CHALLENGING ISSUES ABOUT THE SECULAR AGE

CHARLES TAYLOR

Fergus Kerr

I am grateful to Fergus for his very acute reading of *A Secular Age* in the light of other things I've written, which in a sense lead up to it, as he rightly observes. And he has put his finger on a big unresolved issue with which I've been struggling both in *Sources of the Self* (1989) and in *A Secular Age* (2007). I think there are demands on the kind of writing I am engaged with in these two books which are very hard to satisfy, but one has nevertheless to keep trying.

What are these demands? In both books I am trying to get clear on long term developments in (to put it shortly) Western civilization, which take us from an epoch in which one outlook (or what we now are tempted to identify as one outlook, however contested the versions) dominated, to one in which several incompatible ones vie for our allegiance. *Sources of the Self* ends up talking about a plurality of moral sources, and *A Secular Age* presents a "nova" of multiplying spiritual and anti-spiritual directions which call on us to follow them.

In both cases, I argue that this kind of division or plurality is crucial to what we call "modernity" in the Western context. *Sources of the Self* perhaps highlighted the battle between "technologists" and "ecologists"; *A Secular Age* takes up the fault lines if you order the field in terms of believers and unbelievers. But both end up dealing with what is recognizably the same scene.

(Of course, in these two books I am trying to do more than frame the contemporary debate. I am also trying to give an account of how our existing

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situation of pluralism arose. But in fact, I believe that you can't do the first without also doing the second. I haven't got space to justify that here.)

Now why take up this kind of enterprise? There are lots of reasons, of course, but a crucial one is that this continuing division, and the debate that it ought to inspire, is often distortively misconceived, so that the kind of exchange and reflection that we need doesn't happen. It doesn't because very wrong conceptions of what in fact divides us become current, ones that allow us to foreclose debate without really examining the issues. This not only makes for an intellectual loss, a lack of clarity; but it also involves an impoverishment on the human level. That's because there is much to gain from a serious exchange between the different positions. There are three related such gains: each party comes better to understand its own position; each overcomes the temptation simply to caricature the others; and through all this each learns to respect, and thus in many respects to learn from, the others.

This requires a certain kind of discourse. The goal here is not "neutrality", in one obvious sense of this word. The positions are moral/spiritual/ evaluative (whichever of these terms applies in a given case), and it is in the nature of these positions that they cannot be adequately expressed in "neutral", in the sense of non-evaluative, language, nor in a "colourless" language devoid of rhetoric. This last point could take further argument, but I haven't got space to do that here, so I'll just take it as given. So we need expositions of the different stands, either by direct quotation, or in indirect discourse, which carry the sense and often take up the rhetoric which can make understandable why people often passionately espouse these views. Perhaps the ideal here is "even-handedness".

But this doesn't mean that one is "even-handed" in relation to philosophical theories, we might say meta-theories, which attempt to explain what is at stake in these debates. On the contrary, I have taken up one such, and I fight tooth and nail against the others, which I think are the cause of the distortion. Thus in *Sources of the Self*, I strongly criticize the notion that, rationally constructed, our moral views are essentially about the criteria of right action (hotly disputed between utilitarians and deontologists), and do not depend in any way on deeply held notions of the good. That's because I think that we all draw on such sources, and that this is the deep and powerful issue that divides us. If we buy this meta-view that real questions can't be debated, it can't even be seen. It falls into a null zone of inattention. A parallel case in *A Secular Age* comes from reductive theories of scientific explanation, from which one can imagine arguing that "science" (that is post-Galilean natural science, which has sidelined all teleology and intentionality) can "disprove" religion. The really interesting and revealing debates don't start until one has sidelined this (I think confused and illusory) view. Not accidentally, many of these attempts at short-circuiting real debate depend on post-Cartesian views of epistemology, very powerfully entrenched in our culture, which yield a very wrong and distortive view of the life of us rational animals. (Briefly, they

lose the animal and thus distort what is involved in the rational. But of course, there are also other forms of short-circuit, those precisely which depend on a caricatural understanding of religion, or of atheism, which forestall the kind of exchange that could discredit them.)

But to be fiercely partisan on the meta-level is not to depart from even-handedness on the substantive level. In making the arguments mentioned in the previous paragraph, I don't think for a minute that I've refuted Utiltari-anism, defined as the view that the only thing that ultimately matters for moral choice is desire-satisfaction (another way of defining "utility"). There are arguments against this view, but they are part of the substantive debate, which doesn't admit of resolution by a knock-out blow, and where the parties owe it to themselves and to each other to understand the deep reasons of their interlocutors. This debate is engaged with "really existing Utilitarian-ism", that is, not with a view which has no place for the notion of virtue, but which is drawn to a powerful virtue of "rationality", peculiar to this position (i.e., very different from Plato's, and also from Kant's, and others).

Or again in arguing against, say, Dawkins' views about what constitutes proof on the issue of the "God delusion", I do not see myself as refuting atheism. I am just trying to clear aside a short-cut that has the effect of stopping real debate, and I might add, of increasing the degree and intensity of mutual misunderstanding and contempt. I'm trying to kick away a crutch on which some atheists want to lean, so that they can walk into a more fruitful debate; this is analogous to the demand on Christians to drop the crutch of Paleyan Design theory, which turns out to be another such argument-stopping short-circuit. Indeed, the present ill-tempered debate between these two kinds of crutch-hobblers is calculated to strengthen each in their stance of artificial life-support. Both substantive positions would benefit from throwing their crutches away.

But of course, to orthodox utilitarians, for whom the meta-theory about the good is fused with their substantive views, as for Dawkinsian atheists, such attacks don't look even-handed on the substantive level. That's too bad; as long as these post-Cartesian epistemological views command such support, we can't convince everyone to separate off the meta-level, and focus on the interesting debate. But nevertheless, people doing the kind of thing I attempted in these two books ought to aspire to even-handedness on what I'm calling the substantive level.

And that is what I have been attempting in these two books (and in other writings). In other words, one of the causes that I might hope these books might serve is that of helping to frame a debate with the various good features, epistemic and human, that I outlined above. Have I succeeded? Of course not, certainly not all around. I think that in some cases I have pre-sented views which are in crucial respects opposed to mine in something like the full force of what makes them attractive to their holders; but this is far from being the case everywhere. This, however, is what I aspire to do, and I

hope that I have not egregiously distorted opposing positions by casting them in terms dictated by my own. I think that in many cases where I have been accused of this, my critics are pointing to my attempt to clear aside short-cuts and elisions which impede the real debate. I hope this might be abundantly clear in the way I deal with accusations against religion as a cause of violence and anti-humanism, and the counter-accusations against the violence of atheist regimes (*A Secular Age* Chapter 17: both these accusations reflect the lamentable tendency to caricature one's opponent which bedevils [a specially apt word] our exchanges today); in fact both faiths and modes of atheism face puzzling questions of how they are led to betray their most basic allegiances; and they would gain from treating these questions together.

But nevertheless, I clearly fall short. But I plead that this kind of writing is very difficult. One is situated somewhere. I am a Catholic Christian. It takes a lot of learning to come to understand other positions as they are seen and felt by those who espouse them. So I think that books of this kind ought to include something else. They ought to include a frank admission of what anyway might be obvious, a kind of statement of "full disclosure". And this is what I have done in each of the books under discussion. In each of them there are passages in which I speak openly in my own voice. And then there are passages in which I present opposing positions. Of course, in some of these latter, I am expounding positions which partly overlap with my own, but the aim of these passages as a whole is to try to define what the issues are. I don't think either book would have been improved by suppressing the "full disclosure" statements. I think such exclusion would either be taken as a lack of frankness, trying to pass off my account as one from nowhere; or else might make the book appear as one with simply apologetic purpose. (Of course, on the meta-level, the books *have* a strong apologetic purpose; but this is not specifically Christian or even theistic; lots of atheists agree with me in condemning post-Cartesian epistemology and mechanistic-reductive accounts of human life.)

Somewhat to my surprise, these moments of full disclosure have been taken as *evidence* of apologetic intent. Which is not to say that I would not repeat them were I to rewrite either book. I still believe strongly in what I was trying to do, even though I fell short of the mark. My only resolution is to try harder next time. And I hope that others will enter the same terrain from other standpoints, or my own, and do much better than I did.

But I am very grateful to Fergus for his article which has induced me to clarify a basic feature of the logic of *A Secular Age* that was far from evident in the book, and not fully worked out in my mind either.

Graham Ward

I am conscious of how partial and incomplete my response to Fergus Kerr's article has been, and I am tempted to take up immediately Graham Ward's

very penetrating comments in order to continue and extend the discussion. Graham points out how far apart the discourses of philosophy/history /social science, on one hand, and theology on the other, have been. I admit that I have tried to use them together to illuminate one and the same matter, and no doubt there is much here of the naïve novice who doesn't understand what he is getting into (I mean this principally in relation to theology, of course, but the remark might just as well apply to social science, to which I stand as an interested amateur).

Once again, I want to separate my actual, rather deficient performance from the project attempted. I think this latter, joining up these discourses in the same argument, is not only desirable, but absolutely indispensable. Of course, Christian theologians make claims to truth. And of course, these claims will be rejected by many practitioners of social science or philosophy. But that is also true of most of the claims made *within* these disciplines. They are all more or less hotly contested. It is hard to find an equivalent to what one can recognize in physics or chemistry, a core of pretty universally accepted findings and theory.

But the idea that some intervention in a social science debate, which happens to emanate from theological reflection is somehow "offside" in social science, and should be considered null and void, is a symptom of threatening stultification. I am sure that Graham agrees with me, but let me drive the nail in a bit deeper. The very concept of "methodological atheism" is either irrelevant or terminally confused. It is irrelevant if we are talking about sciences like physics which by their very nature seek immanent causes (see my response to Hauerwas and Coles); what would a "theological" intervention in these debates look like, unless it be one of the deliverances of "Creation science"? It is deeply confused if it seriously meant a social science of history.

The hypothesis that there is something like a "désir d'éternité" in human beings, however one might want to formulate it, is one that has direct relevance to social science, and in particular to the debate about modern secularization. Not that it could be taken as a hypothesis for which evidence might be sought through interviews, questionnaires, and so on; but because it is an interpretive hypothesis which structures the kinds of things one looks for, and the ways one makes sense of the findings one has established. What I tried to show is that some sociologists just *assume* that there is no long term convincing power for religious faith, once the historical conditions which have rendered it plausible have disappeared. And secularization theory must try to identify what these conditions have been (closed horizons, tight communities, little room for individual difference, absence of technological progress, or whatever). If that is a sociological interpretive hypothesis—albeit one which often goes unexpressed—then surely it is conceivable that it be wrong; and that is just what the "désir d'éternité" hypothesis posits. We wait perhaps for a twenty-first-century Cromwell: "I do beseech you, in the bowels of Popper, bethink ye that ye might be mistaken".

Social science, history, always operate on what might be called philosophical anthropologies, views of human life and the human condition which are often only partly articulate. These should always remain open to criticism. But some of these see human beings in a wider than natural context, as possible loci of access to nirvana, or as creatures made in the image of God. None of these, atheist, theist or of some quite different form, can be ruled out a priori. The claim that one can do so on "methodological" grounds is irreceivable. Seen from one side, that was the message of John Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory*.

Graham no doubt agrees. In certain situations, and before certain questions, you may indeed have to draw on theological sources to make sense of what you're examining. But this might be seen as a misuse of theology; so the thinker of mixed discourse is not yet out of trouble. If the telos of theology is apologetics, then this thinker is engaged in an abuse, using a theologically-based formulation (like the "désir d'éternité") to formulate the interpretive basis for an explanation of a social science fact (e.g., the surprising [to some] persistence of religion).

But all this brings us to a deeper question, which Graham raises, and which was implicit in Fergus' paper: what really does apologetics consist in? I argued in the response to Fergus above that my efforts to situate what I think the real debate consist in required that we clear away certain too facile proposals to settle the issues on mistaken epistemological grounds, and also certain gross caricatures that each side puts forward of the other; in many cases, I have been dealing with caricatures of faith, because in our present intellectual/academic milieu these are the most prominent. Out there, in particular in the US Bible belt, equal and opposite caricatures are cherished, e.g., of latte-sipping, permissive, Northeastern liberals, but I didn't anticipate many readers there (but I'd be delighted to be proven wrong).

These attempts to sideline the shortcuts to non-faith could also serve an apologetic purpose, in those cases where readers are deeply invested in one of these, and are shaken loose by argument, so that they are ready to take faith seriously as an option; or in the commonly-encountered case where someone is leaning towards faith and is discouraged from taking it as a serious option by one of the shortcuts or caricatures. Lots of arguments in this way could serve an apologetic purpose in one context, and a quite different purpose in others.

And in my case, the principal goal of my meta-level arguments was to foster an eventual debate about the real issues which would have the effects of self-clarification, overcoming caricatures and mutual respect that I described above in responding to Fergus. For epistemic and human reasons, I think this is something we should try for, and that all can gain from. In addition, I have very strong theological reasons (which I will just gesture towards as involving the close relation between Christian faith and the dialogical) to want to bring this about.

But, and this is perhaps surprising, this goal amounts to a kind of "accommodation", which Graham identifies as an *alternative* to apologetics as traditionally conceived. Whereas in the mixed discourse that I am (perhaps somewhat confusedly) cobbling together they in some ways not only go together but further each other.

This sense of the value of a certain kind of exchange between different faiths, and between faith and non-faith, I feel to be the adequate response to the "signs of the times". And this brings me to another place where something like apologetics—or at least advocacy—comes in. Earlier, in response to Fergus, I described both *Sources of the Self* and *A Secular Age* as having moments in which I expressed my own commitments. But in fact, these "moments" are much more developed in *A Secular Age*. Most notably, this emerges in the last chapter on "Conversions", but it obtrudes at different places earlier.

I didn't plan on this last chapter when I started writing. I got carried along. This was partly because I wanted to say something about this; I wanted to get something off my chest. But it is also because the issues of how Christians respond to this "secular age" just got more and more pressing; in the argument of the book, but also in the life of the church. So there is a lot of advocacy in the end, intervening in an internal debate in the Church. Here I am not just setting the stage, but trying to convince people, or so I must confess. Graham picks up on the crucial points in his piece: that we not write the history of these centuries (1500–2000 in Latin Christendom) either as "progress" or as "decline"; that we see these different ages rather the way we see different cultures in which the faith has been differently "inculturated"; and that we see the demands of our age as including the kind of conversation that I have been outlining.

This does not entail a negation of apologetics. On the contrary, the conversation I envisage is one in which different, incompatible views meet, and in which arguments are exchanged. If this is absent, the exchange becomes anodyne; it ceases to be mutually revelatory, and ends up in an "agreement to disagree" which gives everyone a good feeling, but doesn't foster real respect. Much more needs to be said about all this. And many more insights find expression in Graham's very thought-provoking article, which I haven't been able to do justice to here.

Stanley Hauerwas and Romand Coles

I am very much in agreement with the thrust of the comments of Hauerwas and Coles. This thrust is in a sense continuous with *A Secular Age*, but also as they say, it raises important questions for it. One set of questions concerns what is left out. And there are lots of things left out. I could have mentioned a great number of other people, movements, actions, thinkers in our contemporary world, from which lessons might be drawn about how one can

respond to the "immanent frame." I have been aware of this throughout the writing of the book. Every facet of it calls for supplementation; it concentrates on a few countries in the North Atlantic world (which defines its scope), and a few confessions, movements, etc. The truth of the basic hypotheses about Reform, the buffered self, the Immanent Frame, and so on, would have to be tested in relation to a great number of other periods, churches, confessions, secularizations. That's why I described it in the preface as more like a set of interlocking essays than a continuous story. The book is in a sense a first draft, of some basic theses which could eventually be tested and refined (but not by me, and I hope not refined out of any recognizable shape).

But the challenge that Hauerwas and Coles raise goes beyond incompletion. It concerns whether some of the things left out, and in particular a host of instances of "daily liturgical work" (page 15), could just be added, in an expanded edition, as it were, or whether the possibility of these has been perhaps foreclosed by the basic terms of *A Secular Age*. One of the big obstacles in *A Secular Age* blocking this extension they identify is what they take as a very strong distinction between the immanent and the transcendent, which seems to merge on the watertight.

I think they have a very strong point here, and I now can see more clearly that the book has an important weakness at this point.

I must admit right here that this distinction as I make it in the book has been enormously contested in the discussions I've read or participated in on the book. Very often the objections go along with pleas for other, wider definitions of transcendent, by those among others who would like to argue for a "horizontal transcendence", forms of self-overcoming which remain in the immanent world, which is not quite the issue raised by Hauerwas and Coles. But in one way or another the distinction is troubling and very unclear, and I begin to regret having used the terms.

But they aren't that easy to avoid, and I'd like to explain why. In fact I wanted to make two points with this terminology. One is that the distinction it marks is indispensable; the second was that as an absolute distinction, it is wrong. I spent a lot of time making the first point, and I gave only disconnected hints in favour of the second.

First, why indispensable? Under some terminology or other, it was essential to my explanatory story. This culminates in a social imaginary of what I call the "immanent frame". This is the fruit of a development which I believe to be at its origin unique to Latin Christendom, although it has since been borrowed, or imposed, much more widely. In every civilization, and through smaller societies which have existed before or outside the great civilizations, we can see some distinction between the beings of our everyday world, on one hand, and higher beings, on the other, be these spirits, or gods, or higher levels of the cosmos—for instance, Plato's Ideas, or the concept in traditional China that we translate as "heaven", as in "the mandate of heaven". In all these cases, these two levels were not seen as rigorously separated. On the

contrary, events or beings on the higher level were necessary to understand and explain what happens at the lower level. Plato's Ideas have to be invoked to explain the things in space-time function. Actions of Gods or spirits explain success or disaster that we experience in our world.

Latin Christendom breaks the pattern, in that it developed in the modern period the conception of the lower, or immanent order, as in a certain sense self-sufficient; that its operation could be explained in terms drawn from itself, without necessarily appealing to the higher level. It is this new distinction, which in a way deserves the description "watertight", which we see developing in our world in modern times. This emerges in a number of forms, but I want to mention three, because they play a particular part in my story. The first is the universe as understood by post-Galilean and Newtonian Natural science. Of course one can argue (as Newton among others did) that the magnificent order exhibited by the universe bespeaks a benevolent Creator, but the actual unfolding of things requires only immanent factors, force, mass, etc. As Laplace answered to Napoleon when the Emperor asked him what he made of God, "Sire, je n'ai pas eu besoin de cette hypothèse".

The second is the social-political order, as understood by the modern Natural Law theory, which posited a Social Contract. Society is built from the bottom up; and while we can see the principles on which they should be built (natural law) as willed by God, this is quite different from pre-modern notions of political order as reflecting the order of the cosmos. The third domain is that of modern moral philosophy, which developed out of natural law, whether in its consequentialist (mostly utilitarian) or deontological (most prominently Kantian) forms. This sees the moral law as emerging from "natural reason", whether or not that coincides with what we can identify as the will of God.

These and other immanent, in the sense of self-sufficient, orders have come to constitute our world, in that they are implicit in our political, economic, scientific-technological practices. Consequently, we have come to live within a social imaginary which takes the split for granted. This is what I have called the "immanent frame", a this-worldly order that we have come to imagine together, whether or not we take this to be the final word on reality, whether we live it in other words, in an "open" or "closed" fashion.

So the distinction is indispensable, because without it we couldn't understand our dominant social imaginary, and hence the world it helps constitute. And this would make it difficult to understand some of the ways in which the issues of belief and unbelief are inevitably posed for us, whether there is something "beyond" this order or not, whether it exhausts reality or not.

But at the same time, the watertight distinction is wrong, and needs to be challenged. This is clearly a necessary condition of living any form of Christian faith, as Hauerwas and Coles clearly show. They invoke Henri de Lubac, and John Milbank's commentary on his *Surnaturel*, and I am entirely in agreement with the common direction of their thought, even though there

are problems with the detailed formulation of this thought which may never be entirely resolved. (Compare the parallel, and related, attempts to overcome the radical mind/body split with which many thinkers today are engaged.)

There is thus an important dimension missing in my thesis in *A Secular Age*, and this remains the case, however one works out in detail, not just the theory, but the practice of "daily liturgical work" in a world in which both the immanent frame and the temptations of a Constantinian Christianity weigh so heavily on us.

Gregory Baum

I largely agree with Gregory's article, which offers what might be thought a series of "friendly amendments" to the main thesis of my book. The critical element mainly concerns omissions from my text. But I have also to note that Gregory raises questions about my use of the immanent/transcendent distinction, which show in their own way the difficulties already raised by Hauerwas and Coles, and other critics. Gregory raises the question, whether "immanent humanism committed to universal well being lacks . . . a transcendent dimension"? (page 5). Connecting to the earlier discussion, one can see this issue in two lights: a) must one not describe the aspiration to go beyond not only one's self-interest, but also the allegiance to one's own community or nation, towards the good of all mankind, as a move to self-transcendence, in some sense of this word? And this, even if there is no recognition of a power beyond the immanent. This raises the issue of what I called above "horizontal transcendence". But one can also take the question in another way, one specifically addressed to the Christian: b) picking up on the passage from Matthew 25 that Gregory quotes, does not the Gospel recognize as doing the will of God acts which are described in purely "immanent terms", feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting prisoners? I take both of these as valid challenges, and I presume that Gregory probably meant them both. (And of course, they are related.)

There is also another criticism which I'd like to take up. My way of presenting the important changes of the late twentieth-century was in one way very inept, and Gregory's remarks point this up. Of course the Age of Authenticity doesn't simply replace the Age of Mobilization as a basic understanding of social existence, in the way that this latter replaced the *ancien régime*. We are still very much in the Age of Mobilization, and it is even hard to imagine our leaving it, short of some terrible civilization-destroying catastrophe. But within this age, there was a crucial shift in understanding of the relation of our spiritual options to political society. The new understanding is the one I identify with the ethic of authenticity. We are far from unanimous in our reaction to this change; for many people the move away from neo-Durkheimian fusions of spiritual outlook and political identity is a regrettable decline. Sometimes this is seen as a betrayal of faith: refusing, for

instance to see America as "one nation under God". But this can also be seen as a betrayal of the nation. And clearly many of those who object to this refusal see it in this double light. But it is not only religious nationalists who are troubled by this. For certain Jacobin-leaning French "republicans", the notion that the Republic can be dissociated from a "laïque" philosophy of emancipation-through-reason is anathema. The republican tradition would be thereby eviscerated.

I am trying to say all this in the book, but I admit that my talk of three Ages is very misleading in that it sounds as though there were three watertight periods, and I am grateful to Gregory for pointing this out.

With the main thrust of his article, I am very much in agreement. What Gregory calls the "back and forth" movement is very much the lens within which we should see the process that has been called "secularization". This is the lens that I propose to replace the idea of a linear causal story which was the essence of the mainline secularization theory, that the more the basket of changes we describe as "modernization" advances, the more religion declines, and/or is marginalized or privatized. Not only is the movement not linear, not only are the responses to "modernization" various, but there is not a single thing, called "religion", which is declining throughout the period. On the contrary, various modernizing changes destabilize earlier forms of religious life, giving rise to new forms, which often flourish but may face destabilization at a later moment. Neo-Durkheimian confessionalization was a response to the French Revolution and its aftermath, but this was destabilized by the changes of the late twentieth-century. What we call "religion" changes and becomes more diverse; and at the same time, atheist and unbelieving outlooks also immensely diversify. Each is impacted on by the other; none of them develops in isolation.

Gregory gives a rich description of part of this process in describing the great range of movements, both of immanent humanism, and of people of faith, which have changed the face of our world; and will go on doing so, as our global civilization confronts a mounting and in some ways terrifying crisis.

Hent de Vries

Hent's fully developed and subtly-argued paper points up a number of facets of my argument in *A Secular Age*. There are a number of important challenges here. But I felt, as his argument proceeded, that there was also a growing misunderstanding between us.

One locus of misunderstanding seems to nest in the notion of "immediacy". On page 23, for instance, he refers to "the putative, hypothesized pre-historical age of immediacy"; I have the sense that thinkers like Hegel, or modern theorists of the "primitive", are being described, but not *A Secular*

Age. In this too-grand term, a number of different points that I tried to make seem in danger of losing their contours.

One very important distinction for me was "naïve" versus "buffered". Here I wanted to grasp the very important shift which amounts to "disenchantment". This involves, I believe, a change in the way we experience the world. In the first condition, the actions of spirits or "magical" forces is sensed as something we experience, as we can the wind, or the elements, or human or animal aggression. The self is "porous", and one can be to different degrees "taken over" by such "magical" agencies. By contrast, for the "buffered" self, the agency here has to be "occult", that is, it is something one might accept as a hypothetical cause of events which would themselves be "naïvely" experienced, such as my falling ill, or suddenly losing a capacity I counted on.

In disenchantment, there is a very important change in our relation to a (possible) spiritual world, but it doesn't consist in a change of belief or hypothesis. Rather, considering different hypotheses belongs to the second stance. What changes is our way of being in, experiencing the world. I am far from satisfied with my account of this change. We have trouble finding the language which will capture it. But I think this shift is of very great importance, and is an important component in the coming of the secular age. But we lose sight of this change if we swallow it up in some supposed massive move from "immediacy" to "mediation". These words all have many meanings.

Another more circumscribed change is what I described as mutual fragilization of different positions, and the resulting sense of optionality. Of course, our society is different from earlier ones in which virtually everybody believed in or experienced the same shape of spirituality. But it is also different from other societies, such as India has been for centuries, and the Ottoman Empire was, to take two examples, in which everyone was aware of many spiritual positions being lived in one's society. But this could be so without one's feeling that some other position was a real existential option for one. Someone living in the Greek Orthodox milieu of Ottoman Turkey was used to sharing his world with Muslims, but it didn't necessarily seem a live option to become a Muslim; and the reverse was, if anything, even more the case (since there were possible gains in conversion for the minority).

But for many people today, members of their own family live some other position; moreover, there have been shifts within the family, and new changes are always taking place. Moreover, everyone is aware that this isn't a rare fact about my family alone, but is very widespread. There are indeed, milieux in which this variety is less salient, and this sets up a powerful "default position" in such micro-worlds, but their inhabitants are well aware that this stability stops at their boundaries. This is what it is to see one's stance as in this sense an option. There would be nothing weird or outlandish in my changing.

This sense of "optionality" is part of my perception of "what goes on", of "how things go" in our society. It has nothing to do with my being ready or

even vaguely tempted to *exercise* an option to change. I may be very firmly rooted in my atheism, or faith, or some such position as I would describe as "spiritual but not religious", or any other of a host of available stances. That perhaps is a weakness of my term "fragilized". I meant just that sticking with the position you're in is now minimally protected by the social inconceivability of changing. But it doesn't mean that faith or anti-faith cannot be robust.

In this connection, I couldn't disagree more with Hent's claim on page 34: "For faith to have consistency, coherence, or even substance and consequence, it would have to be dogmatic, unquestioning, sealed off, blocking us from—blinding us against—the alternative view, thus undermining the very meaning and importance of 'optionality' ". 'Taint necessarily so. Indeed, there are clear cases of people leaping into dogmatic and militant forms of a faith that they feel may be slipping, as we see with some Islamist terrorists.

Another source of cross-purposes attends my term "fullness". This has given a lot of trouble. I was looking for a term that was unattached to any particular position, faith or non-faith. But it tends to drift towards a particular way of filling it out. Maybe I should have chosen another word. I wanted to use this as something like a category term to capture the very different ways in which each of us (as I claim) sees life as capable of some fuller, higher, more genuine, more authentic, more intense . . . form. The list of adjectives is indefinitely long, because the positions we may adopt have no finite limit. Why do this? Because I think that it is valuable to try to grasp a position you find unfamiliar and even baffling through trying to bring into focus the understanding of fullness it involves. This is particularly the case if you want really to understand it, to be able to feel the power it has for its protagonists, as against simply dismissing it. And this kind of understanding is crucial for me, as I explained above in discussing Fergus' article.

But the term "fullness" seems to have led to more misunderstanding than communication. A lot of readers saw it as applying only to religious conceptions of fullness. I guess the term can be pronounced in a way which has a religious or metaphysical ring. But this doesn't have to be the case. Take Sportin' Life in *Porgy and Bess*. "Methusaleh lived 900 years;/ but who'd call that livin' / when no gal would give in / to no man of 900 years". Who'd call that living? Some living isn't the real thing. There is *real* living; living to the full, as you might call it. My claim is that analogous distinctions crop up in all life forms. This distinction and its analogues are a human universal.

Maybe I'm wrong about this. I don't think so. But in all likelihood I need another term.

In this and the other cases above, I recognize that the misunderstandings have been largely of my own doing. Crucial points should have been made more carefully. But I'm learning from this and other discussions, and I am very grateful to Hent for pushing me further towards clarity in his interesting and very suggestive article.