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### November 13, 2007: The Limits of Charles Taylor's Categories in A Secular Age

Bruce Ledewitz

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Title: The Limits of Charles Taylor's Categories in A Secular Age

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11/13/2007--My colleague and teacher, Robert Taylor, opened his Law and Religion lecture yesterday with the following question: "What is the human being essentially? We are pulled by a mysterious attractor at the center of things. We are not that existentially, but we are that essentially." I was greatly moved by the truth of these statements. They show the impossibility of considering the rise of secularism within the framework of a tension between the immanent and the transcendent. For the "pull" at the heart of our lives is immanent, in the here and now. Yet, it pulls us out of the immanent into the beyond. Obviously, the mysterious pull can be thought of in religious terms. Yet, secular life can also be thought this way, in terms of the pull. Certainly there is nothing here of dogma or doctrine. The pull is a question concerning what human life is like as lived experience. In contrast, Charles Taylor tells the story of the secular age in terms of the "distinction transcendent/immanent"(15). If he had not looked at the story in those terms, his history and speculation would have been very different. He might have told a story of the constant return of the transcendent through new secular/immanent forms. This, I think, would have made for a vital and revolutionary book. Taylor's goal is to describe the history of an argument, a debate, between religious and secular people. This is why the book, for all its marvelous erudition, falls somewhat flat. It is limited to the terms of that debate. The book does not attempt to answer the question for us, which is, what are we to do now? The answer to that question, given what Professor Taylor has told us, is openness to the mystery of the pull at the heart of things. How to do that is quite a different matter. Doing that—opening ourselves, which is, of course, not a doing—is not aided in any way by talk of the immanent in contrast to the transcendent.