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Faith Formation in a Secular Age

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In the fragmenting and shifting landscape of North American ministry, there has been one conversation that has seemed to garner the most attention. This conversation is most often framed within the sociological descriptors of the evolving and changing religion environment in America: Moral Therapeutic Deism (a concept constructed by Christian Smith to describe the operative religious commitments of young people) and "Nones on the rise" (which refers to the Pew Research Fund's findings that young adults are disaffiliating from religious communities at a rapid pace).

Within ministry many have sought to respond to these challenges, asserting that we are in need of new ways, models, practices, and overall conceptions of faith formation. The most impactful have been popular programs like Fuller Seminary's "Sticky Faith," the Barna Group's "You Lost Me," and Reggie Joiner's "Think Orange," but many more within particular denominations could be named. All these initiatives seem to state their goals by adding adjectives in front of faith, intending to create "sticky," "robust," "consequential," or "vital" faith.

This adjective-adding move raises theological questions about what faith actually is and how it is formed. But more importantly for this article, it reveals a deep philosophical misunderstanding of our secular age. Programs like Sticky Faith and Think Orange have constructed initiatives that have misdiagnosed the

Many theologians have focused on faith formation as a means of countering the trend toward disengagement from Christian belief among people today, especially among young adults. Using the insights of Charles Taylor, Andrew Root argues that many such programs are inadequate to the task, because they do not go to the heart of the matter.

very issues that impact faith formation. In their perspectives, the objective seems to be *keeping* young people in religious institutions. But, while this may be of importance, this article contends, following Charles Taylor, that we face a secular age where the plausibility of belief itself has been undercut. Therefore, this article will explicate Taylor's perspective next to these popular faith-formation programs, showing where they are left wanting, and opening up new space for the reader to consider what faith formation might be in a secular age.

SUBTRACTION

Most often the social imaginary of Western, particularly North American Christian, people is one of subtraction. We tend to assume that we've gotten to where we are because things have been subtracted from our cultural lives. We see our history as a subtraction wizard. We believe that we are dealing with an epidemic of faith formation because we've *lost* moral commitment, *dropped* prayer in school, *declined* in church attendance. Or maybe if that isn't the list, there are other losses that have led us to this predicament. Conservatives are particularly good at heralding narratives of subtraction, but mainline liberals too are not adverse to the interpretation, tending to concede the erroneous exclusive humanist claim that once we subtract religion from our civilization we'll become a much more logical and peaceful people.[1]

We imagine that in the void left by these subtractions, all kinds of spiritual ailments grow. We suppose, in one way or another, that we are where we are *because faith has been subtracted from our cultural and societal lives.* The disposition of our faith-formation programs is usually meant to counteract the subtraction while, inevitably, accepting this interpretation of subtraction. We seek strategies and best practices that plug the drain in the sink, hoping there are pragmatic actions (like youth group activities, mission trips, book studies) we can use to keep young people from subtracting church participation from their lives. Or we interpret that it is the subtraction of parental involvement in sharing the faith story with their own children, so we seek models or workbooks or workshops that might block deduction and keep faith from disappearing down the drain.

These approaches seem appealing because they promise action in the anxiety of loss. When valuable things are racing toward the drain, quick action is preferred. Yet, these faith-saving or faith-fortifying actions and programs don't provide anything like the foolproof results we are looking for, because our issue is not subtraction at all. Of course, at one level young people are subtracting religious participation from their activities, and many parents do feel disempowered to share the faith with their children, but this is not because the drain needs to be

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[1]"Taylor's relentless criticism of subtraction stories is thus part of his attempt to show how secular modernity is both more sedimented and more creative than it takes itself to be. Secular societies are not just mankind minus the religion. They are very specific kinds of societies, imaginable only as the outcomes of long histories." Michael Warner, Jonathan VanAntwerpen, and Craig Calhoun, "Introduction," in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013) 24–25.

plugged. Rather, these programs, mentioned in the introduction, are successful in plugging drains, but fail to realize that the sink itself is at the bottom of the ocean. The problem with our faith-formation programs is that we too simply contend that if we could just plug the drain, then faith would be retained. Yet, our issue is much deeper.

We are in new waters. Religious commitment, or even God, hasn't simply been subtracted from our culture, like taking one picket out of the backyard fence. With a little action and persistence, the picket can be replaced in the whole. Rather, the whole of our social imaginary has shifted. Charles Taylor says it this way, "Modernity is defined not just by our 'losing' an earlier world, but by the kind of human culture that we have constructed."[2]

Rather than subtraction, we've created forms of cultural and social life where "the God gap," for many young people, simply isn't there. Many young people have constructed their lives in such a way that they feel no need for God. They have no sense of a gaping loss or sense of subtraction in their lives. Instead, they have added new narratives, moral codes, and identities beyond God to direct their lives.[3]

Once we had a system that presumed the reality of a personal God. But now other, different layers have been added to people's lives that have reworked the system into one where such belief is contested at every corner. Taylor says it this way: "We cannot help looking over our shoulder from time to time, looking sideways, living our faith…in a condition of doubt and uncertainty."[4] The challenges we face in faith formation did not necessarily come because of what we lost, but what we added.

In nearly all faith-formation models and programs, *it is assumed that we know what faith is*. We presume without much reflection that faith need not be defined or examined too closely. But this is the illusion of subtraction, imagining that our conception of faith is continuous and unbroken from the time of, say, the Reformation, or church fathers, or maybe even Paul. Because of the false idea of subtraction, often these programs don't recognize that the conception of faith they work from matches more the social imaginary of our secular age, rather than biblical faith.

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[2]Charles Taylor, "Afterword: Apologia pro Libro suo," in *Varieties of Secularism*, 302.

[3]Paul Janz reminds us that not only is Taylor opposed to seeing modernity as a subtraction story, but also as a coming of age story. Modernity is a production, but not one that subtracts by outgrowing either. He explains, "The story of the emergence of modernity, and with it secularity, has for Taylor usually been told in one of two basic ways. It is either told as a 'subtraction' story—that is, the story of a loss, or of something left behind in the abandonment of the premodern view—or it is told conversely as a 'coming of age' story—that is, the story of a kind of gain in coming to a new intellectual maturity. More fully, subtraction stories, as stories of a loss, are 'stories of modernity in general and secularity in particular, which explain them by human beings having lost or sloughed off, or liberated themselves from certain earlier, confining horizons, or illusions, or limitations of knowledge.' 'Coming of age' narratives tell their stories in the other direction, as stories of a natural growth toward the 'adulthood' of the intellect, especially as an effect of scientific discoveries and the resulting changes in philosophy, through which humans' understanding of themselves and the world has attained to greater levels of clarity and critical accuracy." Paul D. Janz, "Transcendence, 'Spin,' and the Jamesian Open Space," in *Aspiring to Fullness in a Secular Age: Essays on Religion and Theology in the Work of Charles Taylor*, ed. Carlos D. Colorado and Justin D. Klassen (Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 2014) 50.

[4]Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007) 11.

In these programs, faith is presumed to surround religious participation and particular beliefs. They ultimately seek to move young people to consent (to stick) to certain beliefs and institutional participation. What they miss is that *what ultimately upends faith is the loss of the plausibility of transcendence, and the presumption that our world is only a natural and material place.* In a secular age where the self is buffered and the world is disenchanted, God is always on the verge of being reduced to a psychologically created imaginary friend.

PICKETED FAITH

To say that the "God" picket has been removed and has not been missed from our cultural environment is not quite right. Especially in North America we seem to use God language often, and most people say they believe in God. When God is made into a concept, the fence analogy still sticks. Some people have indeed subtracted the concept of God from their lives. But others have held to this concept. Most who continue with a conception of God explain that they *have individually chosen* to keep that picket in their lives for their own individual reasons. It is authenticity that pushes and justifies them in keeping the picket nailed to the fence of their individual lives. They say things like, "For me, I believe in God," or "For me, church is important because I need a higher power in my life."

> *The real problem with subtraction stories is that they turn everything, including God, into a concept. Concepts do not, necessarily, put a demand on me. So if the concept of God helps you be authentically you, then it is worth keeping.*

Others, living literally next door, see no need for the concept, and therefore kick the conceptual picket labeled "God" out of their fence. Some feel a rush of excitement, and even hubris, as they announce their bravery to live beyond the concept. Others feel a little sad or even nostalgic, wishing that they could continue living with this concept of a God in their fence, but admit that they have individually outgrown the concept's value, and therefore to hold to it would be inauthentic. Both those that arrogantly or sadly kick out the concept of God feel oddly mature, courageous, and sophisticated[5] as they individually live without the need for God.[6]

The real problem with subtraction stories is that they turn everything, includ-

[5]"A religious outlook may easily be painted as one which offers greater comfort, which shields us from the truth of an indifferent universe, which is now felt as a strong possibility within the modern cosmic imaginary. Religion is afraid to face the fact that we are alone in the universe, and without cosmic support. As children, we do indeed, find this hard to face, but growing up is becoming ready to look reality in the face." Ibid., 364.

[6]"Baseline moral commitments stand behind CWSs, specifically the coming-of-age metaphor of adulthood, having the courage to resist the comforting enchantments of childhood. In short, to just 'see' the closedness of the immanent frame is to be a grown-up. Secular spin, in this way, is associated with maturity: 'modernity as adulthood' (p. 588). But that is a story, not neutral data, and Taylor has been contesting such self-congratulatory stories all along." James K. A. Smith *How (Not) To Be Secular* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014) 99.

ing God, into a concept. Concepts do not, necessarily, put a demand on me. So if the concept of God helps you be authentically you, then it is worth keeping. But if the concept makes you feel unhappy, or guilty—or worse, restricted—you then abandon the concept for the sake of your own authentic journey. Subtraction and authenticity go together. The job of the truly authentic person is to subtract all concepts that are blocking the path to authenticity. Marriage, God, and morality are just concepts, just ideas that must serve authenticity. If they feel restricting, then you must eliminate those picketed concepts from the fence of your life.[7] The young and youthful are often idealized for removing complexity and conceiving of life as a random bundle of concepts that can be kept or disregarded as one individually chooses.

When faith formation is mobilized as a way to keep young people from sliding, drifting, or slipping away from faith, we've failed to notice that we ourselves have given in to the logic of subtraction. We've allowed reality to be conceived as a bag of concepts, and we have given over faith formation to this logic. Faith becomes an idea, and our job is to fortify the concept enough that it is chosen as valuable. Faith formation becomes a battle to win a place for the concept of God and the idea of church participation in the lives of the young, so they'll keep the pickets of faith in their fence. Faith formation is about adding screws and nails to the picket of God and church, so people might remain loyal to the idea, concretely represented in their institutional participation. We need to do this particularly for the young, because it is most often the youthful who kick out concepts, discarding them as they seek their individual path to authenticity.

In the end, faith, then, is not really *something*, but rather is *the absence of subtraction*. Faith is not constructive, but is rather the (chosen) unwillingness to subtract a concept from your individually constituted fence (most often given to you by your parents). Faith is not so much a movement into a new reality, or a sense of entering into the Spirit, or relating to God and others in some different way. Rather, we operate as though faith is simply the willingness to resist subtraction.

THREE KINDS OF "SECULAR"

Our issue is not *really* the loss of the *conceptual* value of God and church. Rather, there is a larger issue we face in faith formation that has often been obscured in our inability to recognize the scrim of subtraction. While no doubt this loss is a kick to the stomach, subtracting (and relativizing) the concept of God is not really our issue. Rather, our issue is the possibility that God is something more

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[7]Smith adds a layer of Taylor's argument that I cannot go into here. Smith says, "This is an important point, and we won't understand Taylor's critique of subtraction stories without appreciating it: on the subtraction-story account, modern exclusive humanism is just the natural telos of human life. We are released to be the exclusive humanists we were meant to be when we escape the traps of superstition and the yoke of transcendence. On such tellings of the story, exclusive humanism is 'natural.' But Taylor's point in part 2 of *A Secular Age* is to show that we had to learn how to be exclusively humanist; it is a second nature, not a first." Ibid., 48.

than an individually constituted concept, more than just an idea to give or take—this is the core concern.

Because it has become much harder for people to believe in transcendence, the thought that God may actually be an acting force in the world, has become unbelievable.[8] That God could be something more than just a concept or idea, but a personal force that exists apart from our natural and material world, outside individual paths of authenticity, placing, as living beings do, demands on our lives, seems dubious at best. Most faith-formation programs buy the narrative of subtraction, seeking in the swirl of subtraction to protect faith/church/religion from being sucked from people's lives. But subtraction is only the tip of the iceberg.

> *today, people may still have experiences of divine action, but practices and locales have been blocked by so many cultural additions that any present-day Luther would be left to doubt his experience, unable, even in many churches, to find the resources to make sense of the encounter*

More pervasive is that our culture has little room for belief in a transcendent/personal God who acts to bring forth an all-new reality, promising transformation. It is not necessarily subtraction that is our problem but the development of a social imaginary that gives little heed to transcendence or divine action. But this should not be interpreted as saying that no one can any longer experience the divine action—many do! Yet, there were once concrete practices and locales where we could expect to encounter divine action, or find the resources to integrate transcendent experience into our life. That transcendence existed was a given, and there were mediums to help explain and mediate it when it did appear.

When Luther was nearly struck by lightning, he gave himself over to a transcendent experience, turning from an earthly vocation to a heavenly one, entering the monastery as a holy locale where such experiences could be continued and interpreted. Today, people may still have experiences of divine action, but practices and locales have been blocked by so many cultural additions that any present-day Luther would be left to doubt his experience, unable, even in many churches, to find the resources to make sense of the encounter. Even if holding to it as true, it would still be hard to find a place where they could process such a thing. This person would wonder if they were crazy, left to hold to the veracity of their experience but being blocked from practices and locales that in the past might have helped others integrate, understand, and discuss such experiences.

Charles Taylor has spilled a great deal of ink making this very point. He has

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8"By the transcendent, Taylor generally means sources of meaning that lie beyond this world—at least as we can grasp it in either anthropocentric humanistic or naturalistic terms. Taylor articulates three dimensions in which we go 'beyond': a good higher than human flourishing (such as love in the sense of agape), a higher power (such as God), and extension of life (or even 'our lives') beyond the 'natural' scope between birth and death (SA, 20)." Michael Warner, Jonathan VanAntwerpen, and Craig Calhoun, "Introduction," in *Varieties of Secularism*, 14.

sketched out a complicated picture of how the Western world has been on a cultural journey of *addition.* All that has been added has, in turn, blocked out the probability of a transcendent God that is anything more than people's individual pet idea or concept. People may seek out and have, in small and large ways, experiences of transcendence. But Taylor's point is that the many additions of the last five hundred years have blocked the doorway that once widely welcomed people into experience of divine action. Some people may still lie on the floor, peering under the door, at times spotting light from the other side. Or they may choose to find other cracks in the cultural wall, seeking transcendence beyond the blocked doorway of the sacraments, confession, fasting, and the preached word that once ushered people into the transcendent. But this door is no longer culturally open, and walking into it is no longer culturally assumed. This door has not been subtracted or removed, but rather has been blocked by a pile of additions (like scientific positivism, materialism, expressive individualism, and more). Taylor's story of addition is much too complicated to rehearse in full here. Yet, what might be helpful is to examine Taylor's three understandings of "secular." This discussion may help us not only see the additions that led to the obstruction of transcendence, but also recognize further how the narrative of subtraction misleads our views of faith and faith formation, pushing them from divine action.

SECULAR1: SACRED VS. SECULAR PLANS

Five hundred years ago, particularly in the centuries and decades before the reforms (i.e., before the many Catholic and then Protestant Reformations) the secular was defined as that which existed on a different temporal plane than the sacred. The being of all people sought the sacred. The point of life was to commune with, even be possessed by, a transcendent force. But not all people could spend their time seeking and entering this transcendent reality. While the being of all people sought the sacred, not all people could *ac*t to take on the practices of constant prayer, fasting, and confession. Cows needed to be milked, children needed to be fed, fields needed to be plowed, and so much more. So it became the job of some to give their action to the eternal, escaping the temporal, to pray and fast on behalf of all those who lived for the sacred but whose action was bound in the secular.

There, then, was a divide between the sacred and secular, but this divide was more in act than being. The farmer's being sought the sacred; he wished in life and death to enter the transcendent plane. But his day-to-day action was ordinary, and therefore secular, because it attended to the earthly plane of domestic life. Transcendence remained an ever-present reality as the farmer lived with an imaginary in which the eternal and temporal planes of existence met, and often interpenetrated each other.[9] For the farmer, even things were divided into transcendent and temporal planes. The essence of some things was ordinary, but the essence of oth-

[9]"It's not that these features guarantee that all medieval inhabitants 'believe in God'; but it does mean that, in a world so constituted, 'atheism comes close to being inconceivable' (p. 26) because one can't help but 'see' (or

ers was holy or demonic. Things themselves could possess transcendent power. The relics at the time of the Reformation were seen as a great danger by the reformers because as medieval people they believed that things in themselves possessed ontological power that bound them in the plane of the transcendent or temporal.[10]

The cathedrals of Europe became a particularly powerful holy thing. These buildings of stone and glass became, literally, a place where the eternal plane broke into the temporal. For the most part, we no longer believe that things in themselves possess the transcendent. Rather, through the addition of natural science and technological advancements (and other philosophical perspectives), we see things as the sum of their parts. A cathedral might still be holy, but not because it possesses this quality as a thing in itself. Cathedrals are just bricks and glass, and glass is just heated sand. A cathedral is just the addition into a new sum of many ordinary things. And if this thing can no longer be paid for, then it can be sold and made into expensive loft apartments or a hip new nightclub. The thing can be sold, exchanged, and repurposed because its power doesn't rest in the thing itself.

> *You may still believe that beautiful building is holy, but probably not in its "thingness." You think it remains a holy place because the will of people have given the ordinary material this value. It is holy not because in itself it is ontologically bound to the eternal, but because human minds have given it meaning, willing to name it sacred.*

Today as you drive east down Interstate 94 in your Toyota hybrid, led by your navigation system into Minneapolis, streaming Spotify on your phone as you go, you'll see on the hill before you, the St. Paul Cathedral. You may still believe that beautiful building is holy, but probably not in its "thingness." You think it remains a holy place because the will of people have given the ordinary material this value. It is holy not because in itself it is ontologically bound to the eternal, but because human minds have given it meaning, willing to name it sacred. Independent from the will of human beings it is only ordinary. Seeing it, you don't say, "Look kids, see that building? That is a place where the eternal plane of existence breaks into our temporal reality! Go in there, and you step out of this world into God's world. Evil can't reach you when you are there, because the very essence of that place is differ-

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'imagine') that world as sort of haunted—suffused with presences that are not 'natural.' To say this was part of the ancient and medieval imaginary is to say that it's what was taken for granted." Smith, *How (Not) To Be Secular*, 27.

[10]James K. A. Smith explains further, "To sense the force of this shift, we need to appreciate how this differs from the 'enchanted' premodern imaginary where all kinds of nonhuman things mean—are loaded and charged with meaning—independent of human perception or attribution. In this premodern, enchanted universe, it was also assumed that power resided in things, which is precisely why things like relics or the Host could be invested with spiritual power. As a result, 'in the enchanted world, the line between personal agency and impersonal force was not at all clearly drawn' (p. 32). There is a kind of blurring of boundaries so that it is not only personal agents that have causal power (p. 35). Things can do stuff." Ibid., 29.

ent than the apartment building below it or here in our car." Rather, you say something like, "Hey kids, look at that beautiful building! That is a special building because it's been there a very long time looking over our city. So many people have gotten married there and had funerals there over time, even famous people!"

In other words, the cathedral is special because human minds find it aesthetically pleasing, and to such an extent that they have done some of their most important meaning-making inside it. It is now blocked from radiating a transcendent holy force that it would have had for the farmer and priest five hundred years ago in Europe.

Taylor explains that in secular1 the transcendent was not bound in people's heads but loose in the world. Some things were secular (like the farmer's pitchfork) and others sacred (like sacraments, chapels, or the bones of a saint). Some things took you into the transcendent and some did not. The zone where people could encounter transcendence was a massively open door that would dwarf you in its enormity (even to the point of fright), because it was imagined that things in the world were enchanted and the self was porous.

SECULAR2: RELIGIOUS VS. ARELIGIOUS SPACES

With the additions that led us into a modern world, the secular versus the sacred was drastically redefined. In secular1 there was a perceived difference between temporal realms; in secular2 this distinct divide disappeared, as the human will became the manifesting power of reality. Defining the sacred as the eternal plane that breaks into the temporal became impossible, because the independent reality of eternity became more and more unbelievable. There were still sacred realities, but they were located almost completely in the institutions made by the minds of human willing. Now, to say "secular" was not to say "that which is bound in the temporal plane in relation or contrast to the eternal (as you would in secular1)." Rather, now in secular2 to say "secular" was to mean "a particular space that was areligious." It was (is) a space where the willing of human minds promises to be absent religion. In turn, the sacred is now a unique space where human willing is allowed to seek the interest of the religious. It is a distinct and special location where religious belief and practice is allowed its freedom.

In secular1, the sacred and secular were planes of reality with porous boundaries and extensive reach. People were always on watch for when and where the sacred might penetrate the secular, and no part of life was protected from the possibility of the sacred upending the secular. Yet, in secular2 the sacred and secular are no longer exponential and fluid, and in many ways they can no longer mix. In a sense, of course they can; the will of individuals living in secular realms of school can do sacred things, like pray at flagpoles (e.g., the very odd American youth ministry practice called *See You at Pole,* in which one day of the first week of school Christian young people pray around their flagpole). But this is not necessarily a move to find the transcendence breaking through the secular realm; rather it is

an act of the human religious will pushing into the boundary of secular space. It is (no pun intended) to plant a flag for the sacred in the secular arena, "bringing God back to school" as the adult leaders will say—which really means to bring the religious to intrude on the space of the secular.

The secular and the sacred, then, are no longer planes where the eternal and temporal collide, but distinct locations *bound within institutions and ideologies*, located almost exclusively in our cultural and social realms. Because both the secular and sacred are bound in these spaces and represent two opposed (or dissimilar) ways of willing, they find themselves in a battle for turf. The struggle is no longer between the planes of eternity and time, but for cultural and societal space. The anxiety that seems to keep church people up at night is not "Will our children ever have experiences of the eternal in time?" but, "Will we lose our children to the secular space, and therefore find our religious institutions losing ground?"[11]

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The reason faith formation is so difficult is because we have failed to see how our imagination is caught in the rut of secular2. In this rut we've erroneously interpreted our issues through secular2, believing that the real issue of faith formation is the loss, or revealed impotence, of the (institutional) church. Caught in secular2, we believe we have to confront MTD (Moral Therapeutic Deism), "nones," and other descriptions of our faith-formation struggles, because if we don't, our children will not have faith, and therefore the secular will grab more space from the church. For instance, "nones" and the loss of emergent adults is such a deep issue to many because we have bought into secular2 as our major (even sole) problematic. To lose eighteen- to thirty-five-year-olds is to lose the youthfulness that authenticates (and bolsters) the space of religion against the secular. In secular2, faith becomes about affiliation (in belief and participation) to the cultural/societal institutions of religion.

Nearly all of the faith-formation programs mentioned in the introduction are driven by the imaginary of secular2 (or to say it more boldly, they're almost all stuck in a secular2 mindset). We add adjectives to "faith" because in the end faith isn't about divine action, but maintaining religious space. We need faith that is robust, vital, and sticky so young people continue to believe, and participate, in such a way that the space of the religious is maintained.

When we are stuck in the rut of secular2, our visionaries are sociologists. The

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[11] This is the anxiety of the secularization theory that Taylor opposes as a description of our context. The secularization theory is bound in the frozen view of secular2. It views our issue as the loss of religion as societies become more and more modern.

sociologist becomes more powerful (and educative) than the theologian, because the sociologist provides the scorecard of institutional space, using her instruments to point to the material, ideological, and cultural shifts in religious market share. Because faith is bound in this spatial conception, there is little need for the theologian, for there is little interest in speaking of distinct ontological realities and radical transformations by a wholly other Spirit.[12]

Faith is hard to define when we are bound in a secular2 imaginary because it seems unnecessary. Because of the overwhelming pull to see everything as immanent—material, ideological, and cultural (even a distinction between the sacred and secular)—faith seems to be an obvious category. Faith through the lens of secular2 is willful affiliation with religious institutions; it is choosing to locate yourself in the cultural space of the institutional religion. Faith is bound, then, in a closed material space, because it is that which is chosen over against the secular, areligious space.

Faith need not be defined any further than this *willingness* to affiliate through participation and claimed belief. Faith isn't defined because it is obvious—in secular2 it can be little more than *the cultural willfulness to affiliate to religious space over the areligious.* There is little else to say in the sense of definition, but there becomes a lot to say in regards to how you pragmatically win such spatial commitment. We want young people to have faith, which means we want them to define themselves inside religious over areligious spaces. To *not* have faith is to *not* go to church/youth group or, at least to *not* directly affiliate with an institutional collective (it is to catch a case of the nones). These people may be spiritual (they have found a way to authentically connect to something meaningful[13]), but they do not have faith, because in secular2, faith is bound in religious institutional affiliation.

Divine action is much harder to encounter in secular2; transcendence must penetrate the buffered force field of the self and change the will of an individual. Because these spaces have become defined mostly as material, cultural, and societal, the doorway into the transcendent becomes very segregated. To encounter the transcendent, we willfully enter the religious space to open up our mind—feeling mindfully engaged in worship, preaching, and the study of scripture. We encounter divine action when we really believe something, when we willfully commit to God by committing to religious space over secular—and transcendence itself is only possible in the religious space itself.

SECULAR3: THE NEGATING OF TRANSCENDENCE

The additions that lead us from secular1 to secular2 create the conditions for secular3. Where secular1 sees transcendence in different planes of existence, and secular2 concedes transcendence to a spatial division between the religious and

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[12]Or the theologian becomes culturally captured. Choosing to talk about identity politics and religious studies more than God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit.

[13]This is Taylor's nova effect.

areligious, secular3 ultimately finds transcendence and divine action unbelievable. "The difference between our modern, 'secular' age and past ages is not necessarily the catalogue of available beliefs but rather the default assumptions about what is believable."[14] Secular2's obsession with the definition of culture and societal locales, and its fight over turf through the willing of human minds, allows for the creation of a new frame to our social imaginary. And this frame crops out, almost completely, the doorway into the transcendent. This new encasing, Taylor calls the immanent frame.[15] The immanent frame is "a constructed social space that frames our lives entirely within a natural (rather than supernatural) order. It is the circumscribed space of the modern social imaginary that precludes transcendence."[16]

Because we assume we know what faith is (keeping people in church and those people really believing <u>something</u>) we can move on quickly to pragmatic tools that win us this institutional loyalty. Faith need not be defined because faith has been stripped of transcendence, and has little to nothing to do with mystery, transformation, and ontological encounter.

Secular1 was continuously open to the supernatural, to encountering that which transcends human minds, cultures, and natural realms. This openness could turn corrosive, like in Salem, where witches were assumed to be around every corner. In contrast, Secular3 has swung the pendulum to the other end, granting the natural and material complete reign, even claiming that nothing exists outside of it.[17]

Secular3, then, looks sideways and skeptically at any definition or articulation of human experience that draws on anything other than the immanent.[18] People, of course, may still speak of angels, demons, and more, but such talk is harshly

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[14]Smith, *How (Not) To Be Secular*, 19.

[15]Taylor explains the immanent frame. He says, "We end up living in what I want to call an 'immanent frame.' This undemanding draws on the sharp distinction between 'natural' and 'supernatural' that became dominant in Latin Christendom. The sense of the immanent frame is that of living in impersonal orders, cosmic, social, and ethical orders which can be fully explained in their own terms and don't need to be conceived as dependent on anything outside, on the 'supernatural' or the 'transcendent.' This frame can be lived as 'closed' but also as 'open' to a beyond, and the tension between these two spins runs through the multiplying gamut of mutually cross-pressured positions that I call the nova." Taylor, "Afterword: Apologia pro Libro suo," 306–307.

[16]Smith, *How (Not) to be Secular*, 141.

[17]"The emergence of the secular is also bound up with the production of a new option—the possibility of exclusive humanism as a viable social imaginary—a way of constructing meaning and significance without any reference to the divine or transcendence. So it wasn't enough for us to stop believing in the gods; we also had to be able to imagine significance within an immanent frame, to imagine modes of meaning that did not depend on transcendence." Ibid., 26.

[18]"What had to happen for this kind of secular climate to come about? (1) There had to develop a culture that marks a clear division between the "natural" and the "supernatural," and (2) it had to come to seem possible to live entirely within the natural. Point I was something striven for, but point 2 came about at first quite inadvertently." Taylor, "Afterword: Apologia pro Libro suo," 304.

judged and sanctioned under the force of the immanent frame.[19] To talk too much about such realities (outside some online chat rooms) makes you sound or even be assumed to be crazy—literally out of your mind. And now, because reality is mostly constituted in human minds, to be out of your mind is to be untrustworthy, deranged, and mad.

Popular faith-formation programs tend to spend little time even defining faith, because it is squeezed flat by the realities of secular3 and the anxieties of secular2. Faith need not be defined because it is the observable material operations of institutional affiliation. Because we assume we know what faith is (keeping people in church and those people really believing *something*) we can move on quickly to pragmatic tools that win us this institutional loyalty. Faith need not be defined because faith has been stripped of transcendence, and has little to nothing to do with mystery, transformation, and ontological encounter.

If faith were truly a reality of cosmic and ontological encounter, if it brought forth a completely alien ontological reality into your being, if it swept you into an encounter with a transcendent force, then defining its shape and possibility would be necessary over and over again. If, for instance, baptism was really believed to be a death and resurrection, where the person dies in the water to come out of the water no longer living, but Christ living in her, finding such a deep union within her being that she is ontologically changed—we would need to explain over and over again what it means and how it works, and more importantly, who it is that encounters us in this radical ontological way. But because faith has been locked within the concerns of secular2 and been flattened by the invisible gravitational pull of secular3, faith has little to no transcendent quality (whether *in the minds* of liberals or conservatives).

RAMIFICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

These popular faith-formation programs have trapped themselves in a vicious cycle. They feel pushed to fight things like MTD (Moral Therapeutic Deism) and "nones," but most often their reasons for the battle are caught in the rut of secular2. They assert that young people must have a robust or consequential or super-meaningful faith or they'll leave the religious for the areligious space. So they provide pragmatic acts, not recognizing that the gravitational pull of secular3 has already upended their best efforts. Secular3 has already led young people (if not us ourselves) into a dark corner where transcendence/divine action is an impossibility.

All this means that something like MTD is *not* the consequence of a dreary church that has subtracted its mind from serious or passionate faith formation. Rather, MTD is the direct project (it is the endorsed and honored perspective) of faith built for secular3. MTD did not grow like a fungus when we were not looking.

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[19]This again is the Nova Effect that Taylor discusses. It is the explosion of all sorts of third ways and new spiritualities to construct meaning in the reductive ways of the immanent frame.

MTD is not an unfortunate and haphazard occurrence. It is an intricate construction designed perfectly for the world of secular3. We in the church keep misdiagnosing MTD and "nones" as an issue of secular2 (they'll leave the church!); we keep misunderstanding MTD and "nones" as issues of subtraction. Yet, in actuality, it is rather the very production of secular3. MTD and "nones" are forms of faith where the actuality of a personal (ontologically other) God is unbelievable and transcendence is impossible.

Taylor's perspective gives us both a window into the challenges we face and why (at least North American) faith-formation initiatives have missed the mark. Seeing secular3 as the addition and construct of an immanent frame allows us to see why a deeper theological construct is necessary, for the believability of divine action itself has come under question. To discuss faith in ministry, we are compelled to do so theologically, exploring how divine action might be testified to in a secular age of unbelief. ⊕

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