, and then, afterwards, has repeated, explained, deepened and sharpened the ideas that they contain. *The Ethics of Authenticity*<sup>4</sup> summarized *Sources of the Self* in a comprehensible and succinct way, while *A Catholic Modernity*?<sup>5</sup> prepared the way for *A Secular Age*. In several articles that were published after 2007, Taylor returned to topics dealt with in this latter book and explained them further.<sup>6</sup>

Apart from his own writings, the literature on Taylor's philosophy is steadily growing, to the extent that some scholars have even spoken of the "Taylor-effect".<sup>7</sup> In any case, it is difficult at present to speak or write about secularism, humanism and other related topics, academically, without engaging Charles Taylor. He has become one of the most central thinkers on Christian humanism and Christian secularity.

### 1. 3. *Methods*

Taylor's academic impact is accentuated by two characteristics of his methodology, which define the whole of his scholarly production: the use of hermeneutics and the balanced, essentially positive attitude towards the achievements of modernity.

We first turn to hermeneutics, a word that in English may be perceived in several ways. In English we distinguish several notions of this word. Some of its usages include:

A sound exegesis of texts;

<sup>2</sup> C. TAYLOR, *Sources of the Self. The Making of Modern Identity*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 1989.

<sup>3</sup> IDEM, *A Secular Age*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA and London 2007.

<sup>4</sup> IDEM, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA and London 1991. The same book appeared as a Canadian version with the title *The Malaise of Modernity*, Anansi, Ontario 1991, 1995<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> J.L. HEFT, *A Catholic Modernity? Charles Taylor's Marianist Award Lecture*, Oxford University Press, New York and Oxford 1999.

<sup>6</sup> Cfr. e.g. C. TAYLOR, *Western Secularity*, in C. CALHOUN, M. JUERGENSMAYER, and J. VAN ANTWERPEN (eds.), *Rethinking Secularism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2011, 31ff; C. TAYLOR, *What was the Axial Revolution?*, in R.N. BELLAH and H. JOAS (eds.), *The Axial Age and Its Consequences*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA – London 2012, pp. 30-46.

<sup>7</sup> Besides the book edited by Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Jonathan Van Antwerpen, mentioned in the last note, see, among others: I. LEASK (ed.), *The Taylor Effect: Responding to a Secular Age*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Cambridge 2010; M. KÜHNLEIN and M. LUTZ-BACHMANN, *Unbefüllte Moderne? Neue Perspektiven auf das Werk von Charles Taylor*, Suhrkamp, Berlin 2011; M. WARNER, J. VAN ANTWERPEN and C. CALHOUN, *Varieties of the Secular in a Secular Age*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA and London 2010.

A cluster of epistemological problems relating to the validity or objectivity of textual interpretation or translation;

A stance that rejects the possibility of objectivity in interpretations;

A methodology in social sciences as contrasted with the method of natural science. In this sense, hermeneutics is associated with relativism in social sciences.

Taylor does not use hermeneutics in any of the abovementioned senses. Instead, for Taylor, hermeneutics is the understanding of meanings. He aligns himself with the central thesis of post-Heideggerian hermeneutics, with the belief that “human existence is expressive of and constituted by meanings shaped by self-interpretations”. On this theme, Taylor has clearly been influenced by Merleau-Ponty rather than by Dilthey or Gadamer. It is the meaning of human existence and not the reflective act of interpretation of texts that is at the center of Taylor’s interests.<sup>8</sup> With his hermeneutic method, Taylor turns against naturalism, which strives to overcome subjectivism through empiricism, in order to achieve certainty through empiric data, i.e. facts that require no interpretation. However, together with Gadamer and the hermeneutic tradition, Taylor denies the existence of “brute facts” or pure scientific facticity as well as social facts prior to interpretation. Everything is consequence of a prior mode of self-interpretation, even the process of interpreting external facts. Man is a self-interpreting animal: «It means that he cannot be understood simply as an object among objects, for his life incorporates an interpretation, an expression of what cannot exist unexpressed, because the self that is to be interpreted is essentially that of a being who self-interprets».<sup>9</sup> Every human action takes place within a hermeneutic horizon of meaning, defined by the language, practices, and institutions of a specific culture. This culture is an «irreducibly social good»<sup>10</sup> and an objective reality. It is a horizon that cannot be overcome but only moves further away: we cannot, by purely human means, transcend our natural and cultural limits. We can, however, become conscious of our cultural horizon through the reflexive appropriation of the historical formation of our identity. This is the history of ideas, which Taylor presents in his two monumental books. True to his hermeneutic method, the history of ideas is not merely an object to be pondered. Ideas constitute that which we are. Defining our modern identity means discovering the mesh of self-interpretations, inherent in our culture, that defines the

<sup>8</sup> Cfr. N.H. SMITH, *Taylor and the Hermeneutic Tradition*, in R. ABBEY, *Charles Taylor*, cit., pp. 29-51, 31f. The quote is to be found on p. 31.

<sup>9</sup> C. TAYLOR, “*Self-Interpreting Animals*”, in IDEM, *Philosophical Papers*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 45-76; 75 quoted from BREUER, *Charles Taylor*, cit., p. 23.

<sup>10</sup> IDEM, *Philosophical Arguments*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA and London 1995, pp. 127-145.

way in which we inevitably interpret ourselves.<sup>11</sup> Thus, Taylor explains that his historical analysis is not a general history of culture but an interpretative one: he tries to show the appeal of an idea under certain circumstances.<sup>12</sup>

The second methodological aspect worth highlighting in the introduction is that Taylor is never unilaterally critical of modernity. In fact, he does not reject modernity at all but strives to extract the core values latent in modernity and then reconstruct an ethical society. Taylor resists the temptation of contempt for contemporary culture to which some authors have succumbed. According to Taylor, these authors, such as Alasdair MacIntyre and Alan Bloom, do not seem «to recognize that there is a powerful moral ideal at work here, however debased and travestied its expression might be».<sup>13</sup> He defends the thesis that «in modern, secularist culture there are mingled together both authentic developments of the gospel, of an incarnational mode of life, and also a closing off to God that negates the gospel».<sup>14</sup>

## 2. HUMAN FLOURISHING

“Human flourishing” is a key concept of virtue ethics and also of an incarnational Christian humanism that studies the way the Christian faith contributes to happiness not only in heaven but on earth. The following essay, based primarily on Taylor’s book *A Secular Age*, is limited to Taylor’s concept of “human flourishing” and its importance for Christian humanism. The concept of human flourishing plays a decisive role in *A Secular Age*, but not in *Sources of the Self*. However, as will become apparent, it is necessary to refer to other publications by Taylor, in addition to the two most famous, in order to correctly comprehend Taylor’s use of the concept of “human flourishing”.

*A Secular Age* is a monumental book, comprised of 847 erudite pages, a type of *summa* in which the author presents us with the harvest of his lifelong scholarship.<sup>15</sup> In a nutshell, Taylor writes a “genesis of exclusive humanism”, the core of modern secularity, and challenges the prevailing representation

<sup>11</sup> See C. TAYLOR, *Humanismus und moderne Identität*, in C. TAYLOR, *Wieviel Gemeinschaft braucht die Demokratie? Aufsätze zur politischen Philosophie*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M. 2001, pp. 218 – 270, 223. This article was first published under the same (German) title in K. MI-CHALSKI (ed.), *Der Mensch in den modernen Wissenschaften, Castelgandolfo-Gespräche 1983*, Klett-Cotta, Stuttgart 1985, pp. 117-170, thus before *Sources of the Self* appeared, of which it anticipates a large section nearly word by word.

<sup>12</sup> Cfr. C. TAYLOR, *Sources*, cit., p. 203.

<sup>13</sup> IDEM, *Ethics of Authenticity*, cit., p. 15.

<sup>14</sup> IDEM, *Catholic Modernity?*, cit., p. 16.

<sup>15</sup> A useful guide to properly understanding the book is to be found in C. TAYLOR, *Afterword: Apologia pro Libro suo*, in M. WARNER, J. VAN ANTWERPEN, and C. CALHOUN (eds.), *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA and London 2010, pp. 300-321.

of secularization as a subtraction story that is too simple. Such a subtraction story sees modernity as the result of a history in which religious influence is subtracted from the various fields of human activity and thus the importance of religion in public life diminishes and finally withers away altogether. It is misleading to see secularization in this sense as a necessary prerequisite for modernization. Taylor shows how the Protestant Reformers of the 16<sup>th</sup> century contributed to preparing the way; how in the 18<sup>th</sup> century the commercial society created the “modern moral order”, viz. a culture of mutual benefit in harmony; and how culture in the 19<sup>th</sup> century became increasingly immanent and capable of religious unbelief. Even then there remained a certain nostalgia for God, which left a vacuum to be filled by aesthetics. Some thinkers, however, positively and aggressively excluded God from human life (Taylor calls this the “Nova – effect”). This attitude of excluding God became culturally dominant after World War II (our author names this phenomenon the “Supernova-effect”). Taylor’s point is that neither Christians nor humanists are able to explain the predicament of human existence in its entirety. He argues in favor of a mutual disarmament of arguments and urges each one to approach the other in a common concern for man. The last chapters of this book analyze a number of “dilemmas” that both religion and secular humanism have to face.

*A Secular Age* concentrates on the question of what a secular age is and how it was formed. Taylor circles around this question, unfolding the answer in a grandiose historical narrative. The Canadian philosopher affirms that we have moved from a world, in which fullness was conceived as coming from outside, to a world where everything is explained and decided within human life, an “immanent frame”. Applying this to our practical context, Taylor states that all persons and societies live according to their conceptions of “human flourishing”. What constitutes a fulfilled life? What is worth the effort? What makes life worth living? What do we admire others for? Our author defines secularity by the notion of human flourishing: «A secular age is one in which the eclipse of all goals beyond human flourishing becomes conceivable». <sup>16</sup> Taylor calls such a form of humanism self-sufficient or exclusive humanism: it accepts no final goals beyond human flourishing, nor any allegiance to anything beyond this human flourishing. There is therefore a crucial link between human flourishing, secularity and self-sufficing humanism. In *A Secular Age*, Taylor holds that Christian religion goes beyond human flourishing, and that «there remains a fundamental tension in Christianity». <sup>17</sup> It is thus imperative to understand what Taylor means by the concept of “human flourishing”.

<sup>16</sup> C. TAYLOR, *A Secular Age*, cit., p. 19.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 18.

### 3. WHAT IS HUMAN FLOURISHING ACCORDING TO CHARLES TAYLOR?

Even though it is such a central concept for his book, Taylor defines “human flourishing” only towards the end of *A Secular Age*. It is «a purely human fulfillment»;<sup>18</sup> «life, health, prosperity, many descendants».<sup>19</sup>

In Taylor’s oeuvre, one finds three similar conceptions of human flourishing; these conceptions differ in the degree to which they admit an inclusion of, or exclude, transcendence.<sup>20</sup>

The first notion is a defense of inclusivity: human flourishing is brought about by transcendence. Christian faith, writes Taylor in 1999, speaks of life in fullness and abundance, *ζοέ*, thus including transcendent aspects within the concept of human flourishing. Acknowledging the transcendent dimension of one’s life implies being called to a change of identity, to a transformation: to the radical decentering of the self in relation with God expressed in the petition, “Thy will be done”. This can be called “theocentrism”. It means opening oneself to a change in identity. «Renouncing—aiming beyond life—not only takes you away but also brings you back to flourishing. In Christian terms, if renunciation decenters you in relation with God, God’s will is that humans flourish, and so you are taken back to an affirmation of this flourishing, which is biblically called *agape*».<sup>21</sup>

The second conception is the one given in *A Secular Age*, and it seems to contradict the first version. In this book, Taylor argues that renunciation and flourishing cannot be collapsed into each other. The Canadian philosopher holds that the Christian religion goes beyond human flourishing, as it seeks a good that is «independent of human flourishing».<sup>22</sup> For Christianity, «loving, worshipping God is the ultimate end. Of course, in this tradition God is seen as willing human flourishing, but devotion to God is not seen as contingent upon this. The injunction ‘Thy will be done’ is not equivalent to ‘Let humans flourish’, even though we know that God wills human flourishing».<sup>23</sup> A great part of what we hear of Jesus in the Gospel is his making human flourishing possible for those whom he heals and frees from their affliction.

Nevertheless, in *A Secular Age*, Taylor rejects the idea of reconstructing “true” human flourishing as involving renunciation for two reasons: 1. In the

<sup>18</sup> C. TAYLOR, *A Secular Age*, cit., p. 471.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 687.

<sup>20</sup> Eoin G. Cassidy criticizes a notion of human fullness that requires a good that is independent of human flourishing. It must be a “misplaced” ideal of human flourishing that is too self-absorbed, cfr. E.G. CASSIDY, *Transcending Human Flourishing: Is there Need for a Subtler Language?*, in I. LEASK (ed.), *The Taylor Effect. Responding to a Secular Age*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle 2010, pp. 26-38, 30. The point is that Taylor is aware of these difficulties, and uses several concepts of human flourishing.

<sup>21</sup> C. TAYLOR, *A Catholic Modernity?*, cit., p. 21f.

<sup>22</sup> IDEM, *A Secular Age*, cit., p. 16.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 17.

case of Christianity, renouncing human flourishing for higher aims presupposes that ordinary flourishing, which is foregone in sacrifice, is accepted as valid. In this, Christian faith differs from Socratic or Stoic philosophy, which justified renunciation of earthly aims because they were bad or indifferent and therefore unworthy of a virtuous person. Socrates serenely drinks the cup of poison, because this life is not worth living. Christ suffers the agony in Gethsemane, because he wants to live. His sacrifice presupposes the worthiness of life. 2. In renouncing our own human flourishing, we become a source of flourishing for others, and God can heal the world. Therefore, concludes Taylor, in the Christian faith, renunciation cannot be built into human flourishing as an element of a single goal; rather, «there remains a fundamental tension in Christianity. Flourishing is good, but seeking it is not our ultimate goal. But even when we renounce it, we re-affirm it, because we follow God's will in being a channel for it to others, and ultimately to all».<sup>24</sup>

The third conception is an intermediate position. The post-Axial religions<sup>25</sup> redefine our highest goods. This redefinition makes it impossible to reduce the aim of the divine to individual or familial "ordinary human flourishing". The Axial goals can involve flourishing on a wider scale, and this «may be expressed by a redefinition of what 'flourishing' consists in».<sup>26</sup> Taylor does not specify in what sense such a redefinition might be undertaken: whether it includes transcendence and belief in God or not.

It is in his study of axial religions that Taylor explains his position on "human flourishing" in greater detail and the reason why he sustains it the way he does. For him, the Axial Revolution is fundamental for modern religion. He calls this Revolution which took place in the axial time, "disembedding". Pre-Axial religions consisted in propitiating the ambiguous and not always benign gods and placating their wrath in order to win their support for "ordinary human flourishing", understood as "prosperity, health, long life, fertility", and their protection against "disease, dearth, sterility, premature death". After the Axial shift, religions began to proclaim a notion of a higher, more complete

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 18.

<sup>25</sup> The "Axial Age" (and derived terms) is a concept that is widely but not universally accepted. It designates the middle centuries of the first millennium BC in which texts known as "classics" were written in important regions of Eurasia (China, India, Greece, Mesopotamia, Israel). Classics are texts that were written in the past but still form part of the contemporary culture of educated persons. The term was coined by K. JASPERS in his book *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte*, Piper, München 1949. Cfr. R.N. BELLAH and H. JOAS (eds.), *The Axial Age and Its Consequences*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA and London 2012, pp. 1-6, Introduction, and especially Hans JOAS, *The Axial Age Debate as Religious Discourse*, in the same book, pp. 9-29.

<sup>26</sup> C. TAYLOR, *What was the Axial Revolution?*, cit., p. 35.

human good «even a salvation beyond human flourishing».<sup>27</sup> All post-Axial religions have a revisionary stance toward the human good: «[...] they all call into question the received, seemingly unquestionable understandings of human flourishing and hence inevitably also the structures of society and the features of the cosmos through which this flourishing was supposedly achieved».<sup>28</sup> Following this logic, Christianity, on one hand, asserts the unwavering benevolence of God towards mankind; on the other, it redefines our ends so as to take us beyond human flourishing.

The differences between these three conceptions should not be exaggerated.<sup>29</sup> However, it is important to show that in *A Secular Age* Taylor uses the expression “human flourishing” in a sense that excludes transcendence and reduces it to inner-worldly goods and aims. He deplores this reduction, because it «entrenches one in a certain definition of this flourishing, which is made the absolute standard of good and bad, right and wrong».<sup>30</sup> *A Secular Age* has even been described as a narrative that highlights the role of the transcendent in constituting a person’s identity.<sup>31</sup> This makes it all the more difficult to understand why Taylor chooses a reductionist definition of human flourishing. One can only speculate as to the reason. Perhaps he does so in order to better define secular self-sufficing humanism, and thus secularism and the secular age, as an historical period, in which no final goals beyond ordinary human flourishing are accepted.

From the viewpoint of moral theology, it might perhaps have been preferable not to surrender the concept of human flourishing to the reductionist sense of exclusive humanism, and to define it in the broader sense already present in *A Catholic Modernity?*.<sup>32</sup> Taylor could have expressed the reductionist notion with the words “immanent flourishing” or “imperfect flourishing”. Within the renewal of Catholic moral theology, the idea of human flourishing expresses the holistic vision of man as a being directed towards the eternal happiness of which we partake – albeit imperfectly – on earth. Taylor actually agrees with this vision: happiness and fullness are not possible without breaking through the immanent frame and reaching transcendent reality.<sup>33</sup> Still, he

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 31-34.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 35.

<sup>29</sup> I agree with Ruth Abbey, that Taylor’s use of definition is «flexible, open-minded and characteristically relaxed», cfr. R. ABBEY, *A Secular Age: The Missing Question Mark*, in I. LEASK (ed.), *The Taylor Effect. Responding to a Secular Age*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle 2010, pp. 8-25, p. 11.

<sup>30</sup> C. TAYLOR, *A Secular Age*, cit., p. 435.

<sup>31</sup> See F. KERR, *How Much Can a Philosopher Do?*, «Modern Theology», 3/26 (2010), pp. 321-336, p. 321.

<sup>32</sup> This regret is also expressed in other words by J.A. KIRK, *A Secular Age in a Mission Perspective: A Response to Charles Taylor’s Magnum Opus*, p. 10, <<http://klice.co.uk/.../A%20secular%20age%20in%20omission%20perspective.doc>>

<sup>33</sup> Cfr. C. TAYLOR, *A Secular Age*, cit., pp. 718 – 721. Graham Ward beautifully points out



does not call this “itinerary of conversion” human flourishing.<sup>34</sup> Taylor’s decision to maintain a reductionist notion of human flourishing means that he not only critically engages self-sufficing humanism but also the current of Catholic moral thought that identifies flourishing as the «appropriate description of our ultimate goal».<sup>35</sup>

#### 4. WHY DID MODERN SECULARISM EXCLUDE TRANSCENDENCE FROM ITS NOTION OF HUMAN FULLNESS AND HAPPINESS?

That the emergence of exclusive humanism with its rejection of Christian belief is not the result of scientific progress alone is one of the central ideas of *A Secular Age*. There exists not only an epistemic question of belief or unbelief in God but also an ethical, moral question. In an immediate and trivial sense this becomes apparent in the courage necessary to accept truth. Modern thinkers feel as though they are adults who must overcome a childish but comforting frame of mind, known as faith, in order to take on the scientific truth of an indifferent universe. However, the ethical dimension in Taylor’s narrative of modernity goes beyond this “epistemic virtue”. The modern moral order,<sup>36</sup> with its affirmation of ordinary life and its notion of reason as an instrument of the disengaged self,<sup>37</sup> has posited mutual benevolence, production and reproduction, prosperity, peace, harmony, health, alleviation from pain, and nondiscrimination as the highest aims of life. This was not always the case in the past. For instance, there existed an asceticism undertaken in order to obtain higher goals, an asceticism imposed by certain historical forms of organized Christian religion. The present situation has been constructed by overthrowing those religious barriers and by breaking away from medieval

the necessity of faith for “transformation” in the Christian sense, see G. WARD, *History, Belief and Imagination in Charles Taylor’s A Secular Age*, «Modern Theology», 3/26 (2010), pp. 337-348, p. 347.

<sup>34</sup> A helpful insight into why this might be so, comes from J.A. MERCADO, *Charles Taylor: De la autointerpretación a la participación política*, «Anuario Filosófico», 1/XXXVI (2003), pp. 441-454, p. 454: Charles Taylor does not pay special attention to virtues. Virtues, however, are intimately connected to and require a fuller, anthropological notion of human flourishing.

<sup>35</sup> E. CASSIDY, *Transcending Human Flourishing*, cit., p. 30. On the same line S.J. COSTELLO, *Beyond Flourishing: ‘Fullness’ and ‘Conversion’ in Taylor and Lonergan*, in I. LEASK (ed.), *The Taylor Effect. Responding to a Secular Age*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle 2010, pp. 39-52, p. 39.

<sup>36</sup> See *ibidem*, pp. 159-211. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century the commercial society created the “modern moral order”, viz. a culture of mutual benefit in harmony.

<sup>37</sup> Under “disengagement” Taylor understands the objectification or “reification” of the human being. It requires a reflexive stance through which we construct our own scientific representation of the world, our own moral character, and our own social structures. Cfr. C. TAYLOR, *Sources of the Self*, cit., pp. 159-176, in particular p. 174 f.

Christendom. These arguments are the deep source of immanence's moral attraction. The power of atheist humanism or exclusive humanism does not stem from scientific "facts" but from a bundling of materialism with a moral outlook: religion is seen as a menace for modernity. We live in a kind of post-revolutionary cultural climate, writes Taylor, in which any renunciation of the revolution suggests a reactionary return to the past. Thus, speaking of transcendence evokes the specter of renouncing the important acquisitions of modernity and its conquest of normality and humanity. However, many religious people have also contributed to building the modern humanist world. Must Christians really pay the price of a kind of "spiritual lobotomy" in order to enjoy modern freedom? It should be possible to affirm the positive claims of modernity while at the same time «opening the way for the insight, that more than life matters». <sup>38</sup> Taylor gives his own position: the immanent frame in which we live leaves the open question of whether we might have to invoke something transcendent «for purposes of ultimate explanation, or spiritual transformation, or final sense-making». There is no inner logical necessity to close off the narrative by "spinning" it in a certain way. <sup>39</sup>

##### 5. WHY SHOULD EXCLUSIVE HUMANISM, BASED ON ITS OWN LOGIC OF MORALITY, OPEN ITSELF TO TRANSCENDENCE?

Taylor answers this question by referring to the cultural malaises of modernity. He himself summarizes these malaises as three losses: the loss of meaning, of ends and of freedom. <sup>40</sup> We will follow the structure of his book.

The first source of concern is individualism. On the one hand, individualism is «the finest achievement of modern civilization» <sup>41</sup>: individual freedom, human rights and the personal pursuit of happiness are its fruits. On the other hand, together with the liberation from socially fixed orders which modernity has brought, something was lost: «the larger social and cosmic horizons of action». <sup>42</sup> This brings about a loss in meaning. Lives have been "flattened and narrowed", and this is connected "to an abnormal and regrettable self-absorption", the fruits of a "permissive society" together with a prevalence of narcissism. Exclusive humanism wipes out the transcendent beyond immanent life. This implies a danger. It provokes an immanent negation of life. Without transcendence, it is not possible «to affirm something that matters beyond life, on which life itself originally draws». <sup>43</sup> Nietzsche's destructive philosophy – antihumanist humanism, one of the immanent "cross-pressures" in moder-

<sup>38</sup> Cfr. C. TAYLOR, *A Catholic Modernity?*, cit., pp. 19-24. See also with more detail IDEM, *A Secular Age*, cit., pp. 546-548.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 594 and 600.

<sup>40</sup> C. TAYLOR, *Ethics of Authenticity* (American edition. The Canadian edition is called *The Malaise of Modernity*), cit., p. 10.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 2.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 3.

<sup>43</sup> C. TAYLOR, *A Catholic Modernity?*, cit., p. 20.

nity – poses the question of whether he has not described «the possible fate of a culture that has aimed higher than its moral sources can sustain». <sup>44</sup>

The second malaise stems from the primacy of instrumental reason in modern secularism. This is a cause of concern, because people feel reduced to factors in a process of calculation, in which efficiency must be maximized: the «best cost-output ratio is its measure of success». <sup>45</sup> Actually, people have reacted against materialism because they do not feel determined in their actions, as materialism wants them to believe. Rather, they feel as though they are free protagonists. Realizing that there are higher ethical and spiritual motives in their lives that cannot be reduced to materialism, they strongly experience aesthetic values. <sup>46</sup>

Finally, the third malaise concerns social atomism and alienation from the public sphere in consequence of individualism, something upon which Tocqueville expounded: almost 200 years ago, he was concerned that people in liberal democracies would become so engrossed with their own personal interests that they would leave the public good to others. The result would be soft despotism by a class of bureaucrats. <sup>47</sup> In such a characterization of modern society, Taylor manifests his communitarian stance, even though he refuses the label. For the communitarians, a democratic society that does not converge in certain aims and meanings finally becomes a democracy without democrats, a society of individuals concentrated exclusively upon their own interests. In order for a democracy to function, people need a certain sense of community and solidarity. The communitarian's criticism is directed against the purported value neutrality of modernity. As previously stated, Taylor's position on modernity is not as negative as that of others, but he does accuse modernity of blindness to its own implicit values. Value neutrality is an illusion, because modernity contains many ideas of the good despite its self-assessment as value-neutral. Taylor strives to reveal these values that are the constitutive moral sources of the identity of each person. Therefore, in the same measure, and for the same reasons that the values of modernity have to be reevaluated, the atomistic conception of modern society also requires rethinking. <sup>48</sup>

In *A Secular Age*, Taylor takes this analysis a step further by showing that the difficulties are not all on the side of secularism, that Christians too need a good dose of humility in approaching the dilemmas of life. He sets out from the affirmation that the question of fullness of life, viz. of a "livable understanding of human life", is inescapable. We could formulate it in these

<sup>44</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 30.

<sup>45</sup> C. TAYLOR, *Ethics of Authenticity*, cit., p. 5.

<sup>46</sup> Cfr. IDEM, *A Secular Age*, cit., p. 596 f.

<sup>47</sup> Cfr. IDEM, *Ethics of Authenticity*, cit., pp. 8-12.

<sup>48</sup> Cfr. I. BREUER, *Charles Taylor zur Einführung*, cit., pp. 10-12.

words: in which way does life look «good, whole, proper, really being lived as it should»?<sup>49</sup> It is a debate about the “ends of life”, viz. an ethical debate. The crucial debate in modern culture thus concerns not only fullness but also the conceptions of our ethical predicament.<sup>50</sup> Having said this, Taylor speaks of a series of dilemmas, which both religion and exclusive humanism have to face. The basic form of such a dilemma is: «how can we define our highest spiritual or moral aspirations for human beings, while showing a path to the transformation involved which doesn’t crush, mutilate or deny what is essential to our humanity?» Taylor calls this the “maximal demand”.<sup>51</sup>

The maximal demand stems from our desire for wholeness. To modern culture, it appears wrong to sacrifice the body or ordinary aspirations in pursuing our highest ideals. This, in its turn, is a result of our Christian cultural matrix, because a religion based on incarnation cannot sideline the body. Criticism of Christianity has taken its critique from this cultural matrix and turned it against Christianity. The dilemma, which neither Christianity nor secular humanism can solve, is: do we have to scale down our higher goals in order to achieve human flourishing, or do we have to sacrifice some elements of human flourishing in order to reach our highest goals? Both extremes seem unacceptable: we need higher goals, but we do not want to negate immanent human flourishing.

Secular humanism assumes it can solve this dilemma, but in reality, it reduces the goals. Secular humanism’s aim is to produce a world in which self-interest also benefits others, interests harmonize and history comes to an end. But it cannot explain why, and therefore it does not deliver the moral sources that empower us.

Christianity cannot solve the dilemma either. The transformation of human life, which the Christian faith envisions, cannot be completed in history. Christians do not offer a global historical solution, because the direction in which they point has to be taken in faith, it cannot be proven; moreover, it cannot be laid out in a code or a fully-specified social system.<sup>52</sup>

#### 6. HOW DOES CHRISTIAN FAITH CONTRIBUTE TO CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION? WHAT WOULD CHRISTIAN HUMANISM LOOK LIKE? WHAT IS THE CULTURAL CALLING OF CHRISTIAN FAITH?

According to Taylor, the Christian perspective on human life is characterized by a “perspective of transformation” through love, which goes far beyond human flourishing. It takes human beings «beyond, or outside, of whatever is normally understood as human flourishing, even in a context of reasonable

<sup>49</sup> C. TAYLOR, *A Secular Age*, cit., p. 600.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 639 f.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 602-604.

<sup>52</sup> Cfr. *ibidem*, pp. 640-643.

mutuality – i.e. where we each work for the well-being of all. For Christians, this means participating in the love, the *agape*, God has for human beings, which is, by definition, a love which extends far beyond any possible mutuality, a self-giving not bounded by some measures of fairness». <sup>53</sup> The main cultural struggle, according to Taylor, has been shaped by a polarization between the transformation perspective and its secular rejection in the name of human flourishing, which sees such a perspective as a danger, an enemy even, to a society of mutual benefit. As an example, Taylor mentions Francis of Assisi: he was called to go beyond human flourishing through the renunciation of his life as a merchant, his austerities and his suffering. This can be seen in a positive light, or, to the contrary, one can see in him an example of monkish virtues, «a practitioner of senseless self-denial and a threat to civil mutuality». Many people would want to situate themselves in-between, attempting a compromise between the transformation and the immanence perspectives, «and yet not wanting to return to the strong claims of the transformation view». <sup>54</sup>

Whatever a majority would prefer, modern Christian consciousness, Taylor affirms, «cannot follow exclusive humanism in making human flourishing its only goal. There is a point in giving it all up, if one can contribute to repairing the breach with God». <sup>55</sup> Christian social and cultural life is caught in a tension that comes from drawing both from modern humanism and adhering to the central mysteries of Christian faith. «It cannot accept the self-enclosure in immanence, and is aware that God has given a new transformative meaning to suffering and death in the life and death of Christ. God's initiative has given a new sense to renunciation, which has to be recovered beyond the deforming encrustations of religious anti-humanism». <sup>56</sup>

Taylor addresses two specific areas as special fields of transformation by Christian faith: happiness and solidarity. The first important concept, happiness, is the ultimate aim of ethics. The lack of an understanding of life's meaning, and therefore also of happiness, threatens all the narratives of modernity by which we live. Not that religion should serve exclusively in supplying meaning to the world in a servile or instrumental way, but it should do so in the sense that love in its nature calls for eternity. If happiness were possible as separate sensations, as a thing of one moment, that gives way to the next moment of happiness, then we could enjoy life in contingent forms of happiness. However, the «deepest, most powerful kind of happiness, even in the moment, is plunged into a sense of meaning. And this meaning seems denied by certain kinds of ending», such as death. <sup>57</sup>

<sup>53</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 430.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 430 f. The quotations are on p. 431.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 655.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 656.

<sup>57</sup> Cfr. *ibidem*, pp. 718-721.

The second field of application is solidarity. Our age gives great importance to solidarity and makes high demands on the individual to contribute to universal justice. The Christian version of this attitude is charity, and it goes beyond unilateral heroism or altruistic unilateralism – sacrificing oneself for others even though one can give no reasonable account for one's action or knows that there is no sense in it – by spreading the social imaginary<sup>58</sup> of communion, mutual giving and receiving in a bond of love. This can only become real if we open ourselves to God, thus overstepping the limits established by exclusive humanism. One who really believes this has something important to say to modernity.<sup>59</sup>

The transformation God causes by his plan is thus not an achievement of personal human effort, but an act of faith in God's power. «This is an essential weakness for some, but for its protagonists what makes the transformation ultimately credible». <sup>60</sup> However, Christians must be aware lest they zealously overdo their service to society. Humanism and Christian faith both need a good dose of humility in the face of humankind's common dilemmas. In the context of the immanent frame, a lot turns on codes, structures and systems. However, Christian faith is unable to offer solutions of this kind. This makes Christians feel “inadequate and irrelevant to the great discussion”. As a result, they are often induced “to claim more than they should”. Christian life then becomes identified with one specific type of “normality” or a certain polity. Furthermore, believers must be careful lest they close their openness to God by false certainties. Fundamentalists, for instance, revert to a closed bubble of false transcendence that in reality is caught in immanent structures and aims, such as power, and uniformization. Thus religious faith can be dangerous because of premature closure, dividing people into pure and impure.

The decisive question for both sides is who offers the better response to our commonly felt dilemmas. <sup>61</sup> In answer to this question, Taylor is convinced that our sense of fullness is a reflection of transcendent reality, the God of Abraham, even though many in our society refuse to “envisage transcendence as the meaning of this fullness”. He hopes for conversions: itineraries where people break through the immanent frame into a broader picture including transcendence. <sup>62</sup>

## 7. WHAT IS TAYLOR'S CONTRIBUTION TO CHRISTIAN HUMANISM?

Taylor's contribution to Christian humanism is immense. If we understand Christian humanism as the contribution to human happiness not only in heaven but also on earth, then everything that has been said above about the trans-

<sup>58</sup> Socially shared ways in which social spaces are imagined.

<sup>59</sup> C. TAYLOR, *A Secular Age*, cit., p. 702.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 675.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 656.

<sup>62</sup> Cfr. *ibidem*, p. 769.

formation wrought by Christian faith is relevant. However, in *A Secular Age*, Taylor uses the concept of humanism merely as “self-sufficing or exclusive humanism”. He does not employ the expression “Christian humanism” in any of his writings. On the other hand, he does not exclude it either. In one passage, he mentions pre-modern concepts of integral human flourishing that include transcendent elements, saying: «In this kind of case, we might speak of a humanism, but not of a self-sufficing or exclusive humanism». <sup>63</sup>

In order to discern his position regarding Christian humanism, we have to turn to earlier publications. In 1983, in a forerunner to *Sources of the Self*, Taylor defined his notion of humanism as a doctrine, a conception or an attitude that understands human nature in reference to some kind of model or example, which serves as foundation of practical philosophy. <sup>64</sup>

Understood in this way, humanism is the object of controversy and debate. Our author discerned three lines of criticism:

1. Theist criticism: humanism is presumptuous, because it overly exalts man’s capacities and denies his radical dependence on divine help.

A) There is a subgroup in this current that rejects humanism completely, because it accuses humanism of essentially and necessarily ending in atheism. (De Lubac).

B) Another group classifies modern humanism as essentially Christian but soiled and distorted. (Jacques Maritain).

2. Ecological criticism: Humanism has separated us from nature and through its instrumental notion of reason has subjected our environment to irresponsible manipulation and exploitation.

3. Antihumanist criticism following Nietzsche. The modern individual is incapable of rational self-consciousness and freedom. Liberalism is nothing but an unconscious strategy of control. <sup>65</sup>

Taylor sketches his own answer in confrontation with subjectivism, the largest challenge posed by modern humanism: if our transformation, our *Verklärung*, is our doing and responsibility, as the immanent frame of modernity believes, can we only count on our own human strength and means?

Our author sees two possible answers. The first is romantic expressivism, which replies that human inwardness in itself takes us beyond ourselves. The second answer is the theological answer, which we could call the answer of Christian humanism. Dostoyevsky held that man could not love himself as long as he did not accept God’s love for him. Taylor’s own position builds on this idea, but affirms the essential goodness of modern culture: we must not, in the name of criticism of modern humanism, reject any of the enhanced

<sup>63</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 19.

<sup>64</sup> C. TAYLOR, *Humanismus*, cit., p. 218. This article was first published in 1983.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 218-220.

“poietic capabilities” or achievements, which modernity has created. The aspiration to transformation through enhanced human strength and means must not be considered as presumptuous or devious. To the contrary, it opens us up to a new understanding that our relationship with God is one of partnership.<sup>66</sup> This can be understood in the sense that we can build our lives together only with God, because only faith in God’s love makes it possible to see the world as good. Any conception of reality that includes a notion of reason, truth, the human subject, goodness, justice, etc., somehow presupposes God’s love of what exists. It is a hermeneutical horizon of self-interpretation, which we can never transcend. The question posed by modernity is whether or not our experience of the Enlightenment points us towards its only condition of possibility: it shows clearly and forcefully that man can only love himself if he partakes of the love that God pours out over us.<sup>67</sup>

This begs the question of how Taylor understands the relationship between human nature and divine grace. This is the underlying issue and decisive question in Christian humanism. Taylor has specifically dealt with this topic in *Sources of the Self*, as always, in an historical hermeneutical perspective.

In the course of history, there were two ways in which the help of divine grace was understood as a necessity for the human natural good:

1. God calls man to something more than the natural good, to a life of sanctity with theological virtues. For this kind of life, grace is necessary as a principle of a new form of life, in a supernatural dimension.
2. Human will is wounded by original sin (or even completely depraved according to some Reformers), and, as a result, human beings need grace even to be decent humans.<sup>68</sup>

Aquinas and others interpret the need for grace for supernatural life (1.) radically, but not so the need of grace for natural life (2.). Thus Aquinas was able to write that “*gratia supponit non destruit naturam*”. Aquinas fundamentally acknowledges natural goodness, and unites grace and nature in human life. Luther, to the contrary, interpreted the need of grace for natural goodness (2.) radically and therefore is suspicious of the search for natural perfection. Taylor calls this view “hyper-Augustinian”. Deism and the Scottish Enlightenment fought against the notion of original sin, i.e. they suppressed the need of grace in sense 2. In the course of historical development, the good that God wills centers ever more on the natural good alone. The Enlightenment definitively lost the supernatural dimension.<sup>69</sup>

This organic mesh of nature and grace, characteristic of the Catholic tradition, leads us to the next chapter.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 269.

<sup>67</sup> Cfr. *ibidem*, p. 270.

<sup>68</sup> Cfr. C. TAYLOR, *Sources of the Self*, cit., p. 246.

<sup>69</sup> Cfr. *ibidem*, pp. 246 f. and 271.



## 8. THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

Thus far, Taylor's thought alone has been summarized, with the intent of showing the content and the importance of Taylor's concept of human flourishing in his analysis of secularity and his contribution to Christian humanism. As the relationship between nature and grace is an important concept for Christian humanism, it is important to conclude this article with two brief theological reflections: one on the unity of nature and grace and the other on the first person perspective in moral theology.

8. 1. *The Unity and Distinction between Nature and Grace*

In the Thomist tradition, human flourishing means happiness. Thomas distinguishes between perfect happiness, which we shall possess in heaven, and imperfect happiness, of which we can partake on earth. It is important to note that Thomas uses the same word, *beatitudo*, for both kinds of happiness, thus expressing their essential sameness. They are not two essentially different and separate species of happiness, but rather differ in their grade. This happiness on earth is not to be achieved by human goods alone – by honor, wealth, and pleasures – but does presuppose them to a certain degree. Such a degree is not only a minimum, but the amount required for well-being. However, in order to achieve happiness, human goods must not be considered ultimate goods. This would destroy happiness. Happiness is knowing God and pursuing God's love.

In the Christian tradition of the Church Fathers and of Thomas Aquinas, nature and grace are not opposed, even though they are distinguished. Nature is fully nature only with the help of grace. Man cannot reach his flourishing without the Redeemer. It is a unity both in the protological as well as in the soteriological sense. By "protological", we mean the original founding of human nature through divine creation, and by "soteriological", we mean the restitution of human nature, wounded by sin, in the Redemption wrought by Christ. In our context, the distinction is relative, because we only know nature wounded by sin, and grace therefore enters our experience only as restorative grace.

Two examples from the Church Fathers can illustrate the unity of nature and grace. Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 335 – ca. 395) wrote the first Christian treatise on anthropology *De hominis opificio*.<sup>70</sup> Therein, Gregory exalts the human be-

<sup>70</sup> GREGORY OF NYSSA, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, Vol. 5, P. Schaff and H. Wace (eds.), translated by H. A. Wilson, *On the making of man*, Christian Literature Publishing Co., Buffalo, NY 1893), Revised and edited for New Advent by K. Knight. <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/2914.htm>. Quoted as "Hom. Op."

ing as the greatest of all creatures on earth. Man and woman are an image of God, and this bestows royal dignity upon them.<sup>71</sup> The text in the book of Genesis (1:26-27) describes man and woman as created in the image and likeness of God. For Gregory, this means that God's features become visible on the human being's face. These features are the divine element in man, the divinization of man. Other Church Fathers before Gregory had distinguished between the concept of "image" and that of "likeness" in the Bible text. In their interpretation, "image", or *eikon*, meant the inalienable dignity of human nature, whereas "likeness", or *homoiosis*, referred to the supernatural similarity derived from divine grace and virtues. The likeness of God could thus be lost through sin.<sup>72</sup> For Gregory, on the contrary, image and likeness are equivalent terms. Both expressions are originally placed on the supernatural level. *Eikon* does not merely express natural similarity but the original creation in grace that *homoiosis* strives to put into practice.<sup>73</sup>

H. Merki has shown that Gregory of Nyssa goes beyond Plato's conceptions of similarity with God, because Gregory knows the idea of grace. Plato saw the ideal of the philosopher in becoming similar to God – *homoiosis theo* – through flight from the world.<sup>74</sup> This ideal was very influential during Middle and Neo-Platonism and therefore also on Gregory. However, Gregory's concept is supernatural and no mere co-naturality with God as in Plato. Similarity with God is a result of grace. Through the abundance of grace, «man escapes from his own nature: from mortal he becomes immortal, from decaying undecaying, from transient eternal; from man, in short, he becomes God». <sup>75</sup> The "true nature of man" for Gregory is human nature in grace. Man is created similar to God: this divinization is the beginning, not the end. The animal nature of man was, as it were, created after original sin and is opposed to man's original destination.<sup>76</sup>

John Damascene wrote in a similar manner. He affirms that God created man without sin and with free will. That man was created without sin does not mean that he cannot commit any sin, but that sin does not form part of

<sup>71</sup> *Hom.Op.*, n. 2.

<sup>72</sup> See R. LEYS, *L'image de Dieu chez Saint Grégoire de Nysse. Esquisse d'une doctrine*, Bruxelles-Paris: L'édition universelle/Desclée de Brouwer, Bruxelles-Paris 1951, p. 119.

<sup>73</sup> See J. DANIELOU, *Platonisme et Théologie mystique. Doctrine spirituelle de Saint Grégoire de Nysse*, Éditions Montaigne, Aubier 1944, p. 49f.

<sup>74</sup> Cfr. PLATO, *Dialogue Theaitetos*, 176 B.

<sup>75</sup> GREGORY OF NYSSA, *Homily 7 De Beatitudinibus*, GNO VII/2, 151,15-17; PG 44, 1280 C; GREGORY OF NYSSA, *Homilies on the Beatitudes*, Hubertus R. Drobner and Albert Viciano (eds.), Koninklijke Brill nv, Leiden, The Netherlands 2000, p. 77.

<sup>76</sup> In this sense H. MERKI, ΩΜΟΙΟΣΙΣΘΕΩ. *Von der platonischen Angleichung an Gott zur Gottähnlichkeit bei Geger von Nysa*, Paulusdruckerei, Freiburg 1952, p. 94ff.

human nature. Sin is one of the options of free choice.<sup>77</sup> Evil soils and humiliates man's dignity, contradicting human nature as image of God. Goodness and virtuosity are man's natural condition even though not everyone lives accordingly.

«And the discipline and trouble of this life were not designed as a means for our attaining virtue which was foreign to our nature, but to enable us to cast aside the evil that was foreign and contrary to our nature: just as on laboriously removing from steel the rust which is not natural to it but acquired through neglect, we reveal the natural brightness of steel».<sup>78</sup>

Thomas Aquinas formulated similar ideas when dealing with the commandments, which seem to exceed the possibilities of our natural strength. It is the same challenge Taylor poses when he speaks about the highest goods that transform our nature by going beyond ordinary human flourishing. What we do with the help of our friends, writes Thomas, we do as though by our own means. What we achieve with grace, we do as if through our own nature, because God is our friend.<sup>79</sup>

These quotations and reflections are meant to argue in favor of including transcendence in the concept of human flourishing. To me this seems to draw closer to the original Christian position than the concept used in *A Secular Age*, even though Taylor's reasons for reducing the concept are comprehensible. The idea of bringing together nature and grace is present both in the theology of Karl Rahner—i.e. supernatural existential<sup>80</sup>—and in the *Nouvelle Théologie*.<sup>81</sup> Taylor, even though he has read it, does not reflect much upon theological literature. This is a pity, because the relationship between nature and grace is a central topic of contemporary theology.<sup>82</sup>

<sup>77</sup> Cfr. JOHN OF DAMASCUS, *An exact exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, translated by Rev. S.D.F. Salmond, in *John of Damascus and Hilary of Poitiers, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, Vol. 9, Rev. W. Sanday (ed.), translated by Rev. E.W. Watson, Rev. L. Pullman and others, Hendrickson Publishers Inc., Peabody MA 2004. <sup>78</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 60.

<sup>79</sup> Cfr. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 156, a. 2 ad 1: «*Homo potest vitare peccatum et facere bonum, non tamen sine divino auxilio: secundum illud Joan. 15: 'Sine me nihil potestis facere'. Unde per hoc quod homo indiget divino auxilio ad hoc quod sit continens, non excluditur quin incontinentia sit peccatum: quia, ut dicitur in 3 Ethicorum (c. 5), 'quae per amicos possumus, aequaliter per nos possumus'*».

<sup>80</sup> D.P. HORAN, *A Rahnerian Theological Response to Charles Taylor's A Secular Age*, «*New Blackfriars*», 94 (2013), pp. 21-42; proposes the complementarity of Rahner and Taylor.

<sup>81</sup> Charles Taylor expresses his sympathy and agreement to Yves Congar and Henri de Lubac in his reply to K. FLANAGAN, *A Secular Age: an exercise in breach-mending*, «*New Blackfriars*», 91 (2010), pp. 699-721. Taylor's reply is on pp. 721-724, with reference to the authors mentioned on p. 722f.

<sup>82</sup> In this sense S. HAUERWAS and R. COLES, «*'Long Live the Weeds and the Wilderness Yet': Reflections on A Secular Age*», «*Modern Theology*», 3/26 (2010), pp. 349-362, it is odd that Taylor does not engage Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and point out that he draws too

If the unity of nature (immanence) and grace (transcendence) is to have a tangible practical sense for normal life, then this unity cannot only be its eschatological horizon. A horizon is a limit, which we can never reach but from which we can only move further away. If it is to be a shaping element of our daily life on earth, transcendence somehow has to become integrated into our life. This, however, strictly and humanly speaking, is not possible: grace remains completely transcendent. Transcendence can never form part of immanence. Anything we build into our earthly existence by this very fact becomes immanent. However, by our human strengths and means alone, we can experience transcendence only in the mode of immanence, because all transcendent phenomena – even revelation, grace, etc. – must be translated into immanence in order to be accessible to us. We receive transcendence through words, experiences and other inner-worldly manifestations. We cannot transcend our own horizon of immanence. Our faith tells us that it is not humans who self-transcend to the side of God, but God who self-transcends to the side of his creation.

It is the event of Incarnation that brings about the self-transcendence of God: His «Self-Transcending from the beyond of Absolute Transcendence into the horizon of Immanence without thereby ceasing to be Absolute Transcendence».<sup>83</sup> «In short, the transcendence of God is no longer that which makes God wholly other and inaccessible to *human* self-transcending but rather the *divine* Self-Transcending that makes God present as God to humans in the horizon of Immanence before they can even begin to self-transcend».<sup>84</sup> Man corresponds with “dislocating passivity”<sup>85</sup> to divine action, allowing himself to be transformed from an old self into a new self. This passivity requires a lot of active correspondence from the side of human will, expressed in the biblical call to *metanoia*: «The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel» (*Mk 1:15*). It is no coincidence that repentance, *metanoia*, is a prerequisite for faith and fellowship.

### 8. 2. *The First Person Perspective in Moral Theology*

A second underlying topic that struck me as theologically relevant in Taylor’s writings is his adoption of the so-called first person perspective. By this, we mean a shift of perspective from a legal, normative conception of ethics to a personal approach based on virtues. In the normative version, the source of

strong a line between immanence and transcendence (p. 358). They suggest “liturgies” in ordinary life that provoke «the ethical-political work in the vertical dimension» (p. 359).

<sup>83</sup> I.U. DALFERTH, *The Idea of Transcendence*, in R.N. BELLAH and H. JOAS (eds.), *The Axial Age and Its Consequences*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA and London 2012, pp. 46-188, p. 172.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 173.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 173.

morality is rules. Ethics is understood as norms that are applied to actions in the way a judge applies law to another person. Morality of an action is understood as compliance to rules; virtues are instrumental and secondary to these rules and norms. In virtue ethics the perspective is that of the acting person in search of personal happiness and fulfillment. This aim is achieved in a virtuous life. Norms are secondary to virtues and function as indicators of a moral minimum. The fundamental questions of the ethics of the first person are many: in what does a good life consist, what kind of life is this, what kind of person do I desire to be and how can I be happy?<sup>86</sup>

We can find similar thoughts in Taylor. As has already been said, he criticizes the “subtraction story” as too simple to explain the formation of modern culture. One of the positions that this subtraction story presupposes is an ethical one: the exclusive focus on normative ethics. Modern moral philosophy has an «exclusive focus on questions of obligatory action, the question of what is the right thing to do. It in fact abandons wider issues of the nature of the good life, of higher ethical motivation, of what we should love».<sup>87</sup> However, the search for the moral sources that can support our commitment to benevolence and justice is obstructed by meta-ethical systems, which exclude the notion of good and make us see the commitments of justice «through the prism of moral obligation».<sup>88</sup> This is a precise description of the motives and the content of the first person perspective. However, Taylor does not take the next step towards a notion of “human flourishing” that would correspond to and support virtue ethics. He is absolutely aware of the need for virtues,<sup>89</sup> but it is just not his preferred topic. However, having focused more on the notion of virtue, also in modern thought, would have improved his use of the notion of human flourishing.

*ABSTRACT: This essay was written for people who are not yet familiar with A Secular Age and other publications by Charles Taylor, as well as for those who are already acquainted with his work. Here I attempt to summarize, introduce and reflect upon Taylor’s massive oeuvre, with particular attention to the specific and central topic of human flourishing. I have chosen this special theme because it is essential to comprehending Taylor’s definition of what a secular age is, and because it is also a vital component of the renewal of moral theology after*

<sup>86</sup> For further explanation see M. RHONHEIMER, *The Perspective of Morality: Philosophical Foundations of Thomistic Virtue Ethics*, Catholic University of America Press, Washington 2011; E. SCHOCKENHOFF, *Grundlegung der Ethik. Ein theologischer Entwurf*, Herder, Freiburg i Br. – Basel – Wien 2007; G. ABBÀ, *Quale impostazione per la filosofia morale?: ricerche di filosofia morale 1*, LAS, Roma 1996.

<sup>87</sup> C. TAYLOR, *A Secular Age*, cit., p. 590.

<sup>88</sup> IDEM, *Sources of the Self*, cit., p. 518.

<sup>89</sup> Cfr. C. TAYLOR, *Replik*, in M. KÜHNLEIN and M. LUTZ-BACHMANN (eds.), *Unerfüllte Moderne? Neue Perspektiven auf das Werk von Charles Taylor*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M. 2011, p. 858.

*the Second Vatican Council. Furthermore it is an important concept for Christian humanism and Christian secularity. This essay follows Charles Taylor on his intellectual journey, as he strives to guide both secular and Christian minds to a mutual comprehension of the other's true intentions, as well as to uncover shared values and the common concern for the human predicament. The article concludes with a reflection on the ways in which Taylor's arguments could be improved by theology. I consider this to be the unity and distinction of nature and grace, as well as virtue ethics examined from a first person perspective.*

KEYWORDS: Charles Taylor, human flourishing, secularism, Christian humanism, transcendence, virtue ethics.

## NOTE E COMMENTI