It would be ideal if we could follow the development of the nova in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, because it is then that the alternatives open to unbelief are multiplied and enriched, prior to their diffusion to society as a whole in the process I’m calling “super-nova”, which mainly takes place after the Second World War.

Here the trajectories differ significantly between national cultures. A really satisfactory account would have to follow all of these. But alas, I lack the space and the competence, and probably the reader lacks the patience, to accomplish this. And so I want to concentrate on a couple of interesting, illustrative cases. I will look first at England (sometimes also Britain, but mainly England) from roughly 1840 to 1940. And then I will take a brief look at France around the turn of the twentieth century. After which I will turn in the next part to try to draw some general conclusions about the coming of the “secular age” in the West.

The early nineteenth century saw a resurgence in belief and practice associated with the Evangelicals, and partly driven by the shock of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. But in the 1830s, orthodox belief among intellectual and social elites comes once again under pressure. Some of the same philosophical considerations were at work as earlier. Philosophical Radicalism, with its Utilitarian principles, was very much an intellectual product of the eighteenth century. But as I mentioned earlier (Chapter 10, section 2), we should perhaps see the new regression of Christian faith rather as a reprise than as a simple continuation of the developments of the previous century. That’s because the line of attack was in some ways new. The old arguments continued, but they were supplemented by a new approach.

An important retreat occurred; so that by mid-century John Stuart Mill (true, not quite a neutral observer) could say that “the old opinions in religion, morals and politics, are so much discredited in the more intellectual minds as to have lost the
greater part of their efficacy for good.”1 But one of the most important vectors by
which this roll back occurred was new to the age. We can perhaps best understand it
as the resolution of a cross-pressure which many people felt at the time. It is the one
I described in the previous section between the seemingly inescapable idea of an im-
personal order, on one hand, and the need above all to avoid the flatness, the empti-
ness, the fragmentation, which only too obviously seemed to accompany the social
and cultural order which was emerging around them, on the other. The pull to
impersonality dictated or reflected a rejection of orthodox Christianity; but in face
of what seemed like the loss of so many crucial goods, it seemed imperative to save
certain values of historical Christianity.

Thus for many whatever in the traditional faith went beyond or contradicted the
notion of impersonal order was no longer believable; but at the same time, their
sense of the weaknesses, ugliness, or evils of their age forbade them to accept the
more reductive, scientistic or Utilitarian modes of order.

A good reason for looking at the advance of unbelief in these terms is the influ-
ence and impact of Carlyle. This is hard to understand today, not just because of
Carlyle’s over-the-top polemical style (that might of itself keep us interested); but
largely because at the end of his career he attacked some of the most basic values of
modern liberalism, and this makes him hard to forgive. Indeed, one can argue that
his eclipse occurred very shortly after his death.2 But in the 1830s and 40s, he was
immensely popular. When I speak here of a vector of the advance of unbelief, I
mean that Carlyle’s solution to the cross-pressures which he was responding to pro-
vided the bridge by which many members of the elite public could distance them-
selves from their ancestral faith. In this, he was followed by Arnold, who in a certain
sense extended the bridge, or rebuilt it in a rather different, in the end more palat-
able way. (Another bridge of this kind was offered by George Eliot, again following
in the wake of Carlyle.)

In giving Carlyle such a central role, I am deviating from what is often seen as the
standard story of the Victorians’ loss of faith. Somewhat oversimplifying, this is
thought to have been caused by the impact of Darwinian evolution, which is held
so directly to have refuted the Bible. This created an agonizing conflict for many
people of devout upbringing, which was in the end resolved by many, often with a
poignant sense of loss, by the abandonment of their faith. There is some truth in
this story, especially about the agonizing, and sense of loss (which seems to have
been felt by Darwin himself). But it leaves out something crucial: that evolutionary
theory didn’t emerge in a world where almost everyone still took the Bible story
simply and literally; that among other things, this world was already strongly
marked by the ideas of impersonal order, not to speak of the dark abyss of time; and
that an influential formulation had already been given to the displacement of Chris-
tianity by a cosmic vision of impersonal order, that of Carlyle.
This doesn't mean that Darwin was without impact. His theory gave an important push towards a materialist, reductive view of the cosmos, from which all teleology was purged (because explained away on a deeper level). But it enters a field in which many people had already felt the pull of the primacy of impersonal order; it did not initiate this pull on its own.

Carlyle, formed in large part by Goethe, and partly through him by Schiller and the German Romantics, reacted against all those features of Christianity uncombinable with impersonal order: the crucial importance of a personal relation to God, particular providences, Divine judgment as a personal decision of God, and above all, miracles (those "old Hebrew clothes"). Moreover, he didn't understand this as his own personal reaction. He shared the view which I described in an earlier chapter, based on a stadial conception of history, that the pieces he rejected were basically unacceptable to the mind of his age, however much some people, in their failure to understand their times, hung on to them. Whatever could be saved in Christianity couldn't be preserved in that form. "The Mythus of the Christian Religion looks not in the eighteenth Century as it did in the eighth"; who will help us "to embody the divine Spirit of that Religion in a new Mythus, in a new vehicle and vesture, that our Souls, otherwise too like perishing, may live?" As we can already guess from the invocation of the term 'myth', the doctrines of this new form were not very definite, but they seemed to involve the existence of some not purely human spiritual force, which could help humanity to move forward to higher forms of life. They involved some form of Providence, History, Moral Absolutes, as Wilson puts it. These higher forms would allow us really to affirm the goodness and rightness of all being, in what Carlyle called "the everlasting Yea".

This faith was of the greatest importance to Carlyle, because otherwise the trends of the time pointed towards a degradation of human life: the ugliness and egoism of commercial-industrial society, the atomism and lack of common concern that this society bred, held together only by the "cash nexus", the absence of any larger, more heroic perspective on life, beyond a myopic hedonism, which it tends to inculcate in us. (Carlyle, prefiguring Nietzsche, sarcastically defines organized philanthropy as "the Universal Abolition of Pain Association"). In this age, the universe and society appear as merely mechanical, devoid of meaning. "To me the Universe was all void of Life, of Purpose, of Volition, even of Hostility; it was one huge, dead, immeasurable Steam-engine, rolling on, in its dead indifference, to grind me limb from limb. O the vast, Gloomy, solitary Golgotha, and Mill of Death." Everything, even the sublimest issues, are being reduced to calculation: "Benthamite Utility, virtue by profit and Loss; reducing this God's-World to a dead brute Steam-engine, the infinite celestial Soul of Man to a kind of Hay-balance for weighing hay and thistles on, pleasures and pains on."

All this would be unbearable, if there weren't some assurance that we could move
to a higher stage. We can see here reflected a broad brace of those dissatisfactions with the buffered identity and modern order that I distinguished in the different "axes" of an earlier chapter. But in particular, we see reflected in the last quote axis 1.2 in my scheme, the need to rescue some sense of the human potential for spiritual/moral ascent, in face of the degrading theory and practice of utilitarian-commercial-industrial society.

One had thus to be both against Christianity and for it. Carlyle’s (not very definite) doctrine was a resolution of this cross-pressure. And the tension was reflected in his own life, in his inability to tell his devout mother straight out that he had abandoned his faith. The formulation he offered, that he had not abandoned, but redefined it, gave some colour to the attempted deception (but not much).

Arnold follows after, in his own way, and responds to the same pulls. The old faith is unbelievable, but much of what it offered is essential. An atomized commercial society is threatened with "anarchy", and only the diffusion of high culture can combat this. The inculcation of this culture by a clerisy is very much like the maintenance of certain forms of worship by a national church. The two enterprises can be seen as overlapping, and in this way Arnold too could tell his mother that he was carrying on the work of his Broad Church father.

Arnold lost the faith he was brought up in during his early 20s, and that for the reasons which we have already seen in Carlyle. But this was not an easy step for him, for reasons analogous to Carlyle’s. On the personal level, he was distancing himself from his father, who was a strongly committed Broad Church Anglican. But more, he felt that the decline of that faith he could no longer accept had brought terrible consequences in its wake.

Arnold felt acutely a sense that the modern world lacked depth, and the modern self, wholeness. We tend to live on the surface, and are therefore cut off from the greater currents of meaning which could transform our lives: "you must plunge yourself down to the depths of the sea of intuition; all other men are trying as far as in them lies to keep you at the barren surface".

This sense of being cut off from some great source can also be felt as a division from self: "The misery of the present age is not in the intensity of men's suffering—but in their incapacity to suffer, enjoy, feel at all, wholly and profoundly... in their having one moment the commencement of a feeling, at the next moment the commencement of an imagination, & the eternal tumult of the world mingling, breaking in upon, hurrying away all... The disease of the world is divorce from oneself".

As Honan puts it, Arnold concluded that "man lacks a deep identity; he suffers from disorientation and ennui, shifting and unsatisfying feelings, shallowness of be-
ing, dissatisfaction with his own endeavours... debilities caused by the lack of any compelling authority for the spiritual life.”

Arnold felt to the full what I called in Chapter 8, section 2, the absence of resonance in the modern world, and he felt it particularly through the axes of the “Romantic” dimension; a sense of ourselves as divided, cut off from a great stream of life without. Like Carlyle, an important source for him was Goethe and the thinkers of the Romantic period. And like them as well, he saw a healing power in beauty; in practice in literature, and what he came to define as “culture”.

This was not just the tragedy of the lone thinker, or person of exceptional awareness and feeling. The emptiness was reflected in the age. We live in a civilization that values the mechanical and material, that encourages narrow specialization for advantage, and encourages individual action without a sense of the whole. In England, this latter fault was at its most serious: “we are in danger of drifting towards anarchy. We have not the notion, so familiar on the Continent and to antiquity, of the State—the nation in its collective and corporate character, entrusted with stringent powers for the general advantage, and controlling individual wills in the name of an interest wider than individuals.”

This civilization was both philistine and atomistic. A fragmented society was the counterpart to a fragmented self. Arnold takes up the basic idea of Schiller in his Aesthetic Education.

This fragmentation and loss of depth is part of the price we pay for the ending of the Christian era. Arnold is as clear and sure as Carlyle that this is not a personal option of his, but reflects a change in epoch, which no one can in the end gainsay. His later poem, “Obermann once More”, lays out a kind of capsule sketch of our spiritual history. After the flowering of the pagan period, with its great achievements and beauty, a sense of “secret loathing fell / Deep weariness and sated lust / Made human life a hell” (ll. 94–96). But Christianity came, and conferred a great boon on the world. The Obermann figure cries:

‘Oh, had I lived in that great day,
How had its glory new
Filled earth and heaven, and caught away
My ravished spirit too!

‘No thoughts that to the world belong
Had stood against the wave
Of love which set so deep and strong
From Christ’s then open grave.’ (ll. 141–148)

......
'While we believed, on earth he went,  
And open stood his grave,  
Men called from chamber, church, and tent;  
And Christ was by to save.

'Now he is dead! Far hence he lies  
In the lorn Syrian town;  
And on his grave, with shining eyes,  
The Syrian stars look down.

'In vain men still, with hoping new,  
Regard his death-place dumb,  
And say the stone is not yet to,  
And wait for words to come.' (ll. 169–180)

'It's frame yet stood without a breach  
When blood and warmth were fled;  
And still it spake its wonted speech—  
But every word was dead.' (ll. 193–196)

Arnold's profound ambivalence, his sense of the impossibility of faith, whose departure has nonetheless left a great void, comes out most forcefully in the "Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse". The speaker feels, for all his powerful sense of sympathy, that he cannot return to the world in which the monastery's life of prayer played such an important part.

For rigorous teachers seized my youth,  
And purged my faith, and trimmed its fire,  
Showed me the high, white star of Truth,  
There bade me gaze, and there aspire.  
Even now their whispers pierce my gloom:  
*What dost thou in this living tomb?*

Forgive me, masters of the mind!  
At whose behest I long ago  
So much unlearnt, so much resigned—  
I come not here to be your foe!  
I seek these anchorites, not in ruth,  
To curse and to deny your truth;

Not as their friend, or child, I speak!  
But as, on some far northern strand,
Thinking of his own Gods, a Greek
In pity and mournful awe might stand
Before some fallen Runic stone—
For both were faiths, and both are gone.

Wandering between two worlds, one dead,
The other powerless to be born,
With nowhere yet to rest my head,
Like these, on earth I wait forlorn.
Their faith, my tears, the world deride—
I come to shed them at their side. (ll. 67–90)

Arnold gives expression here to a very widely felt sentiment, certainly in the Europe of the early nineteenth century, but in some ways also today. As Lionel Trilling points out, there were various ways of responding to this sense of, as it were, self-legislated, yet nevertheless irrevocable abandonment. One way is to explore this condition of despair, almost to wallow in it, as in their different ways do Goethe’s Werther, Chateaubriand’s René, and Senancour’s Obermann. Modern melancholy seeks in these works for its definition; and the plangent picture at least provides this. Another response is titanic action, defiant, possibly even destructive and immoral; the kind of self-affirmation we see in Byron. This in a certain way answers the concerns of what I called above the “tragic” axis.

Arnold recognizes both these roads, and they are mentioned in this poem. One of them, the first, had a strong attraction for him, and he dwelt lovingly on it. But both are rejected here; the second a little dismissively: “What helps it now, that Byron bore, I . . . The pageant of his bleeding heart?” (ll. 133, 136); while the first is parted from with regret:

Or are we easier, to have read,
O Obermann, the sad stern page,
Which tells us how thou hidd’st thy head
From the fierce tempest of thine age
In the lone brakes of Fontainebleau,
Or chalets near the Alpine snow? (ll. 145–150)

But there is also a third path: the search for a new age of faith, a new positive form of religion. Here is where Carlyle, Arnold, Emerson situate themselves.

I can’t go into great detail here, but Arnold’s hope was that the new age, at present “powerless to be born”, could be brought nearer by literature and education. “Culture” is what Arnold came to count on to wreak this change. This means Cul-
ture defined as "a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world; and through this knowledge, turning a stream of fresh and free thought upon our stock notions and habits, which we now follow staunchly and mechanically." Our perfection means the growth of our humanity, as against our animality. It consists in "the ever-increasing efficacy and in the general harmonious expansion of those gifts of thought and feeling, which make the particular dignity, wealth and happiness of human nature." This perfection is to be realized not just in the isolated individual; rather the goal is to bring about "a harmonious perfection, developing all sides of our humanity", which would also be "a general perfection, developing all parts of our society." Culture in this sense was close to religion, but could not be subordinated to it. "Culture, disinterestedly seeking in its aim at perfection to see things as they really are, shows us how worthy and divine a thing is the religious side in man, though it is not the whole of man."

But the two are brought closer together when, late in life, Arnold defines religion as "morality touched with emotion"; and describes God as "the enduring power, not ourselves, which makes for righteousness". The consubstantiality of this religion with the code which springs from an impersonal order is evident, as is the attempt to retain some vestige of transcendence (through the expression "not ourselves").

But this attempted resolution of the dilemma was a hope, which didn't attenuate the powerful sense of division and loss, which resonates throughout the poetry, and must have been felt by the man.

It is worth looking at one more document here, a novel which had an immense success both in Britain and America at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. The novel is Robert Elsmere, and the author is Mrs. Humphry Ward, a niece of Matthew Arnold. The protagonist, Elsmere, is an Anglican clergyman who loses his faith in orthodox Christianity. But instead of falling into indifference, or even becoming an open enemy of Christianity (or even worse, cynically carrying on a comfortable career as a clergyman, hiding his true beliefs), he struggles to an Arnoldian position. He wants to redefine the faith, free of its—now indefensible—supernatural myths, and make it once more the vehicle by which humans can accede to a higher moral life.

In a moment of great inner turmoil and suffering at the loss of his early faith, Robert sees the new vision, of a "purely human Christ—a purely human, explicable, yet always wonderful Christianity" (321). He finds that he believes in Christ "in the teacher, the martyr, the symbol to us Westerns of all things heavenly and abiding, the image and pledge of the invisible life of the spirit—with all my soul and mind!" But he cannot accept "the Man-God, the Word from Eternity—..."
wonder-working Christ, in a risen and ascended Jesus, in the living Intercessor and Mediator for the lives of his doomed brethren" (342).

He believes in God, but this God is something like an impersonal force. He is "an Eternal Goodness—and an Eternal Mind—of which Nature and Man are the continuous and only revelation" (494). Here the author seems to have borrowed less from her uncle, and more from the philosopher T. H. Green. Green appears in the story, under the (rather transparent) name "Grey", a fellow of Robert's college in Oxford, who befriends him and acts as his mentor at crucial moments. Green's philosophy emerged as well out of the same cross-pressures that I have been describing. On the one hand, a strong reaction against Hume and Utilitarianism, as theories which deny the human potentiality for moral ascent; on the other hand, an inability to accept God as a supernatural agent, intervening in human history. Green found in the work of Kant and Hegel a way of articulating his position. God was in a sense the lodestone which draws us higher, and also the ontic guarantee that this ascent will be possible. But the ascent is towards an impersonal moral order, prefigured in Hegel's notion of Geist, rather than in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

As Robert puts it from his deathbed: "personality, or intelligence, or what not! What meaning can they have as applied to God?" (603).

But we need God: "Love and revere something we must, if we are to be men and not beasts" (498–499). And this God is not only indispensable for personal moral ascent. We also need him if we are to find a way of binding together our society. Here he takes up a crucial theme for Arnold. We need a new religion, because we need "a new social bond". We need it, for "that diminution of the self in man which is to enable the individual to see the world's ends clearly, and to care not only for his but for his neighbour's interest, which is to make the rich devote themselves to the poor, and the poor bear with the rich. . . . It is man's will which is eternally defective, eternally inadequate. Well, the great religions of the world are the stimulants by which the power at the root of things has worked upon this sluggish instrument of human destiny. Without religion you cannot make the will equal to its tasks. Our present religion fails us; we must, we will have another!" (572).

In Arnoldian terms, religion is portrayed here as the essential bulwark of Culture against Anarchy.

The novel, as we can see, contains lots of intellectual exchanges on a very high level. How did it nevertheless manage to be a runaway best-seller? Because it portrays so vividly the inner conflict, the intense suffering, which accompanied this deconversion and reconstruction. It is not only that Robert is dismayed himself by the need to abandon his early faith. His marriage to Catherine is almost destroyed by it. Catherine is herself deeply anchored in an orthodox Evangelical position. For her
there is nothing between cleaving to this faith on one hand, and open, scoffing disbelief on the other. She can’t see the point of Robert’s reconstructed religion of a purely human Jesus. “How can that help them? . . . Your historical Christ, Robert, will never win souls. If he was God, every word you speak will insult him. If he was man, he was not a good man!” (480).

The novel is set in the mid-1880s, and reflects the times. Thus Robert’s early faith follows a contemporary trend, the reaction against the “overdriven rationalism” of Mill and Spencer among many young people of the time (62–63). And again, it is clear that the crucial issues that his de-conversion turns on are not those of natural science and evolution, but those raised by Biblical scholarship. It is these that are pressed on him by Roger Wendover, the squire-scholar who is the major agent of the change. The crucial question might be said to be that of miracles, but in a broad sense; that is, not just the miracles performed by the Christ of the Gospels, but all the Christological doctrines which affirm divine intervention in history: the Incarnation, the Resurrection and Ascension, atonement and intercession, etc. And the squire in his arguments is firmly in the space in which Trevor-Roper placed Gibbon; “My object has been to help in making it discreditable . . . to refuse to read . . . Christian documents in the light of trained scientific criticism” (318). In other words, the “same social laws” are to be applied to all historical events, including those foundational to Christianity. The assumption is that we, in our rational age of impersonal orders, know perfectly well what these laws are, and have nothing to learn from first-century Palestinian fishermen. The squire is writing a “History of Testimony”, which has a clear master narrative, in which science emerges out of earlier ignorance and irrationality (317–318).

The novel illustrates the force of this historicized framework, in which history is read as an ascent to a consciousness of impersonal orders, on which there is no turning back. Or rather, that is my reading; it would seem that Mrs. Ward accepts this framework as an unquestioned background of her own thinking. The novel, read in the way I am suggesting, can help us break free from that. But it also helps us break free of an equal and opposite simplification, and this is one which Mrs. Ward plainly wanted to challenge.

Where the Wendovers think their judgments are unproblematically scientific and rational, many of the orthodox of the day saw this kind of apostasy in equally stark terms as the simple fruit of pride. It is related that Mrs. Ward attended the first set of Bampton Lectures in 1881, at which the speaker, himself a nephew of Wordsworth, explained the abandonment of orthodox Christianity by a number of intellectual faults, including indolence, coldness, recklessness, pride, and avarice. It was this attack which spurred Mrs. Ward to write her novel, which would show that this was a caricature. And indeed, what emerges from the novel is that good faith and
honesty can be found on all sides of this controversy, even though the story awards the ultimate palm for courage and integrity to Robert.

This is a place where I might clarify further my own understanding of these conversions and deconversions. I cannot accept the Whiggish master narrative that they are determined by clear reason. They look rational within a certain framework, indeed, but this framework attracts us for a host of reasons, including ethical ones. Among the ethical attractions is certainly that of the free, invulnerable, disengaged agent. Being one of these is something in which moderns take a certain pride. But to leap from this to saying, simply, that the move from orthodoxy is actuated by pride is quite invalid. In some cases, undoubtedly. But what we’re dealing with in talking of these frameworks is complex environing backgrounds of our thought and action, which impinge on our lives in a host of ways. In one respect, yes, this modern sense of impersonal orders can give us a sense of our dignity as free agents. But it also offers us powerful ideals, of honesty and integrity, as well as of benevolence and solidarity, just to name some of the most prominent. In the whole aetiological story of how these frameworks arose, pride has its place. But in individual cases, the stories can be as many and as different as there are people who inhabit them. In some cases, for a variety of reasons, the sense of an alternative was so far off the screen, that the principal response was determined by the ideals: say, honesty, integrity, and a sense of the human potential for moral ascent. This is what one sees with T. H. Green; and this is what Mrs. Ward shows us in her protagonist.

We are in fact all acting, thinking, and feeling out of backgrounds and frameworks which we do not fully understand. To ascribe total personal responsibility to us for these is to want to leap out of the human condition. At the same time, no background leaves us utterly without room for movement and change. The realities of human life are messier than is dreamed of either by dogmatic rationalists, or in the manichean rigidities of embattled orthodoxy.

But what Mrs. Ward shows best of all is the intense anguish of the cross-pressures here. As with Carlyle and Arnold, so with Robert Elsmere: the agony cannot just be explained by the rational considerations that were in play: the impersonal order pushes to deny Christianity, the need for some purpose or direction in history calls for it. There also were deep personal emotions involved, as we see in Carlyle’s exchange with his mother. The pain was often great of deserting a childhood faith. As Wilson says in describing this retreat of belief, “this is a story of bereavement as much as of adventure”.24

These reflections of Carlyle and Arnold were the bridges which people started to cross out of Christianity to some religion of impersonal order, before their structure was shaken by the controversy over evolution, which threatened one side of the syn-
thesis—the saving of (impersonalized) Christianity as a bulwark against materialism and reductivism. This crisis eventually pointed the way to other compromises, which promised to save the (moral and cultural) furniture from the burning (theological) house.

But in the short run, it upped the ante. I have described the controversy between science and faith in Victorian times in the previous chapter, and what I think were the decisive considerations which settled it, one way or another. Briefly, my point is that it was not so much the science which decided things, as it was a battle between two understandings of our epistemological predicament, tinged with moral import, and related to images of adulthood and childishness. But the issue of theodicy also played a role. It already had in the earlier, pre-Darwin phase: the more austere faith of Carlyle in something like a direction of history could accommodate without difficulty Lisbon earthquakes, and this was seen as part of its superiority to Christianity.

But the Darwinian picture tended to shatter even those theories of general design which concentrated on the benevolent over-all drift of things. We have not just nature “red in tooth and claw”, but a system which operates through extinctions, through the winnowing of the unfit. This could be very shaking to Christian faith, but it also undermined the more impersonal conception of Providence, as a cosmically-anchored vector in history towards higher modes of being. In the end, it is this kind of view, involving a world-soul or cosmic force, which seems to have suffered, more than orthodox Christianity. Not that there are not many people today who believe in a God conceived as an impersonal force; contemporary surveys show this (as we will see in the next chapter); and popular movies invoke it (“The Force be with you”). But as an explicitly espoused, intellectually defended view, it has greatly receded, where atheist materialism and orthodox Christianity still polemic against each other.

This may have partly to do with the theodicy issue. As I argued earlier (Chapter 7), while the issue of theodicy may always be raised in a theistic context, there are certain conditions for its being felt as a real problem, which have not always been met. Pressed by a sense of menace, both natural (famine, disease) and spiritual (devils, goblins, wood spirits, etc.), the pre-modern in an enchanted world could be more concerned with appealing to God as helper, or saviour, while acknowledging that it was quite beyond her to explain how things had come to this pass. The idea of blaming God gets a clearer sense and becomes much more salient in the modern era where people begin to think they know just what God was purposing in creating the world, and can check the results against the intention. The issue as posed in an atheist context inherits this clarity; only now it is we who are setting the standards, while assuming that what we know and can discern about human fate is all there is
to know—in particular that there is nothing after or beyond our traceable life-path here, or that if there were, it would have to be of such and such a nature. God is set up to flunk the atheist exam, as surely as He was set up to pass that of Providential Deism with flying colours.

The atheist and the Deist are arguing within similar frameworks: we know the standards, and we know what happens to people. And they can thus score points against each other. And when we look at the most horrifying sides of nature and history, it is the atheist who tends to score. For the Christian, these arguments to a negative theodicy, a condemnation of any God who might claim to exist, are deeply disturbing, as is indeed, any tragic event seen up close: the death of a loved one, for example. But they realize that they are helpless to argue against these accusations. To do so, one would have to know, that means be able to exhibit or demonstrate, things we will never know. The case for the defense depends on there being more to human fate than we can exhibit as undeniable in history: that these people died in the earthquake, and those in gas chambers, and no-one came to rescue them. Christians can only reply to the accusations with hope.

In a sense, the only possible stance for a Christian is to recover something like the pre-modern one I described above, to see God as helper, and not cruel puppet-master. Only where earlier this was often adopted naively, that is, without the sense that there was an alternative, it now has to be recovered in full awareness. This is perhaps what Dostoyevsky was telling us in *The Brothers Karamazov*, in the dialogue between Ivan and Alyosha which culminates in the “Legend of the Grand Inquisitor”. Ivan has all the arguments; Alyosha’s only response is to be profoundly perturbed: “Blasphemy”, he says; or pitiful attempts to deflect the force of the arguments. But the ultimate issue is, which stance can begin to transform the savage and cruel plight which Ivan so tellingly describes? The rest of the novel is meant to offer an answer to this question.

Theodicy thus may have played some role in the recession of these theories of cosmic force. But this cannot be the whole story. Perhaps the crucial point was this: as attempts to hold on to some of the force of Christian piety, while dropping the Christian God of personal agency, these middle positions didn’t have the staying power. In the end they could win minds but not hearts.

This judgment gets some support, if we look beyond Britain for a moment to France. The “Religion of Humanity”, if we take this in a broad sense, including Saint-Simon and the various offshoots of his movement, as well as Comte and his positivism, could be seen as another such attempt to retain some of the force of Christian piety while denying the dogmatic basis for it. Like Carlyle and Arnold, too, they found some of the sources of their new religion in German thought of the Romantic period. Only here the compromise didn’t lie on the ontological plane, as
it were, scaling God down to some cosmic force, rather the attempt was to keep the
institutions, practices and attitudes of piety, without any of the dogma at all. Comte
proposed to institute a hierarchy and sacraments, to offer a series of rituals for the
crucial transition moments in life. He was ready in a sense to match Catholicism
point for point. But the doctrinal core centred on Humanity, and its Progress
through science.

Positivism did take off as a movement and quasi-religion, and even played an im-
portant role in Mexico (Porfirio Diaz was a positivist), and Brazil. But in the longer
run, it withered away. The ritual couldn’t sustain itself on such a weak basis, any
more than that of the French Revolutionaries, complete with festivals and calendar,
had been able to.

Perhaps we might think of Carlyle and Comte in another European context, that
of the powerful personalities of the Romantic era which had such an impact on the
thought, life and art of the nineteenth century and beyond; people like Wagner,
Bakunin, Marx, Berlioz, Hugo. Each was responding to some part of that range of
dissatisfactions of the age, articulated in the “axes” of Chapter 8, in lines of attack
which differed but over-lapped, and which included the emptiness, lack of beauty,
division from self and nature, atomism, and injustice of the contemporary world,
and this is what gave them their impact on this world. Only Comte, Marx and
Bakunin started movements, and only Marx’s had staying power, although Wagner
and Hugo remain important figures in our canon to this day. But the point of the
comparison is that the only cases in which their outlook could be seen as continu-
ing today (perhaps only Marx is in this category) lie at the materialist end of the
spectrum. As has often been pointed out, militant Marxism has very often taken on
some of the trappings of a religion, but it has done so while vigorously denying that
this is what it is about. And as we enter the twenty-first century, the staying power
even of this quasi-religion seems in sharp decline.

Of course, at the turn of the twentieth century, we see Hardy recurring to a
Prime Force underlying the universe. But this is already in a different moral space
than Carlyle and Arnold. The Prime Will can be seen as blind and cruel. And al-
though Hardy late in life puts forward the notion that it may grow and improve
along with the humans whose lives it has so roughly handled, we have moved into
the company of Schopenhauer (who influenced Hardy), rather than of the Goethe-
plus-Transcendental-Idealism which inspired Carlyle. And even then, this meta-
physical-cosmological dimension of Hardy’s thought has been largely forgotten in
the reception of his novels and poetry.

So dogmatic-metaphysical compromises between Christianity and materialism,
based on the modern sense of an impersonal immanent order, don’t seem to have a
very long shelf life. Or do appearances deceive? If, as I want to argue, these compro-
mises arise from a deep cross-pressure, between the unacceptability of Christianity for those who have deeply internalized the immanent order (or come to see themselves totally within it), on one hand, and a strong dissatisfaction with the flatness, emptiness of the world, and/or the inner division, atomism, ugliness or self-enclosed nature of human life in modernity, on the other; then we might ask, where has the second set of considerations gone in an age where materialism is incomparably stronger than in the nineteenth century, and seemingly without major rivals outside of orthodox religion? Does this mean that the second set of considerations no longer weigh with many people? That, unlike these great nineteenth-century prophets, we have adjusted to the purely immanent world?

Certainly some people have, or at least understand themselves to have so adjusted. One master narrative of “secularization” would hold that there is a trend here, and that more and more people will just turn away altogether from the issues to which Goethe, Carlyle, Hardy, etc., in one way, and orthodox Christianity, in another, offer answers. Certainly more people would declare themselves in this category than in the nineteenth century. But the evidence of a continuing trend here doesn’t seem strong. The sense of emptiness, flatness, the dissatisfaction raised in the whole group of resonance axes, seem still with us. Rebellions occur among the younger generation, of which the most spectacular in recent times was that of the 1960s. Surveys tell us that lots of people still situate themselves in this metaphysical middle ground, where they accept some impersonal force at work in the universe and/or their lives. The short shelf life of these compromise metaphysics is a phenomenon of the intellectual-academic world, on one hand, and that of religious-ideological institutions on the other. There is an important disconnect between these on one side, and the spiritual life of people in general on the other. This will be explored (even if not satisfactorily explained) in the next chapter.

But still we might ask the question again: where has the set of dissatisfaction of the Romantic age gone among contemporary materialists? Are they all unproblematically adjusted? And the answer here too, seems to be negative. The need to articulate a sense of something fuller, deeper, often drawing on the same Romantic sources, continues, as we see with Hardy, and those who continue to draw on him today. Only it has to be reinterpreted, so as to disconnect it from any extrahuman source. I will return to this below.

At the same time as these conceptions of impersonal order on the cosmic level, variants of the modern order of mutual benefit, as well as the reactions against it, have played an important role in the development of what I’m calling the nova, the mul-