

# A Secular Age

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# Introduction

1

What does it mean to say that we live in a secular age? Almost everyone would agree that in some sense we do: I mean the “we” who live in the West, or perhaps Northwest, or otherwise put, the North Atlantic world—although secularity extends also partially, and in different ways, beyond this world. And the judgment of secularity seems hard to resist when we compare these societies with anything else in human history: that is, with almost all other contemporary societies (e.g., Islamic countries, India, Africa), on one hand; and with the rest of human history, Atlantic or otherwise, on the other.

But it’s not so clear in what this secularity consists. There are two big candidates for its characterization—or perhaps, better, families of candidate. The first concentrates on the common institutions and practices—most obviously, but not only, the state. The difference would then consist in this, that whereas the political organization of all pre-modern societies was in some way connected to, based on, guaranteed by some faith in, or adherence to God, or some notion of ultimate reality, the modern Western state is free from this connection. Churches are now separate from political structures (with a couple of exceptions, in Britain and the Scandinavian countries, which are so low-key and undemanding as not really to constitute exceptions). Religion or its absence is largely a private matter. The political society is seen as that of believers (of all stripes) and non-believers alike.<sup>1</sup>

Put in another way, in our “secular” societies, you can engage fully in politics without ever encountering God, that is, coming to a point where the crucial importance of the God of Abraham for this whole enterprise is brought home forcefully and unmistakably. The few moments of vestigial ritual or prayer barely constitute such an encounter today, but this would have been inescapable in earlier centuries in Christendom.

This way of putting it allows us to see that more than the state is involved in this change. If we go back a few centuries in our civilization, we see that God was pres-

ent in the above sense in a whole host of social practices—not just the political—and at all levels of society: for instance, when the functioning mode of local government was the parish, and the parish was still primarily a community of prayer; or when guilds maintained a ritual life that was more than pro forma; or when the only modes in which the society in all its components could display itself to itself were religious feasts, like, for instance, the Corpus Christi procession. In those societies, you couldn't engage in any kind of public activity without “encountering God” in the above sense. But the situation is totally different today.

And if you go back even farther in human history, you come to archaic societies in which the whole set of distinctions we make between the religious, political, economic, social, etc., aspects of our society ceases to make sense. In these earlier societies, religion was “everywhere”,<sup>2</sup> was interwoven with everything else, and in no sense constituted a separate “sphere” of its own.

One understanding of secularity then is in terms of public spaces. These have been allegedly emptied of God, or of any reference to ultimate reality. Or taken from another side, as we function within various spheres of activity—economic, political, cultural, educational, professional, recreational—the norms and principles we follow, the deliberations we engage in, generally don't refer us to God or to any religious beliefs; the considerations we act on are internal to the “rationality” of each sphere—maximum gain within the economy, the greatest benefit to the greatest number in the political area, and so on. This is in striking contrast to earlier periods, when Christian faith laid down authoritative prescriptions, often through the mouths of the clergy, which could not be easily ignored in any of these domains, such as the ban on usury, or the obligation to enforce orthodoxy.<sup>3</sup>

But whether we see this in terms of prescriptions, or in terms of ritual or ceremonial presence, this emptying of religion from autonomous social spheres is, of course, compatible with the vast majority of people still believing in God, and practising their religion vigorously. The case of Communist Poland springs to mind. This is perhaps a bit of a red herring, because the public secularity was imposed there by a dictatorial and unpopular régime. But the United States is rather striking in this regard. One of the earliest societies to separate Church and State, it is also the Western society with the highest statistics for religious belief and practice.

And yet this is the issue that people often want to get at when they speak of our times as secular, and contrast them, nostalgically or with relief, with earlier ages of faith or piety. In this second meaning, secularity consists in the falling off of religious belief and practice, in people turning away from God, and no longer going to Church. In this sense, the countries of western Europe have mainly become secular—even those who retain the vestigial public reference to God in public space.

Now I believe that an examination of this age as secular is worth taking up in a

third sense, closely related to the second, and not without connection to the first. This would focus on the conditions of belief. The shift to secularity in this sense consists, among other things, of a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace. In this meaning, as against sense 2, at least many milieux in the United States are secularized, and I would argue that the United States as a whole is. Clear contrast cases today would be the majority of Muslim societies, or the milieux in which the vast majority of Indians live. It wouldn't matter if one showed that the statistics for church/synagogue attendance in the U.S., or some regions of it, approached those for Friday mosque attendance in, say, Pakistan or Jordan (or this, plus daily prayer). That would be evidence towards classing these societies as the same in sense 2. Nevertheless, it seems to me evident that there are big differences between these societies in *what it is to believe*, stemming in part from the fact that belief is an option, and in some sense an embattled option in the Christian (or "post-Christian") society, and not (or not yet) in the Muslim ones.

So what I want to do is examine our society as secular in this third sense, which I could perhaps encapsulate in this way: the change I want to define and trace is one which takes us from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others. I may find it inconceivable that I would abandon my faith, but there are others, including possibly some very close to me, whose way of living I cannot in all honesty just dismiss as depraved, or blind, or unworthy, who have no faith (at least not in God, or the transcendent). Belief in God is no longer axiomatic. There are alternatives. And this will also likely mean that at least in certain milieux, it may be hard to sustain one's faith. There will be people who feel bound to give it up, even though they mourn its loss. This has been a recognizable experience in our societies, at least since the mid-nineteenth century. There will be many others to whom faith never even seems an eligible possibility. There are certainly millions today of whom this is true.

Secularity in this sense is a matter of the whole context of understanding in which our moral, spiritual or religious experience and search takes place. By 'context of understanding' here, I mean both matters that will probably have been explicitly formulated by almost everyone, such as the plurality of options, and some which form the implicit, largely unfocussed background of this experience and search, its "pre-ontology", to use a Heideggerian term.

An age or society would then be secular or not, in virtue of the conditions of experience of and search for the spiritual. Obviously, where it stood in this dimension would have a lot to do with how secular it was in the second sense, which turns on

levels of belief and practice, but there is no simple correlation between the two, as the case of the U.S. shows. As for the first sense, which concerns public space, this may be uncorrelated with both the others (as might be argued for the case of India). But I will maintain that in fact, in the Western case, the shift to public secularity has been part of what helped to bring on a secular age in my third sense.

## 2

Articulating the conditions of experience turns out to be harder than one might think. This is partly because people tend to be focussed on belief itself. What people are usually interested in, what arouses a lot of the anguish and conflict, is the second issue: what do people believe and practice? How many believe in God? In which direction is the trend going? Concern for public secularity often relates to the issue of what people believe or practice, and of how they are treated in consequence: does our secularist régime marginalize believing Christians, as some claim in the U.S.A.? Or does it stigmatize hitherto unrecognized groups? African-Americans, Hispanics? or else gays and lesbians?

But in our societies, the big issue about religion is usually defined in terms of belief. First Christianity has always defined itself in relation to credal statements. And secularism in sense 2 has often been seen as the decline of Christian belief; and this decline as largely powered by the rise of other beliefs, in science, reason, or by the deliverances of particular sciences: for instance, evolutionary theory, or neuro-physiological explanations of mental functioning.

Part of my reason for wanting to shift the focus to the conditions of belief, experience and search is that I'm not satisfied with this explanation of secularism 2: science refutes and hence crowds out religious belief. I'm dissatisfied on two, related levels. First, I don't see the cogency of the supposed arguments from, say, the findings of Darwin to the alleged refutations of religion. And secondly, partly for this reason, I don't see this as an adequate explanation for why in fact people abandoned their faith, even when they themselves articulate what happened in such terms as "Darwin refuted the Bible", as allegedly said by a Harrow schoolboy in the 1890s.<sup>4</sup> Of course bad arguments can figure as crucial in perfectly good psychological or historical explanations. But bad arguments like this, which leave out so many viable possibilities between fundamentalism and atheism, cry out for some account why these other roads were not travelled. This deeper account, I think, is to be found at the level I'm trying to explore. I will return to this shortly.

In order to get a little bit clearer on this level, I want to talk about belief and unbelief, not as rival *theories*, that is, ways that people account for existence, or morality, whether by God or by something in nature, or whatever. Rather what I want to

do is focus attention on the different kinds of lived experience involved in understanding your life in one way or the other, on what it's like to live as a believer or an unbeliever.

As a first rough indication of the direction I'm groping in, we could say that these are alternative ways of living our moral/spiritual life, in the broadest sense.

We all see our lives, and/or the space wherein we live our lives, as having a certain moral/spiritual shape. Somewhere, in some activity, or condition, lies a fullness, a richness; that is, in that place (activity or condition), life is fuller, richer, deeper, more worth while, more admirable, more what it should be. This is perhaps a place of power: we often experience this as deeply moving, as inspiring. Perhaps this sense of fullness is something we just catch glimpses of from afar off; we have the powerful intuition of what fullness would be, were we to be in that condition, e.g., of peace or wholeness; or able to act on that level, of integrity or generosity or abandonment or self-forgetfulness. But sometimes there will be moments of experienced fullness, of joy and fulfillment, where we feel ourselves there. Let one example, drawn from the autobiography of Bede Griffiths, stand for many:

One day during my last term at school I walked out alone in the evening and heard the birds singing in that full chorus of song, which can only be heard at that time of the year at dawn or at sunset. I remember now the shock of surprise with which the sound broke on my ears. It seemed to me that I had never heard the birds singing before and I wondered whether they sang like this all year round and I had never noticed it. As I walked I came upon some hawthorn trees in full bloom and again I thought that I had never seen such a sight or experienced such sweetness before. If I had been brought suddenly among the trees of the Garden of Paradise and heard a choir of angels singing I could not have been more surprised. I came then to where the sun was setting over the playing fields. A lark rose suddenly from the ground beside the tree where I was standing and poured out its song above my head, and then sank still singing to rest. Everything then grew still as the sunset faded and the veil of dusk began to cover the earth. I remember now the feeling of awe which came over me. I felt inclined to kneel on the ground, as though I had been standing in the presence of an angel; and I hardly dared to look on the face of the sky, because it seemed as though it was but a veil before the face of God.<sup>5</sup>

In this case, the sense of fullness came in an experience which unsettles and breaks through our ordinary sense of being in the world, with its familiar objects, activities and points of reference. These may be moments, as Peter Berger puts it, describing the work of Robert Musil, when "ordinary reality is 'abolished' and



something terrifyingly *other* shines through”, a state of consciousness which Musil describes as “*der andere Zustand*” (the other condition).<sup>6</sup>

But the identification of fullness may happen without a limit experience of this kind, whether uplifting or frightening. There may just be moments when the deep divisions, distractions, worries, sadnesses that seem to drag us down are somehow dissolved, or brought into alignment, so that we feel united, moving forward, suddenly capable and full of energy. Our highest aspirations and our life energies are somehow lined up, reinforcing each other, instead of producing psychic gridlock. This is the kind of experience which Schiller tried to understand with his notion of “play”.<sup>7</sup>

These experiences, and others again which can't all be enumerated here, help us to situate a place of fullness,<sup>8</sup> to which we orient ourselves morally or spiritually. They can orient us because they offer some sense of what they are of: the presence of God, or the voice of nature, or the force which flows through everything, or the alignment in us of desire and the drive to form. But they are also often unsettling and enigmatic. Our sense of where they come from may also be unclear, confused, lacunary. We are deeply moved, but also puzzled and shaken. We struggle to articulate what we've been through. If we succeed in formulating it, however partially, we feel a release, as though the power of the experience was increased by having been focussed, articulated, and hence let fully be.

This can help define a direction to our lives. But the sense of orientation also has its negative slope; where we experience above all a distance, an absence, an exile, a seemingly irremediable incapacity ever to reach this place; an absence of power; a confusion, or worse, the condition often described in the tradition as melancholy, ennui (the “spleen” of Baudelaire). What is terrible in this latter condition is that we lose a sense of where the place of fullness is, even of what fullness could consist in; we feel we've forgotten what it would look like, or cannot believe in it any more. But the misery of absence, of loss, is still there, indeed, it is in some ways even more acute.<sup>9</sup>

There are other figures of exile, which we can see in the tradition, where what dominates is a sense of damnation, of deserved and decided exclusion forever from fullness; or images of captivity, within hideous forms which embody the very negation of fullness: the monstrous animal forms that we see in the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch, for instance.

Then thirdly, there is a kind of stabilized middle condition, to which we often aspire. This is one where we have found a way to escape the forms of negation, exile, emptiness, without having reached fullness. We come to terms with the middle position, often through some stable, even routine order in life, in which we are doing things which have some meaning for us; for instance, which contribute to our ordi-

nary happiness, or which are fulfilling in various ways, or which contribute to what we conceive of as the good. Or often, in the best scenario, all three: for instance, we strive to live happily with spouse and children, while practising a vocation which we find fulfilling, and also which constitutes an obvious contribution to human welfare.

But it is essential to this middle condition, first that the routine, the order, the regular contact with meaning in our daily activities, somehow conjures, and keeps at bay the exile, or the ennui, or captivity in the monstrous; and second, that we have some sense of continuing contact with the place of fullness; and of slow movement towards it over the years. This place can't be renounced, or totally despaired of, without the equilibrium of the middle condition being undermined.<sup>10</sup>

Here's where it might appear that my description of this supposedly general structure of our moral/spiritual lives tilts towards the believer. It is clear that the last sentences of the previous paragraph fit rather well the state of mind of the believer in the middle condition. She goes on placing faith in a fuller condition, often described as salvation, and can't despair of it, and also would want to feel that she is at least open to progress towards it, if not already taking small steps thither.

But there are surely many unbelievers for whom this life in what I've described as the "middle condition" is all there is. This is the goal. Living this well and fully is what human life is about—for instance, the threefold scenario I described above. This is all that human life offers; but on this view this is a) no small thing, and b) to believe that there is something more, e.g., after death, or in some impossible condition of sanctity, is to run away from and undermine the search for this human excellence.

So describing fullness as another "place" from this middle condition may be misleading. And yet there is a structural analogy here. The unbeliever wants to be the kind of person for whom this life is fully satisfying, in which all of him can rejoice, in which his whole sense of fullness can find an adequate object. And he is not there yet. Either he's not really living the constitutive meanings in his life fully: he's not really happy in his marriage, or fulfilled in his job, or confident that this job really conduces to the benefit of humankind. Or else he is reasonably confident that he has the bases of all these, but contrary to his express view, cannot find the fullness of peace and a sense of satisfaction and completeness in this life. In other words, there is something he aspires to beyond where he's at. He perhaps hasn't yet fully conquered the nostalgia for something transcendent. In one way or another, he still has some way to go. And that's the point behind this image of place, even though this place isn't "other" in the obvious sense of involving quite different activities, or a condition beyond this life.

Now the point of describing these typical dimensions of human moral/spiritual

life as identifications of fullness, modes of exile, and types of the middle condition, is to allow us to understand better belief and unbelief as lived conditions, not just as theories or sets of beliefs subscribed to.

The big obvious contrast here is that for believers, the account of the place of fullness requires reference to God, that is, to something beyond human life and/or nature; where for unbelievers this is not the case; they rather will leave any account open, or understand fullness in terms of a potentiality of human beings understood naturalistically. But so far this description of the contrast seems to be still a belief description. What we need to do is to get a sense of the difference of lived experience.

Of course, this is incredibly various. But perhaps some recurring themes can be identified. For believers, often or typically, the sense is that fullness comes to them, that it is something they receive; moreover, receive in something like a personal relation, from another being capable of love and giving; approaching fullness involves among other things, practices of devotion and prayer (as well as charity, giving); and they are aware of being very far from the condition of full devotion and giving; they are aware of being self-enclosed, bound to lesser things and goals, not able to open themselves and receive/give as they would at the place of fullness. So there is the notion of receiving power or fullness in a relation; but the receiver isn't simply empowered in his/her present condition; he/she needs to be opened, transformed, brought out of self.

This is a very Christian formulation. In order to make the contrast with modern unbelief, perhaps it would be good to appose to it another formulation, more "Buddhist": here the personal relation might drop out as central. But the emphasis would be all the stronger on the direction of transcending the self, opening it out, receiving a power that goes beyond us.

For modern unbelievers, the predicament is quite different. The power to reach fullness is within. There are different variations of this. One is that which centres on our nature as rational beings. The Kantian variant is the most upfront form of this. We have the power as rational agency to make the laws by which we live. This is something so greatly superior to the force of mere nature in us, in the form of desire, that when we contemplate it without distortion, we cannot but feel reverence (*Achtung*) for this power. The place of fullness is where we manage finally to give this power full reign, and so to live by it. We have a feeling of receptivity, when with our full sense of our own fragility and pathos as desiring beings, we look up to the power of law-giving with admiration and awe. But this doesn't in the end mean that there is any reception from outside; the power is within; and the more we realize this power, the more we become aware that it is within, that morality must be autonomous and not heteronomous.

(Later a Feuerbachian theory of alienation can be added to this: we project God

because of our early sense of this awesome power which we mistakenly place outside us; we need to re-appropriate it for human beings. But Kant didn't take this step.)

Of course, there are also lots of more naturalistic variants of the power of reason, which depart from the dualistic, religious dimensions of Kant's thought, his belief in radical freedom of the moral agent, immortality, God—the three postulates of practical reason. There may be a more rigorous naturalism, which accords little room for manoeuvre for human reason, driven on one side by instinct, and on the other hemmed in by the exigencies of survival. There may be no explanation offered of why we have this power. It may consist largely in instrumental uses of reason, there again unlike Kant. But within this kind of naturalism, we often find an admiration for the power of cool, disengaged reason, capable of contemplating the world and human life without illusion, and of acting lucidly for the best in the interest of human flourishing. A certain awe still surrounds reason as a critical power, capable of liberating us from illusion and blind forces of instinct, as well as the phantasies bred of our fear and narrowness and pusillanimity. The nearest thing to fullness lies in this power of reason, and it is entirely ours, developed if it is through our own, often heroic action. (And here the giants of modern "scientific" reason are often named: Copernicus, Darwin, Freud.)

Indeed, this sense of ourselves as beings both frail and courageous, capable of facing a meaningless, hostile universe without faintness of heart, and of rising to the challenge of devising our own rules of life, can be an inspiring one, as we see in the writings of a Camus for instance.<sup>11</sup> Rising fully to this challenge, empowered by this sense of our own greatness in doing so, this condition we aspire to but only rarely, if ever, achieve, can function as its own place of fullness, in the sense of my discussion here.

Over against these modes of rejoicing in the self-sufficient power of reason, there are other modes of unbelief which, analogous to religious views, see us as needing to receive power from elsewhere than autonomous reason to achieve fullness. Reason by itself is narrow, blind to the demands of fullness, will run on perhaps to destruction, human and ecological, if it recognizes no limits; is perhaps actuated by a kind of pride, hubris. There are often echoes here of a religious critique of modern, disengaged, unbelieving reason. Except that the sources of power are not transcendent. They are to be found in Nature, or in our own inner depths, or in both. We can recognize here theories of immanence which emerge from the Romantic critique of disengaged reason, and most notably certain ecological ethics of our day, particularly deep ecology. Rational mind has to open itself to something deeper and fuller. This is something (at least partly) inner; our own deepest feelings or instincts. We have therefore to heal the division within us that disengaged reason has created, setting thinking in opposition to feeling or instinct or intuition.

So we have here views which, as just mentioned, have certain analogies to the re-

ligious reaction to the unbelieving Enlightenment, in that they stress reception over against self-sufficiency; but they are views which intend to remain immanent, and are often as hostile, if not more so, to religion than the disengaged ones.

There is a third category of outlook, which is hard to classify here, but which I hope to illuminate later in this discussion. These are views, like that of certain contemporary modes of post-modernism, which deny, attack or scoff at the claims of self-sufficient reason, but offer no outside source for the reception of power. They are as determined to undermine and deny Romantic notions of solace in feeling, or in recovered unity, as they are to attack the Enlightenment dream of pure thinking; and they seem often even more eager to underscore their atheist convictions. They want to make a point of stressing the irremediable nature of division, lack of centre, the perpetual absence of fullness; which is at best a necessary dream, something we may have to suppose to make minimum sense of our world, but which is always elsewhere, and which couldn't in principle ever be found.

This family of views seems to stand altogether outside the structures I'm talking about here. And yet I think one can show that in a number of ways it draws on them. In particular, it draws empowerment from the sense of our courage and greatness in being able to face the irremediable, and carry on nonetheless. I hope to come back to this later.

So we've made some progress in talking about belief and unbelief as ways of living or experiencing moral/spiritual life, in the three dimensions I talked about earlier. At least I drew some contrasts in the first dimension, the way of experiencing fullness; the source of the power which can bring us to this fullness; whether this is "within" or "without"; and in what sense. Corresponding differences follow about experiences of exile, and those of the middle condition.

More needs to be said about this distinction of within/without, but before elaborating further on this, there is another important facet of this experience of fullness as "placed" somewhere which we need to explore. We have gone beyond mere belief, and are closer to lived experience here, but there are still important differences in the way we live it which have to be brought out.

What does it mean to say that for me fullness comes from a power which is beyond me, that I have to receive it, etc.? Today, it is likely to mean something like this: the best sense I can make of my conflicting moral and spiritual experience is captured by a theological view of this kind. That is, in my own experience, in prayer, in moments of fullness, in experiences of exile overcome, in what I seem to observe around me in other people's lives—lives of exceptional spiritual fullness, or lives of maximum self-enclosedness, lives of demonic evil, etc.—this seems to be the picture which emerges. But I am never, or only rarely, really sure, free of all doubt, untroubled by some objection—by some experience which won't fit, some lives

which exhibit fullness on another basis, some alternative mode of fullness which sometimes draws me, etc.

This is typical of the modern condition, and an analogous story could be told by many an unbeliever. We live in a condition where we cannot help but be aware that there are a number of different construals, views which intelligent, reasonably undeluded people, of good will, can and do disagree on. We cannot help looking over our shoulder from time to time, looking sideways, living our faith also in a condition of doubt and uncertainty.

It is this index of doubt, which induces people to speak of “theories” here. Because theories are often hypotheses, held in ultimate uncertainty, pending further evidence. I hope I have said something to show that we can’t understand them as mere theories, that there is a way in which our whole experience is inflected if we live in one or another spirituality. But all the same we are aware today that one can live the spiritual life differently; that power, fullness, exile, etc., can take different shapes.

But there is clearly another way one can live these things, and many human beings did. This is a condition in which the immediate experience of power, a place of fullness, exile, is in terms which *we* would identify as one of the possible alternatives, but where for the people concerned no such distinction, between experience and its construal, arose. Let’s recur to Hieronymus Bosch for instance. Those nightmare scenarios of possession, of evil spirits, of captivation in monstrous animal forms; we can imagine that these were not “theories” in any sense in the lived experience of many people in that age. They were objects of real fear, of such compelling fear, that it wasn’t possible to entertain seriously the idea that they might be unreal. You or people you knew had experienced them. And perhaps no one in your milieu ever got around even to suggesting their unreality.

Analogously, the people of New Testament Palestine, when they saw someone possessed of an evil spirit, were too immediately at grips with the real suffering of this condition, in a neighbour, or a loved one, to be able to entertain the idea that this was an interesting explanation for a psychological condition, identifiable purely in intra-psychic terms, but that there were other, possibly more reliable aetiologies for this condition.

Or to take a contemporary example, from West Africa in this case, so it must have been for the Celestine, interviewed by Birgit Meyer,<sup>12</sup> who “walked home from Aventile with her mother, accompanied by a stranger dressed in a white northern gown.” When asked afterwards, her mother denied having seen the man. He turned out to be the Akan spirit Sowlui, and Celestine was pressed into his service. In Celestine’s world, perhaps the identification of the man with this spirit might be called a “belief”, in that it came after the experience in an attempt to explain what it

was all about. But the man accompanying her was just something that happened to her, a fact of her world.

So there is a condition of lived experience, where what we might call a construal of the moral/spiritual is lived not as such, but as immediate reality, like stones, rivers and mountains. And this plainly also goes for the positive side of things: e.g., people in earlier ages of our culture, for whom moving to fullness just meant getting closer to God. The alternatives they faced in life were: living a fuller devotion, or going on living for lesser goods, at a continuing distance from fullness; being “*dévo*t” or “*mondain*”, in the terms of seventeenth-century France; not taking off after a different construal of what fullness might mean.

Now part of what has happened in our civilization is that we have largely eroded these forms of immediate certainty. That is, it seems clear that they can never be as fully (to us) “*naïve*”<sup>13</sup> as they were at the time of Hieronymus Bosch. But we still have something analogous to that, though weaker. I’m talking about the way the moral/spiritual life tends to show up in certain milieux. That is, although everybody has now to be aware that there is more than one option, it may be that in our milieu one construal, believing or unbelieving, tends to show up as the overwhelmingly more plausible one. You know that there are other ones, and if you get interested, then drawn to another one, you can perhaps think/struggle your way through to it. You break with your believing community and become an atheist; or you go in the reverse direction. But one option is, as it were, the default option.

Now in this regard, there has been a titanic change in our western civilization. We have changed not just from a condition where most people lived “*naïvely*” in a construal (part Christian, part related to “*spirits*” of pagan origin) as simple reality, to one in which almost no one is capable of this, but all see their option as one among many. We all learn to navigate between two standpoints: an “*engaged*” one in which we live as best we can the reality our standpoint opens us to; and a “*disengaged*” one in which we are able to see ourselves as occupying one standpoint among a range of possible ones, with which we have in various ways to coexist.

But we have also changed from a condition in which belief was the default option, not just for the naïve but also for those who knew, considered, talked about atheism; to a condition in which for more and more people unbelieving construals seem at first blush the only plausible ones. They can only approach, without ever gaining the condition of “*naïve*” atheists, in the way that their ancestors were naïve, semi-pagan believers; but this seems to them the overwhelmingly plausible construal, and it is difficult to understand people adopting another. So much so that they easily reach for rather gross error theories to explain religious belief: people are afraid of uncertainty, the unknown; they’re weak in the head, crippled by guilt, etc.

This is not to say that everyone is in this condition. Our modern civilization is

made up of a host of societies, sub-societies and milieux, all rather different from each other. But the presumption of unbelief has become dominant in more and more of these milieux; and has achieved hegemony in certain crucial ones, in the academic and intellectual life, for instance; whence it can more easily extend itself to others.

In order to place the discussion between belief and unbelief in our day and age, we have to put it in the context of this lived experience, and the construals that shape this experience. And this means not only seeing this as more than a matter of different “theories” to explain the same experiences. It also means understanding the differential position of different construals; how they can be lived “naïvely” or “reflectively”; how one or another can become the default option for many people or milieux.

To put the point in different terms, belief in God isn’t quite the same thing in 1500 and 2000. I am not referring to the fact that even orthodox Christianity has undergone important changes (e.g., the “decline of Hell”, new understandings of the atonement). Even in regard to identical credal propositions, there is an important difference. This emerges as soon as we take account of the fact that all beliefs are held within a context or framework of the taken-for-granted, which usually remains tacit, and may even be as yet unacknowledged by the agent, because never formulated. This is what philosophers, influenced by Wittgenstein, Heidegger or Polanyi, have called the “background”.<sup>14</sup> As Wittgenstein points out,<sup>15</sup> my research into rock formations takes as granted that the world didn’t start five minutes ago, complete with all the fossils and striations, but it would never occur to me to formulate and acknowledge this, until some crazed philosophers, obsessively riding their epistemological hobby-horses, put the proposition to me.

But now perhaps I have caught the bug, and I can no longer be naïvely into my research, but now take account of what I have been leaning on, perhaps entertain the possibility that it might be wrong. This breach of naïveté is often the path to fuller understanding (even if not in this case). You might be just operating in a framework in which all moves would be in one of the cardinal directions or up or down; but in order to function in a space ship, even to conceive one, you have to see how relative and constrained this framework is.

The difference I’ve been talking about above is one of the whole background framework in which one believes or refuses to believe in God. The frameworks of yesterday and today are related as “naïve” and “reflective”, because the latter has opened a question which had been foreclosed in the former by the unacknowledged shape of the background.

The shift in background, or better the disruption of the earlier background, comes best to light when we focus on certain distinctions we make today; for instance, that between the immanent and the transcendent, the natural and the super-



natural. Everyone understands these, both those who affirm and those who deny the second term of each pair. This hiving off of an independent, free-standing level, that of “nature”, which may or may not be in interaction with something further or beyond, is a crucial bit of modern theorizing, which in turn corresponds to a constitutive dimension of modern experience, as I hope to show in greater detail below.

It is this shift in background, in the whole context in which we experience and search for fullness, that I am calling the coming of a secular age, in my third sense. How did we move from a condition where, in Christendom, people lived naïvely within a theistic construal, to one in which we all shunt between two stances, in which everyone’s construal shows up as such; and in which moreover, unbelief has become for many the major default option? This is the transformation that I want to describe, and perhaps also (very partially) explain in the following chapters.

This will not be easy to do, but only by identifying the change as one of lived experience, can we even begin to put the right questions properly, and avoid the naïvetés on all sides: either that unbelief is just the falling away of any sense of fullness, or the betrayal of it (what theists sometimes are tempted to think of atheists); or that belief is just a set of theories attempting to make sense of experiences which we all have, and whose real nature can be understood purely immanently (what atheists are sometimes tempted to think about theists).

In fact, we have to understand the differences between these options not just in terms of creeds, but also in terms of differences of experience and sensibility. And on this latter level, we have to take account of two important differences: first, there is the massive change in the whole background of belief or unbelief, that is, the passing of the earlier “naïve” framework, and the rise of our “reflective” one. And secondly, we have to be aware of how believers and unbelievers can experience their world very differently. The sense that fullness is to be found in something beyond us can break in on us as a fact of experience, as in the case of Bede Griffiths quoted above, or in the moment of conversion that Claudel lived in Notre Dame at Vespers. This experience may then be articulated, rationalized; it may generate particular beliefs. This process may take time, and the beliefs in question may change over the years, even though the experience remains in memory as a paradigm moment. This is what happened to Bede, who came to a fully theistic reading of that crucial moment only some years later; and a similar “lag” can be seen in the case of Claudel.<sup>16</sup> The condition of secularity 3 has thus to be described in terms of the possibility or impossibility of certain kinds of experience in our age.

### 3

I have been struggling above with the term “secular”, or “secularity”. It seems obvious before you start thinking about it, but as soon as you do, all sorts of problems

arise. I tried to conjure some of these by distinguishing three senses in which I will use the term. This by no means gets rid of all problems, but it may be enough to allow for some progress in my enquiry.

But all three modes of secularity make reference to “religion”: as that which is re-creating in public space (1), or as a type of belief and practice which is or is not in regression (2), and as a certain kind of belief or commitment whose conditions in this age are being examined (3). But what is “religion”? This famously defies definition, largely because the phenomena we are tempted to call religious are so tremendously varied in human life. When we try to think what there is in common between the lives of archaic societies where “religion is everywhere”, and the clearly demarcated set of beliefs, practices and institutions which exist under this title in our society, we are facing a hard, perhaps insuperable task.

But if we are prudent (or perhaps cowardly), and reflect that we are trying to understand a set of forms and changes which have arisen in one particular civilization, that of the modern West—or in an earlier incarnation, Latin Christendom—we see to our relief that we don’t need to forge a definition which covers everything “religious” in all human societies in all ages. The change which mattered to people in our (North Atlantic, or “Western”) civilization, and still matters today, concerning the status of religion in the three dimensions of secularity I identified, is the one I have already started to explore in one of its central facets: we have moved from a world in which the place of fullness was understood as unproblematically outside of or “beyond” human life, to a conflicted age in which this construal is challenged by others which place it (in a wide range of different ways) “within” human life. This is what a lot of the important fights have been about more recently (as against an earlier time when people fought to the death over different readings of the Christian construal).

In other words, a reading of “religion” in terms of the distinction transcendent/immanent is going to serve our purposes here. This is the beauty of the prudent (or cowardly) move I’m proposing here. It is far from being the case that religion in general can be defined in terms of this distinction. One could even argue that marking our particular hard-and-fast distinction here is something which we (Westerners, Latin Christians) alone have done, be it to our intellectual glory or stultification (some of each, I will argue later). You couldn’t foist this on Plato, for instance, not because you can’t distinguish the Ideas from the things in the flux which “copy” them, but precisely because these changing realities can only be understood through the Ideas. The great invention of the West was that of an immanent order in Nature, whose working could be systematically understood and explained on its own terms, leaving open the question whether this whole order had a deeper significance, and whether, if it did, we should infer a transcendent Creator beyond it. This notion of the “immanent” involved denying—or at least isolating

and problematizing—any form of interpenetration between the things of Nature, on one hand, and “the supernatural” on the other, be this understood in terms of the one transcendent God, or of Gods or spirits, or magic forces, or whatever.<sup>17</sup>

So defining religion in terms of the distinction immanent/transcendent is a move tailor-made for our culture. This may be seen as parochial, incestuous, navel-gazing, but I would argue that this is a wise move, since we are trying to understand changes in a culture for which this distinction has become foundational.

So instead of asking whether the source of fullness is seen/lived as within or without, as we did in the above discussion, we could ask whether people recognize something beyond or transcendent to their lives. This is the way the matter is usually put, and I want to adopt it in what follows. I will offer a somewhat fuller account of what I mean by this distinction several chapters down the road, when we come to examine modern theories of secularization. I fully recognize that a word like “transcendent” is very slippery—partly because, as I hinted just now, these distinctions have been constructed or redefined in the very process of modernity and secularization. But I believe that in all its vagueness, it can serve in our context.

But precisely for the reasons that I explored above, I want to supplement the usual account of “religion” in terms of belief in the transcendent, with one more focussed on the sense we have of our practical context. Here is one way of making sense of this.

Every person, and every society, lives with or by some conception(s) of what human flourishing is: what constitutes a fulfilled life? what makes life really worth living? What would we most admire people for? We can't help asking these and related questions in our lives. And our struggles to answer them define the view or views that we try to live by, or between which we haver. At another level, these views are codified, sometimes in philosophical theories, sometimes in moral codes, sometimes in religious practices and devotion. These and the various ill-formulated practices which people around us engage in constitute the resources that our society offers each one of us as we try to lead our lives.

Another way of getting at something like the issue raised above in terms of within/without is to ask: does the highest, the best life involve our seeking, or acknowledging, or serving a good which is beyond, in the sense of independent of human flourishing? In which case, the highest, most real, authentic or adequate human flourishing could include our aiming (also) in our range of final goals at something other than human flourishing. I say “final goals”, because even the most self-sufficing humanism has to be concerned with the condition of some non-human things instrumentally, e.g., the condition of the natural environment. The issue is whether they matter also finally.

It's clear that in the Judaeo-Christian religious tradition the answer to this ques-

tion is affirmative. 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 on this. The injunction “Thy will be done” isn’t equivalent to “Let humans flourish”, even though we know that God wills human flourishing.

This is a very familiar case for us. But there are other ways in which we can be taken beyond ordinary human flourishing. Buddhism is an example. In one way, we could construe the message of the Buddha as telling us how to achieve true happiness, that is, how to avoid suffering, and attain bliss.<sup>18</sup> But it is clear that the understanding of the conditions of bliss is so “revisionist” that it amounts to a departure from what we normally understand as human flourishing. The departure here can be put in terms of a radical change of identity. Normal understandings of flourishing assume a continuing self, its beneficiary, or in the case of its failure the sufferer. The Buddhist doctrine of *anatta* aims to bring us beyond this illusion. The way to Nirvana involves renouncing, or at least going beyond, all forms of recognizable human flourishing.

In both Buddhism and Christianity, there is something similar in spite of the great difference in doctrine. This is that the believer or devout person is called on to make a profound inner break with the goals of flourishing in their own case; they are called on, that is, to detach themselves from their own flourishing, to the point of the extinction of self in one case, or to that of renunciation of human fulfillment to serve God in the other. The respective patterns are clearly visible in the exemplary figures. The Buddha achieves Enlightenment; Christ consents to a degrading death to follow his father’s will.

But can’t we just follow the hint above, and reconstrue “true” flourishing as involving renunciation, as Stoicism seems to do, for example? This won’t work for Christianity, and I suspect also not for Buddhism. In the Christian case, the very point of renunciation requires that the ordinary flourishing forgone be confirmed as valid. Unless living the full span were a good, Christ’s giving of himself to death couldn’t have the meaning it does. In this it is utterly different from Socrates’ death, which the latter portrays as leaving this condition for a better one. Here we see the unbridgeable gulf between Christianity and Greek philosophy. God wills ordinary human flourishing, and a great part of what is reported in the Gospels consists in Christ making this possible for the people whose afflictions he heals. The call to renounce doesn’t negate the value of flourishing; it is rather a call to centre everything on God, even if it be at the cost of forgoing this unsubstitutable good; and the fruit of this forgoing is that it become on one level the source of flourishing to others, and on another level, a collaboration with the restoration of a fuller flourishing by God. It is a mode of healing wounds and “repairing the world” (I am here borrowing the Hebrew phrase *tikkun olam*).

This means that flourishing and renunciation cannot simply be collapsed into each other to make a single goal, by as it were, pitching the renounced goods overboard as unnecessary ballast on the journey of life, in the manner of Stoicism. There remains a fundamental tension in Christianity. Flourishing is good, nevertheless seeking it is not our ultimate goal. But even where 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.

Can a similar, paradoxical relation be seen in Buddhism? I'm not sure, but Buddhism also has this notion that the renouncer is a source of compassion for those who suffer. There is an analogy between *karuna* and *agape*. And over the centuries in Buddhist civilization there developed, parallel with Christendom, a distinction of vocation between radical renouncers, and those who go on living within the forms of life aiming at ordinary flourishing, while trying to accumulate "merit" for a future life. (Of course, this distinction was radically "deconstructed" in the Protestant Reformation, with what fateful results for our story here we are all in some way aware, even though the task of tracing its connections to modern secularism is still very far from completed.)

Now the point of bringing out this distinction between human flourishing and goals which go beyond it is this. I would like to claim that the coming of modern secularity in my sense has been coterminous with the rise of a society in which for the first time in history a purely self-sufficient humanism came to be a widely available option. I mean by this a humanism accepting no final goals beyond human flourishing, nor any allegiance to anything else beyond this flourishing. Of no previous society was this true.

Although this humanism arose out of a religious tradition in which flourishing and the transcendent goal were distinguished and paradoxically related (and this was of some importance for our story), this doesn't mean that all previous societies projected a duality in this domain, as I have argued for Buddhism and Christianity. There were also outlooks, like Taoism seems to be, where flourishing was conceived in a unitary way, including reverence for the higher. But in these cases, this reverence, although essential for flourishing, couldn't be undertaken in a purely instrumental spirit. That is, it couldn't be *reverence* if it were so understood.

In other words, the general understanding of the human predicament before modernity placed us in an order where we were not at the top. Higher beings, like Gods or spirits, or a higher kind of being, like the Ideas or the cosmopolis of Gods and humans, demanded and deserved our worship, reverence, devotion or love. In some cases, this reverence or devotion was itself seen as integral to human flourishing; it was a proper part of the human good. Taoism is an example, as are such

ancient philosophies as Platonism and Stoicism. In other cases, the devotion was called for even though it be at our expense, or conduce to our good only through winning the favour of a God. But even here the reverence called for was real. These beings commanded our awe. There was no question of treating them as we treat the forces of nature we harness for energy.

In this kind of case, we might speak of a humanism, but not of a self-sufficing or exclusive humanism, which is the contrast case which is at the heart of modern secularity.

This thesis, placing exclusive humanism only within modernity, may seem too bald and exceptionless to be true. And indeed, there are exceptions. By my account, ancient Epicureanism was a self-sufficing humanism. It admitted Gods, but denied them relevance to human life. My plea here is that one swallow doesn't make a summer. I'm talking about an age when self-sufficing humanism becomes a widely available option, which it never was in the ancient world, where only a small minority of the élite which was itself a minority espoused it.

I also don't want to claim that modern secularity is somehow coterminous with exclusive humanism. For one thing, the way I'm defining it, secularity is a condition in which our experience of and search for fullness occurs; and this is something we all share, believers and unbelievers alike. But also, it is not my intention to claim that exclusive humanisms offer the only alternatives to religion. Our age has seen a strong set of currents which one might call non-religious anti-humanisms, which fly under various names today, like "deconstruction" and "post-structuralism", and which find their roots in immensely influential writings of the nineteenth century, especially those of Nietzsche. At the same time, there are attempts to reconstruct a non-exclusive humanism on a non-religious basis, which one sees in various forms of deep ecology.

My claim will rather be something of this nature: secularity came to be along with the possibility of exclusive humanism, which thus for the first time widened the range of possible options, ending the era of "naïve" religious faith. Exclusive humanism in a sense crept up on us through an intermediate form, Providential Deism; and both the Deism and the humanism were made possible by earlier developments within orthodox Christianity. Once this humanism is on the scene, the new plural, non-naïve predicament allows for multiplying the options beyond the original gamut. But the crucial transforming move in the process is the coming of exclusive humanism.

From this point of view, one could offer this one-line description of the difference between earlier times and the secular age: a secular age is one in which the eclipse of all goals beyond human flourishing becomes conceivable; or better, it falls

within the range of an imaginable life for masses of people. This is the crucial link between secularity and a self-sufficing humanism.<sup>19</sup>

So “religion” for our purposes can be defined in terms of “transcendence”, but this latter term has to be understood in more than one dimension. Whether one believes in some agency or power transcending the immanent order is indeed, a crucial feature of “religion”, as this has figured in secularization theories. It is our relation to a transcendent God which has been displaced at the centre of social life (secularity 1); it is faith in this God whose decline is tracked in these theories (secularity 2). But in order to understand better the phenomena we want to explain, we should see religion’s relation to a “beyond” in three dimensions. And the crucial one, that which makes its impact on our lives understandable, is the one I have just been exploring: the sense that there is some good higher than, beyond human flourishing. In the Christian case, we could think of this as *agape*, the love which God has for us, and which we can partake of through his power. In other words, a possibility of transformation is offered, which takes us beyond merely human perfection. But of course, this notion of a higher good as attainable by us could only make sense in the context of belief in a higher power, the transcendent God of faith which appears in most definitions of religion. But then thirdly, the Christian story of our potential transformation by *agape* requires that we see our life as going beyond the bounds of its “natural” scope between birth and death; our lives extend beyond “this life”.

For purposes of understanding the struggle, rivalry, or debate between religion and unbelief in our culture, we have to understand religion as combining these three dimensions of transcendence. This is not because there are not other possibilities which are being explored in our society, options somewhere between this triple transcendence perspective, and the total denial of religion. On the contrary, these options abound. It is rather because, in a way I shall explain many chapters down the road, the multi-cornered debate is shaped by the two extremes, transcendent religion, on one hand, and its frontal denial, on the other. It is perfectly legitimate to think that this is a misfortune about modern culture; but I would like to argue that it is a fact.

#### 4

So secularity 3, which is my interest here, as against 1 (secularized public spaces), and 2 (the decline of belief and practice), consists of new conditions of belief; it consists in a new shape to the experience which prompts to and is defined by belief; in a new context in which all search and questioning about the moral and spiritual must proceed.

The main feature of this new context is that it puts an end to the naïve acknowledgment of the transcendent, or of goals or claims which go beyond human flourishing. But this is quite unlike religious turnovers in the past, where one naïve horizon ends up replacing another, or the two fuse syncretistically—as with, say, the conversion of Asia Minor from Christianity to Islam in the wake of the Turkish conquest. Naïveté is now unavailable to anyone, believer or unbeliever alike.

This is the global context in a society which contains different milieux, within each of which the default option may be different from others, although the dwellers within each are very aware of the options favoured by the others, and cannot just dismiss them as inexplicable exotic error.

The crucial change which brought us into this new condition was the coming of exclusive humanism as a widely available option. How did all this happen? Or otherwise put, what exactly is it which has happened, such that the conditions of belief are altered in the way I've been describing? These are not easy questions to answer.

That is, I think they aren't easy. But for many people in our day, the answer seems, at least in its general lines, fairly obvious. Modernity brings about secularity, in all its three forms. This causal connection is ineluctable, and mainline secularization theory is concerned to explain why it had to be. Modern civilization cannot but bring about a "death of God".

I find this theory very unconvincing, but in order to show why, I have to launch myself into my own story, which I shall be telling in the following chapters. At a later phase I shall return to the issue of what a convincing theory of secularization might look like.

But first, a word about the debate I shall be developing. In fact, two words. First, I shall be concerned, as I said above, with the West, or the North Atlantic world; or in other terms, I shall be dealing with the civilization whose principal roots lie in what used to be called "Latin Christendom". Of course, secularization and secularity are phenomena which exist today well beyond the boundaries of this world. It should be possible some day to undertake a study of the whole phenomenon on a global scale. But I don't think one can start there. This is because secularity, like other features of "modernity"—political structures, democratic forms, uses of media, to cite a few other examples—in fact find rather different expression, and develop under the pressure of different demands and aspirations in different civilizations. We are more and more living in a world of "multiple modernities".<sup>20</sup> These crucial changes need to be studied in their different civilizational sites before we rush to global generalization. Already my canvas is on the verge of being too broad; there are many regional and national paths to secularity within the North Atlantic world, and I haven't been able to do justice to all of them. But I hope some light can be cast on general features of the process nonetheless.<sup>21</sup> In fol-



lowing this path, I am repeating what I attempted in *Sources of the Self*,<sup>22</sup> which also took up a set of issues of universal human concern, but dealt with them within a regional compass.

Secondly, in the following chapters, I will be making a continuing polemic against what I call “subtraction stories”. Concisely put, I mean by this 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. What emerges from this process—modernity or secularity—is to be understood in terms of underlying features of human nature which were there all along, but had been impeded by what is now set aside. Against this kind of story, I will steadily be arguing that Western modernity, including its secularity, is the fruit of new inventions, newly constructed self-understandings and related practices, and can’t be explained in terms of perennial features of human life.

I hope that the detailed discussion which follows will make clearer what is involved in this issue, and I shall also return to it more systematically towards the end, in Chapter 15.

# 10 The Expanding Universe of Unbelief

1

The creation of this free space has been made possible in large part by the shift in the place and understanding of art that came in the Romantic period. This is related to the shift from an understanding of art as mimesis to one that stresses creation. It concerns what one could call the languages of art, that is, the publicly available reference points that, say, poets and painters draw on. As Shakespeare could draw on the correspondences to make us feel the full horror of the act of regicide, to recur to the case I cited above. He has a servant report the “unnatural” events that have been evoked in sympathy with this terrible deed: the night in which Duncan is murdered is an unruly one, with “lamentings heard i’ the air; strange screams of death”, and it remains dark even though the day should have started. On the previous Tuesday a falcon had been killed by a mousing owl, and Duncan’s horses turned wild in the night, “Contending ’gainst obedience, as they would / Make war with mankind.” In a similar way, painting could draw on the publicly understood objects of divine and secular history, events and personages which had heightened meaning, as it were, built into them, like the Madonna and Child or the oath of the Horatii.

But for a couple of centuries now we have been living in a world in which these points of reference no longer hold for us. Few now believe the doctrine of the correspondences, as this was accepted in the Renaissance, and neither divine or secular history has a generally accepted significance. It is not that one cannot write a poem about the correspondences. Precisely, Baudelaire did.<sup>1</sup> It is rather that this can’t draw on the simple acceptance of the formerly public doctrines. The poet himself didn’t subscribe to them in their canonical form. He is getting at something different, some personal vision he is trying to triangulate to through this historical reference, the “forest of symbols” that he sees in the world around him. But to grasp this forest, we need to understand not so much the erstwhile public doctrine (about which no one remembers any details anyway) but, as we might put it, the way it resonates in the poet’s sensibility.

To take another example, Rilke speaks of angels. But his angels are not to be understood by their place in the traditionally defined order. Rather, we have to triangulate to the meaning of the term through the whole range of images with which Rilke articulates his sense of things. “Wer, wenn Ich schrie, hörte mich, aus der Engel Ordnungen?”, begin the *Duino Elegies*. Their being beyond these cries partly defines these angels. We cannot get at them through a mediaeval treatise on the ranks of cherubim and seraphim, but we have to pass through this articulation of Rilke’s sensibility.

We could describe the change in this way: where formerly poetic language could rely on certain publicly available orders of meaning, it now has to consist in a language of articulated sensibility. Earl Wasserman has shown how the decline of the old order with its established background of meanings made necessary the development of new poetic languages in the Romantic period. Pope, for instance, in his *Windsor Forest*, could draw on age-old views of the order of nature as a commonly available source of poetic images. For Shelley, this resource is no longer available; the poet must articulate his own world of references, and make them believable. As Wasserman explains it, “Until the end of the eighteenth century there was sufficient intellectual homogeneity for men to share certain assumptions . . . In varying degrees, . . . men accepted . . . the Christian interpretation of history, the sacramentalism of nature, the Great Chain of Being, the analogy of the various planes of creation, the conception of man as microcosm. . . . These were cosmic syntaxes in the public domain; and the poet could afford to think of his art as imitative of ‘nature’ since these patterns were what he meant by ‘nature’.

“By the nineteenth century these world-pictures had passed from consciousness. The change from a mimetic to a creative conception of poetry is not merely a critical philosophical phenomenon . . . Now . . . an additional formulative act was required of the poet. . . . Within itself the modern poem must both formulate its cosmic syntax and shape the autonomous poetic reality that the cosmic syntax permits; ‘nature’, which was once prior to the poem and available for imitation, now shares with the poem a common origin in the poet’s creativity.”<sup>2</sup>

The Romantic poets and their successors have to articulate an original vision of the cosmos. When Wordsworth and Hölderlin describe the natural world around us, in *The Prelude*, *The Rhine*, or *Homecoming*, they no longer play on an established gamut of references, as Pope could still do in *Windsor Forest*. They make us aware of something in nature for which there are as yet no established words.<sup>3</sup> The poems are finding words for us. In this “subtler language”—the term is borrowed from Shelley—something is defined and created as well as manifested. A watershed has been passed in the history of literature.

Something similar happens in painting in the early nineteenth century. Caspar David Friedrich, for instance, distances himself from the traditional iconography.

He is searching for a symbolism in nature that is not based on the accepted conventions. The ambition is to let “the forms of nature speak directly, their power released by the ordering within the work of art”.<sup>4</sup> Friedrich too is seeking a subtler language; he is trying to say something for which no adequate terms exist and whose meaning has to be sought in his works rather than in a pre-existing lexicon of references.<sup>5</sup> He builds on the late eighteenth-century sense of the affinity between our feelings and natural scenes, but in an attempt to articulate more than a subjective reaction. “Feeling can never be contrary to nature, is always consistent with nature.”<sup>6</sup>

And of course, music too. But here we can see another facet of the development of subtler languages. This comes partly, as we saw, from the fading of metaphysical beliefs, about the Great Chain of Being, the order of things, and the like; partly from the end of consensus on metaphysics and religion. But first in the realm of music, and then also later elsewhere, we can see a move towards more “absolute” forms. These arise in a kind of further development out of the process by which poetry and music becomes “art” in the first place.

When we think of chanted prayer in a liturgical setting, or bardic recitation praising heroes at a banquet, we think of poetry and music as in the category “art”. But as is well known, in the original societies, there may have been no such category, or if so, these activities may not have belonged to it. We think of them as “art”, not only because of their resemblance (and sometimes ancestral relation) to our poetry and music, but also because we think of art as surrounded by an aura, and these too had their aura.

But this is not to say that we could explain their aura in the terms that we do that of our art, that is, in what we have come to call “aesthetic” categories. The liturgy is indeed, something special; it is singing in a special register. But this is because it is a privileged way of speaking to God, or being in communion with him. The bardic song is a uniquely solemn way of remembering and honouring our heroes.

In other words, what is special here is not to be understood aesthetically, in terms of the way in which the listener is (or ought to be) moved, but ontically: a specially important kind of action is being carried out (worshipping God, praising heroes).

In the original context, even telling a story within certain canonical forms, singing a love song, can be understood in this earlier “ontic” way. It lifts the events to a higher plane; there is now something archetypal, something close to the universal human grain, in this love, or this story. It places them in a higher register.

Then with song and story, we sooner or later come to a shift. In chant and bardic recitation, we have well understood social action. We don’t yet have “art” in the modern sense, as a separate activity from religion, praising heroes, etc. The separate activity arises when we come to value creations because they allow us to contemplate, that is, to hold before ourselves so that we can appreciate whatever it is (great-

ness of God, or of the sense of the divine; greatness of heroes, or their admiration; the archetypes of love and suffering, etc.), without participating in the actions they were originally embedded in, e.g., praying or publicly praising our heroes at the feast.

So a first disembedding takes place. This is theorized, for instance, in Aristotle's *Poetics*. Art, as allowing this kind of contemplation, holding things up before us, can be described as mimetic. This is how Aristotle is understanding tragedy, rather than as a species of liturgy, as it was earlier. We are now entering the domain of (what will later be classified as) "art", as with, in more recent centuries, opera, the practice of playing Masses in concerts; nineteenth-century musical performances; and the like.

But there is a second disembedding, which arises with the subtler languages. We see this clearest in the case of music. Music develops over the history of its use in heightened action, and later in mimesis—love song, prayer, opera, etc.—a kind of "semanticisation". This is partly motivated; clearly the tones chosen for the love song and the chant felt right. But they weren't the only possibilities, and there is a great deal of historic association and accretion here.

The first, contemplative disembedding left the music with a clear context of human action: prayer, love declarations, dance, the plot of the opera, etc. These actions were not being done, but contemplated, but still they formed the context. The second disembedding is the step to "absolute" music. This creeps up in the instrumental music of the baroque and classical ages, before being theorized in the Romantic period.

There is a kind of desemanticisation and resemanticisation. The Mozart G Minor Quintet gives us a powerful sense of being moved by something profound and archetypal, not trivial and passing, which is both immensely sad, but also beautiful, moving, and arresting. We could imagine being moved in some analogous kind of way by some beautiful story of star-crossed love, of loss or parting. But the story isn't there. We have something like the essence of the response, without the story.

To put it another way: A love song evokes our being moved profoundly by some love story which seems to express a human archetype: Romeo and Juliet, say. The love song, play, opera gives us both the response expressed, and the intentional object of this response. Now with the new absolute music, we have the response in some way captured, made real, there unfolding before us; but the object isn't there. The music moves us very strongly, because it is moved, as it were; it captures, expresses, incarnates being profoundly moved. (Think of Beethoven quartets.) But what at? What is the object? Is there an object?

Or to come at this resemanticisation from another direction, we might think of the attempts to describe the opening bars of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony as the call

of fate. Here the music is not capturing our being moved, but rather the meaning of intentional object itself. What people are saying is that this is the kind of music you might want to write for an opera for the moment in which fate calls. Only this is “absolute”, not “programme” music; unlike in the opera, the object is left unportrayed.

Nevertheless we feel that there must be an object, an adequate object; or else this would be deception, play-acting. But we don't necessarily have any (other) language for it. Certainly not an assertoric language. This opens the way for Schopenhauer's theory of music. And then the practice of Wagner, which brings “absolute” music back into the story context of opera, but now enriched.

Semanticisation works thus at least in part, by capturing modes of being moved. But also perhaps by trying to express what is chthonic, cosmic. Here it trades on resonances of the cosmic in us.

This is a new kind of semantic freedom of exploration. Other arts imitate this. Mallarmé is a paradigm example in poetry. Then non-representational painting moves into a new space.

Subtler languages which have taken this “absolute” turn, unhooked themselves from intentional objects (music), or the assertoric (poetry), or the object represented (painting), are moving in a new field. The ontic commitments are very unclear. This means that such art can serve to disclose very deep truths which in the nature of things can never be obvious, nor available to everyone, regardless of spiritual condition. Thus Beethoven; and certainly Hopkins. But it can also combine with a denial of deep ontic realities out there. There is only *le Néant*. This leaves a residual mystery: why are we so moved? But this mystery is now replaced within us. It is the mystery of anthropological depth. This is what we have with Mallarmé. But the explorations here can then be re-used by those who see a reality outside, like Eliot; and those who want to point to one: Celan?

We can thus see how subtler languages operating in the “absolute” mode can offer a place to go for modern unbelief. In particular, for those who are moved by critiques on the “Romantic” axes: the modern identity and outlook flattens the world, leaves no place for the spiritual, the higher, for mystery. This doesn't need to send us back to religious belief. There is another direction.

The idea is: the mystery, the depth, the profoundly moving, can be, for all we know, entirely anthropological. Atheists, humanists cling on to this, as they go to concerts, operas, read great literature. So one can complement an ethic and a scientific anthropology which remain very reductive and flat.

All this shows how the new recourse to “subtler languages” reflects the predicament of the buffered identity. First, in an obvious negative way: the increasing

unavailability of the earlier languages of objective reference, connected to sacred history, the correspondences, the Great Chain, is the ineluctable consequence of disenchantment, the recession of the cosmos before a universe to be understood in mechanistic terms. But the aspiration to create new languages shows the unwillingness to leave matters there. It reflects the force, in part, of the new cosmic imaginary, the struggle to articulate the new moral meanings in nature. This is plain in the work of Friedrich just mentioned, as well as in the poems of Wordsworth and Hölderlin, and in a host of other places. In more general terms, the struggle is to recover a kind of vision of something deeper, fuller, in the recognition that this cannot be easy, that it requires insight and creative power.

The enframing understanding is that our epistemic predicament is different. Where before the languages of theology and metaphysics confidently mapped out the domain of the deeper, the “invisible”, now the thought is that these domains can only be made indirectly accessible through a language of “symbols”. This polysemic word took on a special sense for the generation of German Romantics of the 1790s, which was later reflected in Goethe’s writings. The “symbol” in this sense reveals something which can’t be made accessible in any other way; unlike the “allegory”, whose images refer us to a domain which we could also describe directly, in literal language.

The symbol is in fact constitutive of what Wasserman calls a “subtler language”. It first and only gives access to what it refers to. It cannot simply rely on established languages. And that is why making/finding a symbol is so difficult; why it needs creative power, even genius. But this also means that what has been revealed is also partly concealed; it cannot be simply detached from the symbol, and be open to scrutiny as the ordinary referents are in our everyday world.

Now there is a close connection between the modern cosmic imaginary and the subtler languages of the last two centuries, particularly the poetry. The earlier imaginary was articulated and given shape by the cosmos ideas which animated it. There is nothing analogous for the new imaginary, save science; and important as this is, it cannot suffice to articulate the moral meanings of things. At the moment when the hermeneutic of nature as the embodiment of the forms and the Great Chain begins to falter, probing its half-hidden meanings becomes one of the major themes of subtler languages, as in this passage from *Tintern Abbey*, where Wordsworth speaks of

A presence that disturbs me with the joy  
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime  
Of something far more deeply interfused,  
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
And the round ocean and the living air,

And the blue sky, and the mind of man;  
 A motion and a spirit, that impels  
 All thinking things, all objects of all thought,  
 And rolls through all things. (ll. 94–102)

The idea that nature has something to say to us hovers there in our culture, too far out for the buffered identity to be uncomfortable with it, but powerful enough to be evoked in a number of indirect ways—in art, in our feelings of renewal as we enter countryside or forest, in some of our responses of alarm at its destruction.

As I argued above, this sense of the need to open to nature is a counterpart to the feeling that there is something inadequate in our way of life, that we live by an order which represses what is really important. One of the paradigm places in which this sense of inadequacy was articulated was in Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*.<sup>7</sup> This was a critique of the dominant form of Enlightenment anthropocentrism, mainly on the second axis discussed in Chapter 8, section 2. It was a critique of this outlook as a moralism. The imposition of morality by the will on our refractory desires (Schiller plainly has Kant in mind here) divides reason and sensibility, and in effect enslaves one side of our nature to the other. But the simple affirmation of desire against morality divides us no less, and simply reverses the relation of master and slave. What we need to seek is a spontaneous unity, a harmony of all our faculties, and this we find in beauty. In beauty, form and content, will and desire, come of themselves together, indeed they merge inseparably.

At first, it seems that Schiller is talking about beauty as an aid to being moral; it enables one more effectively to live up to the moral law, because one goes along willingly, so to speak. But as the work proceeds, it more and more appears that Schiller sees the stage of aesthetic unity as a higher stage, beyond moralism. It is an integral fulfillment, in which all sides of our nature come together harmoniously, in which we achieve full freedom, since one side of us is no longer forced to submit to the demands of the other, and in which we experience the fullness of joy. This is the fulfillment, going beyond morality, which is really the point of our existence.

This is what Schiller seems to be saying. He introduces his new term 'play', which was to be taken up by so many writers after him in the last two centuries. It designates the activities by which we create and respond to beauty, and it is chosen to carry the sense of gratuitous, spontaneous freedom which is lacking in the imposition of law by the will. Schiller asserts that human beings "are only human insofar as they play".<sup>8</sup> This is the apex of human self-realization.

Schiller thus gave a wonderfully clear, convincing and influential formulation to a central idea of the Romantic period, that the answer to the felt inadequacy of moralism, the important defining goal or fulfillment which it leaves out and re-



presses, was to be found in the aesthetic realm. This went beyond the moral, but in Schiller's case wasn't seen as contradicting it. Rather it complements morality in completing human fulfillment. Later, a doctrine which derives a great deal from Schiller's theory, one which also makes crucial use of the notion of 'play', will set the aesthetic against the moral. It finds its most important spokesman in Nietzsche.

So the aesthetic was established as an ethical category, as a source of answers to the question, how should we live? what is our greatest goal or fulfillment? This gives a crucial place to art. Beauty is what will save us, complete us. This can be found outside us, in nature, or in the grandeur of the cosmos (especially if we also incorporate the sublime in this regenerating power). But in order to open ourselves fully to this, we need to be fully aware of it, and for this we need to articulate it in the languages of art. So created beauty, works of art, are not only important loci of that beauty which can transform us, they are also essential ways of acceding to the beauty which we don't create. In the Romantic period, artistic creation comes to be the highest domain of human activity.

If we reach our highest goal through art and the aesthetic, then this goal, it would appear, must be immanent. It would represent an alternative to the love of God as a way of transcending moralism. But things are not so simple. God is not excluded. Nothing has ruled out an understanding of beauty as reflecting God's work in creating and redeeming the world. A theological aesthetic in von Balthasar's terms<sup>9</sup> is still an open possibility after Schiller.

The important change is rather that this issue now must remain open. This is what marks us off from earlier times. In pre-modern times, the beauty of art was understood in terms of mimesis: the imitation of reality which was set in an ordered cosmos, with its levels of being, which was further understood as God's creation; or the imitation of a divine history, in portrayals, say, of Mary and her Son, or of the Crucifixion. It went without saying that great art refers us to the correspondences, to the order of being, to sacred history. With the fading of these backgrounds, with the coming of a buffered self, for whom this larger spiritual environment was no longer a matter of untheorized experience, though it might still be an object of reasoned belief, we have the growth of what I have been calling, following Wasserman, "subtler languages". This was the second important creation of the Romantic period, complementing the identification of beauty as the key to restoring our lost unity.

Now as I argued above, these languages function, have power, move us, but without having to identify their ontic commitments. "Absolute" music expresses being moved by what is powerful and deep, but does not need to identify where this is to be found, whether in heaven, or on earth, or in the depths of our own being—or even whether these alternatives are exclusive. The consummation of subtler lan-

guages is when, in Pater's words, all arts strive to approach the condition of music. Now to enter in this medium does not mean to deny God. On the contrary, many great modern artists—Eliot, Messiaen—have tried to make their medium a locus of epiphany. This is perfectly possible. But it is not necessary. The ontic commitments can be other, or they can remain largely unidentified.

And this is what offers a place to go for modern unbelief. As a response to the inadequacies of moralism, the missing goal can be identified with the experience of beauty, in the realm of the aesthetic. But this is now unhooked from the ordered cosmos and/or the divine. It can be grounded anew in some purely immanent outlook, such as that offered by Freud, for instance. But it can also be left unspecified, and that is in fact the option most frequently taken.

It is largely thanks to the languages of art that our relation to nature can so often remain in this middle realm, this free and neutral space, between religious commitment and materialism. Something similar can perhaps be said of our relation to music. I am thinking of the way in which publicly performed music, in concert hall and opera house, becomes an especially important and serious activity in nineteenth century bourgeois Europe and America. People begin to listen to concerts with an almost religious intensity. The analogy is not out of place. The performance has taken on something of a rite, and has kept it to this day. There is a sense that something great is being said in this music. This too has helped create a kind of middle space, neither explicitly believing, but not atheistic either, a kind of undefined spirituality.<sup>10</sup>

Other features of our world seem to exist in the same ambiguous space. For instance, tourism, an activity involving masses of people in the late twentieth century; people travel for all sorts of reasons, but one is to see the important "sights" of our and other civilizations. Now these are overwhelmingly churches, temples, sites in which the strong transcendent meanings of the past are embedded. Perhaps one might reply that this proves nothing, except that the civilizations of the past invested heavily in the transcendent; those who want to see the monuments of the past, admire its art, etc., don't have the choice; they have to find these in cathedrals, mosques, temples. But I don't believe that this is all there is to it, but that there is also a certain admiration, wonder, mixed with some nostalgia, at these sites where the contact with the transcendent was/is so much firmer, surer.

The existence of this middle space is a reflection of what I called above, in Chapter 8, section 1, the cross-pressure felt by the modern buffered identity, on the one hand drawn towards unbelief, while on the other, feeling the solicitations of the spiritual—be they in nature, in art, in some contact with religious faith, or in a sense of God which may break through the membrane.

The continued search for what can be revealed by "symbols" (however this no-

tion is phrased) in the art of the last two centuries, the very prominence of this understanding of art, even as something to rebel against, through a denial of “meaning”, says something about our predicament. The loss of pre-modern languages shows how embedded we are in the buffered identity, but the continued attempt to devise subtler languages shows how difficult it is just to leave things there, not to try to compensate for, to replace those earlier vehicles of now problematic insight. This is another cultural fact about modernity, which testifies in the same sense as the concern for lost meaning. It bespeaks the malaise, the uncertainties, which inhabit the buffered identity.

The shift from cosmos to universe did two important things. It allowed for the development of deeper and more solid forms of materialism and unbelief, and it also gave a new shape to the cross-pressure felt by the buffered identity between belief and unbelief. Along with the development of post-Romantic art, it helps to create a neutral space between these.

## 2

I have been discussing this second development in the last pages. I now want to connect up to the beginning of this section by examining the maturing of unbelief in this period.

Of course, if we're looking for the reasons which made people renounce their religious belief in the nineteenth century, the gamut is very wide. Some of them are similar to these we have already rehearsed in the discussion of the rise of an option of unbelief in the eighteenth century. It is clear, for instance, that people who felt strongly the satisfactions of the buffered identity—power, invulnerability—and were not very sensitive to its narrowing effect, tended to opt more easily for the materialist side. Then there are all the reasons which made people reject Christianity: its counter-Enlightenment doctrines of human evil, and of divine punishment; the Church's practices of exclusion, its siding with obscurantism.

To take up this point from the other side, it could easily appear that the values of the modern moral order could only be carried out fully and radically by the step into unbelief. In the nineteenth century, one of the key values was understood to be altruism. And in this regard exclusive humanism could claim to be superior to Christianity. First, Christianity offers extrinsic rewards for altruism in the hereafter, where humanism makes benevolence its own reward; and secondly it sometimes can be tempted to exclude heretics and unbelievers from its purview whereas humanism can be truly universal. Mill, for instance, put forward these arguments.<sup>11</sup>

In other ways too, materialism seemed to complete a movement implicit in the modern order. The rehabilitation of ordinary, sensuous nature against the calum-

nies laid on it by those outlooks which aspire to some “higher” or “spiritual” level of existence, seems to take its most radical, thoroughgoing form in a doctrine which denies flatly all such higher levels. The defense of ordinary human desire against the demands of the supposedly superior renunciative vocations, which was undertaken by the Reformers, seems to reach its final end and logical conclusion in materialism. It is a declaration of the innocence of sensuous nature, of solidarity with it against the tortured demands of an illusory inhuman perfection.

All these factors had already been operative in the eighteenth century, although perhaps not focussed in quite the same way in the case of altruism. But now there entered two new factors, which both shifted the argument somewhat, and also contributed to the new depth and solidity of materialist positions. They are obviously linked. I am thinking of the impact of science and scholarship, on one hand, and the new cosmic imaginary, on the other.

Both science and scholarship had considerably developed. The latter was principally relevant in the form of Biblical criticism, which called into question the sources of the Bible. But far more important was the support which science was purported to offer to a materialist view of the universe, principally in connection with Darwin’s work on evolution.

I don’t mean by this that the “scientific” argument from evolutionary theory to atheism is convincing, or even that just as a scientific argument it convinced. My view, as I shall argue below (Chapter 15), is that the shift in world views turned rather on ethical considerations. I don’t just mean ethical considerations extraneous to the “scientific” argument, such as those concerning altruism just mentioned. I mean that what began to look more plausible was the whole stance underlying the epistemology of materialism, over against that underlying the epistemology of Christian faith.

It is not hard to see why this was (and still is) so. Even where the conclusions of science seem to be doing the work of conversion, it is very often not the detailed findings so much as the form. Modern science offers us a view of the universe framed in general laws. The ultimate is an impersonal order of regularities in which all particular things exist, over-arching all space and time. This seems in conflict with Christian faith, which relates us to a personal Creator-God, and which explains our predicament in terms of a developing exchange of divine action and human reaction to his interventions in history, culminating in the Incarnation and Atonement.

Now there is a deep conflict in Western intellectual sensibility, going way back, between those who respond to this personal-historical faith, and those whose sense of what is plausible leads them to seek as ultimate framework an impersonal order. Many “philosophical” minds, even in the great religions which descend from Abra-

ham, have been drawn in this direction. The attraction in the Middle Ages of the Aristotelian idea of an eternal universe, even though (seemingly) incombinable with the belief in the creation, on thinkers like Maimonides and Ibn Rushd, is a case in point.

The draw to the impersonal framework also helped to promote Deism and eventually unbelief, as I described in Chapter 7. We saw how for Providential Deism the principal claim to God's benevolence is precisely the nature of his unchanging order in creation. Lessing speaks of the "broad ditch" that separates the general truths of morality and religion from any particular facts of history.<sup>12</sup>

For those who take this view, the noblest, highest truths *must* have this general form. Personal interventions, even those of a God, would introduce something arbitrary, some element of subjective desire, into the picture, and the highest truths about reality must be beyond this element. From this standpoint, a faith in a personal God belongs to a less mature standpoint, where one still needs the sense of a personal relation to things; one is not yet ready to face the ultimate truth. A line of thinking of this nature, steadily gathering strength, runs through modern thought and culture, from Spinoza, through Goethe, to our present time.

Now I think that an important part of the force which drove many people to see science and religion as incompatible, and to opt for the former, comes from this crucial difference in form. In other words, the success of science built on and helped to entrench in them the sense that the Christian religion they were familiar with belonged to an earlier, more primitive or less mature form of understanding.

Now this bent to impersonality was greatly reinforced by the new cosmic imaginary. The vast universe, in which one could easily feel no sense of a personal God or a benign purpose, seemed to be impersonal in the most forbidding sense, blind and indifferent to our fate. An account in terms of impersonal causal law seemed called for by the new depth sense of reality in the universe.

This inference was all the stronger in that the stance of disengaged reason, construing the world as it does as devoid of human meaning, fits better with the impersonal picture. But this stance is part of the modern identity of the buffered self, which thus finds a natural affinity for the impersonal order.

But the affinity was not just epistemic. In a sense the moral outlook of modernity—the modern social imaginary with its stranger sociability, the great centrality of the moral code which articulates the modern moral order—calls on us to rise to a universal standpoint. The new morality comes to be identified with the standpoint of the "impartial spectator", as Hutcheson phrased it. We have to rise above and beyond our particular, narrow, biased view on things, to a view from everywhere, or for everyman, the analogue of the "view from nowhere" which natural science strives to occupy.

Seen from this perspective, the real telos implicit in the earlier forward steps of humanity—the Axial period, the end of paganism and polytheism, the Reformation—was the bringing of disenchantment, the end of a cosmos of spirits respondent to humans, and the coming of the impersonal order defined by the moral code. Straight line orthodox monotheism was not yet at the goal of this development. It turned the many gods into one, but is still seen as posing the moral issue too much in terms of the favour or disfavour of a capricious tyrant. We are now beyond this.

We shall see later that one of the crucial issues today is precisely whether this relegation of the personal relation in favour of the supremacy of an unchallengeable moral code is really as unproblematic as so many moderns, utilitarians and neo-Kantians, but not only they, seem to think.

In any case, this general *parti pris* for the impersonal may then spill over onto materialism, as the outlook which “science” has developed. But it is interesting that this is not always so. Some people who opted for science over religion were later influenced by the sense of spiritual flatness which I mentioned above. They felt both sides of the cross-pressure. Indeed, this malaise seems to grow among educated élites in the late nineteenth century. They turned to various forms of spiritualism, para-scientific researches, para-psychology and the like. In one case, that of Frederick Myers, the two moves were successive; first a loss of Christian faith owing to Darwinism, then a return to the spiritual, but within the bounds of an impersonal framework. He spoke of himself as “re-entering through the scullery the heavenly mansion out of which I had been kicked through the front door.”<sup>13</sup> A spiritual-but-not-Christian (or Jewish or Muslim) position, adopted on something like these grounds, has remained a very widespread option in our culture.

But other things too, tend to make us align materialism with adulthood. 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.

Of course, this story will probably make little sense to someone who is deeply engaged in a life of prayer or meditation, or other serious spiritual discipline, because this involves in its own way growing beyond and letting go of more childish images of God. But if our faith has remained at the stage of the immature images, then the story that materialism equals maturity can seem plausible. And if in addition, one has been convinced that manliness is the key virtue, then the appeal to go over can appear irresistible. The appeal of science for Mill was precisely that of “good down-

right hard logic, with a minimum of sentimentalism”; it enables you to “look facts in the face”.<sup>14</sup>

We can see from all this how much the appeal of scientific materialism is not so much the cogency of its detailed findings as that of the underlying epistemological stance, and that for ethical reasons. It is seen as the stance of maturity, of courage, of manliness, over against childish fears and sentimentality.

We can say in general terms that, where there was a conversion from faith to “science” which was undertaken reluctantly, and with a sense of loss, the kind of faith involved played an important role. On one hand, there were those who were very deeply wedded to certain particular beliefs, and couldn’t conceive their faith without them. Thus, to the extent to which Christian faith was totally identified with certain dogmas or cosmic theories—e.g., the literal belief that Creation occurred in 4004 B.C., or the neat intermeshing of Deist Providential order—the new depth reality could appear as a decisive refutation. Or to the extent that the drama of Fall, Incarnation, Redemption was understood as incompatible with the slow evolution of human culture, refutation threatened.

And then there were those who felt the accusations of childishness levelled against faith as hitting a target in their own religious life. The presumption of immaturity deeply shook them because of this inner insecurity, and they ended up resolving the tension by abandoning their religion, even if with sadness and a sense of irreparable loss.

In the first case, we can really speak of a conversion brought about by certain scientific conclusions. But then the question must remain: why did they need to identify their faith with these particular doctrines? Why were they so deaf to the moral meanings of the new cosmic imaginary which might have led them back to God?

This fits, of course, with my general position here, that conversions from religion under the influence of “science” turn not on the alleged scientific proofs of materialism or the impossibility of God (which turn out on examination not to go through anyway), but rather on other factors which in this case consist in attachment to inessential doctrines which can be refuted.

In the second case, what happens is that people are convinced that there is something more mature, more courageous, readier to face unvarnished reality in the scientific stance. The superiority is an ethical one, and of course, is heavily influenced by the person’s own sense of his/her own childhood faith, which may well have remained a childish one.

However, we can easily understand that, having gone through this conversion, the way it will appear to the convert will fit the standard story which makes scientific truth the decisive agency. If I become convinced that the ancient faith reflects a more immature outlook on things, in comparison to modern science, then I will in-

deed see myself as abandoning the first to cleave to the second. The fact that I have not made the move following some rigorously demonstrated scientific conclusion will escape me, either because, having already taken my side, I am easily convinced by its “arguments”, or because, also owing to this *parti pris*, I am ready to have faith in science’s ability to come up one day with the conclusive proofs of God’s inexistence.

To put the point in another way, the story that a convert to unbelief may tell, about being convinced to abandon religion by science, is in a sense really true. This person does see himself as abandoning one world view (“religion”) because another incompatible one (“science”) seemed more believable. But what made it in fact more believable was not “scientific” proofs; it is rather that one whole package: science, plus a picture of our epistemic-moral predicament in which science represents a mature facing of hard reality, beats out another package: religion, plus a rival picture of our epistemic-moral predicament in which religion, say, represents true humility, and many of the claims of science unwarranted arrogance. But the decisive consideration here was the reading of the moral predicament proposed by “science”, which struck home as true to the convert’s experience (of a faith which was still childish—and whose faith is not, to one or another degree?), rather than the actual findings of science. This is the sense in which what I’ve been calling moral considerations played a crucial role; not that the convert necessarily found the morality of “science” of itself more attractive—one can assume that in a sense the opposite was the case, where he bemoaned loss of faith—but that it offered a more convincing story about his moral/spiritual life.

As I stated above, in commenting on the long evolution of the universe idea out of the cosmos, there are no important scientific moves which are not also motivated by a strongly held vision, which in turn has spiritual implications. When “science” beats out “religion”, it is one such vision which expels another, and in this victory the moral/spiritual implications are probably playing a role. But once this happens, then the very ethic of “science” requires that the move be justified retrospectively in terms of “proofs”. The official story takes over.

This whole way of seeing things, which comes about through the joint effect of science and the new cosmic imaginary, helped along by a notion of maturity which they generate along with the buffered identity, has brought about modes of unbelief which are much more solid. They are more firmly anchored, both in our sense of our world, and in the scientific and technological practices by which we know it and deal with it. This is why for whole milieux today materialism has become the obvious, the default position. It is no longer a wild, far-out theory, but creeps close to what is seen as common sense.

But materialism has not only solidified, it has also deepened. As we saw in the above discussion, the new cosmic imaginary carried further what the mechanistic



view of the universe had already started. This world-picture had dissipated totally the earlier view of a meaning in things captured in the Platonic-Aristotelian idea that the world around us was the realization of Forms, the theory of ontic logos. But there was still room for other kinds of meaning: for instance, the purposes which God furthers in creating the mechanistic universe, or those which we have in virtue of having souls. Thoroughgoing materialism wipes these away as well.

Now an utter absence of purpose can be experienced as a terrible loss, as the most dire threat levelled at us by the disenchanting world. But it can also be seen in the other positive perspective, that of invulnerability. In such a universe, nothing is demanded of us; we have no destiny which we are called on to achieve, on pain of damnation, or divine retribution, or some terminal discord with ourselves. Already the Epicureans had made this point in one form. To know that all comes from atoms and their swervings, that the Gods are utterly unconcerned with us, is to liberate us from fear of the beyond, and thus allow us to achieve ataraxia. Modern materialism takes up this legacy, but gives it the characteristically modern activist twist: in this purposeless universe, we decide what goals to pursue. Or else we find them in the depths, our depths, that is, something we can recognize as coming from deep within us. In either case, it is we who determine the order of human things—and who can thus discover in ourselves the motivation, and the capacity, to build the order of freedom and mutual benefit, in the teeth of an indifferent and even hostile universe.

We are alone in the universe, and this is frightening; but it can also be exhilarating. There is a certain joy in solitude, particularly for the buffered identity. The thrill at being alone is part sense of freedom, part the intense poignancy of this fragile moment, the “dies” (day) that you must “carpere” (seize). All meaning is here, in this small speck. Pascal got at some of this with his image of the human being as a thinking reed.

The new cosmic imaginary adds a further dimension to this. Having come to sense how vast the universe is in time and space, how deep its micro-constitution goes into the infinitesimal, and feeling thus both our insignificance and fragility, we also see what a remarkable thing it is that out of this immense, purposeless machine, life, and then feeling, imagination and thought emerge.

Here is where a religious person will easily confess a sense of mystery. Materialists usually want to repudiate this; science in its progress recognizes no mysteries, only temporary puzzles. But nevertheless, the sense that our thinking, feeling life plunges its roots into a system of such unimaginable depths, that consciousness can emerge out of this, fills them too with awe.

Our wonder at our dark genesis, and the conflict we can feel around it, is well captured by a writer of our day. Douglas Hofstadter recognizes that certain people

have an instinctive horror of any “explaining away” of the soul. I don’t know why some people have this horror while others, like me, find in reductionism the ultimate religion. Perhaps my lifelong training in physics and science in general has given me a deep awe at seeing how the most substantial and familiar of objects or experiences fades away, as one approaches the infinitesimal scale, into an eerily insubstantial ether, a myriad of ephemeral swirling vortices of nearly incomprehensible mathematical activity. This in me evokes a cosmic awe. To me, reductionism doesn’t “explain away”; rather, it adds mystery.<sup>15</sup>

But this awe is modulated, and intensified, by a sense of kinship, of belonging integrally to these depths. And this allows us to recapture the sense of connection and solidarity with all existence which arose in the eighteenth century out of our sense of dark genesis, but now with an incomparably greater sense of the width and profundity of its reach.<sup>16</sup>

And so materialism has become deeper, richer, but also more varied in its forms, as protagonists take different stands to the complex facets I have just been trying to lay out. The reasons to opt for unbelief go beyond our judgments about religion, and the supposed deliverances of “science”. They include also the moral meanings which we now find in the universe and our genesis out of it. Materialism is now nourished by certain ways of living in, and further developing, our cosmic imaginary; certain ways of inflecting our sense of the purposelessness of this vast universe, our awe at, and sense of kinship with it.

This was one way, through science and the cosmic imaginary, in which unbelief deepened and solidified in the nineteenth century. Another, which I will just mention here, is that the forms of social imaginary built around simultaneity and action in purely secular time—the market economy, the public sphere, the polity of popular sovereignty—were becoming more and more dominant. Once again, we have a sense of social reality, parallel to the cosmic imaginary’s sense of natural reality, which by no means must command an unbelieving outlook; but it certainly can consort with one, and on certain readings of the issue can be made to seem alone compatible with such an outlook. Certainly Pius IX thought so.

But whatever we think of nineteenth-century Papal politics (and they certainly don’t convince anyone today), there is a deeper point here, which is analogous to our discussion of the cosmic imaginary. Modern societies are impersonal in an important sense; that is, they are based on stranger sociability, and involve the creation of collective agency among equals; they privilege categorical identities, in which people are linked through shared properties (being Americans, Frenchmen, Muslims, Catholics), rather than through a network of personal relations, as in kinship,

or the relations of fealty central to pre-modern European societies (“feudal”, as they were called.) People whose religious life was bound up with the forms of life of a network society—for instance peasants living in the hierarchical world of a country parish—once transferred to an industrializing city in the nineteenth century, would be profoundly disoriented, and unable to live their traditional religion. They may easily fall away from churches altogether, or else invent quite new forms of religious life. I shall explore this in a later chapter.

### 3

The deeper, more anchored forms of unbelief arising in the nineteenth century are basically the same as those which are held today. We can see the Victorians as our contemporaries in a way which we cannot easily extend to the men of the Enlightenment. Foucault and others have noticed the watershed that the Romantic age made in European thought, accrediting a sense of reality as deep, systematic, as finding its mainsprings well below an immediately available surface, whether it be in the economic theories of a Marx, the “depth psychology” of a Freud, or the genealogies of a Nietzsche.<sup>17</sup> We are still living in the aftermath of this shift to depth, even though we may contest these particular theories. In this respect, we might be tempted to say that modern unbelief starts then, and not really in the Age of the Enlightenment. The nineteenth century would be the moment when “the Modern Schism” occurred.<sup>18</sup>

The mention of Nietzsche in the preceding paragraph brings us to an extremely important turn in the moral imagination of unbelief in the nineteenth century. I talked of the “post-Schopenhauerian” visions earlier, which give a positive significance to the irrational, amoral, even violent forces within us. The idea is, in various forms, that these cannot simply be condemned and uprooted, because our existence, and/or vitality, creativity, strength, ability to create beauty depend on them. This turn finds a new moral meaning in our dark genesis out of the wild and prehuman. It comes of a rebellion against the standard form of modern anthropocentrism, along the “tragic” axis, rejecting the too-harmonized picture of life, in which suffering, evil and violence have been painted out.

This is a turn against the values of the Enlightenment. But unlike what we usually call the counter-Enlightenment—thinkers like Bonald and de Maistre—it is not in any sense a return to religion or the transcendent. It remains resolutely naturalist. That’s why I will refer to it as the “immanent counter-Enlightenment”.

What it is rebelling against is a crucial strand of modern exclusive humanism, which in turn draws on the religious tradition which preceded it. This is, in fact, a powerful constitutive strand of modern western spirituality as a whole: an affirma-

tion of the value of life, of succouring life and sustaining it, healing and feeding. This was intensified by the anthropocentric turn, where the purposes of God were narrowed to this one goal of sustaining human life. The continuing power of this idea is perhaps evident in the contemporary concern to preserve life, to bring prosperity, to reduce suffering, world-wide, which is I believe without precedent in history.

This concern reflects, on one hand, the modern idea of moral order; while on the other, it arises historically out of what I have called elsewhere “the affirmation of ordinary life”.<sup>19</sup> What I was trying to gesture at with this term is the cultural revolution of the early modern period, which dethroned the supposedly higher activities of contemplation and the citizen life, and put the centre of gravity of goodness in ordinary living, production and the family. It belongs to this spiritual outlook that our first concern ought to be to increase life, relieve suffering, foster prosperity. Concern above all for the “good life” smacked of pride, of self-absorption. And beyond that, it was inherently inegalitarian, since the alleged “higher” activities could only be carried out by an élite minority, whereas leading rightly one’s ordinary life was open to everyone. This is a moral temper to which it seems obvious that our major concern must be our dealings with others, in justice and benevolence; and these dealings must be on a level of equality.

This affirmation, which constitutes a major component of our modern ethical outlook, was originally inspired by a mode of Christian piety. It exalted practical agape, and was polemically directed against the pride, élitism, one might say, self-absorption of those who believed in “higher” activities or spiritualities.

Consider the Reformers’ attack on the supposedly “higher” vocations of the monastic life. These were meant to mark out élite paths of superior dedication, but were in fact deviations into pride and self-delusion. The really holy life for the Christian was within ordinary life itself, living in work and household in a Christian and worshipful manner.

There was an earthly, one might say, earthy critique of the allegedly “higher” here which was then transposed, and used as a secular critique of Christianity, and indeed, religion in general. Something of the same rhetorical stance adopted by Reformers against monks and nuns is taken up by secularists and unbelievers against Christian faith itself. This allegedly scorns the real, sensual, earthly human good for some purely imaginary higher end, the pursuit of which can only lead to the frustration of the real, earthly good, to suffering, mortification, repression, etc. The motivations of those who espouse this “higher” path are thus, indeed, suspect. Pride, élitism, the desire to dominate play a part in this story too, along with fear and timidity (also present in the earlier Reformers’ story, but less prominent).

Exclusive humanism has inherited both the allegiance to the moral order, and the affirmation of ordinary life. And this has provoked, as it were, a revolt from within.

The revolt has been against what one could call a secular religion of life, which is one of the most striking features of the modern world.

We live in an extraordinary moral culture, measured against the norm of human history, in which suffering and death, through famine, flood, earthquake, pestilence or war, can awaken world-wide movements of sympathy and practical solidarity. Granted, of course, that this is made possible by modern media and modes of transportation, not to speak of surpluses. These shouldn't blind us to the importance of the cultural-moral change. The same media and means of transport don't awaken the same response everywhere; it is disproportionately strong in ex-Latin Christendom.

Let us grant also the distortions produced by media hype and the media-gazer's short attention span, the way dramatic pictures produce the strongest response, often relegating even more needy cases to a zone of neglect from which only the cameras of CNN can rescue them. Nevertheless, the phenomenon is remarkable. The age of Hiroshima and Auschwitz has also produced Amnesty International and Médecins Sans Frontières.

Of course, the Christian roots of all this run deep. First, there is the extraordinary missionary effort of the Counter-Reformation Church, taken up later by the Protestant denominations. Then there were the mass-mobilization campaigns of the early nineteenth century—the anti-slavery movement in England, largely inspired and led by Evangelicals; the parallel abolitionist movement in the United States, also largely Christian-inspired. Then this habit of mobilizing for the redress of injustice and the relief of suffering world-wide becomes part of our political culture. Somewhere along the road, this culture ceases to be simply Christian-inspired—although people of deep Christian faith continue to be important in today's movements. Moreover, it probably needed this breach with the culture of Christendom for the impulse of solidarity to transcend the frontier of Christendom itself.

This is the complex legacy of the Enlightenment which I am trying to describe here. It incorporates a powerful humanism, affirming the importance of preserving and enhancing life, of avoiding death and suffering, an eclipse/denial of transcendence which tends to make this humanism an exclusive one, and a dim historical sense that the first of these came about through and depends on the second.

From its beginnings two and a half centuries ago, this developing ethos encountered resistance. In its very influential Utilitarian variant, it was seen as a kind of flattening of human life, rendering it "one-dimensional", to use an expression which gained wide currency later. Life in the "Crystal Palace", to quote Dostoyevsky's protagonist in *Notes from Underground*, was felt as stifling, as diminishing, as deadening, or as levelling. There were clearly at least two important sources of this reaction, though they could sometimes be (uneasily) combined.

One was the continuing spiritual concern with the transcendent, which could

never accept that flourishing human life was all there is, and bridled at the reduction. The other sprang from the older aristocratic ethos, and protested against the levelling effects of the culture of equality and benevolence. It apprehended a loss of the heroic dimension of human life, and a consequent levelling down of human beings to the bourgeois, utilitarian mean. That this concern went well beyond reactionary circles, we can see from the case of Tocqueville, who was very worried by this kind of reduction of humanity which threatens us in a democratic age. He feared a world in which people would end up being occupied exclusively with their “*petits et vulgaires plaisirs*”, and would lose the love of freedom.<sup>20</sup>

Now these resistances were nourished by long-standing traditions, those of the transcendent on one hand, and certain long-existing standards of honour and excellence on the other. What I am calling the immanent revolt is a resistance against the primacy of life, but which has abandoned these traditional sources. It is neither grounded in transcendence, nor based on the historically received understandings of social hierarchy—though it may be inspired by earlier versions of the warrior ethic, as we see with Nietzsche.

It is the revolt from within unbelief, as it were, against the primacy of life. Not now in the name of something beyond, but really more just from a sense of being confined, diminished by the acknowledgment of this primacy.

So as well as an external counter-Enlightenment, nourished by the traditions that the Enlightenment relegated to the zone of illusion, there has grown an immanent counter-Enlightenment, which shares in, even sometimes intensifies this rejection of the past. But just as the secular Enlightenment humanism grew out of the earlier Christian, agape-inspired affirmation of ordinary life, so the immanent counter-Enlightenment grew out of its transcendent-inspired predecessor.

Where this primarily happened was in the literary and artistic domains that grew out of Romanticism and its successors. The Romantic movement was one of the important loci of the Counter-Enlightenment, even if it was also always much more than this. Protest against a flattened world, one which had been denuded of meaning, was a recurring theme of Romantic writers and artists, and this could go together with counter-Enlightenment commitments, although it didn't have to. At least it made it impossible to align oneself with the crasser variants of Enlightenment secularism, such as Utilitarianism.

The immanent counter-Enlightenment comes to existence within this domain of Western culture. From the beginning, it has been linked with a primacy of the aesthetic. Even where it rejects the category, and speaks of an “aesthetic illusion” (as with Paul de Man), it remains centrally concerned with art, and especially modern, post-Romantic art. Its big battalions within the modern academy are found in literature departments.

One of its major themes is a new understanding of the centrality of death, a kind of answer to the inability of mainstream exclusive humanism to cope with mortality. This finds some of its sources in the religious tradition. I will discuss this in Chapter 19.

Alongside that, and interwoven with it, is another kind of revolt against the primacy of life, inspired mainly by the other source of resistance in the external counter-Enlightenment, the resistance against levelling, in the name of the great, the exceptional, the heroic.

The most influential proponent of this kind of view has undoubtedly been Nietzsche. And it is significant that the most important anti-humanist thinkers of our time: e.g., Foucault, Derrida, behind them, Bataille, all draw heavily on Nietzsche.

Nietzsche, of course, rebelled against the idea that our highest goal is to preserve and increase life, to prevent suffering. He rejects this both metaphysically and practically. He rejects the egalitarianism underlying this whole affirmation of ordinary life. But his rebellion is in a sense also internal. Life itself can push to cruelty, to domination, to exclusion, and indeed does so in its moments of most exuberant affirmation.

So this move remains within the modern affirmation of life in a sense. There is nothing higher than the movement of life itself (the Will to Power). But it chafes at the benevolence, the universalism, the harmony, the order. It wants to rehabilitate destruction and chaos, the infliction of suffering and exploitation, as part of the life to be affirmed. Life properly understood also affirms death and destruction. To pretend otherwise is to try to restrict it, tame it, hem it in, deprive it of its highest manifestations, what makes it something you can say “yes” to.

A religion of life which would proscribe death-dealing, and the infliction of suffering, is confining and demeaning. Nietzsche thinks of himself as having taken up some of the legacy of pre-Platonic and pre-Christian warrior ethics, their exaltation of courage, greatness, élite excellence. And central to that has always been a paradigm place for death. The willingness to face death, the ability to set life lower than honour and reputation, has always been the mark of the warrior, his claim to superiority.<sup>21</sup> Modern life-affirming humanism breeds pusillanimity. This accusation frequently recurs in the culture of counter-Enlightenment.

Of course, one of the fruits of this counter-culture was Fascism—to which Nietzsche’s influence was not entirely foreign, however true and valid is Walter Kaufman’s refutation of the simple myth of Nietzsche as a proto-Nazi. But in spite of this, the fascination with death and violence recurs, e.g., in the interest in Bataille, shared by Derrida and Foucault. James Miller’s book on Foucault shows the depths of this rebellion against “humanism”, as a stifling, confining space one has to break out of.<sup>22</sup>

My point here is not to score off neo-Nietzscheanism, as some kind of antecham-

ber to Fascism. As though any of the main spiritual tendencies of our civilization was totally free of responsibility for Fascism. The point is to allow us to recognize that there is an anti-humanism which rebels precisely against the unrelenting concern with life, the proscription of violence, the imposition of equality.

The Nietzschean understanding of enhanced life, which can fully affirm itself, also in a sense takes us beyond life; and in this it is analogous with other, religious notions of enhanced life (like the New Testament's "eternal life"). But it takes us beyond by incorporating a fascination with the negation of life, with death and suffering. It doesn't acknowledge some supreme good beyond life, and in that sense sees itself rightly as utterly antithetical to religion. The "transcendence" is, once again in an important sense and paradoxically, immanent.

What I have been calling the immanent counter-Enlightenment thus involves a new valorization of, even fascination with death and sometimes violence. It rebels against the exclusive humanism that dominates modern culture. But it also rejects all previous, ontically-grounded understandings of transcendence. If we took account of this, we might perhaps change our picture of modern culture. Instead of seeing it as the scene of a two-sided battle, between "tradition", especially religious tradition, and secular humanism, we might rather see it as a kind of free-for-all, the scene of a three-cornered—perhaps ultimately, a four-cornered—battle.

This would allow us to see how greatly what I've called the nova has expanded; positions have multiplied. Their affinities and oppositions become ever more complex. We have just seen this with materialism and unbelief. But a similar multiplication is taking place in other basic positions, and so the debate swirls on among a wider and wider range of participants, between whom a multiplicity of lateral, cross-cutting affinities arises—such as we sensed above between Pascal (of all people) and one strand of modern materialism, as the nova expands.

#### 4

In the nineteenth century, one might say, unbelief comes of age. It develops a solidity, and a depth, but also and perhaps above all, a variety, a complex of internal differences. So that for many people in many milieus in our day, it can become a world unto itself. That is, for them it circumscribes the horizon of the potentially believable. There are exclusive humanists who are unsure of their position; but the direction from which they feel vulnerable is neo-Nietzschean anti-humanism. Or these "post-modernists" themselves have occasional pangs of doubt when they read John Stuart Mill or Karl Marx. The transcendent is off their map.

This is perhaps a moment, then, to recur to my original question: what has changed between 1500, when unbelief was virtually impossible, and (just about)



2000, when there are not only lots of happy atheists, but in certain milieux faith is bucking a powerful current?

Our discussion of the modern cosmic imaginary has helped us to understand this further. At our starting point in 1500, the enchanted world, in which nature and social life were interwoven with higher times, left little room for unbelief. Theologians distinguished between the natural and the supernatural level, but it was not possible to live experientially with one's awareness confined to the first. Spirits, forces, powers, higher times were always obtruding.

With the disenchantment of the world, and the marginalization of higher times, this kind of extrusion of the higher became in principle possible. But it was held off by the sense that the inspiration, strength and discipline we needed to re-order this world as disenchanted and moral came to us from God. It came as grace in individual lives, and it came as divinely ordained disciplines and structures in public life. And central to both individual morality and public order was a sense of a cosmic disposition of things which was providentially established by God for our good.

God was in our conscience, in our social order, in our cosmos; not in the obtrusive fashion of the immediate experience of certain things, places and times, as in the enchanted world; but rather as the ordering power which made sense of the shape of things in morality, society and world.

So the immediate encounter with spirits and forces gives way, but this opens space for that much more powerful a sense of God's ordering will. And indeed, it is partly our sense of this ordering will which has driven enchantment to the margins.

With the anthropocentric turn, this sense of God's ordering presence begins to fade. The sense begins to arise that we can sustain the order on our own. For some, God retreats to a distance, in the beginning or the end (Deists); for others, he fades altogether. Others again aggressively deny him.

The shift in cosmic imaginaries intensifies and completes this undermining of our sense of ordering presence. It is not just that this presence was over-heavily identified with the early modern apologetics of design. It is also that the vast, unfathomable universe in its dark abyss of time makes it all too possible to lose sight of this ordering presence altogether. Indeed, it can make it hard to hang on to this idea.

Our sense of the universe is not unequivocal, as I tried to explain earlier. It can occlude all sense of order and meaning, but it also can be the locus of powerful spiritual meanings. When these are denied, the result is often a narrow and philistine scientism. But if we are open to them, the outcomes can be very varied: read one way, in an Epicurean-naturalist direction, they lead us towards a deep and rich materialism; taken another way, they can open us to a range of spirituality, and for some people, to God.

But if one goes one of the first two ways—either refusing the meanings, or taking them in the Epicurean-naturalist sense—then one can indeed live in a world which seems to proclaim everywhere the absence of God. It is a universe whose outer limits touch nothing but absolute darkness; a universe with its corresponding human world in which we can really experience Godlessness.

This is not the way in which our forebears in 1500 could experience spirits and powers, in an encounter with particular things and places. It is more like the way our (élite) forebears in 1700 experienced God's ordering presence, that is, as a diffuse, structuring principle, rather than an object which can be foregrounded.

But it is different from this again, because it is the sense of an absence; it is the sense that all order, all meaning comes from us. We encounter no echo outside. In the world read this way, as so many of our contemporaries live it, the natural/supernatural distinction is no mere intellectual abstraction. A race of humans has arisen which has managed to experience its world entirely as immanent. In some respects, we may judge this achievement as a victory for darkness, but it is a remarkable achievement nonetheless.