

CAN MEANING EXIST WITHOUT GOD?

A CLOSE READING OF QOHELET IN LIGHT OF THE SECULAR SOCIAL IMAGINARY

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A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF DIVINITY

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MEQUON, WISCONSIN

22 FEBRUARY 2017

ABSTRACT

This study explores the timeliness of the book of Qohelet in Christian Apologetics. It follows a methodology of close reading in Qohelet conducted within the conceptual frame of Charles Taylor's *Secular Social Imaginary*. This is an interdisciplinary study including biblical theology, rhetorical analysis, and Christian apologetics. These come together to show how humanism is an invalid construction for meaning and how Qohelet destroys all meaning-making undertaken apart from God. Subsequent apologetic cues from this comparison will be discussed. All this is done to chase readers to the present and eternal meaning found only in Christ.

Keywords: Qohelet, Charles Taylor, Meaning, Hebrew, Christianity

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INTRODUCTION

It was a safe space, buffered from any outside presence. No joke was off limits; no one could laugh too loudly. Yet it was not a group for everyone. Reason was a necessary credential. There was no membership fee for the Atheist Book Club, just maturity and honesty. As soon as everyone arrived and poured themselves some coffee, they sat down to begin their meeting. The group leader began as usual to read a section from a supporter of the cause, “‘Meaningless! Meaningless’ says the Teacher. ‘Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless. What do people gain from all their labors at which they toil under the sun? Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever.’”¹ He paused, “Any guesses?” “Why that’s Nietzsche; I know that voice,” said one. “No, it has to be Kierkegaard!” exclaimed another. “Camus?” posed a third. “Nope. All wrong.” said the leader. “This is something interesting I stumbled upon this week, written by an ancient philosopher named Qohelet.” No one had heard of him before, but the message sounded honest and mature so he continued to read...

Charles Taylor’s book, *A Secular Age*, traces the transformation of Western society from one in which it was virtually unthinkable not to believe in God, to one in which it is perfectly acceptable to state that there is no God. In order to help the reader comprehend the current underpinnings of the modern mind, he introduces an important concept called a *social imaginary*. A social imaginary is the way we collectively think of or imagine, even on a precognitive level, the whole of society. Taylor’s thesis thoroughly illustrates that the social imaginary of the Western world has become pervasively secular. However, the path wasn’t a linear progression or a tale of inevitable conclusions. Secularism has assumed the intellectual high ground, but Taylor does not accept this assumption and points to the general feeling of malaise that accompanies humanism’s new take on the world.

Secularism’s narrative has not resulted in cultural or individual triumph. Today’s Western society is full of people striving to forge transcendent meaning within an immanent frame. Although the impossibility of such a project is self-evident from the description, surprisingly, for many people, this is not self-evident at all. It remains a task which people in the *Secular Social Imaginary* busy themselves with every day. This challenge has also been a matter of debate among philosophers and is a core component in Christian apologetics. Meaning must be

¹ Ecclesiastes 1:2-4. All Scripture is taken from the New International Version 2011 unless otherwise noted.

grounded in God or else we merely live our lives pretending as if meaning is real, all the while knowing it is not. Only when we rest in God's eternal meaning can we know that our convictions are more than a personal philosophy or another technique to "get us through a bad day." Only God's meaning can stand the test of life and continue to stand after life has ended.

This thesis contains a parallel study of the *Secular Social Imaginary* next to a rhetorical analysis of Qohelet.² In the book of Qohelet, a mature, experienced man has taken up secularism's search for meaning "under the sun" and found it to be lacking. "Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless." Can meaning exist without God? Qohelet's honest, well-reasoned conclusion is a resounding, "No." This study explores the kind of space this could open up in our conversations in this cultural moment and at this particular apologetic challenge. All this is done to bring people into contact with the grace of God and the everlasting meaning found in Jesus Christ.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

This thesis stands on the shoulders of countless, faithful scholars. The following section succinctly describes the current field of apologetics and the current field of study within Qohelet as the base upon which the present study builds.

Apologetics

As postmodern thought has taken a hold of the Western mind the contemporary field of apologetics has become quite complex. Many apologists now favor a variety of apologetic methods in encounters with people of differing beliefs and temperaments. Apologists such as William Lane Craig, J.P. Moreland, Gary Habermas, Ravi Zacharias, John Warwick Montgomery, Timothy Keller, Alvin Plantinga, Richard Swinburne, and Jay Richards have established solid arguments that range from scientific to philosophical inquiries.³ Recently a number of apologists have moved toward integrating the existential perspective promoted by

² "Qohelet" is the Hebrew name for the biblical book of Ecclesiastes.

³ This section is indebted to the fine work of Luke Thompson's master's thesis. Luke, Thompson, "An Apologetic of the Cross as a Lutheran Approach to 21st Century Apologetics Centered on the Hiddenness of God." Master's thesis, Wisconsin Luther Seminary, 2013., 2.

Kierkegaard into an essentially traditional apologetic; notable among these is the Christian philosopher C. Stephen Evans.

While literature in apologetics is plentiful, Confessional Lutheran writers within the field are limited. The works of John Warwick Montgomery, Siegbert Becker, Craig Parton, Allen Quist, Gene Edward Veith, and Angus Menuge comprise the vast majority of the field with works that range from evidential apologetics to Christian vocation in academia. Publications on apologetics are quite rare within the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) and Evangelical Lutheran Synod. A small number of book reviews on apologetic topics, Lyle Lange's 2011 *Lutheran Synod Quarterly* article "Lutheran Apologetics: From Our Classrooms and into the World," and just a few essays in the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Essay File make up almost all of WELS output in this field.⁴

Perhaps the most significant development in Confessional Lutheranism regarding apologetics is the interest doctrine of vocation as it relates to apologetics. This subject has been explored through the books of Gene Edward Veith, who examines Christians' vocations both in and out of the home and how they specifically relate to bearing one's cross. Recent essays of Ken Cherney, Mark Paustian, and Jonathan Schroeder also examine vocation more specifically in light of the hiddenness or masks of God.⁵

The current study focuses on an apologetic that harkens back to Blaise Pascal, Søren Kierkegaard, or Emil Brunner. This particular apologetic argument concentrates on the lack of meaning within the *immanent frame*⁶ and will use Qohelet to answer the question, "Can meaning exist without God?" The general direction of this argument is introduced by Ravi Zacharias,

One of the most common refrains we hear from those who have reached the pinnacle of success is that of the emptiness that still stalks their lives, all their success notwithstanding. That sort of confession is at least one reason the question of meaning is so central to life's pursuit. Although none like to admit it, what brings purpose in life for many, particularly in countries rich in enterprising opportunities, is a higher standard of

⁴ Thompson, Luke. "An Apologetic of the Cross as a Lutheran Approach to 21st Century Apologetics Centered on the Hiddenness of God." 2.

⁵ Thompson, Luke. "An Apologetic of the Cross as a Lutheran Approach to 21st Century Apologetics Centered on the Hiddenness of God." 2.

⁶ This term will be further explained in the Conceptual Frame part of this study, but most simply refers to the terminate span of a single human life.

living, even if it means being willing to die for it. Yet, judging by the remarks of some who have attained those higher standards, there is frequently an admission of disappointment... Jack Higgins, the renowned author of *The Eagle Has Landed*, has said that the one thing he knows now at this high point of his career that he wished he had known as a small boy is this: “When you get to the top, there’s nothing there.”... Those who have not yet experienced the success they covet find it impossible to believe that those who have attained it find it wanting in terms of giving meaning to life.⁷

The Western world is busy chasing of all sorts of God-less visions of flourishing as meaningful, not daring to ask why any of it matters in the long run. Millions of people are working and striving for meaning, not daring to imagine the despair that will settle in, not when they fail, but, more disturbing, when they succeed at achieving everything they set their hearts on. “Meaningless, meaningless, a chasing after the wind.” The Qohelet had success, wealth, prestige, legacy—everything his heart desired. Yet after he turned to view his vast sum of human accomplishment he had nothing to say but “Meaningless.” Qohelet both completely decimates the humanist’s quest for meaning and points to a source of lasting meaning found in a hidden God. In terms of apologetics, the preceding points make this book incredibly timely in Western society today.

Recent Studies in Qohelet

Currently there is no specific use of Qohelet in contemporary apologetics but there is a growing field of study attached to Qohelet. At the turn of the century Qohelet was subjected to historical critical scrutiny and the attempt to discern a variety of sources. To a great extent historical criticism sought to exclude theological presuppositions from its methodology by insisting that the Old Testament should be read in the same way as any other Ancient Near Eastern text. However, towards the end of the twentieth century scholars began to move away from the fragmentation of Qohelet into multiple pieces and have increasingly come to recognize its purposeful design.⁸

Brevard Childs, who is not without his flaws, has sought to develop a hermeneutic which takes the Old Testament seriously as a unified canon. The intriguing effect of his canonical

⁷ Zacharias, Ravi. *Can Man Live Without God?* (Dallas; World Publishing, 1994), 56.

⁸ Bartholomew, Craig. *Qoheleth in the Canon? Current Trends in the Interpretation of Ecclesiastes*, (Themelios 24, no. 3, 1999), 20.

approach in his reading of Ecclesiastes is that he views the epilogue as the key to the canonical function of Ecclesiastes, undermining the one universal truth of source-criticism of Qohelet.⁹

More recently, however, literary approaches have come to the forefront of Qohelet scholarship and are proving fruitful.¹⁰ The literary turn in biblical interpretation has also encouraged interpretation of Qohelet as one complete composition. These results have renovated scholars' engagement with Qohelet. For instance, J.A. Loader analyses specifically the polar opposites in Qohelet's thought, T.A. Perry treats the book as a dialog between two opposite points of view, and A.G. Wright uses new critical insights to great effect in his very useful analysis.

Michael Fox has become well-known for his thorough work on a narrative approach to Qohelet. Some of Fox's conclusions are controversial but his discussion of Qohelet's contradictions and the structure of the book are hard to ignore. His book, *A Time to Tear down and a Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes*, casts a well-deserved shadow over the entire field of scholarship. His commentary is also in strong favor of a reading of Qohelet as a literary whole.

The Place of This Thesis

The present study will be quite different than the current field of study. Although I will approach Qohelet with rhetorical analysis, my methodology of *close reading* is executed through the conceptual frame of Charles Taylor's *Secular Social Imaginary*.¹¹ This study is also undertaken in service of Christian apologetics. Both of these distinctions will lead to different emphases than a purely theoretical rhetorical analysis would. This study culminates in a demonstration of the usefulness of Qohelet in contemporary Christian apologetics.

⁹Craig Bartholomew. *Qoheleth in the Canon? Current Trends in the Interpretation of Ecclesiastes*, 8.

¹⁰ It is important to be aware that certain studies in Qohelet, among both biblical and secular scholars, are unduly affected by issues of authorship or by the dating of the book's Hebrew.

¹¹ This term will be explained in detail in the Conceptual Frame section of this thesis.

APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

The present study will approach the text using rhetorical analysis and will employ *close reading* as the “on-the-ground” methodology. Rhetorical analysis means many things to different scholars, so what follows is the view that characterizes this study.

Rhetorical Analysis

Certainly it is my desire that there shall be as many poets and rhetoricians as possible, because I see that by these studies, as by no other means, people are wonderfully fitted for the grasping of sacred truth and for handling it skillfully and happily... Therefore I beg of you that at my request (if that has any weight) you will urge your young people to be diligent in the study of poetry and rhetoric.¹²

Although Luther’s belief in biblical inerrancy would cause him to reject most rhetorical critical works, he would appreciate that rhetorical analysis has always relied on rigorous, careful attention to textual detail. Plus, recently, scholarship has lead away from more dissecting, negative criticism into a methodology of *close reading*, or penetrating analysis of the text as it now stands.

This emphasis is increasingly welcomed by proponents of biblical inerrancy. It involves a turn back from alleged sources, oral traditions, and proposed historical circumstances, to a lively engagement with the text in its canonical form. In this way, rhetorical analysis connects us to the thought patterns of the author to understand most clearly the intended meaning of a text in its original context, presuming mastery, rather than mistake. For a conservative Lutheran, this approach to the text respects the brilliance and complexity of divine inspiration and treats the text as an artistic and sophisticated whole.¹³ In the best cases, the interfusion of theological and literary understandings is mutually beneficial as the careful reader is led into a deeper interaction with the subtle intricacies of God’s inspired Word. I approach Qohelet with rhetorical analysis having this goal in mind.

¹² Preserved Smith and C. M. Jacobs (eds.), *Luther’s Correspondence*. (Philadelphia: United Lutheran Publication House, 1918), II, 176-177.

¹³ Of course, rhetorical analysis is not a solution for all interpretive problems and hermeneutical questions. There always remains a caution to not overlay the biblical text with a grid of literary constructions, but the potential benefits are vast. In any case, advocates of biblical inerrancy and inspiration can hardly disagree with the central principle of rhetorical analysis: read the text.

The book of Qohelet is also an excellent candidate for rhetorical analysis because his story positively asks for this approach. Rhetorical analysis is said to be most fruitful at “sites of struggle.”¹⁴ These are the instances in which a humanly constructed artifact conceals something that the rhetoric implicitly assumes about the “oughtness” of life in a way that challenges the *taken-for-grantedness* of a prevailing ideology.¹⁵ The personal struggle of Qohelet is undeniably evident in the contradictions and artful dissonance which pervade throughout its twelve chapters. This agonistic quality is a useful criterion for approaching Qohelet with rhetorical analysis.

Close Reading

Concern for the relationship between form and content commends *close reading* as the methodology for this study. *Close reading* is closely associated with the specific techniques that constitute the “knack you use ‘on the ground’ once inside the text.”¹⁶ A close reader draws inferences about what the work in question is designed to do, and how it is designed to do it.¹⁷

Although the present study employs close reading under the broad umbrella of rhetorical analysis, it is not a strictly theoretical analysis of Qohelet. Certainly there is a general sense in which every study of this kind is theoretical because it looks for explanations that will add to an understanding of rhetorical patterns that might then be recognized in other texts. However, the present study is not intended to contribute to rhetorical theory, per say. As useful as rhetorical theory can be when it functions as a lens for noticing certain features of a text, strict reliance on a given rhetorical theory is also a way of not seeing.¹⁸

My method of close reading will not be driven by specific facets of rhetorical analysis but will be conducted through the conceptual frame of Charles Taylor’s Secular Social Imaginary. Jasinski expresses the ideal that correctly characterizes the present study:

¹⁴ Sellnow, Deanna D. *The Rhetorical Power of Popular Culture: Considering Mediated Texts*. (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2010), 12.

¹⁵ Deanna Sellnow, *The Rhetorical Power of Popular Culture: Considering Mediated Texts*, 3.

¹⁶ Brummett, Barry. *Techniques of Close Reading*. (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2010), 28.

¹⁷ Leff, M. C. & Sachs, A. (1990). Words the most like things: Iconicity and the rhetorical text. *Western Journal of Speech Communication*, 54, Special Issue on Rhetorical Criticism, 252-273, 256.

¹⁸ Paustian, Mark A. *The Beauty with the Veil: Validating the Strategies of Kierkegaardian Indirect Communication Through a Close Christological Reading of the Hebrew Old Testament*. PhD diss., (Regent University, 2016), 77-78.

It proceeds more through a process of abduction which might be thought of as a back and forth tacking movement between text and the concepts that are being investigated simultaneously....Conceptually oriented criticism proceeds through the constant interaction of careful reading and rigorous conceptual reflection.¹⁹

Qohelet invites its reader to discover or learn something for themselves. This strong heuristic element is evident in the personal narrative-style communication, the gaps opened between purposeful paradoxes, and all the natural questions that arise when reading the book. This supports close reading as my lens into the Hebrew text. Hariman speaks of the “transfer of consciousness created...within the text...into the world outside the text”.²⁰ In case it is not apparent to the reader, this point of view affirms the critic’s search for the author’s intended, objective meaning, avoiding the morass of “reader response.” Benson shows a similar interest in the inwardness of the receivers by his comment that the close reading critic “inquires into the states of thought and feeling an audience is invited to experience.”²¹ This heuristic quality also shows why *close reading*, in particular, is well-suited to interpretive challenges Qohelet poses.

Finally, close reading is really an end to itself. As a result of a successful close reading of a familiar text, it will be as if we were “hearing” it for the first time.²² “We do not enjoy a story fully at the first reading. Not till the curiosity, the sheer narrative lust, has been given its sop and laid asleep, are we at leisure to savor the real beauties.”²³

¹⁹ Jasinski, J. *The status of theory and method in rhetorical criticism*, *Western Journal of Communication*, 65(3), 2001., 256.

²⁰ Hariman, R. *Time and the reconstitution of gradualism in King's address: A response to Cox*. In M. C. Leff & F. J. Kauffeld (Eds.), *Texts in Context: Critical Dialogues on Significant Episodes in American Political Rhetoric* (pp. 205-218), (New York, NY: Psychology Press, 1989), 213.

²¹ Benson, T. W. *The rhetorical structure of Frederick Wiseman's high school*. *Communications Monographs*, 47(4), 1980., 235.

²² Clines, D. J. A. "Story and Poem: The Old Testament as Literature and as Scripture." *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 34, no. 2 (1980): 115-27., 27.

²³ Lewis, C. S., and Walter Hooper. *On stories, and other essays on literature*. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), 103.

CONCEPTUAL FRAME

And, tricked by our own early dream
And need of solace, we grew self-deceived,
Our making soon our maker did we deem,
And what we had imagined we believed,

Till, in Time's stayless stealthy swing,
Uncompromising rude reality
Mangled the Monarch of our fashioning,
Who quavered, sank; and now has ceased to be.²⁴

“Why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable?”²⁵ Was it really an inevitable conclusion of uncompromising reality as Tom Hardy assumes? Charles Taylor doesn't think so and his almost 900-page answer is a persuasive retelling of the process known as secularization. His narrative-style documentation of the massive cultural shift of the past several centuries demonstrates the inadequacy of Mainstream Secularization Theory²⁶ and the spiritual complexity of our “cross-pressured”²⁷ society. The culmination of this story lends voice to a hemisphere's subconscious. With Taylor's guidance an attentive reader is enabled, perhaps for the first time, to dive beneath the taken-for-granted assumptions of the Western mind to uncover the Secular Social Imaginary.

The Secular Social Imaginary

The underlying level of taken-for-granted assumption is what Charles Taylor calls a *social imaginary*:

²⁴ Thomas Hardy. *The collected poems of Thomas Hardy*. (London: Macmillan, 1974), 307. The English poet composed these extraordinary lines sometime between 1908 and 1910, in which he imagined himself attending God's funeral. It expresses in vivid form some of the issues which will be explored in the following pages.

²⁵ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 25.

²⁶ The Mainstream Secularization Theory (MST) generally states that these changes are the result of something like industrialization, urbanization, the differentiation of value spheres, or the progress of the natural sciences; and that this decline and decrease, seen as a linear progression, was all but inevitable, and will almost certainly continue.

²⁷ When Taylor speaks of Western society as “cross-pressured” he is referring to the simultaneous pressure of various spiritual and secular options. Living in a cross-pressured society means feeling caught between a religious past and the drive toward humanism. This cross-pressure has created an explosion of different options for belief.

What I'm trying to get at with this term is something much broader and deeper than intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in a disengaged mode. I am thinking rather of the ways in which they imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations which are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images which underlie these expectations.²⁸

Charles Taylor definition of social imaginary is much different than a social theory in a few ways. He uses "imaginary" because he is speaking about the way ordinary people imagine their social self and surroundings, and this is not something people usually express in theoretical terms. An "imaginary" is carried within; it is expressed in images, stories, and legends, etc.²⁹ A social imaginary, then, is the unspoken understandings which shape the perception and actions of many people. This social imaginary enables common practices, enjoys a widely shared sense of legitimacy, and it is mutually experienced by large groups, as in a whole society, not a small minority, as is usually the case with those who possess a theory.³⁰

A social imaginary also does not equate with a worldview. I might be able to explain in words what my worldview is, but my social imaginary is difficult to be aware of, much less articulate. It is made of the videos in our heads, pictures seared into the mind, a world of memory and experience operating at a precognitive level. Moreover, since a social imaginary is inherited by a society, people can possess completely contrasting worldviews while having the same social imaginary. Finally, the social imaginary is not so much possessed as inherited, positioned somewhere deeper in and more intertwined with the self.

The book, *A Secular Age*, then, addresses the question of how, specifically, the social imaginary of the West has become pervasively secular. As a result, the answer is concerned not so much with the content people believe as much as with what is *believable*. So the difference between the modern secular age and past ages is not necessarily the available options of belief but the unspoken, default assumptions about what is believable. This unique way of framing the question leads to Taylor's unique definition what it means to be "secular."³¹

²⁸ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 171-172.

²⁹ This is a key reason why Taylor designed his book as a narrative.

³⁰ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 171-173.

³¹ Smith, James K. A. *How (not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor*. (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B.), 19. In this insightful book, James Smith offers a faithful guide through the pages of Taylor's monumental work and raises perceptive questions relevant to Christian apologetics and evangelism.

In classic or medieval accounts “secular” referred, in general, to the earthly realm and was most often applied to vocations. For instance, the priest has a sacred vocation, but the cobbler and the butcher have secular vocations. In modernity, “secular” most often refers to a non-religious or *areligious* standpoint or space. Some schools are parochial while others are secular.³² But Taylor articulates a third type of “secular” that is to be understood when speaking of the *Secular Social Imaginary*. A social imaginary is “secular” in this sense when religious belief is understood to be simply one option among many, and contestable at that.³³

Charles Taylor highlights the secularity of the Secular Social Imaginary by exposing the newest option in the marketplace of belief. The non-axiomatic nature of belief in God and the contestability of all ultimate belief has not rooted out faith, nor will it, but it has given rise to the emergence of an *exclusive humanism*.³⁴ Taylor explains: “For the first time in history a purely self-sufficient humanism came to be a widely available option. This means a humanism that accepts no goals beyond human flourishing, nor any allegiance to anything else beyond this flourishing.”³⁵

The idea of flourishing, having a meaningful life and purpose, is a key to understanding the Secular Social Imaginary. For example, media has filled our head with versions of all sorts of people—men, women, athletes, rich, famous, etc.—living a good and meaningful life. Media has brought the Secular Social Imaginary to full bloom in the thousands upon thousands of images of flourishing that have no reference to God at all. Consequently, in the West’s current social imaginary people do not, as many Christians like to think, live their lives in conscious awareness that they are missing a “second floor” of transcendence. There is no Jesus-shaped hole gaping in their chest, at least not that they can find without some help.³⁶ Faith is only one alternative among the many.

The Western world is certainly not divided between exclusive humanists and devout believers. Today there are a thousand supposedly viable ways to live in this world besides the

³² This is also the meaning of “secular” assumed by the secularization theory.

³³ James K. A. Smith, *How (not) to Be Secular*, 21.

³⁴ Exclusive humanism draws strong correlations with the Qohelet’s view of life “under the sun.”

³⁵ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 23.

³⁶ This is the great mistake Christian apologists make if they assume that Christianity comes to the secularist to supply something for which they have long been hungering.

life of faith, a thousand ideas of what it means to flourish. So, although staunch believers would never consider giving up their faith, they cannot call someone without faith depraved or ridiculous because these alternate forms of life have been established in Western society as acceptable and valid.³⁷ In other words, when Taylor says that we have a Secular Social Imaginary he means that the very ground beneath us has changed; our society's underlying assumptions have become secular.³⁸

The Secular Social Imaginary does not destroy faith, nor does it prevent religious revival or growth, but the machine of secularization will not stop. In a certain sense, some within the Secular Social Imaginary do not doubt while believing, but rather believe while doubting. No matter how sacred the believer's worldview, no matter how devout, an American Christian today is constantly aware of the contestability of what they believe. Those contesting voices, which were previously muted, now sing out secularism's tune from a believer's television, computer, or school textbook. The modern believer lives amidst the secular and the secular lives within the believer. Even if a large number of the populace were to embrace religious belief, that could not turn back the clock on secularization. A machine has been set in motion that will not stop. "We would always know we *used* to believe something else."³⁹

The Components of Disenchantment

Charles Taylor does not simply identify the Secular Social Imaginary; he tells the story of how it came to be. A secular age didn't arise because modernism stripped belief away from society. Our social imaginary has been transformed: our feel for the world, our way of perceiving and reacting to the world without thinking about it has changed, because the formative stories of our culture have changed.

That story starts with the five "bulwarks of belief" which were each replaced by a corresponding component of disenchantment. The components of disenchantment and the bulwarks of belief refer to the five main concepts assumed in the modern and ancient social

³⁷ For this reason Christians should be aware that publications or hymns which speak of unbelievers as "pagan" or "heathen" may be quite offensive to new converts and prospects.

³⁸ James K. A. Smith, *How (not) to Be Secular*, 21-22.

³⁹ James K. A. Smith, *How (not) to Be Secular*, 23. Emphasis original.

imaginary, respectively. The bulwarks of belief are those unsaid taken-for-granted assumptions which made rejection of God unthinkable and which have since been replaced by the components of disenchantment, which make unbelief normal and even celebrated. First, (1) the *porous self* was replaced by the *buffered self* and a fierce individualism,⁴⁰ (2) the idea of earthly flourishing replaced spiritual goals, (3) time was taken down from the heavens and encased in an earthly frame, and (4) the cosmos of God's design was replaced by the universe as explained by humans.

The Buffered Self

What once was enchanted, that is had spiritual depth, has been disenchanting. Diseases and mental illness are no longer demonic possession; there is no magic in the stars; the body does not have an everlasting soul; and so on. Generally, disenchantment is thought to be a process of naturalization, but Taylor's account has a different accent. He sees disenchantment as primarily a shift in the location of meaning, moving it from the world into the mind.⁴¹ As Smith summarizes, "Significance no longer inheres in things; rather meaning and significance are a property of minds who perceive meaning intentionally."⁴² So, while in the enchanted world humans were vulnerable to outside force, whether blessing or curse, favor or scorn, in the disenchanting world the self is bound up inwardly and buffered from any supernatural influence. This is the first and most fundamental component of disenchantment.

The buffered self is the understanding of the self which is insulated from divine influence and isolated by its subjective inner nature. The buffered self transitioned from the *porous self* which was open to the spiritual world, to divine power, to blessing and curses and influenced by

⁴⁰ Individualism is an important component within Charles Taylor's story of Disenchantment, but I find it to be a sub-point of the buffered self and therefore I do not give it the special emphasis Taylor does. This shift occurred on a social level. Even the social bonds were enchanted. Living in the enchanted, porous world of our ancestors was inherently living socially. "One for all and all for one." There was not only a collective good, but a need for consensus. For example, if one person turned into a heretic it was not a personal matter, that choice had communal repercussions. Thanks to the Buffered Self, the groundwork was already in place for individualism. Once individuals became the locus of meaning, the social atomism that results means that disbelief no longer had social consequences.

⁴¹ Taylor sees this as not only about "linguistic meaning" but also about the fuller sense of meaning as in "the meaning of life" (p.31). This will be related to his use of the term *fullness*, which will be discussed below.

⁴² James K. A. Smith, *How (not) to Be Secular*, 29.

social bonds. “This sense of vulnerability,” Taylor says, “is one of the principal features which have gone with disenchantment.”⁴³ The new way of understanding ourselves allows us to feel safe in rejecting God and retreating to the safety and security of our minds.

Earthly Flourishing

The second feature of disenchantment which is most pertinent to this study is the idea of earthly flourishing. It was assumed in that human life found its ultimate meaning in a transcendent reality. The buffered self protected people from believing in a God and lead to an individualism that separated them from the social stigma and ramifications of their choices and so people began to free themselves from the expectations of religion. Consequently, since they no longer placed faith in God they needed to have a meaningful goal somewhere else. Soon ideas of purely *earthly flourishing* were constructed and the seeds of humanism were sown.

Secular Time

The third bulwark of belief to be disembedded was an idea of “higher” time. Events that were far apart in time could nevertheless be closely linked.⁴⁴ However, now the encasement of our time in is strictly natural. Time is simply a measurement, something Charles Taylor calls *Secular Time*. We have constructed an environment in which we live a uniform, univocal *secular time*, which we try to measure and control in order to get things done. So nothing “higher” ruins our schedules—only the relentless pace of life and our self-imposed burdens.

Cosmos to Universe

The final component of Disenchantment to triumph is something that Taylor calls the shift from *Cosmos to Universe*. Modernism shifted our perspective on the universe from a

⁴³ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 36.

⁴⁴ For instance, a Christian would experience Good Friday 2016 A.D. as closer in a way to the original day of the Crucifixion than a random day in 1016 A.D. A Christian’s sense of time, especially our view of history, is thrilling to ponder because in it we see the hand of God and are thankful for that time we are given in our own lives. It may seem obvious, but to those living in a secular social imaginary time is simply a measurement. No comfort, no joy, no wonder, just a steady ticking. This is also a good reminder to maintain the liturgical church year in our churches. We are focused on God’s “higher” time when our seasons, festivals, and weeks are placed around the Word of God, and not on the secular measurement of the earth’s journey around the sun.

cosmos, a well-ordered and hierarchical universe made by God with meaning and purpose, to a universe, massive and chaotic, in which we are but a small, chance part.

The five components of Disenchantment filled the underlying assumptions that needed to be replaced after the bulwarks of belief were disembedded. Only when they were in place could a Secular Social Imaginary be possible.⁴⁵

The Construction of a Secular Social Imaginary

It may be tempting to imagine a neat step-by-step description of how we got to where we are, but the rise of secularism didn't develop because of any single concept, nor was it a progression of coordinated changes. The modern Secular Social Imaginary was not an inevitable triumph of reality as the subtraction stories state.

By a subtraction story, Taylor means

... stories of modernity in general, and secularity in particular, which explain them by human beings having lost, or sloughed off, or liberated themselves from certain earlier, confining horizons, or illusions, or limitations of knowledge. What emerges from this process—modernity or secularity—is to be understood in terms of underlying features of human nature which were there all along, but had been impeded by what is now set aside.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ The rich narrative which traces the history through which these disenchanting shifts took place is a process Taylor calls *Reform*. Taylor's concept of *Reform* names a range of initiatives already underway in the late medieval period, and so should not be thought of as just the Protestant Reformation, although it did play a major part. *Reform* is the umbrella term Taylor uses to describe an array of movements in the late Middle Ages and early modernity. These movements are like the underground river of our secular age because they set in motion disenchantment's possibilities that wouldn't come to fruition until later in the 20th century. The richness and complexity of Taylor's *Reform* account, opposed to the postmodern illusion of being able to free ourselves from grand narratives, make his analysis of secular modernity so compelling. Taylor's account is more honest than the subtraction stories precisely because it successfully integrates history without assuming intellectual superiority.

Part of Taylor's account of *Reform* celebrates the Reformation's "sanctification of ordinary life" while also suggesting that this was the foot in the door of enchantment—that somehow the Protestant Reformation opened the door to what would become, by a winding path, exclusive humanism. In my mind, Taylor's understanding of the Reformation's intended purpose is not completely accurate, but his ability to point out human nature's tendency to overreact and to follow those implications is impressive. Particularly striking, Taylor notes that those reformers who rejected sacramentalism opened the door to the possibility of naturalism. One can see how this entails a kind of disenchantment: "we reject the sacramentals; all the elements of 'magic' in the old religion" (Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 79.). If the church no longer has good magic, "then all magic must be black" (Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 80.); all enchantment must be blasphemous, idolatrous, even demonic. The implications of this development are profound. The intent to return to the Word of God was, in and of itself, not a catalyst for humanism. Instead, certain reformer's unscriptural reactions to Catholicism may have had as large an impact on the emergence of humanism as anything else that happened in the 16th-19th centuries.

⁴⁶ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 22.

Science supplants religion, Darwin denies the Bible, reason dispels myth, and the list goes on. The move to modernity is described as a trimming of the fat of religious belief to get at the real meat beneath. After the mature have set aside the supernatural, the underlying reality emerges; fanciful interpretations are dismissed, revealing pure, naked fact for all to see. Humanists who pride themselves on these subtraction narratives enjoy the feeling of maturity and honesty that they believe to now possess. However, the subtraction stories cannot be defended as more mature or more honest. In the first place, their stories are far too simple and reductive. They either unduly prioritize one factor as the major motor of secularization—economics, science, etc., and/or drastically distort religious belief, practice, and institutions in order to fit the bounds of their interpretative frame.⁴⁷

Secondly, modernity and the rise of the Secular Social Imaginary were not inevitable. Taylor provides the zigzag account of causal complexity, demonstrating that the gradual emergence of today's Secular Social Imaginary involved a great many tectonic shifts in human thought, practice, and experience. Each of these factors had motivations and ends of their own, and only their intermingling led us to where we are now. It could have been otherwise; there were alternatives. Merely recognizing this fact is a necessary step toward a rounder understanding of what it means to live with the Secular Social Imaginary.⁴⁸ What many humanists speak of as the “discovery” of the way things are, or the “obvious” unveiling of reality once we remove enchantment, is in fact a construction, a creation. In short, this was not just a subtraction project. Secularism is, ironically enough, more of a tale of addition. The Secular Social Imaginary is an *imaginary*, not that it is all made up, but it is a construction for meaning apart from transcendence and, as such, it is contestable.

In some ways, this is the end-game of Taylor's argument. It's not that he's trying to construct a proof for the existence of God. Nor is he trying to prove an exclusively materialistic worldview false. Instead, he wants to disrupt the way humanism's intellectual superiority and honesty.⁴⁹ He does this by calling into question the obviousness of the humanist take on the

⁴⁷ Storey, David. “Breaking the Spell of the Immanent Frame.” *Rethinking Secularization: Philosophy and the Prophecy of a Secular Age*, (2009), 1-2.

⁴⁸ David Storey, “Breaking the Spell of the Immanent Frame,” 4.

⁴⁹ James K. A. Smith, *How (not) to Be Secular*, 99.

world—a take many have accepted in part because of the humanist’s claim to a position of maturity, honesty, and realism. Taylor doesn’t buy this narrative, and he points not only to the refutation of history, but also to a broad experience of malaise and dissatisfaction as part of his evidence.

The Malaise of Immanence

The *immanent frame* is that in which human flourishing, moral life, and nature all come to be understood in a self-sufficient, “this-worldly,” naturalistic way. Nevertheless, this immanence does not always result in psychological triumphs. A study conducted by San Diego State University psychology professor Jean M. Twenge shows that Americans are increasingly more depressed now than they have been in decades. Analyzing data from 6.9 million adolescents and adults from all over the country, Twenge found that Americans now report more psychosomatic symptoms of depression than their counterparts from the 1980s. Comparatively, teens in the 2010s are 38 percent more likely to have trouble remembering, 74 percent more likely to have trouble sleeping and twice as likely to have seen a professional for mental health issues. College students surveyed were 50 percent more likely to say they feel overwhelmed, and adults were more likely to say their sleep was restless, they had poor appetite and everything was an effort—all classic psychosomatic symptoms of depression.⁵⁰ Twenge says of her study, “This study shows an increase in symptoms most people don’t even know are connected to depression, which suggests adolescents and adults really are suffering more.”⁵¹

Those living in the Secular Social Imaginary often find themselves suffering, unsatisfied, and empty. Although some can fight off feelings of malaise for a while, not having stared down the barrel of meaninglessness that Solomon did, eventually everyone must wrestle with the inevitably crushing conclusion of the immanent frame. Death comes to us all and therefore no amount of success or wealth has any lasting meaning. This disconnect between earthly striving and the inevitable meaningless it amounts to is the shortcoming of the disenchantment. It is a dark cloud of vapor that all those who encased in the immanent frame breathe every day.

⁵⁰ San Diego State University. "Depression increasing across the United States." ScienceDaily. www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2014/09/140930132832.htm (accessed February, 2017).

⁵¹ Jean M. Twenge. “Time Period and Birth Cohort Differences in Depressive Symptoms in the U.S., 1982–2013.” Social Indicators Research, 2014; DOI: 10.1007/s11205-014-0647-1

The malaise of immanence proves not only the shortcomings of disenchantment, but the inherent dangers as well. As Alan Jacobs describes C.S. Lewis on the topic:

He felt there was nothing he could do to re-enchant the world. The one thing he could do, over and over again in a particularly brilliant move, was to say that the disenchantment of the world is the work of an evil enchanter. It is Satan...whose enchantment was to disenchant. If we are disenchanted, we are more easily manipulated, we are more easily controlled. We learn to dismiss our most powerful and intense feelings as being irrelevant...⁵²

Powerful and intense feelings spring up in the heart of every human. So from time to time everyone finds themselves experiencing moments of transcendence for which materialism can't account. Taylor argues that "our secular age is haunted, and always has been."⁵³ Dried of transcendence the world leaves us with a thirst, a sneaking suspicion that we are missing something. And so we hunger for transcendence and cling to it wherever we can find it, like in intimate relationships, the beauty of nature, and the arts.⁵⁴

It's on this point that Taylor moves toward an apologetic: "We might be haunted because, well, there's a Ghost there."⁵⁵ Or, as C. S. Lewis said, "If I find in myself desires which nothing in this world can satisfy, the only logical explanation is that I was made for another world."⁵⁶ Maybe there's a better explanation for the world than the account assumed by the *Secular Social Imaginary*. Smith puts it like this: "Taylor's phenomenology speaks into that contested space and simply says, 'Try this account on for size. Does it make sense of something you *feel*?'"⁵⁷

. . . the sense that there is something more presses in. Great numbers of people feel it; in moments of reflection about their life; in moments of relaxation in nature; in moments of bereavement and loss; and quite wildly and unpredictably. Our age is very far from settling in to a comfortable unbelief. Although many individuals do so, and more still seem to on the outside, the unrest continues to surface. Could it ever be otherwise?⁵⁸

⁵² Alan Jacobs. *The Narnian: the life and imagination of C.S. Lewis*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006, 354.

⁵³ James K. A. Smith, *How (not) to Be Secular*, 61.

⁵⁴ Taylor's section on the arts is one of the best sections in his book in my opinion. He says that the arts move us "because they are moved." They are alive with the expressive weight of someone else's experience of transcendence, and we thrive on what they encapsulate.

⁵⁵ James K. A. Smith, *How (not) to Be Secular*, 76.

⁵⁶ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 106.

⁵⁷ James K. A. Smith, *How (not) to Be Secular*, 76. Emphasis original.

⁵⁸ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 727.

A reader well acquainted with the book of Ecclesiastes may already sense some of the connections that have begun to flow between the ancient text and this conceptual frame. Our Secular Social Imaginary asks us to find meaning in this immanent frame. And while there are many who feel quite good about their pursuit of meaning here on earth, there is one who would disagree. “Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the teacher. “Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless!”⁵⁹ The search for meaning within the immanent frame was exactly that to which he devoted his life and when it came to this-worldly flourishing he was second to none. He had everything he could want but at the apex of his accomplishment he looked around and found it all to be utterly meaningless. Qohelet is a bucket of ice-water for the disenchanted; it is a severe mercy which tears away the veil of vanity from humanistic striving and points to a source of meaning not found within the immanent frame. Disenchantment will not do for Solomon. He looks to a hidden God and suggests a contented life that enjoys being present in this world despite the meaningless that permeates this life.

A CLOSE READING OF QOHELET

Qohelet⁶⁰ is in some ways the most peculiar book of the Old Testament. Solomon,⁶¹ the author of Qohelet, is not even concerned with wisdom as a means towards a goal. In this way

⁵⁹ Ecclesiastes 1:2; 12:8.

⁶⁰ Most modern scholars use the untranslated Hebrew name of “Qohelet” when referring to the book of Ecclesiastes as a whole, a practice I follow. A long history of translation, beginning with the ancient Greek version, uses some form of “Ecclesiastes” for the title. The Septuagint translators chose that title because the Hebrew root means “the one who assembles.” Some believe this refers to an assembling of sayings, but this root almost always refers to people, not words or things, as its object, so it may reflect the assembling of audiences or disciples for the subsequent discourses. The grammatical form is also a little odd because one would expect a masculine form, not feminine. The suffix may refer to a vocational term, but there are only a few instances of this use in Late Biblical Hebrew. So whether Qohelet is a title, a proper name, or a vocation is uncertain. All this uncertainty and possibly the closeness of “Ecclesiastes” and “Ecclesiasticus” have led most scholars to prefer the name “Qohelet.”

⁶¹ Since the Qohelet may have been Solomon, and, more importantly, since the canonical form of the book asks the reader to see the author as Solomon, I will refer to him as such. The writer of Qohelet self-identifies as “son of David, king in Jerusalem” (1:1). I do not insist that Solomon is the writer based on this descriptor, since the Hebrew word for “son” is flexible, but I would challenge the critical assumptions that dismiss the possibility of Solomonic authorship. The arguments against Solomon’s authorship are usually either based on dating or linguistics and such arguments tend to be circular. While some modern scholars point to a Grecian period, C. L. Seow argues convincingly on linguistic grounds that authorship must have taken place before the conquest of Palestine by Alexander the Great in 333 BCE. There are two Persian loan words, but no Greek-loan words which would be evident in the Hebrew language during the Hellenistic period. Many of the linguistic differences may also reflect the

Qohelet distinguishes itself even from the other books of wisdom in the Old Testament. Wisdom literature in the Bible generally concerns itself not with ends but with means: neither Job nor Proverbs⁶² appear to find any difficulty in establishing what people actually want, broadly characterized as security, morality, success, and long life. Knowing how to achieve these things is what presents an issue, or dealing with problems when these things are not achieved when they seemingly should be. Solomon's book is exceptional in this respect, because for him the problem lies, moreover, not in having the wisdom⁶³ to get what he wants, but in the lack of meaning after his achievement. It is not the conviction of wisdom, but the meaninglessness which pervades this world that inspires Solomon to write so skillfully.

This unique philosophical position is compounded by the striking techniques within Solomon's literary vehicle. In Qohelet, Solomon employs different voices which purposefully contradict each other. He makes central use of refrains and other devices of repetition. He has a finely developed sense of expressive rhythm. He often thinks in metaphors and the range of meanings made possible through the concrete image are repeatedly examined and overlapped. He utilizes ambiguity as a powerful rhetorical device and invites the reader to join him in search of meaning. All these literary techniques drive his point deep into the mind, impressing upon the reader what they instinctively know to be true.

Qohelet is not an easy book. It is not meant to be. It does not resolve all of its own tensions, and this is rather the point. The reader is not permitted to stand back and mildly assess how well *someone else* has done at the task that confronts every human being in

frame narrator who probably lived during the third or fourth century BCE, the content of the book still originating with Solomon. Ultimately the exact date of authorship cannot be answered conclusively be it based upon internal or external evidences. The argument *for* Solomon's authorship simply notices how well the book from the son of David fits with what we know of him: he experienced wealth, power, learning, and pleasure on a grand scale and to his own spiritual ruin.

⁶² The book of Proverbs is sometimes misread as the conventional wisdom of "doing good so that good things happen." This point of view can easily fossilize into a system of self-righteousness and self-sufficiency. In other words, a naïve reading of the book of Proverbs could contribute to a false, comforting narrative about life in this world to be defended at all cost. People in the ethical sphere must preserve that narrative as if survival itself is at stake: personal obedience will stem disaster, and every human pursuit is within the grasp of those who sufficiently commit themselves. In the ethical sphere of existence, the religious life is turned into "a branch of self-interest" (Horace Hummel, *The Word Becoming Flesh*, p.534). Not if Qohelet can help it. The wisdom of Proverbs is correctly understood in light of Qohelet and vice versa (Paustian, *The Beauty With the Veil*, 317-318).

⁶³ Key to understanding Qohelet's purpose is his search to "understand" wisdom. He already possessed great wisdom, but now he wondered what good it did him. What profit comes from being wise? Two sad conclusions are reached: Wisdom brings additional pain (Ecclesiastes 1:18) and although wisdom is better than folly, as light is preferred to darkness, in the face of death it is just as meaningless (Ecclesiastes 2:12-16).

aloneness with God. Instead, the alternating viewpoints on the part of the Preacher, and the way he burns the bridges of thought behind him hint at a profound change in his soul struggling for birth. The reader witnesses the struggle and the overwhelming transparency that attends it, and cannot *not* ask of what this change consists.⁶⁴

Qohelet's Immanent Frame: Life "Under the Sun"

The expression "under the sun", תחת השמש, occurs 27 times in Qohelet and is extraordinarily significant, referring to how things appear to human sight and unaided reason.⁶⁵ This refrain draws strong parallels to Charles Taylor's concept of the immanent frame. It is "under the sun" that the younger Solomon conducts his search for meaning. The older Solomon who wrote Qohelet came to a new understanding; for him the fear of God is essential. On the other hand, the younger Solomon would fit right in with the Secular Social Imaginary of today. Not in that this young man would have considered belief in God to be one single option, but in the fact that he lived and experienced his life completely within the immanent frame.

The young Solomon verbalized no shame in his rejection of the traditional values of Torah piety, professed something closer to agnosticism than Judaism,⁶⁶ and possessed an undeniably materialistic heart. His search for wisdom was not the ramblings of an ascetic monk or a theoretical quest taken in the private chambers of the mind. No, the younger Qohelet lived his life and very much experienced his life completely "under the sun." He spoke honestly about what he experienced and observed and did not varnish over reality with a dishonest, tortured theodicy defense for God or pious half-truths. His humanistic search for meaning was completely encased within the immanent frame.

⁶⁴ Mark Paustian, *The Beauty with the Veil*, 322.

⁶⁵ This helps to resolve how such a book gained acceptance in the canon. For example, it seems theologically problematic that the same fate is said to come to people and animals alike when they die (Ecclesiastes 3:19). However, that every living thing returns to the dust from which it was made is precisely how things appear "under the sun," and a biblical book that acknowledges this is of inestimable worth. Later, in the haunting poem about aging, the older Solomon speaks of a more traditional Biblical thought, "the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it" (Ecclesiastes 12:7).

⁶⁶ I do not assert that the book of Qohelet promotes agnosticism. Within his cultural setting Solomon certainly would have believed in the God of Israel. But his depiction of God as unknown and impersonal does not give the impression of a man who had the same relationship with God that his father, King David, did. It is also telling that he never once uses the Tetragrammaton. In this earlier portion of his life it is difficult to see his conception of God as clearly defined. In fact, that is one of his most important points: God is, to a great extent, hidden. It is important to note, however, that when Solomon composed Qohelet in his old age and speaks with unflinching monotheism, it is certain that the repeated refrain of "Fear the Lord," refers to the God of the Bible.

This is part of the reason that the older Solomon's conclusion of "Meaningless!" is so powerful. It is not just an intellectual observation produced from the observation of nature in chapter 1. In the 11 remaining chapters, the older Solomon remembers his earlier search for meaning, a search that employed not just his head, but his hands, his mouth, and his heart. As a young ruler, he denied himself nothing his eyes desired and refused his heart no pleasure.⁶⁷ He possessed an entire kingdom and gained unparalleled wealth. He experienced foolishness and laughter. He knew well both the pride of piety and the sensations of debauchery. He experienced the fleeting consolation of achievement after hard work. The young king had every material and experiential advantage in securing meaning "under the sun," but failed. In the end he found that no matter how magnificently he flourished within the immanent frame, meaning still eluded him. The old Solomon realized that his young years spent in the immanent frame had amounted to "chasing after the wind."⁶⁸

The immanent frame is an interesting place in that some people feel the nagging lack of meaning and some are just consumed enough, just pleased enough, or just ambitious enough not to notice it. But eventually death comes and, like Solomon, we are, all of us, forced to acknowledge the meaningless of all our labor "under the sun." If this world is all there is, our ambition, success, and even our wisdom amounts to a body rotting in the ground, eternally unaware, lost to the realm of nothingness. The immanent frame is a terrible place to chase meaning, because in the end the search proves futile. Any lasting meaning "under the sun" is a vapor that slips through fingers, a mere breath.

הבל and The Malaise of Immanence

הבל is the word Solomon chose to represent meaning within the *immanent frame* and is a microcosm of the entire book of Qohelet. As a leitwort,⁶⁹ הבל symbolizes and drives home the

⁶⁷ Ecclesiastes 2:10.

⁶⁸ Any human effort to change the inherent absurdity of life is portrayed vividly as רעות רוח, "a herding after the wind" Ecclesiastes. 1:14, et passim.

⁶⁹ Martin Buber coined this term. By *Lietwort* he means a word or word root that is meaningfully repeated within a text so that those who attend to these repetitions will find a meaning of the text revealed, clarified, or emphasized. What is repeated need not be a single word but can be a word root; indeed the diversity of forms often strengthens

message of meaninglessness. Translated literally as “vapor” or “breath” the Hebrew sense of הבל reflects the air that is exhaled in breathing, invisible except on a cold winter day and immediately dissipating in the air.⁷⁰ But this term is used in a much different way by the Qohelet than by other Biblical writers.

Solomon uses this insubstantial, momentary הבל as a metaphor to communicate three abstract concepts: (1) a lack of meaning or purpose; (2) a lack of logic or sense, an absurdity—often including overtones of wrongdoing; (3) a lack of duration.⁷¹ These three aspects of the Qohelet’s הבל are never completely separated. Still, while these connotations are closely layered and compounded in almost every use, the reader naturally perceives which concept is most emphasized based on the context.

For example, in Qohelet 2:12-16, wisdom is compared with foolishness. Solomon sees that although wisdom is much better than foolishness, the fate of death overtakes both the wise and the fool. In this respect he declares wisdom הבל, for there is a lack of purpose or substance in being wise as a means to an end which will inevitably lead to death. While meaningless is the prominent emphasis of הבל in this context, there is a strong flavor of absurdity included as well. Conventional knowledge says that there is something to gain by being wise, so it doesn’t logically equate when the wise and the foolish lay equal in death. The reader can hear Solomon’s frustration as he realizes the deceit of profit in face of the absurd, “What then do I gain by being wise?”⁷² All the while in the background runs the third concept of transience as Solomon is constantly aware of the brevity of human life.

the overall dynamic effect. I say “dynamic” because what takes place is in a way a movement; readers who are aware of the term feel something akin to waves beating back and forth between each usage. Such measured repetition, corresponding to the inner rhythm of the text—or rather issued from it—is one of the strongest techniques for communicating a vast amount of meaning without articulating it explicitly. An impression is imprinted into the text in such a way that even unknowing readers understand the basic message. הבל is a perfect example of this.

⁷⁰ Alter, *The Wisdom Books*, 340.

⁷¹ I find that “lack of duration” is the least directly emphasized concept of הבל used by Qohelet, but by inference this concept of temporality is a constant tension within the book and certainly comes across through the concrete metaphor of “breath.”

⁷² Ecclesiastes 2:15.

In Qohelet 8:9-11; 14-15, Solomon reorders the emphasis hierarchy of הבל. Here in the Qohelet, Solomon crowns absurdity over meaningless in his use of הבל. The author remembers watching the funeral of a wicked man, saying, “And so I have seen the wicked being buried, and from a holy place they came [interpreted as the synagogue where the funeral took place], but those who did right were forgotten in the town. This also is הבל.”⁷³ Qohelet struggles primarily with the unfair, wretched absurdity. The emphasis of meaningless is secondary in this passage, but the reader still infers that righteousness is meaningless in regards to receiving an honored burial. Not to be forgotten, the undercurrent of transience is clearly present, witnessed in the funeral.

Qohelet’s unique metaphorical use of הבל with its multiple and varying shadings has left many translators struggling to comprehensively render this term. Jerome’s translation of הבל as *vanitas* translated as “vanity” became influential in Qohelet scholarship until recent years.⁷⁴ More recently more scholars have offered translations such as “C. L. Seow’s “beyond mortal grasp,” Bartholomew and Ogden’s “enigmatic,” and Michael Fox’s philosophical “absurd.”⁷⁵ All these English equivalents fit many uses of הבל in Qohelet, but, being abstractions, often tend to limit the scope of the Hebrew metaphor.

⁷³ Ecclesiastes 8:10, my translation.

⁷⁴ Many modern versions, including the ESV, KJV, NKJV, NAB, NASB, and NRSV, follow Jerome by translating הבל with the English term “vanity.” It is the opinion of this author that the term “vanity” should not be used as a translation because the current use of the term is more commonly associated with an excessive admiration of one’s own appearance than the traditional meaning of futility.

⁷⁵ Michael Fox rejects previous attempts to translate הבל as being unable to convey its full meaning, opting for the word “absurd” instead. He borrows this terminology from Camus’ work *The Myth of Sisyphus*, where “absurd” indicates the absence of a rational relationship between legitimate expectations and reality’s outcomes, a sentiment that Qohelet repeatedly demonstrates. In my mind Michael Fox’s “absurd” comes the closest to conveying the full thrust of Qohelet’s meaning, but the philosophical underpinnings of this translation will only resonate with those who are well-acquainted with Albert Camus’ writings and are informed concerning the connections.

Also, as Fox readily admits, there is profound difference between Camus and Qohelet. Qohelet does not believe that this world is masterless, though often the incomprehensibility of Qohelet’s God does reflect the void which Camus sees. Nor does Qohelet advocate “rebellion,” to confront his fate. For Qohelet, recognizing and embracing life’s הבל is in accord with God’s will. Camus does not see a God involved with the world. Also the little joy they see in this life is motivated differently, for while Camus takes joy in the scorn of the Absurd, Qohelet finds life’s small joys the gift of a hidden God. In the end, despite their differences, the connection between Camus and Qohelet remains strong and Fox’s connection of the two has become deservedly influential in Qohelet scholarship.

Douglas Miller attempts to fix these problems by arguing that Qohelet uses הבל as a symbol to indicate one or more of the three referents. Russel L. Meek continues in this vein by suggesting that הבל may be an intertextual reference to Abel, also הבל, in Genesis 4 that is intended to cause the reader to reflect on the discontinuity of what Abel experienced and what he should have experienced.⁷⁶ All these solutions have their strengths but there is no perfect equivalent which can capture the rich, malleable nature of Qohelet's הבל. Solomon wrote in a way that causes the reader to struggle with many paradoxes and interpretive decisions and הבל is no exception.

The significance of הבל cannot be overstated in the mind of the Solomon. In Qohelet הבל occurs 38 times in 12 chapters; it is inescapable. From the initial verses and forward, הבל gives off an incantatory feel and demonstrates one of the book's smaller lessons: all things constantly repeat themselves.⁷⁷ Further emphasis is created as הבל is often paired with its own plural as הבלים,⁷⁸ a form in Hebrew which indicates a superlative or extreme case. הבל is the resounding hammer strike that labors throughout the book, embedding the nails of Solomon's words and firmly fixing within the reader an unshakable sensation of meaningless when faced with the absurdity of earthy life.

“Malaise,” by definition, is a vague feeling of uneasiness or discomfort so the Malaise of Immanence is the general feeling of discomfort that those living in the Secular Social Imaginary experience but cannot diagnose. Solomon, however, has figured out the disease; the immanent frame is infected with הבל. Life purely lived within the immanent frame is absurd, brief, monotonous, and meaningless. At some point in life everyone comes face to face with the

⁷⁶ This is a fascinating thesis, but its validity is difficult to prove or disprove with any certainty. What can be said is that the connections to Genesis tie Qohelet into Jewish thought. This is especially important when interpreting what Qohelet means when he says “fear God.”

⁷⁷ Alter, *The Wisdom Books*, 346.

⁷⁸ Pronounced, *he-vel he-ve-leem*, it is easy to exhale while saying this phrase. Even vocally it communicates the metaphor of breath. When read in Hebrew, the repetition of this phrase is unmistakable and lends the reader an opportunity to sigh along with Solomon as you reach his conclusion.

question, “What’s the point of it all?” and there are only two answers: “This world cannot be all there is.” or “הבל.” Solomon’s application of הבל throughout Qohelet shows the inadequacy of the components of Disenchantment and, consequently, the delusional assumptions of the Secular Social Imaginary.

Qohelet’s Paradox vs. The Buffered Self

The one thing that all commentators will agree on is that Qohelet is filled with paradoxes. There is no good way to harmonize them or call them additions.⁷⁹ I argue that Solomon wants his paradoxes to be understood as paradoxes.

One major paradox in Qohelet is that of justice and injustice. Solomon is unwilling to generalize justice. Even small personal injustices bother him. If one baby is born dead out of a hundred some might try to rationalize it by saying that on the whole God must be gracious, but Solomon sees this as an inconsistency. Theodicy is not the point of the Qohelet. Solomon refuses to subordinate the anomalies he observes to the beliefs he accepts. He does not paper over those obviously, overt injustices. Injustices are incorrigible distortions that stain the larger picture rather than fade into it.⁸⁰

When speaking of the injustice violations of the court, Solomon reminds himself that God will eventually judge the innocent and the guilty.⁸¹ Yet with all confidence in justice deferred to an indefinite future, he realizes that this does not set things right here on earth.⁸² Injustice is a fact of life. “Nothing warped can be straightened out... And I saw something else under the sun: In the place of judgment—wickedness was there, in the place of justice—wickedness was

⁷⁹ Some commentators try to ease the tension of the paradoxes by assigning some the opposed propositions to a later hand. This approach was popular in the nineteenth and early twentieth century and is represented by the commentaries of Siegfried, Barton, McNiele, and Podechard. Currently it is followed more cautiously by Crenshaw. While there is some plausibility to this approach, the real problem becomes retaining any definite trail of Solomon’s thought. Even with all the additions that Podechard, McNiel, and Barton claim to have discovered, the skeptical character remains blatant. So if the book was really considered to be so offensive as to require extensive glossing, why did the scribes do such a poor job? They could have edited it in much simpler and more effective ways. What is more natural is Solomon wants the reader to feel tension as they read Qohelet. He wants us to feel torn. He wants us to weigh the two sides and come to the conclusion only after much thought and reflection.

⁸⁰ Michael Fox, *A Time to Tear down and a Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes*, 66.

⁸¹ Ecclesiastes 3:17

⁸² Ecclesiastes 3:18-22

there.”⁸³ So while Solomon does not see a different reality than other Old Testament prophets, his emphasis has a markedly different focus—current injustices rather than ultimate justice. Solomon does not paint himself as a hero of faith, comfortably resting in God’s justice despite how things look. Quite the opposite, he certainly does have faith in God’s justice, but it does not solve the problem; it only makes the anomalies more obvious and, hence, the world more decisively הבל. Injustices still occupy the center of his focus. He is frustrated and his readers should be too.⁸⁴

Although most in the Secular Social Imaginary live with a buffered self and do not have faith in God’s justice, the attitude of Solomon toward justice sounds strangely familiar. Social injustice bothers and frustrates the unbeliever and believer alike.⁸⁵ This shows just how inadequate the buffered self really is. We are affected by things outside of our own mind. Humans are bothered by injustice. This is something that we cannot help but feel. If meaning and significance is created within the mind, then why are we so affected by things outside of us?

The buffered self is more like the visor of a helmet that can be removed or closed when one wishes. It is a soft buffer that is often stripped away or destroyed and then rebuilt when needed. Personal injustice destroys the buffered self but faraway injustice often does not breach the buffer. Especially if the owner of the buffered self causes the injustice, the buffered self is quickly put into place to shield from accusing voices around and even within. In light of so many involuntary, yet significant emotional reactions to outside forces, like affection, guilt, or anger, the buffered self proves to be a mere construction.

⁸³ Ecclesiastes 1:15; 3:16.

⁸⁴ Michael Fox, *A Time to Tear down and a Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes*, 67-70.

⁸⁵ Believers ought to take Qohelet’s words to heart here as well. Sometimes unbelievers are more bothered by injustice than God’s children. Unfortunately, when an injustice is observed, often a believer immediately reminds themselves of God’s justice and walks away feeling comforted and safe. But, as Solomon reminds us, that later justice does not make it ok now. God is just and yet injustice thrives in this world. There is no rational harmonization; we must allow this contradiction to stand. Where does that leave us? We do not despair because we have hope in God’s ultimate justice, but at the same time we are sensitive and bothered by injustice in and around us. We should be frustrated and hate the sin that causes such problems. We long for God’s final judgment, but are not comfortable with the injustice he allows. This also sheds light on times when Jesus was troubled over injustice. As he weeps outside of Lazarus’ tomb he is not sad because he will never see his friend again. He is not sad because he does not know if he will be able to raise him from the dead a moment later. He is not sad because he is God and knows the eternity of incomparable joy that awaits Lazarus. That does not make death just fine. He weeps because he hates sin and the ugliness of its ultimate consequence. It bothers him profoundly. He is grieved by sin and the injustice it has caused.

Solomon's Cosmos and The Modern Universe

Although he lived among people who certainly ascribed to creation, Solomon's account of a world "under the sun" sounds much more like a humanist approach. In response to his own question, "What profit is there for a person in any of his labor, at which he works beneath the sun?"⁸⁶ Solomon poetically portrays a wearisome world of absurd, seemingly meaningless repetition. The sun sets only to rise again, the wind never stops blowing, and the rivers continually flow into the sea but never fill it up. Humans, however, spend their short, terminate lives failing to comprehend the unending world around them, and then are promptly forgotten. All people are, willingly or unwillingly, a part of the broader processes of this repetitious world, yet all people will die, and have no place in this world in which they have toiled, loved, and yearned for significance.

The stylistic verbal pattern mirrors the repetition of nature, especially in 1:6, 7, 9-11. In fact, the Hebrew poetry is so repetitious in the first chapter's great prose-poem that after reading it one senses the irony when he says in verse 8, "All things are wearisome; A man cannot say [it]." By mirroring the repetitive workings of the world and nature the reader is in turn reminded of the constant repetition of their own lives and is keenly aware, by contrast, of the smallness and shortness of human life. The answer is, of course, הבל. "Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Qohelet. "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless."⁸⁷

Solomon did not know all that we now know about the processes of nature, but everything he says is objectively true, both in his time and ours. Compared to this repetitious world, our lives are incredibly definite. We often think that we will have one more chance, one more shot at love, one more time to go around, but we do not. We are mortal, terminate beings. This is the truth for both those who believe in a Cosmos and those who believe in a Universe. Increased knowledge about how nature works, or at least the ability to better observe and understand nature's processes, does not change how we relate to nature, whether created or evolved. The only difference is that those who believe in a Cosmos have something to look forward to after this life's הבל and those who believe in a Universe do not.

⁸⁶ Ecclesiastes 1:3

⁸⁷ Ecclesiastes 1:2; 12:8

Solomon's Success vs. Earthly Flourishing

The best case scenario of Charles Taylor's *earthly flourishing* is found in Solomon's life. If anyone could have worked themselves to happiness it would have been Solomon. He experienced success on a scale unlike anyone in the history of his kingdom.⁸⁸

His overuse of the first person singular near the beginning of chapter two shows us his ambitious and materialistic heart. Although the use of first singular verbs and pronouns are inevitably pervasive in any personal narrative, its excess use in Qohelet 2:4-9 is obvious:

*I made me great works. I built for myself houses. I planted for myself vineyards. I made for myself gardens and orchards and I planted in them every kind of fruit tree. I made for myself pools of water from which to water a wood growing trees. I bought slaves and maidservants and home-born slaves were to me. Also many herds of cattle and sheep were to me, more than all who were before me in Jerusalem. I gathered for myself both silver and gold, and the treasures of kings and provinces. I got myself male and female singers and the pleasures of humankind, and many a concubine. And I grew great and I added more than all before me in Jerusalem.*⁸⁹

The twenty-two uses of the first person in this sort section are even more obvious in the Hebrew. The *lamed* preposition is overwhelming and the reader's ear is filled with the repeated *long hireq*.⁹⁰ This repetitive technique ensures the reader of the king's personal ownership of his wealth and the pride he takes in his profit, both of which make Solomon's forthcoming realizations profoundly unsettling.

In the latter half of chapter two Solomon comes to the dual realization, both that all he has accomplished in life will be left behind when he dies, and that the products of his work will cease to be his in any sense, but will become the property of others. What he has gained in material terms, therefore, is not really his own. Contrasted with deliberate repetition of the first person singular signifying the obvious pride and personal attachment Solomon kept in his wealth, this crushing conclusion is the bitterest הבל. The proud King will leave the world with no more than when he entered it. What is worse, since he worked so hard while he was alive, his labor does not yield a profit but a loss. The impressive list of earthly wealth amassed in chapter

⁸⁸ Ecclesiastes 2:9

⁸⁹ My translation and emphasis.

⁹⁰ In Hebrew a first singular verb and the *lamed* pronoun connected to a first singular object both end with a "long E" sound. This would be somewhat akin to listening to an English paragraph read in which someone wrote the word "me" twenty times.

two seems to add number after number to the sum, but no matter how Solomon works the figures he still ends up at zero. Death is the great equalizer. Furthermore, since it may be the undeserving who gain what the deserving created, material possessions cannot be understood purely as rewards which have been earned, no matter how they are gained.

The tangible blessings which are often the mark of earthly flourishing have no real meaning for Solomon. In 5:12-16 the similarly painful case of a man who loses all his possessions, and will leave the world as he entered it—burdened with nothing but his resentment and his grievance at losing that for which he had worked. Later on in 6:2-6, he describes the case of a man to whom God has granted wealth, and possessions, and plenty, and whose appetite is deprived of nothing which it desires; but God has not given him the power to enjoy them, for he soon dies and someone quite unknown to him will enjoy them. The King then states that a miscarried child is better off than this man because the child never was conscious of life's *הבל*.⁹¹

We cannot actually own what we earn, and we cannot determine the course of our lives. Since we have no effective ownership or control over what we put our efforts into gaining, therefore, then the possession of material goods is of no value in itself, and may actually leave us worse off than if we, like the miscarried child, had never really existed. So what is the point of earthly flourishing? “I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind.”⁹²

The Catalogue of Times vs. Secular Time

Perhaps the most obvious use of repetition in the whole book of Qohelet is the well-known poem called “The Catalogue of Times” found in chapter 3.⁹³ This is the first example of formal poetry in the Qohelet and its exquisite structure is framed around the compact, rhythmic repetition of *תע*, “time.”⁹⁴ Each of the paired lines contains the word *תע* four times, making up 28 of the 60 Hebrew words in this poem. The pattern of contradicting events is closely tied

⁹¹ Ecclesiastes 6:3-5

⁹² Ecclesiastes 1:14

⁹³ Ecclesiastes 3:2-8

⁹⁴ “Time” as used in this poem seems to point to an occasion more than an actual segment of duration.

together by the repetition of *תע* which mimics the monotonous, perpetual human sense of time. The compactness of the poem also gives “time” a demanding, urgent character. As an activity takes place, “time” is there to begin again, another activity and it is “time” again. With the exception of verse 5, in Hebrew *תע* constitutes almost every other word. This repetition indicates that while there is a time for everything, it does not stop for anyone and is not controlled by those whom it affects.

“The Catalogue of Times” is introduced by one verse of introduction⁹⁵ which states that there is a time for everything. This includes both things that are in and out of human control. While one can control when to speak and when to keep silent, who can choose when to be born or when to die? Who can decide when to lose something? At one moment a human may laugh, at another, weep but unless these emotions are faked, humans really don’t control these events. The meaning of time’s relation to these contradictory events is found in the words which directly follow the poem.

What profit is there for the one who does in what he toils? I have seen the task God has given to the sons of man to be occupied in it. Everything, he has made beautiful in its time. Eternity, too, he has placed in their heart, without man’s grasping at all what it is God has done from beginning to end...I know that whatever God does will be forever. One cannot add to it and one cannot take away from it. And God does [this] so that they will stand in fear before him.⁹⁶

Eternity, too, he has placed in their heart. Solomon knows that God in his unfathomable determination is the controller of time and yet humans are well aware of eternity. Mortals know there is something that continues and goes on beyond this temporary striving, but cannot see the bigger picture. That view belongs only to a hidden God. As humans scurry around struggling vainly to add or change the effects of time, Solomon knows that this effort is meaningless. If God has determined that such a thing is going to happen, it will. Although humans may sometimes choose when to do smaller, temporary things, what God has done will endure forever. Solomon has experienced this first hand. But instead of growing demoralized he realizes that the

⁹⁵ Ecclesiastes. 3:1

⁹⁶ Ecclesiastes. 10-11; 14, my translation.

failure of human reason and self-confidence is what God intends in his control of time. For after these collapse, the fear of God is ready to begin.⁹⁷

Qohelet's fear of God is also reflected in the structure of this repetitious poem. He chose to compose this poem in seven lines, a pointed choice because of the number's connection to the divine and perfection. The compact structure of this poem is also an effective rhetorical tool that heightens these concepts. With all the contradicting and purposefully erratic portions of the book of Qohelet, this tightly composed poem stands out visibly and audibly from the surrounding context. The more one reads the Qohelet, the more this poem begins to look like a knitted mitten lying in a pile of tangled yarn. This structure points to a view of God as an *intentional* deity. Although everything is הבל from a human standpoint, Qohelet sees an autonomous, yet purposeful God.

This understanding of God and of time, specifically, is hard to reconcile with Disenchantment's secular time. Humans have no control over the timing of some of the most important events in their life. Calling time "secular" does not mean that we can control it. Humanism may want to hold to their idea that nothing "higher" even impinges on their schedule, but that is simply not honest, as The Catalogue of Times poetically demonstrates.

Remember Your Creator: A Meaningful Phrase

One of the most apparent paradoxes within Qohelet is the repetitions of the הבל conclusion next to the joy passages.⁹⁸ The history of the interpretation of Qohelet is from one angle a sustained attempt to level the book to one or other of these poles. Either the joy passages

⁹⁷ As for the word ירא [fear], it includes all the normal associations English speakers have with the word *fear*, but the word in Hebrew has a much more expansive semantic range. This is signaled in a psalm verse that reads literally, "For with you is forgiveness, therefore *you are feared*" (Ps 130:4). There it is demonstrated that ירא extends to another sort of trembling that is different in kind from that of anxiety or dread. The word can signify a profound and reverent awe before the mystery of divine condescending love. In other words, this "fear of the LORD" is the sinner's experience of the "infinite qualitative difference" between themselves and God, and it can be occasioned by his holiness, his grace, or both at one time. (Paustian, *The Beauty with the Veil*, 302.)

⁹⁸ The joy passages produce a *carpe diem* impression and stand out starkly in close contrast to הבל statements. The joy passages are Ecclesiastes 2:24-26; 3:12-13; 3:22; 5:18-20; 8:15; 9:7-10; 11:8-10.

are made subsidiary to the negative הבל conclusion or the הבל passages are made subsidiary to the joy conclusion. The vital issue centers on how the הבל passages relate to the joy passages.

I suggest that in Qohelet the הבל conclusions—arrived at through the young Solomon’s humanist epistemology—juxtaposed next to the joy passages open up gaps in the reading which can only be filled by the reader. This heuristic nature of the book is one of the reasons the book has remained so compelling throughout the ages. These juxtapositions would also explain why some readers are tempted to flatten out about Qohelet in terms הבל or joy. However, this is not a matter of complete subjectivity; Solomon gives his reader an important clue as to how to bridge the gaps he has opened between these perspectives.⁹⁹

Normally in Qohelet a הבל conclusion is reached and then it is juxtaposed with a joy passage, but towards the end of the book this order is reversed¹⁰⁰ and particularly important is the exhortation prefacing the final section before the epilogue, “Remember your creator”¹⁰¹ followed by three pictures of life’s end.¹⁰² The final advice to remember *your creator* points the reader away from a humanist point of view and suggests developing a perspective integrally shaped by an enchanted view of this world and of the self as God’s.

The Hebrew rendering of “your creator”, בוראִיךָ, is of great significance especially because of Qohelet’s inclusion of the *final kaph*. The entire book views God as a hidden, autonomous deity. I do not believe that Solomon annuls that overall depiction of God, but here he does not ask us to see God as *the* creator, but our own creator, meaning that we are undeniably affected, controlled, and dependent on this God who made us. This demands an enchanted view of the world and a deconstruction of the buffered self. Such a starting point does

⁹⁹ Craig Bartholomew. Qoheleth in the Canon? Current Trends in the Interpretation of Ecclesiastes, *Themelios* 24, no. 3, 1999., 15-16.

¹⁰⁰ Ecclesiastes 11:8ff.

¹⁰¹ Ecclesiastes 12:1

¹⁰² Craig Bartholomew. Qoheleth in the Canon? Current Trends in the Interpretation of Ecclesiastes, *Themelios* 24, no. 3, 1999., 16.

not deliver one from the struggles of life, as the very strong poem of death¹⁰³ makes abundantly clear. However, it does provide one with a place to stand amidst the struggle so that “light is sweet, and it is pleasant for the eyes to see the sun.”¹⁰⁴

This final exhortation is even more startling in light of Qohelet’s epistemology. Solomon’s first describes his approach as חכמה, “wisdom,”¹⁰⁵ but he has seen only meaningless “under the sun”, within the immanent frame as Taylor would say, and so concludes that there is only one thing to remember: the fear of God. Therefore, it is with terrible irony that Solomon ends by asking his reader to stop following in his footsteps. That path is meaningless because it does not begin with the fear of the Lord. All meaning “under the sun” is wearily examined and discarded, but he does not say that meaning itself does not exist. If everything is meaningless, then why bother to “remember your creator?” This is perhaps the greatest paradox of Qohelet.

For although the Qohelet begins and concludes with a heap of הבל, “Meaningless! Meaningless!... Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless,”¹⁰⁶ Solomon’s message does not culminate in epicurean detachment. Instead we find a man who advocates for a strangely contented existence which enjoys the small pleasures of life and is always conscious of a hidden God. In a book full of objectively abysmal observations there lie contradicting moments of worth and wonder connected to statements such as “the gift of God,”¹⁰⁷ “God has already approved of what you do,”¹⁰⁸ “Remember your Creator,”¹⁰⁹ and the oft repeated and conclusive imperative: “Fear God.”¹¹⁰ In these words, the existence of meaning is never stated, but can be inferred.

Solomon does not want you to feel comfortable after reading his book; no honest reader should sleep well after Solomon has instructed. What is certain is that the hope of meaning does not originate within the immanent frame of this world. Meaning cannot be established in eighty

¹⁰³ Ecclesiastes 12:1-8

¹⁰⁴ Ecclesiastes 11:7

¹⁰⁵ Ecclesiastes 1:13

¹⁰⁶ Ecclesiastes 1:2; 12:8

¹⁰⁷ Ecclesiastes 3:13; 5:19

¹⁰⁸ Ecclesiastes 9:7

¹⁰⁹ Ecclesiastes 12:1, 6

¹¹⁰ Ecclesiastes 5:7; 8:12, 13; 12:13.

years, no matter what the Secular Social Imaginary assumes. The only scent of meaning for the reader to follow is one that is interpreted and, even then, leads to a hidden God. “Fear God and keep his commandments,”¹¹¹ then is not just the conclusion of the matter, but also the beginning.

A Severe Mercy

The book of Qohelet chases readers to an intellectual and experiential honesty: a knowledge that contradicts one they have been taught to assume, that of their own nothingness and frailty. It is a severe mercy that peels apart and dismantles a temporal humanist view of life that can only set the soul up for horrifying disillusionment and despair. The illusion meaning in this world is championed within our Secular Social Imaginary despite the enigmas and paradoxes that persist, but Qohelet mercifully tears the supposedly meaningful mask off this immanent frame so that we might see the truth: “Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Qohelet. “Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.”

Qohelet is not the only book in Bible and it is best read as a text which makes Christ necessary. The natural knowledge of God still exists in the hearts of modern humans no matter how repressed by the Secular Social Imaginary. Even Solomon’s struggle and his ultimate conclusion of meaningless cannot deny the God who created him. As modern readers interact with this ancient text they witness his struggle, all too similar to their own, and are forced to come face to face with the inevitable meaningless of a life lived within the immanent frame.

¹¹¹ Ecclesiastes 12:13. There is nothing wrong with the recognition that 12:13-14 are different in character from the rest of the book. These verses are not spoken by Solomon, but the epilogist. In light of this, almost all modern commentators view 12:13-14 as an addition designed to inject a certain orthodoxy to the book. Even Michael Fox, who argues persuasively for the first part of the epilogue to be considered as original composition, calls the last two verses a “postscript” and says “the familiar piety of the conclusion could outweigh the uncomfortable observations of the preceding twelve chapters.” (Fox, *A Time to Tear down and a Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes*, 373-4.) I do not think that this is a good solution. We should avoid patronizing ancient readers by assuming that they were not as smart as we are. Our understanding that the ancient context was different from our own can easily become an excuse for ignoring what is common sense in every age. So if it is obvious to any modern reader that exhortations to Torah piety sit uncomfortably alongside other aspects of Qohelet’s main body, then that fact would presumably be more obvious to an ancient reader. If pious readers had found the preceding 239 verses disturbing and unorthodox, it seems unlikely that their minds would have been set at ease simply by a two-verse reference to the Torah, slapped on the end of the book like a smiley face bumper sticker on the back of a tank, or whatever the epilogist expected them to be. It becomes quite problematic to assume that the verses were written by someone who disagreed with the contents but wanted them to be accepted as orthodox. The purpose of Ecclesiastes 12:12-13 then seems not an attempt to misrepresent Qohelet and may not even be to accurately summarize Qohelet’s message. Perhaps it was not written to make us take Solomon’s words lightly, but to make us think about them some more. (Stuart Weeks. “‘Fear God and Keep his Commandments’ Could Qohelet Have Said This?” Stuart Weeks - Academia.edu. 2013. Accessed Winter 2016., 101-118.)

They will be left with a sense of longing and restlessness for which humanism cannot account, a restlessness that may make the revelation of Christ, not just an option, but a necessity.

FINDINGS

In this cultural moment and at this particular apologetic challenge Qohelet is incredibly useful. This section contains a distillation of Qohelet's apologetic wisdom and a demonstration of how this ancient text might open up space in our apologetic conversations today.

Cracking the Frame

The problem for the modern apologist is not grasping what the conclusion of Qohelet means to say. The problem is that people who have inherited the Secular Social Imaginary, who breathe in that secular atmosphere every day, do not agree with Qohelet's conclusion. The whole point of the phenomenon of a Secular Social Imaginary is that people do not at all find it to be self-evident. "How can you say that meaning is not created here on earth? I'm doing it every day!"

There are many in the Secular Social Imaginary rather content with their life in the immanent frame and not just because they are depraved or thoughtless. Many have not forsaken God or given up on the church. For many, there never was a church or an awareness of God in their life. Matters of spirituality and transcendence rarely come up and their existential world is quite flat. They want to find significance but they are not going to start believing in made up stories, because that would not be mature. They have been disenchanted. Their comprehension of the world is closed up within the boundaries of their own skull. In fact, because of the Secular Social Imaginary, many even find it hard to believe that in the year 2017 people still cling to transcendence. So over and over each day they get up and work. Over and over again they pay bills and buy toys. Over and over they go to sleep tired and worn out. Over and over they love and laugh, cry and complain. Over and over they live their lives, each day convincing themselves from the comfort of their buffered minds that this immanent frame is meaningful. The challenge for the apologist then becomes removing the subject from the comfort of their buffered minds and cracking the immanent frame in which this illusion of lasting meaning thrives.

The buffered self is able to transcend limitations. Only a buffered self works on the pretense that it can survey the whole of the universe and discern what it best. Only the buffered self has the option of adopting its very own worldview. Therefore, any talk of a worldview, transcendent or otherwise, may actually support this assumed capability of the buffered self. In other words, a strictly rational approach to apologetics may in some ways actually support the very secularism it aims to refute. If the apologetic argument is itself totally encased in the mind, such arguments already cede ground to the Secular Social Imaginary. Taylor writes, “Once we claim to understand the universe, and how it works; once we even try to explain how it works by invoking its being created for our benefit, then this explanation is open to clear challenge...”¹¹²

We must be careful not to construct a transcendent buffered self.¹¹³ If we present a mind that has all the answers, a brain that can even explain away the paradoxes of life, then we have just tried to dissuade the secular buffer with an equally constructed transcendent buffer. There is a refreshing honesty that comes with the admittance of our own limitations. Like Solomon, we need to allow paradoxes to stand. Qohelet teaches us that meaning cannot be simply a product of our thinking. Ultimate, objective meaning cannot be constructed, by theists or atheists. Meaning is set down by God.

Therefore, an apologetic approach in the Secular Social Imaginary should not concentrate solely on knowledge and justified belief, but also on the ways we experience things and thus the meanings things have in our experience. We need to reframe the debate. We should not aim to talk about belief and unbelief as rival theories, that is, ways that people account for existence, but talk rather about different kinds of lived experience, what it is like to have meaning life as a believer or an unbeliever. Thankfully, because of the natural knowledge of God and a biblical anthropology, the apologist can count on the experiences of the person to wake up in support of the way we argue for the existence of God and transcendent reality.

This is not to say that our argument only deals with the subjective. Ultimately, since the phenomenon of meaning-making exists, revelation by an omniscient God is the only thing that

¹¹² Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 306.

¹¹³ There is a temptation among Christians, pastors especially, to create a transcendent buffered self, that is, a mind which foolishly operates as if it is impervious because it knows so much about God. Although the revelation of the Bible tells us so much about the character and workings of God, we only know that which is necessary. We would do well to humbly admit that our loving Lord remains, in many ways, a hidden God.

can safe-guard us from total relativity. Our argument for Christ then would start within the subjective land of lived experience and end in the halls of Scripture. In fact, the Christian apologist can even utilize Scripture in the land of lived experience, because there we have a willing ally named Qohelet.

Solomon's honest decimation of meaning in the immanent frame attests to two striking truths that will be invaluable in our modern apologetic challenge. Number one: The immanent frame is completely, irreversibly, and irrevocably meaningless. Number two: Despite the iron grip of the immanent frame on the present age, a universal longing for meaning still flickers in the heart, even for the staunchest materialist, just like it burned in the heart of young Solomon. If we can communicate both the *meaninglessness* of the immanent frame and the *meaningfulness* of a life that leans into transcendence, then we will be utilizing the same type of rhetorical paradox that Solomon employs so effectively in Qohelet. This two pronged approach would automatically testify to an opening in the buffered mind and would allow certain aspects of Postmodernism's emphasis on subjectivity to be an ally of Christianity rather than a threat. This type of apologetic approach that utilizes the wisdom of Qohelet may be the key to cracking the immanent frame.

Instead of getting buried beneath a barrage of theodicy and creation arguments, we can affirm the meaninglessness of earthy flourishing and then speak about what is like to live as a believer. We should pick up on specific, individual points of הבל within our subject's life. If we point to those moments of unique absurdity that someone has experienced this will help them recognize future sites of meaninglessness. The absurdity that pervades an imminent existence will begin to weigh on them, especially when they think about the brevity and futility of mortality like Solomon did. Qohelet will be our hammer, pounding on the frame of their contented existence.

On the positive side, we can point to the "evidences" of transcendence within our lives, the longing for permanency, the moments of on-the-cusp elation that point to something more, the innate knowledge of eternity, etc. These moments are the blind spot of humanism and should be exploited. We can leverage these moments of transcendence to begin a conversation that leads to Christ and the fullest realization of meaning in his love. This sort of argument allows us to open up the conversation; we get to listen to someone's story and infuse their subjective experiences with transcendent meaning. "What if that longing you have is not a weakness left

over from antiquity? What if you are sensing something more than this world? What if your weariness is a good thing? What if striving for permanence is a built in feature? What if humanism is a dishonest construction and the real story is better? What if God would die for you because *you mean that much to him*?

The Most Powerful Narrative

Solomon expressed his message through multiple stories and experiences. He searched for meaning with all five senses and only when they were exhausted did he relay his observations. Solomon refused the simple assumptions and corrections that were commonly offered. He embraced the complex, experiential nature of life. This honest storytelling is hard not to appreciate when reading Qohelet. Solomon's honest, complex, and inspired narrative is relatable and incredibly powerful.

Charles Taylor also told his story as a grand narrative. More than this, he thinks that those who convert to unbelief because of science are less convinced by data and more moved by the form of the story that science tells and the self-image that comes with it: rationality and maturity. Implicit in this attraction is the sad reality that the faith they left was misunderstood as a story worth leaving. For those in our Secular Social Imaginary, persuasion is about the story.¹¹⁴

If Taylor is right, then we should not start an argument for some vague theism, but offer the story of Christ in all its simplicity, complexity, and transcendence. The story of Christ is the most powerful narrative, basic enough for children and deeper than human comprehension. His story reveals the truth: our universe is enchanted and full of transcendent meaning because of God. The goal of such an apologetic will naturally lead to an invitation to experience biblical, sacramental Christianity.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ Secular advertizing understands this all too well, while many churches focus on programs and publications that only affect the head in their outreach.

¹¹⁵ This apologetic approach asks for a church that matches the narrative we tell. We should strive to lead worship services that require both the head and the body: sermons that tell the greatest story with all the complexity, honesty, and passion that the original writers possessed; sacraments that provide Christ's forgiveness, audibly, visibly, and tangibly; songs and liturgy that move the heart; and fellow worshipers who delight in Christ's meaning. This is not to say that Christian faith is a story told not just on Sunday morning. Faith in Christ lives and breathes every waking moment. Our every action and attitude will demonstrate the impact of the most powerful narrative.

Confessional Lutheranism may not be known for transcendent experiences, but each week when we celebrate the means of grace transcendence is experienced. We should emphasize this part of the story. As C.S. Lewis wrote,

Do not attempt to water Christianity down. There must be no pretense that you can have it with the Supernatural left out. So far as I can see Christianity is precisely the one religion from which the miraculous cannot be separated...if there is a true religion it must be both Thick and Clear: for the true God must have made both the child and the man, both the savage and the citizen, both the head and the belly... It [Christianity] takes a convert from central Africa and tells him to obey an enlightened universalist ethic: it takes a twentieth-century academic prig like me and tells me to go fasting to a Mystery, to drink the blood of the Lord...That is how one knows one has come to the real religion.¹¹⁶

Perhaps Confessional Lutherans shrink back at the thought of a transcendent “experience” of Christianity, but it can be understood correctly. The Christian faith involves us in an “experience” of something more than just head knowledge. As our Secular Social Imaginary demonstrates, humans are more than just “heads on sticks.” So too faith, as described in the Bible, asks us to connect with Jesus’ story in more than just an intellectual way. Not only in our worship services, but each moment the gospel story should permeate every facet of our existence.

We have the most powerful narrative; the story of how the transcendent God, from all eternity, became a man and lived among us. In a theological sense, we communicate a biblical imaginary, the Christian version of flourishing. We convey the kingdom of God, all the stories, images, mystery, and transcendence involved. We are privileged to champion this story and present it with all the truth and beauty it conveys, with all the paradoxes it contains, and especially with all the meaning it reveals.

RESEARCH LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

There are several limitations that should be mentioned in connection with this study. I also describe a few ideas for future research that flow from base of the current study.

¹¹⁶ C.S. Lewis, *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology*. (London: Collins, 1979), 99-103.

Limitations of Research

My study has a specific scope and purpose: to connect the book of Qohelet to the conceptual frame of Charles Taylor's Secular Social Imaginary. This naturally means that I did not look at my subject in every possible way, from every possible perspective. For example, it was beyond the scope of this study to interview secularists or conduct a pilot study that would bring secularists into conversation with Qohelet. I also did not do an in-depth study of Charles Taylor's critics. Finally, I did not conduct a comprehensive study of contemporary apologetics, but just focused on the specific cues of Qohelet as an apologetic approach.

Suggestions for Further Research

Every study points a way forward. There are many future topics which could be pursued in connection with Qohelet's interaction with Charles Taylor's Secular Social Imaginary, but I will only highlight two that seem especially fruitful. We are all, to a greater or lesser extent, a product of our environment. A future study would do well to explore the ways in which Christianity absorbed the components of Disenchantment and how we can fight against the assumptions of the Secular Social Imaginary in our own churches and lives. Another useful study could focus on communicating the spiritual forces of darkness to a disenchanted world. It is difficult to hold the terrors of eternal punishment over people who think that eternity is not coming. This study might explore speaking effectively about the devil and hell to people in the Secular Social Imaginary.

THE CONCLUSION OF THE MATTER

“For who knows what is good for a person in life, during the few and meaningless days they pass through like a shadow? Who can tell them what will happen under the sun after they are gone?”¹¹⁷ A sober atmosphere had permeated the room as the study club listened to the end of chapter six. “Should I continue?” asked the leader. They looked around to gauge each other with expectant eyes. At this point they weren't sure if the ancient Qohelet was their ally, enemy, or something in-between. He spoke about Camus-like absurdity, but no Rebellion; with

¹¹⁷ Ecclesiastes 6:12.

Nietzsche-like Nihilism somehow combined with objectivity. The different viewpoints had somehow entangled a resigned humanistic frustration with moments of joy born of stubborn monotheism. All these contradictions were puzzling and yet did not seem accidental. Perhaps this was the reason that, against their better judgment, they decided to keep reading.

Chapter seven ended, “‘I am determined to be wise’—but this was beyond me. Whatever exists is far off and most profound—who can discover it?”¹¹⁸ Chapter eight rolled by,

When I applied my mind to know wisdom and to observe the labor that is done on earth—people getting no sleep day or night— then I saw all that God has done. No one can comprehend what goes on under the sun. Despite all their efforts to search it out, no one can discover its meaning. Even if the wise claim they know, they cannot really comprehend it.¹¹⁹

The Qohelet twisted and contorted through the readers into the ninth chapter,

“For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing; they have no further reward, and even their name is forgotten. Their love, their hate and their jealousy have long since vanished; never again will they have a part in anything that happens under the sun.”

The leader stopped reading and said, “We don’t have to keep going, this is getting a little depressing.” “No, keep going. We’ve gone this far, let’s at least see how it ends.” said Mark. The refrain was taken up by a few others and the Qohelet continued to weave its spell.

Chapter ten and the beginning of eleven allowed a little respite from the grueling demolition of meaning, but eleven finished viciously by batted them back and forth from joy to despair.

Light is sweet, and it pleases the eyes to see the sun. However many years anyone may live, let them enjoy them all. But let them remember the days of darkness, for there will be many. Everything to come is meaningless. You who are young, be happy while you are young, and let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth. Follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see, but know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment. So then, banish anxiety from your heart and cast off the troubles of your body, for youth and vigor are meaningless.¹²⁰

A silence hung in the room until Mark shattered it, “Could he make up his mind? He is seriously confused!” “He isn’t confused, that much is sure.” combated Ian. “If anything he is like

¹¹⁸ Ecclesiastes 7:23-24.

¹¹⁹ Ecclesiastes 8:16-17.

¹²⁰ Ecclesiastes. 11:7-10.

us, just a bit misled by his culture. I agree with everything he has said, apart from the stuff about God.” “Well then you haven’t accepted any of it!” said Mark, getting worked up. “Why are we listening to this ancient fool? He only brings up God because he was too stuck in his ancient context to reject theism.” “No, I think he keeps bringing God into it because that’s the only way that he can see any enjoyment in this meaningless life!” exclaimed Ian. “Let’s just finish it,” said the leader, “then we can discuss it intelligently.”

Chapter twelve began with the great prose poem of death. The words were not pleasant to hear. Although they did not understand everything, the point was clear.

Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you will say, “I find no pleasure in them” ... Then people go to their eternal home and mourners go about the streets. Remember him—before the silver cord is severed, and the golden bowl is broken; before the pitcher is shattered at the spring, and the wheel broken at the well, and the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.¹²¹

Qohelet had ruined the meeting. There was not much discussion after the book drew to a close and they concluded the book club early that day.

No one was converted, but some could not shake the Qohelet. He had hammered the nail of meaningless into their heads, deeply embedding a creeping sense of futility to each aspect of their lives. Everywhere they went, paradoxes began to appear and the absurd became undeniable. “Meaningless! Meaningless!” says Qohelet. “Everything is meaningless!”

Imagine their surprise when they looked for the Qohelet and found his writing canonized in the Bible. Those who hear the Qohelet will not automatically believe in Christ, but if they find Solomon’s honesty compelling, they will have to concede the comfort of eternal meaning found in Christ. “The chasing after the wind either settles permanently in the soul or gives way to the chasing after *him*.”¹²²

Qohelet is just a short chapter within the greater story of salvation. “The queen of the south will rise up at the judgment with the men of this generation and condemn them, because she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and look—something greater than Solomon is here!”¹²³ The “greater thing” of which Jesus speaks is something that

¹²¹ Ecclesiastes.12:1, 5-7.

¹²² Mark Paustian, *The Beauty with the Veil*, 322. Emphasis mine.

¹²³ Luke 11:31.

Solomon would appreciate, a deliberate paradox: The only thing greater than the wisdom of Solomon is the foolishness of God.

For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but it is God's power to us who are being saved. For it is written: I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and I will set aside the understanding of the experts. Where is the philosopher? Where is the scholar? Where is the debater of this age? Hasn't God made the world's wisdom foolish? For since, in God's wisdom, the world did not know God through wisdom, God was pleased to save those who believe through the foolishness of the message preached. For the Jews ask for signs and the Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles. Yet to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ is God's power and God's wisdom, because God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom...¹²⁴

"Now all has been heard. Here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is everything for humankind."¹²⁵ This is everything, because *in Christ*,¹²⁶ we realize that the fear of God is *meaningful*. Solomon declares this immanent frame "Meaningless!" but Christ calls to all who are searching restlessly, to all striving vainly to justify their existence, "Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."¹²⁷

¹²⁴ 1 Corinthians 1:18-25.

¹²⁵ Ecclesiastes 12:13, my translation.

¹²⁶ Meaning "in Christ" is a main theme in the New Testament. The Apostle Paul, especially, helps us appreciate the totality of meaning that results from being "in Christ." There is no condemnation for us, Romans 8:1; we can never be separated from God's love, Romans 8:39; we who are many form one body, Romans 12:5; we have wisdom from God, 1 Corinthians 1:30; our labor is not in vain, 1 Corinthians 15:58; we are a new creation. 2 Corinthians 5:17; we become God's children, Galatians 3:26; we have every spiritual blessing, Ephesians 1:3; we have the forgiveness of sins, Ephesians 1:7; we were also chosen, Ephesians 1:11; we are for the praise of his glory. Ephesians 1:12; we have been seated in the heavenly realms, Ephesians 2:6; we've been given the incomparable riches of God's grace. Ephesians 2:7; we who were once far away have been brought near, Ephesians 2:13; we are built together as a holy building, Ephesians 2:22; we may approach God with freedom and confidence, Ephesians 3:12; we are light, Ephesians 5:8; our joy overflows, Philippians 1:26; all our needs are met according to his glorious riches, Philippians 4:19; we are holy and faithful, Colossians 1:2; all things hold together, Colossians 1:17; we have our hope of glory, Colossians 1:27; we become fully mature, Colossians 1:28; are hidden all treasures of wisdom and knowledge for us, Colossians 2:3; we are rooted and built up, Colossians 2:7; we have been given the fullness of the deity, Colossians 2:9-10; we come into reality, Colossians 2:17; our life is now hidden, Colossians 3:3; we will rise from the dead, 1 Thessalonians 4:16; we can give thanks in all circumstances, 1 Thessalonians 5:18; we have faith, hope, and love, 1 Timothy 1:1, 14; we gain an excellent standing and great assurance, 1 Timothy 3:13; we have the promise of eternal life, 2 Timothy 1:1.

¹²⁷ John 16:33.

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