

# Time of Origins: Charles Taylor, Mircea Eliade, and Sacred Time

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In 2007, following the release of his book, *A Secular Age* (ASA), Charles Taylor was awarded the Templeton prize, a prize that “honors a living person who has made an exceptional contribution to affirming life’s spiritual dimension.”<sup>1</sup> In Taylor’s acceptance speech for the award – the award value totaling around 1.5 million dollars<sup>2</sup> – he made the following observation:

There is a tremendous capacity in human life to forget things that we somehow deep-down know, I think there is a kind of forgetfulness that we fall into. And, in particular, there is a set of “forgettings” that are very very central to the modern world...<sup>3</sup>

Taylor continued by arguing that one of the central “forgettings” particular to the modern world is its propensity to neglect its inherited spiritual or sacred foundation. Indeed, throughout ASA – and many of his other publications – Taylor tracks the social, cultural, economic, philosophical, and scientific processes that led to the state of “forgettings” relating to spiritual and religious matters. Key to Taylor’s conception of forgetfulness is his belief (hope?) that humans can both remember their spiritual past and find ways to productively reencounter the spiritual dimension in both their present and future lives. This temporal – i.e. past, present, and future – backdrop figures prominently in Taylor’s analysis, and will serve as the analytical focus of this paper.

Specifically, below, I examine a phrase that is repeated in four of Taylor’s books and a number of his published articles and essays; the phrase being: “A time of origins’ in Eliade’s sense.” This phrase occurs in several

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1. “Templeton Prize: Purpose,” *Templeton Prize*, accessed June 14, 2017, <http://www.templetonprize.org/purpose.html>.

2. Connie Kang, “Canadian philosopher wins \$1.5-million Templeton Prize,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 15, 2007, <http://articles.latimes.com/2007/mar/15/world/fg-taylor15>.

3. John Templeton Foundation, Clip 1: The case for spiritual rediscovery (Templeton Foundation), *YouTube*, 5:09, May 27, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b4Y0KL56GwU>.

different variations throughout Taylor's work, but it is always used to signify a ritualized "higher-time" that connects the individual to the sacred; this is in contrast to a profane or mundane temporal order.<sup>4</sup> In this paper, I show that this "time of origins" phrase is instructive for both how Taylor understands religion, as well as time and the theme of renewal. Indeed, as I argue, what religion *is* for Taylor is the engagement with rituals so as to produce moments of time that give human life "depth" and "fullness."<sup>5</sup> Thus, one of modern society's "forgettings" is how to encounter religious time in a deep and fulfilling manner.

What, though, is the ideational genealogy of this "temporal" emphasis for Taylor? First, and obviously, there is his biographical context: Taylor is a Catholic and he brings his Catholic spirituality into his analysis – i.e. his Catholicity informs the hermeneutic horizon within which his studies emerge. That being said, for the present analysis, this biographical feature will be set-aside. Instead, in order to trace this genealogy, I will focus on Taylor's intellectual connection with Mircea Eliade, the religious studies scholar from whom the "time of origins" phrase is taken. For, although Taylor attributes much to Eliade's scholarship on religion and time, he devotes very little space to actually engaging with Eliade's thought – indeed he only provides one paragraph in *ASA* to explaining Eliade's notion of time. Taylor's general silence about what exactly it is that Eliade means by "time of origins" is noteworthy given that the phrase is used over 22 times throughout Taylor's writing. The present paper has been prompted by that silence.

In order to explore the above stated questions and tensions, this essay will unfold as follows: first, I provide a brief outline of Taylor's *ASA*; as it is in *ASA* that Taylor most cogently and thoughtfully confronts the issue of secularity, religion, and spiritual experience. Additionally, in this first section, I lay out the topic of time and religion insofar as it relates to Taylor's overall project. Second, I turn to Eliade and examine how he discusses time and religion in his book *The Sacred and the Profane* (1959) – the text which Taylor cites when he first uses the term "time of origins" in *ASA*. Finally, I return to Taylor and reflect upon the meaning of time and its relation to religion via the terms "depth" and "fullness," and compare this analysis with

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4. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 57.

5. Cf. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 5, 9, 16, 26, 36, 38, 138, 310, 318, 501, 597, 672.

Eliade. I end by considering the idea of “forgettings” that Taylor alluded to in his Templeton speech and reflect on what time, and the remembrance of time, means for Taylor as a religious act in the modern world.

### **Taylor: A Secular Age, Religion, and Time**

#### *A Secular Age*

The prompting question that motivates Taylor’s discussion throughout ASA is “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?”<sup>6</sup> Taylor’s project in ASA is thus primarily interested in looking at the movement and development of an idea over a period of time. That said, Taylor’s analysis of time is largely anthropological in scope, as what generates his temporal analysis is the subjective shift from what he calls the “porous-self” to the “buffered-self.” The porous-self describes that state of relating to the world which is open and “vulnerable to a world of spirits and powers,” i.e. to those forces outside the mind.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, the buffered-self is a modern phenomenon and designates a bounded or self-enclosed mode of personal relationality whose “ultimate purposes are those which arise within me.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, the buffered subject does not expose itself to, or recognize the existence of, spiritual forces. For Taylor, the porous-self best describes those who lived in the 1500s while the buffered-self refers to the modern subject of the 2000s. In order to illuminate this historic shift, Taylor chiefly traces the theological and metaphysical changes that, he argues, are causal factors in the movement from the porous to the buffered-self – a process he calls, echoing Max Weber, disenchantment.<sup>9</sup>

One example that sheds light on this buffered/porous dynamic is Taylor’s analysis of the protestant Reformation. The Reformation, according to Taylor, was historically unique because it privileged a self-reliance that was new to European religiosity – as, in this period, one’s personal devotion to God became paramount to religious activity.<sup>10</sup> This inward turn is exemplified by the Reformation’s rejection of the ritualized

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6. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 25.

7. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 27, 38.

8. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 38.

9. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 28.

10. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 75.

and clergy-centric spirituality of its Catholic antecedent. The Reformation, then, signaled a shift to a faith-centered religiosity in which the subject and their own convictions dominated.<sup>11</sup>

Key to Taylor's discussion of the Reformation is his contention that this new way of relating to God affected subjective conceptions of time. Prior to the Reformation church services and events were indicators of a sacralized-time that was qualitatively and obviously distinct from profane time.<sup>12</sup> When one went to Church to watch the Mass being performed, Taylor argues, one engaged in an event that was specifically unique from all other activities in one's day. In contrast, the Reformation demanded that the individual be engaged in a perpetual state of sacred openness in which faith and religious observation were ubiquitous – i.e. the duty to be religious was no longer tied to a specific spiritual event.<sup>13</sup> Instead, *everyone* became responsible for their own spiritual work *all* of the time. The result, as becomes vital to Taylor's latter discussion in *ASA*, is a sort of "flattening" experience in which the once sacred event and time (e.g. the Mass) became the norm in all facets of life;<sup>14</sup> consequently, Taylor argues, there was a loss of a discernably sacred time.

What Taylor wants to highlight with his study of the Reformation is the movement towards social homogeneity that he argues is central to modernity.<sup>15</sup> As he writes, "The Reformation is the ultimate fruit of the Reform spirit, *producing for the first time a true uniformity of believers, a levelling up which left no further room for different speeds.*"<sup>16</sup> Note, then, Taylor's argument here: in examples such as the Reformation we see instances in which individuals relate to the sacred and time in a uniform manner; the by-product of this relational dynamic is that individuals no longer feel connected to a sacred time, they instead become disconnected from their cultural and social milieu. For Taylor in *ASA*, this is the first stage of the buffered-self.

The example of the Reformation is but the first of many for Taylor in

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11. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 76.

12. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 76.

13. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 78.

14. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 371.

15. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 77.

16. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 77 (emphasis added).

ASA in which he traces how modalities of individuation become expressed, refined, and ultimately legitimized as normal public behaviour. Indeed, Taylor's historical study traces the emergence of the buffered-self through the Renaissance, the religious movements in Deism, Romanticism, and in the 1960s "urge to authenticity." In each stage, similar to the example of the Reformation, Taylor describes how certain (theologically motivated) conceptual shifts resulted in a change of attitude towards time – the key idea being that people related to time more and more as if it were a constant unchanging "flat" dimension of life. This "flatness" is the experience of the buffered-self.

Importantly, Taylor does not describe the above process as a loss *per se*. For Taylor, the movement from the porous-self of the 1500s to the buffered-self of the 2000s is not the movement of the *loss* of the porous-self. Instead, as the example of the Reformation suggests, an individual in the Reformation gained a new way of relating to the world – i.e. an individuated relationality. However, the consequence of this new mode of relating – Taylor wants to emphasize – was one in which, a) an experience of the sacred as a disruptive element in the normal flow of temporal order (i.e. "this time" is sacred but "that time" is not) was replaced with the experience that all time was seen as latently potentiating an engagement with the sacred; and b) this new form of relating to time in a homogenous manner was a development over the previous custom. Thus, modernity, and the movement towards the "secular" was not a loss as such. Instead, it signifies a shift in how religion was lived, and therefore, how time was experienced.

### *Time and Religion*

As the above analysis makes clear, the experience of time, according to Taylor, is demonstrably linked to the experience of God. For Taylor, time simply is the means by which the sacred is experienced. By the "sacred" Taylor means "certain places: like churches, certain times: high feasts, certain actions: saying the Mass, in which the divine or the holy is present. As against these, other places, times, actions count as profane."<sup>17</sup> With that in mind, Taylor argues, the modern buffered-self has no functional

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17. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 446. Though tertiary to this essay's focus, the obvious western and thus "Christian" elements of Taylor's definition of the sacred should not go unnoticed by the reader.

techniques by which to engage in sacred time and events, something his analysis – I argue – hopes to ameliorate. One way he does this in *ASA* is by exploring premodern conceptions of time. According to Taylor, premodern societies were structured around more rigid understandings of profane time and sacred time. Sacred time disrupted profane time, while “profane time existed in relation to higher times.”<sup>18</sup> Taylor divides premodern conceptions of time into three distinct categories. First, there is the higher time of the Platonic mindset (T1). In the Platonic model, sacred time is utterly beyond the flux of the profane world. Time, in this sense, is pictured as an impassible space unaffected by the world as such.<sup>19</sup> Second, there is God’s time as expressed in the biblical tradition (T2). The idea here being that God fashioned the universe and created time in order to fulfill specific eternal plans (e.g. the crucifixion).<sup>20</sup> Taylor describes this God-ordered eternal time schema as “the gathering together of past into present to project a future.”<sup>21</sup> What Taylor seems to suggest here is that God’s eternal time in T2 slips into and effects profane time; stated otherwise, this is teleological time.

The third type of time that Taylor argues premodern societies imaged is “following Eliade, a ‘time of origins’” (T3).<sup>22</sup> Taylor notes that this type of time, unlike the first two, was not the product of either a philosopher (T1) or of a theologian (T2). Instead, this third type “belongs to the folk traditions of peoples, and indeed, not only in Europe, but almost everywhere.”<sup>23</sup> What exactly then, does Taylor mean by this Eliadean third type? By “time of origins,” he is referring to a time “when the order of things was established – either via a primal law, or primordial creation. These acts were accomplished either by gods or “at least heroes” and were seen as creative moments undertaken at a “time out of mind”; thus, they were dirempt of the profane ordering of things.<sup>24</sup> That being said, Taylor writes, “it is not simply in the past, because it is also something that we can re-approach, can get

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18. Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 97.

19. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 56.

20. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 56.

21. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 56.

22. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 57.

23. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 57.

24. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 57.

closer to again” through ritualistic acts.<sup>25</sup> The performed ritual has the effect of shrinking the “time of origins” and making its past-otherworldliness present and directly accessible to those who perform the ritual. Importantly, Taylor argues that the community is renewed by its perceived connection to this primordial act. Taylor sums up his analysis of Eliade by writing:

The Great Time is thus behind us, but it is also in a sense above us. It is what happened at the beginning, but it is also the great Exemplar, which we can be closer to or farther away from as we move through history.<sup>26</sup>

Central, then, to Taylor’s discussion of the “time of origins” – or of time in general – is the dialectical relationship that he suggests links sacred time with profane time. It is precisely the designation of the sacred as a temporal “other” from which the profane of *this* world surfaces.

Notice that in each description of time discussed above, the profane is described as an order of existence that is affected by, or responsive to, the impact of eternal time – whether it be by the philosophical conjecture of T1, God’s ordering of the universe in T2, or human attempts to recreate and symbolically link with this sacred time in T3. In each stage, Taylor is arguing, a higher vertical sacred time was perceived to *act* upon a lower horizontal profane time.

Taylor concludes ASA by arguing that in modern society – one dominated by secular time – the vertical heights of eternal time have become erased from our collective “imaginaries.” The result, much like the example from the Reformation, is a “flattening” of experience in which the buffered-self reigns supreme and the porous-self is pictured as a mere primitive stage in human psychological development. As he writes:

A purely secular time understanding allows us to imagine society “horizontally,” unrelated to any “high points” where the ordinary sequence of events touches higher time, and therefore without recognizing any privileged persons or agencies... This radical horizontality is precisely what is implied in the direct-access society, where each member is “immediate to the whole.”<sup>27</sup>

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25. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 57.

26. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 57.

27. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 713.



We are, Taylor is claiming, completely gripped by the disenchanted buffered-self's mode of being.<sup>28</sup> This is further evidenced in Taylor's description of the "direct-access society" in the quote above, a concept that signals the state in which one's "membership" to society at large "is unmediated by any partial group," therein allowing for the continual production of "new associations."<sup>29</sup> The effect of the direct-access society on individuals, as Ruth Abbey notes, results in social, political, and religious relationships formed around "primarily horizontal" rather than "traditionally hierarchical" or "vertical" manners of socially relating.<sup>30</sup> The underlying idea being that individuals should all be served "equally" by systems of power, therein negating a presumed "*a priori* privilege" that organized pre-modern society.<sup>31</sup> The result of these processes is a homogenized experience in which secular homogeneous time and events become the only, and thus the normalized, temporal experience.<sup>32</sup>

This unquestioned and entrenched time of the buffered-self for Taylor is problematic. He argues that the spiritual world is something that continues

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28. For Taylor, as he argues further, this experience of time is both a subjective as well as a socially experienced phenomenon (Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 714, cf. 55, 209, 344, 542). Taylor specifically links the experience of "disenchantment" to the temporal experience of secular time – an experience of time that leads to the instrumentality of time, wherein time is conceived of as a "resource to be managed" by both individuals and society (Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 714).

29. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 107.

30. Ruth Allen, *Charles Taylor* (Teddington, UK: Acumen, 2000), 208. It is perhaps noteworthy here to expand on this apparent division between the idea of the buffered-self and the idea of direct-access society. The buffered-self implies that the subject is indifferent to external forces while the direct-access society notion signifies an immediate access to the whole by the subject. Both of these dispositions, for Taylor, demarcate modern subjectivity as both simultaneously closed (to the infinite) and radically open (to social realms). Hence, one would be correct in seeing a paradox here. However, for Taylor, what is key is that the modern social imaginary that propels the modern subject and the entities that compose the modern social order i.e. "nations, states, churches" are no longer grounded in "something higher than common action in secular time" (Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 713). In this way, the buffered-self is precisely how it is that Taylor argues one mediates with the direct access society: for the buffered-self is the name for that mode of being that does not see transcendent forces governing social and phenomenal experience, a mode of being that, therefore, is required so as to act in and be motivated by the direct-access society (Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 713).

31. Allen, *Charles Taylor*, 208.

32. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 714.



to shape and affect us, and that we *must* find ways to reengage it. However, he is not advocating a retreat into the past to engage this lost time. Instead, Taylor wants to find new ways to encounter the transcendent that still acknowledges our present condition (i.e. the buffered-self). One way that Taylor suggests this can be done is via a full engagement with the “cycles of time” that punctuate modern society with repeated celebrations, i.e. “the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, the 14<sup>th</sup> of July, the 3<sup>rd</sup> of May” or New Year’s Eve.<sup>33</sup> As Taylor writes, these “repeatable cycles of life” demonstrate both our continued desire to connect events over time and our attempts to find meaning in that continuity.<sup>34</sup> Thus, interestingly, Taylor’s prescription to a recovery of meaning and an engagement with the porous-self via the modern entrenched buffered-self, is through a mode of being that exhibits the structure of T3 – i.e. Eliade’s “time of origins.” It is with the above in mind that I now turn to Eliade and briefly consider his description of the “time of origins.”

### **Eliade and the “Time of Origins”**

Mircea Eliade (1907-1986) has the curious distinction of being simultaneously a respected voice in the history of western religious studies, as well as a much derided and criticized theorist.<sup>35</sup> Eliade’s esteem surfaces, first, from the vast historical research that underlies his thought; and, second, because he has provided religious studies with a host of conceptual tools that have aided scholars in their understanding of religion as a category.<sup>36</sup> However, he is often disparaged in modern scholarship for the essentialism and broad generalizations that his research produced.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, even terms such as “time of origins” have been largely rejected in modern religious studies scholarship precisely due to the unexamined essentialism that this

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33. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 716.

34. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 716.

35. Robert Ellwood, “Eliade: Essentialist or Postmodern? The Sacred and the Unseen Order,” in *Mircea Eliade: Myth, Religion, and History*, ed. Nicolae Babuts (London: Transaction Publishers, 2014), 1.

36. Douglas Allen, “Eliade’s Phenomenological Approach to Religion and Myth,” in *Mircea Eliade: Myth, Religion, and History*, ed. Nicolae Babuts (London: Transaction Publishers, 2014), 85-86.

37. E.g. Russell McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 13; Tony Stigliano, “Fascism’s Mythologist: Mircea Eliade and the Politics of Myth,” *ReVision* 24, no. 3 (2002): 37.

phrase carries.<sup>38</sup> I raise these points now, before I examine Eliade in greater detail, as I feel it is important to instigate this analysis by acknowledging that Taylor's unremarked-upon use of Eliade unwittingly places him within a charged debate that currently marks religious studies scholarship.

What then is Eliade's religious studies project? And, specifically, what assumptions and implications do terms like "time of origins" carry in Eliade's work? The ensuing analysis will seek to briefly resolve these questions by situating "time of origins" within Eliade's understanding of religion, ritual, and time – clarification of which will serve as a helpful contrast to further my analysis of Taylor's use of the phrase.

### *Time as Re-collection*

Eliade's most sustained treatment of the "time of origins" occurs in his book *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*. The phrase develops out of a chapter entitled "Sacred Time and Myths," and is preceded by the section "Profane Duration and Sacred Time."<sup>39</sup> Eliade argues that, for "religious man, time was neither homogenous nor continuous," as periodical events like "festivals" interrupted the "ordinary temporal duration" of profane time.<sup>40</sup> There is, then, a dual experience of time for "religious man."<sup>41</sup> Central to this experience of sacred time, Eliade argues, is a participation in the "annual repetition of the creation" of order and/or the world.<sup>42</sup> These rituals involved the participants acting out the destruction of the world, and the re-creation of the world in a repetitive yearly ritual.<sup>43</sup> The engagement with repetition and re-creation was, Eliade writes, grounded in the assumption that "by symbolically participating in the annihilation and re-creation of the world, man too was created anew; he was reborn, for he

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38. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion*, 79.

39. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1987), 68.

40. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 68. This is a theme that Eliade touches upon throughout his work; see, e.g., Mircea Eliade, *The Quest: History and Meaning in Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 79, 86-87; Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1959), 22-27; Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 18-20.

41. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 68.

42. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 78.

43. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 79.

began a new life.”<sup>44</sup> The central assumption that orients Eliade’s analysis, then, is a claim regarding “religious man” and his capacity to be renewed by ritually participating in the symbolic destruction and renewal of the mythological time within which he is a part.<sup>45</sup>

A key aspect of the above account concerns Eliade’s notion of an original time, what he called an *illud tempus* – i.e. “that time.”<sup>46</sup> Indeed, what the “time of origins” signifies is “the stupendous instant in which reality was created, was for the first time fully manifested”; and by creating rituals to encounter this *illud tempus* humans “return to that original time.”<sup>47</sup> Importantly, for Eliade, these rituals are not simply a “commemoration of a mythical event,” rather the ritual “reactualizes the event”; that is, the ritual symbolically constructs the sacred event, uniting therein the ritual performers with a primeval sacred time. Hence, for Eliade, a deep connection links time, religion, and spiritual experience. Eliade’s “religious man,” then, surfaces only insofar as he is able to connect with a “time of origins” – a time that interrupts the profane ordering of things and reconnects the subject with “the instant that saw the appearance of the most immense of realities.”<sup>48</sup>

### *Time and Religion*

One way to conceptualize Eliade’s time/religion dialectic concerns a presumed anxiety that he argues haunts humanity: the capacity to forget.<sup>49</sup> That is, humankind’s propensity to forget the past and thus to forget how to renew the present and thus engage with the future, propels this “time of origins” concept.<sup>50</sup> Indeed, as Nicolae Babuts notes, Eliade’s hermeneutic awakens modern scholars to the notion that “among the primitives [the “time of origins” ritual] was part of a *nostalgia* for the lost paradise.”<sup>51</sup> Eliade’s

44. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 79.

45. Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, 35. See also Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1958), 388-392.

46. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 81.

47. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 81 (emphasis added).

48. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 81.

49. See, e.g., Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, 107; Eliade, *Cosmos and History*, 121.

50. For an excellent analysis of the idea of “forgetting” in relation to Eliade’s work, see: Mac Linscott Ricketts, “On Reading Eliade’s Stories as Myths for Moderns,” in *Mircea Eliade: A Critical Reader*, ed. Bryan Rennie (Oakville, CT: Equinox Publishing, 2006), 364-378.

51. Nicolae Babuts, “Introduction,” in *Mircea Eliade: Myth, Religion, and History*, ed. Nicolae

conception of time, then, is deeply embedded within an anthropological assumption that emphasizes the human need to commune with and be redeemed by a lost part of its primordial past.<sup>52</sup> Thus, like Taylor, Eliade is suggesting that engaging fully in sacred time and bringing it to the present is key to religious activity.

Additionally, Eliade is arguing that religion is emergent from the material and social conditions of the world. Religion is something that arises from human needs (i.e. in the desire to commune with the past and quell a basic anxiety) and is constructed to meet those needs (i.e. through “time of origins” rituals). Importantly, then, for Eliade the sacred is both “out there” *sui generis* as well as “an element in the structure of consciousness” and human finitude.<sup>53</sup>

What then does this tell us about Eliade, religion, and time – especially Eliade’s “time of origins”? First, Eliade’s analysis, is rooted within a hermeneutic that acknowledges the legitimacy of religious experience as such. In this way, Eliade’s “time of origins” phrase references humanity’s connection and construction of the infinite via our finite material resources.<sup>54</sup> And, here, following the work of Douglas Allen, we should see Eliade as a “normative” thinker whose understanding of religion departs from mere descriptive claims; for Eliade, Allen correctly claims, themes of “elevated times” saturate his work.<sup>55</sup> Second, then, Eliade’s account of religion is underscored by a normative claim regarding the capacity of rituals and symbols to alter human experience and shape society. Hence,

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Babuts (London: Transaction Publishers, 2014), xxiv.

52. Douglas Allen, *Myth and Religion in Mircea Eliade* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998), 65-66. As Allen writes, “the mythic structure of sacred and history orients” individuals so that they can “return mythically to the fullness of mythic origins” and thereby find regeneration (Allen, *Myth and Religion*, 65-66).

53. Quoted in Ellwood, “Eliade: Essentialist or Postmodern?” 5; see also Bryan Rennie, “The Life and Work of Mircea Eliade,” in *Mircea Eliade: A Critical Reader*, ed. Bryan Rennie (Oakville, CT: Equinox Publishing, 2006), 13. Here Rennie helpfully draws a parallel between Eliade’s conception of the sacred and Immanuel Kant’s “*a priori* postulates of the understanding” – which is to say, for example, a hierophany for Eliade signals the transcendental structure “of consciousness” itself.

54. This position is developed from Douglas Allen, “The Dialectic of the Sacred,” in *Mircea Eliade: A Critical Reader*, ed. Bryan Rennie (Oakville, CT: Equinox Publishing, 2006), 96-101.

55. Douglas Allen, *Structure and Creativity in Religion: Hermeneutics in Mircea Eliade’s Phenomenology and New Directions* (New York: Mouten Publishers, 1978), 221-222.

“time of origins” rituals are akin to the material “transcendental conditions for the possibility” of spiritual renewal and temporal recollection – rituals connect individuals with their past, present, and future, which, for Eliade, is fundamental to “religious man” as such.<sup>56</sup>

### **Taylor, Time, and Eliade**

The above two analyses have had two overarching objectives: a) to situate Taylor’s conception of religion within his understanding of time, specifically, what Eliade’s “time of origins” means for Taylor, and b) to analyze Eliade’s own conception of “time of origins,” and to highlight some of the complexities and tensions that accompany his theory. In what follows, I extend the above discussion by comparing and contrasting Taylor’s understanding of “time of origins” with Eliade’s. I will reflect upon what the similarities and differences that exist between Taylor and Eliade tell us about Taylor’s conception of the sacred. However, I begin this section by examining some of the ways in which Taylor uses his “time of origins” phrase throughout his writing.

#### *Taylor, Time, and Repetition*

Taylor’s repetitive use of Eliade’s “time of origins” phrase in his work, far from being a mere incidental habit, is both instructive regarding Taylor’s conception of what religion is, and how he feels one can reencounter the sacred in modernity. But in what ways has Taylor actually used this phrase, and are there variations in Taylor’s use? Taylor uses the phrase “time of origins” twelve times in *ASA* both with and without a reference to Eliade.<sup>57</sup> The phrase is first used on page 57 and its final use is on page 713 – it thus has considerable relevance throughout the text. In every single use of the phrase in *ASA*, Taylor deploys it to signify how people have connected with something higher and/or immaterial, whether in a religious or in a political sense.<sup>58</sup> As noted previously, Taylor only devotes a single paragraph to

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56. For Further clarification on this point, see Allen, *Myth and Religion*, 4, 66-67, 182; and Rennie, “The Life and Work of Mircea Eliade,” 13.

57. Pages with references to Eliade can be found in Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 57, 195, 197, 208, 446, 713. Pages without references to Eliade can be found in Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 58, 96 (3 references on this page), 209, 413.

58. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 57, 197.

explaining how he actually interprets the phrase “time of origins.” It is noteworthy that Taylor sees very little reason to expand upon what the phrase means other than the additional “in Eliade’s sense.”<sup>59</sup> Indeed, Taylor seems to simply imbue Eliade’s phrase with implicit authority, therein removing the need for exposition on either the positives or negatives of the theory.

Aside from ASA, Taylor also uses the “time of origins” phrase in his 2002 book *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited* as well as his 2004 book *Modern Social Imaginaries*. In *Varieties*, he uses the term only once, and in the same way that he does on page 57 of ASA,<sup>60</sup> while, in *Social Imaginaries*, the phrase appears six times, three cases of which have no reference to Eliade.<sup>61</sup> In *Imaginaries*, the term is used to signify both spiritual as well as political order.

Aside from Taylor’s own books, the phrase also appears in several collections of essays in which he is published. For example, the books *Theorizing Nationalism*, *The Morality of Nationalism*, and *The State of the Nation* all contain the same essay entitled “Nationalism and Modernity.” In this essay, the term “time of origins” is deployed so as to suggest that the modern subject no longer relates to the political state as if it were imbued with a sense of transcendent excess or authority – a precondition for the “direct access society.”<sup>62</sup> Taylor also has a 2006 essay entitled “Religious Mobilizations” in which he uses the term. Here, though, it is used in the same way as in ASA on page 57. This essay was also published in Taylor’s 2011 book *Dilemmas and Connections*.<sup>63</sup> Finally, on a German website for the *Institute for Human Sciences*, Taylor has an article in which he discusses religion in modernity. Here, too, Eliade is invoked to aid Taylor’s discussion

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59. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 208.

60. Charles Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 66.

61. Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 97, 110, 155, 156, 157, 175.

62. Charles Taylor, “Nationalism and Modernity,” in *Theorizing Nationalism*, ed. Ronald Beiner, (New York: State University of New York Press, 1999), 226; Charles Taylor, “Nationalism and Modernity,” in *The Morality of Nationalism*, eds. Robert McKim and Jeff McMahan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 37; Charles Taylor, “Nationalism and Modernity,” in *The State of the Nation: Ernst Gellner and the Theory of Nationalism*, ed. John A. Hall (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 198.

63. Charles Taylor, “Religious Mobilizations,” *Public Culture* 18, no. 2 (2006): 283; Charles Taylor, *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 148.



of the shifting connection of time, religion, and the sacred in modernity.<sup>64</sup>

Interestingly, then, in each example raised above, Taylor uses Eliade in two senses. The first, to talk specifically about religion; the second, to talk about politics and the direct-access society. In both cases, Taylor uses Eliade's "time of origins" phrase to denote how people ritually engage with a perceived higher-order via time. As I have suggested above, Eliade's notion of a renewal-in-the-present by ritualistically engaging with a higher sense of time is key to Taylor's prescription for the modern malaise.<sup>65</sup> For, although Taylor is using Eliade's phrase in a descriptive manner throughout his works, he seems, nonetheless, to deploy Eliade's "time of origins" prescriptively, i.e. as a potential corrective to the modern "flatness" of the buffered-self – a point to which I will return below.

*Taylor and Eliade: Time, Loss, and the Sacred*

Taylor's use of Eliade's "time of origins" is a fairly accurate application of Eliade's theory. For, as was shown above, Taylor argued that in its basic structure the "time of origins" signified the ritualized attempt to unify the present moment with a perceived sacred *illud tempus* – i.e. to make the "present" holy by uniting it with a sacred past event.<sup>66</sup> And, as my discussion on Eliade indicated, this is also how Eliade deploys "time of origins" in his own writing.

Regarding the use of the term by both thinkers, I would argue that there is an anthropological assumption concerning an anxiety about "forgetting the past" that they share. In reactualizing the sacred time of "back then" now, they are both suggesting that humans become grounded in the present social and religious order to be better fixed or "located" within the world. As such, for Taylor and Eliade, to forget the past is to lose an understanding of the present.

Additionally, though associated with remembrance, both Eliade and Taylor emphasize the capacity of an individual to engage in an experience of fullness and depth via the religious and/or ritual act. Taylor stresses this point at the beginning of *ASA* via his example of the Catholic thinker Bede

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64. Charles Taylor, "Religion Today," *Institute for Human Sciences*, 2016, accessed on December 2, 2017, <http://www.iwm.at/transit/transit-online/religion-today/>.

65. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 716.

66. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 57.



Griffiths' (1906-1993) spiritual experience, an example that repeats itself throughout the text. Taylor writes that "in [Griffiths'] case, the sense of fullness came in an experience which unsettles and breaks throughout our ordinary sense of being in the world, with its familiar objects, activities, and points of reference."<sup>67</sup> Griffiths' experience, was marked by a mystical encounter which, for Taylor, signified the capacity of the spiritual to disrupt and alter one's life – a disruption that rituals in the "time of origins" sense denote.<sup>68</sup> Likewise, with Eliade, the "time of origins" is the ritualized breaking through of the "most immense of realities," the "fullness" of life into the subject's experience – the same descriptive experience that Taylor ascribes to Griffiths.<sup>69</sup> This process, what Allen calls the "dialectic of the sacred" in Eliade's work, echoes Eliade's notion of the hierophany, a paradoxically transcendent process whose "wholly other" and "infinite" nature "limits itself by manifesting itself in some relative, finite, historical thing."<sup>70</sup>

Central though, for both Taylor and Eliade, is the emphasis not simply on the "spiritual" or the ritual as such, but on the potential of time to reveal this spiritual dimension. That is, there is a latent supposition to both thinkers writing that certain "times" are infused with an evocative "excessive quality" that awakens the subject to the possibility of a "more than" – i.e. a sense of the infinite.<sup>71</sup> Rituals, as it were, direct the gaze and the focus of the subject to a presumed numinous time; this re-focused attention dissolves the temporal boundary between "past" and "present" and creates a unified experience in which the ritual participant exists in both time periods at once – i.e. Taylor's "experience of fullness"<sup>72</sup> or Eliade's "experience of the sacred."<sup>73</sup> This description runs through both Taylor's as well as Eliade's work whenever the phrase "time of origins" is discussed.

Thus, just as Eliade is normatively accounting for the way in which

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67. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 5.

68. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 252.

69. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 81.

70. Allen, *Mircea Eliade: A Critical Reader*, 99.

71. Eliade, following Rudolf Otto, will call this "numinous present" the "*Ganz Andere*," i.e. the experience of "something basically and totally different" (Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 9-10).

72. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 10.

73. Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, 2; Eliade, *Myth and Religion*, 139-140.

“religious man” is connected to a dimension of “depth” and “the spiritual” via rituals,<sup>74</sup> Taylor’s account, too, is normatively *prescriptive* in intent. That is to say, Taylor is not simply noting how it is that rituals function in society – as he sometimes seems to imply; nor is he merely documenting the manner in which rituals have functioned. Instead, he is implying that we (moderns) *need* to engage in these rituals, in a “time of origins” sense, so as to confront modern ills.<sup>75</sup> For example, despite Taylor’s claim that his analysis is not oriented around what he calls the “subtraction hypothesis” of modernity, i.e. that a “loss” marks the experience of the modern buffered-self, his overall position in the ASA would seem to complicate that assertion. For instance, consider the following quote:

Modern “secularization” can be seen from one angle as the *rejection of higher times, and the positing of time as purely profane*. Events now exist only in this one dimension, in which they stand at a greater and lesser temporal distance, and in relations of causality with other events of the same kind. The modern notion of simultaneity comes to be, in which events utterly unrelated in cause or meaning are held together simply by their co-occurrence at the same point in this single profane timeline.<sup>76</sup>

We see here the issue of “flattening” that was raised in the discussion of the Reformation above – for Taylor, time, in modernity, is the homogenization of experience into one flat “profane timeline.” But, continuing on in a paragraph just below the one quoted above, Taylor writes:

Now the move to what I am calling “secularity” is obviously related to this *radically purged* time-consciousness. It comes when associations are placed firmly and wholly in homogenous, profane time, whether or not the higher time is negated altogether, or other associations are still admitted to exist in it.<sup>77</sup>

Note, then, Taylor’s claim here: secularity “purges” the recognition of the experience of a higher time-consciousness, whether or not that higher “time-consciousness” is real or not. I would argue that passages like the ones just

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74. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 82.

75. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 716.

76. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 195 (emphasis added).

77. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 196 (emphasis added).

quoted imply that central to Taylor's assumptions in ASA is that the modern buffered-self has *lost* the capacity to engage in a higher time, a loss which for Taylor is harmful. Simply stated, Taylor is advocating a subtraction hypothesis regarding the experience of higher times in modernity – a subtraction that he argues requires remedying.

### *Retrieving Sacred Time*

To further the above argument, consider Taylor's 2016 interview with the philosopher Richard Kearney. Here, Taylor notes the loss of the spiritual in modernity, and the role that "grace" can play in inspiring modern thinkers to see a place for "something more" in the world than just the profane.<sup>78</sup> This spiritual dimension, Taylor argues, necessarily leads one to "need and want to get closer to [transcendent grace] through prayer and a certain faith practice."<sup>79</sup> Moreover, as Taylor notes, the recognition of the infinite comes about only via a rejection of the buffered or disenchanted self.<sup>80</sup> Taylor, replying to Kearney, notes:

Yes, all of this [i.e. the "hunger" to return to spirituality] is deeply related to a response to the modern disenchantment of the world, which coincides with the strict and often legalistic codes of the modern moral order. Max Weber was right about the [disenchantment] of our secular time, with its occlusion of any notion of higher times or sacred places. This is a fact, though I think Weber used the term too loosely. *It is precisely after having gotten rid of the spirits that a number of people in the west today... are interested in retrieving something that was lost but may be rediscovered in new ways, in terms of what I call reconversions to something new from our past.*<sup>81</sup>

Note the use of the idea of retrieval and return that Taylor speaks of here. For we have, Taylor says, lost something in modernity; and, in order to move forward as a society, we need to look to the spiritual foundations of the past in order to ameliorate this loss.

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78. Richard Kearney and Charles Taylor, "Transcendent Humanism in a Secular Age," in *Reimagining the Sacred: Richard Kearney Debates God*, eds. Richard Kearney and Jens Zimmermann (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 79.

79. Kearney and Taylor, "Transcendent Humanism," 79.

80. Kearney and Taylor, "Transcendent Humanism," 83.

81. Kearney and Taylor, "Transcendent Humanism," 84 (emphasis added).

I would suggest that Taylor's argument from ASA and expressed in his interview with Kearney, can be interpreted in the following way: modern individuals need to undergo their own "time of origins" experience in order to recover what has been lost in modernity; they need to retrieve those past times and spaces in which the sacred was fully present. Taylor's claim is that once we re-learn how to engage the transcendent "time of origins" of the past within the present moment, then we can more fully and deeply encounter the modern world and our future. Simply stated, Taylor is suggesting that a) a deep and profound sacred "time of origins" marks our cultural landscape; b) this sacred depth has been lost to, or forgotten by, the buffered-self; and c) the modern subject *needs* to find ways to remember the past sacred "time of origins" in ways that speak to present society.

### **Conclusion**

This essay began by noting Taylor's Templeton award speech, a speech that underscored his anxiety regarding the "forgettings" of modernity; specifically, the forgotten capacity to engage with the sacred. And as was shown in this essay, the inability to engage with and fully encounter the sacred is a hallmark of the modern experience, a claim made throughout Taylor's work. I proposed that one way to better understand exactly how it was that Taylor's project conceived of the spiritual or sacred features of human experience was via the theme of time – specifically via the loss of a higher-time as a signifier of the sacred. In order to think through Taylor's understanding of time, I examined the repetitious phrase "'time of origins' in Eliade's sense" that Taylor uses in many of his published works. This phrase, I argued, provides a helpful way to think through Taylor's notion of time, religion, and the "forgettings" of modernity.

The "time of origins" phrase, as I have argued throughout this paper, shows us that Taylor conceives of sacred time – and therefore religion – as an attempt to recapitulate a past time that was infused with an excess of "transcendent" quality. Sacred time, for Taylor, is not simply a descriptive account of religious phenomena, instead it also functions as a prescriptive and normative corrective to the homogeneity of modern time and the malaise of the buffered-self. Indeed, for Taylor, it is the slow encroachment of the uniform experience of time that led to the buffered-self, the loss of the porous-self, and, thus, the loss of the sacred that he laments with Kearney.

This occurs, according to Taylor, because the experience of time as uniform results in a subjective and social disposition in which the possibility of a “sacred” time – a breaking-through – seems foreign at best and impossible at worst. Taylor thus argues that the modern subject, in order to experience the sacred and forgo the forgettings of the contemporary world, needs to experience these disruptive moments of time – this is the anthropological assumption that undergirds Taylor’s “time of origins” claim. Indeed, as Nicholas Smith insightfully notes, for Taylor “self-understanding inescapably occurs in time, it requires some synthesis of the present, past and future” – the “time of origins” I have shown in this essay, is one way in which that synthesis occurs for Taylor.<sup>82</sup> Hence, Taylor’s depiction of the buffered-self is a portrayal framed around a lamentation of the loss of the sacred for the modern subject – and a hope of its retrieval via the remembrance of the “time of origins” in Eliade’s sense.

How we reimagine and reengage the “sacred” – via the buffered-self – is what Taylor is fundamentally concerned with. For these reasons, as I have argued, Taylor’s understanding of this re-engagement with a lost sacred time mimics Eliade’s “time of origins” idea. For, what Taylor ultimately prescribes is that “through prayer and a certain faith practice” the modern subject relearns to bring to life the “lost” sacred past, uniting the modern individual with the primal sacred “time of origins,” thereby undoing the “forgettings” that Taylor sees haunting modernity.<sup>83</sup>

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82. Nicholas Smith, *Charles Taylor: Meaning, Morals, and Modernity* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2002), 97.

83. Kearney and Taylor, “Transcendent Humanism,” 79.