

Post-Secular Politics

RESURRECTING DEMOCRACIES: Secularity Recast in Charles Taylor, Paul Valadier, and Joseph Ratzinger

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I. INTRODUCTION

The signs of “exhaustion, cynicism, opportunism, and despair” as well as a “politics of resentment” pointed out by Jean Bethke Elshtain two decades ago are worryingly conspicuous in the European context today.¹ Most intellectuals have rightly resisted the temptation of perceiving these phenomena as merely manifestations of human egoism. Most of them carefully distinguish between ordinary human egoism on the one hand, and a healthy “self-affirmation,” on the other. These two types of “individualism” are antitheses: while the first one undermines democracy, the second one can be “a

¹ Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Democracy on Trial* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 27, 37.

potential source of democratic renewal.”² Along these lines, the quality of political, social, cultural life, and institutions depends on humans themselves, that is, on the “quality” of their will, reason, and heart, or their whole “personhood”. It follows that incomplete personal cultivation, also known as “humanization”, can lead to the collapse of the entire European civilization. It also means that neither the will nor reason is a constant (or, neutral), but instead has to be continuously (re)formed. This old wisdom lies at the heart of the works of Charles Taylor, Paul Valadier, and Joseph Ratzinger. Taylor and Ratzinger are widely known for their criticisms of radical anthropocentrism; Valadier, a Jesuit philosopher and theologian, is a public figure of French Catholicism, known for his profound reading of Nietzsche. In accordance with this engagement, he holds that contemporary persons must to recover the “appetite to live,” and the corresponding desire to “humanize” or “create” themselves.³

These three men share the view that anthropocentrism is mutilating because it isolates humans from each other, from the channels of values (Valadier), from the sources of their selves (Taylor), or from spiritual and human resources (Ratzinger). Such isolation is mutilating on both personal and public (civic) levels because sources or values are constitutive of human persons and of their civilizations. Rather than strictly comparing and contrasting these three thinkers' thoughts, I deem it more fruitful to show how they complement each other. Though they certainly differ from each other, there is a remarkable overlap in their theological and philosophical anthropologies in which the notion of gift or gratuity is central. The ideal of solidarity and justice that stems from this understanding of the human differs from conceptions that rely on the idea of the

² Christopher Lasch, *The Minimal Self: Psychic Survival in Troubled Times* (London: Pan Books, 1984), 59.

³ All translations of Valadier's works, published in French, and hence all possible inaccuracies, are my own. I have generally translated the French “homme” to “man,” though I have tried to use “human” as far as possible.

rational *qua* autonomous agent. This is the subject of the third section. To begin with, I will show how their conception of a secularized society, which they take as a given and established condition, does not exclude religion, Christianity or Christian transcendence, in particular. They all understand the latter term as “overabundant Life”, which enables them to reckon with the distance and closeness inherent to Christian “transcendence” and to enter the dialogue with non-Christians. In the second section, the relationship between Christianity (Church) and democracies (State) is further worked out. The idea that the Church is of a different order, and hence has a different “power” appears in all three. And, finally, their alternative understanding of the human is dealt with in the third section.

2. SECULARITY *VERSUS* SECULARISM

At the very beginning of his *A Secular Age*, Taylor points to two prevailing definitions of “secular” or “secularity,” namely, in terms of “public spaces” without references to God or “ultimate reality” and a “falling off of religious belief and practice.”⁴ He proposes a third definition, related to the other two and yet different: “the shift to secularity [...] consists, among other things, of a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace.”⁵ This condition is also what he calls the “Jamesian open space,” which is our modern condition in the “West.”⁶ His conception of secularity stands in stark contrast to a “subtraction” account of secularization in which the very existence of religious realities, aspirations, ideas, and practices is

⁴ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge/London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 2.

⁵ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 2-3, 19-20.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 549.

cleared off. Secularity is often associated with the “death of God”, and this is correct to the extent that one understands it as the collapse of the unique and unifying moral reference “God”, “Good” or “common good.” But since divine reality or religion cannot be reduced to a set of beliefs, doctrines, or codes, as Taylor, Valadier, and Ratzinger all emphasise, the death of God does not lead to the end of the religious (life). This is the reason why Ratzinger is not very happy with John Rawls’ understanding of Christianity as a “comprehensive religious doctrine”.⁷ While the three espouse a particular understanding of secularity, they are also highly critical of what Taylor calls the “secularist spin” and Ratzinger the “bunker with no windows” because it deprives humans of both human and extra-human resources.⁸ In this section, I will try to explain why they perceive a secularized society as a good, and when, according to them, this secularization goes wrong.

Secularization can be defined as a process of *desacralization*, so that society is longer defined in relation to God, but becomes, instead, “self-referential”. This is also what is called the “immanent frame”, an important concept in Taylor. The immanent frame refers to the new, modern understanding of the social order as “self-sufficient”, definable on its own terms, without reference to outside influences. It refers more specifically to the “disenchanted world”, free from the caprices of good or evil spirits, which, in the ancient cosmology, were all very much part of human reality and had the power to upset human affairs, making them quite unpredictable. Instead, moderns are no longer vulnerable to the

⁷ Benedict XVI, Lecture of the Holy Father Benedict XVI for his visit to La Sapienza University of Rome (17 January 2008), Vatican Website, http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2008/january/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20080117_la-sapienza.html (accessed 18 September 2015).

⁸ Benedict XVI, Apostolic Journey to Germany: Visit to the Federal Parliament in the Reichstag Building (Berlin, 22 September 2011), Vatican Website, http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2011/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20110922_reichstag-berlin.html (accessed 18 September 2015).

influences of demons, but are deemed capable of bearing responsibility for their deeds (and thoughts). In a strong sense, Judaism and Christianity (particularly with the Reformation) are themselves the sources of the modern immanent frame because of their demonization of various forms of “paganism” and “superstitions”, and the idea that “ordinary life” can be hallowed. This religious demythologization has been explicated by Ratzinger in several of his writings, including his (in)famous Regensburg lecture (2006), but also by Horkheimer and Adorno in their *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*. As Taylor recalls, the distinction between “natural”—“ordinary life”—and “supernatural”, emerged *within* theology and did not prevent the ardent defenders of “secular”, that is, “earthly” life from also being religious.⁹ The modern moral order did not entail the end of the transcendent for the early moderns, and it does not entail its end today. Even if the conceptualization of the modern order does not start with the Cosmos, Nature, or Creator, it does not mean that there is no longer an issue of “whether we have to suppose some higher creative power behind it [modern order]”.¹⁰ It was, and still is, not unusual for moderns to start from the immanent, secular order, and then arrive at a Creator—even a benevolent Creator.¹¹ This is an important dimension of the Augustinian legacy that Taylor sees as constitutive of the modern self.

This “shift to secularity” to which Taylor refers, is, in fact, for Ratzinger and Valadier, the end of an insalubrious, indeed unchristian alliance between Church and secular power, and the return to an original state of affairs brought about by Christianity itself. The Church can consequently be herself once again. The separation between political and religious powers, whereby religion cannot accept the weapons of the state to enforce faith, and the state cannot make use

⁹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 542.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, note 7, 832.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 543.

of the sacral to impose its will, is, for Ratzinger, a “salutary duality” introduced by “Hellenic Christianity”.¹² This is also called the “politico-theological” principle. Like most Christian political thinkers and theologians, Ratzinger sees the dictum “Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s (Mt 22:21)” as illustrating the relationship between the Church and the political sphere. The desacralization or demythologization brought about by Christianity does not abolish the political, but limits its power. It counters both the totalitarian state and theocracy. Conversely, “when this duality does not exist the totalitarian system is unavoidable”.¹³ Though humans are essentially social and political beings, they are not owned by the State, which is itself accountable to the higher law of God.¹⁴ Ratzinger speaks of the Christian “sober view of the state”; the state has to be respected “in its profane character”.¹⁵ As soon as the state tries to earn respect or commitment on the ground of promises that bear a religious character, we again fall into the sacralization of politics, which is a permanent threat of modern democracies. On the other hand, the “politico-theological” principle also counters theocracies: the God whom Christians worship does not want the worldly power that belongs to the political. This refusal of power is, according to Valadier, the core of Christian secularity. In contradistinction to Ratzinger and other thinkers, he holds that Mt 22:21 does not constitute a “theory of separation of powers,” and can be found in other religious traditions and books (like the Qur’an).¹⁶ According to Valadier, it is the message and the acts of Jesus Christ that explain the separation between the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of the Prince of this World. Specifically,

¹² Joseph Ratzinger, *Church, Ecumenism and Politics: New Essays in Ecclesiology* (New York: Crossroad, 1988), 161-162.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 163.

¹⁴ Joseph Ratzinger, *Values in a Time of Upheaval* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006), 20.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Paul Valadier, *Détresse de politique, force du religieux* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2007), 192.

he refers to Jesus' resistance to Satan in the desert and his willingness to submit himself to the judgement of Pilate.¹⁷ This means that the Church does have "power", but that it is the power of a "Word that creates and arouses liberties [...] nothing more, nothing less".¹⁸

Valadier's and Ratzinger's conceptions of secularity are not shared by everyone. Jürgen Habermas' history of secularization, for instance, does not go further back than the seventeenth century. For him, the "bases of the legitimation of a state authority with a neutral world view are derived from the profane sources of the philosophy of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries".¹⁹ In this respect, it is also significant that Taylor points to the disagreement between himself and Habermas (and Max Weber) on the issue of the exploration of a cosmic order through personal resonance.²⁰ The latter two thinkers perceive such self-understanding as "pre-modern", while Taylor has precisely gone to great pains to show that modernity is not simply the negation or supersession of an "old" order. Habermas' sharp distinction between the old and the new makes it necessary for him to speak in terms of "postsecularism", which does entail much more than a functionalist approach to religious traditions.²¹ Taylor, Valadier, and Ratzinger, on the other hand, could do without the term since, for them, it is an especially distorted form of secularisation that leads to social pathologies. In other words, their thinking enables them to reconcile a secularized society with religion or transcendence. The "secularization" that has developed since the eighteenth century is, indeed, one that is antagonistic to religion because it is closely related to a positivist ideal. This is why Valadier can

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 284-5.

¹⁹ Jürgen Habermas, "Pre-political Foundations of the Democratic Constitutional State?" in *Dialectics of Secularization. On Reason and Religion* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006), 24.

²⁰ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 510.

²¹ Habermas, "Pre-political Foundations of the Democratic Constitutional State?", 46.

hold that secularization “has also generated these diseases of rationality of which Ernest Renan is most probably the most moving and pathetic example”.²² He speaks of the “degradation” of *laïcité*—the acknowledgement of pluralism—into “*laïcisme*”, which is often the ally of “etatism” and scientific politics.²³

Though all three have probed into the question of why the mainstream secularization theory is so powerful, Taylor’s answer is particularly insightful. Why is the immanent frame presented as necessarily closed while it can be lived as open? The view that closure is “obvious” or necessary is dubbed by him as the “secularist spin”, which he sees as especially prevalent in intellectual and academic circles.²⁴ His concept of spin is a kind of repartee to those who, from Weber onwards, have been accused believers of intellectual dishonesty. Taylor notes that “spin” is “less dramatic and less insulting; it implies that one’s thinking is clouded or cramped by a powerful picture which prevents one from seeing important aspects of reality”.²⁵ His argument is that those who think that the modern order *necessarily* means that there is nothing beyond the “natural order” or “ordinary human flourishing” suffer from such imprisonment in a picture. They are what Taylor—following Wittgenstein—says are “caught in a picture.” He argues that it is the present “background understanding”—one of the three types of understandings that constitute the social imaginary—that somehow *morally* motivates the closed reading and makes “stories” and scientific “discoveries” plausible and appealing.²⁶ Humans, he stresses, only respond to “facts” or “discoveries” against a certain “background” that makes sense of these crude

²² Paul Valadier, *L’Église en procès: catholicisme et société moderne* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1987), 20.

²³ *Ibid.*, 21.

²⁴ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 549-550.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 551.

²⁶ Taylor, “Modernity and the Rise of the Public Sphere,” in *the Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, ed., Grethe B. Peterson, (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1993), vol. 14, 215, <http://tannerlectures.utah.edu/documents/a-to-z/t/Taylor93.pdf>.

facts.²⁷ According to Taylor, it is the image of the “mature” self, capable of “self-authorization” and disengaged reason that dominates modern imagination. He consistently argues that the closed reading is not a necessary “natural” reading, but instead involves a moral stance. The “spin” consists not in acknowledging the latter, but in taking absolute closure as *certain* or “obvious,” like a “brute fact”. In a similar way, there is also a “spin of openness”. The two constitute two faces of the same coin, in their failure to acknowledge that there is such a thing as a “Jamesian open space”; in their failure to distinguish between the “rational certainty” of natural science and “religious truths”, and to see that opting for either the closed or open reading (and changing readings) is a “leap of faith” or “anticipatory confidence”.²⁸

The modern condition—the Jamesian open space—that Taylor depicts was well understood by Pascal who proposed his wager to his non-believing friends, following the Augustinian insight that religious reality first has to be lived in order to be believed. “If the act of faith in God should be well-founded,” says Taylor—a few centuries after Pascal—then one runs the risk of turning oneself, and worse, many others, “away from the path towards a much more powerful and healing action in history”.²⁹ It is highly significant that Ratzinger has effectively re-coined Pascal’s wager, proposing to his “non-believing friends” to try to live as if God exists, “*veluti si Deus daretur*”.³⁰ What drives him is the fear of the “abolition of man” in a context in which bio-technology, eugenics, and cloning are possible. Many have blamed the horrors of the twentieth century on the closed reading of the immanent frame, which time and time again enables the sacralisation of politics and prevents selves from drawing on truly empowering

²⁷ See Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 568.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 550-551.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 703.

³⁰ Joseph Ratzinger, *Christianity and the Crisis of Cultures* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006), 51-52.

resources. Though religious fundamentalism seems to correspond to the spin of closure, it is more logical to consider it as stemming from the effects of a closed reading of the frame because it also deprives humans persons of sources of humanization. This is a slightly different way of formulating Ratzinger's argument that religious violence is a result of unreason. According to Valadier, anthropocentrism leads to the paralysis of the will, that is, to a weak desire for life, with the corresponding incapacity to affirm an abundant life, which includes alterity, death and suffering. This incapacity to affirm life in its fullness has also been noted by Taylor³¹. There are innumerable reasons for holding, with Taylor, that the "limits of the regnant versions of immanent order", both in terms of theories and (political) practices, have to be overstepped.³² In the next section, we shall see how these thinkers conceive such a transcendence.

3. CHRISTIAN TRANSCENDENCE AND DEMOCRATIC VITALITY

The distinction between private and public spaces is constitutive for liberal democratic systems. Moreover, we have seen that, for Valadier and Ratzinger, this very distinction has Christian roots. In that model of secularity, Christianity does have an important role in debates concerning fundamental human issues. Hence, though the distinction between the political and the religious should be upheld—for the sake of the human person—our context of democratic weakness calls for a rethinking of the different types of "powers". Christianity, Valadier argues, can find its proper place not by being represented as, or in, a power next to, or above, other powers, but by being a source of inspiration that maintains an

³¹ Charles Taylor, *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays* (Cambridge/London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 20-22.

³² Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 732.

open and dynamic democracy.³³ This is what he calls “modern transcendence”, which no longer takes God as an objective foundation. For Ratzinger, since democracy is a “product of the fusion of the Greek and the Christian heritage” it can “only survive in this basic context”.³⁴ Along these lines, reason is so intimately related to the religious (symbolic) world that emancipation from this relationship leads to various pathologies of reason. I will further work out this idea of the dialectic between reason and religious world/faith, which is also to be found in Valadier. For Taylor, the transcendence of certain secularist limits means acknowledging the possibility of a “vertical space”, or a third dimension.³⁵ This runs parallel to his consistent argument that integral personhoods require the continuous tapping of “sources”, especially the theistic source and nature, which have atrophied under anthropocentrism. On the political level, he sees the effects of such “contact with fullness” in the leadership of Tutu and Mandela, whose exceptional political wisdom has enabled them to guide people towards an “unworldly” standard of justice, beyond retribution, towards “reconciliation and trust”.³⁶

Politics is the realm of reason, says Ratzinger. “Natural reason” can recognize “the essential moral foundations of human existence and can implement these in the political domain”.³⁷ This natural reason is, however, a “moral reason”, since the end of the state is of a moral nature, namely, to strive after peace and justice.³⁸ This emphasis is necessary because of the dominant concept of reason as instrumental, for politics cannot be exercised by technocrats and scientists. In a democratic state, power is regulated by, and subordinated to, the law. The

³³ Valadier, *Détresse de politique, force du religieux*, 284.

³⁴ Ratzinger, *Church, Ecumenism and Politics*, 215.

³⁵ See Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 706.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Ratzinger, *Values in a Time of Upheaval*, 23.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 24.

latter ensures that the constitutive values of the state can be realized. However, neither the law nor these values are empirical objects that can “simply” be seen and applied by any democratic state. In modern democracies, it is the political community—the “people”—that makes the laws, through tedious deliberation. With respect to this, Valadier points out how, for Jacques Maritain, whom he considers *the* “philosopher of democracy” and the “philosopher of the people”, the reason why one can hope in a democracy is a theological one.³⁹ According to Maritain and Valadier, the only reason why one can still trust the people—despite all episodes of unreason—is because of the faith in a “common humanity” endowed with reason by the Creator. The idea of the democratic people, the argument goes on, is derived from the idea of “God’s little people,” the “people of humbles” to whom “the beatitudes are promised”.⁴⁰ But this God’s little people are also continuously exhorted to “seek God”, to “change their hearts and minds”. In other words, the quality of laws depends on the quality of the people, that is, on the quality of their reason and will (heart).

The neutralization of reason and will has made this idea of transformation incoherent. Hence, Ratzinger claims that the Church should and can (once again) assume “the Socratic function of worry”, which entails recalling “reason to the greatness of its task”.⁴¹ There is, indeed, hardly any other task greater than the legislation of laws that allow human beings to live a properly human life, that moves them to desire the good and to respond to their vocations. Christianity, through the Church, can help heal or purify a weak reason. Ratzinger’s conceived relationship between Christianity and reason is also that which distinguishes him from philosophers who have undergone a change of heart vis-

³⁹ Paul See Valadier, “Maritain: philosophe de la démocratie,” in *Études* 399 (2003/10): 344.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Joseph Ratzinger, “Le christianisme au-delà de la tradition,” in Joseph Ratzinger, Paolo Flores d’Arcais, *Est-ce que Dieu existe? dialogue sur la vérité, la foi et l’athéisme* (Paris: Éditions Payot & Rivages, 2006), 111.

à-vis religion, such as Habermas and Rawls. Though Habermas' postsecularism certainly includes religious traditions (Christianity, in particular) into public debates, it still rests on a conception of reason that Ratzinger is trying to correct. The tone of reservation in Ratzinger's reaction to Habermas' postsecular approach to religion is therefore hardly surprising. He notes that "with regard to the practical consequences, [he is] in broad agreement" with the latter (Habermas), "about the willingness to learn from each other, and about self-limitation on both sides".⁴² He then goes on to recall his own thesis that religion and reason have to be purified. Similarly, Ratzinger points out that Rawls denies that "comprehensive religious doctrines have the character of 'public' reason though he does see their 'non-public' reason as one which cannot simply be dismissed by those who maintain a rigidly secularized rationality".⁴³ Rawls' distinction between public and non-public reason, as in the case of Habermas, rests on an understanding of reason that diverges from Ratzinger's. Rawls' thinking, Ratzinger stresses, cannot help us to determine the reasonable since public reason itself is sick.⁴⁴

Valadier also endorses this diagnosis because, according to him, reason is affected by nihilism. He likewise points out the "limits of the Kantian legacy" in Habermas: "if the cosmopolitan project depends entirely on the good will of peoples ...what happens when the human will despairs of itself?"⁴⁵ The exhaustion and sickness of reason follow from the severance of the dialectical relationship between reason and the religious universe. Ratzinger's argument that reason slumbers if it no longer actively seeks what moves it is expressed in a

⁴² Joseph Ratzinger, "That Which Holds the World Together: The Pre-political Moral Foundations of a Free State," in *Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006), 77.

⁴³ Benedict XVI, Lecture of the Holy Father Benedict XVI for his visit to La Sapienza University of Rome.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Valadier, *Détresse de politique*, 27, 88-89.

slightly different language in Valadier's conceptualization of the relationship between modern rationality ("calculating" or secular reason) and the symbolic matrix that is provided by religions. The "symbolic universe of religions," says Valadier, not only provides "the symbolic structures through which man relates to nature, to others and to himself".⁴⁶ It also acts as a "reference" for calculating reason; it provides it with its ends and arouses it when it becomes exhausted, preventing it from collapsing into nihilism.⁴⁷ Both Valadier and Ratzinger are trying to convey the idea of an *intrinsic* relationship between reason and "faith", which is not presumed even by those who think in terms of the complementarity of reason and religion. (What is implicitly assumed in these cases is a "pure" reason—a "buffered" reason—that then takes into account various moral traditions.) On an anthropological-historical level, it means that religion is that which precedes all other human institutions (including thinking and science); it is that which shapes the living environment of humans. The positivist endeavor to get rid of the so-called "primitive stage" is therefore self-defeating: reason cannot be detached from that which gives it direction (values) because it cannot be detached from the body, including the social body of symbolic relationships. And, these symbolic relationships are typically provided by religions.

The Enlightenment, Ratzinger observes, has in a way recalled the essence of Christianity; and "secularizing trends—whether by expropriation of Church goods, or elimination of privileges or the like – have always meant a profound liberation of the Church from forms of worldliness".⁴⁸ Both Ratzinger and Valadier hold that it is when the Church is stripped of all its worldly privileges

⁴⁶ Valadier, *L'Église en procès*, 37.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 89; Valadier, *Détresse de politique*, 139.

⁴⁸ Benedict XVI, Apostolic Journey to Germany: Meeting with Catholics engaged in the life of the Church and Society gathered in the Konzerthaus (Freiburg im Breisgau, 25 September 2011), Vatican Website, http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2011/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20110925_catholics-freiburg.html (accessed 18 September 2015).

that it can truly be itself, and can also be credible. Truth does not shine in and through power but in powerlessness and poverty.⁴⁹ The Church, Ratzinger holds, can accomplish her mission by “[setting] herself apart from her surroundings, to become in a certain sense “unworldly””; the “Church must constantly renew the effort to detach herself from her tendency towards worldliness and once again to become open towards God”.⁵⁰ Since Ratzinger has been highly critical of the “ghetto-mentality” of the Church, it is quite clear that he is not preaching reclusion or sectarianism. Instead, he is arguing that the Church has to be of a different order, one that corresponds to the self-giving God. Hence, it has to transcend the “worldly” standards of benevolence, justice, or “merit”. This is the theme that Matthew (Mt 20: 6-15) takes up in his “eleventh hour call”. The Church, in order to be the sign and instrument of God, has no other choice—calling—than striving after those divine standards, and therefore, as Ratzinger notes in the same address, it cannot adopt the “standards of the world”. And this is precisely what Taylor has in mind when he refers to the same parable, which, according to him, “opens the eschatological dimension of the Kingdom of God: at the height of that vertical space, that’s the only appropriate distribution. God operates in that vertical dimension, as well as being with us horizontally in the person of Christ”.⁵¹ However, wisdom is required to be able to see and reach this vertical dimension. Taylor notes how, according to Aristotle, the “*phronimos*” has to have “the right dispositions in order to discern the good. Bad moral dispositions do not destroy our understanding of mathematics, he [Aristotle] says, but they do weaken our grasp of the *arche* or

⁴⁹ Joseph Ratzinger, *Many Religions—One Covenant: Israel, the Church and the World* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999), 108.

⁵⁰ Benedict XVI, *Apostolic Journey to Germany: Meeting with Catholics*.

⁵¹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 707.

starting points of moral deliberation. [...]”⁵² And, Christian tradition is a source of wisdom.

This line of thought can be translated into the idea of gratuity, which both Ratzinger and Valadier have thoroughly articulated in their work. The Church has to be the “religious universe of gratuity”, thereby distinguishing itself from the dominating order of exchangeability. It also has to propose the message that “gratuity is, that [it] is the source of all gift and of all life”.⁵³ The latter message is in itself liberating in a context where the worth of persons seems to be determined by what they do. The Church “has to be the sign of the One [*Celui*] who does not let himself be manipulated, appropriated or exchanged”.⁵⁴ To enter the order of gratuity is of “no use”, but saves; it is one where one can find “beauty” and the “energy to transform the world in order to recognize alterity (respect, justice, charity)”.⁵⁵ It is noteworthy (and understandable) that Valadier makes recourse to “beauty”—of a deed, of a profession, or of self-creation – to convey the idea of the intrinsic worth of humans, things and acts, that is, of a value that is determined by neither market-exchange nor dominant fashions. The human can be said to have entered the order of gratuity when he or she discovers the beauty of the say-yes and of “self-abnegation;” when he or she “recovers the taste of the divine”.⁵⁶ He or she discovers the beauty of desiring the good and saying the truth; he or she discovers the beauty of living.⁵⁷ According to Valadier, one uproots “in oneself the germs of nihilism” by recognizing, experiencing and living the gift of life, in all its dimensions; under the dynamic of

⁵² Taylor, *Dilemmas and Connections*, 12.

⁵³ Valadier, *L'Église en procès*, 136.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 130.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 134.

⁵⁶ Paul Valadier, “Nietzsche et l’avenir de la religion,” in *Le Portique*, 2001, vol. 8, §12, <http://leportique.revues.org/199> (accessed 18 September 2015).

⁵⁷ Paul Valadier, *Inévitable morale* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1990), 11.

gratuity, one desires values for themselves, and not for their social necessity or usefulness.⁵⁸ The encyclical *Caritas in veritate* also develops this idea: “The great challenge before us [...] is to demonstrate, in thinking and behaviour, not only that traditional principles of social ethics like transparency, honesty and responsibility cannot be ignored or attenuated, but also that in *commercial relationships* the *principle of gratuitousness* and the logic of gift as an expression of fraternity can and must *find their place within normal economic activity*”.⁵⁹ As Ratzinger rightly notes, “the market of gratuitousness does not exist, and attitudes of gratuitousness cannot be established by law. Yet both the market and politics need individuals who are open to reciprocal gift”.⁶⁰ The idea of gift is the core of the alternative anthropology proposed by here, and the subject of the next part.

4. THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL PRESUPPOSITIONS OF THE DEMOCRATIC IDEAL

“The democratic philosophy of man and society”, writes Maritain, “has faith in the resources and the vocation of human nature. In the great adventure of our life and our history it is placing its stakes on justice and generosity. It is therefore betting on heroism and the spiritual energies”.⁶¹ Taylor expresses a very similar thought when he says that it is the belief that the human being is capable of *agape*, or a “kind of secularized variant of *agape*”, which has fed the “faith in ourselves [Western civilization]” as being capable of “reaching higher moral

⁵⁸ Valadier, *L'Église en procès*, 134-135.

⁵⁹ Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate* (29 June 2009), Vatican Website, § 36, http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html (accessed 18 September 2015).

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, § 39.

⁶¹ Jacques Maritain, *Christianity and Democracy and The Rights of Man and Natural Law* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 56.

goals than any previous age has”.⁶² This faith or hope in the human does not mean being blind to the “power of evil”. Democracy is based on neither the imaginary innocence nor the complete depravity of the human. Instead, as Valadier says, “only those who know the worst of which man is capable can *hope* in him, without illusion and in truth”.⁶³ The Judaeo-Christian approach to the human contains both grandeur or human exceptionality and depravity. It therefore refers to both sin and the greatness of the human soul, or its “transcendent vocation”. *If* it is true that all humans are called to a life that can neither be created nor fulfilled by themselves or other humans, and are, by reason of this vocation, also endowed with an irrevocable “dignity” here and now, it would mean that anthropocentrism deprives them of ends proper to them and forces them to lower their aspirations. In what now follows, I will develop a line of thought endorsed by Taylor, Valadier, and Ratzinger, namely, that human nature is essentially the image of God (*imago dei*), which further means that the latter can be conceived as a serious and credible rival to dominant anthropologies that are now determining ideas, feelings and practices. Since the three men are addressing themselves to a general, non-Christian public, I deem it fair to assume that their understanding of human nature is one that a non-Christian could possibly be able to embrace and put in practice.

As is to be expected, the conceptualization of the “image of God” is as difficult as the conceptualization of “God”. Ratzinger has gone to great lengths to clarify the Christian image of God. Ratzinger makes it clear that the question regarding who God is and the question regarding who the human is are inseparable. “The biblical account of creation”, he notes, can provide us with some “orientation in the mysterious region of human-beingness” by helping us to

⁶² Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 367.

⁶³ Paul Valadier, S.J., “Le Mal Politique Moderne,” in *Études* 394 (2001) : 198-207, here at 207.

“appreciate the human person as God’s project”.⁶⁴ This means that humans are called to become what they are. In other words, the *imago dei* is not only what we are, but also what we are meant to become. This is why it can be better concretised by trying to answer the question of what it means to “imitate” God (*imitatio dei*). The *imitatio dei*, for Ratzinger, is nothing else than “entering into Christ’s manner of life,” or being “like the Trinitarian God”.⁶⁵ To live like Christ and the Trinitarian God is to live like a God who gives himself continually. “God” is not an idea, but is, as Ratzinger relentlessly recalls, “a God-in-relationship” because he is love.⁶⁶ This conception of God resists the idea of God as pure egoism, which seems to be ingrained in modern consciousness, including “secular” consciousness. Ratzinger, indeed, holds that it is this distorted image of God that inspires the understanding of freedom as absolute independence: “the primal error of [...] a radicalized will to freedom lies in the idea of a divinity conceived as a pure egoism”.⁶⁷ To imitate a God who is Love is therefore not an impossible or vague enterprise – even for non-believers – since as Ratzinger points out, “be truly a human being [similarly] means to be related in love, to be *of* and *for*”.⁶⁸ “Man,” he says, “is God’s image precisely insofar as the ‘from,’ ‘with’ and ‘for’ constitute the fundamental anthropological pattern”.⁶⁹

Valadier also carefully distinguishes between the egoist, sovereign God, on the one hand, and the God who is love, on the other. He explains that

The divine model of the image, revealed by the Bible and hence through the economy of salvation, is that of a God

⁶⁴ Joseph Ratzinger, *In the Beginning...: A Catholic Understanding of the Story of Creation and the Fall* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 42.

⁶⁵ Ratzinger, *Many Religions, One Covenant*, 87; *Church, Ecumenism and Politics*, 198.

⁶⁶ Ratzinger, *Many Religions, One Covenant*, 75.

⁶⁷ Joseph Ratzinger, “Truth and Freedom,” in *Communio: International Catholic Review* 23 (Spring 1996): 16-35, here at 28.

⁶⁸ Ratzinger, *In the Beginning...: 72.*

⁶⁹ Ratzinger, “Truth and Freedom,” 28.

Logos, Word and reason, wisdom ordering everything and source of a Law that makes [one] live, merciful love, overabundant and inexhaustible. It is to this God that man resembles and not to an imaginary Sovereign imagined by spontaneous religious sentiment. So created, the human being is analogically endowed with the attributes of reason, of wisdom, of a regulating will, of love, which are those of his Creator. Would God be so jealous as to refuse to his creature what he is himself...while he himself is in totality overabundant gift? [...] Hence, the more man exercises his possibilities, the more he glorifies God and conforms to his image, makes himself what he must become... Is this not a remarkable charter for a Christian humanism? Divine by participation and election, man is therefore ontologically related to God, and this is why saint Augustine could say that to know oneself, that would be to know God, and conversely, that the knowledge of God would be the true knowledge of oneself (“*Noverim te, noverim me*”). This means, besides, that man is not a self-enclosed individual, but a being fundamentally relational, like God himself is, capable of Word and of self-communication.⁷⁰

The comprehensiveness of the *imago dei* does mean that these aspects of the human–reason, sensibility, the capacity for sympathy, solidarity and self-sacrifice, the capacity to experience awe or reverence—are included in the image of God. Hence, Valadier does speak in terms of “attributes”, but only of a God who is primarily gift.⁷¹ The same line of thought is to be found in Ratzinger and Taylor. We see above that Valadier is able to convey the notion of a God who is both Other and at the same time, intimate, to the human. The ways in which he combines law with love, creator with creature, transcending all kinds of tenacious dualisms in theology (and philosophy) are admirable.

The question of human nature, if not denied, is in the end one regarding the end of the human, that is, his (her) vocation. Within the framework of self-

⁷⁰ Valadier, P., *Morale en désordre* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2002), 204.

⁷¹ In this sense, Valadier’s approach does not suffer from the same weakness, pointed out by Nicholas Wolterstorff, as the “capacities approach.” See Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton/Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008), 325, 331–360. See also Paul Valadier, *Un philosophe peut-il croire?* (Paris: Éditions Cécile Defaut, 2006), 78–81.

authorization, such final end or vocation does not make sense since it is up to the individual to “invent” his or her own destiny in a “meaningless universe”.⁷² Valadier, instead, makes it quite clear that the measure of the human—and hence, human vocation—is God himself, properly understood as gift (self-giving). This is also what Ratzinger recalls when he points to the inseparability of the questions of God and of man. For Taylor, it is precisely this aspect of gift—overabundant love—that is the essence of the “image of God”.⁷³ Consequently, “the highest good consists in communion, mutual giving and receiving, as in the paradigm of the eschatological banquet”.⁷⁴ Taylor notes that

Being made in the image of God, as a feature of each human being, is not something that can be characterized just by reference to this being alone. Our being in the image of God is also our standing among others in the stream of love which is that facet of God’s life we try to grasp, very inadequately, in speaking of the Trinity.⁷⁵

Lest one be tempted to brush this aside as “Catholic apology,” it has to be remarked that others have seen this “communion” as the “dream of democracy,” or of “civil society.” Jean Bethke Elshtain, in her *Democracy on Trial*, holds that to “share a dream of political responsibility [means] sharing the possibility of a brotherhood and sisterhood that is perhaps fractious – as all brotherhoods and sisterhoods are—and yet united in a spirit that’s a spirit more of good than ill will”.⁷⁶ In the same book, she refers to John Paul’s definition of solidarity as our seeing “the ‘other’... not just as some kind of instrument...but as our ‘neighbor,’ a ‘helper’...to be made a sharer on a par with ourselves in the banquet of life to

⁷² Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 589.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 385.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 702.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 701.

⁷⁶ Elshtain, *Democracy on Trial*, 36.

which all are equally invited by God,” and notes that “to the extent that John Paul’s words strike us as utopian or naïve, we have lost civil society”.⁷⁷

The image of God, when understood in this way, is for Taylor more comprehensive than the rational disengaged agent who is a law unto himself (herself), or the being who simply responds to his (her) feelings of sympathy. It arguably “captures the full force of the call we feel to succour human beings as human”.⁷⁸ This is related to the question regarding what the Samaritan “sees” in the one lying along the road, or what moves him to perhaps risk his own life to save someone else’s. Or, in the cases of newborns and growing children, what explains “this sense of awe, surprise, tenderness, which moves us so much when a new human being emerges?”⁷⁹ What relates us to each other in “normal” times and in extremis? It is not simply a matter of interpretation and hence of different “perspectives.” The question of human nature and vocation is not only a theoretical one. Our perceptions and decisions in cases of abortion, euthanasia, genetic and other kinds of medical-technical interventions largely depend on how we “see” ourselves, others—including the unborn, the dying, and the disfigured—and each other. This “seeing” is not simply a matter of an extra pair of glasses, of a theistic “mindset” or belief, but goes much deeper; it is inseparable from who we are at a particular time of our lives. This also means that it changes as we transform ourselves. Our (implicit) idea and experience of human nature determine the organization of politics, economics—including our production and consumption patterns—and social life in general, including our ways of interacting with each other (disengaged or engaged; embodied or disembodied). And these dominant ways of thinking, feeling and doing things can also be challenged by the ontology of which the *imago dei* is part and parcel. As Taylor

⁷⁷ Ibid., 14.

⁷⁸ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 678.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 700.

argues, our phenomenology is not fixed, but can be disputed and corrected by the alternatives entailed by an ontology. A circular movement that somewhat resembles the hermeneutic circle is inescapable. But such a circle is far more preferable to the fixation of both ontology and phenomenology, and besides, it does get broken from time to time when there is a transformation.

The priority of love, which we see in both Taylor and Ratzinger, is not merely a “preference”, but is a statement as to the “nature” of the human and of God, the vocation of humans and the nature of the relationship between the human and God. Taylor offers the alternative ideal of “communion” as possibly the highest good, which he contrasts to the (neo) Stoic heroism that he rightly discerns in Camus.⁸⁰ Such “heroism of gratuitous giving has no place for reciprocity. [...] This unilateral heroism is self-enclosed. It touches the outermost limit of what we can attain to when moved by a sense of our own dignity.”⁸¹ The bond of love “where each is a gift to the other, where each gives and receives, and where the line between giving and receiving is blurred” is missing.⁸² If one holds that such a bond (communion) is a utopia – because there is no such thing as God’s love to support our own love – then Stoic courage may well be our highest aspiration. However, without “trying it out”, we cannot know this. Hence Pascal’s wager: it is less harmful to try to tap a possible theistic source—which is much more than simply “believing” in it—than closing oneself off to it. Agnosticism or indifference regarding whether there is a theistic source or such a thing as “deep ecology” is not without a price because it cannot be separated from our practical lives, which involve conflicts and dilemmas, wars and destruction, and reconciliation attempts, both on personal and interpersonal (social) levels.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 251-252.

⁸¹ Ibid., 702.

⁸² Ibid.

5. CONCLUSION

The alternative ontology of the human, proposed by Taylor, Valadier, and Ratzinger, can be an antidote to an all-pervading “crisis” because it releases forces that can vivify both individual persons and societies with new life and dynamism. It recalls the very need of continuous invigoration; an idea that has suffered under what Taylor calls the “naturalist temper”. Since the three men address themselves to a non-Christian public (as well), it does have to mean that these ideas, especially their religious anthropology, have to be relevant to non-Christians, and even more so, the “theistic source” has to be accessible to them somehow or the other. From this, it follows that all three thinkers have to claim a certain “universalism” for their propositions, in the sense that they can be endorsed by non-Christians as non-Christians, that is, while they preserve their particular “identities” or differences. Indeed, Valadier notes that there is “a Christian universalism,” which, however, “needs to be well understood”; it is not a form of “imperialism or desire of conquest”; instead, “the universal is a task or a duty that imposes itself on all and everyone, a task of opening and humanization of oneself”.⁸³ Similarly, to “open ourselves to God”, for Taylor, “means in fact, overstepping the limits set in theory by exclusive humanisms.”⁸⁴ The need to “open” oneself or reason runs through all writings of Ratzinger. As a result, it cannot simply be claimed that the theistic source is not available to non-Christians. What is also not being advocated here is a return to Christendom, in which Christianity (religion) is the ordering principle of society. Such an attempt would not only be a denial of the “pluralist principle,” but would also pervert Christianity. The works of the three men therefore do not hide a strategy to proselytize non-Christians.

⁸³ Valadier, *Détresse de politique*, 49.

⁸⁴ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 703.

The thought of the three men allow anyone, on certain conditions, to draw on the theistic source (grace). Let me emphasize that I do not wish to trivialize the difference between Christianity and other religions as well as non-believing modes of life, or even worse, to attribute such trivialization to either of the thinkers I have discussed. Yet, since my underlying concern is a worrisome condition that involves people from all walks of life, it seems legitimate to explore the relevance of Christian thinking as an intellectual resource for all. Taylor, who owes a lot to Ivan Illich and Fyodor Dostoyevsky, recalls that “one of Dostoyevsky’s central insights turns on the way in which we close or open ourselves to grace. [...] We are closed to grace, because we close ourselves to the world in which it circulates and we do that out of loathing for ourselves and for this world”.⁸⁵ Valadier’s conception of God as being Life itself underlies his claim that all civilizations and traditions contain both condemnable elements and “essential values.”⁸⁶ Our challenge is to continuously distinguish between them. Ratzinger believes that he will find support from adherents of other religions in his fight for the “defence and promotion of life.”⁸⁷ The idea of life as sacred is, of course, related to the idea of life as a gift, which can be translated into the notion of being given to each other. Taylor believes that this notion “addresses the fragility of what all of us, believer and unbeliever alike, most value in these times.”⁸⁸ He also holds that it is possible for us humans to live up to the “demands” that such an idea entails. As Celia Deane-Drummond notes, “gift” is

⁸⁵ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 451.

⁸⁶ Valadier, *Détresse de politique*, 48.

⁸⁷ Benedict XVI, “Apostolic Journey to the United States: Meeting with the representatives of other religions at the Rotunda Hall of the Pope John Paul II Cultural Center of Washington” (April 17, 2008), Vatican Website, http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2008/april/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20080417_other-religions.html, accessed 18 September 2015.

⁸⁸ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 703.

“not exclusively a Christian concept.”⁸⁹ And this is precisely what makes it such a fruitful idea. But life, any form of life, can only be experienced as a gift—and not as a curse—within a human community that makes each and every one experience the goodness of life, despite all suffering and evil. The creation of such a human community is, I believe, our political and moral responsibility.

⁸⁹ Celia Deane-Drummond, “Taking Leave of the Animal? The Theological and Ethical Implications of Transhuman Projects,” in *Transhumanism and Transcendence: Christian Hope in an Age of Technological Enhancement*, ed., Ronald Cole-Turner (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2011), 123.