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- Alan Noble, “The Disruptive Witness of Art” (Ch. 12, 135-146)
- Mike Cosper, “Piercing the Immanent Frame with an Ultralight Beam: Kanye and Charles Taylor” (Ch. 13, 147-159)

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OUR SECULAR AGE

EDITED BY

COLLIN HANSEN

TEN YEARS OF READING AND APPLYING CHARLES TAYLOR

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HAN
HOW DID FAITH GO FROM ASSUMED TO ASSAULTED?

Probably no book published in the last decade has been so ambitious as Charles Taylor’s A Secular Age. He seeks nothing less than to account for the spread of secularism and decline of faith in the last 500 years.

Now a remarkable roster of writers—including Carl Trueman, Michael Horton, and Jen Pollock Michel—considers Taylor’s insights for the church’s life and mission, covering everything from healthcare to liturgy to pop culture and politics.

Nothing is easy about faith today. But endurance produces character, and character produces hope, even in our secular age.

“No philosopher has offered more insight regarding the state of belief in the modern age than Charles Taylor. This work will benefit all Christians by teaching them to communicate the gospel to a secular culture with neither ignorance nor fear.”

RUSSELL MOORE, president, Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention

“The essays in this helpful volume do more than borrow from Taylor: they engage, question, develop, and occasionally criticize his influential account of our complex cultural moment in which we all—moderns and postmoderns, millennials and non-millennials—are trying to live, move, and have our being as disciples of Jesus Christ.”

KEVIN J. VANHOOZER, research professor of systematic theology, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

“Easily one of the best books I’ve read this year.”

TREVIN WAX, Bible and reference publisher at B&H, author of This Is Our Time: Everyday Myths In Light of the Gospel

“Charles Taylor’s A Secular Age is a landmark book, and the essays collected here ponder it intelligently and charitably. Some echo Taylor, some extend his ideas, some contest his claims, but all engage his argument with a seriousness that the book deserves—and that Christ’s church needs.”

ALAN JACOBS, distinguished professor of humanities in the honors program at Baylor University

ABOUT THE EDITOR

Collin Hansen serves as editorial director for The Gospel Coalition.
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PIERCING THE IMMANENT FRAME WITH AN ULTRALIGHT BEAM: KANYE AND CHARLES TAYLOR
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Perhaps the most promising sphere for applying Charles Taylor’s ideas in *A Secular Age* is the arts. Here the cross-purposes of the “immanent frame” are keenly felt and, to a lesser extent, relieved through articulations of fullness grounded in our allegories of the transcendent. Taylor’s treatment of secularism, cross-purposes, and “subtler languages” can help us better understand the arts and literature and bear witness to God. He offers Christians a more insightful description of modern art and literature by revealing the anxieties and desires that haunt modern people.

But Taylor also gives a promising prescription for how the arts can contribute a “disruptive witness” within the immanent frame. In heeding his words, we can become better participants in and creators of art.

**WORLDVIEW SHIFT**

Taylor’s conception of secularism suggests that evangelicals should shift away from interpreting art primarily through the lens of “worldview” and focus more on the conditions of
belief. In works of art and literature, we encounter particular attempts at reckoning with life both within the immanent frame and in light of the pull toward the transcendent—the "cross-pressures" of modernity. The emphasis here is not on the explicit, discrete, and coherent belief system or worldview in a text, because in the secular age belief is fragile, fragmented, and pluralist. Every vision of the good life is contested, and we are hyperaware there is always another option. This does not mean discussing how an author works within a Marxist ideology is always inaccurate or unhelpful. But it should draw our attention to the more visceral aspects of the text—the desires, hopes, longings, and ideals it expresses. Approaching works through predefined categories of worldview may close us off to understanding the artist's particular way of envisioning the cross-pressured experience and perhaps the "malaise of immanence," Taylor's term for the sense that we have lost something with the retreat of transcendence.

Taylor notes three significant challenges for life within the immanent frame, three points of tension that define the cross-pressures. Similar to Peter Berger's arguments for transcendence in A Rumor of Angels, Taylor doesn't use these items to falsify materialism, but to point out incongruity. He doesn't deny that these issues can be answered from within the closed immanent frame. But he does believe it is difficult to do so without impoverishment: "[H]ow can one account ... for the power of artistic experience, without speaking in terms of some transcendent being or force which interpellelates us?" In a sense, Taylor takes the methods of empiri-

199  See discussion of the "Nova Effect" in Smith, How (Not) to be Secular, 62.
200  Taylor, A Secular Age, 309.
201  Ibid., 597.
cism (how do we make sense of this evidence?) but applies it to our sense of being in the world. And that “sense of being in the world” requires a much more nuanced analysis than “worldview” typically offers us. From a strictly materialist perspective, it is difficult to account for the human capacity for agency, the weightiness of moral obligations, and the spiritual power of beauty “without impoverishment.”

BEAUTY IS A PROBLEM

Now, this line of reasoning does not lead to proof of God’s existence or the necessity of belief in true transcendence (as opposed to analogies of transcendence, which is the non-theist alternative). But it does tell a better story and offers a more full and satisfying interpretation of existence. And in a culture overwhelmed with contrasting narratives of existence, that counts for something.

Beauty is a problem for modern people—and not one we are prone to ignore. We are fascinated, even obsessed with it. Yet this obsession typically looks like efforts to recast beauty in ways that retain a sense of awe from within the immanent frame. Taylor calls this “immanent transcendence” (interestingly, humanitarianism and social justice work are sometimes the equivalent of this move in the realm of ethics). But I’d like to call them allegories of transcendence, in that they are not in any meaningful sense transcendent, but are simply allusions to transcendence. Our culture will con-

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203 Ibid., 726.
204 Ibid., 677.
205 There is an ontological distinction between the transcendence that enters immanence through the incarnation in Christiani-
continue to produce art that depicts allegories of transcendence, from the green light at the end of the bay in *The Great Gatsby* to the ache of love in Radioheads's "True Love Waits." We will find allegories of transcendence in commercials that promise us things like the end of racial injustice if we only drink the right soda.

The question for evangelicals is how we will respond. The two principal responses are interpretation (analysis and criticism) and creation.

**MAKE SENSE OF EXISTENCE**

As participants in culture, all Christians are interpreters, and the framework Taylor provides can help us to more accurately and insightfully interpret art. Interpretation never happens in a vacuum. Works of art and literature (I include "pop culture" here as well) are attempts by fallen people to tell some truth about a fallen world created by God. When we interpret these works, then, we are participating in a larger, collective effort to make sense of existence and to make sense of how others make sense of existence. Christians may be tempted to opt out of this work, since they may feel they have "existence" mostly figured out. But this is hubris. There are socioeconomic, technological, geographical, interpersonal, and cultural forces that shape our experience of being, and when we participate in great cultural works, we gain a kind of wisdom.

This participation almost always happens in community. When we watch a film, we immediately want to discuss it.
We share our musical experiences. We have book clubs. We interpret together. Once we see this desire for shared experience, Taylor’s project becomes invaluable, since it allows us to more clearly see the tensions that haunt our times. When we can look at Jay Gatsby’s desire for Daisy Buchannan as not merely an intense romantic desire but a doomed allegory of transcendence, one that (nearly-century-old spoiler) *kills* him, we have a new way to speak to our neighbors about the human heart, the contemporary world, and God. We can make explicit the cross-pressures that haunt us, and consider how certain narratives fail or succeed in accounting for our agency, ethics, or beauty without impoverishment.

In the case of *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald depicts Daisy’s failure as an object of transcendence (as Ernest Becker would say, she could not bear the burden of godhood, nor could any mortal).206 Yet the depiction of Gatsby’s longing for some ideal outside of the immanent frame is compelling to readers precisely because it is so relatable. Part of the pleasure of the text is in sympathizing with Gatsby’s longing and suffering. When we use Taylor’s language to interpret art and literature in this way, it allows us to better understand both our neighbors and ourselves.

Please don’t misunderstand this approach as a New Evangelism Method. It’s not. It is, however, a way to bear witness to God’s truth in a highly contested world. Part of what makes interpreting works in this way so moving is that Christians can empathize with a horizontal longing for transcendence even though we have a robust belief in a transcendent

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God. This is because, as Taylor notes, we are all living in the immanent frame. While we may be open to transcendence, there is a sense in which we have to labor to pursue it. Practically, this means Gatsby’s desire for total existential justification through a romantic relationship is not a foreign feeling for Christians. We know this desire, or something very much like it. And in the act of participating in these cultural works that offer allegories of transcendence or even hints at true transcendence, we can praise what is true as we point to what is more fully true. The longing we experience is a longing we share with our unbelieving neighbors. Which means that when we share our interpretations, we are doing so from a place of common experience, not disengaged superiority.

**ALTERNATIVE IMAGINARY**

For most of us, Taylor’s story of secularism, cross-pressures, and the immanent frame will be most helpful in interpreting cultural works. But for a few, there is a more pressing and, I think, exciting application of Taylor’s ideas. Near the end of *A Secular Age*, he suggests literature (and I would argue the other arts as well) may offer one of the most poignant, disruptive voices for our times. Taylor’s account of unbelief in the 21st century suggests that it is not typically intellectual objections that keep people from faith, but the visceral pull of the immanent frame in the background. So we need to offer an alternative social imaginary, one that conceives of human fullness in Christ. It may require the creation of a “new language or literary style,” but the Christian artist may depict

transcendence from within immanence in a way that speaks to the lived experience of modern people.208

For his model, Taylor cites Flannery O’Connor.209 Evangelicals’ general admiration for O’Connor may blind us to Taylor’s point here, so I think it is instructive to look at the particular ways O’Connor works from within the immanent frame to push against closed immanence. Taylor notes how she told stories grounded in the everyday, worldly experience of the immanent frame while providing “a point not visible to the naked eye,” a point that forces a paradigm shift.210 One thinks of the grandmother’s epiphany at the end of “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” as an example. She embodies the petty evil of selfishness, perfectly absorbed in her own world and desires. Yet her epiphany at the end of the Misfit’s gun points to a force of transformation from outside herself, a force of grace.

Taylor doesn’t want us to see O’Connor’s use of violence and the grotesque as the only or primary way writers can offer signs of transcendence in an immanently framed world, but she does offer a model. Good contemporary art and literature will convey these cross-pressures. But the Christian artist may tilt toward the plausibility of true transcendence, demonstrating how this “take” on existence deeply satisfies since it doesn’t result in an impoverished vision.

208 Taylor, A Secular Age, 732.
209 Ibid.
210 O’Connor quoted in Taylor, A Secular Age, 732.
The opportunity for the Christian artist to point a way out of a closed immanent frame ought to be a source of both inspiration for artists and support from their communities. But it is hard to strike the balance Taylor is calling for, especially in a manner that can be effectively received. Art that unironically depicts the transcendent, as opposed to an allegory of transcendence, will tend to upset audiences. The ending of Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair* is a good example. Greene's novel recounts a love affair and a conversion to Catholicism during the Battle of Britain. Although God and Catholicism are themes within the text, the world of the novel—the characters, the events, the drama—takes place comfortably within an immanent frame, until the conclusion.

The novel's final sections introduce a series of miracles. Though most have a plausibly natural explanation, it requires the reader to accept a high degree of coincidence. But the last miracle—the clearing of one character's birthmark—has no other explanation. Critics and readers have been troubled by this miracle in an otherwise sensible novel. It strains credulity. It forces the reader to accept a particular account of the transcendent, rather than leaving it open. Interestingly enough, the protagonist rejects the miracle as evidence of God, demonstrating that Greene is sensitive to the difficulty of imagining something beyond the immanent. Yet despite acknowledging how hard it would be to accept a miracle while living within an immanent frame, and despite Greene's

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beautiful prose and storytelling, for some the novel's conclusion remains an aesthetic failure.

I don’t tell this story to discourage artists from following Taylor’s advice, but simply to show that it is no easy task. The temptation on one side will be to misrepresent the immanent frame—to cast it as wholly unsatisfying or joyless, when the truth is many live relatively pleasant lives without recourse to faith or any form of transcendence. If anything, technology and consumerism have made it easier than ever to live a fairly pleasant, distracted life within the immanent frame. Likewise, we may try to exaggerate the experience of an encounter with transcendence such that the audience feels unable to empathize. The key, I suspect, is the reality that we’ve almost all experienced the force of the immanent frame and a longing for something beyond it—and so the audience has the ability to empathize with both pulls. Artists can work with these foundational experiences, so long as they don’t abuse them through contrivance or unearned emotions.

**SIGNIFICANT INVESTMENT**

Bearing witness to the Christian faith in the 21st century requires a disruptive witness,212 one that unsettles our neighbor’s assumptions about life within the immanent frame. One of the most powerful ways to accomplish this is through interpreting and creating cultural works that speak not only to our minds but also our bodies, emotions, and memories. Taylor has given us valuable tools to better understand our neighbors and the kinds of anxieties that haunt both them

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212 For more on this concept, see Alan Noble, *Disruptive Witness: Speaking Truth in a Distracted Age* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, forthcoming).
and ourselves. To cultivate the deep knowledge to apply Taylor’s ideas, we will need significant investment in the Christian liberal and creative arts.

When evangelicals think about their relationship to the broader culture, I see two prominent approaches. The first is to treat their faith as just another aspect of their identity. In this trend, Christians conceive of themselves first as modern American individuals. The kinds of movies, films, songs, books, and video games they consume—and the way they interpret those works—is largely indistinct from their nonbelieving neighbors, except that they may have less tolerance for sex scenes, blasphemy, and excessive violence. The second approach sees the culture as divided into worldview categories, with each worldview vying for power and insidiously persuading us through the media. In this trend, the kinds of cultural works Christians consume and the way they interpret them tend to be distinct from their nonbelieving neighbors—so distinct that they may find it difficult to converse about the same film in any meaningful way. In light of Taylor’s work, it seems both of these popular approaches are misguided, since they fail to account for the force of the immanent frame and the cross-pressures we experience within it.

Charles Taylor’s work invites us to a much more complex—but much more insightful—conception of culture and our relationship to it. He emphasizes the way a basic human desire for fullness, which tends to be oriented toward some kind of transcendent end, motivates cultural works. To pursue this approach, we need foundational investment in Christian liberal arts universities, creative writing and film programs, literary publications, and more. Taylor has done the great service of making us aware of the power of aesthetic witnesses to God’s existence and goodness in a society largely held captive by the immanent frame. We are capable of
casting an alternative social imaginary, one that disrupts our neighbors' conception of the world by revealing and validating eternity hidden in their hearts (Eccl. 3:11). But to learn to interpret and create cultural works in this way will require time, investment, and mentorship.
It’s February 13, 2016. Kanye West takes the stage as the musical guest on Saturday Night Live. He stands in all-white camouflage, flanked by a choir. Behind them is an angled projection screen scrolling pixelated images of what appears to be clouds. A track starts playing—the voice of a little girl praying, casting out demons (“We don’t want no devils in the house”), speaking in tongues. Kanye sings, “We on an ultralight beam, we on an ultralight beam, this is a God dream, this is a God dream, this is everything.” His voice is contorted by an auto-tuning effect, simultaneously making it more perfectly in tune and yet more broken, unnatural.

The track is deconstructed and minimalist. No real drumbeat, just occasional stabs and throbs. Kanye prays for serenity, peace, and love. “Lord knows we need it.” The choir moves in choppy unison. They join him, singing, “This is an ultralight beam.” Two Gospel singers join him, lament-
“I’m trying to keep my faith . . . why send depression not blessings?”

“I look to the light,” one sings. “I know you’ll take good care of your child.”

Out of the wings comes Chance the Rapper, who before this performance wasn’t a household name. He sings, “When they come for you, I will feel your pain. I will field their questions. I will feel your pain. No one can judge.”

Suddenly Chance breaks out in verse, his rhymes moving in a fast counter-rhythm to the song’s lurching slow one. His first line: “Foot on Devil’s neck ’til it drifted Pangea.” It is apocalyptic; like an image from John’s revelation, stomping on the Devil so hard it causes continental drift. The verse is expressionist—a series of images, phrases, and ideas, all invoking spiritual warfare, fighting demons, seeking freedom.

“You can feel the lyrics, Spirit coming in braille / Tubman in the underground come and follow the trail. I made Sunday Candy I’m never going to hell. I met Kanye West I’m never going to fail.” The beat intensifies, the choir dances, the verse comes to its climax. “This is my part; nobody else speak / This is my part; nobody else speak / this little light of mine / glory be to God.”

The beat intensifies even more. Chance leaps and shouts, “I’m just having fun with it / you know that a n***** was lost / I laugh in my head cuz my ex lookin’ back like a pillar of salt / but people just please don’t forget about Jason
Van Dyke\textsuperscript{213} / you cannot mess with the light / just look at lil’ Chano from 79.\textsuperscript{214}

The chorus returns. “I’m trying to keep my faith / but I’m looking for more / somewhere I can feel safe / and end this holy war.” Kanye walks to the middle of the stage and falls prostrate. Kirk Franklin emerges from the wings and prays, “Father, this prayer’s for everybody who feels like giving up. This prayer’s for everybody who feels like they’re not good enough. Everybody that said, ‘I’m sorry’ too many times. Jesus, that’s why I’m glad you came to give us eternal life. I’m so glad about it.”

The choir erupts, and in a call and response, they join Franklin and sing, “Faith. (In this world we’ve been looking for) more. (Lord, please keep my little brother) safe. (We stand here and we fight in this) war.”

The whole performance is stunning. It’s earnest. It seesaws between desperation and celebration. When the song ends, Kanye bursts up from the ground to announce his record is releasing then and there, streaming on the music service Tidal. It breaks the tension of the moment—the deep sense of transcendence—and yanks us back into the present. This is a TV performance, not the desperate pleas of a broken man.

Worse than that, it is (to borrow a phrase from \textit{A Christmas Story}) a crummy commercial.


\textsuperscript{214} One of Chance’s names for himself.
BUFFERED SELF

I can think of no other moment from pop culture that so perfectly provides fodder for talking about Taylor's *A Secular Age*. It's all there: the buffered self, the immanent frame, the malaise of immanence, longing for fullness.

Let's start with the buffered self.

Taylor says that pre-modern humanity understood itself as “porous.” By this, he means humanity believed their bodies and souls were vulnerable to unseen, external, and spiritual influences:

This porousness is most clearly in evidence in the fear of possession. Demons can take us over. And indeed, five centuries ago, many of the more spectacular manifestations of mental illness, what we would class as psychotic behavior, were laid at the door of possession, as in the New Testament times.215

Porousness wasn't just a negative concept. The good things in our lives and in our minds are also open to external influences:

Say someone falls in love. . . . An “internal” event, we [meaning, us—moderns] think, albeit susceptible to pressures from the outside. . . .

But now let's say that we see this whole side of life as under the aegis of a goddess, Aphrodite. That means that its going well if it's being smiled on by Aphrodite. This means not only that she is keeping external dan-

gers at bay; like a human patron, she is in this aspect causally responsible for the conditions being propitious. It also means that the blooming of the right internal motivation is a gift from her. In other words, my being in the highest motivational condition [I think he means to say “in love”] is not just a fact about my inner realm of desires; it is my being the recipient of the gift of the goddess. The highest condition can’t just be placed unambiguously within; it is placed in that interspace, where the gift is received.

In other words, pre-modern humanity saw the life of the mind as subject to external, spiritual, and mysterious influences. Just as madness might exist because of the influence of evil spirits, love might exist because of the influence of benevolent spirits. Love does not just happen within the mind; love is something external that penetrates my mind, and I participate in it. I am vulnerable to love, just as I am vulnerable to madness.

In modern humanity, things are quite different. No longer is there a plausible sense that our lives are under the influence of unseen—whether malevolent or benevolent—spiritual forces. Instead, there are clear, palpable explanations for life’s questions. Love evolved to motivate the perpetuation of the species. Disease comes not from demons, but germs. Our psychological disorders result either from bad genes or bad upbringing. This modern way of understanding feels safer (and thus “buffered”) because our problems are comprehensible, and not the product of mysterious forces:

See the contrast. A modern is feeling depressed, melancholy. He is told: it’s just your body chemistry, you’re hungry, or there is a hormone malfunction, or whatever. Straightaway, he feels relieved. He can take a
distance from this feeling, which is ipso facto declared not justified. Things don't really have this meaning; it just feels this way, which is the result of a causal action utterly unrelated to the meanings of things. This step of disengagement depends on our modern mind/body distinction, and the relegation of the physical to being "just" a contingent cause of the psychic. But a pre-modern may not be helped by learning that his mood comes from black bile. Because this doesn't permit a distancing. Black bile is melancholy. Now he just knows that he's in the grips of the real thing. Here is the contrast between the modern, bounded self—I want to say "buffered" self and the "porous" self of the earlier enchanted world.216

The modern self is "buffered"—safe from the mysteries of an unknowable world. But there are consequences to that buffering. The flip side of being buffered from unknown spiritual powers is that you're cut off—or at least hindered—from any experience of transcendence. Taylor describes our world, where there are explanations for every phenomenon, as the "immanent frame."

Imagine it like a dome. Everything inside the dome is the realm of immanence; outside is the realm of transcendence. People whose imaginations are formed by life in a secular age bump their heads on the ceiling of the dome when they veer near ideas that invoke transcendence, be they religious, moral, or aesthetic.

Taylor says "we come to understand our lives as taking place within a self-sufficient immanent order," and this is the only world we can take seriously. It is made up of things we can touch, taste, smell, and measure, and it is dismissive of

216 Taylor, A Secular Age, 37–38.
the speculative realm that lies outside of it. "This frame," he writes, "constitutes a 'natural' order, to be contrasted to a 'supernatural' one, an 'immanent' world, over against a possible 'transcendent' one."²¹⁷

MEN IN A CAVE

In her essay "Tradition and the Modern Age," Hannah Arendt makes her own attempt to describe how we've found ourselves in a culture without transcendent categories. According to her account, one can trace it back to the philosophy of Karl Marx, who sought to turn philosophy on its head. She describes Marx's accomplishment through the lens of Plato's cave analogy.

Plato imagined humanity like men shackled in a cave, forced only to know a world of shadows cast on the wall. He wanted to release man from his shackles and move him out of the world of shadows (the realm of immanence) and into the light (the realm of transcendence). Marx wanted the opposite. Away with your transcendence; let's deal with reality: politics and economics. Arendt writes, "Turning the tradition upside down within its own framework, [Marx] did not actually get rid of Plato's ideas, though he did record the darkening of the clear sky where those ideas, as well as many other presences, had once become visible to the eyes of men."²¹⁸

In other words, in a secular age, we've returned to the cave, to shackles, to a world of shadows.

Herein lies the curse of secularism. Ecclesiastes 3:11 says God has put eternity in the hearts of men. The im-

²¹⁷ Taylor, A Secular Age, 542.
manent frame is ultimately a dissatisfying place to live, because it shackles the human heart inside a world that is simply too small for it. Our longing for transcendence can’t be squelched, nor can it be satisfied. And, as James K. A. Smith puts it (summarizing Taylor), “The dissatisfaction and emptiness can propel a return to transcendence. But often—perhaps more often than not now?—the ‘cure’ to this nagging pressure of absence is within immanence, and it is this quest that generates the nova effect, looking for love/meaning/significance/quasi ‘transcendence’ within the immanent order.”219

This leads to a search for satisfaction in other ways: through consumption, pleasure, or a certain kind of tribalism, all of which have a way of temporarily distracting us from our longing for eternity. A malaise sets in, which Taylor says is one of a secular age’s most notable characteristics.

He identifies three specific kinds of malaise:

(1) the sense of the fragility of meaning, the search for an overarching significance; (2) the felt flatness of our attempts to solemnize the crucial moments of passage in our lives; and (3) the utter flatness, emptiness of the ordinary.220

To expand these slightly: (1) We long for an overarching account of the meaning of life, our purpose here on earth. (2) We don’t know what to do with life’s big moments—weddings, childbirth, funerals, and so on—because our secularist account for them is inadequate for the deeper sense of meaning we intuit about them. (3) Daily life always feels like something is missing.

219 Smith, How (Not) to Be Secular, 69.
220 Taylor, A Secular Age, 309.
On this third point, Taylor writes:

[We] can also just feel the lack in the everyday. This can be where it most hurts. This seems to be felt particularly by people of some leisure and culture. For instance, some people sense a terrible flatness in the everyday, and this experience has been identified particularly with commercial, industrial, or consumer society. They feel emptiness of the repeated, accelerating cycle of desire and fulfillment in consumer culture; the cardboard quality of bright supermarkets, or neat row housing in a clean suburb; the ugliness of slag heaps, or an aging industrial townscape.221

Those who become frustrated with the malaise of the city move to the suburbs, only to find the same emptiness and flatness there. To quote Woody Allen, “It turns out life is just a little unsatisfying.”

But there are nonetheless moments, within the overarching feeling of malaise, when something opens up in the immanent frame and a little light gets in. Taylor uses the word “fullness” to describe these moments—moments of transcendence that feel too big to make sense of within the secular frame. It is the kind of life we all aspire to—a sense of completeness and wholeness.

It is also something artists experience in their work. Brian Koppelman is a filmmaker and screenwriter. He’s also an atheist. In an interview with singer/songwriter Glen Phillips, he admitted, “For an atheist, these moments are very confus-

221 Taylor, A Secular Age, 309.
This is precisely the experience of fullness. Something a little too big to account for in immanent terms.

**CROSS-PRESSURED LIFE**

Which brings us back to Kanye.

Kanye’s work is a clear illustration of the cross-pressured life. His music has demonstrated a struggle with faith from his early beginnings, like in “Jesus Walks.” The song begins by describing the life of a drug dealer, wrestling with guilt over his sins and hoping the Devil doesn’t break him down. By the end, there’s almost a conversion. He needs Jesus, and he’s testifying to “hustlers, killers, murderers, drug dealers, even strippers.” He needs Jesus “the way Kathy needs Regis.”

Faith is a central feature of Kanye’s music. Sometimes it is angry, bordering on imprecatory prayer, like in “Black Skinhead” from 2013’s *Yeezus*. Sometimes he nods to it quietly while he raps graphically about sex, power, and money. But “Ultralight Beam” seems to be the most honest and confessional work of faith in his whole catalogue.

From the beginning of the song, Kanye exposes the haunted fear that his soul might indeed be porous. “We don’t want no devils in this house,” says a little girl’s voice. “We want the Lord.” It is a prayer of both exorcism and invocation. It is as if he’s *haunted* by faith—a word Taylor uses to describe life in a secular age. Haunted by the dream that perhaps there’s something more.

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Because make no mistake, in the rest of Kanye's life, he's unapologetically looking for meaning within immanence. He's married to Kim Kardashian, one of the most famous, wealthy, and pampered human beings on earth. He's regularly bragging about his greatness on Twitter and on camera. His other songs boast about sex with models, seducing record executive's wives, and varied expressions of power and wealth. Kanye is not a Christian role model.

That's what makes "Ultralight Beam" so telling. All the pleasures of life in immanence leave him unsatisfied. "I'm trying to keep my faith / but I'm looking for more / somewhere I can feel safe / and end this holy war." His buffered self feels fragile and porous. His search within immanence has left him wanting. So he surrounds himself with his own "cloud of witnesses"—Kelly Price, The-Dream, Chance the Rapper, and Kirk Franklin—who offer something akin to intercessory prayers.

Witnesses might be the best word to describe these collaborators, since most of their work is far more overtly religious than Kanye's. Franklin, for instance, is a giant in the world of Gospel music, and has put faith at the center of his work. Chance, too, is a much more consistently Christian voice. It is hard to imagine Kanye writing "How Great Is Our God," Chance's song that begins with three minutes of an a cappella choir singing Chris Tomlin's praise-and-worship hit of the same name.

Kanye can't seem to make peace with the world of faith, can't make sense of it. What does make sense to Kanye is the world of immanence. He gives that away at the end of the Saturday Night Live performance, when he manically leaps to his feet to announce the release of his record. The performance is drama; the sales and distribution of the album is real. Likewise, on the album The Life of Pablo, "Ultralight Beam" is the opener; the next song, "Father Stretch My
Hands, Pt. i,” opens with a vulgar description of sex. It is as though Kanye reaches for repentance and transcendence and immediately returns to the world of immanent pleasure. He repents in the wrong direction.

This is the pendulum of Kanye’s music: movements toward religious hope followed by despair and indulgence.

Yet there’s another element of “Ultralight Beam” that resonates nicely with Taylor’s ideas. Taylor speaks specifically about the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins (who, we should note, is a very different poet than Kanye West). “Poetry is potentially world-making,” Taylor says. It creates new symbols and provides new meaning. It can create a kind of breach in the immanent frame, opening our imaginations to the possibility of something more. Something transcendent.

I think this is true of the arts in general. Literature like that of David Foster Wallace or John Jeremiah Sullivan has a way of probing and poking holes in the limits of the immanent frame. Damien Hirst, a visual artist, takes objects from the real world (embalmed cattle, or an embalmed great white shark) and presents them to us in a way that is undeniably transcendent and haunting. The point being, the immanent frame isn’t made of concrete.

There’s a scene in the original Jurassic Park where they’re touring past the velociraptors’ cages. Robert Muldoon, the game warden, notes that they used to attack the fences when the feeders came. Systematically striking various sections. “They were testing them for weaknesses,” the game warden says.

This, I think, is what the arts can do in a secular age. They can test and probe the immanent frame, looking for weaknesses. James K. A. Smith gets at this when, summa-

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rizing Taylor, he writes: “Don’t you *feel* it? Don’t you have those moments of either foreboding or on-the-cusp elation where you can’t shake the sense that there must be something *more*?”

This is Kanye’s explicit cry in “Ultralight Beam.” In a secular age, we grasp for concrete reasons why art “works”—how it evokes activity in the brain, the neurosystem, and the body that accounts for the feeling we get when we encounter it. The best artists push those accounts to their limits, and make us question whether they’re sufficient to describe what the artwork has done to us. They push us to the edge of the immanent frame.

“I’m looking for more,” Kanye says. And the opportunity for the church in a secular age is to greet that thought with joy. Because there is so much more.

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224 Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 137.