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Religion as Play:

Pentecostalism and the Transformation of the Secular Age

Wolfgang Vondey

Pentecostals have avoided the conversation on secularization. Ten years since Charles Taylor wrote, *A Secular Age*, few Pentecostals have engaged his seminal proposal and monumental genealogy.¹ One of the reasons may be the general reluctance of scholarship on secularization to engage Pentecostals in the telling of the story. In Taylor's narrative, Pentecostals are examples of embodied, ecstatic, and "festive" counter-movements, which help not to exaggerate the reach of secularization, but which otherwise play no dominant role.² However, a more convincing reason for the reluctance of Pentecostals seems to be precisely their lack of awareness of their own place within the secular. The question we need to ask is where Pentecostalism fits Taylor's narrative of the secular age and, perhaps more importantly, whether Pentecostals fit this telling of the story in the first place. Taylor leaves room here for Pentecostals in his account of modern conversions, or reconversions, back to a nostalgic image of Christendom. Yet, I suggest that this room does not fit, that Pentecostalism is not a reconstruction of disillusioned modernists who wish to return to the premodern world but an alternative experience of the sacred in which the plausibility of the secular is suspended. The metaphor I want to invoke here for Pentecostals is that of religion as play, a ludic way of the religious life that engages with the secular without accepting the conditions that lend it authority. Pentecostalism is a manifestation of the divine at play *with* the religious and the secular, a divine festival, to use Taylor's image. In order to follow this argument, this article engages with Taylor's foundational proposal of the central conditions of

¹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

² See Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 244, 314, 455, 512, 552, 554, 766.

premodern life that have made room for our modern, secular world and demonstrates how and why these conditions are *not* met in Pentecostalism. I then examine the notion of play in Taylor's genealogy in order to illuminate more closely the ill-fit of Pentecostalism in the history of the secular. I conclude that Pentecostalism represents a condition of religion which resolves the tension between sacred and secular unaccounted for in Taylor's work. In the uncontested terrain of the secular supernova we call modernity, with its explosive multiplicity of alternative options, Pentecostalism is the nucleus of a different religious age.

1. Pentecostalism and the Conditions of the Secular

A Secular Age offers a complex history of secularization, not in the sense of the emptying of religion from public spaces (secularity 1) or the waning of religious belief and practice (secularity 2) but in a third sense of the secular manifested in changing conditions of belief (secularity 3) "from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith . . . is one human possibility among others."³ Taylor's work should be read primarily with this focus on identifying the conditions of the secular, and any critique from the perspective of Pentecostalism depends on its fit within this third type of secularity.

The impression that Pentecostalism does not fit the master narrative of secularization has emerged only sporadically in recent years. David Martin, whose political sociology of religion joins interests in secularization and Pentecostalism, suggests that the Pentecostal movement "was discounted because it was presented as politically the wrong kind of modernity or treated as an alarming case of reactive fundamentalism or dismissed as simply a phase before genuine

³ Ibid., 3.

modernity set in.”⁴ If Martin is correct, then the place of Pentecostalism must be identified with regard to the five instrumental changes which mark the transition from the premodern to the modern age and which form the conditions for the possibility of unbelief in the secular age: (1) the disenchantment of the modern world, (2) the disengagement from others, (3) the loss of equilibrium, (4) the instrumentalization of time, and (5) the discovery of the universe. The following account begins with Taylor’s definition of each condition, identifies where the narrative meets Pentecostalism, and suggests how Pentecostalism challenges the notion of the secular age.

1.1 The Enchantment of the Disenchanted

Taylor’s account begins with the disenchantment of the enchanted premodern world. Investment in a world of spirits, demons, and devils is replaced by a process of internalization and introspection in which meaning is determined entirely by the human mind (pp. 29-41). Disenchantment is a shift in naïve understanding, where meaning can reside in the world independently from and external to human beings (p. 32), to the secular conviction that the outside world impinges on the human being no longer through its own exogenous power but only through the inward space of the mind. Whereas the premodern human being was a “porous” self, vulnerable, or more favorably, “healable” to benevolent and malevolent forces (p. 36), the modern self is “buffered” (p. 37) in a very different existential condition of choice to disengage “from everything outside the mind” (p. 38). Hence, the modern person has the option of disbelief in God, whereas this is not an option to the healable premodern self.

⁴ David Martin, *The Future of Christianity: Reflections on Violence and Democracy, Religion and Secularization* (Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2011), 25.

Taylor illustrates the change of boundaries with relation to spirits, also referencing the work of Birgit Meyer on Pentecostalism in Ghana (p. 39).⁵ The modern, secular age, Taylor suggests, has replaced spirits with spirituality, that is, “not ‘real’ bodies or spirits but rather ways of talking about secular, modern mystifications.”⁶ Meyer challenges Taylor’s proposal precisely on the premises of Pentecostal pneumatology. She points out that secular Pentecostals do not simply exhibit the unexpected choice of a buffered self to return to a premodern age and rejects Taylor’s “temporalization of cultures” as unacceptable in “a heavily pentecostalized public sphere in which . . . spirits . . . are not just there, as signs of a traditional past, but *reproduced* under modern conditions.”⁷ In response, Taylor holds on to the idea that Pentecostalism represents merely a “transition phenomenon” although questioning at another place whether secularization applies inevitably to all religions.⁸ Meyer suggests that what Pentecostals exhibit are at once both secular and religious lives intersecting in the category of “spirit” and hence in a secular world of enchantment.⁹ Pentecostals belong to what we might call “enchanted secular religious” movements, a porous entanglement of spirits that reaches from the secular to the religious and back again because the notion of “spirits” takes seriously all dimensions of created existence in a way that undercuts any awareness of either enchantment or disenchantment. Hence, Pentecostals can be enchanted naturalists, interventionist or non-interventionist

⁵ See Birgit Meyer, *Translating the Devil: Religion and Modernity among the Ewe in Ghana* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999).

⁶ Courtney Bender and Ann Taves, “Introduction”, in *What Matters? Ethnographies of Value in a Not So Secular Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 18.

⁷ Birgit Meyer, “Religious and Secular, “Spiritual” and “Physical” in Ghana,” in Bender and Taves, *What Matters*, 86-118 (88).

⁸ Charles Taylor, “The Future of the Religious Past,” in *Religion: Beyond a Concept*, Hent de Fries (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 178–244 (243).

⁹ Meyer, “Religious and Secular,” 89.

supernaturalists.¹⁰ Disbelief is not an option in the encounter with spirits.¹¹ Yet, this extensive “pneumatological imagination” lies not in the choice of the individual mind but in a complex intersection of the acts, objects, and contexts of spirited existence.¹² Pentecostal spirit-awareness is profoundly embodied in a community undergirded by and interwoven with “spirits” who are experienced in a radically social imaginary of both socio-religious and secular engagements.

1.2 The Engagement of the Disengaged

The possibility of disengagement marks the second condition in Taylor’s account of the secular age. The social life of the porous premodern self, including “the spiritual forces which impinged . . . on us as a society” and which were previously defended by “deploying a power that we can only draw on as a community” (p. 42), has turned into an atomic individualism where “disbelief no longer has social consequences.”¹³ The secular, already marked in Taylor’s account by the absence of spiritual power, is unable to locate such power in society itself because the buffered self now has the option not to participate in collective rites aimed at harnessing the spirits. Since secularity as disengagement is the consequence of disenchantment, all realms of religious imagination are now disassociated from one another and from the sacred. The result is both a society no longer grounded in shared religious beliefs and religious beliefs which no longer require a social framework.

¹⁰ James K. A. Smith, *Thinking in Tongues: Pentecostal Contributions to Philosophy*, Pentecostal Manifestos 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 89-99.

¹¹ For a nuanced evaluation see Allan H. Anderson, *Spirit-Filled World: Religious Dis/Continuity in African Pentecostalism*, Christianity and Renewal – Interdisciplinary Studies 8 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

¹² See Amos Yong, *Spirit-Word-Community: Theological Hermeneutics in Trinitarian Perspective* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 219-310.

¹³ James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) To Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 31.

Pentecostalism does not easily fit this pattern. On the one hand, Pentecostals are clearly bound up in a socio-spiritual network where the self exists always as part of a community of “sons and daughters, young and old, men and women” (see Acts 2:17-18) filled with God’s Spirit and engaging other spirits within the social realm of the secular.¹⁴ On the other hand, spiritual empowerment among Pentecostals is also bound up with concerns for individual well-being and autonomy, even resisting traditional social obligations.¹⁵ Yet, this spiritual autonomy of the Pentecostal self should not be misunderstood as simply the replacement of social bonds with a secular individualism. Rather, ethnographic studies point instead to a redefining of the principles of kinship through a restructuring of socio-spiritual bonds.¹⁶ It is precisely the enchanted worldview which necessitates these structures, not as a departure from social bonds but as a transformation of community for the sake of spiritually *and* socially embodied lives.

With embodiment I refer to the materiality of practices that form and are informed by an enchanted worldview in which meaning is spiritually, and thus physically, socially and culturally communicated.¹⁷ Contemporary studies of Pentecostalism affirm certain foundational rites as the

¹⁴ See Wilma Wells Davies, *The Embattled But Empowered Community: Comparing Understandings of Spiritual Power in Argentine Popular and Pentecostal Cosmologies*, Global Pentecostal and Charismatic Studies (Leiden: Brill, 2010); Paul Brodwin, “Pentecostalism in Translation: Religion and the Production of Community in the Haitian Diaspora,” *American Ethnologist*: 30, no. 1 (2003): 85-101; Melvin D. Williams, *Community in a Black Pentecostal Church: An Anthropological Study* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1974).

¹⁵ See Gwyneth H. McClendon and Rachel Beatty Riedl, “Individualism and Empowerment in Pentecostal Sermons: New Evidence from Nairobi, Kenya,” *African Affairs* 115/458 (2015): 119–44; Ruth Marshall, *Political Spiritualities: The Pentecostal Revolution in Nigeria* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL, 2009); Birgit Meyer, “Make a complete break with the past: Memory and postcolonial modernity in Ghanaian Pentecostal discourse,” in *Memory and the Postcolony: African Anthropology and the Critique of Power*, ed. Richard Werbner (Zed Books, London, 1998), 182–208.

¹⁶ See Sitna Quiroz, “Relating as Children of God: Ruptures and Continuities in Kinship among Pentecostal Christians in the South-East of the Republic of Benin,” (PhD thesis, The London School of Economics and Political Science, 2015); R.A. van Dijk, “Religion, Reciprocity and Restructuring Family Responsibility in the Ghanaian Pentecostal Diaspora,” in *The Transnational Family: New European Frontiers and Global Networks*, ed. D.F. Bryceson, and U. Vuorela (Oxford: Berg, 2001), 173-96; Meyer, *Translating the Devil*, 179-204.

¹⁷ See Michael W. Wilkinson and Peter Althouse (eds.), *Annual Review of the Sociology of Religion*, vol. 8, *Pentecostals and the Body* (Leiden: Brill, 2017).

consistent practices and traditions of the Pentecostal life.¹⁸ The role of embodiment, materiality, affectivity, and experience is evident throughout all facets of Pentecostalism.¹⁹ Pentecostal theology heralds a form of enchanted, thoroughly material and transformational, attachment in its so-called “full gospel” with the expectations that in a personal encounter with Jesus Christ the human being and the community experience salvation, sanctification, baptism in the Holy Spirit, divine healing, and the coming of God’s kingdom. Genuine fullness, the human experience of meaning and significance, and an important category for Taylor (pp. 5-12), rather than a projection of the human mind, is “believed” only because it is *experienced* in embodied practices and rituals which are shaped by and which shape social living. Pentecost is unthinkable as privatized, atomic disengagement from the languages, cultures, and social life of the secular world. It is the festival of enchanted social attachment that forms the symbol of Pentecostalism.

1.3 The Festival of Enchanted Attachment

With Pentecost we arrive at the enchanted and embodied Christian festival par excellence. The continuing experience of Pentecost also identifies the heart of the problem of situating Pentecostalism in Taylor’s account. He identifies the third feature of the premodern world as “an equilibrium in tension . . . between the demands of total transformation which the faith calls us to, and the requirements of ordinary ongoing life” (p. 44). Whereas medieval Christendom possessed the spectacle of carnival as a mechanism of restoring the equilibrium,

¹⁸ Cf. Daniel E. Albrecht, *Rites in the Spirit: A Ritual Approach to Pentecostal/Charismatic Spirituality* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999).

¹⁹ *Pentecostal Theology: Living the Full Gospel* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2017). See also Michael Wilkonson, “Pentecostals and the World: Theoretical and Methodological Issues for Studying Global Pentecostalism,” *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 38, no. 4 (2016): 373-93; Jon Bialecki, “Affect: Intensities and Energies in the Charismatic Language, Embodiment, and Genre of a North American Movement,” in *The Anthropology of Global Pentecostalism and Evangelicalism*, ed. Simon Coleman and Rosalind I.J. Hackett (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 95–108.

“periods in which the ordinary order of things was inverted” (p. 45-46), the modern secular age has abandoned the festival for functionalist structures, boundaries, and order. Employing the ritual theory of Victor Turner, Taylor argues that secularity eclipses the festival and its “anti-structure” to social norms and expectations.²⁰ What is dissolved in the secular age is the sense of complementarity and co-existence in all forms of public and religious life, so that “the traditional play of structure and anti-structure is no longer available to us” (p. 53).

The biblical account of Pentecost, with the first Christians behaving as if they were drunk, speaking in tongues, preaching in the streets of the city, speaking of a Spirit poured out on all flesh, should readily lend itself to a comparison with Taylor’s notion of the lost festival. Indeed, Taylor alludes to the festive element in Pentecostalism, yet without further explanation, “as a crucial dimension of contemporary religious life.”²¹ Pentecostals have been acutely aware of the demands of enacting and re-enacting the festive nature of Pentecost in the modern world. Bobby Alexander’s examination of Turner’s ritual studies in African American Pentecostalism proposes that charismatic practices establish a ritual anti-structure by placing Pentecostals in a liminality which generates alternative social arrangements which allow for the ecstatic display of the Spirit.²² Pentecostal ritual here functions as instrument of social change redressing established behavioral norms within a suspended environment of freedom, spontaneity, and enthusiasm.²³ Jean-Jacques Suurmond and Andre Droogers have described this liminal realm in Pentecostalism as a form of play. Suurmond highlights the anti-structural manner of Pentecostal

²⁰ Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978), 237. Cited by Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 47.

²¹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 470, 554.

²² Bobby C. Alexander, “Correcting Misinterpretations of Turner’s Theory: An African-American Pentecostal Illustration,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 30, no. 1 (1991): 32-41. See also Alexander, “Pentecostal Ritual Reconsidered: Anti-Structural Dimensions of Possession,” *Journal of Religious Studies* 3, no. 1 (1989): 109-28.

²³ See Bobby C. Alexander, *Victor Turner Revisited: Ritual as Social Change*, AAR Academy Series 74 (Atlanta: Scholars, 1991).

play in contrast to the “goal-oriented, play-corrupting attitude” of society.²⁴ For Suurmond, play resides between order (supplied by the Word of God) and chaos (supplied by the Spirit) in a ludic realm characterized by relative purposelessness.²⁵ Droogers proposes that Pentecostals exhibit a form methodological ludism which he defines as “the capacity to deal simultaneously and subjunctively with two or more ways of classifying reality.”²⁶ In my own analysis of Pentecostalism, I have suggested that this play constitutes a consistent expectation and imagination which among Pentecostals suspends established social structures and performative expectations.²⁷ The festival of fools, as Harvey Cox has called it, is seen in the Pentecostal resistance to imposed structures, rules, and boundaries in the secular city.²⁸ Nimi Wariboko’s response to Cox and to my work challenges Pentecostals to consider that the real principle of Pentecostalism lies in their inherent secularization at the core.²⁹ He speaks of play as “pure means” and “purposelessness”: play is religion as a form of principal human action that exhibits our existence in the secular.³⁰ Whereas Cox seemed uncertain that Pentecostals can engage the secular age, for Wariboko, the playful carnival not only brings Pentecostals into the secular city

²⁴ See Jean-Jacques Suurmond, “The Church at Play: The Pentecostal/Charismatic Renewal of the Liturgy as Renewal of the World,” in *Pentecost, Mission, and Ecumenism: Essays on Intercultural Theology; Festschrift in Honour of Professor Walter Hollenweger*, ed. Jan A. B. Jongeneel et al., Studien zur Interkulturellen Geschichte des Christentums 75 (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1992), pp. 247-59 (252).

²⁵ Jean-Jacques Suurmond, *Word and Spirit at Play: Towards a Charismatic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 29; idem, “The Church at Play,” 248–50.

²⁶ André Droogers, “Methodological Ludism beyond Religionism and Reductionism,” in *Conflicts in Social Science*, ed. Anton van Harskamp (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 44-67 (53); idem, “The Third Bank of the River: Play, Methodological Ludism and the Definition of Religion,” in *The Pragmatics of Defining Religion: Contexts, Concepts and Contents*, ed. J. G. Platvoet and A. L. Molendijk (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 285-313.

²⁷ Wolfgang Vondey, *Beyond Pentecostalism: The Crisis of Global Christianity and the Renewal of the Theological Agenda*, Pentecostal Manifestos 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 136-40.

²⁸ Harvey Cox, *Festival of Fools*. See also idem, *Religion in the Secular City: Toward a Postmodern Theology* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), 240-61.

²⁹ Nimi Wariboko, “Fire from Heaven: Pentecostals in the Secular City,” *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 33, no. 1 (2011): 391-408.

³⁰ Nimi Wariboko, *The Pentecostal Principle: Ethical Methodology in New Spirit*, Pentecostal Manifestos 5 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 161-95.

but transforms that city into a charismatic world.³¹ These accounts of Pentecostalism challenge Taylor’s argument of the lost equilibrium. The chief problem lies in defining Pentecostalism exclusively as a religious phenomenon. That Pentecostals show the festival with particular force should also not indicate that they are aware of their place amidst the secular. Breaking out in unknown tongues, prophecies, words of wisdom or praise, exorcising demonic spirits, laying on of hands, jumping over pews, soaking in prayer, or falling out in the Spirit—and any other manifestations of Pentecost, whether in the first century or today—belong neither to the religious or to the secular realm. Pentecost is not the opposite of the secular, in order to bring out an equilibrium, but a divine in-between:³² Pentecostalism as a religious festival is a necessary part of the secular in order bring the whole world into the rhythm of God’s time and promise.

1.4 The Transformation of Secular Time

From the perspective of Pentecostalism as a continuation, extension, and revival of the festival of Pentecost, it is easy to agree with Taylor that the carnival possesses its own time. In his account of the changing conditions of the secular, the time of the premodern festival is a higher time, filled with kairotic and eschatological “moments whose nature and placing calls for reversal” of ordinary time (p. 55). If there was a secular time in the premodern world, it existed “in a multiplex vertical context, so that everything relates to more than one kind of time” (p. 57). But in the modern age, the “secular” comes to represent its own time, an ordinary time against religion and eternity. For Taylor, the secular age eschews God’s time for the fixed and unvarying resource of measurable time (p. 59) so that the secular world disconnects from the premodern

³¹ Nimi Wariboko, *The Charismatic City and the Public Resurgence of Religion: A Pentecostal Social Ethics of Cosmopolitan Urban Life*, Christianity and Renewal-Interdisciplinary Studies 2 (New York: Palgrave, 2014).

³² This idea emerges particularly in the African context of Pentecostalism where the Africanization of Christianity and the Pentecostalization of Africa overlap. See Meyer, *Translating the Devil*, 134-40.

sense of eternity because it no longer participates in the life of God. Today's church continues to participate in eternity through its liturgical enactment but can no longer fill the disenchanting, homogeneous and empty cosmic time of the secular with the common experience of eternity.

The festival of Pentecost, with its enchanted engagement of the religious and the secular amidst a time filled with the activity of God's Spirit, resists also this fourth facet of Taylor's account. As I have argued elsewhere, a pneumatological understanding of time suggests that eternity is determined by the perpetuation of the present moment in the activity of the Holy Spirit through, across, and beyond ordinary time.³³ Put differently, the festival as an encounter with the divine Spirit always relates to more than one time. Pentecostals in their present experience of Pentecost relate also to the biblical Pentecost and to the coming Pentecost of God's kingdom. Yet, this present "lived" time is in an important sense neither the "higher" time of the divine or the "lower" time of the world; Pentecost is a time "between": God's eternity is brought low, so to speak, into the world and into the secular, while ordinary time is lifted towards the eternal kingdom. To use a common Pentecostal parlance, Pentecost marks a time of the inbreaking of God's kingdom where human beings are "saved, sanctified, filled with the Spirit, healed, and on their way to heaven." At Pentecost, the times of promise and fulfillment overlap in the present realization of God's activity in the world. Pentecostal experiences, as much as they are religious markers of a liturgical time that belongs to the church, are the playful, irrational, unexpected and foolish markers of the kingdom of God breaking into the secular. At the spectacle of Pentecost, secular time encounters God and is suspended in visions and dreams and encounters with eternity. The religious behavior of Pentecostals is the observable form of the unspeakable and inexpressible charismatic encounters with God's Spirit. This realm of the "charismatic" cuts

³³ Wolfgang Vondey, "The Holy Spirit and Time in Contemporary Catholic and Protestant Theology," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 58, no. 4 (2005): 393-409.

through the “secular” age and muddles the distinction between transcendence and immanence and what belongs to each realm.³⁴ Charismatic time ticks within a “perichoretic” cosmos.

1.5 The Perichoretic Cosmos

The final element in Taylor’s account, deeply connected with the idea of secular disenchanted time, is the transformation of the idea that we live in a divinely instituted, meaningful and limited cosmos into the scientific notion of an unbounded self-governing universe. The premodern hierarchy of beings is replaced with “exceptionless natural laws” (p. 60) which no longer evolve around human meaning. The language of a universe “has altered the terms of the debate, and reshaped the possibilities both of belief and unbelief, opened up new loci of mystery, as well as offering new ways of denying transcendence” (p. 61).

Pentecostals have been rather disinterested in scientific cosmology and often hostile to evolutionary accounts of existence.³⁵ The reasons for this hostility are rooted in the enchantment of the Pentecostal worldview that is dominated by theological concerns for salvation. The doctrine of creation is subsumed under soteriology as an indication that the meaning of the universe is found not in the product or act of creation itself but in the redemption of the cosmos.³⁶ Creation is the economy of salvation in a Pentecostal narrative that begins and ends with God punctuated by the experiences and interaction of human beings with different powers in a “spirit-filled” cosmos that engages perichoretically four broad spheres: (1) the divine; (2) the

³⁴ See Charles Taylor, “Western Secularity,” in *Rethinking Secularism*, eds. Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer, Jonathan Van Antwerpen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 31–53.

³⁵ See James K.A. Smith and Amos Yong (eds.), *Science and the Spirit: A Pentecostal Engagement with the Sciences* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010); Amos Yong (ed.), *The Spirit Renews the Face of the Earth: Pentecostal Forays in Science and Theology of Creation* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2009).

³⁶ Wolfgang Vondey, *Pentecostal Theology: Living the Full Gospel*, Systematic Pentecostal and Charismatic Theology (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), 155–74.

human; (3) the natural world; and (4) the realm of evil.³⁷ This perichoretic metaphysics rejects a strict distinction between God and the economy of salvation in favor of a kenotic realism of the divine persons in the world.³⁸ What we find in this cosmology is not a dialectic of secularization and religion, as argued by David Martin and endorsed by Taylor, but the interpenetration of transcendence and immanence, sacred and secular, Christianization and secularization, at all levels.³⁹ The perichoretic cosmos speaks of material deliverance, sanctification and salvation of the world deeply dependent on spiritual beings, powers, and God. The entire cosmos, not just the individual, is porous and healable. The Pentecostal cosmos is, to use Taylor's idea of the premodern world, finite and bounded, and thus open to disaster and destruction as much as to miracles and deliverance. Universe and cosmos are not identical but overlapping realities confronting each other in an eschatological tension which expects the dissolution of the secular and religious divide with the arrival of a new creation.

2. Pentecostalism and the History of the Secular

In the previous section, I examined the conditions of premodernity identified in Charles Taylor's account as obstacles to the rise of a secular age and found them still to be present in the contemporary Pentecostal movements. Put differently, the mechanisms of secularization do not

³⁷ See Amos Yong, *The Spirit of Creation: Modern Science and Divine Action in the Pentecostal-Charismatic Imagination*, Pentecostal Manifestos 4 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 175–84; Carolyn Denise Baker, 'Created Spirit Beings', in Horton, *Systematic Theology*, 179–94; Frank D. Macchia, 'Repudiating the Enemy: Satan and Demons', *ibid.*, 194–213; Derek B. Mutungu, 'A Response to M. L. Daneel', in *All Together in One Place: Theological Papers from the Brighton Conference on World Evangelization*, eds. Harold D. Hunter and Peter D. Hocken (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 127–31.

³⁸ Vondey, *Beyond Pentecostalism*, 98–108.

³⁹ See David Martin, *On Secularization: Towards a Revised General Theory* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), foreword by Charles Taylor. See also David Martin, *A General Theory of Secularization* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978).

readily apply to Pentecostalism. I have identified the alternative mechanisms in place as a form of religion at play evident in an enchanted worldview, socio-spiritual attachment, the festival of Pentecost, the transformation of secular time, and a spirit-filled cosmos. What emerges from this proposal is a significant challenge to the identity of the secular as a historical construct, a temporal “age” in contrast to the premodern. Pentecostalism challenges the authority of the secular which Taylor’s historical narrative assumes behind the conditions emerging with modernity. In contrast, the festival we label “Pentecostalism” engages in a play of the divine and the world in a way that locates meaning in the intentions of God and thus places the mechanisms of this play outside of the history of religious and secular reality. In order to demonstrate this impact, the following section takes a closer look at the notion of play in Taylor’s genealogy of the secular in order to situate Pentecostalism more firmly in the tumultuous history of religion. The intention is to critically examine the nature of the historical narrative of the secular age along the contours of play. I begin with a brief analysis of Taylor’s observations on the idea of play in the Romantic age and then suggest how Pentecostalism (as play) transcends the historical narrative of the religious and the secular.

2.1 Play in the History of the Secular

David Martin’s suggestion, noted at the beginning of this essay, that Pentecostalism was discounted in the history of the secular is followed by his alternative theory that Pentecostalism identifies a “subculture [which] runs alongside modernization in a mutually supportive manner”⁴⁰ producing its own major narrative of modernity.⁴¹ Taylor’s foreword to Martin’s revised theory of secularization highlights its main achievement as identifying alternative models

⁴⁰ David Martin, *On Secularization: Towards a Revised General Theory* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 5.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 141–55.

of the history of secularity.⁴² Yet, despite Taylor’s noticeable dependence on Martin’s work for integrating Pentecostalism in his own narrative, he makes little use of Martin’s suggestion that Pentecostalism presents a major alternative route to the modern and that its success is rooted, as Martin explains, in the Pentecostal espousal of “story and song, gesture and empowerment, image and embodiment, enthusiastic release and personal discipline.”⁴³ Neither Martin nor Taylor make use of these principal observations of Pentecostalism in terms of identifying a model of modern religion.⁴⁴ Still, the qualitatively distinctive nature of Pentecostalism lies for Martin in its mobilization of self-consciousness and voluntary association.⁴⁵ These elements appear also in Taylor’s work in the context of diverse attempts at navigating the modern “supernova” of possible options confronting the buffered self.

Navigating the nova, Taylor insists, is the true “malaise of modernity,” and play appears as one of its historical solutions precisely in its capacity for expressing human self-consciousness and the full realization of human nature. Taylor’s account of the notion of play begins with the Romantic philosopher, historian, and poet, Friedrich Schiller, in a line of thought which continues in two diametrically opposed directions, on the one hand, the ideals of a liberated humanism and, on the other, the religious fascination of the Pietistic and modern Pentecostal movements.⁴⁶ Taylor does not expand on how one may understand Pentecostals as children of the Romantic age, but the integration of the notion of play in the narrative of secularization offers significant possibilities for advancing its role as a model for a religious age in balance with the secular.

⁴² Ibid., ix–x.

⁴³ Ibid., 142.

⁴⁴ See also the subsequent discussion in David Martin, *Secularisation, Pentecostalism and Violence: Receptions, Rediscoveries and Rebuttals in the Sociology of Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 136–54, 170–84.

⁴⁵ Martin, *The Future of Christianity*, 63–83.

⁴⁶ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 314–17, 358–59; 609–10.

Schiller introduces the term “play” in his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* as the highest fulfillment of human self-realization in the sense of a gratuitous and spontaneous freedom “by which we create and respond to beauty.”⁴⁷ A closer look shows play as the expression of the aesthetic instinct of human existence which completes the sensuous and formal instincts of humankind.⁴⁸ In play, passion, feeling, and reason are in harmony, liberated from the demands of law and necessity for the pursuit of beauty as their ultimate object.⁴⁹ More precisely, for Schiller, sensuous impulses precede rational impulses and human consciousness and therefore present the key to the realization of human liberty.⁵⁰ The human being finds its full realization when sensibility and reason become the mutually balancing powers of an aesthetic imagination that sees no conflict between form and uselessness.⁵¹ The human being bound to history finds an existential freedom beyond the limitations given to the individual by life’s phenomenal domains. “To give freedom to freedom is the fundamental law of this realm.”⁵² Consequently, although the instinct of play exists in every human being, Schiller concludes that its actualization is the real task of the self-realization of humankind in history.

In light of Taylor’s focus on the genealogy of the secular, he does not take up Schiller’s notion of play as an essential solution to secularity but only as a line of further historical controversy.⁵³ Of course, Schiller’s critique of Enlightenment anthropocentrism reacts both to the inadequacies of an unqualified moralism and to the uncritical affirmation of desire. Yet, the crucial problem for Taylor is that the inclusion of God in the pursuit of beauty, while still an

⁴⁷ Ibid., 358.

⁴⁸ Friedrich Schiller, *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, trans. Elizabeth Wilkinson and L. A. Willoughby (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967), chapter XIV. See William F. Wertz Jr., “A Reader’s Guide to Schiller’s *Letters on the Aesthetical Education of Man*,” *Fidelio* 14, nos. 1-2 (2005): 80–104.

⁴⁹ Ibid., chapter XV.

⁵⁰ Ibid., Chapter XX.

⁵¹ Ibid., Chapter XXVII.

⁵² Ibid., Chapter XXVII.

⁵³ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 320.

option, is not a necessity but can evolve in the imagination of the buffered identity into a mere symbol.⁵⁴ While Schiller may convince us that what is missing from human self-realization is an aesthetic imagination, the ontic commitments of play remain undefined and thus allow for the direction of unbelief.⁵⁵ Play as the pursuit of beauty may speak to a division within human nature or to a separation of human communal nature or to a loss of the enchanted ideals of the past without engaging religious concerns.⁵⁶ Hence, the concept is taken up by Nietzsche eventually in deliberate contrast of the aesthetic realm to the moral.⁵⁷ The cross-pressures of secularization following Schiller ultimately leave the transformation of desire unresolved in modern Western culture and thus deny success to the human pursuit of beauty.

Schiller continues to appear as a paradigm in Taylor's work, yet his notion of play does not reappear in the continuing narrative. Taylor seems to find in the Romantic idea of play only a particular historical reaction to human fragmentation, disengagement of reason from the senses, isolation of bodily existence, neglect of feeling, and loss of creativity resulting from the Enlightenment.⁵⁸ In this sense, Pentecostalism is one possible re-articulation of the Romantic protest amidst the winded history of secularity. The importance of the physical and the moral life in the Pentecostal worldview speaks to the Romantic idea of balance and transformation.⁵⁹ However, it is Schiller's aesthetic dimension, the realm of beauty, not the activity of play, that identifies for Taylor the heart of the Romantic ideal. In this sense, Pentecostalism does not appear to be a child of the Romantic age since its "selective assumption of disciplines"⁶⁰ (rather than their playful engagement) yields no clear aesthetic model. Moreover, the notion of beauty

⁵⁴ Ibid., 360.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 400.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 315.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 359.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 379, 381, 400, 476, 609–10, 615–16, 642.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 552–53.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 493, again interpreting David Martin.

(and thus of play) remains tied to the historical conditions and rules internal to the Romantic age, which are ostensibly absent from Pentecostalism.⁶¹ This struggle to integrate Pentecostalism in Taylor's account of play is the direct result of the Pentecostal resistance to the loss of premodern conditions which characterize Taylor's master narrative. Yet, underlying this problem is the more fundamental difficulty to fit Pentecostalism in the history of ideas, not as unfolding chronologically but as it were idealistically. Martin's account of Pentecostalism offers historically compelling reasons for the neglect of Pentecostalism in the master narrative. Taylor's account, in contrast, seeks to tell the history of ideas by relying on the history of events. Here we arrive at the central questions for considering Pentecostalism's relation to the secular. If Pentecostalism represents a different narrative of modernity, one that resists the historicizing of the religious and the secular (and their fundamental opposition), how is that narrative told? The answer may lie in the telling of the story of Pentecostalism as religion at play throughout, and ultimately beyond, the historical distinction of the religious and the secular.

2.2 Pentecostalism beyond the Religious and the Secular

Taylor is interested in a social imaginary based on the way we experience the world rather than in our ideas.⁶² Consequently, he situates the Romantic protest in the modern age as a historical response to the Enlightenment.⁶³ Even when considering the Romantic appeal as an

⁶¹ For my own tracing of Pentecostal ontology in German idealism see Wolfgang Vondey, "Spirit and Nature as Ultimate Concern: Tillich's 'Radical' Ontology in Conversation with Contemporary Pentecostalism," *Bulletin of the North American Paul Tillich Society* 39, no. 1 (2013): 30-35.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 171-72. See Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 358, 372.

axis of ideas, the resulting “subtler language”⁶⁴ of the Romantics exists only because of and in contrast to the premodern conditions.⁶⁵ Schiller’s notion of play is not seen as a transcendental attempt to realize the fullness of human nature but as an aesthetic located in history and aimed at rediscovering what is lost with the turn to the modern. Taylor’s continued attempt at historicizing the conditions of the secular to uncover the experiences of the world underlying them presses him further to define the aesthetic in the material sense as art, and the heart of the artistic ideal in the production of Romantic literature.⁶⁶ In this way the demand for the history of the secular deconstructs the idea of play for the sake of constructing the social imaginary of beauty. As an expression of the latter, the appeal to beauty can transcend history only when it enables “people to explore . . . meanings with their ontological commitments as it were in suspense”⁶⁷ and thus opening the way for both belief and unbelief. This conclusion, however, is acceptable only if the conditions of the premodern world have been removed and made room for non-religious and non-theistic ontology (or even the possibility of suspending ontological commitments in the first place). If the “premodern” conditions are still operative, either in ignorance of the need to question them or in deliberate rejection to do so, the ontological presuppositions accompanying this social imaginary cannot be suspended.

James K. A. Smith recently related Taylor’s notion of the social imaginary to Pentecostalism and proposed that a Pentecostal social imaginary arises first of all from “a constellation of spiritual practices that carry within them an implicit understanding.”⁶⁸ For

⁶⁴ A phrase borrowed from Earl Wasserman, *The Subtler Language* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1968).

⁶⁵ See Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 356–61.

⁶⁶ See Colin Jager, “This Detail, This History: Charles Taylor’s Romanticism,” in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, ed. Michael Warner, Jonathan Van Antwerpen (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 166–92.

⁶⁷ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 351.

⁶⁸ Smith, *Thinking in Tongues*, 30–31.

Smith, the Pentecostal social imaginary is an aesthetic in its relentless pursuit of the experience of the divine in the world. More exactly, embedded in Pentecostal practices is an implicit ontological commitment to a noninterventionist supernaturalism where “the miraculous is normal”⁶⁹ because “nature is always already suspended in and inhabited by the Spirit such that it is always already *primed* for the Spirit’s manifestations.”⁷⁰ This pneumatological ontology is tied to an epistemology of the Spirit that is radically open to the possibility of any social imaginary beyond the confines of particular historical manifestations. The Pentecostal aesthetic lends itself to a surreal rather than a realist version of history.⁷¹ Probing Smith’s idea of this ontological commitment further, Nimi Wariboko speaks of existence in the Pentecostal cosmos as a “continual opening and reopening” of history to the divine.⁷² The *novum*, to use Taylor’s term, arises from the emergent and disruptive creativity of the Spirit who is neither (or both) immanent and transcendent to history.⁷³ Instead, the freedom of the Spirit allows for both crisis and opportunity in historical time and is both (or neither) fundamentally religious and radically secular.⁷⁴ For Wariboko, the experience of the Spirit is “pure mediality” disinterested in productivity or enactment and as unended action representing the “pure potentiality” in and beyond history of the self-realization of humanity.⁷⁵ The mechanism of this self-realization prevalent in Pentecostalism he designates as play.

Although neither Smith or Wariboko engages Schiller’s notion of play, their ideas can be seen as a radical extension of the Romantic appeal to the aesthetic.⁷⁶ The turn to play as a

⁶⁹ Ibid., 98–99.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 101.

⁷¹ Ibid., 80–85.

⁷² Wariboko, *The Pentecostal Principle*, 51. See *ibid.*, 51–59.

⁷³ Ibid., 53.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 87–88. Following Paul Tillich’s idea of *kairos*.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 99–100.

⁷⁶ The preface mentions Schiller briefly; *ibid.*, xi.

resource for understanding Pentecostalism is indebted to Jean-Jacques Suurmond and my own attempt to think of and beyond Pentecostalism by understanding the movement as an expression of play.⁷⁷ Wariboko presses the understanding of play (and Pentecostalism) further through an ontological analysis that identifies play as the foundational principle of Pentecostalism as a religion which radicalizes grace. In Schiller's terms, the radicalization of grace is its "aestheticization of desire"⁷⁸ for all freely evolving potentialities of human existential self-realization with no regard for the difference between secular and sacred.⁷⁹ Play reorganizes religion by depriving religion of necessity, want, and purpose so that it functions within the secular but outside of its laws.⁸⁰ That is, the object of religion is the rendering inoperative of the law of purpose (whether perceived as beauty or morals). Taylor's criticism of Schiller's aesthetic as allowing in principle for the pursuit of beauty apart from God does not hold for Pentecostalism because the ontology with which the Pentecostal aesthetic operates is bound to the continuing expectation of the encounter with the divine Spirit in the world. Put theologically, the state of grace is the fulfillment of Schiller's vision of the mutually balancing powers of an aesthetic imagination which avoids the distinction between form and uselessness. Pentecostalism exhibits religion as play beyond its historical form (at the end of a development begun with Pietism or evangelical revivalism) in its existential manifestation as an aesthetic of desire which seeks by all means the continuing participation in the evolving potentialities of encountering the divine in the world.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 161–71. Jean-Jacques Suurmond, *Word and Spirit at Play: Towards a Charismatic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994); Wolfgang Vondey, *Beyond Pentecostalism: The Crisis of Global Christianity and the Renewal of the Theological Agenda*, Pentecostal Manifestos 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010). See also André, Droogers, *Religion at Play: A Manifesto* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014); idem, *Play and Power in Religion: Collected Essays* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012).

⁷⁸ Ibid., 176.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 151–54; 173–74.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 185.

The problem of forcing Pentecostalism in the secular age finds its fullest expression in the historical narrative applied to both secularization and religion. Taylor's genealogical account is indebted to Herder's genetic-historical method, which demands that ideas and actions originate always in a specific historical context and must therefore be understood according to the laws internal to that moment.⁸¹ Tied to the historical narrative, Pentecostalism exist only as a subsequent development of prior forces of the secular/religious divide, as revival or re-conversion or re-action to particular (preceding) constellations. While this account has been successfully applied to Pentecostal historiography in North America,⁸² it relates only with difficulty to Pentecostalism as a global phenomenon.⁸³ The difficulty to understand Pentecostalism as an expression of religion which differs in its internal make-up as widely as the tensions visible in global Pentecostalism and which resists a simple fit in the narrative of the secular is amplified by the exclusive choices for the telling of this narrative. Taylor's genealogy must disperse the essence of Pentecostalism into the energies of often overlapping and contradicting historical developments subordinate, as it seems, to the dominance of the secular and the religious as the only true competing essences at work in the narrative.⁸⁴ Talal Asad's critique of the genealogies of religion, in general, identifies the alternative in Kant's attempt to explain religion *sui generis* as "a fully essentialized idea . . . which could be counterposed to its

⁸¹ See Hans Adler and Ernest A. Menze (eds.), *Johann Gottfried Herder on World History: An Anthology*, trans. Ernest A. Menze and Michael Palma (New York: Routledge, 1997). Jager, "Charles Taylor's Romanticism," 181–83, argues that Taylor's genealogy is a shift away from Herder's genetic history.

⁸² See Augustus Cerillo Jr. and Grant Wacker, "Bibliography and Historiography of Pentecostalism in the United States," in *International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements: Revised and Expanded Edition*, ed. Stanley M. Burgess and Eduard M. Van Der Maas (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 382–405.

⁸³ See David Bundy, "Bibliography and Historiography of Pentecostalism outside North America," *ibid.*, 405–17.

⁸⁴ Cf. Jon Butler, "Disquieted History in *A Secular Age*," in Warner and Van Antwerpen, *Varieties of Secularism*, 193–216.

phenomenal forms.”⁸⁵ The distinction between the essentialization of religion, on the one hand, and its historicization and temporalization, on the other, comes to a point in Schleiermacher’s distinction between the inner essence and the outer appearance of religion.⁸⁶ We can find the perpetuation of this distinction in the tendency of contemporary scholarship on Pentecostal Christianity to over-contextualize the movement in its phenomenological, historical, and sociological manifestations or to essentialize Pentecostalism as a historical metaphenomenon often located in a pneumatological or revivalist account. What should have become evident throughout this brief study is that Pentecostalism resists the exclusive pull of either direction. What is visible in Pentecostalism is not the distinction between secular and religious, and all the derivative binaries that grasp at this distinction, including essence and phenomenon, idea and history, premodern and modern, transcendent and immanent, sacred and profane, but the expression of one in terms of the other, not by accident or by pure determination but by the unexpected and incalculable dynamic of play.

Religion as play writes the history of the essence of Pentecostalism in both the narrative and the counternarrative to our secular age. Pentecostalism suggests that the secular and religious binary is suspended because play is disinterested in either side’s exclusive claim at human self-realization and liberty. The festival of Pentecostalism is an aesthetic imagination in which history itself is subject to transformation by the divine Spirit. That the narrative of this transformation cannot be written apart from history is evidence for the importance of understanding the ontological, epistemological, and aesthetic commitments of religion. That this narrative must

⁸⁵ Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 42.

⁸⁶ See Colin Jager, “After the Secular: The Subject of Romanticism,” *Public Culture* 18, no. 2 (2006): 301–22.

transcend history demands a different reading of religion at play. For this task, Pentecostalism represents a leading opportunity.

Conclusion

A critical examination of the fit of Pentecostal Christianity in Charles Taylor's narrative of secularization suggests that Pentecostalism represents a condition of religion unaccounted for in this dominant story of the secular. Pentecostalism does not show the absence of the central conditions of premodern life that have made room for our modern, secular world because it suspends the secular/religion binary foundational to the narrative. The integration of Pentecostalism demands a different narrative in which religion is disinterested in itself as religion understood exclusively and in contradistinction to the secular. Instead, religion as play suspends the authority of any finite reality (religious or secular) and engages all things for the goal of the existential self-realization of humankind in relation to the divine. Discovering religion as play calls for a telling of the narrative of religion in which Pentecostalism is included neither as an exception nor as ultimate fulfillment. The particular Pentecostal narrative of religion as play finds its manifestation as the festival of the divine Spirit ("Pentecost"). Those who are caught up in the Spirit's play find their Pentecost beyond the secular and the religious divide in a redemptive festival penetrating and transforming the nature of all things.