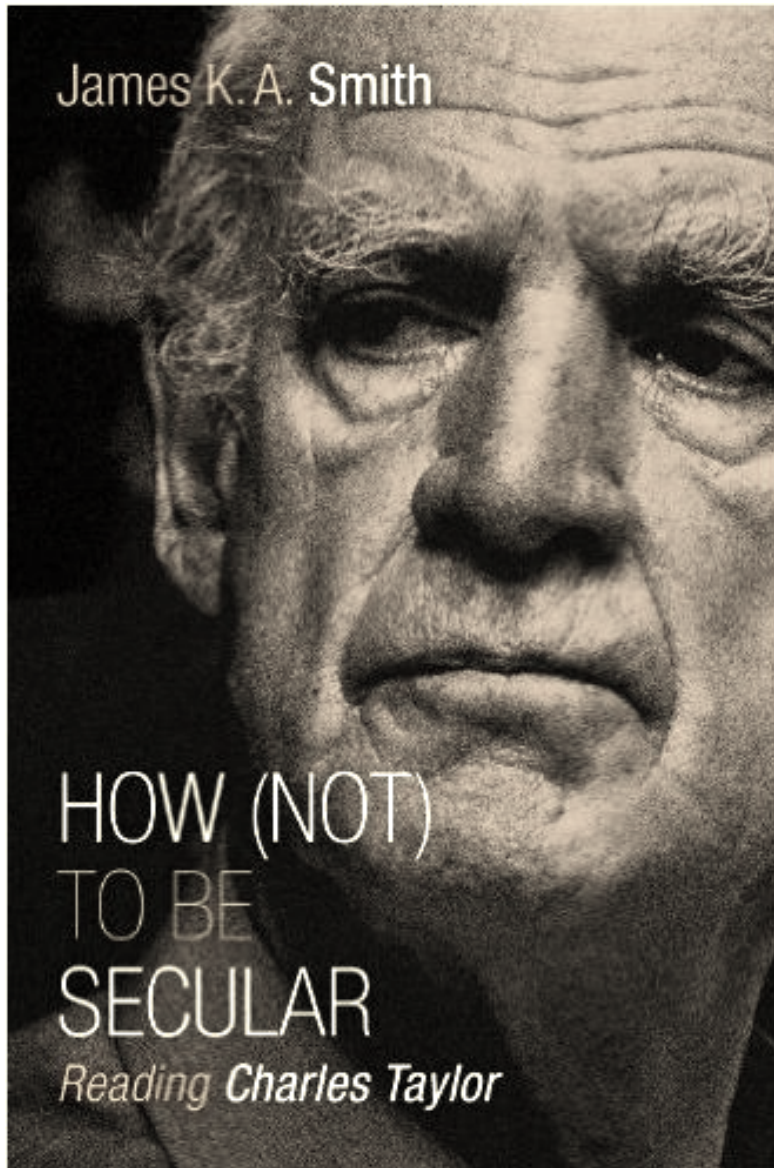


Discipleship in a Secular Age:  
Engaging the Culture with Charles Taylor and James Smith



Curriculum by  
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## Introduction to Discipleship in a Secular Age

Charles Taylor's award-winning work, *A Secular Age*, has caused ripples in the academic world with its bold analysis of Western history and its powerful argument against modern enemies to the Christian faith, such as the vaunted New Atheists. It has tremendous resources for the Western Church, as we seek to both understand and reach our culture with the Gospel. However, its 800+ pages of highly academic writing make it inaccessible for many who would benefit from its reflections. Thankfully, James K.A. Smith has sought to distill its message for believers outside of the Academy. In *How (Not) to be Secular*, Smith brings out the heart of Taylor's message, and his reflections help us more faithfully live out our faith in this secular age.

This study guide comes out of a summer wrestling with James Smith and Charles Taylor in the context of the local church. For seven weeks, close to twenty of us gathered for prayerful and spirited discussion of the material. As the conversations progressed, it became clear that, while Smith's guide to Taylor offers excellent insights, it would be helpful to have a guide to Smith. A philosopher in his own right, Smith offers a dense retelling of the major points. Boiling down 800+ pages into a scant 150 is an incredible feat, but the effort renders a very dense product. This reading guide is designed to allow a group to experience and apply the necessary insights offered in *How (Not) to be Secular*, without having a background in philosophy or familiarity with the certain cultural touch-points Smith utilizes.

### Curriculum Design

*Discipleship in a Secular Age* is an in-depth, seven-week study engaging *How (Not) to be Secular* through conversation, film, poetry, and music. The core of the study is five discussion sessions, where participants read through and discuss Smith's book. The two film interludes allow participants to experience Taylor's insights as portrayed in popular culture. The seven-session schedule is as follows:

Discussion 1: Preface and Introduction

Discussion 2: Chapters 1-2

Film Interlude: *Garden State*

Discussion 3: Chapters 3-4

Discussion 4: Chapter 5

Film Interlude: *Blue Like Jazz*

Discussion 5: Conclusion

For each section in the study, you will find a reading guide and a discussion guide. The reading guides offer a summary of the content, some definitions of relevant terms or persons discussed in the text (the "VIP Section"), the Key Vocabulary from each chapter (corresponding to Smith's Glossary), some questions for discussion, and some takeaways. Participants can use these reading guides alongside of their weekly reading. The discussion guides offer some sample questions and key thoughts from each section and are meant to help leaders shape the conversation to hit the main points of Smith/Taylor's work, while offering some more in-depth application. Each discussion starts out by engaging a work of art that illustrates part of Taylor's project. Film discussion guides are also included with sample questions that tie the film's content with key elements of the book. The guides are meant to be starting points, and leaders are free to improvise and supplement as needed.

### A word about the author(s)

Charles Taylor is a former philosophy professor at McGill University in Montreal, Canada. Taylor is a Roman Catholic, whose theological and religious convictions underlie much of his work. He received the Templeton prize in 2007 for his work in philosophy and religion. *A Secular Age* is Taylor's attempt at charting the cultural shifts that led to Western secularization. As sociologist Robert Bellah says, "[this] is his breakthrough book—one of the most important books to be written in my lifetime. Taylor succeeds in no less than recasting the entire debate about secularism...[it is] a “must read” for anyone concerned with religion and modernity.”

James K.A. Smith is a philosophy professor at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, MI. Hailing from the Dutch Reformed tradition, he is the author of several books exploring the intersection of faith and philosophy and the nature of liturgy. *How (Not) to be Secular* won the 2014 Christianity Today Book Award in Christianity and Culture. Theologian Gene Veith says of it, “Taylor is the author of a monumental study of contemporary life called *A Secular Age*, which explores the widespread loss of religious sensibility in modern life. His work exposing the ideology of secularism has important implications for contemporary apologetics, evangelism, and ministry. But it's so technical and sophisticated that it is mainly accessible to academics. Smith has offered not a CliffsNotes style simplification, but a paradigm-shifting book that creatively applies Taylor's findings to the church and the larger society.”

Billy Boyce is Associate Pastor at Christ Church of Arlington, in Arlington, VA. He enjoys reading, writing, and discussing faith and culture in community settings. This curriculum flows out of the church's annual Summer Reading Series, which seek to invite discussion, encourage faith, and foster love for Christ and the world.

### A note on Taylor's method

As a work of cultural anthropology, Taylor's book takes a view of the world “from below.” This essentially means that he offers a historical rationale for cultural progress and decay and an anthropological view of Christian conversion. He looks at the cultural forces that act as barriers or aids to conversion to the Christian story. As such, he avoids theological thinking “from above,” which focuses on the impact of sin in the world. For example, when discussing the slide away from a broad cultural consensus on Christianity (circa 1500) towards the cultural consensus on secularism, he centers his diagnosis on theological shifts; likewise, his discussion of the malaise of the immanent frame does not hinge on the impact of sinfulness, but of a sense of “haunting.” James Smith, seeking to faithfully represent what is present in *A Secular Age*, does not do much to change that, although he adds certain theological qualifications to Taylor.

However, this should not distract from the value of either work, but rather adds another layer to the purpose of this discussion guide. As Christians, we have theological resources to describe these realities, and it is important to grapple with this view “from above.” God is at work in human history. Original sin has plunged humanity into a state of godlessness. The Holy Spirit is necessary for people to accept the Gospel. Prayer is a weapon against Satan's devices. These biblical statements offer support for Taylor's thinking and can strengthen our convictions and our cultural engagement. Still, Taylor's work remains important for Christians. His observations “from below” offer flesh-and-blood description of the Christian analysis “from above.” In answering the question, “what does original sin look like,” Christians gain significant insight from the experiential question Taylor poses, “what does the secular age feel like?”

## Week One: Landscape of Our Secular Age

Reading:  
Preface and Introduction

Introduction:

Welcome to the neighborhood coffeehouse, where James Smith has a table and an open seat for us. That thick book next to him will be the main focus of the conversation, but first, Smith wants us to look around and listen. Who's at this place anyway? What's that music they are listening to? What does it mean that they are reading books about the absurdity of existence? And what is that haunted feeling that we sometimes get if we quiet down enough to pay attention? Smith has a map of this landscape, and in the Preface and Introduction, we begin to get a sense for what "the secular" is and why we should care.

## Week 1 Reading Guide: Preface and Introduction

### VIP Section:

**Julian Barnes:** British novelist who is an atheist. Unlike the New Atheists, who are marked by zealous confidence in their correctness, Barnes remains skeptical of his own beliefs, acknowledging a certain temptation to believe in God.

**New Atheists** (Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, etc.): A group of “evangelistic” atheists, who oppose all religion as being societally destructive. They represent, for Smith, the counterpart to religious fundamentalism: antireligious fundamentalism. They are heavily “scientific,” believing that science has replaced the need for God, and thus are staunchly embedded in Taylor’s secular<sub>2</sub> framework.

**David Foster Wallace:** Postmodern writer who demonstrates the “suffocating immanence” of modern society, while also showing a discontent with this immanence. Smith uses Wallace to illustrate the attempt to find transcendence within immanence, fullness within the immanent frame, as well as the sense of hauntedness. His sense of religious devotion and wonder within a world devoid of God is summed up well in the title of his essay, “Roger Federer as Religious Experience.”

### Preface: Smith’s Personal Introduction

- Intended Audience: Practitioners, whether Christians and unbelievers
- Intended Purpose: A philosophical guide to Taylor’s *Secular Age* and a practical guide to life in the secular age
- Important Questions: Analysis and Praxis
  - o “So what does it look like to bear witness in a secular age? What does it look like to be faithful? To what extent have Christians unwittingly absorbed the tendencies of this world? On the one hand, this raises the question of how to reach exclusive humanists. On the other hand, the question bounces back to the church: To what extent do we “believe” *like* exclusive humanists?” (viii)

### Key Vocab:

Secularism  
Immanent Frame  
Fragilization  
Fullness  
Expressive Individualism  
Cross-Pressure  
Nova Effect  
Secular<sub>1</sub>, Secular<sub>2</sub>, Secular<sub>3</sub>  
Exclusive Humanism  
Subtraction Stories

### Introduction: Landscape of the Secular Age

Part 1: The “Haunted” Landscape of the Secular Age (pp. 1-17)

**Key Vocab:** *secularism, immanent frame, fragilization, fullness, expressive individualism, cross-pressure, nova effect*

- Both belief & doubt are haunted
  - o In a way, everyone syncretistic – believers doubt and doubters believe.
- Neither rigid atheism nor religious fundamentalism satisfy the question of haunting.
- Examples from literature and music
  - o Julian Barnes, Walter Isaacson, Postal Service, Radiohead  
David Foster Wallace

**Callout Box:** p. 6 – *The Difficulty of Belief*

**For reflection:** *Smith offers numerous examples from pop culture illustrating Taylor’s analysis and name-drops several more. Don’t get overwhelmed if you haven’t encountered these artists previously. Instead, as you read the quotes from their work, can you think of other areas where these feelings or concepts emerge?*

Part 2: Charles Taylor as Guide to “Haunted Landscape” (pp. 17-25)

**Key Vocab:** *Secular<sub>1</sub>, Secular<sub>2</sub>, Secular<sub>3</sub>, Exclusive Humanism, Subtraction Stories*

- Taylor’s Question: “how,” not “what”/“when”
  - o Taylor wonders how we moved from a largely “religious” society to a largely “secular” society, as characterized by what people are able to believe easily.
- Taylor’s Taxonomy: Three movements of “secular”
  - o Secular<sub>1</sub>, Secular<sub>2</sub>, Secular<sub>3</sub>

**Callout Box:** p. 23 – *Changing conditions of belief and Discipleship*

- Taylor’s Method: Story
  - o In countering a deficient story, an alternative story is needed.

**Chapter Summary:** Smith introduces Taylor's project and his preliminary analysis of the current Western culture. This culture is described as "haunted," and can be summarized by a line from Julian Barnes' literature: "I don't believe in God, but I miss Him." On the one hand, we constantly live with a closed-in cosmos, believing the universe is *less* than ages past. On the other, we constantly deal with the sense that there has to be something *more*. Taylor asks how we got here and how we can make movement out of this haunted space.

**Takeaways:** 1) The secular landscape, encased in its immanence, is still haunted by the lack of transcendence – having pushed out God, we now miss his presence. 2) Competing forces in our culture impact everyone – believers are tempted toward doubt and doubters are tempted toward belief. 3) Taylor's method is significant – to combat the deficient story of secularism, Taylor tells an alternative story; we are "narrative animals."

**For Reflection:** There's an old joke: if you ask a fish "how's the water?" the fish will respond, "what's water?" Culture is usually invisible to those in it. Since secularism is the cultural water most of us swim in, how do you respond to Taylor's initial observations? Are they helpful or uncomfortable?

## Week 1 Discussion Guide: Preface & Introduction

### Opening Exercise: Death Cab for Cutie, "I Will Follow You Into the Dark"

Listen to the Death Cab for Cutie song, "I Will Follow You Into the Dark."

Discuss: Describe the song's engagement with religion; in what ways is it positive or negative? How does this song exhibit a type of spiritual haunting? How might this song influence those who love it or believe it to match their experiences?

#### *"I Will Follow You Into the Dark"*

Love of mine  
Someday you will die  
But I'll be close behind  
I'll follow you into the dark

No blinding light  
Or tunnels, to gates of white  
Just our hands clasped so tight  
Waiting for the hint of a spark

*If Heaven and Hell decide that they both are satisfied  
Illuminate the NOs on their vacancy signs  
If there's no one beside you when your soul embarks  
Then I'll follow you into the dark*

In Catholic school, as vicious as Roman rule  
I got my knuckles bruised by a lady in black  
I held my tongue as she told me, "Son  
Fear is the heart of love," so I never went back

You and me have seen everything to see  
From Bangkok to Calgary  
And the soles of your shoes are all worn down  
The time for sleep is now  
It's nothing to cry about  
Cause we'll hold each other soon  
In the blackest of rooms.

### Preface: Getting Started

**Main Summary:** Smith introduces himself and his project.

#### **Discussion Emphases:**

- Getting to know each other. What are our faith stories? What are our experiences? In what ways are we practitioners?
- Do we resonate with Smith's mission?

### Introduction: Landscape of Our Secular Age

**Main summary:** Smith and Taylor illustrate how the secular age is haunted by the absence of God. The haunting comes from an increasing "immanentization" of culture, illustrated by the differences in secular<sub>1</sub>, secular<sub>2</sub>, and secular<sub>3</sub>.

#### **Discussion Emphases:**

- How do you experience this cultural "haunting"? Does this description match your experience or the experiences of your coworkers, peers, etc.?
- Faith and Doubt in Evangelism – what are the implications of "cross-pressure" for our evangelism? (see callout box on p. 6)
- Faith and Doubt in Discipleship – how does cultural "cross-pressure" impact our discipleship? (see callout box on p. 23)

Open Discussion

Closing Prayer



## Week Two: Twisted Tales – the Creation of the Secular

Reading:  
Chapters 1 & 2

### Introduction:

In Chapters 1 and 2, Smith takes us with Taylor on a whirlwind tour of the past 1,500 years of theological and philosophical thought. This time machine is no mere thought project; rather, Taylor is after the roots of our current climate. We'll find ourselves strangely at home in the world of the 1700's and will begin to see how the landscape of today has been shaped by the thinkers who came before, in some unexpected ways.

## Week 2 Reading Guide: Chapters 1 & 2

### VIP Section:

**Nietzsche:** German philosopher who critiqued Christianity as embodying a weak, therefore “evil,” ethic. Famously declared, “God is dead...and we have killed him,” meaning that philosophy has usurped religion.

**New Atheists** (Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, etc.): Discussed in Introduction, representing “atheistic” fundamentalism. Their belief that science has replaced the need for God in society places them in a rigid secular<sub>2</sub>.

**Nominalism:** a theological movement that denies that visible reality is a copy of a “universal” nature (as in Platonism). This freed the individual from a larger universal construct.

**Hegel:** German philosopher who held that history was a positive process of moving towards greater freedom through three stages: thesis (an original idea), antithesis (an idea conflicting with the thesis), and synthesis (a formulation that combines the thesis and antithesis, retaining the positives and removing the negatives). Holds that we can know the working of God through the outplaying of history.

**Stoicism:** Philosophical movement that stressed the importance of ridding the self from all passions.

**Deism:** popular in the 17<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries, this philosophical movement held that God created the universe, but removed himself from it after creation, leaving it governed by natural laws. Controlling image: God as the watchmaker – winds the watch and lets it tick.

### Chapter 1: Pathway towards the Immanent

Part 1: The Shift from the Medieval to the Modern (pp. 26-35)

- Three features of the “medieval social imaginary” that acted as social “obstacles to unbelief”

**Key vocab: Social Imaginary**

1. Natural world pointed beyond itself to a “spiritual” realm
2. Society grounded in heavenly reality under God’s rule
3. People saw the world as enchanted

- Five elements of the modern, secular<sub>3</sub> social imaginary

**Key vocab: Porous self, buffered self**

1. Disenchantment and the buffered self
2. Individualization of social realm
3. Allowing ultimate flourishing without the transcendent
4. Making time simply linear, without markers of transcendent weight
5. Possibility of a deistic universe

**Callout Box:** p. 34 - *Christianity's relationship with social shift*

Part 2: Reform (pp. 35-40)

- Two aims of Reform

**Key Vocab: Reform**

1. Leveling “two-tiered” society
2. Disenchantment of stuff (e.g. sacraments)

**Callout Box:** p. 39 - *Reformation and catholicity*

**Discussion:** *Interact w/ Taylor's Catholicism. Is he fair to the Reformation? In what ways does Smith offer a corrective (see e.g. footnotes 2 & 6)?*

Part 3: The Path to Exclusive Humanism (pp. 40-46)

- The “zigzag” nature of “progress”
- Two examples: Interest in nature & Nominalism
- Result: The Great “Disembedding” = the reversal of the medieval social construct

**Discussion:** *What then is social shift? How does Taylor view the process of “progress”?*

**Chapter Summary:** Taylor shows the intellectual formula leading toward exclusive humanism, and it is not simply “Nature – God = Reality.” Instead, there is a “zig-zag” force at play, as various movements play off each other in the game of Reform. The unexpected zig-zag eventually leads to the secular<sub>3</sub> social imaginary.

### Key Vocab:

Social Imaginary  
Porous self  
Buffered self  
Reform  
Excarnation  
Take  
Immanentization  
Modern Moral Order

**Takeaways:** 1) The shift to modernity happened as every sphere of life was systematically “disenchanted,” 2) Religious reform opened the door to secular reform, 3) Development is more the work of unintended consequences than the inevitable march towards liberal virtues. “The right side of history” isn’t available to us!

**For Reflection:** How does Taylor’s account of historical “progress” differ from other popular narratives? If there is no “right side of history,” how can we lovingly resist the pressure to conform on certain cultural points, without simply withdrawing from cultural debate?

## Chapter 2: The Immanent Becomes Preeminent

### Part 1: Becoming Immanentized: Theological Shift

- Diagnosing the Secular<sub>3</sub> Age:

*Discussion:* What is the new account of meaning, why does it matter, and what is the problem with the narrative?

- Four "eclipses" of immanentization

**Key Vocab: Immanentization**

1. Eclipse of Transcendent Good for this-worldly economic flourishing
2. Eclipse of Grace by human capacity for achieving good
3. Eclipse of Mystery by human clarity for understanding
4. Eclipse of Transcendent Purpose of humanity for immanent purpose

**Callout Box:** p. 49 - Reactionary Christianity

*Discussion:* Is immanentization a new phenomenon? What makes it particularly potent and/or alarming today?

- Apologetics and Immanentization: Ways that apologetics bought their narrative

- o The Faith reduced to certain intellectual doctrines
- o Expecting an answer to every question (e.g. theodicy – the problem of evil)

*Discussion:* “The scaled-down God and presbrunk religion defended by the apologists turned out to be insignificant enough to reject without consequence.” Agree/disagree? Is Taylor being fair? (Note Smith’s footnote 5.) What are countermeasures Christians can adopt? Explore narrative as an option.

### Part 2: Becoming Immanentized: Political Shift

- Impact of Church-craft on State-craft: Emergence of "Polite Society"

**Key Vocab: Modern Moral Order**

1. Immanentized theology allows for a dogmatically neutral “civil religion”
2. Civil society places boundaries on the in-breaking of transcendence
3. Society itself becomes the immanent *telos*.
4. How to Survive Immanence: find ways of experiencing fullness without transcendence

*Discussion:* Is Taylor’s (and Smith’s) reading of America/ American history accurate?

*Discussion:* What is Smith’s critique of this civil religion (see footnote 10)? Is he accurate? Where do you see signs of deistic civil religion in America today?

### Part 3: Immanentized Religion

- Marks of the new religion

**Key Vocab: Excarnation**

1. Deistic: God is not an active agent
2. “De-Communioned, de-ritualized, and disembodied”

**Callout Box:** p. 59 - Re-enchanting Protestantism

**Chapter Summary:** Taylor continues to answer the question “how did we get here?” by noting the shift from belief in God, to beliefs about God, to no belief in God at all. In keeping with the previous chapter’s emphasis on combined forces producing an unexpected cocktail, the “zig-zag of progress,” as the robust religious traditions of previous generations are emptied to become functionally deistic belief.

**Takeaways:** 1) A theological shift, in part accidentally ceded by apologetics, laid partial foundation for immanentization, 2) Deistic, immanentized religion allowed formation of dogmatically neutral “civil religion,” where altruism and activism become vehicles for experiencing fullness, 3) Deistic religion and areligious “civil religion” perpetuate a thoroughly immanentized culture, opening the door to the total immanentization of exclusive humanism.

**For Reflection:** If one of the primary forces in the path to exclusive humanism is “excarnation,” how can the Church embrace a more “incarnational” approach to theology and practice? How do you see the process of excarnation in your own life and practice? What would a properly “enchanted” Christianity look like?

## Week 2 Discussion Guide: Chapters 1 & 2

### Opening Exercise: Enchantment and Star Wars

Watch the clip from Star Wars: Episode Four, where Obi-Wan explains the Force to Luke. Then watch the clip from Star Wars: Episode One, where Qui-Gon explains the Force to Anakin. (These clips can be found on YouTube.) One reviewer of *How (Not) to be Secular* describes the process of “immanentization” by distinguishing between Episodes Four and One. Episode Four represents the enchanted world, where life is mysterious – here, the Force is a mysterious power present in the world. Episode One represents the disenchanted world of secular<sub>2</sub> and secular<sub>3</sub> – the Force is now reduced to a parasite, present in some and not in others.

Discuss: Is this a fair way to describe the process of immanentization?

### Chapter 1: Pathway towards the Immanent

**Main Summary:** Taylor describes how the obstacles to unbelief gave way to increasing immanentization. Emphasis on forces that combine in a hybrid through the zig-zag of history.

#### **Discussion Emphases:**

- Social Imaginaries and the Self (porous and buffered)
- Systematic Disenchantment
- Zig-Zag Nature of Progress

### Chapter 2: The Immanent Becomes Preeminent

**Main Summary:** With the obstacles to unbelief diminished, various theological and political shifts result in a thoroughly immanentized culture, with exclusive humanism a theoretical option.

#### **Discussion Emphases:**

- Path of Immanentization
- The New Civil Religion
- Christian Responses: How have Christian apologetics contributed to the process of immanentization? How can we engage in apologetics in ways that do not diminish the enchanted elements of our faith? Also, is there a better way of engaging in politics that allows Christianity to remain distinct from a generic “American civil religion”?

Open Discussion

Closing Comments:

- Recap of Taylor's project:
  - o Topographical landscape of secular culture, not a theological account of culture shift
  - o Theology and Anthropology
    - Taylor comes at his analysis “from below,” from an anthropological angle. The Scriptures tend to speak “from above,” from a theological angle. As we go through his cultural analysis, remember our theological foundations, but listen carefully to his reflections and analysis “from below.” Where are the overlaps?

Closing Prayer

## Week 3: Gut Check – What the Secular Feels Like

Reading:  
Chapters 3 & 4

### Introduction:

After our history lesson is over, Smith draws our attention to our gut – what does it feel like to live in this secular age? Chapter 3 explores the pressure and hauntedness we (and our friends) can feel, and for all our technological advances, there is something missing. Chapter 4 then takes on those dogmatists that insist on a flat view of history, that science simply replaced religion and we are all better off for it. If that narrative doesn't satisfy, then how can we find meaning in this age that is devoid of the transcendent?

## Week 3 Reading Guide: Chapters 3 & 4

### VIP Section:

**David Foster Wallace:** Discussed in Introduction. Postmodern writer whose nonfiction and fiction illustrates the attempt to find transcendence within immanence, and the “hauntedness” of the modern realm. The title to his essay, “Roger Federer as Religious Experience,” illustrates this well.

**Dreyfus & Kelley:** see Introduction, p.14, footnotes 17 & 18; interpreters of modern literature who try to take the “haunting” out of the texts.

**Romanticism:** Movement in art and philosophy, which prized created beauty and sought to find meaning through nature/art.

**Enlightenment:** Philosophical movement that believed in the capability of thinking/cognition to achieve scientific certainty; encapsulated in Descartes’ famous phrase, “I think; therefore I am.” Contrast with Romanticism and postmodernism.

**Nietzsche:** German philosopher who critiqued Christianity as embodying a weak, therefore “evil,” ethic. Famously declared, “God is dead...and we have killed him,” meaning that philosophy has usurped religion. Taylor/Smith refers his work *Genealogy of Morals*, which demonstrates the influence of Arthur Schopenhauer, a philosopher who extensively critiqued some of the pillars of “modernism”: Kant and Hegel.

**Michel Foucault:** French philosopher, influenced by Nietzsche, who worked to illustrate the interplay of knowledge and power. Foucault’s “unthought” (see Glossary, p. 143) points to the reality that humans are not merely what they think, because their thoughts are influenced by context, background, and biases. Foucault is influential as a postmodern philosopher.

**Emerging Church:** movement from early 2000s, sought to recapture a more “ancient” faith – emphasized ancient rituals, communal living, experiential religion, justice; deemphasized systematic theology, authoritarianism, and denominationalism. There is irony here, b/c some ended up with the more authoritarian and sectional splintering.

**Taizé Community:** A monastic community in France, popular for its experiential worship and ecumenical priorities.

**Hegel:** German philosopher who held that history was a positive process of moving towards greater freedom.

### Chapter 3: What Secular<sub>3</sub> Feels Like

Part 1: Nova Effect (pp. 62-65)

#### *Key vocab: Nova Effect, Fragilization*

- Context of Secular<sub>3</sub>
  - o “tensions and fractures” → Exclusive humanism is available and influential, but by no means universal. Contrast with secular<sub>2</sub> theorists, who claim secularism is simply rational.
  - o “A world flattened by disenchantment” and therefore haunted
- Cross-pressured reality gives way to nova effect, which is accompanied by malaise.
- Nova effect produces both Christian (Pietism) and non-Christian (atheism) “third ways”.
  - o Note Taylor’s emphasis on the need for the Modern Moral Order to allow skepticism to take deep root. In the MMO, the problem of evil generates skepticism. In the world of Christian faith, the problem of evil generates lament. (Discuss this in relation to the actual statement of skepticism of the all-good and all-powerful God – statement attributed to Epicurus, the ancient Greek philosopher; has anything changed, and if so, what?)

#### Key Vocab:

Nova Effect  
Fragilization  
Unthought  
Transformation Perspective  
Ancien Regime (AR)  
Age of Mobilization (AM)  
Age of Authenticity (AA)

Part 2: Malaise as Existential Reaction to Nova Effect (pp. 64-69)

- Buffered self in an immanent-only world is now vulnerable to extreme isolation.
- Stages of progress:
  3. Combine longing for certainty and disbelief in transcendence lead to prizing “this-worldly,” scientific answers to questions and dismissing options rooted in faith.
  4. Find brief empowerment/comfort in being alone, without God: compare with W.E. Henley – “I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul.”
  5. Realize that transcendence offered explanation and comfort of its own.
  6. Seek resolution - Suffer from haunting, return to transcendence, or invent fullness within immanence.

Part 3: Immanence has Landed (pp. 70-73)

- Progress of or Rebellion against Modernism: Taylor’s spectrum of modernism

Religious Fundamentalists (moderns) ----- Secular<sub>3</sub> (Haunted space) ----- Atheist Fundamentalists (moderns)

#### Part 4: Finding Transcendence within Immanence

- Romanticism allows for immanence, yet reveals its weakness, too.
  - o Art becomes absolutized. Significance is not what it points to (transcendence), but lies within the work of art itself. Yet, it haunts our experience, longing for transcendence.
  - o “The result is an immanent space to try to satisfy a lost longing for transcendence.” (p.76)
- Enlightenment and Scientism
  - o Secular<sub>2</sub> scientism is a subtraction story – not pure reason, but itself a faith story!
  - o **Callout Box:** p. 77 – *Converting the converts*

**Chapter summary:** The cross-pressured space of secular<sub>3</sub> is haunted by its lack of transcendence, and is fractured into a variety of options that seek to deal with this haunting.

**Takeaway:** Secular<sub>3</sub>, while fronting as secure, is surprisingly anxious and vulnerable. Modern Christians experience the effects of this cross-pressure, yet have resources for seeing through the false confidence of immanence and offering an alternative faith narrative.

**For reflection:** What biblical passages suggest a reason for our haunting? Why do we long for transcendence?

### Chapter 4: Debunking Secularism Theorists

#### Part 1: Deconstructing Secularism (pp. 79-84)

##### **Key Vocab:** *Untought, Transformation Perspective*

- Taylor’s 1<sup>st</sup> move: explore secularization’s presuppositions
  1. Science reveals religion as false
  2. Science reveals religion as irrelevant
  3. Religion depends on authoritarian power
- Taylor’s 2<sup>nd</sup> move: explore whether secularization<sub>2</sub> is an adequate story

#### Part 2: Taylor’s “Three Ages” (pp. 84-89)

##### **Key Vocab:** *Ancien Regime, Age of Mobilization, Age of Authenticity*

- Ancien Regime: link between religious identity and political identity
  - o Connection to church entailed connection to state and God
- Age of Mobilization: God is present in the *polis* through our proper construction of society
  - o Connection to church more individual preference, but still implies larger spheres of connection
- Age of Authenticity: Society ought to empower expressive individualism (see discussion of fashion)
  - o Connection ultimately severed between spirituality and citizenship, spirituality open to individual interpretation (see p. 88 and footnote 12).

#### Part 3: Religion for the Age of Authenticity (pp. 89-91)

- Main mark: personal spiritual quest
  - o Because everything is contested, one must find one’s own faith.
  - o Caution: don’t simply lament as individualistic – craving for transcendence and community often leads to Christian expressions

##### **Callout Box:** p. 88 – *Understanding Anti-institutional and Experiential Christian Movements*

**Chapter Summary:** Taylor debunks the secularization<sub>2</sub> subtraction story, that science and individualism neatly displace religion. He charts his own story of religious/political development, ending with the “postsecular age” – where both religion and secularism are live options and everyone is impacted by the drive towards expressive individualism.

**Takeaways:** 1) Radical atheism is just as much a faith statement as Christianity. 2) Evangelism in the AA = winsomely inviting friends to (re)explore Christianity as part of their spiritual journey. Speak to their longings, rather than hammer their individualism (though we all need this challenged).

**For Reflection:** If Secular<sub>3</sub> is on a spiritual quest, how do we encourage both exploration and rootedness? When does the quest stop? How can we both be “always reforming” and still rooted in the historical faith?



## Week 3 Discussion Guide: Chapters 3 & 4

### Opening Exercise: Poetry of Mary Oliver

Read the following poems by Mary Oliver, a well-known American poet.

Discuss: How does she demonstrate life within the immanent frame? From where does she derive significance? What does this cross-pressure feel like? How does she exhibit Taylor's "haunting"? Have you ever felt this way? How are these poems beautiful? How do they exhibit brokenness?

#### *The Summer Day*

Who made the world?  
Who made the swan, and the black bear?  
Who made the grasshopper?  
This grasshopper, I mean-  
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,  
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,  
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead  
of up and down-  
who is gazing around with her enormous and  
complicated eyes.  
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly  
washes her face.  
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.  
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.  
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall  
down  
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,  
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll  
through the fields,  
which is what I have been doing all day.  
Tell me, what else should I have done?  
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?  
Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
with your one wild and precious life?

#### *Wild Geese*

You do not have to be good.  
You do not have to walk on your knees  
for a hundred miles through the desert  
repenting.  
You only have to let the soft animal of your  
body  
love what it loves.  
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you  
mine.  
Meanwhile the world goes on.  
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the

rain  
are moving across the landscapes,  
over the prairies and the deep trees,  
the mountains and the rivers.  
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue  
air,  
are heading home again.  
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,  
the world offers itself to your imagination,  
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and  
exciting  
over and over announcing your place  
in the family of things.

#### *The Swan*

Did you too see it, drifting, all night, on the  
black river?  
Did you see it in the morning, rising into the  
silvery air -  
An armful of white blossoms,  
A perfect commotion of silk and linen as it  
leaned  
into the bondage of its wings; a snowbank, a  
bank of lilies,  
Biting the air with its black beak?  
Did you hear it, fluting and whistling  
A shrill dark music - like the rain pelting the  
trees - like a waterfall  
Knifing down the black ledges?  
And did you see it, finally, just under the clouds  
-  
A white cross Streaming across the sky, its feet  
Like black leaves, its wings Like the stretching  
light of the river?  
*And did you feel it, in your heart, how it pertained to  
everything?*  
*And have you too finally figured out what beauty is for?*  
*And have you changed your life?*

### Chapter 3: What Secular<sub>3</sub> Feels Like

**Main Summary:** The cross-pressured space of secular<sub>3</sub> is haunted by its lack of transcendence, and is fractured into a variety of options that seek to deal with this haunting. While fronting as secure, it is surprisingly anxious and vulnerable. Modern Christians experience the effects of this cross-pressure, yet have resources for seeing through the false confidence of immanence and offering an alternative faith narrative.

**Discussion Emphases:**

- The process of losing transcendence and the ensuing malaise
- What biblical passages suggest a reason for our haunting? Why do we long for transcendence? How does this tell us who we are? Identity/dignity through negative relief/cookie cutter.

### Chapter 4: Debunking Secularism Theorists

**Main Summary:** Taylor debunks the secularization<sub>2</sub> subtraction story, that science and individualism neatly displace religion. He charts development of the “postsecular age” – where both religion and secularism are live options and everyone is impacted by the drive towards expressive individualism.

**Discussion Emphases:**

- Secularism<sub>2</sub> v. Charles Taylor: atheism as a faith statement
  - o *Shot of Faith*, “Amazing Atheist” on God’s Not Dead
- Life in the AA
  - o Evangelism, Fashion (opt-in/manipulated), Belonging
- If Secular<sub>3</sub> is on a spiritual quest, how do we encourage both exploration and rootedness? When does the quest stop? Or, for the PCA, how can we both be “always reforming” and still confessional? How can we be faithful travel guides?

Open Discussion

Closing Prayer

## Week 4: Film Interlude – *Garden State*

Discussion:

How does this movie portray the feel of the “immanent frame”? What emotions do the characters embody?

Discuss the sense of isolation that Andrew (Zach Braff) experiences. In one of the first scenes, we see him standing in front of a large mirror, artistically indicating a sense of isolation even inside himself. How does he attempt to overcome this isolation? Is he successful?

How does the movie explore the theme of death? Does death cause deeper reflection on the limitations of the immanent frame? How are the two funerals, for Andrew’s mother and Jelly the Hamster, similar? Different?

Discuss “The Infinite Abyss.” What does the abyss represent? How do the characters’ actions (yelling into the abyss) demonstrate the available options of life in the immanent frame?

Throughout the entire movie, the word “God” is only used once, as Sam (Natalie Portman) states, “I don’t really believe in God.” Religious words (Jesus, God, etc.) aren’t even used as swear words. Discuss this absence of God in the movie.

What does forgiveness look like when there is no transcendence? (Reflect on Andrew’s last dialogue with his dad. Also, reflect on the fact that he describes Yom Kippur as “the day of repentance,” not the day of atonement.)

Where does one find safety, fulfillment, and meaning within the immanent frame?

Discuss the ending – what is the answer to the question, “What do we do now?” Is it in the lyrics of the closing song (“Let go; there’s beauty in the breakdown”), the kiss, both, or neither?

After discussing the immanent frame as portrayed in *Garden State*, does the immanent frame hold up to all the weight placed on it, the weight of safety, forgiveness, fulfillment, meaning?

## Week 5: Re-Framing – “In,” but not “Of” this Secular Age

Reading:  
Chapter 5

(see note below: it might be best to read this in a few sessions)

### Introduction:

Now that we are tuned in to how life got this way and what it feels like, Smith and Taylor go into analysis mode. What is the anatomy of this patient we are examining; what is the makeup of “the secular”? Chapter 5 gives us a thick and detailed analysis of what is “under the hood” of Secular<sub>3</sub>. Don’t get overwhelmed; there’s a lot to take in, but with major pay-off – once we understand, we can begin to push back. Smith and Taylor begin to shift from objective description to active critique, offering us strategies for re-framing our views and challenging the hauntedness of the secular age.

## Week 5 Reading Guide: Chapter 5

**Note: Due to the density and length of this chapter, I highly recommend reading it in two separate sessions; I've outlined a possibility below.**

VIP Section:

**Julian Barnes:** British novelist, discussed in the Introduction. Barnes is an atheist, but remains skeptical of his own beliefs, unlike the New Atheists, who are marked by zealous confidence in their correctness.

**Christopher Hitchens:** Prominent New Atheist writer; Smith references his scathing work on the life of Mother Theresa, where he describes her as “a religious fundamentalist, a political operative, a primitive sermonizer, and an accomplice of worldly secular powers.”

**Foundationalism:** Philosophical system that holds that foundational beliefs must be logically self-evident, and secondary beliefs must be derived from these foundational principles. The Declaration of Independence functions as an illustration. Certain truths were held to be self-evident, and then a structure of belief was derived from the three basic beliefs. Foundationalism is a result of philosophical modernism and the work of Descartes, who famously said, “I think; therefore I am.” In making rationality the foundation of his reality, Descartes opened the door to this system, which relies exclusively on rationality to make its system. Both theists and atheists use Foundationalism; for examples, watch the review of *God's Not Dead* by the YouTube artist “The Amazing Atheist” (note: there is some strong language in the video). He utilizes this system in defense of atheism frequently.

**Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty:** Two philosophers who, though writing at different times, heartily critiqued the method of Descartes, which boiled reality down to intellectual ideas (“I think; therefore I am.”). These philosophers argued that human *existence* is primary, as opposed to merely human rationality. Humans are beings, and this nature of existence/experience becomes the starting point for philosophical inquiry, rather than human rationality. This focus on human experience as the basis for philosophy is known as the philosophical school of *phenomenology*.

**Humanism:** A multifaceted philosophical movement that places the central concern on human beings. Can be compatible with or in contrast to Christian principles.

**Rob Bell:** Former pastor, renowned for his artistic sensibilities, communication style, and appeal to millennials. In *Love Wins*, Bell offers a re-interpretation of the traditional doctrine of hell, approaching something similar to universalism, but he rejects these categories as belonging to the older, traditionalist interpretations.

**Misprision:** erroneous judgment, especially of the value or identity of something.

### Chapter 5: Life in the Immanent Frame

#### Reading Session #1 (pp. 92-109)

Introduction: The Immanent Frame (pp. 92-93)

**Key Vocab: Immanent Frame**

- Taylor's claim: the immanent frame is a universally-applicable (in the West) background framework
- Taylor's question: How do we inhabit the immanent frame? Is the frame open to transcendence?
- Taylor's purpose: to undermine the confidence of secularism<sub>2</sub> theorists

Part 1: Takes and Spins (pp. 93-97)

**Key Vocab: Take and Spin**

- With the immanent frame being not primarily a system of belief, but more the water we swim in, how do we think about the water?
- Take v. Spin
  - o Take = intellectual honesty about being pulled toward belief or unbelief (see footnote 3, p. 94)
    - Argument from experience – we *feel* the tension
  - o Spin = simplistic/overconfident acceptance of one's view/smug dismissal of the other side
    - Argument from subtraction stories
    - Is Taylor/Smith fair to “religious fundamentalism” as a spin for transcendence?

**Callout Box:** p. 96 – *Offering a Take for Transcendence*

Part 2: Tipping the Scales toward Immanence: Closed World Structures (pp. 97-103)

**Key Vocab: Closed World Structures (CWSs)**

- Taylor's Purpose in Examining CWSs: to show what is typically used to bolster the “closed spin” and to then undercut the obviousness of it

Key Vocab:

Immanent Frame

Take

Spin

Closed World Structures

Maximal Demand

- The foundation of CWSs: Foundationalism (see VIP Section)
- Taylor's critique: Foundationalism as a CWS is not simply a logical conclusion (this is a subtraction story), but is a value-laden faith statement. Those who shut out transcendence because their system labels it as illogical are actually making a statement of faith, not merely a rational conclusion!
- Death of God as Case Study
  - o Step #1: Science has proven that God does not exist (see "The Amazing Atheist" video referenced in the VIP section).
  - o Step #2: Moral pressure is exerted to encourage abandoning religion for the sake of a more real compassion towards humans
  - o Step # 3: With God out of the way, humans now face the task of fashioning their own world.
- Taylor's Critique of "Death of God" (DOG) scenario
  - o #1: DOG proponents claim to argue from scientific evidence, but derive their power from the moral force of their argument: "this is simply the rational option: don't be left behind; don't hang on to your outdated conclusions – grow up."
  - o #2: Similarly, DOG convictions do not account for all the evidence, and are therefore a subtraction story/faith statement, rather than a bare scientific conclusion.
  - o #3: Exclusive humanists want justice, but have no real basis for universal principles of justice within the immanent frame (see footnote 13, p. 101).
  - o #4: DOG/Exclusive humanism does not lead directly to a specific way of fashioning the world. Rather, it merely opens up the door to other options; with no transcendence, there is no direction, and thus we really are alone. To some this is exhilarating; to others it is crushing.
  - o Conclusion: DOG claims that it is self-evident, but in reality it isn't self-evident at all. Rather, its perceived self-evidence comes instead from its wide acceptance, not internal coherence.

**For Reflection:** Taylor's/Smith's critique of foundationalism can seem threatening to Christians – after all, we want our faith to be rational, right? However, the heavy rationalism of foundationalism presupposes that our cognitive faculties are functioning properly, and some Christian philosophers have critiqued this presupposition. Are there any biblical reasons why we might think our cognitive faculties might not be working properly? What does the Bible give us to help us have hope and faith? See also the **Callout Box:** p. 98 – *Postmodern Apologetics*.

### Part 3: Cross-pressured Reality (pp. 103-109)

- Contrary to secularism<sub>2</sub> theorists, DOG/Exclusive humanism does not simply free us from the shackles of religion. Importantly, they bring about a state of anxiety and cross-pressure. Our quest for fullness is not fulfilled by these options.
- Three points of pressure:
  - o Agency: what gives us agency/creative power?
  - o Ethics: what provides our motivation for doing good? (i.e. does evolutionary biology provide rationale for feeding the poor?)
  - o Aesthetics: why does art move us so powerfully?
- Our primary place of tension: doing justice to both immanence and transcendence
  - o The question for religion: honoring ordinary life, while also honoring the idea of heaven – these seem to pull in different directions, one towards appreciation of "this life," the other seems to denigrate "this life" for the sake of being otherworldly.
  - o Taylor's example: accounting for brokenness in the world
    - Church's answer: Sin
    - Secularist's answer: Sickness
  - o Taylor's critique of the secularist therapeutic model
    - We move from submission to one authority (the Church) to another (the doctor).
    - Underestimates the real depth of our brokenness

**Billy's personal recommendation:** Take a break here. Get some coffee. Lay the book down for a day or two.

**For Reflection:** Where do you feel the draw of CWSs? How has the Christian faith helped you experience fullness?

## Reading Session #2 (pp. 109-131)

### Part 4: Christianity and the Maximal Demand (pp. 109-121)

- Two-Pronged Tension in Christianity:
  - o Represses our humanity, or too optimistic about our current existence.
- Maximal Demand is the attempt to inhabit the two-pronged tension well: showing a path to spiritual transformation that doesn't stop affirming the goodness of our humanity.
- Taylor's diagnosis of the Maximal Demand:
  1. Exclusive Humanism has this tension too!
  2. Reality isn't the binary "Religion v. Secularism," but rather a debate from multiple angles
  3. Secular humanism actually has fewer resources to meet the Maximal Demand, b/c in this view, it must be met *now* – there is no "afterlife" as an escape valve.
  4. Christianity can sell itself short, too...
    - "Platonizing" versions, which sacrifice the good of human existence to the idea of transformation. (Note the difference between Platonizing and genuine transformation.)
    - Doctrine of Hell (note here Smith's critique)
  5. ...but Christianity still has better resources than the immanent frame
    - Discussion of Violence: Immanent frame can't deal with reality of violence in a way that affirms humanity's goodness or encourages transformation.
    - Note Taylor's apologetic angle: level the playing field, then push the immanentist account off balance, suggesting how Christianity might answer the question better.
- Very important: Smith's critiques
  - o (p. 113) The Maximal Demand has its foundation in being human-centered. Taylor seems to accept this anthropocentrism uncritically. Compare with *Westminster Shorter Catechism* #1 – the Reformed tradition's foundation is God-centered. (see also p. 115, footnote 29)
  - o (p. 116-117) Taylor doesn't demonstrate a full rationale for declaring something a misinterpretation, thus seemingly leads with his preferences rather than principles here.
- Also important: Taylor's objective: honest conversation between various viewpoints that is robust, not simplistic. See **Callout Box**: p. 120 – *Conversational Apologetics*

### Part 5: Tipping the Scales toward Transcendence (pp. 122-131)

1. Moral motivation
  - o Quest for meaning: we need more than simply "meaning" to be motivation for doing good
  - o Experience of Suffering: leads to either running away from or trying to help with suffering
    - Exclusive humanism fails to enable us to care for the truly abject
    - Christianity has better resources for dealing with reality of suffering
  - o Human Dignity
    - Exclusive humanism leads to shame, "fashionable" justice, fatigue, and disappointment
    - Christianity guards against these symptoms, while empowering true love
  - o Conclusion: The MMO only gives codes, and codes do not empower genuine moral action
2. Weak points in Exclusive Humanism (where they can't shake the haunting)
  - o Time: Exclusive humanism lacks meaningful rituals and constructs frail ones in order to stave off boredom and the malaise of meaninglessness (maybe seen in the rise of brunch culture?)
  - o Death: The MMO demonstrates an inconsistent desire for eternity at the death of a loved one.

**Chapter 5 summary:** Taylor thoroughly dismantles the immanent frame, show its complexities (not simply a rejection of faith) and its deficiencies (cannot give adequate moral motivation or answers to haunting) – in the end, the MMO reaps an empty harvest, b/c it shut out transcendence. Christianity offers a powerful alternative.

**Takeaways:** 1) The common trope of science v. faith is a "closed spin," not simply the "grownup" view of the world. 2) Exclusive humanism has major fault-lines that it cannot answer on its own. 3) The Church has more resources to ease the experience of anxiety prevalent in our culture. 4) Simultaneously, the Church has more resources to help address the experience of suffering. 5) Taylor's apologetic method leads to robust discussion.

**For reflection:** What biblical passages suggest a way of viewing suffering that doesn't lead to burnout, but enables robust compassion? How does the centrality of the Cross change the way you approach justice and mercy? How would you help a friend dealing with a sense of meaninglessness resulting from the immanent frame?

## Week 5 Discussion Guide: Chapter 5

### Opening Exercise: *God's Not Dead*

Watch the “courtroom argument” scenes from this movie (clips available on YouTube). How does *God's Not Dead* display both Christian fundamentalism and anti-religious fundamentalism? As a work of art, how does *God's Not Dead* shape us – does it cause us to respect nonbelievers or to be suspicious of them? Does *God's Not Dead* ultimately speak to the cross-pressured culture of secularism and its concerns?

### Chapter 5: Life in the Immanent Frame

**Main Summary:** Taylor thoroughly dismantles the immanent frame, show its complexities (not simply a rejection of faith) and its deficiencies (cannot give adequate moral motivation or answers to haunting) – in the end, the MMO reaps an empty harvest, b/c it shut out transcendence. Christianity offers a powerful alternative.

#### **Discussion Emphases:**

1. *Postmodern and Conversational Apologetics*

Callout Boxes, pp. 96, 98 and 120: Taylor's/Smith's critique of foundationalism can seem threatening to Christians – after all, we want our faith to be rational, right? However, the heavy rationalism of foundationalism presupposes that our cognitive faculties are functioning properly, and some Christian philosophers have critiqued this presupposition. Are there any biblical reasons why we might think our cognitive faculties might not be working properly? What does the Bible give us to help us have hope and faith? How can we offer a “take” for transcendence?

2. *CWSs*: Where do you feel the draw of CWSs? How has the Christian faith helped you experience fullness?

3. *Dealing with the emptiness of immanence:*

What biblical passages suggest a way of viewing suffering that doesn't lead to burnout, but enables robust compassion? How does the centrality of the Cross change the way you approach justice and mercy? How would you help a friend dealing with a sense of meaninglessness resulting from the immanent frame? How does the biblical story offer robust resources for addressing the weak points of the immanent frame (time and death)?

**Takeaways:** 1) The common trope of science v. faith is a “closed spin,” not simply the “grownup” view of the world. 2) Exclusive humanism has major fault-lines that it cannot answer on its own. 3) The Church has more resources to ease the experience of anxiety prevalent in our culture. 4) Simultaneously, the Church has more resources to help address the experience of suffering. 5) Taylor's apologetic method leads to robust discussion.

Open Discussion

Closing Prayer



## Week 6: Film Interlude – *Blue Like Jazz*

Discussion:

How does this movie portray the cross-pressured space of Secular<sub>3</sub>? Are there any easy answers? How are Christians pressured by doubt? How are doubters pressured by faith?

How does this film treat the secular<sub>2</sub> narrative? Does it hold up to scrutiny? If secularization is not the answer, what does the film offer instead?

How does this film explore the power of narrative? Compare the usage of narrative with the debate in *God's Not Dead*. How might *Blue Like Jazz* offer a more compelling witness to the secular<sub>3</sub> world of subtraction stories? Is there a place for debate? How could we harness the humility of *Blue Like Jazz* while also answering real questions?

Discuss this quote: “the human dilemma must be experienced.” How does this demonstrate the plight of the secular<sub>3</sub> age? At the same time, what biblical truth is demonstrated by this need for experience? How does the movie explore human experience as part of the spiritual journey?

Discuss the debate at Powell’s Books – Does God Exist? Is Don satisfied with this answer: “if you want meaning, try a dictionary”? Are you satisfied with this, or are others in your life? How does the movie place pressure on the human desire for meaning?

Discuss this quote: “sometimes you have to see someone love something before you can love it yourself.” How might this idea inform our concept of apologetics and Christian witness via lifestyle? How does this contrast with the format of *God's Not Dead*?

How does this film portray forgiveness? Compare this with *Garden State*'s portrayal of forgiveness within the immanent frame. How does Christian transcendence offer a more robust possibility for forgiveness?

What is the role of the institutional church in offering meaning? How does *Blue Like Jazz* challenge our understanding of what it means to be the Church?

How does *Blue Like Jazz* portray the person and work of Jesus?

At the end of the film, Don explores sharing his faith through confessing his failures. In this powerful scene, “the Pope” is asked to forgive Don for misrepresenting Jesus, and responds with a genuine blessing: *dominus vobiscum* (“The Lord be with you.”) How does Don’s confession impact “the Pope”? Does this offer a winsome way of sharing our faith in a secular<sub>3</sub> world?

## Week 7: Conclusions - Discipleship in a Secular Age

Reading:  
Conclusion

Introduction:

As we wrap up our conversation, Smith and Taylor begin to muse on a few people who have resisted the emptiness of the immanent frame and discovered a new type of fullness by accepting the transcendent. Through these models, we see some hints that there is a way out of the hauntedness for ourselves, and possibly a way forward as a culture. With some warnings against nostalgia, Smith and Taylor close with some hopeful predictions for the future. Our closing discussion engages Taylor's work through the Scriptures and offers some reflections on applying Taylor's and Smith's insights into our lives.

## Week 7 Reading and Discussion Guide: Conclusions

### Part 1: Biblical Foundation: Taking Charles Taylor to Church

#### Explaining Secularism's Malaise

- *Imago Dei* – Our Dignity: Genesis 1:27
- The Immanent Frame – Our Depravity: Ecclesiastes 1:2-9, Isaiah 5:11-12, 22:12-13, 28:7-8; 1 Cor 15:32, Luke 12:16-21

#### Biblical Accounts for Cultural Decay

- Parallel Genealogies in Genesis 4 & 5
- The Book of Judges (Note: America is not Israel, so this is analogous)
- Role of Christians in Cultural Flourishing Combats Cultural Decay: Matthew 5:13-14
- Common Grace: God's Cultural Preservation – See Tim Keller, "What is Common Grace?" (included in Appendices) for a robust description of Common Grace.

### Part 2: Gospel Formulation: Evangelism in a Secular<sub>3</sub> Culture

#### Older Models: The Roman Road, Four Spiritual Laws, Evangelism Explosion

- Main Characteristics:
  - o Rely on simple formulations appealing to intellect
  - o Assume the non-believer has similar starting points as the believer (e.g., basic belief about God, the afterlife, etc.)

#### What about "Friendship Evangelism"?

- Common critiques:
  - o We don't actually share the Gospel.
  - o The Gospel must be proclaimed, not merely demonstrated.
- Personal critique: makes "friendship" into a project, as if friendship is simply a better mechanism for sharing the Gospel.

#### "Reaching Out without Dumbing Down"

- What we know about God: God loves his creation and wants everyone to come to him in repentance, and the Holy Spirit is at work in people's lives
- What we know about people: Everyone is on a journey, so we encourage authentic faith
  - o Through our lives:
    - Actions point to Christ: Deuteronomy 4:5-7; Matthew 5:13-14; Acts 16:25-26, 28-31
  - o Through our speech:
    - Sharing Winsomely: Acts 17:22-34
    - Sharing Freely: 1 Peter 3:14-17; Colossians 4:5-6
    - Sharing Boldly: Ephesians 6:19-20
- Temptations for Believers (Smith, pp. 134-135)
  - o Nostalgia & Activism (compare with Paul's letters to the Thessalonians – don't despair, and don't think it's happened yet...)
  - o What are other temptations for believers in this secular<sub>3</sub> age?
- Common Grace in Action: Allies with different beliefs:
  - o Read through the selections from Albert Camus' "The Unbeliever and Christians" (included in Appendices). How does he encourage Christians to live out lives of faithful action? How can we learn from his commitments?

### Part 3: Spiritual Formation: Discipleship in a Secular Age

#### Appreciating the Power of Story

- Personal Story (cf. Taylor's method of exemplars, pp. 135-137)
- Gospel Story – appreciating the Narrative of Scripture  
See “Talking to Generation X,” by Sarah E. Hinlicky for an excellent and poignant account of the communicative power of Story for the secular age. This article can be found online at: <http://www.firstthings.com/article/1999/02/002-talking-to-generation-x>

#### Training the Whole Human: 3D Catechesis

- Church
  - Embracing all the Means of Grace
  - Worship as “heart-training”
- Personal/Family Life
  - Robust Spirituality
  - Hospitality as Embodying the Story

#### Optimism about the Future (Smith, pp. 137-138)

- Exclusive Humanism becomes less plausible, while...
- Cross-Pressure “heats up,” leading to further exploration
  - Smith's two additions are of crucial importance:
    - Rise of Christian liberalism, but
    - Rise of Robust (catholic) Evangelicalism
      - Note: We are seeing these trends currently.
- Note: Our eschatology impacts our view of cultural decay and the Church's role in preservation. Thus, while embracing Matthew 24:36 and being comforted by John 10:27-29, this is a subject worth investing in.

### The Final Call: Invest yourself

#### Invest yourself in the Church

- Love the Body of Christ
- Take the Sacraments, Cherish the Word, Receive the Benediction
- Pray for God's Kingdom

#### Invest yourself in the World

- Practice “cultural exegesis”
- Practice hospitality
- Practice vocation
- Pray for God's Kingdom

**Closing Exercise: “Take to the World” by Aaron Tate and Derek Webb**

Listen to “Take to the World” and consider how Taylor’s work helps us become more faithful to the mission of Jesus, in order to “become what you want to save.”

*“Take to the World”*

Go in peace to love and to serve  
Let your ears ring long with what you've heard  
And may the bread on your tongue  
Leave a trail of crumbs  
To lead the hungry back to the place that you are from

[Chorus]

And take to the world this love, hope and faith  
Take to the world this rare, relentless grace  
And like the three in one  
Know you must become what you want to save  
'Cause that's still the way  
He takes to the world

Go, and go far  
Take light deep in the dark  
Believe what's true  
He uses all, even you

Closing Prayers

## Excerpts from Albert Camus, “The Unbeliever And Christians”

From Albert Camus, *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death: Essays*, Reissue edition. (New York: Vintage, 1995), 70-74.

[Note: In 1948, Camus was invited to speak at the Dominican Monastery of Latour-Maubourg. The following excerpts from his talk illustrate his sensitive awareness of human suffering and offer a profound word of challenge and encouragement from one who shares similar convictions about the value of the human, but does not “share [our] hope”.]

I shall not try to change anything that I think or anything that you think (insofar as I can judge of it) in order to reach a reconciliation that would be agreeable to all. On the contrary, what I feel like telling you today is that the world needs real dialogue, that falsehood is just as much the opposite of dialogue as is silence, and that the only possible dialogue is the kind between people who remain what they are and speak their minds. This is tantamount to saying that the world of today needs Christians who remain Christians. I shall not, as far as I am concerned, try to pass myself off as a Christian in your presence. I share with you the same revulsion from evil. But I do not share your hope, and I continue to struggle against this universe in which children suffer and die.

What the world expects of Christians is that Christians should speak out, loud and clear, and that they should voice their condemnation in such a way that never a doubt, never the slightest doubt, could rise in the heart of the simplest man. That they should get away from abstraction and confront the blood-stained face history has taken on today. The grouping we need is a grouping of men resolved to speak out clearly and to pay up personally.

We are faced with evil. And, as for me, I feel rather as Augustine did before becoming a Christian when he said: “I tried to find the source of evil and I got nowhere.” But it is also true that I, and a few others, know what must be done, if not to reduce evil, at least not to add to it. Perhaps we cannot prevent this world from being a world in which children are tortured. But we can reduce the number of tortured children. And if you don’t help us, who else in the world can help us do this?

It may be, I am we’ll aware, that Christianity will answer negatively. Oh, not by your mouths, I am convinced. But it may be, and this is even more probable, that Christianity will insist on maintaining a compromise. Possibly it will insist on losing once and for all the virtue of revolt and indignation that belonged to it long ago. In that case Christians will live and Christianity will die. In that case, the others will in fact pay for the sacrifice.

# WHAT IS COMMON GRACE?

[ DR. TIMOTHY KELLER ]

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The doctrine of common grace helps us to acknowledge God's goodness in all of creation and enables us to pursue mission with love in a fallen world.

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The Bible consistently teaches what theologians have come to call “common grace,” a non-saving grace that is at work in the broader reaches of human cultural interaction. This gift of God's grace to humanity in general demonstrates a desire on God's part to bestow certain blessings on all human beings, believer and non-believer alike. Understanding common grace provides the basis for Christians to cooperate with and learn from non-Christians.

## BIBLICAL BASIS

Let's explore the teaching on “common grace” in both the Old and New Testaments.

Psalm 19 differentiates between a kind of “wordless speech” about God that comes through nature and tells us about God's glory, and a propositional revelation that comes through the Bible. Romans 1 and 2 suggest that there is a primordial knowledge of God possessed by all human beings. God's law is written on the heart of every human being (Romans 2:14-15), and every person is born with an innate sense of honesty, justice, and love so that we are “without excuse” (Romans 1:20). Scripture's testimony is that all people know at some deep level that there is a God, that we are his creatures, and that we know we should serve him as Creator-God.

In the book of James we see that “every good and perfect gift comes down from above . . . from the father of lights” (James 1:17). This means that every act of goodness, wisdom, justice, and beauty—no matter who does it—is being enabled by God. It is a gift, and therefore some form of grace. For example, there is a general understanding among Christians that nature reveals God apart from the Bible. That is, most understand that even beyond the Bible and saving faith, God reveals himself generally to all people through the magnificence of nature, as they view the ocean, the mountains, and other breathtaking grandeur. “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies the work of his hands” (Psalm 19:1).

But God also shows common grace by revealing knowledge of himself through human culture, for human culture is simply a wise recognition and cultivation of nature. Isaiah 28:23-29 states, “When a farmer plows for planting . . . when he has leveled the surface . . . does he not plant wheat in its place, barley in its plot, and spelt in its field? His God instructs him and teaches him the right way . . . Grain must be ground to make bread . . . all this also comes from the Lord Almighty, wonderful in counsel and magnificent in wisdom.” This is remarkable. Isaiah tells us that anyone who becomes a skillful farmer or excels in agricultural science is being taught by God. One commentator writes about this text: “What appears as a discovery (the proper season and conditions for sowing, farm management, rotation of crops, etc.) is actually the Creator opening his book of creation and revealing his truth.”<sup>1</sup>

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1. J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 235.

It is important to note that all human culture ultimately follows the same pattern as farming. Every advancement in human learning, every work of art, and every scientific discovery is simply God “opening his book of creation and revealing his truth” to us. Of course, the vast majority of farmers in the history of the world did not know that God was doing this, but Isaiah says that God was at work. This is general revelation, or as theologians call it “the doctrine of common grace.” All artistic expressions, skillful farming, scientific discoveries, medical and technological advances are expressions of God’s grace. An example from Scripture is found in Exodus 31, where we read how Bezalel was “filled with the Spirit of God, with skill, ability, and knowledge in all kinds of crafts to make artistic designs.” Here we see that artistic skill is something that comes from God.

In Isaiah 45:1 we read of Cyrus, a pagan king that God anointed with his Spirit and chose for world leadership. In Genesis 20:6ff we read how God prevents another pagan king from falling into sin. This is an indication of how God’s Spirit does not only function as a non-saving ennobling force in the world, but also as a non-saving restraining force in the world. This is not the Spirit working as a converting or sanctifying agent but rather working to give wisdom, courage, creativity and insight—another facet of common grace.

## THE EFFECTS OF THE FALL

Paul also says that we “suppress the truth in unrighteousness” (Romans 1:18). This statement has two edges to it. John Calvin strikes the balance of the Reformed tradition when first he wrote about secular (referring mainly to ancient pagan) authors:

*...let that admirable light of truth shining in them teach us that the mind of man, though fallen and perverted from its wholeness, is nevertheless clothed and ornamented with God’s excellent gifts. If we regard the Spirit of God as the sole fountain of truth, we shall neither reject the truth itself, nor despise it wherever it shall appear, unless we wish to dishonor the Spirit of God. . . . Those men whom Scripture [1 Corinthians 2:14] calls “natural men” were, indeed, sharp and penetrating in their investigation of inferior things. Let us, accordingly, learn by their example how many gifts the Lord left to human nature even after it was despoiled of its true good.<sup>2</sup>*

At the same time, however, Calvin also wrote that while “...in man’s perverted and degenerate nature some sparks still gleam . . . [the light is nonetheless] choked with dense ignorance, so that it cannot come forth effectively. [His] mind, because of its dullness. . . betrays how incapable it is of seeking and finding truth.”<sup>3</sup> It is quite interesting that the same person could write these two seemingly contradictory things within just a few pages of one another. Are non-believers capable of the truth or not? Calvin, by giving careful heed to Romans 1, provides the answer “yes and no.”

On the one hand it means that there is no neutrality in the world. Everyone who does not acknowledge Christ as Lord is operating out of a false view of things. No one is objective. Everyone has to live for something; everyone, therefore, has to idolize some fallen thing(s) and demonize some good thing(s). Everyone is operating from a worldview that either honors Christ as the central authority or else denies him. There is no such thing as a neutral vantage point where an observer can view the whole of reality objectively.

On the other hand it means that despite the false worldviews, everyone grasps and to some degree acknowledges truths about God, creation, human nature, and so on. Paul says we “suppress the truth in unrighteousness,” which means that we all initially have the truth in some way.

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2. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II. 2.15

3. Calvin, *Institutes*, II. 2.12

4. Leonard Bernstein, *The Joy of Music* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), 29.



How then do we integrate these two sides to the doctrine of common grace? This universal knowledge of God and of good has been called “first order beliefs.” Romans 1 and 2 tells us that all people do know that there is a glorious Creator-God. Throughout the Old Testament, the glory of the Lord is said to “fill the whole earth” (e.g. Numbers 14:21). All people have these beliefs, what Calvin called “a sense of the divine,” even if often their conscious, intellectual “second order beliefs” deny God. This means that much—maybe even most—of what non-Christians do will honor or be based on basic truths that they know at one level and yet do not know at another. For example, Leonard Bernstein’s “second order beliefs” were secular and naturalistic. But in a famous television appearance he provided insight to his first order beliefs when he said that listening to Beethoven “make[s] you feel at the finish: Something is right in the world. There is something that checks throughout, that follows its own law consistently: something we can trust, that will never let us down.”<sup>4</sup> What he was saying was that music gave him not simply good feelings but hinted at a deep structure, a purpose and meaning. Despite the fact that his formal beliefs centered around life as a cosmic accident, and therefore without meaning to anything, music made him feel that there was meaning and purpose to life after all, that it mattered how one lived.

## PRACTICAL APPLICATION

Without an understanding of common grace, Christians will fall prey to many misconceptions.

- For instance, without an understanding of God’s common grace, the world will be a more confusing place. In the movie *Amadeus* (1984), Salieri is totally confused and bitter that he, a morally good person, has so little talent, while Mozart, a morally despicable person, has obviously been blessed with a rare, God-given musical talent. Salieri perceived this situation as a failure of divine justice; but in fact his problem was a failure to understand the doctrine of common grace. God gives good gifts of wisdom, talent, beauty, and skill graciously, that is, in completely unmerited ways. He casts them across the human race like seed, in order to enrich, brighten, and preserve the world. Far from being unfair, God’s unmerited acts of blessings make life on earth much more bearable than it should be given the pervasive effects of sin on all of his creation.
- Without an understanding of the doctrine of common grace, Christians may think they can live and work self-sufficiently within a “sub-culture” of other believers. We may feel we should only go to Christian doctors, work with Christian lawyers, purchase Christian music, support Christian artists, and so on. Of course, we ought to remember that every non-Christian is operating out of a distorted worldview. But the fact remains that the gifts God has put in the world for believers he has also showered upon non-believers. Mozart was a gift to us, whether he was a believer or not.<sup>5</sup> Jesus himself said that God “causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Matthew 5:45).
- Without an understanding of common grace, Christians may feel no need to study the world and other human cultures in order to get to know God. But the fact is that we need to appreciate truth and wisdom wherever we find it and that studying different cultures, languages, artwork, and music expands not only our appreciation of the created world but also the God who made it.
- Without an understanding of common grace, Christians will have trouble understanding why non-Christians so often exceed Christians in morality and wisdom. The differences between believers and nonbelievers are, sadly, often rather hard to discern. One of the reasons, of course, is the common stain of sin. The other reason is the gift of common grace.

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5. See the reflections on Mozart from the likes of such heavyweight theologians as Karl Barth, *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart* (Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2003) and Hans Küng, *Mozart: Traces of Transcendence* (Eerdmans, 1993).

Common grace is therefore a thread that binds us together in our common humanity, as well as a powerful tool in evangelism. If the glory of God is indeed in all the earth as Scripture testifies, the mission of the people of God is to “name the glory”; to name the unknown-known god (Acts 17:23); to speak of the glory that has come down in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

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