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Interreligious Dialogue In A Secular Age

Mark Ryan
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This paper traces how Jewish philosopher Martin Kavka's response to Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*, a major work by a significant Christian philosopher, influenced my own reading of Taylor's work. In addition, Kavka's reading of this text spurred me to explore further my own concerns about what Taylor had done in terms of the habits of Christian exegesis that might represent a temptation for Christians. In addition to exploring what may be wrong with Taylor's work, and comparing certain Jewish and Christian reading habits, the essay tries to point to a way that interreligious encounters can be fruitful.

Taylor's *A Secular Age* culminates in the question of how to go on as a religious person in a secular age. In the book, "secularity" refers not primarily to the lack of assent to certain intellectual propositions about the existence of God, but to the experiential conditions of believing. Taylor is concerned with how these conditions are influenced by a whole outlook and way of life characteristic of our times. How to go on today as a religious person is, I believe, the main issue driving Kavka's concerns in response to Taylor, as well as my own concerns. But related to this is the question of how to get along within the political and institutional frameworks we have—especially in a context of plurality within and among religious and non-religious traditions, and the conflicts or "culture wars" that this plurality seems to generate.

The paper starts off by presenting Kavka's reading of Taylor. He not only criticizes Taylor's conclusions about what it means to be religious in our age, but he also offers a constructive alternative rooted in Jewish reading practices, especially a conception of divine and human law with roots in Maimonides. In the subsequent section, I take Kavka both to have identified an important shortcoming in Taylor, and to have goaded Christians to re-examine their tradition in order to clearly identify the temptation Taylor represents. I suggest that by drawing on Aquinas's treatment of the "New Law" in the gospels we find a better approach that speaks to Kavka's concerns. These steps, I suggest, provide the outline of an interreligious encounter and its fruits. I reflect on this in the conclusion.

Example 1: Kavka on Taylor's Neglect of Torah

First, we must set the terms. Like he did in *Sources of the Self*, Taylor formulates his basic question in *A Secular Age* in terms of the human agent's quest for fullness of life. While in *Sources* he explored "moral ontologies" more generally, here he focuses on how religious belief enters into the human quest for fullness of life. In short, the story of the emergence of our spiritual world today is a tale of passing from an experiential frame, wherein the major sources of fullness were conceived as transcendent, to a frame in which immanent sources of are equal or greater attraction. Taylor remarks that, in our Western society in the year 1500, it was "virtually impossible not to believe in God," while for many of us today it is easy.¹ Immanence is here to

¹ *A Secular Age*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 25.

stay, and it changes the conditions in which religious believers must go on. But the question for our cultural future is whether the immanent frame we have constructed (i.e., secularity) will be porous to transcendence or exclude such sources altogether. How do we “spin” the existential frame in which we live?²

Kavka takes exception to Taylor’s “existential framework” approach. For one, if this is what it means to go on as a religious person in pluralistic societies—i.e., to answer grand questions about the sources of flourishing—what hope do we have of ever getting anything done?³ Second, I believe he suspects that Taylor’s overconfidence in his anthropological universalism accounts in part for Taylor’s overlooking of the Jews in his narrative. Kavka proposes instead an approach based on law and its effects

Specifically, if we take God to have made himself fully immanent through law, as “commanding God” religious traditions like Judaism do, we do not have to worry about agreement on grand questions about which version of the existential frame is best (i.e., best for mediating transcendence and immanence).⁴ Rather, we—and here he means those within a tradition of this sort—can place our attention on the laws and practices we actually have and evaluate their effects. That is, if we assume that our theological sense has already, in some shape, become incarnate in the laws we live by, we can get busy assessing whether they do so well or poorly.

Kavka’s Recovery of Maimonides on Law

As an example of scriptural reasoning, Kavka’s treatment claims that “Leviticus 19:2 (‘be ye holy as I am holy’) gains the full force of its meaning when read alongside Deuteronomy 30:14 (Torah “is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it”). He pairs these scriptures with Maimonides’ reading of the relation between divine/revealed law and “nomotic” or secular laws of lands.⁵

Together, these passages from Leviticus and Deuteronomy allow Kavka to claim that God has rendered himself immanent through law. That law, the following of which enables human beings to become holy as God is holy, is given to us to observe. That is, in observing the law, we are near to God’s will. Law, then, provides a “framework” for addressing religion, or “transcendence,” in our modern age. Kavka will look at the possibility of being religious today in laws of various kinds.

² To see how Taylor sets up the different ways one might read modern secularism’s “immanent frame” see *A Secular Age*, 550-556.

³ At one point, he refers to this as the “tragic” sensibility. See Kavka, 128.

⁴ Kavka writes, “For one of the things that escapes Taylor’s portrait of good religion in *A Secular Age* is the possibility that transcendence might mediate itself fully through law. Such an omission is striking; religious law is something that has a transcendent ground, yet is understood by at least some adherents to some religious traditions as resulting in ordinary notions of human flourishing. In other words, there is no need in a religion that has a robust notion of law to rise to eternity. Eternity has already descended into law. Law is eternity made immanent. (One should also note that law, although revisable, is not perishable—unlike a God made flesh.) One’s life need not be articulated in terms of a large teleological sweep, because the content of revelation is already that telos” (Ibid., 128).

⁵ Ibid.

But what is meant by law here? Kavka is aware that if law is understood (only) in its revealed sense, the law by which God selects out a people and renders them holy may seem to have little to say to modern politics. Here, Kavka begins his discussion of Maimonides' treatment of law, which shows the relationship between divine law and "immanent" or earthly forms of law. This account proposes porous borders between "law" in its revealed or divine sense and in its secular sense. In fact, it is the "divinity" of law that accounts for the overlap of these two kinds of law, divine and secular. How so?

For Maimonides, Kavka claims, what makes a law divine is not the "ground" or source of the law; rather, a law's divine status can be judged from its effects.⁶ Divine laws are associated with those laws that make observers and their actions good. He therefore distinguishes divine laws from secular laws by asking after their intent, what they aim to accomplish. While some secular laws may be directed to inferior or even false ends, the emphasis on effects implies that not only revealed laws can be divine. When secular laws produce good effects within individuals and societies, they may also be judged to be divine. Thus, Maimonides's focus on the effects that a law brings about enables him to relate, and in some cases identify, divine laws and earthly laws.

Furthermore, Maimonides recognizes two orders of goods at which laws might aim. This distinction becomes useful when it comes to instructing religious persons from a "commanding God" tradition in engaging the religious and non-religious Other in pluralistic societies, orders where their tradition is not meaningfully established. These are 1) goods of the soul, or the full perfection of human being, and 2) goods of the body, or the ordinary animal welfare in which all human beings share. In fact the "welfare of the body," as an effect of law, is prior to the welfare of the soul, for without a functioning body we cannot seek perfection. Kavka further clarifies how this distinction among goods colors the account of law and its aims found in Maimonides, writing: "It is necessary to be clear about how a 'secular' *nomos* and revealed law might overlap. Where they overlap is not in their portrait of what human perfection is; in this regard, they do not intersect. But they do overlap insofar as they see law—whether revealed or not—as producing social welfare."⁷ So, while the extent of overlap is limited, this conception of the relation of divine and human laws provides a basis on which religious persons who have a "commanding God" tradition can engage their differences with other religious believers, non-believers,⁸ and even those within their own tradition with whom they have profound conflicts.⁹ Further, such a

⁶ "For it is the aim of this Law that everyone should be such a man [one who is perfect among the people]. Only that Law is called by us divine Law, whereas the other political regimens—such as the *nomoi* of the Greeks and the ravings of the Sabians and of others—are due...to the action of groups of rulers who were not prophets" (Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines, [Chicago:University of Chicago Press: 1963], quoted in Kavka, 129-130).

⁷ Kavka, 130.

⁸ Kavka adds here that, "nevertheless, the possibility of such an overlapping consensus might *require* believers to have an account of transcendence as mediating itself through law, as secularizing itself in a way that produces such an overlap" (Ibid).

⁹ In the article on which I am drawing, Kavka provides an illuminating description of a debate among Jews (Faculty, Administration, governing board) at Yeshiva University on how to conceive of homosexual relationships within Judaism.

form of being religious would evade the anxiety about theological difference, an anxiety which, Kavka thinks, plagues Taylor's "existential frame" approach as well this approach's clumsy method for engaging with cultural conflict. Thus, this tradition of religious law provides an alternative account of how a religious person may go on in a secularized, pluralistic society.

In sum, Kavka, with Maimonides's help, has set out a framework or path for a religious person living in a secular age. This path requires that we begin with concretizations or codification of our theological doctrines and ask whether those structures/codes are having good effects—i.e., whether they are a good embodiment of those doctrines. Kavka suggests that we interrogate our laws and practices with such questions as: "Do they minimize wrongdoing? Do they promote political order? Do they make living with others in our polity easier? Do they promote the good treatment of fellow members of our polity?"¹⁰ Again, all this follows from the idea that God has already mediated Godself to immanence through law and legal structures.

Example 2: Aquinas on the Sermon

Can Christians be considered members of a "commanding God" religious tradition? What resources are there in Christian Scripture and its interpretation for properly mediating transcendence and immanence? How can this be done so as not to give way to the impatient yearning for wholeness that, on Kavka's reading, constitutes Taylor's modern self? We Christians cannot avoid some of the anti-law language that alarms Kavka when it takes the form of expression found in Taylor's account of being religious in our times, but it can be chastened in certain ways. A Kavka-inspired exploration of Christian sources may reveal something about the kind of Christian temptation to which Taylor seems to have fallen prey. Indeed, it may begin to disclose an alternative way to be religious, akin to Kavka's Maimonides inspired account. If this is so, what might it say about the fruitfulness of interreligious dialogue?

I therefore turn to a second example, seeking a way for Taylor and fellow Christians to deliberate about being religious in a way marked by patience with difference—in a way, to insert the terms of Christian eschatology, that rightly relates our this-worldly desires to our fulfillment in the world to come. For this, I look to Aquinas's treatment of the "New Law." Rooted in his interpretation of New Testament texts, and yielding a "theological anthropology," the New Law is the law that, through the Spirit, directs the believer from within toward true happiness. We are interested, of course, in how Aquinas' approach can help us to find a way around what is troubling in Taylor's. Here, I am following Professor Pinckaers, a Dominican theologian who discusses this section of the *Summa* in the context of his call for renewal in Catholic moral theology.¹¹

We begin with what might be most controversial in Aquinas' account of the New Law from the standpoint of the Jewish-Christian encounter, namely its "internal" dimension. For Aquinas, the New Law takes root in the ultimate desire and inclination of human agents for

¹⁰ Kavka admits that these questions themselves contain terms which are "vexed." Nevertheless, he claims that classical rabbinics displays how such reasoning goes on, taking for example the interpretations of the biblical law regarding rebellious sons in Deuteronomy 21:18-21.

¹¹ Servais Pinckaers, *Morality: The Catholic View* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2003).

perfection or complete happiness. He distinguishes it by claiming that, while the law of the Old Covenant that was “written on tablets of stone” (2 Cor. 3:3), the New Law represents a New Covenant law that is “inscribed in the human heart” (2 Cor. 3:3). Aquinas explicates what is meant by “inscribed in our hearts” by saying that this new law is “infused.”¹² He draws on Paul’s remarks in Hebrews 8.10, where Paul refers to Jeremiah: “The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah...I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts.”(Jer. 31.31) Aquinas goes on to identify this law with the Holy Spirit. Drawing on Romans 3.27 and 8.2, he claims that the New Law is simply the grace of the Holy Spirit received through faith in Christ.

Pinckaers comments that the the very brevity of the New Law, found paradigmatically in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7, encourages inwardness. That is, in relieving believers of the burden of obeying the other prescriptions of the Old Testament law, the New Law frees them to turn their attention inward. The believer is able to devote herself to reflecting on her own spiritual growth. Furthermore, he notes that the Sermon, as opposed to a typical legal text enumerating duties, outlines a kind of spiritual transformation toward a spontaneous life of love in and through the grace of the Holy Spirit. The commands named in the Sermon cannot be fulfilled out of duty, but only from love. Thus, they both presuppose and express a distinctively Christian conception of moral freedom.

Thus far, this account of the Christian moral life might seem more likely to encourage than to avoid the temptation of Taylor’s existential frame and turn our attention away from concrete laws and their effects. But I want to turn now to ways in which this interior and teleological frame is complemented—and, I would argue, transformed—by counterbalancing and complementary forces, particularly ones that may ground the Christian’s quest for fullness in pragmatic discernment based on laws. Aquinas also says things here which suggest a form of transcendence always already mediated through laws.

To begin with, Aquinas points out the significant ways in which this law of the Holy Spirit is at the same time a “written law,” if only secondarily. It is worth quoting Aquinas at length here:

Nevertheless the New Law contains certain things that dispose us to receive the grace of the Holy Spirit, and pertain to the use of that grace. These things are secondary, so to speak, in the new law; the faithful needed to be instructed concerning them, both by word and by writing, about what they should believe, and what they should do. Consequently, we must say that the New Law is primarily an infused law, but secondarily a written law.¹³

Aquinas claims that the New Law also contains things that “dispose us to receive” the grace of the Holy Spirit and which “pertain to the use of that grace.” The Christian faithful need instruction about these parts of the law by “both word and writing.” These are the ways in which

¹² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947), I-II, 106,1. Quoted in Pinckaers, 84.

¹³ Ibid.

the New Law is also a written law, and I believe they are necessary to guard against the dangerous interiority that has tempted Taylor. I will therefore devote the remainder of this section to explicating the sense in which the New Law, though primarily spiritual, is also importantly written. Here I rely heavily on the work of Pinckaers, who points to the ways that the written parts of the New Law are also liturgical.¹⁴ What unites each way in which the New Law is a written law is the characteristic of being an instrument of the Holy Spirit.

A first way in which the New Law can be said to be written is in the humanity of Jesus. That is, a proper Christology helps to ensure that the New Law is mediated concretely. We have access to the Holy Spirit by faith in Christ, but Jesus is the *incarnate* Word: an embodied, visible and sensible subject in whose life and death the New Law takes shape and form. The credal testimony that Jesus is both fully human and fully divine is of the essence here. It is through a personal relation with Christ, following him in discipleship, that the New Law becomes our way of life, infused in us by the Holy Spirit or the spirit of life in Christ.

Pinckaers notes that this personal relation is ritually enacted in the sacraments. Among these, Communion, the ritual enactment of Jesus' last supper with his disciples in which he announces a new covenant to be established in his body and blood, is primary. For Pinckaers and Aquinas, the sacraments are instruments of the Holy Spirit and the ritual forms that accompany and facilitate the personal relationship to Christ mentioned above. Like the text of the Sermon, the sacraments prepare and enable us to receive the grace of the Holy Spirit in order to embody the New Law in community. The most important of these actions requires a gathering—symbolic of the community as a whole—in order to be enacted. Sacraments are placed in the context of the church's "liturgy" (the "work of the people"), of which one key aspect is the organization of the church year to "reproduce in the lives of the faithful the principal stages or 'mysteries' in the work of Christ."¹⁵ Thus, the New Law is "written" in the sacraments and the liturgy of the church, through which the Holy Spirit instructs and edifies the Christian believer with regard to what to believe and what to do.

Pinckaers goes on to point out that a further way in which the New Law is for Aquinas "also a written law" is represented by the role of the text itself in Matthew's Gospel. For Aquinas, Pinckaers comments, the Sermon on the Mount is the "specific text" of the New Law just as the Ten Commandments are of the Old. It is a "compendium" of the moral teaching of scripture. The New Law is, in other words, a scriptural law which requires and permits us to return to it and to be reminded, instructed, corrected, and edified. Pinckaers claims, furthermore, that the interpretation of the text cannot be carried out as if it stood free from the rest of Scripture, but it must be read in its broader, canonical setting—i.e. the whole of Christian Scripture. Thus, there are further practices of reading Scripture implied in this view of the Sermon on the Mount, such as the lectionary cycle of reading in which many churches today take part.

A few further characteristics allow Pinckaers to fill out the Sermon's distinctive shape among legal texts. First, it presupposes a community (the church) as its audience. It is not

¹⁴ The following discussion draws heavily upon pages 82-95 of Pinckaers, *Morality: The Catholic View*.

¹⁵ Pinckaers, 93.

addressed to individual persons or personal morality, as was apparent in our discussion of the sacraments. Rather, it is addressed to the church for which it provides a kind of constitution. It provides a basis for ecclesiastical institutions and for the rules and constitutions of religious communities.

Second, following from this, in distinction from most law codes that establish asymmetrical relations, the Sermon is oriented to a society of friends. The Sermon on the Mount thus “leads into a new order of things” characterized by friendship.¹⁶ Pinckaers notes that this goes along with St. Paul’s use of *paraclesis*, or exhortation, in his moral teaching to the early church. Friends exhort one another, and we are prepared to respond to such exhortation by the “gifts” of the Holy Spirit (Aquinas’s infused virtues).

In sum, the Sermon on the Mount is the specific text of the New Law, which, in distinction from other legal texts, is a kind of instrument for the transformation of the human agent toward love through the Holy Spirit that is infused in us and animates us from within. Through its spiritual and written characteristics, the New Law orients us internally toward the ultimate *telos* or perfection of communion with God. If I have him right, Kavka presents Maimonides as having a similar account of the function of revealed law, which aims to direct observant persons to their ultimate perfection.

The New Law directs from within, internally. And yet, it is not merely a law that directs personal morality, but it also guides the community united to Christ by faith. The community is the essential context of this interiority. As the law is the law of a community, the text is the constitution of the community called “church,” both at large and in its local embodiments.

What, then, have we learned from this foray into Aquinas on the New Law, guided by Pinckaers, that might help us to respond to Kavka’s concerns about Taylor? Aquinas’s treatment bears resemblances to as well as distinctiveness from Taylor’s anthropology. If Taylor has picked up his sense of a desire for fullness from reliable sources, he nevertheless could stand to be reminded of the important ways in which Christian perfection is to be pursued in the Scripture-rooted practices of the church.

Christians, like Jews, inhabit a “commanding God” religious tradition, even if Christians by and large have developed distinctive (distinctively inward?) ways of expressing a life of following the will of God. Aquinas’s example, I suggest, provides Christians with some resources for the task of framing their lives as believers living in pluralistic and secularized societies, and to do so more in terms of a pragmatic analysis of the laws and legal institutions that we currently have. Moreover, Christians looking at Aquinas might recognize a way of working with Scripture and tradition that guards against some of the temptations of Taylor’s approach.

Interreligious Dialogue

Before making some comments on the aspect of Christian-Jewish dialogue in this exploration, let me try to map out the path we have come down:

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 91.

- a) With Kavka, I noted Taylor's approach to the problem of being religious today in terms of an existential frame through which the agent chooses whether or not to see the secular world as porous to transcendence.
- b) I observed that Kavka makes the convincing claim that the existential frame, as an approach to being religious in our times, has cumbersome results when brought to bear on cultural conflicts. (This is because the way he puts the question makes it seem imperative that we find agreement on the ultimate purpose of human life in order to go on.)
- c) I detected that Taylor's approach (the existential frame) plausibly has Christian roots. A look at a thirteenth century Christian author (Aquinas) affirms this hunch.
- d) Moved by Kavka's concern about Taylor, and instructed by his alternative rooted in Maimonides, I turned to Aquinas's treatment of the New Law.
- e) I discerned that Aquinas shares Taylor's concern for intentionality and the inner man in relation to ultimate human flourishing (a natural human longing for "beatitude"). However, I also saw that, for Aquinas these concerns, are tied to a scriptural text, which is itself inseparably tied (in theory at least) to the reading practices of a community—practices, moreover, which are embodied in a life-shaping liturgy.
- f) I concluded with the judgment that the most concerning elements of Taylor's approach to being religious in our times stemmed from his failure to tether his anthropology to these scriptural and liturgical sources.

Conclusion

Do these steps reflect some pattern that is significant with regard to interreligious dialogue? We might start with the way that Kavka alerted me to the fact that Taylor seems to harbor a certain bias in his work against "commanding God" traditions (including the Catholic Magisterium!). He does so by his very protest against what Taylor has left out—namely the Jews.¹⁷ Furthermore, he helped me to see that this bias may be related to certain tendencies in the Christian tradition related to anti-Judaism.

Kavka also reinforced the trouble I previously noticed with regard to Taylor's reliance on an existential frame. Further, his critique helped me see the way that this reliance may lead to an impatience with respect to religious difference. I also described this above as the clumsy implications of Taylor's approach for handling cultural conflict. Kavka's Maimonidean alternative, furthermore, indicated what kind of scriptural exploration might best serve to avoid the temptations of Taylor's approach, given the sense that Taylor's work grows out of Christian soil. Not only is a turn to sources of Christian scripture and tradition called for, but one that pays close attention to those dimensions of these sources that Taylor seems likely to have suppressed, namely those elements of Christian tradition that are juridical, institutional, etc. In presenting Aquinas as an example of an alternative, I noted the way that the institutional and juridical elements inform Aquinas' presentation of the anthropological elements.

¹⁷ Taylor's oversight here is made evident when we note how little and how vaguely Judaism plays a role in his voluminous study of the modern age.

Perhaps this dynamic between a Jewish and Christian reader of Taylor points to some similarity of sensibility. How might this similarity be described? What is the extent of it? It is not so great as to make obvious differences between our traditions invisible. For instance, I would not wish to see Kavka adopting the language of “interior law,” etc. If the sensibility is heuristic, or something like a tacit skill, we might ask what practices help to cultivate this skill (e.g., Scriptural Reasoning?). From what I understand of Scriptural Reasoning as a novice practitioner, it suggests that the cultivation of such skills begins in a problem commonly acknowledged by two or more practitioners from two (or more) traditions that share a history. I believe that certainly applies in this case.

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