Postsecularism: Another Sociological Mirage?
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This review essay reflects on two works that pertain to the postsecular: Josef Bengtson, Explorations in Post-Secular Metaphysics (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); and Florian Zemmin, Colin Jager, Guido Vanheeswijck, eds., Working with a Secular Age: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Charles Taylor’s Master Narrative (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2016). The profound influence of Charles Taylor’s A Secular Age (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007) is well illustrated in these two works under review. The review essay situates postsecularity in the context of debates on secularization and the sociological expectations this process generates. By treating postsecularism in terms of contextualisation, metaphysics arises as a default position pertaining to transcendence in Bengtson’s work. The efforts in the Zemmin, Jager, and Vanheeswijck work to steer the Taylor study in the direction of Islam are given a critical appraisal. A particular outcome of postsecularity is to render as untenable sociology’s customary detachment of religion from theology. Lastly, for Catholicism, postsecularism draws attention to a long-standing and long-denied crisis in the reproduction of belief in modernity and in a secularized Europe in particular. A singular exception to this crisis occurs in Scandinavian countries, notable for their absence of religion, which are experiencing a small, but significant renaissance of Catholicism. This opens out a positive side to debates on postsecularity which indicates that it is not solely about mirages which give comfort to secularized forms of sociology.

Usually, the journey home in the evening by bus from the University of Bristol has a dual function of reconnecting to the populace and at the same time, of switching off the sociological imagination. The bus has a small screen on which brief items of BBC news appear. One evening, in mid-November of 2016, all the usual items of news went past as a ticker-tape, until this time the eye was startled, for what appeared was a brief mention that the Oxford Dictionaries had designated “post-truth” as the word of the year. The term signified a lessening of concern with objective facts and instead a fixation on affirming subjective preferences, or in short, the art of cherry-picking to generate any conclusion one wanted.
It was as if the populace had bypassed academics to find a term that signified properties of postmodernity, where all was fragmented, where disbelief and cynicism reigned, and where nothing in any institution—political or financial or religious—was to be trusted. The individual was left with a life of lonely disconnection, where commitment seemed pointless, if not illusory, for all was a mirage. The endless rise of social media, the Internet, and the anarchy of cyberspace fed this sense of inhabiting realms of illusion. This unexpected popularization of nihilism, hitherto the secret of many academics in the social sciences and humanities, managed to render the famous query of Pontius Pilate “what is truth?” as gestural. In this climate of gloom came the Brexit vote in the United Kingdom and Trump’s unexpected victory in the United States, both of which stunned academics, expressing as they did an enormous gap between the mass populace and experts and elites who spoke and ruled on their behalf. Somehow, the “bubbles” inhabited by the guardians of liberal secular sentiment had been pricked by those with other versions of culture, begging queries as to who was alienated from whom. An uncomfortable query arose: were matters missing the post, set for dispatch, or were things at the last post?

Hitherto, in the realms of sociology, the term “post” was a luxurious designation that provided academics such as sociologists with a fig-leaf to cover that which they could not formulate, notably what is to come, if anything, after feminism, modernity, and everything else. Reflecting this insecurity, sociologists gathered as tribes around “great figures” in sociology. These gatherings seemed oddly sectarian for such a secularized discipline. A further perplexity irrupted, one peculiar to sociology. By some mysterious mimesis, the usual gap between the esoteric concepts of academics and the laity had closed in disconcerting ways. Sociology had become a victim of its own popularity as its argot entered public lexicons, so that terms of identity politics, culture, gender, and racism are now tossed around with abandon and with few qualifications. This appropriation might seem flattering to sociology, were it not that it has generated a paralysis over finding and coining new concepts.

With all these “posts” and a conceptual famine, one term has loomed on the horizon of academic concern. Inconveniently, it pertains to religion and seems to express realizations regarding its unexpected return. It denotes an uncomfortable sense that, contrary to its vaunted powers, secularity after all had not slaughtered religion. Somehow, in spectral forms, religion looms on horizons of understanding. Postsecularism has come to signify that realization of return. It is a remarkably baffling, opaque, and contradictory term, signifying the need to choose either between belief or
unbelief. In whatever form, its emergence seems to encapsulate a public mood of gloom, of unsettlement and anxiety.

Perhaps more than at any other time, religion unexpectedly governs events, from the irruption of the Orthodox Church in Russia, to the wars between Shia and Sunni in the Middle East, to the massive influx of refugees into Europe whose outcome is to destabilize seemingly settled arrangements wrought by secularity—whether in the form of laïcité as in France or in the revolt against the expulsion of religion from the public square in Egypt and Turkey.

It is unlikely that those who attended to the famously prophetic work by Giles Kepel, *The Revenge of God* (1993), could have anticipated the spectacular irruption of Islam in Europe. It has emerged in Europe to become the dominant religion of return, one whose advance has come to justify the rise of what is known as the postsecular. Before coming to the two works reviewed in this article, it is important to attend to the genealogy of postsecularism as pertaining to sociology. It is a myth that sociology discarded religion and, as a discipline, totally secularized itself. Its attitudes to religion are complex.

Comte treated sociology as the emblem of his Positivist religion; Durkheim’s last great work, on the elementary forms of the religious life, rehabilitated the importance of the sacred and ritual where all pertaining to religion was of the social; Simmel came nearest to theology in terms of recognizing the actuality of religious belief and its color in a series of essays published between 1898 and 1918; and Weber, afflicted with salvation anxiety, was learned in biblical studies, pessimistic, and given to treat disenchantment as the death knell of modernity. Although affirming the need for enchantment, he could not envisage as a form of “magicing” the return of religion to modernity. His tragedy was that he felt that sociology could beckon no such ghost.

Within sociology itself, in a long tradition in the twentieth century, the study of religion was given a subservient place in the parameters of the discipline. If given habitation, it was placed under strict accountability lest it profane the purity of the scientific calling which so ennobled sociology’s pursuit of knowledge. In deference to such demands, American Catholics, who had done so much to pioneer the sociology of religion, secularized themselves, discarded their theological credentials, and became merely one more group in the flock of scientists in the late 1960s, a stunning example of Bourdieu’s notion of symbolic violence. Sects and cults that arose at the time were treated as tolerable exceptions to the implicit religion of sociology: secularization. Yet, afflicted with so many exceptions and definitional problems surrounding religion, secularization within so-
ciology was itself treated as deceased (Stark 2000). One crucial exception was the United States. Even though its constitution marked a separation of religion and the state, rates of church attendance in the U.S. are significantly higher than in most of Europe. Furthermore, U.S. politicians are prone to express a close relationship to God in their rhetoric, which, if so deployed in Europe, would occasion the deepest embarrassment.

At present, sociology finds itself in uncharted waters and unexpectedly religion is the topic that has generated navigation problems. Even though New Atheists are few in number, they present starkly issues of choice between belief and unbelief in ways unfamiliar to sociology. But in England and Wales in the 2011 Census, it was the significant numbers who placed “no religion” on their forms who excited the most critical interest. Deploying these figures to affirm the powers of secularization seemed to confuse indifference with a definiteness of stance, to confuse rejection of religion with a denial of affiliation with any particular organized form of it. Such difficulties signify a fault-line within secularity and postsecularity over what is the definition of the particular religion that has supposedly ebbed away. But other factors might be emerging. Is the option of a self-made spirituality to account for the failure of commitment, or might it arise from a sense of alienation from any institutions, most especially those in ecclesial form?

If Islam is the religion of return of postsecularism, how did it manage to achieve this primacy if, as Krämer (2009) has argued, it was never secularized because of its belief that the state and religion were one? Increasingly, the whole process of secularization is treated as Protestant and European. Thus, it is argued that the individualism, private judgement, and duties to this world that so marked Protestantism, as Weber envisaged it, are also the properties of secularization. Obviously, a point will arise over which form of Protestantism facilitates secularization. Pentecostalism operates successfully against secularization, whereas with Liberal Protestantism, the opposite is the case. Again, a further complication arises over the United States. Despite constitutional prohibitions, religion is so woven into public life that it is doubtful that secularization has matured sufficiently to necessitate interest in the postsecular in ways similar to Europe. This underlines the distinctly European basis of postsecularity and its particular and peculiar circumstances of gestation. This leads on to a second and delicate point.

Clearly, something is going wrong with Catholicism in Europe, notably in Belgium, Holland, France, and Germany, where church attendance figures and vocations are in long and seemingly irreversible decline. Somehow, it might seem that Islam can “read” culture and flourish within
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Western Europe in ways denied to Catholicism. Lest this be considered an anti-liberal stance, one needs to refer to the words of Pope Benedict XVI on his pastoral visit to Great Britain in September 2010. He observed that

\[\text{[n]}\text{o one who looks realistically at our world today could think that Christians can afford to go on with business as usual, ignoring the profound crisis of faith which has overtaken our society, or simply trusting that the patrimony of values handed down by the Christian centuries will continue to inspire and shape the future of our society.}\] (Ratzinger 2010b: 76–77)

With his successor, Pope Francis, a window of opportunity for sociology to enter into dialogue with theology has been closed, as antique forms of liberation theology were rehabilitated and pastoral concerns were favorably directed to those on the margins of society and not to those in the center of Europe who were perspiring in a meltdown of belief.

Thirdly, the postsecular hovers on the edge of sociological speculation for one obvious reason: culture. As culture became of central concern to sociology in the 1990s, the customary dispatch of religion to the suburbs of the discipline became untenable. The notion of culture contained too many issues such as aesthetics, enchantment, images, and identity, which kept on taking a reluctant sociology to the borders of theological reflection. Their significance has been exponentially expanded with the rise of the Internet. The outcome is that the role of sociology as a secular gatekeeper seeking to exclude any reference to religion has become unsustainable. This widening of realization has drawn attention to matters of evil, theodicy, and the dark recesses of the imagination, signifying a spectral property to the return of religion which necessitates reflection on postsecularity (Flanagan 2017). Such irruptive matters draw attention to the charge that postsecularity is a bundle of mirages.

In this climate of anxiety, insecurity, and unsettlement, one work, Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age* (2007), has caught the academic imagination to a remarkable degree. A chapter of Bengtson’s work on postsecular metaphysics is devoted to Taylor and the edited collection of Zemmin, Jager and Vanheeswijck is specifically devoted to working with *A Secular Age*. Taylor’s study has had profound implications for the exploration of the linkages between sociology and theology, but most especially the possibilities the postsecular opens out.

The study emerged from his Gifford Lectures in Edinburgh in 1999 and was published in 2007. Given this early time period, perhaps it is not surprising that Taylor devotes only a short paragraph to the notion of the postsecular (Taylor 2007: 534–35). His reflection needs to be set against a preceding paragraph on the “minimal religion” of the “post-athe-
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ist,” whose spirituality is extramural to ecclesial channeling. In one sense, the attribution of the postsecular to this work could be misleading. Taylor treats secularity in terms of narratives or “subtraction stories,” thus marking the disappearance of religion rather than its return as signified by the notion of the postsecular. But in another sense, his concerns with the fate of belief and its replacement by unbelief point in the direction of matters of choice that characterize the postsecular. To that degree, his final two chapters—on the “unquiet frontiers of modernity” and on conversions—point in the direction of the postsecular, involving as they do a possible response to the return of religion. One item bedevilling postsecularism is the question of which religion should return. In the case of Europe, it might be asserted that the “wrong” religion, Islam, has returned.

But there is another vexatious issue floating around Taylor’s work. This relates to its Catholicism and the degree to which one of its central concerns—what he terms “the immanent frame”—can be applied to other religions, such as Islam. This issue generates a welter of complications, some of which emerge in the edited work by Zemmin, Jager, and Vanheeswijk. The driving force of the collection is Zemmin and his specific concerns address the issue of how to insert Islam into Taylor’s work, a task complicated by a possible “Christian bias” he perceives in the term “immanent frame” amongst other concepts (Zemmin, Jager, and Vanheeswijk 2016: vi; 309). Such ambitions carry a price of a massive filtering out of the Catholicism of Taylor’s work to make space for Islamic stories (Part IV). As a consequence, those who know the Taylor study might find that the properties that gave it an allure have vanished.

What is also lost in this collection seeking to work with Taylor is the sense of Englishness, where secularization is given a specific genesis in the Reformation whose iconoclasm still haunts English identity. To that degree, Taylor’s study, echoing with sociological resonances, is a philosophical companion to Duffy’s equally famous work, The Stripping of the Altars (2005). It is this property of loss and ruination that accounts for the elegiac tenor of the work (Flanagan 2010). Elusive, deeply imaginative, and connecting to an array of disciplines, Taylor’s treatment of secularity has attracted enormous critical attention.

It is against such background issues that these two works—Bengston (2016) and Zemmin, Jager and Vanheeswijk (2016)—are to be appraised. Both works are innovative, scholarly, rich in bibliography, and impeccably produced. Given that, apart from Jager, who is American, Zemmin is Swiss, Vanheeswijk is Belgian, and Bengtson is Danish, the quality of the English and the copy-editing are impeccable. A further point of interest is that all are young scholars and their interest in these topics is encouraging.
Bengtson has produced a concise work, covering much ground with a remarkable clarity. Bengtson considers postsecularism and metaphysics in chapters 2 and 6, and in between focuses on the works of Charles Taylor, John Milbank, and William Connolly. Correctly, he places Taylor in the context of other innovative Catholic thinkers such as Anscombe and MacIntyre (Bengtson 2016: 29). What emerges is a partial reading of Taylor. The effort in chapter 4 to translate Milbank into a postsecular thinker is unpersuasive. While his coverage of the scale and breadth of the writings of William Connolly is industrious, the outcomes are thin, where it emerges that the chaos of postsecularity provides an opportunity to escape dogma and to exercise a maximum of inclusivity. It cannot be said that the effort to draw the thoughts of these three thinkers into some coherence in chapter 6 (entitled “Post-Secular Visions”) succeeds. Far too much is compressed into a chapter of forty-seven pages with 276 footnotes.

Still, with an excellent bibliography, some fine critical exegesis, and a real attempt to wrestle with a notoriously nebulous term (*postsecular*), the breadth and depth of reading in this scholarly study has much to commend. It does break new ground, and however inchoate the outcome, it is wrestling on a frontier, which is more than can be said for many other studies also dealing with the postsecular. If Bengtson could break free from the textual exegesis of others, he should produce some really interesting material. He does have a capacity for critical independent thought, which, with growing self-confidence, could be given freer rein. Certainly, he brings out well the growing academic realization of the incompleteness of secularity as contextualized, so that attendance is required on that which is beyond. This supplies the warrant for his thesis that postsecularity marks an incompleteness, one which rehabilitates reference to metaphysics.

Bengtson’s interest in the postsecular might be singular; nevertheless it also could be part of an unexpected return of religion, most notably Catholicism, in Scandinavian countries. In these more than elsewhere, the need to find some corrective to the maturation of secularity has emerged of late, where living without a God seems to have generated amongst some a need to find One. The revival of Catholicism is small, and numbers might be inflated by immigration. Nevertheless, vocations to the priesthood and the religious life have risen significantly. A further indication of this Catholic turn to postsecularity is to be found in publishing. As might be expected, a number of books to be found in a well-stocked Catholic bookshop in Stockholm are translations, but others are written within Sweden itself. The sense of being on a frontier of disquiet with the promises of secularization is well-illustrated by the public interest and debate surrounding Ugglå’s recent work, *The Cathedral’s Secret* (2015; to be translated from...
the Swedish). Many will associate Danish society with the exploration of the noir, as in the television series *The Killing*, which attracted remarkable interest. It might be that its concern with the darker side of life has generated a sensitivity to irruptions of light that countries at other stages of secularity have yet to experience.

The Zemmin, Jager and Vanheeswijck collection has two drawbacks. Although well sectioned, chapters are not numbered, thus occasioning difficulties in referencing in a review or elsewhere. More frustrating is the lack of a list of contributors, which is very unfortunate, as many of the contributors come from Germany, Holland, and Switzerland, countries whose studies of religion and culture are not exactly well known in Anglo-American circles. Even though Taylor is criticized for a Catholic bias, the lack of information on the contributors manages to hide that the specialization of many is Islam. Nor is it persuasive to parade Islamic studies “as a confessionally neutral discipline” (p. 15), when many of the contributors are concerned with redress of Taylor’s neglect of non-Western religions, specifically Islam.

Again, as with Bengtson’s work, there is much to recommend. What is here is scholarly, well written, and wide-ranging. All articles have extensive bibliographies. As a contribution to the growing literature on *A Secular Age*, this is an indispensable work, which more than validates the vast impact of the study across many disciplines and topics. The contributions are well sectioned and there is plenty of evidence of good editorial control.

As of mid-November 2016, a search of Google Scholar revealed that *A Secular Age* had 4336 citations. The scale of critical responses the work has generated is further illustrated by the research of one of the editors, Zemmin, who has compiled an annotated bibliography of responses in English to *A Secular Age* (pp. 385–419). He also draws attention to an array of blogs, non-English contributions, and mass media responses. The range of disciplines drawn into critical appraisal is highly unusual. In their introduction, the editors note that the sixteen contributors in their collection are drawn from nine distinct disciplines. A notable feature of the collection is the generous afterword by Charles Taylor (pp. 369–84).

The collection focuses on Taylor’s notion of a story: Part I in relation to various disciplines; Part II, the story’s normative implications; Part III, the story’s subtler languages; and Part IV, Islamic stories. In the light of the Catholic ethos that so shapes *A Secular Age*, an essay from that perspective (not bias) would have been interesting, if for no other reason than to offset the rather jaundiced contribution by Günter Thomas, “The Temptation of Religious Nostalgia: Protestant Readings of *A Secular Age*” (pp. 49–70).
A particular difficulty arises over Part IV. The response of other religions besides Islam, such as Judaism, Buddhism, or and Hinduism, would have been interesting. Some obvious points are made, such as reminding us that there are other civilizations besides those of the West. Zemmin’s own contribution on modern Islamic self-understandings represents an occasion to supply an intricate exegesis which centers on textual understandings of the term mujtama, or society. Taylor’s notion of social imaginaries is the vehicle for this relentless exploration. In section 3 of his essay, Zemmin reflects on the absence of Islam in A Secular Age, leading him to want to rectify this omission by seeking to find a commonality between Taylor and Islam in the notion of society. Further efforts to link to Taylor appear in the essay by Stephan on the dichotomy between immanence and transcendence as applied to Islam. Likewise, Quadri’s essay, also dealing with immanence and transcendence in Islam, seems to deploy some facets of Taylor to think in directions which move far beyond the intrinsic Catholic ethos of A Secular Age. It is notable that in his afterword, Taylor completely ignores these detours in Part IV. Interestingly, in his response to Thomas’s paper in Part I—which, clearly, he disliked—Taylor feels he is treated “as a Catholic apologist, sighing in nostalgia for the good old days.” “Sometimes,” he muses, these seem “to be the European Middle Ages (surely that’s what all good Catholic apologists want to return to)” (pp. 381–82).

Part III, on subtler stories, contains some very useful essays, especially by Jager and Reitsma. Jager’s exemplary contribution sets out to provide a political rendering of Taylor’s project. By exploiting his expertise in Romanticism he draws out well the quest for enchantment as set against matters of reflexivity and melancholy. His reference to the Gothic novel is highly useful and subtle. Like others, he seeks—almost in a perfunctory way—to charge A Secular Age with being “too caught up within the normative dimensions of Christianity” (p. 224). This emerges as the lazy bias of the collection. Reitsma, a young Dutch Protestant minister, also supplies an imaginative contribution indicating well how to work with Taylor. The title of his essay, “Musical Works as ‘Higher Times’: Concert Culture in a Secular Age,” captures well his concerns. It is a nice piece dealing well with time and social space. Part III also has contributions on Heidegger and St. Augustine (Carlson); Nietzsche and Theology in A Secular Age (Shearn); and a diffuse but useful essay on Taylor and modern spirituality from an American perspective (Bender).

Apart from the Thomas essay mentioned above, Part I contains two essays: by Koenig on the paradigm of secularization; and by Lanman on cognitive science of religion, whose relevance to the collection is not clear.
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Koenig’s essay, operating from the ethos of German sociology, provides a distinctive and stimulating overview of Taylor’s approach to secularisation. The essay has an impressive bibliography and a sweep in its dealings with social imaginaries that is interesting. Section 3.2 on “social imaginaries and modern forms of religion” is exemplary (pp. 34–36). In some ways, charging Taylor with a failure to deal with instances of conflict, interest, and power constellations, is a hackneyed sociological attribution, one undermined by the failure of Koenig to amplify what he means by “culturalist,” an unfortunate term that seeps through his essay. The conclusion, in regard to alternatives to secularization that Taylor explores, is decidedly inconclusive.

Part II, on the normative implications of a Secular Age, contains a mixed bag of essays. Arbitrary attributions of what the study was never deployed to handle are to be found in Dalsheim’s essay on “Other Sovereignties in Israel/Palestine.” Bardon’s essay on “Liberal Pluralism in a Secular Age” is useful, suggesting as it does that deployment of “the immanent frame” cannot be neutral, though her conclusion—“if we want to take liberal pluralism seriously, then our official position has to be no position at all” (p. 135)—hardly inspires confidence in working ahead with Taylor. Her exploration of the link between pluralism and skepticism is of critical weight.

The essays by Vanheeswijck, Burchardt, and Schulze in Part II are of special interest. In these three essays, the issue of the neutrality of secularization but also the matter of choice between belief and unbelief comes to the fore. In a fine and wide-ranging essay (with an exceptionally large bibliography of nearly six pages), Schulze treats Taylor’s master narrative as about a resurgence of “a theology of society” (p. 176). He captures well the way narratives of Taylor and MacIntyre have a coherence (perhaps derived from their Catholicism) that can be posited against postmodernity’s tendency to expand tales exponentially. Again, the Christian basis of secularization comes to the fore, as criticized from an Islamic angle, but presented in a persuasive way.

Equally stimulating is Burchardt’s contribution. He draws attention to the issues surrounding secularization and what he terms public religion as fought out in Quebec between 2006 and 2014. Although English, Taylor lives in Montreal and served on a government commission that explored the irreconcilable differences between the implementation of a policy of laïcité and the rights of religions to display their symbols in the public square. Underpinning the conflicts were strenuous efforts to secularize all forms of public identities so as to affirm emancipation from what was regarded as the hegemony of the Catholic Church. Burchardt is especially
good on exploring the tension between accommodating religious diversity and at the same time restricting such expressions in civic fields supposedly emancipated from such colonial embraces. He draws out well the dilemmas that faced Taylor as he completed his masterpiece just before his engagement on this state commission. In a sense this might account for the property of nostalgia that percolates through *A Secular Age*.

Finally, Vanheeswijck’s essay, though rather general in tenor, has a very useful section on the postsecular in relation to Taylor (pp. 98–102). His essay can be related to the concerns of Bengtson with postsecular metaphysics. Vanheeswijck links well the concerns of Habermas with those of Taylor in an innovative comparison of the two. In a pithy comment he suggests that “achieving mutual respect and tolerance . . . is less amenable to the neutrality of procedural rationality than to the imaginative force of subtle words” (p. 97)—a point well worth dwelling on, given Taylor’s concerns with a master narrative as explored further in Schulze’s contribution in the same volume.

These two works reviewed, both of distinctly European genesis, display recent concerns with the postsecular which do not find equivalence in Anglo-American societies. As with the postsecular, Taylor’s *A Secular Age* is itself an irruption, for few would have envisaged the scale of critical response the work has generated. Neither works pay explicit attention to Radical Islam and the fear it has generated, felt doubtlessly in Germany, Denmark, and France, which has stimulated much hostility towards Islam in general and, in particular, toward the many refugees fleeing to their borders. The wish that secularization has expressed, of defenestrating religion from the public square, has been thwarted. But the matter of the postsecular, whether as mirage or reality, has generated some uncomfortable questions.

The term postsecular is one of necessity, of dealing with the irruption of the unexpectedness of the “wrong” religion, Islam, sabotaging secular arrangements constituted to deal with a familiar enemy: Catholicism. Choices have to be made between two incompatible forms of revelation. If Islam is chosen in Europe, then is it to be said that Houellebecq’s subversive novel *Submission* (2015) was not so much a satire as a prognosis of what is to come? Likewise, Catholicism has its own grounds for being affronted by the notion of the postsecular in Europe. If the term is about the return of religion, Catholicism would have to confront its diminishment within identity and culture and the realization that secularization had “won.” It would also have to face up to the realization that it—unlike Islam—has not reproduced in a hostile culture; not necessarily for reasons...
of faith and doctrine, but for an endemic misreading of the ethos of modernity it seeks to operate within.

Even more unthinkably, it might be that an uncritical opening to modernization and to the world, a strategy of *aggiornamento*, as inaugurated by Vatican II and implemented without sociological spectacles, has plunged the Church into a unique, self-generated decline. The figures of contraction within Western Europe all too well illustrate this point. Lest it be thought such conclusions are the myopic musings of traditionalists alienated from the modernizing ethos of Vatican II and after, attention might focus on the comments of Ratzinger in 1985 when he noted that “Christians are once again a minority, more than they have ever been since the end of antiquity.” He went on to add, “What the Popes and the Council Fathers were expecting was a new Catholic unity, and instead one has encountered a dissension which—to use the words of Paul VI—seems to have passed over from self-criticism to self-destruction” (Ratzinger and Messori 1985: 29).

This candid reflection affirms that as far back as the mid-1980s a realization had dawned that something had gone wrong with the strategy of Vatican II. The ambition to open out ecclesial culture to the world generated an unprecedented jumble sale of spiritual capital, a rupture of the continuities of religious practice and the conferral of a state of anomie on the Church. Somehow, it was assumed that the avenues of modernization were devoid of pitfalls. Sociology, living amongst the rocks, felt matters differently. In no sense is it to be argued that sociology had developed critical understanding of culture and modernity that could have been invoked in the 1960s. It is only about three decades after the Council that sociology formulated its understandings of culture in ways that had theological resonances. In retrospect, it seems bizarre that the Council affirmed belief in modernity when three decades later disbelief was the disorder of the day, as it fell into fragments, a state denoted as postmodernity. The realization of the need for second thoughts only emerged in the later parts of the reign of Benedict XVI.

Certainly, Benedict XVI was not a sort of closet sociologist, yet, uniquely, he came to grasp what the insights of the discipline might deliver to theology. In his interview with Messori, there is an interesting section on “Exegetes or sociologists?” (Ratzinger and Messori 1985: 143–44). Strangely, his comments referred to the demonic, part of the concerns of *Sociological Noir* (Flanagan 2017). It is curious that in that study, theologians were charged with neglecting the Satanic, whereas in this interview with Messori, it is sociologists who are accused of eradicating the demonic. Ratzinger claimed that ill-judged reliance on sociologists led to this
dismissal of the Satanic. He claimed that theologians were capitulating to the times and to the world as now. But this criticism might simply suggest that theologians were reading the “wrong” sociology and attributing to it views it does not, and perhaps never did, entertain.

It is true that in the few asides Ratzinger makes to sociology, its concerns with the literal are treated with disdain, as if it had nothing to offer to theology that was worthy of reflection. Yet, a conundrum persists, one that haunted *Sociological Noir* (2017) and one that darkens the issues generated by the postsecular. Latent in the application of postsecularism to Catholicism is the issue of its return, the implication being that it had somehow disappeared in Western Europe, a victim of the tides of secularity in modernity. Few better examples could be found of ebb and flow that would illustrate the issue of reading the signs of the times, a term of critical concern in the Vatican documents and one of considerable interest for Benedict XVI (2010a: Part I.). Leaving aside statistics on the decline in church attendance and use of sacraments, which make a self-evident case for the ebb of practice, a much deeper question arises as to what in contemporary culture impairs the reproduction of religious belief. But to ask that question involves deployment of sociological spectacles to read the signs of times to discern what enables and disables religiosity and commitment. Seeking to characterize these in terms of some petitionary rhetoric hardly suffices as a replacement for some hard-headed sociological analysis of what is happening on the ground of practice where assumptions and reception bear detailed scrutiny. Admittedly, the issue is laden with difficulties. Are sociologists the true prophets equipped to read the signs of the times and if so with what authority? Or are their prophetic insights to be discounted by theologians who resolve such issues by prayer and reflection, for what after all are the issuances of Divine ordinance?

Quite clearly, sociology has no specific qualifications to read expressions of Divine will and purpose, but what of irruptions that invade culture, such as the invention of the Internet, or the arrival of unexpected personages such as Trump to the White House? Each signifies mysterious arrivals which destabilize cultural configurations that sociology is uniquely gifted to decipher. Sometimes what emerges can be nefarious, but at other times what comes can be deemed providential, notably when new needs are to be realized. The reproduction of faith rests increasingly on its context of enactment and this can switch in ways that sociologists can sometimes better discern than their rivals, supposedly myopic theologians.

Only too briefly, Benedict XVI seems to have grasped the unexpectedness of sociological insights into the signs of the times that bear on matters of secularity and postsecularity. An example of this point is to be found in an
earlier part of Ratzinger’s interview with Messori, which relates to a socio-
logical enquiry into the state of female religious orders in Quebec. In the two
decades after the Council, their numbers collapsed. Something happened to
account for the decline that could not just be attributed to Divine Providence.
This collapse, as realized in the mid-1980s, needs to be related to the aggres-
sive secularization which, over two decades later, led to the commission of
inquiry by the Quebec government in which Taylor was involved and which
Burchardt has explored. Ratzinger turns to this sociological report to find a
diagnosis of what happened when it was realized that women’s religious life
might just be a memory in Canada. For the sociologists, the reasons for the
decline were almost self-evident. Through modernizing, abandoning their
religious habits and their structure of life and identity, a self-inflicted crisis
of identity arose. This was the result of a naïve imperative to modernize at
all costs, one given a theological imperative and urgency in the late 1960s.
Yet, in regard to contemplative orders, Ratzinger noticed something else:

The Quebec example confirms that the orders apparently most opposed
to the modern mentality and least receptive to change, the cloistered
contemplative ones, ‘have at most registered some problems but have
not experienced a real crisis,’ if we go along with the words of the
sociologists themselves. (Ratzinger and Messori 1985: 102)

In the light of his vast range of writings, this remark of Benedict XVI might
seem of slight significance were it not for two substantial points it generates.

First there is a perplexing question that goes deeper than the mere
reference to secularity. In a minor way, this sociological insight, drawn
three decades ago in relation to Quebec, points to a parallel with Islam and
the issue of why it is the religion of return in Western Europe. Everything
about that return denotes that which liberals and progressives sought to
jettison after Vatican II. Strict interpretations are made in regard to salva-
tion, sexual morality is strictly enforced, clothing of women is related to
the policing of symbolic boundaries and is zealously upheld, and rituals
are invariable in enactment, thus producing an ethos of identity and affili-
ation based on resistance to modernity. What Islam “discovered,” or rather
maintained, which Catholicism has consigned to history as unsustainable,
is a minimization of anomie (uncertainty over rules) and definite structures
where affiliations of “good” practice are very precisely stated. All affiliate
with a certainty of affiliation.

What the sociologists in Quebec found is a pattern of vocations oper-
ating against the odds, suggesting that resistance to modernity rather than
affirmation might be a key to the successful reproduction of belief. In a
sense, that Quebec report in the mid-1980s captures a point when new tra-
ditional orders were being re-invented. Those founded for nuns, especially
in the U.S. and France, have emerged as flourishing, though admittedly on a small scale. That capacity can be attributed to their skilled deployment of websites, where image and identity can provide windows of opportunities to view for those considering their vocation. They signify a capacity for a return of a lost way of life in ways that resist the powers of secularity and which now come to denote the properties of postsecularity.

Secondly, the dialogue, or rather two essays side by side, between Benedict XVI and Jürgen Habermas, the German philosopher who did so much to sanction the significance of the term postsecular, was of considerable importance, for it indicated a mutual recognition of each other. Even though religion was still captive to reason as a basis for communication, Habermas was slowly moving towards some sort of accommodation that pointed toward properties that the secular university was so keen to deny. In a sense, circumstances had forced this need for recognition on the academy. Its right to live in disembodiment from shifts in culture that entailed religious considerations was becoming precarious, not least because, as its intellectual patrimony was explored to secure its foundations, realizations dawned that thinkers such as Weber and Benjamin and Adorno were not just dealing in religion; their anxieties were theological in orientation to a surprising degree.

On the other side of the dialogue was recognition of the exhaustion of secularity and openings to the postsecular. The tide was moving in the direction of Catholicism, but few seemed to grasp its implications—save Benedict XVI. With his concerns with aggressive secularization, the dictatorship of relativism, and postmodernity (which he deeply disliked for its nihilism), coming from a different theological and philosophical direction, he was moving towards the diagnoses which justified reference to the postsecular. The term bore on the needs of a younger generation, some of whom seek the rehabilitation of traditions, a quest which baffles the liberated of older generations. It is folly to dismiss this searching of a new generation as expressing “insecurity.” It feels the pulse of culture, its needs and wants, so that what was progressive in the late 1960s now emerges as antique, if not naïve to a generation for whom traditionalism is their patrimony, their radical resource for finding something new in the old.

Somehow, the irruptions postsecularity signifies generate shades of foreboding, notably a realization of what secularity cannot supply; hence the need for re-adjustments of its claims to configure modernity. Habermas seemed to realize this point well when he wondered “whether a society with a plurality of world views can achieve a normative stabilization—that is, something that goes beyond a mere *modus vivendi*.” More crucially, he added, “it still remains the case that liberal societal structures are dependent on the solidarity of their citizens. And if the secularization of society...
goes ‘off the rails,’ the sources of this solidarity may dry up altogether” (Ratzinger and Habermas 2006: 22).

By positing this dubious outcome, Habermas risks assigning religion, treated as a means of securing solidarity, back to the realms of Durkheim. It is true that currently religion is treated as divisive and dangerous for, by implication, it bears something irruptive, portents of more than its domestication within sociology might signify. The necessity of religion, as oiling the fabric of civil society, has been well examined by Putnam and Campbell (2010). But that American-based account is pallid by comparison with the fears springing up in Europe, most notably about the non-negotiable irruption of Islam in its midst, an arrival that draws out inconveniently the collapse of Christianity. Increasingly, in some highly secularized European countries, it might seem that mosque attendance on Fridays exceeds that for churches on Sundays. But what has all this to do with the mirages of postsecularity that hover around the two studies under review?

The return postsecularity signifies is revolutionary in re-attaching and fusing theology to religion. Without that attachment neither Islam nor Christianity makes much sense, for their ultimate points of reference denote incompatible beliefs in revelation, each being singular to the other. Imposition of that demand to meld religion and theology makes radical demands on sociology to deal with issues that are remarkably under-theorized. Few sociologists work in this area. A notable exception is David Martin, who has reflected long on the link between sociology and theology (1996) in ways which deserve further elaboration, such as provided by the Polish sociologist Michał Łuczewski (2016). Other examples are to be found in the writings of the Scottish sociologist, James Sweeney who, in well-cast formulations, traces the linkages between the two disciplines (2012).

None of the above authors, editors, and contributors whose two works form the basis of this essay would suggest that their products represent the last word on these unfolding debates. Bengtson’s work well illustrates and documents the need to think anew about seemingly dead issues whose re-calibration is very much the meat of scholarly endeavor. Likewise, Zemmin, Jager, and Vanheeswijk have gathered their contributors around Taylor’s paradigm-shifting work. Even though the Islamic ambitions remain unfulfilled in the collection, an odd question emerges at the end, one difficult to answer. However much it might be disputed, the roots of *A Secular Age* are peculiarly situated on English soil; somehow they do not transpose to foreign fields. But if such is the case, why is there no German or French equivalent to *A Secular Age*? Equally perplexing and equally difficult to answer is why the Catholic response to this work of Taylor, with some exceptions, has been so muted.
References


