Whither Religion in a World of Compounding Crises?

Stephen Ames, Ian Barns, John Hinkson, Paul James and Gordon Preece

Though a significant minority across the world enjoy the gross material benefits of a prodigiously productive global economy, our planet is at the same time beset by escalating system-level crises. Deep economic inequality is intensifying both between and within national polities. Ecological degradation is calling into question the future of the earth as we know it, with disruptive climate change only the most prominent issue. Global (dis)order is stoking increased militarisation, including the possession of planet-destroying arsenals of nuclear weapons by a growing number of nation states and potentially by non-state actors. Democratic institutions and practices are being hollowed out from within, including from within supposedly mature liberal democracies. And there are crosscutting crises of existential meaning. In all of this, religion has an ambiguous place. Entrenched civil conflicts, fuelled by modern cleavages, are, for example, being fought in the name of deep ethnic and religious animosities. Religion, or to be more precise, one religious creed — Islam — is being used to name the reason for the militarisation of public security and border control. And in a world of fractured communities, interpersonal conflicts, ‘culture wars’ and crises of meaning, religion is treated as everything from part of the problem to the source of our salvation.

What does all of this mean? Antonio Gramsci writes: ‘The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum, a great variety of morbid symptoms appear’. Whether or not the concept of ‘interregnum’ adequately captures the patterns and structures characterising our late-modern times, a fractured sense of the future hits many of us in the face. Across the world, people vacillate between morbidity and hopeful anticipation, fear and awe, cynicism and happy hyperbole. This is a time of the ‘resurgence’ of religion in the West. While religion never actually went away, the present has seen contradictory developments, from the local flowering of various syncretisms to global battles over fine differences of dogma.

What has brought about this fractured, abstracted world in which many of us across the globe — people who are religious, spiritual, agnostic, secular, atheist and otherwise — find ourselves vacillating between hope and despair? And what does it mean for the place of religion? It was in response to this question that the six of us came together six years ago to begin writing this volume. We were prompted by a shared discontent about the state of the world. The question of religion in a time of crisis, including the limits of secularism, became our starting point. In 2011, three Arena editors (John Hinkson, Paul James and Geoff Sharp) joined with three theologians (Stephen Ames, Ian Barns and Gordon Preece) to begin a long dialogue about the place of religion in this world. The dialogue was drawn out, exciting, and compounding, as it followed many different pathways and themes. At the same time, in the background, our lives changed and the world convulsed. One of us, Geoff Sharp, died during this period — even as our dialogue continued to include his written and remembered presence in all of our circles of discussion. In turn, we talked philosophically, intimately, politically, theologically, ontologically and personally. We were testing whether writers...

with such diverse backgrounds could work together towards a transformation of contemporary conditions supported by a sufficiently shared grasp of what could be better.

This volume is our limited, time-bound response to both that extended dialogue and to intensifying social change. We remain very aware that our contributions remain inadequate notes towards a lifelong investigation. From a common purpose forged over those years, each of us respond with different answers both to the abstracted fracturing of our world and to what kind of response is required. Within that dialectic of common purpose and individual difference, our responses fall in two broad ways. The three theologically oriented writers among us, more influenced by Charles Taylor than the other three authors, see the present period in terms of a crisis of the general social order that begins and ends with the transcendental. Countering this crisis adequately, they argue, requires both a renewed commitment to political engagement and a higher-order recognition of transcendental meaning, with both coming together to strengthen the possibilities of a just moral order in a globalising world.

These three writers develop their arguments as critical public theologians, emphasising the need for a politics of dignity, faith, justice and relationality, all finding meaning in relation to the sustaining source of being. As Christians, they see this as the triune God — God, holding within and in history, the tension of immanence and transcendence. It would almost be correct to say that for the public theologians amongst us it is ‘the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob’, not the abstract, discarnate ‘God of the philosophers’ (to use Blaise Pascal’s formulation). However, we hesitate to summarise our position so comfortably because not all philosophy is disincarnated, and because serious philosophical issues have come to the fore in discussions to which theologians have made significant contributions — for example, concerning background assumptions about the world, human nature and society, engaging ontology, epistemology and the way ‘worth’ is construed and practised in our society.

The other three writers, who work more closely within Arena’s ‘constitutive abstraction’ approach,[2] are also deeply cognisant of a crisis of the general social order. However, they remain agnostically social-political, much more inclined to emphasise a changed way of living with the layering of immanent contradictions than to appeal to being beyond the social. They treat religion as a social practice, defining it as a relatively bounded system of beliefs, symbols and practices that addresses the nature of existence through communion with others and Otherness, lived as both taking in and spiritually transcending socially grounded ontologies of time, space, embodiment and knowing. In these terms, like their theological colleagues, they would argue that a world without religion and spirituality, a world that succumbs to the hubris of atheism, would be a world that is becoming posthuman, rationalising and empty. However, this does not mean that they take God to be the foundation of being.

In their terms, the manifold crisis of the present is born of an emergent social formation. Intellectual practices have taken a new form — indeed they have exploded thanks to the elaboration of the techno-scientific revolution of the twentieth century — and as such have constituted a new social force in combination with modern capitalism. One expression of this social emergence has been the reconstruction of knowledge practices as they impact upon the natural world and also social relations generally. In this conjunction, contemporary techno-sciences no longer merely exploit the natural world but take it apart and reconstitute it, while social relations enter levels of social

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[2] This approach suggests that material forms of abstraction — from mediation through technoscience to commodification through capitalism and rationalisation through algorithmic managerialism — are constitutive of the nature of social relations and the subjectivity of persons.
abstraction such that the absent other becomes a significant reality. In this view, any reference to an interregnum signifies the emergence of the new but where the composition of the new remains to be stabilised. Social life is dangerously poised between: firstly, a belief that saving the planet is either just a matter of reining in the excesses of capitalism or making it more efficient; secondly, an orientation to a post-human social order that transcends the need for the relations of the generations and the evolutionary order, exhausting the taken-for-granted history of *Homo sapiens*; and, thirdly, an alternative (for which they would argue) that seeks to re-establish the significance and practice of both tangible relations between human beings and embedded relations in the natural world.

All of the authors of this volume come together in suggesting that one of the most immediate reasons for the growing planetary fracturing is an intensifying regime of neoliberal capitalism. It may be increasingly contested, but it has largely replaced the social democratic compromise of the post–Second World War years. Neoliberal practices, the latest way of describing the rise and rise of capitalism, have progressively restructured the governance of social life across economies, polities and cultures. The central neoliberal idea has been that it is the operation of the free market that constitutes the foundation for a growing, prosperous economy — and therefore the good life. The wealth-creating entrepreneurialism of private firms drives innovation, creates new markets for new products and services, and, in the process, creates jobs and the necessary revenues needed to provide for collective goods (such as infrastructure and education) and basic welfare services. In this reductive vision, the operation of the free market is essentially self-regulating and the role of government should be limited to providing the legal and institutional framework for private-sector wealth creation.

The neoliberal project has had a profound impact on the institutional framework of economic, political, cultural and ecological life across the planet. It has entailed the deregulation of economic activity directed towards facilitating corporate, speculative ‘wealth creation’ through the financialisation of the economy, the privatisation of state-owned utilities and assets, the restructuring of public administration away from public service towards underwriting market risk, and the hyper-commodification of goods, services and experiences, encompassing almost everything. For a time, at least for some commentators, it seemed as though the neoliberal order was opening up a new era of global prosperity through increased global trade and the lifting of hundreds of millions of people out of poverty into a middle-class urban consumer way of life. However, the flow of cheap consumer goods and easy credit for housing masked the underlying problems of job destruction, labour exploitation, growing inequality and failures to deal with deepening environmental challenges and the catastrophic erosion of social contexts that have always been taken for granted in the sustenance of social life.

For many critics, the global financial crisis made patently visible the falsity of the neoliberal vision that the operation of lightly regulated ‘free markets’ provided the best way to achieve a prosperous and peaceful global society. The confident belief of many on the Left was that the global financial crisis showed conclusively that the emperor had no clothes, and that the crisis represented a window of opportunity for the establishment of a new social democratic order, or even a socialist ordering of global society. It should have also shown that the crisis of the present cannot be understood in narrowly economic terms or even through an analysis of the follies of neoliberalism — that the current crises are much broader and deeper.

That this did not happen gives pause for reflection. We could spend much time on sorting out why the world remains fractured and stressed, and also why patterns from the past can no longer be relied upon. We could examine these questions narrowly as short-term puzzles, or, given the
complexity of the present, we could stand back and ask larger questions of modernity, the human condition, and its prospect of renewal. This volume chooses to focus on the latter. We have chosen to do so through the prism of Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age*. This book registers the ‘revival’ of religion in many settings and insists that the secular West is in need of religious re-enchantment beyond mere moral reformation. Taylor considers this one of the possibilities of the present. More broadly, his sustained work on the transformation of social orders and related religious phenomena has a scale appropriate for beginning a process of thinking through the meanings and possibilities of the present period.

**Bringing Charles Taylor into Contention**

The overall purpose of Taylor’s project is to give an account of the secularity of late-modern Western society that shows, on the one hand, how deeply secularised we moderns and postmoderns have become, and yet, on the other hand, challenges the assumption that this has meant an irreversible displacement of religion. To this end, he characterises the secularity of modern Western societies in terms of three developments: firstly, the steady decline of institutionalised religious beliefs and practices, particularly since the 1960s; secondly, the effective separation of church and state, such that religious organisations have been relegated to one of many NGOs within civil society, with the state being treated as more or less neutral with respect to any and all religious traditions and world views; and, thirdly and most fundamentally, a shift in what he calls ‘the conditions of belief’. By this phrase, he means the background set of assumptions about the world, human nature and society. In terms of this third development, Taylor suggests that we live in a ‘secular age’ because, by comparison with the previous religious age of traditional Europe, it is no longer the case that the taken-for-granted ‘condition of belief’ is one in which the world is understood in relation to an unseen yet all-knowing and ever-active God.

Taylor’s primary interest is in this framing condition of secularity. The key related term that he develops in his book is that of ‘the immanent frame’, a self-sufficient order that understands itself in its own terms, and certainly without necessary reference to a prior Creator. The prior institutionalised and spiritually sedimented picture of the world in which the Christian theism of Latin Christendom prevails, he argues, has been largely replaced by what he calls an exclusive Enlightenment humanism — exclusive in the sense that it excludes God as a constitutive feature of modern experience of the world. This concept of the ‘immanent frame’ was the point of departure for our discussions.

In brief, there are four key elements in Taylor’s immanent frame. The first is the development of a buffered self, as distinct from the porous self that was intimately connected to the sacred and outside. By ‘buffered’ Taylor means a bounded self, constituted as autonomous rather than formed relationally with respect to a wider moral and spiritual/transcendental ecology. The second is a disenchanted world, displacing the antecedent Christendom view of a teleologically directed and hierarchically ordered cosmos. By comparison, an enchanted world was one in which humans were ontologically dependent on transcendental connection, and which, it can be argued, gave the spirit world a living context that is only contingently available to us today. The third is a contract view of society, in which social life is understood as a conditional asso- ciation of autonomous individuals for mutual benefit, rather than as a cosmically grounded and legitimated hierarchical order from which and in which individuals find their meaning and place. And the fourth is a purely linear view of time, in which the older notions of ‘higher times’ enabling collective festive and ecstatic participation in sacred events have been flattened into the secular linearity of chronological time.

With this key notion of the deeply enculturated and institutionalised ‘immanent frame’, Taylor aims to show how deeply and unavoidably secularised we inhabitants of the West have become (even those of us who continue to be believers) simply by being embedded within practices,
institutions and discourses located within the immanent frame. His deeper purpose is to problematise this immanent frame from within, firstly by challenging its assumed epistemological and historical foundations, and secondly by high light ing the ongoing quest for transcendence, for a sense of meaning and purpose beyond flourishing within the immanence of a secular imaginary, or for contact with the sacred.

It is of no surprise that Charles Taylor is, like all the contributors to this volume, concerned with the question of meaning in our lives. Readers will find more than one approach to this in this volume, but there can be no doubt that the present period intensifies the experience of a contemporary loss of meaning. Whether Taylor holds the solution here is of course part of the contention between the six contributors. But coming to terms with the secular expres- sions of this crisis is a complex issue and it is addressed directly in our various contributions. This is not possible without an explora- tion of the nature of the upheavals today.

The Present Upheavals

There is in our time a pervasive sense of increasingly turbulent, dis- ruptive social change, and of accumulating crisis. On the one hand, there is a growing chorus of voices, by no means all from the Left, questioning the neoliberal framework and in some cases arguing for a return to the ‘entrepreneurial state’ as the key driver for an era of ‘green growth’. And yet on the other hand, as has been dra- matically demonstrated by the experience of Syriza in Greece, and by various other measures aimed at dealing with problems of corpo rate malfeasance and social inequality, the neoliberal regime remains firmly in place. What is dismaying about the shape of contempo- rary politics is that by and large the traditional forces of the progres sive and democratic Left have been unable to take advantage of the opportunities opened up by the fracturing of the neoliberal regime. In this volume, it is suggested that this is because an understanding of neoliberalism requires a larger frame of reference than the econo my. To remain restricted in this way would be to repeat the mistake of neolib eralism itself as it makes ‘the economy’ its master category. An alternative perspective requires an emphasis on the transforma tion of social relations, including but beyond techno-capitalism. Recognising the global fragility of capitalism is important, but the changed structure of economic relations and how this issues in heightened predatory practices cannot be grasped by merely think ing about the economy as such, or even capitalism as such.

What this highlights is the fact that the project of neoliberalisa- tion is carried by processes that go well beyond a shift in economic policy. Political culture, institutions and practices and beyond have been reshaped. The culture and practices of civil society have changed in ways that have reinforced the erosion of the social rela tionships and practices within which the personal and civic identities of citizens once were given a relative stability. A neoliberalising culture has actively promoted the development of a consumeroriented entrepreneurial and individualistic self. And it defends a way of seeing nature with finely focused eyes and powers that rerenders the natural world to its own ends.

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[4] This is a quite different point from that made by Wolfgang Streeck (How Will Capitalism End? Essays on a Failing System, London, Verso, 2016) when he says that what ‘comes after capitalism in its final crisis, now under way, is, I suggest, not socialism or some defined social order, but a lasting interregnum … a prolonged period of uncertainty and indeterminancy’ (p. 13). Capitalism in crisis is still capitalism. Our point is that capitalism is only one dimension of the present complex (dis)order.
All of this issues in a deep political crisis that continues to impact on everyone’s lives. Even ordinary life within contemporary society has been increasingly commodified, rationalised, codified and mediated. (These are aspects of what the Arena editors call processes of abstraction.) They intensify the contradictions of social life. Though many people continue to be formed and live within rich and supportive families, communities and friendship networks, too many of us, at least at one level, are now using such relations to mitigate risk and provide anchoring points of contact, while most of our time is actively directed elsewhere. Friends and families are becoming what one conservative calls ‘havens in a heartless world’, or some writers and self-help gurus call ‘third spaces’ — places of passing comfort between tasks. Friends and families are becoming cafés of the heart — touch points for renewal and confirmation in an otherwise changing and challenging world. Thus, gross disparities and tensions in the contemporary social order are not just manifested as economic inequality, stress and risk management but also bear back adversely on grounded social relations, transforming them as we use them to survive.

One extended version of this projective self is the strongly promoted role model of the contemporary competitive culture. This formation of the self plays out differently within different socioeconomic conditions. For the small global elite that thinks of itself as ‘masters of the universe’, it is reflected in an evident sense of entitlement. It is expressed as a narcissistic resentment towards governments and others, particularly when that privilege is called into question. While most of the world is still a long way from being comfortable with unqualified rapacious self-interest, there is nevertheless a disturbing trend of some people increasingly standing apart from the broader humanity. This is occurring even as they project themselves as entrepreneurially working in the name of the rest of us. Risk is projected downwards onto the public, especially the poor. This ‘secession of the successful’ acts as one solvent of the social or shared good name of the rest of us.

At the other extreme, the projective self is being played out by the many millions who make up what Guy Standing calls the ‘global precariat’. These are people whose lives have been disrupted and displaced from tradition and settled community and yet who are effectively excluded from the modern ‘good life’ supposedly still available to them in the uneven movements of urban society. In between are the members of aspirational classes with the education, jobs and income that have enabled them to have relatively affluent consumer-based lives, and yet who feel stretched and strained, nervous about the various threats posed by globalisation, refugees and technological change. In a culture of risk and resentment an uneven coalition of these groupings is now turning to the populist Right.

The rise to prominence of right-wing populist and authoritarian leaders, unapologetically adopting and promoting racist and xenophobic forms of nationalism, represents not only a political challenge to the Left. It also represents a deeper moral and philosophical challenge to what have long been taken-for-granted values about universal human dignity, human rights, nondiscrimination and political and economic equality. The assault goes beyond the rhetoric and practice of Donald Trump, Recep Tayyip Erdogan or Rodrigo Duterte. In the aftermath of the 2017 terror attacks on London Bridge, on Westminster Bridge, and at the Ariana Grande concert in Manchester, the very proper British prime minister, Theresa May, talked of restricting the political freedoms of suspected

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[7] Many writers have used this concept, with different inflections. One text was A. Fraser, *Third Space: Using Life’s Little Transitions to Find Balance and Happiness*, Sydney, William Heinemann, 2012. It is used here as illustrative because of its subtitle.
terrorists. ‘And if human rights laws stop us from doing it, we will change those laws so we can do it’, she said.\(^9\) In all of this, there is an uncomfortable sense that more is needed in campaigns for humanitarian relief and human rights than a persistent appeal to an assumed shared ethos of fairness and compassion. It is these very values themselves that need to be re-articulated, including the fundamental ideas of human ontology upon which they are based.

**The Meaning and Practice of Religion in a Secular Age**

It is this upheaval of the present — personal and social — that is the context for our reconsideration in this volume of the meaning and practice of religion in the world. This includes the growing association between fundamentalist Christianity and neoliberal regimes. In some cases, the unholy alliance has been a consequence of Christian agencies taking advantage of the withdrawal of state services by neoliberal regimes. However, as William Connolly has suggested, there is a surprising elective affinity between neoliberal individualism and fundamentalist Protestant Christianity, especially in North American churches, where for various reasons right-wing Christianity has combined individual responsibility, support for capitalist enterprise and hostility to government.\(^9\) However, American right-wing Christianity is by no means the only or even the most important socially animating form in Western developed countries. The ‘new’ Christianity comes in a kaleidoscopic variety of forms, ranging from exuberant Pentecostalism to the networks of Catholics and others actively engaged in progressive social-justice campaigns and the nurturing of commitments to community and locality.

In other words, the ‘resurgence of religion’ — or what might better be called the **multiplication of religious expression** — is taking many and varied forms. This multiplication is surprising for some commentators because it goes against the dominant secularist assumption that, within a modernising world, religion has been discredited and residual religious practices, institutions and beliefs are only a hangover from the past and are destined to disappear. To the contrary, religious practices, institutions and beliefs have not been disappearing. Indeed, some of the world religions, most notably Christianity and Islam, have been growing rapidly, particularly in Latin America, Asia and Africa. The most dramatic development has been the harnessing of religion to provide ideological support for various forms of anti-modern terrorism or the crusade against it. The best-known example of the former is the link between Wahhabist political Islam and the activities of AlQaeda and Islamic State, but other religions, including Hinduism, Christianity and even Buddhism, have also been appropriated to various forms of violent insurrection.

Beyond this, other expressions of this multiplication can be found in the diffuse forms of spiritual practices. Perhaps the most surprising form of spirituality has been the intriguing religiosity of new emergences of occult economies on the fringes of contemporary technocapitalism — ‘fantastic Ponzi schemes, the sale of body parts for “magical” purposes, satanic practices, tourism based on the sighting of fabulous monsters, and the like’.\(^10\) Coming back to the mainstream, there are, to be sure, many who draw on the metaphors of religion, a ‘master-narrative in which there are no masters’, to use John Milbank’s term,\(^11\) to critique the supposed rationality of modern markets. However, there is also a deeper sense in which the operation of global capitalism, with its unprecedented consolidation of human power, really does involve the emergence of a postmodern ‘sacred’, at least to the extent that it

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projects a self-focused ‘gospel of salvation’.\textsuperscript{[12]}

The fact that ‘religion’ isn’t disappearing in a secularising modernity has prompted something of a post-secular turn in a range of academic disciplines, most notably, of course, in the sociology of religion but also in mainstream social and political theory. The most prominent representative of this turn has been Jürgen Habermas, who has adapted his erstwhile secularist account of communication in the public sphere to take into consideration not only the claims of religious traditions but also their value as normative resources for liberalism.\textsuperscript{[13]} The position of all the authors in this volume is that the post-secular turn is a misnomer that exaggerates both the supposed demise of religion and the generality of its ‘return’. On this point at least, we are closer to Taylor’s argument about the contemporary dominance in the Global North of an immanent frame.

The essays in this volume are thus the outcome of a conversation about Taylor’s account of the place of religion in our secular age conducted between writers who are part of the Arena community with diverse interests in the connection between religion and alternative politics. Whilst we agreed about the importance of Taylor’s book and its relevance to our contemporary situation, we had different views about Taylor’s overall argument, and in particular the Christian perspective that shaped his account of the possibility of transcendence within the immanent frame. The first set of responses comes from the three Arena editors, the second from the three Melbourne theologians.

**The Arena Editors’ Responses**

**Is transcendence just a religious phenomenon?**

For John Hinkson, the first contributor to our volume, the work of Charles Taylor misses a key dimension of the present: modernity’s own transcendental preoccupations, including a preoccupation with transcending itself. Taylor’s focus is on the possibility of religious transcendence in modernity. In particular, Taylor is concerned with a defence of the Godhead and, as an aspect of that, with a particular form of Christian religious association. It is the open network form of religious association that stands at the centre of the Good Samaritan experience that Taylor believes Christendom and, in turn, modernity have lost. Secularism is the long-term consequence of a development embedded within Christendom itself, one that turns away from the transcendence implicit in the open religious network and seeks an institutionalisation of its ethic (a concern with social well-being) in the world.

In considering these ideas, Hinkson argues that this way of conceiving modernity and secularism does not take enough account of how religious phenomena of earlier times have been recomposed in modernity with particular effects — especially, how transcendence in a secular social mode stands at the centre of contemporary being. While modernity can be partially grasped as a naturalisation of processes previously conceived in religious terms, it is a modernity that has its own transcendental preoccupations. For modernity constantly seeks to transcend itself — most significantly including the constraints of the natural world. Any account of the relation of modernity to religious transcendence will be inadequate if it does not first come to terms with the striving for transcendence — including the transcendental social network paradoxically taking the form of the absent other — that lies at the heart of modern practice. It is a striving for renewal that displaces present as well as pre-modern religious impulses. This can take many forms and developments:


modalities of globalisation that lead to the demise of locality; the colonising of space that devalues our place in a mysterious universe; the enhancement and reconstruction of bodies via technoscience; and warfare that transcends the limits of bodies via nuclear weapons and drone warfare. These secular transcendental processes lie at the centre of many of the structural crises of our time. They carry a secular expression of ‘end of times’.

What does it mean ontologically to be religious?

Responding to Charles Taylor’s question, ‘What does it mean to say that we live in a secular age?’, Paul James’s chapter sets out to develop an alternative theory of religion and secularity. It structures its exploration through three alternative questions. Firstly, how can we find a way to understand the social whole without reducing the complexities and contradictions of social life to that of a singular age — in this case the notion of a secular age? Secondly, what is the social basis of religion and secularism? Here the approach treats faith in the transcendental, and ‘opposing’ arguments that God does not exist, as social belief systems, each originating from different dominant ontological valences emerging at different times in human history. Thirdly, James’s essay asks, how are we to live in our time? Human flourishing, it is argued, will require re-embedding and substantially qualifying the hubris of the modern within a holistic matrix of ontologically different and often contradictory ways of relating.

This chapter suggests that we need to recover forms of relations that arose out of analogical and genealogical ways of being present in customary ways of life (though not necessarily the cultural content of the ways in which those relations were once lived). A viable alternative to the present crises requires a politics of ontological limits. This train of argument leads us to a general proposal that lies at the heart of this essay: the social whole can better be understood in terms of changing intersecting assemblages of ontological formations — life-ways formed in tension with each other. In these terms, ontological formations are themselves understood as patterns of practice and meaning constituted at different dominant levels of abstraction. These formations are always in tension with each other — sometimes creatively, often destructively.

What is at stake now as revelation and reason founder?

Geoff Sharp argues that revelation is a form of social reason. It is a form of reason that relies on intuitive insight and therefore one that cannot give an account of its internal processes. Nevertheless, it is a crucial way of coming to terms with social dilemmas in history. Revelation is contrasted with more explicit forms of rationality that have emerged over time, especially associated with modernity and secularism. Contrary to most modern rational accounts of revelation, it is not to be simply displaced by explicit rationality. By and large they are in a mutual relation. They represent different levels of rationality as our species attempts to come to terms with the dilemmas of being in the world. While modernity tends to value explicit rationality more highly than revelatory knowledge, it is of considerable significance that explicit rationality today moves beyond a project for the exploitation of nature into that of its trans-formation. As such, explicit rationality projects an all-embracing change in the conditions of existence.

What is at stake now, suggests Sharp, is an unprecedented shift in the relation of nature to culture. One in which a new-found acceleration of a trajectory of growth is fused with an even more intense sense of individuated formation. The result is a suppression of active awareness of the permanence of a natural order at the core of the sense of being. Knowledge of localised disaster now opens out onto unprecedented disaster that overwhelms being in the world. Explicit rationality no longer serves to secure the world of Homo sapiens. Rather, it begins to explore a post-human future. Contrary to Taylor, who Sharp suggests advocates a revelatory overview of modernity — a modernity viewed in relatively benign terms — Sharp problematises contemporary social reality
with an emphasis on the limits of explicit rationality. He argues for the need to build an explicit understanding of limits that helps secure a core realm of the natural.

**The Theologians’ Responses**

**How dominant is the immanent frame?**

The chapter by Stephen Ames focuses on the ‘immanent frame’ — what Taylor calls the prevailing social imaginary of the exclusive humanism of our secular age. In the secular account, the immanent frame is projected as the possibility of human beings living a full life, with plenty of scope for self-transcendence, a possibility pursued by a great number of people all without reference to God, the transcendent Other. Taylor further characterises the immanent frame as dominated by the view that we live in a fundamentally impersonal order and that this has followed an earlier Christian attempt to expound a fundamentally personal order. It is this personal order and its implications for life together on this planet that Ames wants to bring to this discussion. He suggests that there have been signs of a shift away from this taken-for-granted secularity, reflected in the broader realisation that religious traditions are not fading away and that the dominant secularisation narrative actually misconstrues the more complex and dialectical relationship between the secular and the religious in the process of modernisation.

Ames takes as his main task to present a theological and philosophical reading of the immanent frame. This proceeds by highlighting two public themes: human inquiry and the revulsion experienced in response to violence. Ames argues that each theme has features that are intimations of God — though are typically unrecognised as such. Within the immanent frame, God remains ‘incognito’. This ‘incognito’ or misrecognition is partly due to the dominance of a naturalistic worldview, which Ames argues is mistaken. The immanent frame is thereby disclosed as an unacknowledged surrogate for God, a vast idolatrous construal of reality and of value, with consequences for all life. The chapter opens the possibility of ‘seeing through’ the idolatry to the intimations of God. This leads to wondering who is the God so intimated. Notwithstanding the commonality and differences between various religious traditions, a Christian answer is explored along with the consequences for living in but not of the immanent frame. The chapter concludes by engaging some of the themes from the Arena editors.

**How can neoliberalism be contested in a secular age?**

In his chapter, Ian Barns explores the intriguing coincidence between the rise to dominance of the political economy of neoliberalism and the global resurgence of religion in many and varied forms. He begins by noting the need to avoid over-generalising about neoliberalism, and to take note of the various ways in which the neoliberal project has been applied in different national and regional contexts. Drawing on the work of American writer Wendy Brown, his particular focus is on the diffusion of neoliberalism as a governing social rationality extending beyond the economy. A daunting challenge is posed for the Left in resisting neoliberalism’s destructive economic, political, social and cultural consequences. Many on the Left recognise that to meet this challenge involves renewing a vision of a good society beyond neoliberalism, with more specific working though of such a vision in terms of a moral economy, an enabling state, and a renewed democratic public sphere. However, the neoliberalisation of the practices, institutions and discourses of late-modern life has also eroded the very conditions in which people are formed as moral agents, able and committed to the kinds of civic action needed to rebuild some form of a good society. Barns suggests that addressing this challenge of moral ontology opens up what are fundamentally religious questions. In this context, Barns then explores the contribution that Charles Taylor makes to the task of developing a vision of a good society beyond neoliberalism, and in particular Taylor’s revisionist account of the genealogy and contemporary form of ‘secularity’. As with other contributors, Barns focuses on the constraints on moral and spiritual formation within the ‘immanent frame’. He raises
the question of the possibility and desirability of reframing modernity in terms of a very different social imaginary that takes the question of theological ‘transcendence’ seriously.

**What is the relationship between the time of God and the time of modernity?**

Like Taylor, Gordon Preece works with the contrast between a Christian-derived, tension-filled view of time and ‘homogeneous, empty time’, the central form of time in modernity. Taylor, Preece says, is not merely trying to imagine a more complete or universally encompassing morality but is rather seeking a more substantial and sustainable social imaginary, particularly in relation to our view of time. The very notion of the secular is a way of conceiving time, born of a clash between the City of God and the city of humanity. The church, and its provisionally sacred space and times, is forced by the delay in Christ’s second coming to patiently make time and space for the secular. The danger of the development of an immanent frame and reductionist secularism is to make empty time the only form of time. This can be seen in the totalistic and triumphal tone of much of the French Enlightenment’s strict secularism, and the twentieth-century totalitarianisms of East and West where pagan and secular dictatorships became sacred causes. Preece’s question is: can Taylor chart a radical middle way between the time of God and the time of modernity?

Preece goes back beyond Taylor’s initial starting point of the twelfth-century Lateran Council’s moralistic reforms to the fifth-century Augustine, the most influential Western theologian, as providing a turning point towards a more nuanced sense of secular time. The New Testament and the Augustinian distinction between the two ages and two cities makes space for the secular, a time of twilight faith, not certain light or blinding light. Secularity is endangered by zealous fundamentalists plucking up secular tares or weeds still indistinct from sacred wheat (Matthew 13:24–30), ahead of Judgement Day. Secularists, by contrast, hold to no final, transcendent transparency but to horizontal, human accountability. Preece examines Taylor’s nuanced narrative of the way in which Western ethics is drawn back to the horizon of flat social life stripped of its sacred transcendental possibilities. This is confirmed in the development of the ‘buffered self’ from the earlier Christian ‘porous self’, open to transcendence. Taylor’s narrative, says Preece, is not a knock-down argument for theism but a form of phenomenologically thick description and an apologetic for a Christian conception of fleshed-out, embodied anthropology, messianic time, and trinitarian balancing of transcendence and immanence.

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In the present context of highly secularised and utilitarian public discourse, the Arena community has long had a particular interest in the deeper questions of human ontology raised by the ongoing development of secular modernity. The secular West has not given much attention to the underlying framing assumptions of the emerging secular order. Indeed, it has tended to rely on the undoubted fact that secularism took over many of the social groundings of Christendom while discarding its theological beliefs. As we have been concerned to outline in this Introduction, the questions that prompted our coming together to write this volume include both ontological and political questions. What should we make of the ‘return of religion’? Are we witnessing a ‘return’ to religion, or does it mean that we need to revise our secularist assumptions to recognise religion as an enduring or even constitutive feature of the human condition? Can the revival of religion, in terms of its practices, discourse and institutions, be a positive and constructive force in relation to overcoming the ‘morbid symptoms’ of late modernity? To these questions the writers of this volume have very different answers, even as they struggle in common with a world in crisis.