

COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

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Author: Alan Noble
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THE BARRIER OF THE BUFFERED SELF

I'm a male witch, not a warlock," my coworker in the Sears electronics department informed me. His teeth were dark brown and jagged from smoking and drinking coffee and, I suppose, not brushing his teeth, which I suspected had something to do with being a witch, although I don't know what. Are there dental hygiene risks to being a witch?

He was very good at sales. Big screen TVs were about the only thing anyone made a decent commission on in our department. I think I sold two the entire six months I worked there. My coworker probably sold one every week or two. I started to wonder whether he was using spells to persuade customers. He would come to work wearing black pants, a black dress shirt, and a black trench coat. On a chain around his neck he wore a chrome skull with cheap black stones for eyes. His hair was slicked back, Malfoy style. His most notable affectation was his cane. It was black with a large silver knob at the top and a silver tip on the bottom. There was no medical reason for the cane; it was just part of the show.

I used to wonder if he really thought he was a witch. How deep did this obsession go? So, when he asked me for a ride home from work one night, I didn't mind going out of my way. I figured that once I got him alone, away from an audience of co-workers and customers, he would put down his guard, stop playing the part, and just be himself. But I was disappointed—he never broke character. It was a long drive home.

I left that job as soon as I could, but I ran into my old coworker a few months later. He had been promoted to the assistant store manager, second only to the store manager. He seemed happy and was certainly proud of what he had accomplished, moving from the sales floor all the way to the penultimate position. But he was still playing the part, dressed in the same gothic outfit, still overdramatically swinging the same cane, and grinning with those same dingy teeth. And it made some sense to see him be so successful in sales. There was a cutthroat quality to our work that fit his persona well. While working with him, I remember thinking, *Does anyone else notice that he's a witch? Or is this just me? Do y'all not see this?* It felt like it should be an issue, like it ought to disrupt our work environment and cost him sales, but it didn't. Not at all. If anything, this persona aided him in his work! What I should have noticed was how he was able to seamlessly integrate into the larger culture. Sure, you don't see many witches in public, but whatever being a witch meant to my coworker, it didn't affect his involvement in society. He could work, buy, eat, sleep, love, and have fun just like anyone else. In that sense, his persona was something added on to a standard life in a modern world.

If I had been paying attention, I would have realized that what the male witch was doing was the same as the rest of us in the electronics department. The only difference was that his cultivated image was a bit more exotic.

We all sought some kind of validation or fullness by playing, cultivating, and expressing an identity. The older salesmen never left the big-screen TV aisles. They prided themselves on their decades of service at Sears, their expertise in televisions, and their ability to close sales. They were family men who believed the good life did not require you to climb up the corporate ladder. It was enough to work hard in your position and support your family. The younger salespeople lacked this view.

Another salesman was working part time while attending a conservative Baptist Bible college in the area. For him, the good life involved personal piety, marriage, a family, and preaching the gospel. He had only recently “turned his life over to the Lord” after a youth of drinking and partying and sex. But now, he told me, he had given up such vices. His conception of the good life had changed so dramatically that he no longer even enjoyed going to the beach. He told me that all the women in swimsuits were a constant distraction for him, so he avoided the place entirely. I could empathize with the Baptist much better than with the male witch, but there was still a chasm between us. The Bible college student checked his progress toward a full life by constantly comparing himself to the sinful people around him. Even though he knew I was a Christian, I got the impression that he didn’t think much of my faith. Where he saw himself as a solitary light in a wicked world, fighting off temptation and calling the

world to repentance, I saw him as an insecure and anxious man. On slow nights we would hang out by the TVs talking, and I could watch while, in the middle of a sentence, his eyes would drift away from me to stare at women on the screens. My point here is not that the Baptist student was a hypocrite or prideful, but that we each had a conception of ourselves that formed our perception and experience of the world, so that even though we shared the same faith, we could hardly understand what drove the other person and where they were headed.

The other group in the electronics department were the apathetic young men. That's where I fit. None of us felt inspired by our work. Most of us were not very good at selling televisions. Whenever we could, we preferred to hang out—away from the career salespeople and the Bible student. For each of us, the good life meant something other than working at Sears. One guy wanted to be a firefighter or a scientist. Another wanted a comfortable job and to enjoy himself at parties, to be desired by women and envied by men. I didn't know exactly what I wanted to do, but I knew I wanted to do something *significant, impressive*. I wanted to accomplish something so great that I could feel my failure to sell TVs was because I was too smart and important to work sales at Sears. Even though I also struggled intensely with lust, I felt superior to the Bible student because at least I didn't blame women for wearing swimsuits at the beach. I felt superior to the career salespeople because, while I couldn't sell a TV to save my job, I never encouraged consumerism. If someone didn't need a bigger TV, I never tried to up-sell them. And most of all, I felt superior to the witch because I wasn't play-acting, unlike

him—except that, in a sense, I was. Just like the male witch, I was obsessed with expressing my identity and finding some kind of existential justification through that expression.

What I couldn't see until much later was that we were all seeking our own sense of fullness in life. We each mapped our narrative of pursuing that fullness onto the world, a world that we all primarily or exclusively experienced as a closed, natural world. Our individual maps told us where we started, where we were, and where we were going. The legend pointed out the values and ideas that allowed us to make sense of our surroundings. But each map was different. And while I could speculate (and have) about how each of these salespeople conceived of the world, I could never really comprehend them, because the sources for our maps were ultimately *internal*. The maps came from deep within us, inspired by the external world, but always finally *chosen by us individually*. It's not that we were monads, unable to communicate what we believed to one another. Whatever ability we had to share glimpses of our personal worldview came from our constant signaling to each other about who we were. We were all interested in subtly letting each other know who we were and how to interpret us. And that's what the witch's cane was about. It was a physical symbol of his commitment to a way of seeing the world as magical and himself as a mage. The Bible student signaled with the small Bible he carried everywhere. The career salespeople signaled by ignoring the younger salespeople and talking about old times. The younger salespeople signaled with their disinterest in earning commissions and attending meetings. We expressed our identities to make our identities real.

While you may not have worked with a witch, what I've just described should be familiar to you. You should be able to identify examples of individually rooted quests for fullness in your own life and community. It may feel so ubiquitous that you can't even imagine another option: "Of course we all pursue our own vision of the good life, which we derive from sources within ourselves, the sources we believe are the most authentic. What's the alternative?"

There *is* an alternative way of conceiving of fullness and the good life: a shared cultural belief with transcendent origins. In this model, we don't measure our self-worth by an internal standard, we don't seek to identify our authentic individualism in order to fulfill it in practice, and we can't even conceive of a telos, or ultimate purpose, mapped from an internal source, because the nature of telos is that it exists outside of us and draws us to it. There isn't a simple answer for when and how this latter model of seeking purpose and fulfillment ceased to be the norm for Western culture. Certainly during the Middle Ages it was assumed, but building up to and during the twentieth century, Western civilization slowly shifted the locus of our hope from a transcendent source in God, who forms us, to finding it deep within ourselves. In no small part, explaining this shift is the goal of Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*.

A SECULAR AGE

If the forces of technology and media alone affected our habits of thinking and believing, perhaps there would not be a serious need for us to alter the way we bear witness to our neighbors. But the

barriers to belief created by technological and societal trends toward distraction have been dramatically strengthened by an increasing secularism in the West. Our secular age has produced an explosion of possible belief systems, all of which are endlessly contested and all of which make the idea of transcendent God less conceivable. As a result, our beliefs are more fragile and more individual, and less open to outside influence. We are buffered selves, protected behind a barrier of individual choice, rationalism, and a disenchanted world.

By *secularism* I don't mean "atheism," although atheism plays a role here. Instead, I'm using the term as defined by the Canadian Catholic philosopher Charles Taylor, who has argued that we live in a "secular age," which differs from the past not in that most people do not believe in God but that not believing in God is a live option: "The shift to secularity in this sense consists, among other things, of a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace."¹ In the secular age, all sorts of beliefs are live options. The one truth we accept about belief in our secular age is that there is an endless number of options, and all of them are contested. In addition, our understanding of these beliefs tends to be more "fragile" than beliefs held in the past.² Whereas people traditionally kept the beliefs of their parents and community, today it is normal and even expected for each contemporary individual in the West to choose their own, personal beliefs. And it is common for people to change beliefs multiple times over their lives.³ Because all beliefs are contested and we

are hyperaware of other options, our commitment to any one belief tends to be much looser. We have witnessed a corresponding decline in all of the structural forces that helped define and enforce belief in the past. Institutions are weaker. We are less reliant on founding documents or philosophies. There are fewer authorities governing right belief. Belief itself is flattened and shifted to the inner judgment of the individual.

Part of the reason we can hold our beliefs so lightly is that what is truly important to us is not only or primarily our beliefs but how they affect our identity. Identity formation becomes the central concern, and our beliefs are just another way we articulate that identity. Since we hold these beliefs loosely, we have less cognitive dissonance when picking and choosing beliefs that contradict one another. A lack of reflection makes it easier for us to hold contradictory beliefs, but now we see that our secular age contributes to this condition by leveling beliefs.

At the heart of the secular age is the individual in their effort to create and project their identity in a chaotic and hostile world.⁴ For Christians this means that open dialogue about the merits and truth of the Christian faith can all too easily be interpreted by our hearers as reasons why they should choose to add Christianity to their identity. And then reasoning about the faith becomes futile, because their objections to Christianity are not so much logical as existential: the faith (if properly described) simply does not *fit* with their conception of themselves. And so they may reply, “Christianity just isn’t my thing.”

The issue is not that modern people do not think rationally about faith. Reason is one of the defining features of modernity,

and more than ever people trust that through reason, logic, and science we can perfect our knowledge and progress as humans. But we assume that the proper object of reason is the practical, physical world. This is why atheists' arguments about the net harm of religion or studies reporting that children who are raised in a religious home are less kind are so persuasive to modern ears. The proper realm of reason, the assumption goes, is the sensible world, and the goal of reason is to live a more comfortable, safe, and happy life. Thus, arguments that show how ineffective or harmful religion is carry a lot of weight.

Such arguments imply that the real criteria for the validity of a belief system is how quantifiably beneficial it is to us, personally. (This understanding of reason stands in stark contrast to older conceptions of it, like we find in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, where reason is the first necessary guide toward Christ.) And because reason can be so thoroughly separated from faith, when we have frank and rational discussions of Christianity, it may be that we are not arguing about a religion with a transcendent referent but a potentially effective belief for *this* world. In that sense, the historical case for the resurrection is less important to a hearer than "Would adopting Christianity fit with and improve my authentic identity?" or "Would this faith improve my quality of life?"

I am speaking in generalities here about large cultural trends. There are exceptions. Perhaps you have even thought of a few rational conversations you have had with non-Christians about the faith that you believe were effective in bearing witness. It's not that providing reasons and evidence is foolish; they have a place and a purpose in the way we share our faith. Rather, our culture's

default way of interpreting religious claims is via the assumption that any religion is just one option among many. We imagine that they all have *some* truth to them, so that what matters most is how a religion fits with who we envision ourselves to be. Thus the criteria for belief shifts from external ideals to internal ones, and that, in part, is what it means to be a buffered self.

EVERYTHING IS CONTESTED

How belief in a God-created cosmos ceased to be a basic, accepted background truth for people in the West is long, complicated, and debated. In fact, Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*, all eight hundred-plus pages, is devoted to answering the question, "Why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable?"⁵ Traditionally, Taylor tell us, the story of the secularization of the West has been told as a "subtraction story." In the 1500s it was hard *not* to believe in God because we understood the world as a part of a cosmos created by God, society was ordered in reference to God, and the world was enchanted because a transcendent God created it. But then, slowly, we saw the physical world more as part of a universe that could be explained through science, without recourse to God. Society could be ordered through reason and an understanding of human rights. Belief in spirits and supernatural forces was viewed as childish superstition, and so the world became disenchanted.⁶

Once religion was "subtracted," we were left with just our own ability to interpret and order our world: exclusive humanism. Taylor rejects this subtraction, in part because it assumes that

exclusive humanism is simply our natural worldview rather than something we had to learn.⁷ But since we learned it, our society has seen an explosion in the number of plausible beliefs, and they are all contested.

Western culture experienced a profound shift inward during the Enlightenment and the Reformation, a shift that prioritized the individual as the basic arbiter of truth. A moral dimension is added to individualism. Rather than depending on tradition, the church, the king, or your community to order your life, now you are morally obligated to search out the truth and verify it for yourself. Along with this comes a skepticism and criticism of the foundational and formative institutions of society: the church, the state, and traditions. It is not that people abandon these authorities, but they no longer assume these forces are valid and correct. Instead, they are just more contested institutions. Whereas in 1350, if you lived in Europe you were almost certainly part of the Catholic Church, by 1550 you might be a member of any number of churches, each claiming supremacy. Later, deism expanded the belief horizons even further, a process that has continued to today. The result is that as strongly as you hold your beliefs, you are aware that they aren't *really* the only option. Maybe you leave the Catholic Church after reading about Martin Luther's criticisms, but you don't have to become Lutheran. You can join Calvin's Reformed Church, or the Anabaptists, or the English Puritans, and with each passing decade as the options multiply, people increasingly *feel* the pressure of living in a contested space. This is the experience of what Charles Taylor means by secularism: the constant background sense that

there are any number of possible beliefs, and many of them involve no reference to a transcendent being.⁸

In some ways, Western society has turned this experience of tentative belief into a virtue, which is significant because with the collapse of a shared belief system we lost a shared stable of virtues to aspire to. Being open-minded, refusing to draw conclusions, the idea that diversity of belief is a good unto itself—these are all results of a fundamental shift in our basic beliefs about the world. Thus, we *aspire* to be noncommittal.

We see the modern virtue of uncertainty play out even in the way people come to faith. For example, when we hear that a Christian was raised in the faith, modern hearers are tempted to question their sincerity. Are they *really* Christian or did they just happen to be raised that way? Have they considered the alternatives? The church tries to alleviate the anxiety of being raised in the faith by relying on testimonies to suss out true believers. So it is common for evangelicals to have to present their testimony when applying to work in ministry or when joining a new church or Bible study. The cradle Christian feels pressure to discover a story of sin and redemption, usually somewhere in the distant past, as evidence of their authentic faith.

In other words, being raised from childhood into belief in Christ is suspicious, somehow less genuine, and certainly more susceptible to a falling away because the alternatives have not been considered. Rather than seeing faithfulness from birth to death as a blessing from God (which is certainly the model of the Old Testament), we harbor doubts about such believers' sincerity. On the other hand, the ideal model is someone who reaches

adulthood, studies all the religions and worldviews they can, weighs the evidence, and decides that Christianity is the truth.

The description of modern belief I have just given might sound as if it results in philosophical relativism, the belief that everyone's reality is true insofar as it is true for them. But this would be a mistake. For one, people do not always go to the logical conclusions of their beliefs. So, even modern people who feel deeply that all beliefs are contested may never come to the conclusion that all beliefs are equally valid. This may never occur to them! Indeed, such relativism is hard to maintain; we are constantly reminded of positions and views that are not only contrary to our own but also deeply offensive and obviously harmful. We should expect modern people, including Christians, to hold strongly to their beliefs and even reject alternatives as falsehoods, but here is the crucial difference for the modern period: no matter how *confident* we modern people are in our worldview, we are always aware of the alternatives. As a result, we become increasingly concerned with signaling our beliefs. For example, no small part of what it means to be a Christian involves our internal and external identification with Christian culture so we know our place in relation to the rest of the world. Our focus shifts away from practicing our beliefs to signaling our beliefs to ourselves and others. In a world where all beliefs are possible, our attention turns to contending about beliefs, and the terms and conditions of those beliefs matter less, except as fodder. Is it any wonder that apologetics is so difficult?

You may be wondering at this point, how can Christians escape this modern, secular view of endless options for belief in our

world? It may not be possible or even desirable to escape. In fact, the early church context was somewhat similar to our own (only with fewer options for belief). The fact that we are aware of many other ways of living and seeking fulfillment does not necessarily undermine our faith, but secularism subtly causes problems for the church and our witness. Rather than reverse secularism (which I don't think is possible until the Lord returns), our task is to identify the harmful outcomes of secularism and reject them.

One of those outcomes is the tendency to focus intensely on the contestedness of our belief, identifying with it rather than practicing the belief. Another disordered outcome is our unconscious privileging of adult converts over cradle Christians. Secularism is more a fact about our modern situation than an enemy to be overcome. But this fact has effects that must be tested against the truth of the Bible. This book is one such test.

The contestedness of belief points us inward, rather than outward, for the basis or ground of our being. If the external world appears to be an endless series of options, from deodorant brands to philosophies, our temptation is to withdraw to a safe, seemingly stable world—the inner world of our being. Our identity and our ability to choose its features becomes the basis for our being in the world, rather than some outside authority. So that even when we believe in God's existence and choose to follow him, we do so because of an inner decision (the buffered self!).

THIN BELIEF

While the secular age does not necessarily lead to philosophical relativism, it does lead to thin belief. By “thin belief” I mean a set

of foundational ideas about the world that lack robust explanatory power. Their sources may be obscured from us, consciously or not. They may come in direct conflict with other beliefs we hold (more on that later). In a sense, all of our beliefs are part of a continuum from thick beliefs (which involve a deep understanding of the internal logic, origins, and context; embodied practice; and robust application of the belief) to thin beliefs (which can be as superficial as signaling your support for a political cause simply because you like its hashtag). We hold a thin belief when we fail to grasp its assorted justifications and reasonings, and therefore are unable to articulate it fully. We then struggle to consistently live according to it. Thin beliefs are easy to adopt and then toss away, so they are useful for crafting our self-image. Not that the beliefs themselves necessarily lack depth, tradition, passion, or truth. In fact, this is part of the great shame of thin belief: it may affect otherwise good beliefs, mistreating and misrepresenting them.

We can adopt thin beliefs about almost anything. Perhaps you become deeply convicted about the plight of Syrian refugees after the US president callously calls for them to be banned. His words strike you as offensive, inhumane, and cruel. And while you may still harbor some unspoken suspicions about Middle Easterners after 9/11, this issue feels like the perfect opportunity to show your goodwill. The next time you see a meme showing refugee children with a superimposed verse about caring for the “least of these,” you decide not only to like it but to *share* it with your friends. This signals what your stance is on the issue and maybe something about your personal character, your open-mindedness

and concern for foreigners. An argument breaks out on your post, with some of your distant relatives and old high school friends arguing over whether Islam is a religion of peace and whether “moderate Muslims” exist. You jump in to defend your position, citing lines of argument that you’ve picked up from other viral images or a John Oliver clip you watched on YouTube. You care about this issue passionately. There is a tremendous moral urgency to your writing, and you are even willing to anger and lose friends over your stance—a stance you adopted fifteen minutes prior, after seeing a compelling viral image on Facebook. Meanwhile, the foundation of your belief goes unquestioned.

You could consider the procedural issue of risk analysis (how likely is it that one of these refugees turns out to be an ISIS member who commits a deadly terrorist attack?), but the moral source of your belief remains unspoken and unidentified. What ethical obligation do we have to our international neighbors? What does this mean for other global conflicts? What does this ethic mean for military interventions and global trade and climate agreements? What shape should a local community take, and how can and should it adapt to foreign newcomers? The web of complex ethical questions that shapes the debate over Syrian refugees matters a great deal, but it’s unlikely that you will explore these questions. Why? Aside from the technological pressure to move on to the “next thing,” which we discussed in chapter one, there is also the feeling that there are just too many important issues for us to care about. The best we can do is stand for *something*. And once we commit to a cause, its momentum sweeps us along.

We've all felt this when arguing some controversial issue online. There is a moral urgency to defend our cause. And if we are honest, no small part of that urgency involves unarticulated fears about how losing this argument might reflect on *our image*. We need to defend refugees not only because they need defending but because we want to be the kind of people who are *known* for defending refugees. This becomes evident when we step back and realize that our online defense of refugees is highly unlikely to *actually* defend them in practice. But because this is a thin belief, this won't bother us much. We're already on to the next cause.

So, a political and moral cause is adopted uncritically. The adoption of the belief primarily takes the form of public expression (your concern for refugees is not likely to stay in the realm of quiet prayers). You are aware that this expression signals things about yourself to others. You defend this belief passionately, despite having little understanding of the deeper ethical motivations. And you know that ultimately your defense is for the benefit of you and your friends, a kind of image-crafting game we play. Meanwhile, refugees are still in crisis.⁹

We aren't all just heartless egotists who use the sufferings of others as props for our expressive individualism. I'm sure that's true for some people, but it is hardly the norm. Instead, we see the formation of an identity as part of our moral duty, and formation takes place, as Charles Taylor argues in his book *The Ethics of Authenticity*, in dialogue with others.¹⁰ This is how we sharpen and declare our beliefs. But when we sincerely and passionately hold thin beliefs, we often do so in conflict with other thin beliefs, and we are liable to drop them when the next issue comes along. Our

modern world invites us to adopt thin beliefs whose moral foundations are poorly understood and which serve in no small way to tell others about who we are, rather than, necessarily, to affect some actual change in some human condition.

Thin belief does not mean that we no longer hold any strong, deep beliefs. On the contrary, most of us have a few beliefs we identify with strongly and that have deep roots, but because we are hyperaware of the contestedness of the world, we are more inclined to hold a strange mixture of thin and thick beliefs, even within the same larger belief system. And the way we express our beliefs to others may make no noticeable distinction between thick and thin beliefs. (Our favorite sports team is listed right along with our marital and parental status and occupation in our Twitter bio.) For example, let's say that Reformed Christianity is one of the thick, strong beliefs that defines me, but sometimes I find partaking in the weekly Lord's Supper at my Presbyterian church to be tedious. Since I am aware of the diversity of beliefs within Christianity, even within Reformed tradition, I might wonder about how often we should celebrate the Lord's Supper, and since I'm also aware that most of my neighbors would say that the entire debate is unimportant, I might not feel all that motivated to come to a conclusion. The diversity of views on the Lord's Supper invites me to throw my hands up in resignation and follow my personal preferences. If I do decide to come to a conclusion, the pressure of all the alternative views will drive me to devote myself to intense study and defense of a particular view, as if my faith depended on certainty on this issue. Certain beliefs like this within larger belief systems

may be thinly understood and loosely held, even while the broader belief system itself is thick and strong.

The image of belief that I would like you to envision is one in which spots of thick belief are surrounded by thin beliefs and everything in between, in an uneven, unordered design. The good news is that our hope in Christ is not based on having a perfectly coherent and thoroughly understood belief in Christ and the world he created. God's grace covers our sins, our doubts, and our ignorance. It is based on Christ's righteousness, not our comprehensively understood doctrine. But we ought to work toward an awareness of what we believe and why we believe it. Which brings us to another major feature of secularism: the uncritical embrace of contrary beliefs about the world.

CONTRARY BELIEFS

No one lives out their beliefs consistently. We all have little pockets of preferences or desires or practices that rub up against what we would claim to be our basic morals and beliefs. Memory, knowledge, will, and sin prevent us from properly living out our worldview. And this has always been true. But the kind of inner conflict between different beliefs that I am describing is much more intense than standard human hypocrisy. Because we are hyperaware of the endless choices in beliefs, and because we are inclined to hold thin beliefs loosely, our tendency is to form a collection of hodgepodge beliefs about the world—beliefs that would be seen as incoherent if we were to look closely at them and their implications, but we don't. Or at least we try not to. And so our perception of the

world shifts easily as we gain new information, new desires, and new influences. We are unmoored.

A strange consequence of this flattening of values is that the distance grows shorter between a belief about our origins, for example, and a belief about who is the greatest basketball player of all time. We understand that both beliefs are tenuous and contentious and identity defining, and so in some respects we may hold each of them just as fervently. We may become apologists for both beliefs. We may purchase clothes to identify with both. We allocate time and money to both.

To illustrate what having a collection of conflicting beliefs might look like, let's start with the way evangelicals often talk about beliefs in terms of discrete "worldviews." A worldview is commonly understood as a holistic way of interpreting the world and our position in it. Worldviews are regularly divided into a number of major headings, such as humanism, Marxism, Islam, biblical Christianity, postmodernism, pragmatism, Darwinism, and so on. This way of understanding belief assumes that we primarily come to belief through conscious, cognitive choice.¹¹ We reason about the world and our experience and draw conclusions that lead us to one of the major worldviews. When this assumption is paired with the claim that "ideas have consequences," the result is that we may assume a great deal about what people believe in the particulars and how they will act if we can "read" their worldview.

Worldviews can be used in different ways. For instance, there is a predictive function of worldview. I was taught that if I met a self-identifying postmodernist, I could expect them to

deny reality because, after all, postmodernism teaches that the binary distinctions between truth and falsehood collapse under inspection. (This is a reductive account of a notoriously hard-to-define philosophy—but it is also the kind of reductive understanding of ideologies I’ve seen taught under the banner of “worldview” studies.) Worldview studies also have an inductive function—if we can observe enough about a person or a cultural work, we can determine which worldview box they fit into. From here, we may compare the secular worldview with the Christian one and see how the former fails. Finally, there’s an explanatory function of worldview. For example, I have seen the following argument made by fellow evangelicals countless times: If we know someone to be a liberal politician and we catch them in a lie, we can *explain* their lie as a natural and logical outgrowth of their belief that truth is a function of power. Whereas when a conservative Christian politician lies, we conclude that the lie was not actually a consequence of their belief but in spite of it. It seems that ideas have consequences, except when they have the wrong ones.

Whatever the merits and demerits of worldview studies, the popular understanding of worldview analysis easily leads to lazy and misguided thinking about how people actually experience and interpret the world.¹² This not a necessary slide, but it is a common one. The very structure of worldview studies pushes us to draw hasty conclusions about actual people. An experiential understanding of worldview would be much more accurate, in which we would need to include everything a person experiences, because a true “world view” is utterly comprehensive and

infinitely detailed and ultimately untraceable. A bad breakup in sixth grade, the death of your father, your favorite band, and your experience as a prematurely bald man will have deep effects on you, just as will your parents' conservative politics and your school's teaching on origins, maybe even more so. Witnessing a relative abuse the welfare system to fund a methamphetamine addiction or having to rely on food stamps to feed your own family for a while can both deeply alter your beliefs about the state's role in providing aid. The way humans view the world is always necessarily embodied, and it includes a perception of reality strongly formed by our past experiences.

Worldviews are composed of all the data we receive in life, and no less. James K. A. Smith has demonstrated that traditional worldview studies overemphasize rational, intentional, and cognitive beliefs over the way habits shape our desires. I'd add that our experience of being is just as formative as how we perceive reality; and liturgy, experience, memories, and even personality are largely ignored by worldview studies. Which means that a true worldview is irreducible to categories. In this sense, Marxism was *only* a worldview for Marx. What we call Marxism is not really a worldview at all but a broad ideology or belief about people, history, and governments. It may or may not have widespread implications for most areas of life, but those implications often will not materialize. Because, while ideas have consequences, they do not *necessarily* have consequences. And they never have the kind of *totalizing* consequences implied by the term *worldview*.

To be fair, some of the best worldview thinkers are aware of these dangers. Where I disagree with them most is on the practical

question of the effectiveness of this method. Whereas worldview thinkers will argue that speaking in terms of the humanist or environmentalist worldview gives us new insight into people and their beliefs, I contend that in practice worldview studies lack explanatory power and often misinterpret people. This is increasingly true today when the fundamental contestedness of all belief and the tendency toward thin belief have conspired to incline us to form eclectic mixes of belief, something we are often quite proud of because it separates us as individuals: I may take a bit of Marxist economics, a conservative view on family and sex and virtues, a modern empirical view of the natural world, a view of nature as raw material for human use, libertarian politics (except on economics), and then undergird it all with a Reformed faith. Would such a worldview be coherent? Probably not, but maybe it makes its own kind of sense to me and how I perceive myself. This means that the language of worldview has increasingly less value. Instead, we ought to speak about general ideologies that individuals hold to varying extents at different times.

How can we hold such a motley collection of perceptions and ideas together without great cognitive dissonance? To some extent, we can't. And we don't. Instead we continually jettison some ideas and adopt others, so there is rarely time for sustained, thorough reflection about what we believe to be true about the world. A shifting sand can never be measured for angle. To whatever extent that we hold these contrary beliefs without troubling dissonance, it is because we feel that there will always be dissonance. That ache in our stomach that we are wrong about something doesn't really disappear, no matter what. Because even

if we somehow found better, more consistent beliefs, we would always feel that external pressure to consider some *other* idea.

When the natural state of mind is the pressing awareness that there's always one more viewpoint to consider, that we *might* be wrong, we grow used to dissonance. No matter what we believe, we will be ignoring some contrary evidence. In the secular age, cognitive dissonance is the normal state of things.

INNER DEPTHS

What then holds us together? What could possibly overcome a perpetual sense that our perception of the world is potentially wrong and needs correction? What would allow us to accept the contestedness of existence? In a response that in some ways echoes René Descartes's beginning quest for certainty, our answer is often a move toward what Charles Taylor calls "inner depths." By this he means the vast, mysterious complexity of our personal psyche: "We might even say that the depths which were previously located in the cosmos, the enchanted world, are now more readily placed within."¹³ When overwhelmed by the infinite iterations of belief that call into question our knowledge and belief, we find the ground to being in our choices. We may not know what is *true*, but we know with certainty that it is our task to *choose* what we believe to be true and that choice will define us publicly. Choice then becomes foregrounded, the choice of the individual.

We may be tempted to conclude that this is the sin of narcissism, and therefore if we can convict people of their selfishness, all these corresponding problems will go away. But Charles Taylor thinks something more than crass egotism is at work.¹⁴ It

may *lead* to narcissism in many cases, but the condition I've just described involves something more fundamental. It is a reflexive way of understanding being in the world.

The secular age turns everything back to the self. During the Middle Ages in the West, you were born in a specific social, economic, religious, gender, political, and commercial position. You had a place within the Great Chain of Being, which led from God all the way down to rocks and dirt. When you came of age, you were not expected to search out your identity, decide which political party to join, or whether to believe in God or which God. Almost without exception, these things were chosen for you.

The modern era stands in stark contrast to this, and the secular age is the culmination of modernity. Together, secularism and the technology of distraction work to place the telos of belief in the individual person. That is, the end purpose of beliefs, the future goal we devote ourselves to achieving, is the fulfillment of the self. We choose the beliefs that comprise our particular worldview (here the word is applicable) based principally on what will grant us a sense of personal fulfillment or self-actualization. Thus, to make decisions on what we will think about the world, we need to look inward. What will help me make sense of the world? What will give me purpose? What will make me happy?

STUCK IN AN IMMANENT FRAME

Framing all these new conceptions of belief is the background sense that we live in an entirely natural, material, explicable, measurable, and comprehensible world. Taylor calls this the immanent frame: "The buffered identity of the disciplined individual moves

in a constructed social space, where instrumental rationality is a key value, and time is pervasively secular. All of this makes up what I want to call the ‘immanent frame.’”¹⁵ The immanent frame comes in different forms. It is possible to feel that we live in a closed immanent frame, which means that there is no higher, transcendent reality. The material universe we live in is all there is and ever will be. But it is also possible to experience life within an *open* immanent frame.¹⁶ By this Taylor means that although our daily experience isn’t imbued with the supernatural, we believe that some transcendent being exists and that he can break into our world at certain times and places. What is notable here is that even when the immanent frame is open, it is still the immanent frame.

To get a sense of what this look likes, consider for a minute what it is like to attend church on Sunday. You are awakened by an alarm on your cell phone, an amazing piece of technology and testament to the power of human mastery over the natural world. You eat eggs for breakfast. They come, almost miraculously, clean, large, and white in a carton that has been inspected by some government agency to ensure it is safe. The carton lists the nutritional composition of the eggs along with a few words about their health benefits. Everything has been considered. You get dressed in clothes that you bought ready-made. You drive to church in a glistening, energy-efficient sedan with advanced safety features, and glance occasionally at the cars next to you, in which people are completely preoccupied and content with the technology around them. As you drive through the city, everything you see appears as a work of human achievement: stoplights, fire trucks, businesses, freeway overpasses, and skyscrapers. By chance you see a bluebird, and you

immediately reflect back on a recent episode of an animal show you watched that featured the bluebird. “Bluebirds are part of the thrush family,” you say to no one in particular. At church, you sing songs praising God’s provision, his mercies, his creation, and his grace. But everything you experienced on the way to church, from the food you ate to the beauty you witnessed, testified to humanity’s ingenuity and mastery of the world. Your *experience* of the world was a testament to humanity, not God, because everything in your experience conditioned you to look to this world and its physical laws. It all makes sense as a self-sufficient immanent world, even though you know that Jesus is our Creator and Sustainer. And so, we experience life in the immanent frame even as we confess that it is open to an outside, transcendent force.

While it’s possible for us to believe in a transcendent God and still live within the immanent frame, it isn’t easy. In fact, it’s becoming increasingly difficult. As the previous example illustrated, providence, mystery, contingency, uncertainty, wonder, and randomness have been systematically, bureaucratically, technologically, and economically drained from our world. Living in such a world makes it difficult to conceive of being outside the immanent frame. Most of us do not rely on good weather for our livelihood or sustenance. We struggle to recognize beauty in the natural world because it has been so thoroughly conquered, and wonder is quashed through scientific language and nature-channel explainers. We are masters of our health, our safety, our morality, our time, and our success. Living in this kind of society, it is hard to *sense* the transcendent. It seems superfluous. This situation is so pervasive that when we bear witness to our faith

to a non-Christian, they may imagine the faith as just another belief system within a closed immanent frame.

And herein lies another barrier to belief. The Christian faith requires a belief in a risen and living Savior, one who lived in this immanent world and transcended it both on the cross and in his ascension. But for our neighbors, the experience of modern life is something like what Peter described in 2 Peter 3:4: “They will say, ‘Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation.’” The world simply does not feel like a place where the supernatural intervenes. The cognitive barrier facing us is, How do we speak to people who feel that things are continuing as they have from the beginning? Who believe that the divine doesn’t interrupt our lives and there will be no second coming to interrupt this march of mechanical time. Our witness must work to disrupt the normative experience of life in a closed immanent frame.

CONCLUSION

Combining Taylor’s understanding of secularism with the technological culture described in chapter one, we may draw some startling conclusions. First, *how* we believe is determined by how we articulate our personal identification with a belief. There is less and less separation between believing something and publicly identifying with that belief. Second, *why* we believe is determined by the ability of a set of beliefs to give us a sense of fullness or the *promise* of fullness. Third, *what* we believe is determined not by coherence or correspondence to truth but by expediency.

Fourth, *when* we discuss our beliefs, in a sense we are able to gamble both more and less than people in similar positions in premodern worlds. We gamble more in the sense that we are aware that everything is contested and so we *expect* our beliefs to be publicly challenged, and we freely offer them up for debate. But we gamble less in the sense that these beliefs are thin and lightly held. Regardless of the course of the debate, our lives will not *fundamentally* change.

Our path to fullness is determined internally. If we happen to adopt a path taught by a religion, it is only because we have chosen to, not because we are compelled to by an external authority. As Taylor notes, “For many people today, to set aside their own path in order to conform to some external authority just doesn’t seem comprehensible as a form of spiritual life.”¹⁷ Our journey may involve us wearing various “hats of belief,” but the journey itself lasts as long as we do, and so our choices constitute the form our journey takes, but perhaps little else.

The implications of all this for evangelism and witness bearing are vast. What we intend to be a persuasive proclamation of the gospel may instead be interpreted by our neighbor as an expression of our identity through argument, just like any other dialogue in modern culture. Our conversation isn’t *really* about someone named Jesus Christ who was the Son of God and who died for our sins; it is about you publicly defining yourself as a Christian through debate because it gives you a certain sense of personal fulfillment and because of your need to promote that definition. I may try on Christianity like I try on styles of clothes or beliefs, but the ultimate focus of this conversation is not an external being who

loves me but my own search for fullness. The challenge, in other words, is that rational arguments for the existence of God, scholarly defenses of the reliability of Scripture, or even personal testimonies of the effectiveness of Christianity in transforming our lives all seamlessly fit into the fluid market of ideas within secularism. Secularism can shape-shift, absorbing counternarratives with ease, since it assumes that every belief is endlessly contested.

This calls for a different way of bearing witness to the gospel of Christ. We need a method of living in light of the gospel that unsettles people from their stupor. The way we communicate our faith must puncture the buzz of modern life, the thinness of belief, the closed immanent frame, and our attempts at crafting identities and narratives of our own.

Talking about Christ's death and resurrection for our sins is categorically different than talking about the importance of conservative politics or the pleasure of some musical album. But if we are born into a culture that sees belief as first a performance of identity and thus something we can easily slip on or off, then it's only natural that when we share the gospel we will be inclined to treat it as a performance of our identity.