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From Axial Spirituality to Laissez-faireism: A Genealogy of the Disembedding of the Economy in Charles Taylor

Roshnee Ossewaarde-Lowtoo

In his famous talk and essay «Economic Possibilities For Our Grandchildren» (1928, 1930), Keynes voiced his expectation that we would someday «return to some of the most sure and certain principles of religion and traditional virtue – that avarice is a vice, that the exaction of usury is a misdemeanour, and the love of money is detestable». ¹ He thought that the return to the preference of virtue above the useful would naturally happen as people gradually satisfied their «economic necessities», and as a result, started to live in peace. In the meanwhile, we have to «pretend to ourselves and to everyone that fair is foul and foul is fair; for foul is useful and fair is not». ² Keynes deplored the fact that traditional morality had to be sacrificed to «economic necessities», for the sake of a carefree and toilless future, but nevertheless accepted this «hard fact». He thereby articulated the tenets on which contemporary economies, worldwide, rest. It is noteworthy that Keynes conceived of morality as an extra layer that we can discard without losing anything of our humanity. This distinction between morality and the physical (natural) is characteristic of the naturalist metaphysics that has been dominant since the nineteenth century, till today. The so-called «natural» world is conceived as «neutral» and devoid of values, and without any reference to ends. ³ «A naturalistic materialism», Charles Taylor observes, «is not only on offer, but presents itself as the only view compatible with the most prestigious institution of the modern world, viz., science». ⁴ It informs all social institutions, including our conception and organisation of the economy. The idea

¹ John Maynard Keynes, *The Collected Writings of John Maynard Keynes*, edited by Elizabeth Johnson/Donald Moggridge, vol. 9, Cambridge 1978, 330–331.

² *Ibid*, 331.

³ Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, Boston 1958, 323.

⁴ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Cambridge, MA 2007, 28. Thereafter referred to as SA.

of an *«economic man»* who is supposedly detached from all moral commitments (*«value»*) and of a universe that is a quarry to be exploited arises in the naturalistic materialist moral framework. So do economic theories that propagate the image of a market governed by laws that are analogous to the laws of a cruel Nature. Yet, these ideas and images have older sources.

Modern and late modern economic thinking did not arise in a vacuum, but is instead sustained by beliefs, ideas and images that have developed over time. Contrary to what we may think, these habits of mind and heart are not merely secular (in the narrow sense of non-religious). Instead, as Taylor shows in his various writings, the centuries-long transformations of our social imaginary were both religiously and *«secularly»* inspired.⁵ In other words, naturalistic materialism has religious roots. It is the outcome of the recurrent despiritualisation or *«disenchantment»* of our universe, which started in the Axial Age and was furthered by Christianity until modernity. However, the disenchantment of the universe in itself did not lead to the disembedding of *«the economy»* from the political community and its institutions. The decisive steps towards a disembedded economy were made in the seventeenth century and later, when economic welfare became the highest good, vices were neutralised, and the doctrine of the harmony of interests became dominant. These ideas and corresponding practices helped to promote the idea of an autonomous economic sphere with its own (amoral) laws, and perhaps even more importantly, to dissolve the social body. Indeed, the establishment of a so-called *«market society»* effectively means the disintegration of the political community and hence unchained economic powers.⁶ *«Market society»* is in fact a contradiction in terms since it is a denial of any kind of organic unity between people. Society or the polity means collective action and the transcendence of self-interest, whereas the market presumes purely self-seeking individuals and the negation of collective action.⁷ Drawing on Taylor's work, I will now sketch the religious and secular ideas and practices that paved the way to our present condition. It is one characterised by the economisation of human life, the hegemony of uncontrollable powerful economic actors, and unmonitorable obscure systems and processes. It is ironical and nearly incredible that the Late Medieval drive to Reform, which is the

⁵ That said, there is no neat distinction between the religious and the secular (political, economic, and so on) in premodern societies since *«religion was «everywhere», was interwoven with everything else, and in no sense constituted a separate «sphere» of its own»*. SA, 2.

⁶ Globalisation and the corresponding asymmetrical power relations also play a role in this process of disembedding. Pre-globalised, traditional economies are local economies, embedded in local communities and not under the control of the *«laws»* of the *«international»* market, which are in fact the laws of the most powerful economic player. However, a further development of this line of enquiry falls beyond the scope of the present article.

⁷ SA, 183.

theme of the next part of this article, should have played such an important role in getting us where we are today. Yet, as we shall see, it is only the beginning of the story.

The Late Medieval urge for perfection

The development of the conditions that led to the disenchantment of the universe, and correspondingly, to the non-porous and autonomous self – that is, the *«buffered self»* – can be traced back to the eleventh century. More specifically, Taylor points to the *«radical attempts to transform society along the principles of Axial spirituality»*.⁸ The latter term refers to the spirit of Reform that characterised the new religions that arose in what Karl Jaspers dubbed the *«Axial Age»*. The period referred to is roughly 800–200 BCE, though it could have been much earlier. Zarathustra, Confucius, Gautama, Socrates and the Hebrew prophets are representative figures of this Axial Age. Their (religious) thoughts are revolutionary – hence *«axial»* – because they involve a change of religious ontology. In re-conceiving the Divine as One, Transcendent and Absolute, these thinkers also propound absolute norms by which prevailing beliefs, ideas and practices are judged and criticised. The Axial spirituality has a disembedding or disruptive effect since it enables those who endorse it to negate prevailing social and cosmic orders, and the corresponding idea of human flourishing.⁹ It drives them to strive for spiritual perfection, in the first place at the personal level, and to *«convert»* others to the Truth. Demythologisation, personal enlightenment and continuous personal transformation – or self-transcendence – are hence core features of Axial religions. A post-Axial religion like Christianity has inherited much of this Axial spirituality, which is hardly surprising given its Jewish and Greek roots. Despite its universal purport, the Axial spirituality has generally been practised especially by the religious elite in the post-Axial, Christian era. This situation changes in the Late Medieval Period.

In the Late Middle Ages, the dormant Axial spirituality revives and sparks off the long tradition of Reform that has been crucial to the forming of Western civilisation. A growing dissatisfaction with what Taylor calls a *«two-tiered religion»*, that is, a two-level or two-speed Christianity practised by respectively the *«people»* and the *«elite»*, makes itself felt. The distinction between the people (laity) and the religious elite is not very accurate since there were educated lay people and a rising *«middle class»* who could therefore be considered as belonging to the elite, while the clergy were not always much better schooled than

⁸ Ibid, 157.

⁹ Ibid, 151–154.

their parishioners.¹⁰ The point is that the <learned> and <committed> Christians were no longer content with the gap separating their Christian praxis from that of the more <folk Christianity> of the people. Since we are here talking about Christian Europe, this means that these critical Christians were not only displeased with the state of the Church, but also with the state of their society. They deplored their contemporaries' failure to at least strive to imitate the true Christian way of life and to remake society according to the principles derived from the gospel. Hence, though this movement of Reform started in religious circles, ecclesiastical and political authorities joined forces to reform society in accordance with the image of the City of God.¹¹

A certain spirit of Reform can be said to be very biblical. A certain degree of <individualism> is already present in the Bible: the emphasis is on personal conversion and transformation. However, this is theoretically speaking. Historically speaking, collective conversions (for many different reasons) and collective rituals were more common. There was a toleration of the fact that most Christians were not able to live up to the high demands of the gospel. The two-tiered religion fitted the hierarchical structures of medieval societies. In this sense, the renewed Christian élan, «to bring Christ to the world» in the late twelfth century can be considered as some kind of <return> to a more genuine Christianity.¹² Taylor writes:

«What I'm calling <Reform> here expressed a profound dissatisfaction with the hierarchical equilibrium between lay life and the renunciative vocations. In one way, this was quite understandable. This equilibrium involved accepting that masses of people were not going to live up to the demands of perfection. They were being <carried>, in a sense, by the perfect. And there is something in this which runs against the very spirit of Christian faith.»¹³

Though the principles of Axial spirituality were known, they were not deployed to remake whole societies. Monasteries were founded on them, but these were precisely havens in a sinful world. A noteworthy feature of the late medieval Reform is therefore an explicit turning to the world, and thereby an affirmation of the goodness of Creation even if it needed to be redeemed. The foundation of the mendicant orders is a good illustration of the spirit of that age. Personal devotion to a suffering Christ is encouraged among those used to performing ceremonies unthinkingly.

Such urge to remake societies according to a specific moral order requires a certain degree of objectification, rationalisation and optimism (or faith in moral

¹⁰ SA, 62.

¹¹ Ibid, 243.

¹² Ibid, 94.

¹³ Ibid, 61–62.

ascent). The idea that we are capable of remaking ourselves and the world according to higher moralities begins to take hold of the human imagination.¹⁴ Within the limits of this world, it is therefore possible to realise the «promise of the Parousia, that God will be all in all».¹⁵ The mass of the faithful is now moved to strive for Christian perfection through rules, sermons and the fear of the Last Judgement. It is clear that the process of disenchantment and the coming-to-be of the buffered self had already begun. Our efforts to improve ourselves and our societies according to Christian principles cannot be thwarted by malevolent spirits. The decrees of the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 manifest this disenchantment and the dark sides of the urge to establish one uniform order for all. New religious orders are forbidden since they would lead to confusion. It is perhaps not surprising that such zeal for order was followed by laxity, to which successive reformers reacted.

The nominalist influence

While ecclesiastical authorities were trying to establish and maintain the one good order, scholastic theologians were arguing about the autonomy of (human) nature, God's sovereignty, human and divine freedom. Taylor speaks of the «nominalist revolution against the reigning, Thomistic idea of the «autonomy of nature»».¹⁶ Theologians like William of Occam (and his followers) believed that the Thomistic appropriation of Aristotelian realism set limits to God's sovereignty. According to the Aristotelian-Thomistic approach, every created being and thing is called to realise its natural perfection (its *telos*). Though God is, of course, the Creator of the particular end (good) of every being, he cannot afterwards redefine that good without contradicting his initial creative act (which is necessarily good). Occam revolts against what he sees to be a threat to the absolute freedom of God, and in a way, to human freedom. «God must always remain free to determine what is good. The good is whatever God wills; not God must will whatever is (determined by nature as) good».¹⁷ In a way, this is the discussion going on in Plato's *Euthyphro*. Living right (the good life), according to the realist perspective, consists in living according to the patterns that are inherent in creation (the inherently meaningful created order), and which need to be discerned. In the Socratic-Platonic-Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition, the hu-

¹⁴ In fact, in his earlier «Sources of the Self», Taylor notes that our inability to believe in the possibility of moral transformation, both at the individual and collective levels, is an important cause of the «spiritual crisis in our civilization». See Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* Cambridge 1989, 367.

¹⁵ SA, 243.

¹⁶ SA, 97.

¹⁷ Ibid.

man is naturally oriented to the good (his/her end), and does not (cannot) choose evil for the sake of evil. We cannot choose against our own good. For Occam and his followers, we can do so since we are free beings. The emphasis on God's will goes hand in hand with the emphasis on the human will, and the human responsibility for his (her) acts. A similar line of thought can be found in the work of Francis of Assisi as well.

The Occamist line of thought, Taylor argues, has enabled modern science. It has facilitated the process of <objectification> or <disengagement>. ¹⁸ The image of the objective scientist or the impartial spectator is captured in the latter term. We come to believe that it is possible to set meanings and pre-given values aside, and to view reality with our <mind> only. Though it might be unfair to attribute such a way of thinking to Occam and his followers, nominalism does have consequences for our vision of the world and our self-understanding in that world. Taylor notes:

«As against this [realism], in nominalism, the super-agent who is God relates to things as freely to be disposed of according to his autonomous purposes. But if this is right, then we, the dependent, created agents, have also to relate to these things not in terms of the normative patterns they reveal, but in terms of the autonomous super-purposes of our creator. The purposes things serve are extrinsic to them. The stance is fundamentally one of instrumental reason.» ¹⁹

In making God an absolute sovereign, whose intentions we do not and cannot know – and cannot discern in the cosmos – nominalism establishes a much greater distance between the Creator and his creation (world and humans). This has implications for our self-understanding, our conception of morality and of the relation between our world and ourselves. Just as the latter is inherently <neutral> – devoid of a normative order (or an ontic logos) – so are our actions. They are only right insofar as they are divinely commanded. This line of thought leads to remarkable conclusions. As Peter King writes,

«Ockham offers a lively illustration: when God commanded the sons of Israel to despoil the Egyptians, this, it turns out, was not a case of theft at all; <it was a good thing rather than an evil.> Given the moral neutrality of acts, it seems as though God could command any given act or type of act to be obligatory or prohibited, and indeed that his command would be constitutive of the rightness or wrongness of these acts.» ²⁰

The neutralisation of vices is still a few centuries away, but it is difficult to overlook the parallel between the «fair is foul and foul is fair» line and the

¹⁸ SA, 284.

¹⁹ Ibid, 97.

²⁰ Peter King, William of Ockham's Ethical Theory, in: Paul Vincent Spade (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Ockham*, Cambridge 1999, 239.

Occamist neutralisation of actions. Besides, a similar voluntarism will be taken up by Locke centuries later.

The ideal of civility

Renaissance humanists inherit the image of a world that is no longer normative in the ancient sense and the habit of disengaged reason. A moral order is not simply out there to be discovered, but can and has to be created. This «introduction of a stance of poiesis into the domain of praxis» is central to the Renaissance ideal of civility.²¹ No longer do we simply contemplate, discern and imitate. We have the freedom and power (and perhaps even responsibility) to construct and create. Such creative power is visible in art and science. It is also manifest in ethics, in the idea that we can morally surpass previous generations. Similarly to the ancient Greek and Roman city-dwellers, Renaissance humanists distinguish themselves from the savages who live in a state of nature. The difference between the natural state and the state of civility is that the latter has disciplined nature and put it under the rule of Law. The savages lack a governed state, discipline and live in constant warfare with each other – or so goes the argument. Though the «common people» are not exactly savages, they were still far away from this ideal of civility. The habit of rational self-control had to be continuously inculcated, also among the elites. The respect for the law and the love of peace, refined taste and polite manners were the characteristics of the «civilised» human. This did not go without resistance, Taylor points out. Public education was an instrument meant to instil this habit of self-discipline, in both the elites and the common people. This latter fact is noteworthy. Why universalise this ideal of civility? History abounds in examples of elites who were convinced of the superiority of their way of life and yet did not convert their subjects (usually slaves).

The same question has been raised above with regard to a similar phenomenon in late medieval Christian Europe. Part of the answer is similar to the one mentioned above, namely, that the urge to reform was religiously driven. Taylor does admit that more materialistic explanations may also be part of the answer. One is that elites were trying to protect themselves from the mass of paupers in the sixteenth century. Another one is that disciplined people are better warriors and producers. The poor laws, established in that period, tend to confirm these explanations. However, what remains unexplained is the urge to «suppress elements of popular culture, like Carnival, feasts of «misrule», various kinds of dancing, and the like».²² Such drive was already noticeable in the twelfth century,

²¹ SA, 113.

²² Ibid, 103.

and was clearly religiously motivated. Like this earlier period, both *secular* goals of civility and the religious reform were combined in practice. We are still in Christian Europe in the end, where morality and religion went hand in hand. We may speak of fear on the part of the elites, but it is a different kind of fear. Taylor notes:

«This is the kind [of fear] we feel when, struggling with a difficult discipline ourselves, we see others flaunting their untamed conduct; the kind of disturbance that overt sexual licence arouses among those who are striving to control desire in their own lives.»²³

There is perhaps also outrage and anger involved. But this indignation can only arise if we have the faith that all, including *ordinary people*, are capable of moral ascent. In a strong sense, it reflects the universalism inherent in Christianity, which, however, was never translated into such widescale social reform.

For the present purpose, it is interesting to take a look at the changed perception of poverty and treatment of the poor in that period. Though the poor were no saints in the Middle Ages, they were at least tolerated and cared for. Whatever the better off did for the poor, they did for Jesus (Matthew 25: 40–45). Less positively, there was also fear involved when the wealthy provided for the poor: they were afraid of hell. Hence, in return for alms, paupers were asked to pray for the souls of the rich. Taylor points to a radical change of attitude to poverty and the poor from the fifteenth century onwards. The «aura of sanctity around poverty» had disappeared. There is no place for beggars and non-productive labour in a well-ordered society. The identification of the poor with Jesus is absent when beggars are perceived as «rotten legs and arms, that drop from the body».²⁴ They do not belong to the social body; they are unproductive, useless and a disgrace. The new series of poor laws of the sixteenth century therefore have the twofold aim of protecting society from the poor and the latter's *rehabilitation* in controlled conditions (usually confinement) to turn them into industrious members of society. Whatever the explanations for this change of attitude may be, we see here the high value that productivity gets and the perception of humans primarily as labour (an instrument). There was resistance to these reforms, especially in Catholic countries, where there was opposition from the mendicant orders. Yet, this did not stop the new approach. An exception is Spain, where the reforms were stopped. Taylor believes that «the break with the whole Mediaeval theology of poverty was too great» there.²⁵

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ SA, 109.

²⁵ Ibid.

The radical Reform

With the Reformation, non-productive monks become a disgrace. The historical forms of Christianity, Taylor notes, had succeeded until the Middle Ages to achieve some kind of equilibrium between two goals, ordinary human flourishing and self-transcendence. The renunciative vocations were perceived as responses to the call of renouncing everything and following Christ, till the cross. The series of Reform since the late medieval period has had the aim of universalising some kind of ⟨high Christianity⟩ (cultured, self-disciplined Christians), thereby reducing the gap between ordinary Christians and committed Christians. The Reformation does not limit itself to reducing that gap. It destroys it by denying the validity of the renunciative vocation, and by sanctifying productive, ordinary life.

«You cannot be a proper Christian by stepping out of the saeculum. This ascetic withdrawal reflects only spiritual pride, and the false belief that you can win salvation by your own efforts. All valid Christian vocations are those of ordinary life, or production and reproduction in the world.»²⁶

There are no longer two spheres that somehow complement each other. Instead, there is one way of Christian life that all Christians should embrace. Indeed, in order to avoid a levelling down of Christian perfection, the high norms of monastic life are integrated into ordinary life. Concretely, this means that the activities of ordinary life are to be done for God, without personal satisfaction, pride, and pleasure.

The integration of asceticism into ordinary life is extremely demanding. All Christians are expected to fully affirm ordinary life without enjoying it. Radical Protestantism, Taylor therefore observes, loads «ordinary flourishing with a burden of renunciation it cannot carry. It in fact fills out the picture of what the properly sanctified life would be with a severe set of moral demands».²⁷ The high moral demand is laid not only on the individual, but also on society as a whole. This confirms Taylor's thesis that the Reformation should be understood as the continuation of the urge to improve society, and hence as part of the Reform. A consequence of this urge, we have seen above, is the strong commitment to discipline, order and uniformisation – one-level morality and spirituality. The good religious order and the good social order went hand in hand, supporting each other. In the well-ordered, reformed society, the ⟨saints⟩ are to rule and keep the godless in check. The rulers are peace-loving, the nobles assume their responsibility and no longer wage war among themselves. Pride and ambition are punished. Children are taught religion and discipline at a young age. Virtue is to be ho-

²⁶ SA, 266.

²⁷ Ibid, 81–82

noured, vice corrected. The poor and the sick are to be taken care of. Begging is to be eliminated. Taylor observes the same fear of vagrancy and disorder among the Puritans of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England and America. Idleness is to be feared, since it is the cause of all sorts of evils. The Puritan saints are «industrious, disciplined, do useful work, and above all can be relied upon. They have «settled courses», and are thus mutually predictable. You can build a solid, dependable social order on the covenants they make with each other».²⁸

The Reformation did not simply arise because of the corruption of the Church. Theological disputes, similarly, cannot explain the radical rejection of compromises. In a sense, the Reformation was nearly inevitable given the trend that had started since the end of the Middle Ages. This is the gist of Taylor's narrative:

«It is clear that the Reformation was driven by the spirit of Reform in an even more uncompromising mode. One of its principal talking points from the very beginning was the refusal to accept special vocations and counsels of perfection. There were not to be any more ordinary Christians and super-Christians. The renunciative vocations were abolished. All Christians alike were to be totally dedicated. Seen in this light, the Reformation is the ultimate fruit of the Reform spirit, producing for the first time a true uniformity of believers, a levelling up which left no further room for different speeds [...] It was Reform, further inflamed by a hatred of idolatry, which animated the grim-faced worshippers Erasmus saw emerging from the Church in Basel.»²⁹

This hatred of idolatry and the rage for order, needless to say, have been extremely powerful in the destruction of the enchanted cosmos. God is still the source of grace that enables Christians to live up to the high demands of the gospel. But he is no longer in earthly things, which are therefore «neutral». There is a strong parallel between this line of thought and the Occamist disenchantment of the world. In both cases, God's absolute sovereignty is proclaimed and «defended».

Theological quarrels did not end with the Reformation. In the seventeenth century, we now witness the dispute between the Jesuits and the Jansenists, illustrative of the clash between different forms of Christianity. Theocentric Christianity was still a feature of early modernity. It was a theocentrism that departed from the self, involving meditation, prayer, devotion, and spiritual self-transformation. Ignatius Loyola's spiritual exercises had the aim of making us more receptive to God. In France, François de Sales and Fénelon represented the devout humanism of that time. They helped their contemporaries nourish the élan towards God, and ensured that «God's presence in the world however nar-

²⁸ Ibid, 106.

²⁹ SA, 77.

rowed in the theories of theologians, [was] still very much felt» in that period.³⁰ Yet, these Christians were not powerful enough to resist what Taylor calls a «religion of fear», represented by the «hyper-Augustinian» movement (the Jansenists) and Bossuet. Human depravity, according to the Jansenists, was so great that it was an illusion to think that we can seek and find God. What we think to be a movement towards God might in fact be self-delusion, or even worse, our pride. Given the unbridgeable distance between God and fallen man, we can only pray and obey God's commandments, hoping for his grace. Bossuet, though not a Jansenist, similarly feared the invisible and incontrollable world of mysticism. In their emphasis on external conduct, these men contributed to the narrowing of religion to moralism: «the Jansenists laid great emphasis on the prayer of the church, and introduced a number of liturgical reforms; they demanded the most excruciatingly high standards of ethical conduct».³¹

Providential Deism

With Providential Deism, we get what Taylor calls a rational, rationalised Christianity without tears.³² Against the background of the late medieval and early modern (religious) wars, it is only logical that thinkers should have sought for common grounds for a peaceful living-together. It could no longer be a common Christian religion. Instead, minimalistic accounts of human nature are propounded to support the social contract. For Taylor, we owe our contractual understanding of societies especially to Grotius and Locke, and in particular, to their modern natural law thinking (in which teleology plays no role anymore). Rational and sociable beings who are naturally keen to preserve their own lives and prosper should logically want laws to enable a peaceful living-together.

«Grotius, who was a follower of Lipsius, thinks that this law is binding in reason alone (hence his famous assertion, that the Law would hold, «etsi Deus non daretur» [even if God did not exist]); while Pufendorf and later Locke see it as binding qua command of God. But the basic argument is the same. God made man rational, and he made him sociable, and with an instinct to his own conservation. It is plain from this what norms he held binding on his creatures. Plainly they must respect each other's life, liberty and estate.»³³

According to the deist framework, the world is created by God, but contrarily to pre-modern conceptions, does not carry his image. It is not a symbol. Instead, it reveals an impersonal order that is meant for our (human) benefit. We can dis-

³⁰ Ibid, 227.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (see note 14), 245.

³³ SA, 126.

cern that moral order with the help of our natural reason, and in living according to that order, we thrive and fulfil God's plan. For some Deists, God is involved at the beginning and at the end (at the Last Judgement). For others, only at the beginning. And for Locke, both at the beginning and the end, and through Scripture – which, of course, should not contradict natural law and rights. Natural reason, and not so much tradition or authority, is crucial for the right interpretation of the Bible. This is also Spinoza's approach. The seventeenth century is one of biblical criticism.

Taylor points to four ways in which Deism contributes to the eclipse of transcendence, and hence to the anthropocentric shift. The first one regards the conception of God's intention in creating the world, and correspondingly, of his Providence. God's intention and Providence is narrowed to us, to our happiness: reason reveals a moral order that is conducive to peace and prosperity. As Taylor writes,

«Gradually this normative order turns into a blueprint for the kind of society the reconstruction aims at. These rational, sociable beings, meant to live together in respect for each other's life and liberty, are also meant to preserve themselves by industrious exploitation of their natural surroundings. Properly carried out, this exploitation leads to economic growth. The right to property both follows immediately from this exploitation of nature, and also makes possible improvement and hence economic growth.»³⁴

This way of living was God-given and befitted rational and sociable beings.

The second blow to transcendence consists in the disappearance of grace from our ontology. The faith in human power and the idea of a fixed order in which God cannot intervene without contradicting himself make the idea of grace superfluous (and incoherent). God has endowed us with the capacities (reason, benevolence and conscience) to discern the order of the world and to realise it. The notion of the Last Judgement, on the other hand, does not disappear completely. Locke holds that the idea of punishment and reward is necessary to keep men on the right path:

«He [Locke] sees us as being so susceptible to being driven from the path of right reason by sloth, covetousness, passion, ambition, superstition, and bad education and customs, that God has acted providentially in establishing and publishing (through revelation) such rewards and pains, without which we wouldn't be able to muster the motivation to comply.»³⁵

Shaftesbury and Hutcheson, who were more optimistic with regard to the power of the loving passions, disagreed with him. Their belief in natural benevolence makes both grace and the Last Judgement redundant.

³⁴ Ibid, 129.

³⁵ Ibid, 223.

The third form of the loss of transcendence lies in the fading away of the sense of mystery: «If God's purposes for us encompass only our own good, and this can be read from the design of our nature, then no further mystery can hide here».³⁶ Evil loses its mysterious nature. The paradox captured by Pascal – human misery and grandeur – is also destroyed. There is nothing incomprehensible in the human heart, contrary to Christian tradition. God is no longer in the human depths and working there to remake us. This, of course, is connected to the disappearance of grace. In other words, the very idea of *theosis* (becoming like God or partaking in his life) becomes incoherent. This negation of this extraordinary human end is the fourth anthropocentric shift that Taylor discerns. The transforming love of God has become unattainable. God is at the beginning and perhaps at the end; he is the lawgiver and the judge. However, in this mortal life, we have only ourselves to rely upon. The only transformation we can hope for is one that takes place after death: «the doctrine of transformation is safely insulated from Christian life in this world».³⁷

The neutralisation of vices

Both the eclipse of grace and the loss of faith in the possibility of inner transformation can be partly blamed on what Taylor calls the hyper-Augustinian strand. Correspondingly and similarly, the neutralisation and innocentisation of self-interest and self-love can be traced back to the same hyper-Augustinianism. The depravity of human nature, predestination and the absolute sovereignty of God (whose decision to bestow grace is not moved by any human action) are constitutive of such hyper-Augustinianism. This is the reason why it clashed so much with devout humanism. The latter, unlike the former, recognises that God is both transcendent and immanent, and integrates this insight (and experience) in Christian spirituality and counselling. If we emphasise the distance that separates humans from God, and believe in the doctrine of predestination (which also means that not all grace is equal and given equally), we have to conceive a morality that can do without grace or God's love. We cannot hope that all can and will be transformed (redeemed) in this mortal life. Self-love becomes an ineluctable fact of human life, and should simply be accepted. The few may be able to destroy their self-love through God's grace, but these are the predestined few.

For the mass of the doomed, we need rules to contain the effects of self-love, and ensure that this self-love is directed to the general welfare, which is increasingly an economic one. Idleness is therefore not to be tolerated. As long as

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ SA, 224.

sinful humans can be disciplined and kept occupied, they cannot do much harm. The blissful consequence of such approach is peace and order. This correlation between private pursuits of self-enrichment and economic growth – which Mandeville points to in his *Fable of the Bees* – partly undergirds the neutrallisation and innocentisation of the lower human passions. Traditional Christian faith stands in the way of economic progress. We should therefore not try to transcend ourselves:

«If God's purpose for us really is simply that we flourish, and we flourish by judicious use of industry and instrumental reason, then what possible use could he have for a Saint Francis, who in a great élan of love calls on his followers to dedicate themselves to a life of poverty? At best, this must lower GNP, by withdrawing these mendicants from the workforce; but worse, it can lower the morale of the productive. Better to accept the limitations of our nature as self-loving creatures, and make the best of it.»³⁸

Welfare and freedom become even more important in the later eighteenth century. An open revolt against Christianity also makes itself be felt. One positive reason for this revolt is the experienced power of being able to build a civilisation. The awareness of what has been achieved at the level of justice, solidarity, welfare, culture, and science starts to work against religion. Man alone can achieve a lot. Yet, there is also an increasing aversion to the reigning forms of Christianity and theodicies. The predestination theories make God appear as an arbitrary tyrant who practises favouritism. The idea of an original sin that is atoned for by the death of Christ arouses repulsion. Many Enlightenment thinkers were willing to have some kind of natural religion, devoid of such irrationalities and other kinds of superstitions.

In the following century, the image of a designed order conducive to human happiness gives way to the image of a cruel nature that winnows the unfit.³⁹ This reigning sociobiological conception of the world makes its way into economic thinking and policies. As Karl Polanyi writes in *The Great Transformation*,

«Economic society was founded on the grim realities of Nature; if man disobeyed the laws which ruled that society, the fell executioner would strangle the offspring of the improvident. The laws of a competitive society were put under the sanction of the jungle.»⁴⁰

Any unity that still held society together faded away. The nineteenth century is the age of Charles Darwin, Herbert Spencer, of positivism, economic libera-

³⁸ Ibid, 230.

³⁹ Ibid, 388.

⁴⁰ Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*, Boston 2001, 131.

lism, revolutions, and ideologies. Polanyi calls it «England's century»: «the Industrial Revolution was an English event. Market economy, free trade, and the gold standard were English inventions».⁴¹ The dehumanisation that the Industrial Revolution brought about was unprecedented. The «satanic mill» ground humans into masses.⁴² However, there was much resistance, especially in the later part of the century:

«Society was attacked by the young in France, Germany, England, and other countries as being too «materialist» in both senses: proffering a too reductive account of human life, and being too concerned with material acquisition, getting and spending. It was also attacked for stifling and denying heroism, dedication, commitment, sacrifice. It was this which created the mood in which the First World War was welcomed by many élite youths as the long-awaited opportunity for great deeds in a great cause.»⁴³

Less radical approaches consisted in supplementing this naturalistic materialism with some form of higher culture, in the sense of *Bildung*, «which was explicitly seen as filling the slot that religion could no longer occupy».⁴⁴

Conclusion

We are today facing an impasse because the fundamental problem of a disembedded economy has not been solved. As we have seen above, the disembedding of the economy from society goes hand in hand with the dissolution of the social body (society, community or polity). A wholesome economy is embedded within a community constituted by justice and civic friendship. We have drifted away from this ideal, and we may wonder whether it is at all possible to reverse this situation. Jean-Jacques Rousseau doubted it. It is easier to prevent vices than cure them. Once traditional morality has been dismissed, it is hard to recover it and make it the heart of a society (and correspondingly, of an economy). History cannot be undone, but we can learn from it, and avoid certain mistakes in our drive to Reform today. We also see that the opposition Christianity versus modernity is not correct since particular historical forms of Christianity have played a major role in getting us where we are today. To some extent, Taylor follows in the footsteps of Max Weber and Ivan Illich in emphasising the religious roots of our secular world. Conversely, a corrupted Christianity can partly be blamed for the disembedding of the economy. In adopting the instru-

⁴¹ Ibid, 32.

⁴² Ibid, 35.

⁴³ SA, 399–400.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 402.

mental stance towards the world and each other, we have strayed away from the agape-network.⁴⁵

We may raise the question as to whether Christianity can help us out of the impasse that it has helped to create in the first place. This is a tricky question since there is no linear relationship between Christianity, on the one hand, and naturalism/materialism and laissez-faireism, on the other. Besides, Christianity no longer (exclusively) determines the social imaginary, as it did in Christian Europe. The Christian ontology has to compete with naturalist ontologies, which seem to be more dominant. However, the latter have also led us to a dead end. This is reason enough to explore other avenues, and to recover other accounts of our highest human motives and possibilities, which include religious ones. Policies can and should be informed by a «stronger ethic, a firmer identification with the common good, more solidarity».⁴⁶ Christianity, according to Taylor, cannot offer any solution with respect to the organisation of our worldly affairs. However, it can «show ways in which we can, as individuals, and as churches, hold open the path to the fullness of the kingdom».⁴⁷ These can, in turn, inspire policies and institutions. This also means that Christians have to face the fact that «there are clearly wrong versions of Christian faith» that we have embraced throughout history, and no single right one that can replace them.⁴⁸

From Axial Spirituality to Laissez-faireism: A Genealogy of the Disembedding of the Economy in Charles Taylor

A wholesome economy presumes a community in which it is embedded and according to whose moral outlook it is organised. This means that economic activities obey the same laws as non-economic activities, such as friendship and parenthood. The reversal of this order therefore entails the corruption of fundamental human relationships, and hence the dissolution of the social body. This disorder is our present condition. The economy is conceived as an autonomous sphere with its own amoral laws. Hence, the self-seeking attitude is warranted when we partake in economic activities. Even worse, the calculating way of thinking has infiltrated what should have been non-economic domains of human life. In this article, I reconstruct the long historical path to this topsy-turvy world, largely by drawing on Charles Taylor's history of ideas. Such corruption is often perceived as a modern phenomenon and is blamed on unbelief. Others have pointed out the monstrosities that arise when the economy, and consequently, economic actors are no longer subordinated to the common good. Contrary to these tendencies, I will show that the Christian urge for perfection, order and uniformity played a role in this regard. This article adds to existing scholarship by highlighting the contribution of Christianity to the anthropocentric turn and the neutralisation of vices. These are the necessary conditions for the coming-to-be of laissez-faireism, and hence for the «disembedding» of the economy from the human community.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 741.

⁴⁶ SA, 692.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 643.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

Agape – anthropocentrism – cosmos – deism – instrumental rationality – laissez-faireism – mechanism – nominalism – Reform.

Von der Spiritualität der Axialzeit bis zum Laissez-faire-Ismus: Eine Genealogie der Entbettung der Wirtschaft bei Charles Taylor

Eine gesunde Wirtschaft setzt eine Gemeinschaft voraus, in die sie eingebettet und nach deren moralischer Einstellung sie organisiert ist. Das bedeutet, dass die wirtschaftlichen Tätigkeiten den gleichen Gesetzen folgen wie nicht-wirtschaftliche – wie Freundschaft und Elternschaft. Die Umkehrung dieser Ordnung führt daher zur Korruption grundlegender menschlicher Beziehungen und damit zur Auflösung des sozialen Körpers. Jene «Störung» beschreibt unseren aktuellen Zustand. Die Wirtschaft ist als autonome Sphäre mit eigenen amoralischen Gesetzen konzipiert. Daher scheint die selbstsüchtige Haltung gerechtfertigt, sobald wir an wirtschaftlichen Aktivitäten teilnehmen. Noch schlimmer ist, dass die kalkulierende Denkweise in die nicht wirtschaftlichen Bereiche des menschlichen Lebens eingedrungen ist. In diesem Artikel werde ich den langen historischen Weg zu dieser auf den Kopf gestellten Welt rekonstruieren, vor allem dadurch, dass ich mich an Charles Taylors Ideengeschichte orientiere. Diese «Störung» wird oft als ein modernes Phänomen wahrgenommen und dem «Unglauben» zugeschrieben. Im Gegensatz zu diesen Tendenzen werde ich zeigen, dass der christliche Drang nach Perfektion, Ordnung und Einheitlichkeit in dieser Hinsicht eine Rolle gespielt hat. Andere haben auf die Monstrositäten hingewiesen, die entstehen, wenn die Wirtschaft und damit die Wirtschaftsakteure nicht mehr dem Gemeinwohl untergeordnet sind. Dieser Artikel ergänzt die bestehende Forschung dadurch, dass er den Beitrag des Christentums zur anthropozentrischen Wende und zur Neutralisierung von Lastern hervorhebt. Dies sind die notwendigen Voraussetzungen für das Entstehen von Laissez-faire-Ideologie und damit für die Ablösung der Wirtschaft von der menschlichen Gemeinschaft.

Agape – Anthropozentrismus – Kosmos – Deismus – instrumentelle Rationalität – Laissez-faireismus – Mechanismus – Nominalismus – Reform.

De la spiritualité axiale au laisser-faire: Généalogie du désenclavement de l'économie chez Charles Taylor

Une économie saine suppose une communauté dans laquelle elle est ancrée et qui est organisée selon sa morale. Cela signifie que les activités économiques obéissent aux mêmes lois que les activités non-économiques, comme l'amitié et la parentalité. Le renversement de cet ordre entraîne donc la corruption des relations humaines fondamentales, et donc la dissolution du corps social. Ce trouble est notre état actuel. L'économie est conçue comme une sphère autonome avec ses propres lois amORALES. Par conséquent, l'attitude égoïste est justifiée lorsque nous participons à des activités économiques. Pire encore, la façon de penser calculatrice s'est infiltrée dans ce qui aurait dû être des domaines non-économiques de la vie humaine. Dans cet article, je reconstruis le long chemin historique qui mène à ce monde de bouleversements, en m'inspirant largement de l'histoire des idées de Charles Taylor. Cette corruption est souvent perçue comme un phénomène moderne et mise sur le compte de l'incroyance. Contrairement à ces tendances, je montrerai que le désir chrétien de perfection, d'ordre et d'uniformité a joué un rôle à cet égard. D'autres ont souligné les monstruositéS qui surviennent lorsque l'économie et donc les acteurs économiques ne sont plus subordonnés au bien commun. Cet article s'ajoute à la recherche existante en soulignant la contribution du christianisme au tournant anthropocentrique et à la neutralisation des vices. Telles sont les conditions nécessaires à l'émergence du laisser-faire et donc au désenclavement de l'économie dans la communauté humaine.

Agape – anthropocentrisme – cosmos – déisme – rationalité instrumentale – laisser-faire – mécanisme – nominalisme – réforme.

Dalla spiritualità assiale al laisser-faireismo: una genealogia del disincorporamento dell'economia di Charles Taylor

Un'economia sana presume una comunità che incorpori e sia in accordo con la morale secondo la quale è organizzata. Questo significa che le attività economiche ubbidiscono alle stesse leggi delle attività non economiche, come l'amicizia e la genitorialità. Il rovesciamento di questo ordine porta perciò alla corruzione delle relazioni umane fondamentali e quindi alla dissoluzione del corpo sociale. Questo disordine è la nostra condizione presente. L'economia è concepita come una sfera autonoma con le sue leggi morali. Dunque, l'egoismo è giustificata quando partecipiamo a attività commerciali. Ancora peggio, il pensiero calcolatore si è infiltrato anche in quelli che dovevano essere degli ambiti non economici della vita umana. Questo articolo ricostruisce il lungo cammino storico che ha portato a questa concezione di un mondo sottosopra, orientandosi fortemente alla storia delle idee di Charles Taylor. Questa corruzione è spesso percepita come un fenomeno moderno e legato alla miscredenza. Contrariamente a queste tendenze, mostrerò che l'urgenza cristiana per la perfezione, l'ordine e l'uniformità giocano un ruolo in questa prospettiva. Altri hanno mostrato le mostruosità che sorgono quando l'economia e quindi gli attori economici non sono più subordinati al bene comune. Questo articolo completa le ricerche esistenti mettendo in evidenza il contributo del Cristianesimo alla svolta antropocentrica e alla neutralizzazione dei vizi. Queste sono le condizioni necessarie per lo sviluppo di un laisser-faireismo e quindi per il disincorporamento dell'economia dalla comunità umana.

Agape – Antropocentrismo – Cosmo – Deismo – Razionalità strumentale – Laisser-faireismo – Meccanismo – Nominalismo – Riforma.

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