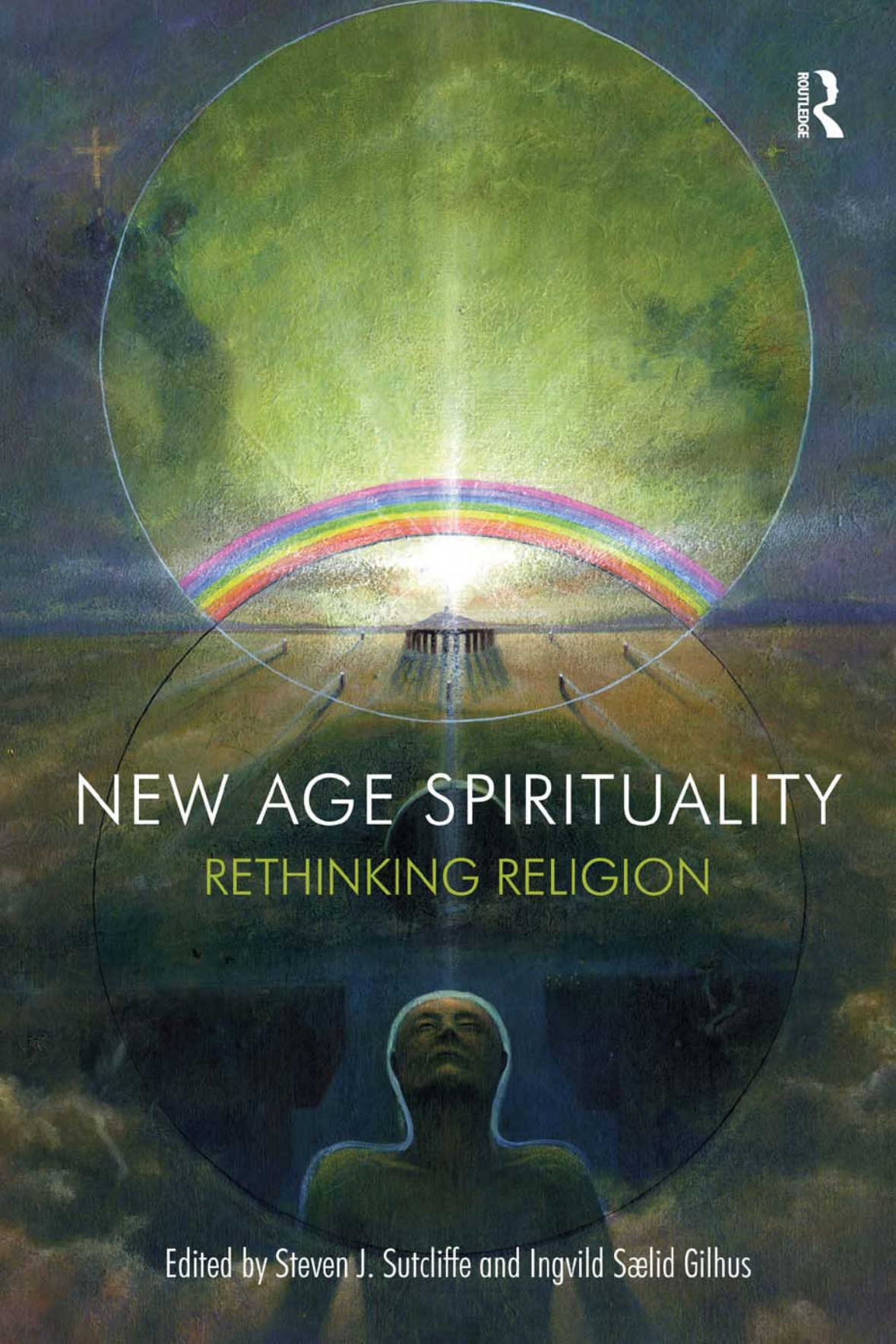
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4. ON TRANSGRESSING THE SECULAR: SPIRITUALITIES OF LIFE, IDEALISM, VITALISM

Paul Heelas

The context of this chapter is set by two major schools of thought. On the one hand, it is argued that the secularization of Christianity ends with the secular, a condition that is *self-sufficient*. Émile Durkheim ([1912] 1971), Steve Bruce (2002) and David Voas (2009) are among those who argue the case. On the other, there is the argument that the secular is *insufficient.* Insufficiencies generate transgressions of the secular condition; movement into the non-secular. A hegemonic secular age is but a pipe dream. Among others, Georg Simmel (1997), Peter Berger (1999) and Charles Taylor (2007) argue along these lines.

The incontestable marginalization of Christianity means that it is now possible to test the idea that the outcome of the decline of Christianity is a self-sufficient secular age; and the opposite idea that insufficiencies of the secular generate sufficient transgression to prevent the advent of a secular age; and to promote "alternative" spiritualities.

Rather than providing a review of all the evidence that counts for and against the two arguments, the aim of this chapter is to strike at the very heart of the idea of self-sufficiency. In face of the evidence supporting the self-sufficiency argument – most noticeably the collapse of Christianity and corresponding movement into the secular – the aim is pursued by arguing that secular sources of motivation are currently in operation. The *transgressive thesis* maintains that the secular – the very state of affairs that scholars like Durkheim and Bruce hold to be self-sufficient – is frequently believed to be insufficient. The secular is not enough; not able to cope on its own. Accordingly, it generates transgression; movement out of itself to the beyond: quite often towards, or into, "New Age" inner-life spirituality.[1]

Temporal and geographical contexts

The temporal context lies with what is taking place today; or in the recent past. The best way of criticizing the self-sufficiency argument is to find evidence of transgression at a time when – according to the self-sufficiency

argument – it should not be taking place: that is, when certain countries are allegedly entering, or have already entered, a secular age. Geographically speaking, attention is limited to northern quarters of the European Union (EU): an area running from the Baltic to the Atlantic.

THE SELF-SUFFICIENCY ARGUMENT

Around a hundred years ago, Émile Durkheim observed that "The old ideals and divine figures that embodied them are in the process of dying". Durkheim continues with an exemplary formulation of the self-sufficiency argument:

> [T]here is one idea that it is necessary for us to get used to: it is that humanity is deserted on this earth, left to its capacities alone and able to rely upon itself to direct its fate. As one moves forward through history, this idea only gains ground; I doubt, therefore, that it will lose any in the future. At first glance, the idea can upset the man who is accustomed to depicting as extra-human the powers that he leans on. But if he comes to accept that humanity by itself can provide him with the support that he needs, is there not in this perspective something highly reassuring, since the resources that he is calling for are found thus placed on his doorstep and, as it were, right at hand?
>
> (Quoted in Christiano 2007: 50)

As Christianity – the "old ideals and divine figures" – fades away, "humanity" takes over; and is set for the future.

Today, the argument runs, that great hope of the secular wing of the Enlightenment – that the secular is self-sufficient – has more or less come to pass. The secular is on the brink of becoming hegemonic. The argument is that the secular is self-sufficient, self-sustaining, self-containing, self-limiting – able to roll on into the future within its own frame of endeavour. Slogans come to mind: "The Triumph of the Secular"; "The Defeat of the Transgressive"; "The Collapse of Transgression"; "The Death of Secularization", to emphasize the point that secularization ends when more or less everything is secular.

Charles Taylor (2007: 514) refers to the "shattering" decline of Christendom. Many scholars have inferred that this decline entails that the most potent form of transgression has become history. The secular is far enough along the road of undermining all that transgresses it – the major transgressor of the past, Christianity, the more recent upstart, "New Age spirituality" – for it to be clear that religion and/or spirituality are not required. The fact that the secular does not generate sources of motivation orientated towards the beyond is held to demonstrate that there is no longer any need

for religion. Sacralization – movement towards the sacred – also belongs to the past. The secular, itself, is quite up to the job of handling its own insufficiencies, with no apparent loss for social processes and personal well-being. The long-standing argument, advanced by propagators or defenders of faith – that social and personal life will collapse into the anarchical, antinomian, anomic, the alienated, the "demoralized", the "moral blindness" of a recent volume by that arch-pessimist, Zygmunt Bauman (Bauman & Donsiks 2013) – is false. Strongly secularized countries, like Sweden, attest to the flourishing of social and personal life – beyond the sacred. It is perfectly possible to live a worthwhile, fulfilling life without Christianity, or any other form of religion or spirituality. People appreciate that they are far better off without the compensatory illusions, delusions, irrationality or non-rationality of religion/spirituality. Nothing should stand in the way of secular potential. The cultivation of the valued life is grounded in the secular itself. The route to human flourishing lies with the human of the secular order. The secular is the end point for all that lies ahead. "Faith in the secular" is the cry for the future.

Richard Dawkins's *Unweaving the Rainbow* (2006) is a paean for secular humanism; for science as poetry, the ground of purpose in life, meaning and beauty. Although the following is from an interview with an apostate living in North America, it is included here because it serves as such an excellent formulation of "the spirit of Dawkins":

> I must tell you when I let go of religion, one thing I felt was relief. I feel a profound sense of relief. I don't have any more unanswered questions. I know there's science to explain it and everything makes sense to me now. I can just live my life knowing I have control of my life. There is no afterlife. This is it, make the most of it and that's why I feel a great sense of relief.
>
> (Zuckerman 2012: 13)

The faithful secularist, we might say.

THE INSUFFICIENCY THESIS

The insufficiency thesis maintains that the secular condition is not up to the task of serving as a self-contained home for humans. With the fading of Christianity in northern Europe, ever more people realize that the secular is not enough. The greater the extent to which "the human condition" is framed in terms of the secular life-world, the greater the likelihood of the magnification of the insufficiencies of the secular: prompting transgression. Rather than the outcome of the collapse of Christianity in northern Europe (and elsewhere, in countries like Australia) taking the form of an enduring condition of secularity, people have experiences, apprehensions,

comprehensions or outlooks that transgress the secular condition itself. And having lost faith with Christianity, transgressions tend to take a non-Christian direction.

Georg Simmel illustrates the thesis:

> The Enlightenment would be utter blindness if it were to assume that with a few centuries of criticism of the content of religion, it could destroy the yearning that has dominated humanity from the first stirrings of its history. … Yet this very point illustrates the whole predicament in which an enormous proportion of civilized humanity finds itself today: it is beset once more with powerful needs, although it sees the historical and the sole existing means of fulfilling these needs as mere fantasy. (Simmel 1997: 9)

Like Durkheim, Simmel draws attention to the collapse of Christian tradition. Unlike Durkheim, he argues that the secularization of Christianity does not eradicate "powerful needs". "Yearning" demonstrates that the secular, alone, is not enough. "Yearning" prompts transgression: to that which lies beyond failed Christian orthodoxy, to that which would now be called "New Age" spirituality (*ibid*.: 18–19).

More recently, two highly influential figures – Charles Taylor (2007) and Peter Berger – are among those who have provided powerful statements of the insufficiency argument. In the words of the latter:

> The religious impulse, the quest for meaning that transcends the restricted space of empirical existence in this world, has been a perennial feature of humanity. This is not a theological statement but an anthropological one – an agnostic or even an atheist philosopher may well agree with it. It would take something close to a mutation of the species to extinguish this impulse for good. (Berger 1999: 13)

All in all, secular motivations, the secular transgressing itself, the secular acting to defeat itself, entail that the very idea of a secular age is an illusion. Slogans run, "The Limits of Secularization"; "The Failure of Secular Enclosure".

ON TESTING THE TRANSGRESSIVE THESIS: PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

Bruce's thought experiment

With customary agility of mind, Steve Bruce (2002) has conjured up the idea of a *tabula rasa*, a human condition absolutely devoid of religion and/or spirituality. Bruce's prediction is that people would stay "blank". My

conjecture is that people would start to move beyond. Since the condition they move out of is devoid of religion and/or spirituality – and so of all non-secular sources of motivation – movement can only be generated by the secular. Using a term with a long history in anthropology and developmental psychology, something akin to "independent invention" takes place (see Segal 1999 on uses of this term).

The Holy Grail is to implement the thought experiment of the *tabula rasa* in the everyday world. As with all quests for the Holy Grail, though, the ideal is unattainable. In the everyday world, the *tabula rasa* does not exist. In some form or another, to some extent or another, religion and/or spirituality is present in every culture: not just among believers, but also among those secularists who have heard of "heaven" (and who hasn't?), who see religion/spirituality on the news, or who remember past events.

Nevertheless, it is worth pursuing a research route that is as close as possible to the Holy Grail. The realistic aim is to seek out the best approximation to the thought experiment, a context where motivation to the non-secular is most likely to be generated by the secular itself; where non-secular motivations are as minimal as possible.

Conditions for testing the transgressive thesis

Charles Taylor (2007: 530) argues that "the longing for and response to a more-than-immanent perspective … remains a strong *independent* source of motivation in modernity" (emphasis added). In context, it is clear that "independent" refers to the idea that sources of motivation lie with the "immanent" of the secular itself (including the "wearing out" of utopian secularity, with the attendant sense of "there is something more"; *ibid.*: 533): not with motivations supplied by faith in the sacred, expressed *via* religion and/or spirituality.

What is involved in testing the idea that "independent" (that is secular) sources of motivation are at work today? All that has to be done to test the transgressive thesis is to ascertain whether or not significant numbers of thorough-bred secularists move out of, away from, the secular to the non secular. A straightforward enough matter, it might be thought. What makes it more complicated, though, is demonstrating that transgressions are due to the secular *alone*: *without* any non-secular motivations; that is, without motivations that are not due to the secular world.

Minimal "lures" To minimize the possibility of transgression being due to non-secular motivations, the aim is to find a culture where the "lure effect" is least likely to be in evidence. The lure effect takes place when people are prompted to move out of the secular by what faith formulations, such as literature espousing cosmic consciousness or the spirituality of nature, have to offer or promise. Secular motivations might well play a role in movement of this kind: for example, generating existential disquiet to encourage

transgression. But the allures of non-secular cultural "learning models" (as social psychologists call them) do not serve as secular motivations, alone.

Thinking of non-secular lures that are secular for the secularist, consider those ideas – like "some sort of spirit or life force that pervades all that lives" – which might be non-secular for those who believe in them, but which are secular for those who (needless to say) do not believe in them. On the one hand, lures have a non-secular component. They contain promises pertaining to "the beyond". On the other hand, promises of lures (say "eternal life") are understood in secular mode ("would that I could live forever"): which means that lures serve as secular motivations. To play it safe, the transgressive thesis is best tested when lures, of whatever kind, are least likely to be operative: thereby minimizing the difficulty (or impossibility) of disentangling motivations that are at one and same time secular and non-secular. This means finding a context (country, culture, etc.) where there is the least possible faith in religion and/or spirituality; where it is is most likely that people are indifferent to, and/or ignorant of, religion and/or spirituality; where religion and/or spirituality are unpopular (perhaps treated as a cultural failure); where aversion of any variety is in evidence.

Christianity Given the ubiquitous presence of Christianity in northern Europe, what role does it play as a non-secular source of transgression? Christianity is certainly transgressive. As a transgressive faith formation, which transcends the secular, Christianity appears to support the insufficiency argument. By and large, though, Christianity does not provide the kind of evidence required to support the transgressive thesis. Since secular sources of motivation, to Christianity, are of little significance today, the tradition does not strike at the very heart of the self-sufficiency argument.

Whatever the role that transgression from the secular might have played in the past, currently very few become Christian by virtue of secular impulses alone; and, for that matter, very few are lured. "Transgression" is bound up with faith socialization. Rather than providing evidence of secular motivation, non-secular motivations are at work. People "become" Christians by being socialized with/in faith. Motivations are primarily *intra-religious*: that is, they come from within Christianity. People are "made" in faith for reasons of faith (Crockett & Voas 2006: 577–8).

This said, it is true that insufficiencies of the secular enter the picture. Faith socialization teaches the value of staying transgressed in face of the insufficiencies of the secular, thereby sustaining the transgressive value of Christianity. Or consider movement from those wings of Christianity, where the sacrality of human life is to the fore, to "New Age" spirituality: *intra-spiritual* movement which, too, is partly sustained by negative evaluations of the secular; an aversion to giving up the sacred for sake of the secular alone. In both cases, the insufficiency argument is supported; but not the transgressive thesis.

Overall, the way in which Christianity functions, today, simplifies the task of testing the transgressive thesis. To a large extent, Christianity does not enter the picture.

TESTING THE TRANSGRESSIVE/INSUFFICIENCY THESIS

Within the confines of the EU, testing is best implemented where there is as "blank" a sheet as is possible, prior, that is, to any transgression that might take place. We have to look for the nation with the most "blank" population: people who might know about religion/spirituality but who are not attracted; people who treat religion/spirituality as secular; people with minimal religion/spirituality at home or school; a culture with minimal religion/spirituality. The "blankest" population is most likely to be found in the most secular nation.

From a thought experiment to cultural engineering: Estonia

Of all the current EU nations, Estonia best fits the bill. The closest approximation to a *tabula rasa* occurred during the years leading up to 1991. In that year, Estonia obtained independence from the Soviet Union. This marked the close of an exercise in social engineering. The independent variable lay with Soviet atheism; the dependent variable with religious tradition in Estonia. To all intents and purposes, the cultural "experiment" worked. In the words of Estonian academic Lea Altnurme (2011: 77), during the period of Soviet occupation (1940–91) "Estonia became strongly secularized, judging by the loss of influence of the traditional churches, both in society in general and in the lives of individuals".

1991 provides an excellent base line for determining whether or not secular sources of transgressive motivation would make a mark; and with minimal possibility of being embroiled by lure factors – even the lures of what people take to be secular religion and/or spirituality in the culture. So what has happened since that date? Writing of the "great changes" that have taken place in the country, Alturme refers to "a noticeable tendency toward church-free spirituality" (*ibid*.: 80); to the fact that "in the circumstances of religious freedom that followed the restoration of Estonia independence (in 1991) the number of people professing individual spirituality increased significantly" (*ibid.*: 85); and to the fact that "fundamental changes are [have been] taking place in Estonia. A new monistic/holistic paradigm has taken its place alongside the monotheistic/dualistic paradigm that has dominated for centuries as the foundation of Christianity" (*ibid.*: 92).

By 2005, Eurobarometer could report that 54 per cent of Estonians "believe there is some sort of spirit or life force", with just 16 per cent maintaining that they "believe there is a God" (Altnurme 2011; Eurobarometer 2005; Heelas forthcoming a). The former is the highest percentage in the EU; the latter the lowest.[2]

Those born between 1960 and 1980, respectively aged between 31 and 11 in 1991, provide the closest approximation to a blank sheet. And these people are precisely those whom Altnurme reports to be most New Age inclined at the time of her research (around 2000). The unintended consequence of the cultural engineering of the Soviet colonialists is to have triggered transgression. Out of something very close to a *tabula rasa*, many of the younger of the Soviet era, it seems, have moved on to adopt New Age "mythic patterns" (Altnurme 2011: 77).[3]

Elsewhere in northern Europe

Elsewhere in the EU countries of northern Europe, there is a greater chance that transgressions are (partly) due to spiritual–religious presence in the culture. This said, Sweden provides the next best opportunity for looking for evidence of the secular transgressing itself.[4]

Sweden's reputation as a secular nation can be traced back to at least the 1970s. During that decade, "church attendance and popularity were at a low ebb" (Scott 1988: 575); and it is virtually certain that "New Age" spirituality was only beginning to develop in the country. By 1990, though, RAMP (the Religious and Moral Pluralism survey) found that 36 per cent of Swedes selected a questionnaire option stating, "I believe that God is something within each person, rather than something out there": the third highest percentage of the eleven European countries surveyed by RAMP; the second highest in northern Europe, after Great Britain. (Unfortunately, Estonia was not included in the RAMP study.) Comparing the percentages of "God within" respondents with those selecting the questionnaire option "I believe in a God with whom I can have a personal relationship", Sweden comes top of the rankings: with "God within" at 36 per cent and "personal God" at 16 per cent, the "God within" percentage is 18 per cent higher than that for "personal God". Eurobarometer (2005), it can be added, reports that 53 per cent of Swedes agree with a "I believe there is some sort of spirit or life force" option: compared with the 23 per cent who select "I believe there is a God". It is also noteworthy that the percentage of Swedes participating in holistic, "New Age" mind–body–spirit practices is almost certainly higher than in countries like Britain (Heelas forthcoming a; and see Heelas & Houtman 2009 for discussion).

It looks as though up to 36 per cent of Swedes have transgressed in favour of "God within"; and/or up to 53 per cent in favour of "some sort of spirit or life force". And with "God within" formulations being relatively rare in the national culture, it very much looks as though transgressions of the kind under consideration are largely due to "independent invention". Unfortunately, there is not any longitudinal data on "God within"; and I have not been able to track down longitudinal data for "spirit or life force". In all likelihood, however, the greater the number of Swedes who have lost faith in the sacred of Christianity, the greater the scale of the transgressive.

Beyond Sweden and Estonia, evidence of secular transgression can be teased out from the kind of material drawn upon above, together with data on Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM), "spiritual but not religious" research, and the study of spiritual/religious experiences (see Heelas forthcoming a). From a comparative perspective, Dick Houtman and Stef Aupers (2007: 305) draw on World Values Survey longitudinal data, from fourteen countries (nine in northern Europe), to explore the statistical connection between the "weakening of the grip of tradition" (not least religious) and "a spiritual turn to the deeper layers of the self". Their main finding – that "the sacred becomes more and more conceived of as immanent and residing in the deeper layers of the self" (*ibid.:* 315) – supports the transgressive thesis. From a qualitative perspective, Abby Day's (2012) excellent essay illustrates the kind of approach which is most likely to elicit evidence of transgression. She sets the scene by citing a major transgressive theorist, Max Weber:

> … the metaphysical needs of the human mind as it is driven to reflect on ethical and religious questions, driven not by material need but by an *inner compulsion* to understand the world as a meaningful cosmos and to take up a position toward it.
>
> (Weber 1922: 117; emphasis added)

Referring to her own research, Day writes that she "designed questions to begin discussion about what may or may not be an "inner compulsion" (Day 2012: 444). So long as discussions with people are carried out on a relatively systematic basis (female and male, from rich to poor, from conservative to liberal, etc.), Day is surely pointing the way to more sophisticated qualitative-cum-representational inquiry of the transgressive (or not).

As things stand, a great deal of material is available for the theorist of transgression. It is found in virtually every source one can think of: academic literature, popular magazines, newspapers, novels, music, and so forth. My own favourite is the autobiography. And the material covers everything, from the most tentative of transgressions (perhaps indicating the authoritative, or demanding, nature of the "hold" of the secular) to the most arresting. To illustrate the former, by drawing on Phil Zuckerman's discussion with Morten, a Danish man aged 55 from Aarhus, about belief in God:

> Uh-h-h … I don't know. I don't know if … well … I haven't had … I don't think I have experienced God, especially. But at the other hand, I have also … if everything is just a matter of – if everything is just by chance, well, then, there may be something. But I don't know what it is and I haven't any idea of what it would be.
>
> (Zuckerman 2012: 15)

And to illustrate the latter, little could be more arresting than Bertrand Russell's autobiographical account of what he encountered when he finally moved beyond the world of his secularity: "In the union of love I have seen, in a mystic miniature, the prefiguring vision of the heaven that saints and poets have imagined. This is what I sought, and though it might seem too good for human life this is what – at last – I have found" (Russell 1975: 9).

There is a wealth of wonderful material. If only there were ethnographic studies of a kind that provided *representative* portrayals of the cultural, let alone addressed the easier task of systematically exploring more particular modes of life (among the retired, for example).

THE MEANING OF TRANSGRESSION

What does it mean to transgress the secular? This simple question raises immensely complicated issues; issues which remain unresolved. What is the secular? What is it to refer to "beyond" the secular?

Discussing the ideal of "a perfect society", and arguing that "it is towards the realization of this that all religions strive", one of the most significant passages of the "Conclusion" of Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* continues:

> But that society is not an empirical fact, definite and observable; it is a fancy, a dream with which men have lightened their sufferings, *but in which they have never really lived*. It is merely an idea which comes to express our more or less obscure aspirations towards the good, the beautiful and the ideal.
>
> (Durkheim [1912] 1971: 420; emphasis added)

The perfect society, that is the utopia of the sacred, has never existed in this world; and never will. The world in which all humans have to live is too imperfect.

In Durkheim's sense, in the "Conclusion" of *The Elementary Forms*, the sacred is the perfect. And the secular is the imperfect. Without going into all the evidence which supports this distinction, it seems to be safe to equate movement from the secular to the sacred with movement from the imperfect to the perfect. However, it would be silly to assume that every movement from the secular to the non-secular is towards or "into" the sacred. Consider the following extract from an interview with a Dane:

> I don't really think so much about it [God]. So I wouldn't know right now how to define it. But I believe in something. … Well … there's *more between heaven and earth* … you know? And there's

> more than I can understand, but I don't think it's a big father sitting up in the sky watching us and helping us, or whatever. But there's something … maybe … I don't know.
>
> (Zuckerman 2012: 15; emphasis added)

It is virtually inconceivable that this interviewee is searching for *the* perfect. Yet to a degree, transgression is in evidence. So what is it to? As the interviewee observes, it is to a "more"; a term, it can be noted, favoured by William James ([1902] 1974).

The "more", "something there", "something more": terms that are frequently encountered among those who – to varying degrees – transgress the secular. And it is reasonable to suppose that terms like "the more" often refer to the less-than-perfect. (Think of the interviewee's "*between heaven* and earth".) When transgression is to the less than perfect – to the imperfect beyond the imperfect of the secular – a tricky issue emerges: distinguishing between the imperfect of the secular and the less than perfect of the beyond. Suffice it to say, for present purposes, that those who favour terms like "the more" clearly have a distinction in mind: between everyday life (the secular) and that which lies beyond. It could well be said, at this point, that participant understanding trumps attempts at analytical clarity and simplicity of the secular–sacred/imperfect–perfect contrast. Whatever, distinctions there are: which justifies the notion of transgression.[5]

ON EXPLAINING TRANSGRESSION

What is it about the secular condition that can generate transgression? Of all the explanations which could be offered, one lies with the simple idea that ideals, in the context of the imperfect of the secular, play the pivotal role. Durkheim's idealism, in the sense of prioritizing the significance of ideals for sociocultural life, inspires his thesis. For Durkheim ([1912] 1971: 421), the process of "idealization" explains the shift from the "world" of the imperfect of the secular to the "world" of the perfect of the sacred. Belonging to the secular, ideals are imperfect. The fulfilment of secular ideals takes place through the ritual process. Ideals come true. Hence the sense of the sacred (*ibid.*: 420–27).

Applying Durkheim's approach to the generation of transgression in northern Europe today, the key lies with the transgressive power of ideals. In the secular world of the imperfect, ideals stand out as beacons of hope and promise. To be seriously engaged with secular ideals *is* to believe in, and pursue, the very best that the secular has to offer. Those engaged look to the future and the past. At one and the same time, their ideals promise and fail. People look forward to promises coming true. However, since secular ideals are imperfect, they are never "truly" fulfilled. Movement towards the

realization of "wholeness" of being, "true" love, the perfect car, or "ultimate" satisfaction, is assailed by the accidents, contingencies, disruptions, distractions, flaws of everyday life. And given failure to fulfil, those engaged with pursuing any particular ideal look to the past: to reflect on their progress in achieving their ideals, what has held them back, what needs to be done to get *on* in the world. The sense of "the promised to come" is enhanced by the very failure of ideals. In face of failure, it becomes even more important to overcome adversity by following ideals "through" until they are achieved. And ideals throw the imperfections of the secular into relief. Relative to ideals, deprivation is cast in the spotlight. Relative to failure, the prospect of living with the imperfections of the secular becomes yet more fraught. Motivation to fulfil ideals is enhanced.

Since secular ideals cannot be fulfilled within the secular condition, one solution is to move "beyond". Secular ideals "point" out the beyond (in both senses of the word). Secular ideals prompt thoughts like "well, there must be something more to the ideal", a something that will bring about completion. The point is brought out by the secular-inclined "spiritual" humanist, Julian Huxley, in his ill-neglected *Religion Without Revelation* (1941: 25), where he writes of "the *infinity* of the ideal", as opposed to "the finite actuality of existence" (emphasis added). Secular ideals – like "true" love – are limitless. And so they can serve as "avenues" to the beyond (Taylor 2007: 533); to the "even better" ideal, perhaps the perfect of utopia itself. And why not? After all, secular ideals frequently proclaim, imply or image the perfect; contemporary "ideal-ogies" of human flourishing, including those embedded in consumptive and productive capitalism, and the culture of romance, call for completion. Progressivist personal culture constantly draws attention to the "something more to life"; to what Taylor (*ibid.*: 509) calls "the 'Peggy Lee' response" to the "inadequacy" of the secular (see also *ibid.*: 533). The "more": so "where is it?; how can I find it?; how can I experience it? I long for it, yearn for it" (see Heelas 2012a for further discussion).

On the embedded operation of ideals

The Romantic influenced Sapir-Whorf hypothesis – in its strongest form, the idea that language determines thought – remains too controversial to take fully on board. (See J. B. Carroll 1956 on the hypothesis itself.) Nevertheless, it is reasonable to suppose that the "graded" language use, so essential for the functioning of everyday – secular – life, plays an important role in guiding movement towards the beyond; and encourages it. Continua, like "impoverished, poor, getting by, reasonably well-off, wealthy, mega-wealthy", are embedded in language. Calibrated for life in the secular, language gradations point to their termini: not "mega-wealthy"; rather "infinitely wealthy". Ideals belong to, are constitutive of, gradations. And the imagination follows the dynamic "logic" of gradation. "Grades" stir the imagination: the finite exists; so something must be infinite, for instance. Guided by language use, the

imagination is transported to the beyond; to what is pointed to by secular ideals. And since grades are composed of "motivational formations", they are bound up with desire, longing, yearning. Grades encapsulate hierarchies of cultural value: from the negatively evaluated of the imperfect to the most positive of the perfect. Each grade (like "wealthy") directs feeling-attention to the one above it ("fabulously wealthy"). The momentum of continua, the desire to pursue "higher grades" readily flows over into the beyond: sometimes as a pipe dream; in "New Age" prosperity spirituality, for example, as the experienced/actual reality of "infinite" wealth.

Recalling Bruce's *tabula rasa*, it is virtually inconceivable that people do not "think beyond"; minimally, in their cognitive imagination. It is virtually inconceivable that people are unaware of "the finite" (in some sense or another), without this promoting them to think of "the infinite" (in some sense or another). The die-hard atheist included, virtually everyone is transgressive in this sense. For some – atheists, the indifferent, "casual" agnostics – "thinking beyond" is of little or no value. To various degrees, and in various ways, though, it is highly likely that the majority of people are more attentive to, more feeling-full about, where language grades could lead.

On some trajectories of ideals

To really *feel* the ideal, to really *sense* that the secular cannot provide fulfilment: it is not surprising that so many "follow" their ideals into the beyond. Accordingly, more needs to be said about ideals at work; how ideals link up with various kinds of transgression. Unless I am very much mistaken, though, the sociology of ideals is not exactly flourishing. In northern Europe, there is little systematic evidence of the connections between particular secular circumstances and particular *beacons of promise*, as secular ideals can be called. Neither is there much systematic evidence bearing on the possibility of recurrent links between relatively specific ideals and ways of signally moving beyond the imperfect secular: for example, between particular ideals and expression of "God within and not without".

Nevertheless, it is possible to illustrate trajectories in action. Consider *health*. The secular context is concern about health. The language gradation runs through illness, somewhat better, normal health, better than normal, top of the world, to perfect health. The beacon is the cessation of illness, the best possible health, becoming as healthy as absolutely possible, experiencing health incarnate. Movement beyond is most likely to be to spiritual CAM. Or consider the "*only connect*" of humanist E. M. Forster. The secular context is provided by a sense of division or separation: the gulf between the "ego" of the "I" and everything else (a theme vividly conveyed by Sam Harris 2005); all that is implied by notions like "atomized", differentiated, "fragmented", "alienated", "homelessness", "anomie". The gradation runs from the divided, the divisive, through to engaging as much as possible, being "truly" engaged; or through to "utterly" absorbed; to the perfect

relationality of "true" love. Resonating with the Neo-Platonic, the beacon shines with "unity", "union", "harmony", "balance", "integration". Movement could well be to spiritual yoga or akin. To give one more illustration, consider *the full*. The secular context is provided by feeling empty, feeling nothing, feeling "unfinished", as portrayed by Theodore Roszak in his *Unfinished Animal* (1975). The beacon signals "completion", "the complete", "whole", "finished", "the finish", "being all that one can be", "the ideal man" as Schiller put it. Movement is probably to those numerous practices which promise (Nietzschian) expansion of "life"; or to apprehensions-cum-comprehensions of the holistic, or cosmic, variety.

Further considerations on motivations of transgression

Three especially significant issues are raised by the "ideals approach". The first is explaining why by no means all secularists come to transgress. An obvious answer is that those who do not transgress are those "held" by the secular to a greater extent than, or in different ways to, those who "move on". People could be held back by being deeply absorbed in the secular, most obviously by consumer culture; or by strong faith in critical reason. The second is the closely related task of explaining why the significance of movement beyond varies so much. Relatively few follow their ideals right through to where they come true: as sacred. Why is this? Why are many more transgressors content with relatively minor "infringements"? An answer which addresses both these questions is that many are content with minor transgressions *until* their sense of the worthwhile is undermined. People remain content with the transgressive that belongs to a kind of a "waiting room": until, that is, they are aroused to go "further"; are aroused by the intrusion of circumstances that undermine the prospect of fulfilling ideals of the worthwhile within the secular. To illustrate: the ideal of vibrant family life; the emptying of the home (offspring going to university; divorce); then the mother or father, already "spiritual" in a subdued, "in the waiting" sense, taking up mind–body–spirit practices (see Heelas 2012a on the notion of the waiting room; and see also Heelas 2012b, 2012c.)

Vitalism The third issue raised by the ideals approach concerns its relationship with endogenous explanations. On first sight, endogenous theorizing – seeking to explain sources of transgression by reference to natural causes belonging to the human itself – is by no means the same as attributing sources of transgression to ideals, where transgression is "natural" in that it is motivated by ideals that belong to the very nature of the sociocultural itself. However, it is perfectly possible to combine the two: the endogenous of the intrinsic vitality of life (the primal sense of being alive) plus the exogenous of sociocultural ideals (required for *human* being).

In an illuminating discussion of endogenous approaches, Malcolm Hamilton (2012: 523) writes, "If man is an animal religiosum this suggests

that religion is rooted in evolved *cognitive and emotional* structures of the human brain and mind" (emphasis added). Although cognitive processes might play a role in stimulating, or guiding, transgression, my very strong hunch is that the generative thrust of the endogenous primarily lies with the sense of inner vitality: with passions of the heart, energized feeling, Byronic sensation, emotionality, potency, impulse, pulse, the pulsating, the surge, Spinozan affective force; in the language of psychology, the physiological arousal of the somatic, the Freudian inchoate, transgressive id. Schleiermacher locates "individual" life within the dynamics of the whole, Feuerbach argues for the "projection" of human animation, Nietzsche stresses the life force of the ever expansive "will", Simmel grounds life spirituality in the "emotional reality" of "life itself", Simmel and his student/friend Buber attribute the sense of the "beyond-within" to the charged "I-Thou" relationship: all emphasize the raw vitality of life itself; the animus of life in the sense of the animating spirit or "intention". Or one can think of others aligned with the Romantic trajectory of modernity, including novelists like Nietzschian D. H. Lawrence on the natural instincts released as raptures of intimacy, or the "blood consciousness" of "The Plumed Serpent"; Diaghilev's ballet, *Le Sacre du printemps*, that climactic expression of the "pagan" torrent of raw earth; film-maker Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*, which, in one way or another, cannot but stir the elemental pulse of the viewer; Riefenstahl's astonishingly evocative photographs of the Nuba; Van Gogh's genius in divining the flow of the sacred within nature; the "sensational" (in both senses of the term) of Bacon's "raw life" (Deleuze 2005).

Without going too far down the path leading to the elusive vitalism of the Nietzschian or Bergsonian legacies, it is surely plausible to argue that the impact of being alive can inspire transgression of the secular.[6] Not given to hyperbole, a conservative not Romantic vitalist, sociologist Edward Shils (1967: 42) nevertheless writes, "The idea of sacredness is generated by the primordial experience of being alive, of experiencing the elemental sensation of vitality and of fearing extinction". Applying this account to secularistic northern Europe, the vital impulse, from within, serves as the source of force, the ground of the existential significance, that can prompt transgression. Beyond northern Europe, if vitalist theorizing of the kind put forward by Shils is valid, human nature itself is not a *tabula rasa*. Vitalistic springs of transgression are universal, and do not require the sociocultural – most especially ideals – for the transgressive impulse.

The vitalist approach is probably more effective, though, when it is combined with sociocultural factors. The argument is that the intensity of the sense of primal "agency" of the within naturally varies in accord with sociocultural circumstances. When the person is *absorbed* by "life-as" identity formations of secular or religious tradition, when the person is *devoted to* "outer-directed" progress laid out by the orthodox order of things, it is unlikely that the focus lies with what life *itself* has to offer. Life largely dwells

with all that lies beyond the person. Conversely, the greater the extent to which values proclaim personal "life", the greater the likelihood of the vital impulse being experienced with intensity.

Cultural ideals enter the picture. Weber's "inner compulsion", better, "inner expression", flourishes with the contemporary "experience economy"; flourishes, that is, when life is idealized as the summation of "inner" experiences; the more arresting the better. When the person is valued as experiential, expressive, creative, autonomous, authorial or sovereign, the "raw" energy of life itself readily comes into play: to serve as an inner-dynamo, vitalizing agency (Heelas 2006). For those who do not treat this life as a preparation for the next, what matters is making the most of life in the here-and-now. Life is the most valuable *presence* of all. Hence the encapsulation of the force of experiential/existential life in popular notions like "universal life force", "something more to life", or "God-within". And hence the popularity of spiritual CAM in secularistic northern Europe. The sheer value of life instils thoughts like "life cannot go away", "life deserves the ultimate, the eternal" (see Taylor 2007: 720 on that "love" that seems "to demand eternity"; that is too valuable to die). The ideals of CAM are in tune with this value: cultivating and expressing life, vitalizing body and mind, perpetuating life, ideally for ever. By enabling participants to contact their "energy" (*the* key theme of CAM), life itself is put to work to fulfil ideals as "well" as absolutely possible. Expression of "energy" is guided by ideals; "energy" serves to fuel their transgressive thrust. Vitalism in action, with ideals helping ensure that action is not simply a matter of taking "the lid off the id".

Vitalism and the countercultural If participants (including myself as a participant observer) are believed, the countercultural "sixties" was a time when "the vital" came to the fore: in the sense of a flourishing of selfhood, relationality and humanity as a whole; in the sense of tapping into the throb of life itself. With the rejection of, or alienation from, mainstream institutions – secular and religious – the vitality of "life" was not incorporated by the mainstream. Instead, untrammelled "inner potency" stood "revealed". In experience, naked *life* fuelled transgression. And the oppositional ideals of the counterculture affirmed the foundational value of inner life – wherever it might be experienced – as the source of the sense of being as alive as possible. Values like equality, freedom, expression, creativity, the sanctity of life or humankindness were celebrated – as affect-charged expressions of "life-in-all" (and see Tipton 1992). The powerful current flowing within, the power of ideals to arouse and direct elemental desires: hence the "sixties" as one of the great "ages" of the "yearn". Hence the pervasiveness of searching away from the secular, to truly experience the force of love, the sentiment of humankindness, for example.

With an eye on advancing the study of "New Age" spiritualities of life, cross-cultural inquiry (historical and contemporary) should illuminate ways

in which ideals, with countercultural leanings, and the vital/ity of "life", can inter-fuse to generate, or sustain, the transgressive: most especially in the mode of spiritualities of the inner-life. Unless I am very much mistaken, social scientific inquiry – rather than theological or metaphysical argumentation – will add more and more substance to the idea that there is a perennial connection between spiritualities of life and the more countercultural. Suffice it to say, for the present, that it is hardly a coincidence that the signature tune of the rebellious Romanticism of the later eighteenth century, through to today, is the expression of vitality from within, in the context of oppositional ideals. It is not a coincidence that the Dionysian spirit of life flourishes among those who transgress the secular while also rebelling against soul-destroying conformity to religious tradition. It is not a coincidence that younger Estonians tend to transgress by affirming their own spirit of life, in terms of ideals opposing conformity to overarching systems.

Neither is it a coincidence that the nexus of countercultural values and a passionate inner life have flourished elsewhere in the world: the early flowering of de-traditionalized Sufism in Damascus; or, in contemporary Pakistan, the immensely popular Sufi, Bulleh Shah: a man who rejected mainstream Islam and promises of the secular; a counterculturalist who sought the ideal of "true love" by "going within"; a man who sought a "blank sheet" beyond the agitations, the irrelevant vitality, of the homelessness of the imperfect world of the secular – to be consumed by the sheer passion of the "Beloved" of the perfect life itself:

> I do not know how to swim. I have no oars and my boat is too old to be used.
> The whirlpools are furious, and I have no place to rest and stay.
> By crying my palms are hurt.
>
> I am consumed by the fire of separation and the longing for my Beloved.
> Crazy in Love I am standing and whisking away crows.
>
> (Ahmad 2003: 25)

In effect: the vitalization of the ideal of love; the idealization of vitalization; potent transgression.[7]

CONCLUSION

It is easy to argue the case for the self-sufficiency of the secular – and to do so apparently without bias. It is not so easy to argue the case for insufficiency. I trust that on the basis of exploratory examination of approximations to societal *tabulae rasae*, I have provided a reasonable argument

in favour of the transgressive thesis: that imperfections, insufficiencies, limitations, failures of the secular can generate movement: beyond itself. Obviously, there is a great deal more to say about the strengths and weaknesses of the self-sufficiency and insufficiency arguments – and how, with modifications, the two can be combined in a variety of cultural settings.

Equally obviously, there is a great deal more to say about the human condition, taken to incorporate the sense of being alive and those ideals required for human life within the sociocultural, specifically the countercultural: to fuel transgression, of a spiritualities of life orientation, around the globe.

NOTES

1. For readers interested in a more sustained discussion of the evidence that underpins many of the points made in this essay, see Heelas (forthcoming a).
2. Similar percentages for Estonia are reported by a Eurobarometer poll of 2010. Thinking of church attendance, Eurobarometer finds that just 4 per cent of Estonians attended church services on a weekly basis in 2004, the lowest percentage of the ten countries which joined the EU in spring 2004 (Manchin 2004). Olaf Muller (2009: 73) reports that "in Estonia … church attendance rates have more or less remained as low as at the beginning of the 1990s".
3. Several essays in *Religion and Society in Central and Eastern Europe* provide more information on Estonia and serve to place the country in broader comparative context: see, for example, Olaf Muller (2011), Miklos Tomka (2010) and David Voas and Stefanie Doebler (2011). Broadly speaking, the argument advanced in the present essay is supported.
4. Within Europe as a whole, the Czech Republic is almost certainly the next best site for exploring the transgressive thesis. Further afield, Russia is one of the countries that could usefully be considered: see Heelas (forthcoming a).
5. Gordon Lynch (2012) is among those who attempt to dissolve the secular–sacred distinction, thereby ignoring what really matters: that the great majority of people distinguish between modes of meaningful reality; and that the secular is transgressed.
6. Daniel Heller-Roazen's *The Inner Touch: Archaeology of a Sensation* (2009) is a brilliant comparison of senses of being sentient; of what it can mean to feel that one is alive. For ways of connecting the vitalistic, as "affect", with the transgressive, in general, see Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth (2010).
7. See Heelas (forthcoming b) for Sufi transgression in Pakistan that accords with the kind of inner-life, vitalistic perennialism under consideration.