

"Christian Identity in a Secular Age: Charles Taylor and Martin Luther on  
the Authenticity of the Self in Society"  
By Joshua Hollmann

"Midway in the journey of our life I found myself in a dark wood." So begins arguably

Instagram Dante and Don Draper explicate extreme cases of identity crises. Yet their searches for self arise from the same Western intellectual ethos. Don Draper actually reads Dante's *Divine Comedy* in season six of *Mad Men*. To put it in terms of contemporary Canadian philosopher

and external world. I have found the writings of Charles Taylor, notably *A Secular Age* and *Sources of the Self*, very helpful in articulating what it means to be human in the present through the conceptualization of the authenticity of the self in society. We will concentrate on Taylor's central concepts in *A Secular Age* and *Sources of the Self* in order to gain greater insight into articulations of Christian Lutheran identity in our North American cultural ethos of the authenticity of the self. First, the essay will present Taylor's account of identity in a secular age. Second, having established how our secular age affects the ageless search for what it means to be human, we will consider Taylor's understanding of identity as inclusive of the affirmation of the ordinary life and how this relates to the Lutheran teaching of vocation in both the private and public spheres. Third, we will compare Taylor and Martin Luther on identity and vocation and what this means for the contemporary quest to discover one's self and one's place in our secular age of authenticity. Finally, in response to Taylor and Luther's focus on agape and vocation, we will revisit Dante and Don Draper's search for finding one's self by observing how the search for authenticity leads to the discovery of human flourishing as experienced in love radiating out to others. While for Socrates the unexamined life is not worth living, for Christians, the unrelated life is not worth living. In the Christian experience, we relate in love to Father (creator), Son (redeemer), and Holy Spirit (sanctifier), and we relate in love to all of our neighbors. This essay is particularly aimed at Christian educators and those striving to teach their students to find themselves in relation with and for God in order that they may live authentic lives of passion and service in relation with and for others. As Christians, our lives in Christ by the Spirit are lived

which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose. In other words, it is the horizon within which I am capable of taking a stand.<sup>18</sup> From the ancient age up to the early modern and Enlightenment, Western thinkers peered the world within and without through differing perspectives on one shared horizon of being and meaning.<sup>19</sup> One orients and originates one's self in relation and reaction to set forth meaning. Thus, Taylor notes, "For someone in Luther's age, the issue of the basic moral frame orienting one's actions could only be put in universal terms. Nothing else made sense."<sup>20</sup> Now, however, such a universal frame makes no sense to my secular student in our secular age.

According to Taylor, the current state of finding one's self and one's place in society is an enigma discernable in the past, yet distorted today. Taylor has different ways of describing this present puzzle of identity formation: fragility and fragmentation in a pluralist world, in which many forms of belief and unbelief jostle and hence embattle each other.<sup>21</sup> ea6]TJ 0.001

three major frameworks: the inner self or inwardness, the affirmation of the ordinary life, and the voice of nature, which implies the expression of nature as inner moral source.<sup>30</sup>

## II. Christian Identity, Vocation, and the Affirmation of the Ordinary Life in the Private and Public Spheres

In relation to the importance of the Reformation as starting point for Taylor's *A Secular Age and Sources of the Self* as well as Luther's revolutionary understanding of the self in society as corporately lived out in God-given vocations, we shall here focus on Taylor's second framework, the affirmation of ordinary life in the private and public spheres. Taylor observes that the affirmation of ordinary life finds its origins in Judeo-Christian spirituality, and the particular impetus it receives in the modern era comes first of all, from the Reformation!<sup>31</sup> Taylor observes that before Luther the Christian was a passenger in the ecclesial ship in its journey to God: "But for Protestantism, there can be no passengers. This is because there is no ship in the Catholic sense, no *comao se-*





on: "And so if it falls your lot to be a street sweeper, sweep streets like Rafael  
painted pictures. Sweep streets like Michelangelo carved marble. Sweep streets  
like Beethoven composed music. Sweep streets like Shakespeare wrote poetry.<sup>52</sup> Here we behold a beautiful affirmation of the ordinary life. Here too, as in  
Luther's "Sermon on The Two Kinds of Righteousness" (1519), most of the focus is given to the  
active realm or actively living out the faith in one's particular duty in life. For Luther and Martin  
Luther King, Jr., vocation includes the struggle for God's justice in the face of human injustice.  
Today, as Taylor shows, belief in God is no longer axiomatic. Social justice may or may not  
include divine justice. There are alternatives to belief. Revealed faith is still an option, but  
contested. Instead of rowing our own boats, more and more humanity willingly embarks as  
passengers on techniven devices floating along the nonlinear, shallow ocean of what the  
French philosopher Luc Ferry titles the shift from science to technology, the disappearance of  
ends and the triumph of means.<sup>54</sup>"

Amidst the aimlessness, Luther is still read and taught. Martin Luther King, Jr. still inspires  
action for the welfare of others. This leads us back to teaching Luther's theology on the self in  
society for students striving to be themselves in the twenty-first century. From the start, the  
living Lutheran tradition has accentuated and actualized the concordance of scholarship and  
Christ-centered vocations of grace, contemplation and activity. My students and I explore the  
convergences of faith and reason, theology and the humanities in professional studies.  
Following Aristotle's lead, we are dedicated to the pursuit of academic excellence in the spirit of  
discovery and the desire to know and delight in the findings of reason and the grounding of  
faith.<sup>56</sup> As a professor of theology, I seek to inspire students, who come from various  
backgrounds and contexts, to live lives with meaning and purpose. In other words, this means  
teaching Luther on the self and society in experiential ways to students living in an age of  
authenticity. Furthermore, this requires patience and open space for students to search for their  
identities in relation to God's identity. And in our increasingly politically polarized world, this  
search especially includes Martin Luther King, Jr. on vocation, justice, the struggle to live  
meaningful lives for the welfare of the marginalized. As Taylor rightly notes, Luther's crisis was  
not one of meaning (the meaning of life was all too unquestionable to an Augustinian monk and  
to his whole age). The existential predicament in which one fears condemnation is quite  
different from the one where one fears, above all, meaninglessness, as Paul Tillich  
explores in *The Courage To Be*.<sup>57</sup> Perhaps defines our age. Even so, the path to discovering  
meaning in our age of authenticity traverses the affirmation of the ordinary and finding

<sup>52</sup> King, "The Three Dimensions of a Complete Life," 198.

<sup>53</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 3.

<sup>54</sup> Luc Ferry, *A Brief History of Thought: A Philosophical Guide to Living*, trans. Theo Cuffe (New York: Harper, 2011), 211.

<sup>55</sup> In the Catholic medieval theological tradition (from which the Lutheran church and confessional movement arises), contemplation is coupled with action as faith is expressed in the charity of the Christian. See for example, Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 179. Christian identity includes matters of the heart and forming habits of virtue and service.

<sup>56</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics* (A), 1 in *The Complete Works of Aristotle, The Revised Oxford Translation*, vol. 2, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 1052. Compare Luther's explanation to the first article of the Apostles' Creed in *The Small Catechism* in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 354.

<sup>57</sup> Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952). See, especially, the anxiety of emptiness and meaninglessness, 46-51. Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 8.







wellbeing of the other.<sup>65</sup> Dante radiating out to Beatrice. Augustine radiating out to Monica. Beatrice and Monica radiating out of God. Ordinary Christians radiating out to others in the extraordinary love of the Holy Spirit. Transforming my life into life. "The heart has its reasons," Pascal pondered in early modernity, "which reason knows nothing." My students still feel it in a thousand things, just as Pas