Dear everyone, greetings.

We continue our discussion of secularism and the age in which we live (Secularism 3, or S3 for short), a summary of the writings of Taylor on the modern secular era.

In our first discussion of secularism, we defined S1, S2 and S3, and concluded that we now live in an S3 era. The question before us today is how we moved from the Reformation era, when belief in God was the default and to believe in atheism required specific and intentional thought, to the modern age in which the default is (apparently) to live without God, without any sense of the transcendent, in an immanent world with immanent purpose, significance, meaning and human flourishing.

The secular era in which we live, S3, is not merely the neutral, rational, areligious world we are left with when we throw off superstition, ritual, and primitive belief in gods and demons. What characterizes the S3 era is a new social imaginary, a way of construing meaning and significance without any need for the divine or any transcendence. The move from the reformation through S1, S2 to S3 did not entirely depend on "subtraction" theories by which rational thought burned away and eroded irrational beliefs to leave us with an intrinsically meaningless, secular and immanent existence. Rather, S3 is possible because we have come to the point in which many believe in the possibility of significance and meaning within exclusive humanism and an exclusive immanence.

In the Reformation era, three features of the mediaeval imaginary functioned as obstacles to unbelief:

1) The natural world was constituted as a cosmos that pointed beyond itself to greater realities than the creation / natural world themselves, i.e. the physical cosmos pointed to the transcendent.
2) Society itself was grounded in a higher reality and a spiritual purpose - the Kingdom of God (as per Jesus Christ) and the City of God (as per Augustine).
3) People lived in an enchanted world, a world charged with multiple spiritual presences. Such individuals had "porous selves" that were open and vulnerable to the transcendent, not closed and self-sufficient.

Let us contrast this with the basic and often unspoken assumptions of the S3 secular humanist imaginary, which for Taylor has 5 basic components.

1. It is a mainstay of secularization theory that modernity disenchants the world, evacuating it of ghosts, demons, gods and spirits. Diseases are not demonic, mental illness it not possession, the body has no soul. The magical spiritual world is dissolved into the machinations of matter. Within this S3 era, significance resides within the brain and mind of the individual. In the mediaeval world, the self was porous – open to transcendency, and to spiritual actors. In the S3 era, we no longer have porous selves but buffered selves – immune to such outside influences, that don't exist anyway. The porous self is open and thus vulnerable, open to blessing or curse, possession or grace. The S3 buffered self is a closed mind, insulated and isolated in its interiority. For the porous self, going without God was unthinkable. For the buffered self, a life without God is the only viable option.
2. In the pre-secular era, people lived in communities with inter-dependence. The good of a common weal is a collective good (hence the word "commonwealth"), dependent upon the social rituals of the community. As everyone depends on the local harvest, everyone participates in the harvest. To reject the common weal, with its shared rites, devotions, allegiances and

beliefs is not only to reject a conceptual and theoretical belief system, but it was to reject the social glue of the entire community. In such an era, disbelief has communal repercussions, e.g. the story of Achan and the stolen goods from Jericho is a classic example of this in practice. In Islam, to reject Islam is to not merely have a different belief, it is to reject the entire fabric of society, and so conversion from Islam is understood not in religious liberty terms but in terms of undermining the whole of society, more akin to treason against the state in the western mind. In the S3 era, the buffered self brings the possibility of, and demand for, disengagement from what is happening in broader society. We are not only impervious to the transcendent, but we buffer ourselves from social trends and forces as we so desire. Once individuals become the locus of meaning, the social dislocation / atomization that occurs when we choose not to believe is not our problem. We are not a communal society in the S3 era, a community seeking a common weal(th) but we are merely a random collection of random individuals each seeking their own meaning within their buffered selves. In this new understanding of radical independence and the self-seeking its own fulfillment, any restrictions placed on the individual are to be torn down. We this in the USA currently with the illiberal SJWs, the radical LGBTQ agenda, and questions of identity. If I (Conrad) believe I am now a man, now a woman, now a 2 Spirit, now a dog, now a parrot, now a Filipina, what is society that it should deny this journey of fulfillment in my buffered self? Society has no communal expectations or collective good, and thus no right to intrude into the movings of my buffered self.

3. In the S3 era, there is a lowering of the bar in what it means to live a life "well lived." In the Reformation era, there were the demands of the mundane, e.g. getting the harvest in, and the demands of the eternal – am I saved or not? It was assumed that humanity found its ultimate meaning in the transcendent. The demands of the eternal required sacrifices in the mundane – an holy life. However, not everyone could enter a cloister or live an "holy" life. Monks could enter the cloister and pray for society at large, for those unable to make such sacrifices for the eternal, but most could not do this. And so religious festivals came into being to regulate the mundane and provide regular "touch points" for the eternal into the lives of those dominated by the mundane. In this context, carnival came into being as a sanctioned way for those living primarily in the mundane to blow off the steam that builds up from the pressure of living entirely in the mundane yet also under the absolute requirements of eternity. Carnival was a social safety valve, as the weight of the required virtue for the eternal was so heavy that there had to be periodic blow-outs to avoid the whole system blowing apart. In the S3 era, having dispensed with the eternal and transcendent, people can stop being burdened by the expectations and demands of eternity and simply frame what it means to flourish in a purely immanent, human, physical sense. Without questions of eternal consequence to burden them, the focus switches to living the best life one can now, which is a life free of eternal consequences, and thus for most is a life primarily of pleasure and experience seeking (known in the West as your "bucket list").

4. In the Reformation era, time was multi-layered, e.g. we eat at 6pm tonight, but we also lived within a religious calendar with religious festivals to regulate and mark the seasons, all of which happens within prophetic time and salvation time (Creation, Fall and Restoration, or Paradise Lost and Paradise Restored). In the new S3 era, we live with *chronos* time – the tick-tock of our clocks that measures our projects….but time is now flat and without any intrinsic significance. History is not moving in a particular direction and has no climax, and so while we measure events and projects by chronological time, the only significance we recognize is in the events and projects, not in the progression of time within a spiritual worldview.

5. Finally, and I mentioned this in the last Worldview, where we live has changed. In the Reformation era, we lived in the cosmos, a created order in which we lived in a physical and

spiritual hierarchy, with laws that governed it – laws given by a loving Creator, and in this cosmos we find our natural home. In the S3 era, we have moved from a cosmos to a cold, unfeeling universe. We now focus not on creation but on nature, a nature that is without a purposeful beginning and which is entirely random in nature, where we are no longer at home but are merely specks of dust sitting on a speck of dust that hangs in the midst of a cold, impersonal universe. In this new philosophical location, we no longer have extrinsic meaning, and must seek our own intrinsic meaning.

Each of the above 5 factors chipped away at the theistic assumptions of the Reformation era and helped deliver the underlying assumptions in which S3 can exist, in which we seek fulfillment and meaning within an immanent framework with buffered rather than porous selves.

One of the drivers for such a shift was, according to Taylor, the various reform movements from the Renaissance to the Reformation to the Enlightenment to the Industrial Revolution and so on. Why was this? There was a (valid) sense and perception in the late middle ages of the spiritual distortion that the two-tiered Catholic system of clergy and laity was producing. If such a system produced the excesses of carnival – feasting on the flesh – while simultaneously preaching morality, something was "rotten in the house of Denmark" (to paraphrase Hamlet). The reform movements sought to remake societies according to new and higher standards (spiritually, aesthetically, technologically, ethically and artistically etc.). In eliminating the Catholic middle-ages and their two-tiered system we replaced them in the Protestant West with a one-tier system. To do this, you either insist that everyone reaches a higher level (e.g. puritanism) or you lower the bar so everyone is acceptable (e.g. the sexual revolution and hedonism of the 1960s). You lift the bar for everyone, or you lift the weight of virtue.

Christian reform movements tend to lift the bar for everyone. In this avenue of thought, the distinction between secular and holy is eliminated as we are to do *all* for the glory of God. Thus, God is present in the work of the butcher, baker and car mechanic as much as in the service of a pastor or Bible worker. However, in lifting the bar for everyone, and with many knowing in their hearts that they were failing to meet the new standards of holiness in everything, it may be (paradoxically) that preachers were preparing large numbers of their congregations to abandon the seemingly unattainable and opt for the other path – to lower the bar for everyone and ultimately slide into secular humanism without any focus on the transcendent at all. Protestants also contributed (unwittingly) to the process of disenchantment through their rejection of rituals, of the Catholic sacraments, of the "high church liturgy" that sought to impress all of the 5 senses with the immanence and transcendence of God, and of the visible presence of the holy in the midst of the mundane. First, distinguish / separate / delineate God from creation and you end up with nature instead of creation, then the process of disenchantment sets in as rational thought burns away the superstitions of the cosmos with the natural laws of the universe, then be happy and content with just the natural world in and of itself, and then you end up with affirming the sufficiency of nature and the material world alone without the need for God.

Parallel to these broader social movements from the Reformation to today was the rejection of the sense that anything had a goal / purpose. In the brave new evolutionary and secular humanistic world, nothing has intrinsic purpose, so one is left to focus on describing the mechanics of what is rather than seeking to understand the direction those mechanics lead in. In this new way of understanding, e.g. understanding how things work rather than why they work the way they do, revealed morality gradually disappears. If a human being exists for a greater purpose than their physical existence, then the important question is now how the human body works, but what is that greater purpose, and how does one accomplish / fulfill that greater purpose? That is where revealed morality comes into the picture.

However, if the human being is simply a human existing, without any greater / eternal / transcendent purpose, than one can only ask how the human existing works and questions of greater purpose are nonsensical.

As these processes went to work in the West from the 1500s onwards, we have seen the rise of radical individualism in which the buffered self exists in isolation from the broader community and without reference to the personal or social consequences of such isolation. We are disembedded from the cosmos and the divine into a cold universe and the material. This disembedded, individualist view contributes to our S3 imaginary, the world in which we now live in the West, where we imagine we can live lives of human flourishing purely on the immanent dimension with no need for the transcendent. We see this lived out in our society in many ways. Endless radio debates about the top 5 basketball players of all time or the top 100 movies of all time or whether Tom Brady is the G.O.A.T. (yes, in my well-informed opinion – but no, in my son's Vikings-distorted opinion), the need to define and complete your bucket list, the need to eat, love and pray, rabid environmentalism which has made a religion out of environmental preservation at the expense of basic human needs, and the YOLO (You Only Live Once) culture that emphasizes the need to experience as much as possible in as short a time as possible….all speak to our yearning S3 desire for significance in the material and determination to drum it up wherever and however we can….for this is all we have got. And if these few years of physical existence are really all we have, and there are no eternal consequences for our behavior or purpose to strive for, it is easy to see why people become very angry when anyone places a roadblock in front of their self-determined path to, and quest for, human flourishing / fulfillment.

This has become for many the new de-facto, unquestioned worldview, living lives that seek a full flourishing in the immanent and material, and yet haunted at moments of tragedy and life stages such as deaths and divorces by echoes of an earlier era in which purpose was presupposed and eternity was something to strive for.

In my own life for the past few weeks I have been experiencing a similar haunting from my past. Something existential was troubling me. I ran through the possibilities for my sense of existential unease and inexplicable dread. It wasn't the window blind that needed replacing or the hall that needs repainting….no. Something was wrong, but I couldn't quite put my finger on it. Was this haunting from the past real? Well, as I walked into the kitchen on Tuesday, I discovered a card with my name on it and an Almond Joy chocolate….my sense of haunting came back, an existential terror. What was this for? What had I done wrong? What had someone else done wrong? I carried it through to my wife, Luda, and asked her who put this card in the kitchen. I dug myself deeper into the hole with some more questions. Apparently, she said with a big smile, she had. On opening the card however, I discovered that it was our wedding anniversary…..and my existential haunting of something from the past was actualized in the loving smile and gracious hug from an all-knowing and ever-loving wife. Truly, we are all sinners in need of a gracious God! My underlying point here is that it is in the haunting from the transcendence of the past that S3 individuals, despite their allegedly buffered selves, are most open to grace.

And as Christmas is almost upon us, I will continue this discussion in the new year. I wish you all a blessed Christmas season wherever you happen to be, and all of God's blessings in the coming year.

Best wishes,

Conrad.