

BROOKE ALLEN

The Value of Doubt

A SECULAR AGE. THIS TITLE, CHOSEN BY CANADIAN PHILOSOPHER Charles Taylor for his recently published *magnum opus*,¹ is rather provocative, making as it does an assertion that this *is* a secular age—a proposition not everyone will agree with, even granting that Taylor is referring only to what he defines as the “North Atlantic world.” It seems to me that as a rule, people who are religious (in which category Taylor includes himself) find our age disturbingly secular, while those who are agnostic or atheist find it disturbingly religious; in fact the latter frequently begin their books and articles with harrowing figures on the percentage of Americans who interpret the Bible literally, who believe in the devil, in angels, in the Rapture, etc. etc. So the question of whether our age is secular or not seems to be a very subjective one.

Taylor blandly asserts his position with a series of statements that are surprisingly questionable, considering that he is a trained academic philosopher. “Religion or its absence is largely a private matter. The political society is seen as that of believers (of all stripes) and non-believers alike.” Is this true? Not, I think, when “faith” has been elevated to an unassailable position in our popular culture. “One understanding of secularity,” he goes on, “is in terms of public spaces. These have been allegedly emptied of God, or of any reference to ultimate reality.” Have they? As I write, Mike Huckabee, the former pastor and president of the Arkansas Baptist State Convention, has just won the Iowa Republican Presidential Caucus in spite of his utter lack of international experience or credibility, and the hottest news story from Fox TV to the *New York Times* editorial page is the tortured question of whether or not the Mormon Mitt Romney is a “real” Christian. “The norms and principles we follow,” Taylor writes, “the deliberations we engage in, generally don’t refer us to God, or to any religious belief; the considerations we act on are internal to the ‘rationality’ of each sphere—maximum gain within the economy, the greatest benefit to the greatest number in the political arena, and so on.” He obviously hasn’t been listening to the endless “values” talk in American politics—and such issues are not, I think, entirely absent even from the Western European political dialogue, despite Nicolas Sarkozy’s recent divorce and open liaison with a supermodel.

¹ *A SECULAR AGE* by Charles Taylor. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. \$39.95.

“Belief is an option, and in some sense an embattled option,” Taylor writes—but of course the same could be said of non-belief, which is rarer and more embattled in this country. And just what is an unbeliever, according to Taylor? “The unbeliever wants to be the kind of person for whom this life is fully satisfying, in which all of him can rejoice, in which his whole sense of fullness can find an adequate object. And he is not there yet.”

Sez who? Which unbeliever is that? Who says he or she is not there yet? Taylor goes on to critique “reason,” as he interprets it. “Reason by itself is narrow, blind to the demands of fullness, will run on perhaps to destruction, human and ecological, if it recognizes no limits; is perhaps actuated by a kind of pride, hubris.” Really? This would depend on how you define “reason”; surely real reason recognizes limits, while faith is by definition less likely to do so? It is not reason that is blind to limits, but hubris and greed, and the truly reasonable person will reject these.

Christianity’s adversarial stance towards reason has an ancient pedigree, a fact that should never be forgotten. The famous peroration of Tertullian, the third-century Christian apologist, stated the principle most dramatically:

What has Athens to do with Jerusalem, the Academy with the Church? . . . We have no need for curiosity since Jesus Christ, nor for inquiry since the Evangel.

Tell me, what is the sense of this itch for idle speculation? What does it prove, this useless affectation of a fastidious curiosity, notwithstanding the strong confidence of its assertions? It was highly appropriate that Thales, while his eyes were roaming the heavens in astronomical observation, should have tumbled into a well. This mishap may well serve to illustrate the fate of all who occupy themselves with the stupidities of philosophy.

This is the substance of secular wisdom that it rashly undertakes to explain the nature and dispensation of God. . . . Unhappy Aristotle, who supplies them with a logic evasive in its propositions, far-fetched in its conclusions, disputatious in its arguments, burdensome even to itself, settling everything in order to settle nothing. . . .

What is there in common between the philosopher and the Christian, the pupil of Hellas and the pupil of Heaven, the worker for reputation and salvation, the manufacturer of words and of deeds, the builder and the destroyer, the interpreter of error and the artificer of truth, the thief of truth and its custodian?

To know nothing against the rule of faith is to know everything. . . .

It is not to thee that I address myself, the soul which, formed in the schools, trained in the libraries, belches forth a fund of academic wisdom, but thee, the simple and uncultivated soul. . . . It is the “secret deposit of congenital and inborn knowledge” which contains the truth, and this is not a product of secular discipline. The soul comes before letters, words before books, and man himself before the philosopher and the poet.

It was not enough for Tertullian to claim that reason, science, and philosophy were insufficient as guides to the truth; he actually attacked them as antipathetic to truth, creating the notorious *credo quia absurdum* which has disgusted so many rationalists over the ages: "The Son of God was born, I am not ashamed of it because it is shameful; the Son of God died, it is credible for the very reason that it is silly; and, having been buried, He rose again, it is certain because it is impossible."

It is certain because it is impossible. Charles Norris Cochrane, author of a comprehensive 1940 study called *Christianity and Classical Culture*, contended that while Tertullian's words may not perhaps be quite typical, "they may be accepted as an overstatement rather than a misstatement of the Christian position. For if there was any single thing to which Christian teaching pointed, it was to a recognition of the authority of the Master as the one avenue to truth. This authority was conceived as absolute and exclusive. As such . . . it meant a departure from . . . the conventional classical approach to the problems of human life, that is, through 'nature and reason.'" As Martin Luther was to affirm some thirteen centuries after Tertullian, "The Holy Ghost is not a skeptic."

This philosophy was entirely radical at the time; it still is, to many of us. From the Christian cult's very beginnings non-Christians perceived Christians as having, in Tacitus' words, an "aversion to the human race," and rationalists from Julian the Apostate to Machiavelli to Gibbon have expressed doubts as to whether a good Christian can also be a good citizen. As the Enlightenment project failed to discredit Christianity, it has been modernity's self-appointed task to try and reconcile Athens with Jerusalem. After all, both reason and religion are inescapable elements of the human condition, and human society seems to be spiritually (or psychologically) incomplete without some of each, as William James asserted more than a century ago in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.

What, in the end, are all our verifications but experiences that agree with more or less isolated systems of ideas (conceptual systems) that our minds have framed? But why in the name of common sense need we assume that only one such system of ideas can be true? The obvious outcome of our total experience is that the world can be handled according to many systems of ideas, and is so handled by different men, and will each time give some characteristic kind of profit, for which he cares, to the handler, while at the same time some other kind of profit has to be omitted or postponed. . . . Evidently, then, the science and the religion are both of them genuine keys for unlocking the world's treasure-house to him who can use either of them practically. Just as evidently neither is exhaustive or exclusive of the other's simultaneous use.

James made his plea "in the name of common sense," but common sense is as rare in the intellectual and religious spheres as it is

everywhere else, and Athens and Jerusalem are still at war—never more so. Taylor’s book is a symptom of this bellicosity: the author was the recipient of the 2007 Templeton Prize For Progress Toward Research or Discoveries about Spiritual Realities, which at slightly more than \$1.5 million is the world’s largest monetary prize awarded to a single individual. The public atheist Richard Dawkins, in his book *The God Delusion*, referred to the prize dyspeptically as “a very large sum of money given . . . usually to a scientist who is prepared to say something nice about religion.” *A Secular Age* should be understood as a personal statement of faith as well as a cultural study, but it is a cultural study, and at 776 dense pages a very substantial one. In it, Taylor seeks to answer the question of why it was virtually impossible not to believe in God five hundred years ago while today many of us find it “not only easy, but inescapable.”

Taylor rejects what he calls the traditional “subtraction stories,” which seek to explain modern secularism in terms of “human beings having lost, or sloughed off, or liberated themselves from certain earlier, confining horizons, or illusions, or limitations of knowledge.” In place of this he offers the argument that “Western modernity, including its secularity, is the fruit of new inventions, newly constructed self-understandings and related practices, and can’t be explained in terms of perennial features of human life.” He then proceeds to review Western spiritual and cultural history since the Middle Ages, from a world that was perceived to be “enchanted,” shot through with magic and the supernatural, through the period Max Weber dubbed as that of “disenchantment,” to arrive at the “expressivist” modern condition in which many people seek spiritual enlightenment not from traditional theological structures and formulae but on different routes to spiritual wholeness, with the stress on “unity, integrity, holism, individuality.”

While Taylor can’t help revealing his distaste, as a conventional Christian, for a “popular culture in which individual self-realization and sexual fulfillment are interwoven,” he is fair-minded enough to allow that if our dispensation “tends to multiply somewhat shallow and undemanding spiritual options, we shouldn’t forget the spiritual costs of various kinds of forced conformity: hypocrisy, spiritual stultification, inner revolt against the Gospel, the confusion of faith and power, and even worse. Even if we had a choice,” he admits—a difficult admission, probably—“I’m not sure we wouldn’t be wiser to stick with the present dispensation.”

The wide coverage *A Secular Age* has had in the popular press should not lead the reader to assume that the book is accessible to a general readership. On the contrary, it is so poorly written, repetitive and jargon-laden as to be almost unreadable; Taylor could have said everything he wanted to in 250 pages, and said it better—but then again, a 250-page book would probably not have seemed “important” enough to pick up the Templeton Prize. When did written philosophy become so egregiously dense and poisoned by jargon? Did Plato use academic

jargon? Augustine? Thomas Aquinas? Machiavelli? Hume? Adam Smith? Schopenhauer? Nietzsche? No, no, and no; the rot seems to have set in for good in the era of Heidegger; it is with him and his ilk that philosophy ceased to be written for the general reader and was aimed purely at the specialist. Taylor, who *is* writing for the general reader, has been so infected by the disease that he simply cannot organize his prose. There is no good reason for philosophy to be written in this obscure fashion: the questions with which it deals are, after all, the oldest and most universal questions there are, not mathematical formulas or complex scientific theora. Here is a sample of Taylor's writing; if it represents an exaggeration of his style, it is only a slight one:

My claim is that this introduction of a stance of poiesis into the domain of praxis is in a relation of mutual facilitation with the changes I mentioned in the previous section; with the view of Cusanus, Ficino, Leonardo, that science is made possible by our own constructive activity, and with the shift in natural science to what Scheler called a "Leistungswissen," a science in which truth is confirmed by instrumental efficacy.

Taylor will puff away in this mode for pages and then disconcertingly turn on a dime in favor of a breezy informality which is just as infelicitous, with a sentence like "What I'm calling social embeddedness is thus partly an identity thing."

His constipated narrative takes great persistence to follow, and if one does persist, the result is a painstaking and coherent but one-sided narrative. One-sided because Taylor assumes that because many people (like himself) clearly need religion and mourn what they see as its loss in society's fabric, then all people do, on at least a subconscious level—in other words that everyone feels the "God-shaped hole" Pascal so memorably described. To Taylor an unbeliever is by definition "not there yet," unsatisfied, unfulfilled, as we read above. This is to ignore entirely a significant portion of the population: not only atheists and agnostics who seem to be perfectly happy and complete human beings—or at least no less so than most religious people—but also those who are only passively religious, the not over-zealous churchgoers described by William James as "once-born." The "twice-born" are those, in James's formulation, who find "salvation through self-despair," "dying to be truly born."

Whatever its ultimate significance may prove to be, this is certainly one fundamental form of human experience. Some say that the capacity or incapacity for it is what divides the religious from the merely moralistic character. With those who undergo it in its fullness, no criticism avails to cast doubt on its reality. They *know*; for they have actually *felt* the higher powers, in giving up the tension of their personal will.

Logic and rationalism are powerless to convince this person who has experienced the divine, and who *knows*; likewise, it will be hard for even the most passionate account of such an experience to convince the rationalist of its truth and significance.

A fascinating 2004 book called *The God Gene*, by Dean Hamer, shows that modern advances in the science of genetics have borne out James's deductions to a surprising degree: the capacity for spirituality seems to be a genetic predisposition. Here "spirituality," it should be stressed, is not a synonym for "religiousness" but is defined as a capacity for self-transcendence. It appears to be a genetically determined feature, while "religiousness," as measured by church attendance, is learned from parents, religious leaders, and peers. "People go to church or mosque or temple because that's what they were told to do," writes Hamer. "Spirituality, as measured by self-transcendence, is more innate. It comes from within, not from without. Of course, spirituality has to be developed, just like any other talent. But the evidence suggests the predisposition is there from the beginning."

James firmly differentiated twice-born spirituality from once-born religiousness, and science, a century down the road, confirms his analysis. Spirituality appears to be free of theology; one might call it, as Leibniz did, *philosophia perennis*, the perennial philosophy. Aldous Huxley (himself a classic case of spirituality unmoored from conventional religiousness) defined the perennial philosophy as

the metaphysic that recognizes a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds; the psychology that finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical with, divine Reality; the ethic that places man's final end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent Ground of all being—the thing is immemorial and universal. Rudiments of the Perennial Philosophy may be found among the traditionary lore of primitive peoples in every region of the world, and in its fully developed forms it has a place in every one of the higher religions. A version of this Highest Common Factor in all preceding and subsequent theologies was first committed to writing more than twenty-five centuries ago, and since that time the inexhaustible theme has been treated again and again, from the standpoint of every religious tradition and in all the principal languages of Asia and Europe.

If Taylor is an example of the twice-born, the spiritual soul who refuses to recognize the authenticity of the non-spiritual life, Stuart Sim, the author of another new book on faith and skepticism, is his opposite number. *Empires of Belief: Why We Need More Skepticism and Doubt in the Twenty-First Century*² preaches a robust Enlightenment philosophy: Sim's gripe is not that there is not enough faith at this historical moment, but that there is far too much of it.

² EMPIRES OF BELIEF: Why We Need More Skepticism and Doubt in the Twenty-First Century, by *Stuart Sim*. Edinburgh University Press. \$24.50.

It is this book's contention [he begins] that unquestioning belief is pervading global culture, and that the most effective way of countering it is by an engaged skepticism, an open-minded and continually questioning and probing sense of doubt. Unless we can develop this, our democratic lifestyle is under severe threat from the narrow-minded purveyors of dogma. In the current world order we are confronted by an array of what can be called "empires of belief." These empires—dominant organizations or groups led by the powerful that exercise dominion over ordinary people—are investing an immense amount of time and effort in trying to dictate how we should think, consume, and behave. . . . The dramatic resurgence of religious fundamentalism on an international scale indicates that there is a significant constituency of people receptive to unquestioning belief of the kind that empires traditionally foster, as does the rise of various other kinds of fundamentalism—market, nationalistic, political, ecological, to name some of the most prominent.

Although Sim, too, is a university professor (of Critical Theory), his combative prose is blessedly free of academic jargon. He presents the reader with a brief history of skeptical philosophy from Sextus Empiricus to Descartes, to Hume, and finally to postmodern thinkers like Foucault and Baudrillard who have taken the concept of skepticism to its logical end and beyond. Some of these philosophers are more useful to the kind of practical skepticism Sim wishes to encourage than others are: Baudrillard's attempt to eliminate not only value-judgment but all systems of meaning and interpretation is not only quixotic but morally dubious. Still, Sim succeeds in casting skepticism as a fortress against repression and the way to a more egalitarian future. Skepticism is the ability to question intelligently systems of authority, and its free expression—guaranteed in this country by the First Amendment but always under siege—he defines as "to be able to criticize those running the empires and all their beliefs: to criticize them until their activities are brought into public disrepute."

It is by its very nature an uphill battle, as Sim points out and as we can see richly illustrated anytime we open a newspaper. It is all too clear that dogmatism naturally lends itself to a group dynamic, while skepticism tends to be an individual position. "True believers are nothing if not indefatigable, and unless they are met with some degree of commitment and persistence from the skeptical side, then they will continue to make the inroads into our individual and collective freedoms that they are currently making." Unfortunately, however—and this is an unarguable contention—"skepticism does not naturally lend itself to politics, since its basis is essentially negative."

The positive connotations of skepticism have been all but eradicated by religious zealotry, which has chosen to endow it with the negative label "doubt"—it being of course understood that this is an undesirable condition, to be recovered from as though it were a debilitating disease

as one works one's way towards the blessed goal of "faith." This attitude was memorably allegorized in John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, when Christian and Hopeful are imprisoned by the dreadful giant Despair in his Doubting Castle before they escape to their ultimate destination, the Celestial City.

Sim, on the contrary, defines faith in negative terms as a "willing suspension of doubt," and eloquently refutes the accusation so often taken up by religious fundamentalists, that science constitutes a faith system of its own. "If science is a faith," he writes, "then it is a faith which has the capacity not just for change, but for very radical change, and on a regular basis—which is not a characteristic of religious faith." So-called "global-warming skeptics," like "Holocaust skeptics," cannot be classified as true skeptics since their critiques so often turn out to be in the thrall or the service of some other faith or agenda. Science should indeed be placed under a permanent critique; but by its nature it is open to such a critique, unlike the monolithic demands of faith: *credo quia probabilis*, in fact, rather than *credo quia absurdum*. No leap of faith necessary.

Satire, "designed to spread doubt about authority, whether vested in the person or in the institution, and to mock its pretensions," has always played an essential role in maintaining an open society—yet religion, or rather "faith," is popularly considered off-bounds for the satirist, who is supposed to respect "faith traditions" and avoid hurting the susceptible feelings of the believer. Hate speech is of course undesirable in public discourse: but how do we differentiate hate speech from ridicule, or indeed informed criticism? As Sim asks, when does a belief become a faith?

One need look no further than America, and the Church of Jesus Christ Christian Aryan Nations, to see this particular combination in, deeply unpleasant, action. Racism in this case has indeed been turned into a faith, with all the benefits such status brings with it in a Western democracy. . . . Even Satanism is now recognized as a religion by the British Navy, which after a recent test case has been forced to allow one of its sailors to worship on board ship according to his religion's demand that its believers practice excess. . . . If Scientology can become a religion, then surely anything can?

Skepticism, therefore, should be seen not as a nihilistic leveler but as "a cure for philosophical pretension, a permanent internal critique of philosophical discourse, tactically geared to thinking the unthinkable, and saying the unsayable, about all grand narratives, in open opposition to the latter's guardians." The very process of creating a grand narrative, whether religious, historical, political, or economic, requires a suppression of certain facts and aspects to make the narrative cohere; ideology becomes the internalization of such a selective narrative (n.b. Charles Taylor's grand narrative of "secularization").

When grand narratives clash, the virtues of tolerance are too often discounted. Christians were persecuted in the pre-Constantinian Roman Empire, when they were perceived as being inimical to civic order; in the fourth and fifth centuries, however, ensconced in positions of power, they in their turn began to persecute the pagans, their former oppressors. One of the most poignant victims of these ancient persecutions was Hypatia of Alexandria, the foremost mathematician of the Empire during the early fifth century, a pagan who was torn apart and burned by a Christian mob—very possibly at the behest of the bishop who would later be canonized as St. Cyril of Alexandria and declared, in 1882, a Doctor of the Universal Church.

Hypatia quickly became known as a martyr in the cause of reason and knowledge. Her life and work has now been given a new treatment by Michael A. B. Deakin,³ an Australian mathematician and historian; as the author points out, this is the first book-length biography to attempt an evaluation of Hypatia's mathematical work.

The third and fourth centuries constituted a period of intellectual decline in Alexandria. The great libraries were destroyed during a succession of civil wars, the Temple of Serapis was razed and replaced by a Christian church, and the Museum—the institute of advanced scholarship founded by Ptolemy I—was on its last legs. The last attested member of the Museum was the mathematician Theon of Alexandria, Hypatia's father; his work, and hers, can be seen as an effort against the odds “to preserve valid mathematics in a climate where the genuine article was becoming a rarity and pseudo-mathematics was flourishing in its place.”

Ancient mathematical studies (which consisted of arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music) were intimately linked with Platonic philosophy: they were conceived as a sacred pursuit which could lead the human soul to the One. If not anti-Christian, they were not Christian either, and mathematicians in the increasingly Christian empire were often labeled as magicians, astrologers, and general hucksters. The climate of the times, conducive to Christian zealotry, was anti-intellectual and easily consumed by “that tide of opinion which knows no possibility of doubt, which adheres blindly and mindlessly to a cause, which abandons intellectual quest for the assurance of a mute and unquestioning ‘faith.’ . . . [Hypatia's] life became forfeit to the bloodlust of those who would claim, with the ironic certainty of unconscious self-refutation, their access to a higher morality.”

Accounts of Hypatia's death and of Cyril's complicity in it vary drastically “along party lines.” The ecclesiastical historian Socrates Scholasticus, writing only twenty-five years after the event, provides what appears to be the most objective account.

Some of [the Christian populace], hurried away by a fierce and bigoted zeal, whose ringleader was a reader named Peter, waylaid her

³ HYPATIA OF ALEXANDRIA, by *Michael A. B. Deakin*. Prometheus Books. \$28.00.

returning home, and dragging her from her carriage, they took her to the church named *Caesareum*, where they completely stripped her, and then murdered her with [roofing] tiles [or oyster-shells]. After tearing her body in pieces, they took her mangled limbs to a place called Cinaron, and there burnt them. The affair brought not the least [i.e., considerable] opprobrium, not only on Cyril, but also on the whole Alexandrian church. And surely nothing can be further from the spirit of Christianity than the allowance of massacres, fights and transactions of that sort.

Compare this with the seventh-century Coptic writer John of Nikiu, who derived his account from Socrates' while adding material purposely derogatory to Hypatia:

And in those days there appeared in Alexandria a female philosopher, a pagan named Hypatia, and she was devoted at all times to magic, astrolabes and instruments of music, and she beguiled many people through [her] satanic wiles. And the governor of the city honored her exceedingly; for she had beguiled him through her magic. And he ceased attending church as had been his custom. . . .

And thereafter a multitude of believers in God arose under the guidance of Peter the magistrate—now this Peter was a perfect believer in all respects in Jesus Christ—and they proceeded to seek for the pagan woman who had beguiled the people of the city and the prefect through her enchantments. And when they learned the place where she was they proceeded to her and found her seated on a [lofty] chair; and having made her descend they dragged her along until they brought her to the great church, named Caeserion. . . . And they tare off her clothing and dragged her [till they brought her] through the streets of the city till she died. And they carried her to a place named Cinaron, and they burned her body with fire. And all the people surrounded the patriarch Cyril and named him “the new Theophilus”; for he had destroyed the last remains of idolatry in the city.

Everything, clearly, depends on perspective, and one person's grisly crime is another's act of purification.

Theodore Ziolkowski, professor emeritus of German and comparative literature at Princeton, has contributed a historical study to the current dialogue on questions of belief, called *Modes of Faith: Secular Surrogates for Lost Religious Belief*.⁴ This book addresses the subject of the God-shaped hole as it appeared a century ago. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw a tremendous crisis of faith in Europe as a result of the scientific discoveries of the Victorian era, the Freudian

⁴ *MODES OF FAITH: Secular Surrogates for Lost Religious Belief*, by Theodore Ziolkowski. University of Chicago Press. \$35.00.

revolution, and the First World War, which shattered so many people's faith in a beneficent God and in history as progress. As Siegfried Kracauer wrote in 1922, the young people of his era "are suffering to the core from their expulsion from the religious sphere, from the enormous alienation prevailing between their spirit and the absolute. They have lost faith, indeed almost the capacity for faith, and the religious truths have become for them colorless thoughts . . ."

There is nothing particularly new or surprising in Ziolkowski's thesis; lots has been written on this subject, and I particularly remember one book from the 1980s, *The Will to Believe: Novelists of the 1930s*, by Richard Johnstone, which said very much the same thing Ziolkowski does—though Johnstone confined himself to England while Ziolkowski deals with Continental writers as well. Darwin, Freud, Nietzsche, and the iniquities of Field Marshal Haig sowed doubts—God was deemed to be lost—hence the God-shaped hole, which alienated writers attempted to fill with some other faith: socialism, some other form of Christianity, Eastern mysticism, art, utopia, what have you.

Freud's *The Future of an Illusion* (1927), says Ziolkowski, claimed that "if religion is expelled from European civilization, it will simply be replaced by another system of doctrines, which would take on all the psychological characteristics of religion: sanctimoniousness, rigidity of form and belief, and intolerance of free thought." Mankind obviously requires faith; and if he does not get it through an established creed, he will make one up for himself. Ziolkowski examines the work and lives of thirty-odd European writers in this light, including Roger Martin du Gard, Stefan George, Pierre Loti, Hermann Hesse, Ignazio Silone, Yevgeny Zamiatin, and H. G. Wells.

Ziolkowski claims that the pattern of these writers' lives and works

is worth our attention precisely because today's secularized society, especially in Europe but also among many rootless Americans, finds itself in a situation remarkably similar to that of almost a century ago, even if our surrogates display a conspicuous tendency toward the trivial. . . . The desires of our modern society have combined with the marvels of technology to breed many mechanisms of escape, but the surrogates are original only in form, not in substance. Yet beyond those twenty-first century modes of faith awaits, inevitably and inescapably, the problematic reality of a world still disenchanted and of lives still unfulfilled.

Is this true? Yes; but Ziolkowski can't seem to decide just how "secularized" our society actually is. His preface mentions countless religious conflicts that are occurring all over the world as he writes, and he discusses the astounding fact that in the United States, according to the *New York Times*, religion is a more accurate predictor of voting preferences than income, education, gender, or any other factor except for race.

When we call a culture “secular,” then, we can only ever speak in relative terms. Spirituality (or self-transcendence, as the scientists described by Dean Hamer have formulated it) is ever-present, yet ever-morphing; it will often reappear in unrecognizable guises, while its outer shell—theology—might be adapted to serve not God but Mammon, or Power. When this happens, as it always does, the Will to Believe will have to find new forms and new objects.

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