


## Article

# Secularist Humanism, Law and Religion in Ian McEwan's *The Children Act*

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**Abstract:** Ian McEwan's *The Children Act* focuses on a real-life conflict between religion and children's rights in a pluralist society. By drawing on Charles Taylor's work on religion in the "secular age", I argue that McEwan's narrative is ultimately built on secularist assumptions that devalue religious experience. McEwan's approach aims to build a bridge between literary imagination and scientific rationality: religion is, from this perspective, reducible to a "fable" and an authority structure incongruous with legal rationality and the quest for meaning in the modern-secular society. In *The Children Act*, art substitutes religion and its aspiration to transcendence: music in particular is a universal idiom that can overcome barriers of communication and provides "ecstatic" experiences in a godless world.

**Keywords:** religion; law; secularist humanism; Charles Taylor; immanent frame; Jehovah's Witnesses



**Citation:** Ungureanu, Camil. 2021. Secularist Humanism, Law and Religion in Ian McEwan's *The Children Act*. *Religions* 12: 468. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12070468>

Academic Editor: Daniel H. Levine

Received: 10 March 2021

Accepted: 16 June 2021

Published: 25 June 2021

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Motto: "He came to find her, wanting what everyone wanted, and what only free-thinking people, not the supernatural, could give. Meaning" (McEwan 2014, p. 136).

## 1. Introduction

"The return of religion", "de-secularization" and "postsecular society" are all catchphrases that overstate the prior decline of religion and the relevance of secularization theory.<sup>1</sup> However, these catchphrases draw attention to two significant phenomena at odds with the secularist belief in the decline of religion in modernity. First, there has been an intensification of the role of religion in the public arena of politics and law-making. Religion has become increasingly politicized in various parts of the globe—from the US and France to India and Africa—being interconnected to opposite reactionary-populist movements (Ungureanu and Popartan 2020) and, to a lesser extent, emancipatory forces. Additionally, religious matters have become ever more juridified: the number of legal cases involving religion has increased exponentially both at the state and supra-state level, even in the more secularized Europe.<sup>2</sup> Second, there has been a renewed interest into spiritual-religious explorations of meaning and transformation in late modernity. While there has not emerged a novel "postsecular society" (Habermas 2008; Caputo 2001), both the individualized quest and the development of closed and totalizing communities reactive to aspects of modernity have become ever more relevant in a Europe where traditional religious institutions have lost significant ground.

These phenomena represent the background context of McEwan's (2014) *The Children Act*—a context deeply divided over the place of religion in modern society and in particular in the education of children. Charles Taylor usefully maps this tension-ridden background by focusing on the "conditions of belief" in the West, as well as on the historical shift from transcendence to the "truth of immanence" (Taylor 2007, p. 137). Taylor's argument is that an "immanent frame" establishing the conditions of belief-formation has gradually emerged in the aftermath of the Protestant and the scientific revolution (Taylor 2007, p. 8). Today different belief systems interact and clash against the backdrop of the immanent

frame: a secularist humanism unwelcoming to spiritual-religious search, an inclusive humanism and a closed anti-modernism (see II).<sup>3</sup>

McEwan's *The Children Act*, I argue, portrays religion one-sidedly on the basis of humanist-secularist premises, reducing it to an authoritarian structure, and that are sustained by his long-term interest in scientific rationality.<sup>4</sup> *The Children Act* is his first novel dedicated entirely to religion, although the religious problematic is present in some of his previous short stories, novels and public interventions. Most famously, McEwan was involved, together with his close friends, Martin Amis and Christopher Hitchens,<sup>5</sup> in a public polemic about Islam and Islamism: a commentator for the *Independent* went as far as to call the three authors the “clash-of-civilisations literary brigade.”<sup>6</sup> McEwan, a self-declared atheist, rightly dismissed such characterizations as inaccurate. However, “there is no doubt that McEwan is a groupie of Enlightenment rationalism—so long as science subjects itself to the same rigorous scepticism that it does to myth” (Ridley, quoted in Groes 2013, p. xi). Indeed, he advances a neo-realist literary approach by drawing on his interest in science—evolutionary biology, socio-biology and cognitive science. Far from the postmodern zeal of tearing apart any claim to objectivity, McEwan pursues a vigorous interest in the relation between consciousness, language and the world, and between literature and reality.

In particular, McEwan explores in *The Children Act* two real-life conflicts involving religion, a legal and an ethical-existential one. The novel looks into a legal conflict in the UK that opposes the legal recognition of religion to children's rights and welfare. McEwan focuses on the case of a 17-year minor (Adam) who refuses, together with his Jehovah's Witnesses parents, a life-saving blood transfusion due to their strong religious beliefs. McEwan depicts this legal-argumentative dispute with a distanced meticulousness; the tone and the style of rendering the legal debate are at points not “literary”, but close to those of an actual decision and argument. Tellingly, the novel's title is that of an actual legal document.

The second conflict deals with the problem of meaning and religion in a godless society, and it takes aim at the double difficulty of holding strong religious beliefs and finding meaning in a secular world.<sup>7</sup> In the final analysis, religion in *The Children Act* boils down to an authority structure incongruous with the quest for meaning in the modern-secular society.<sup>8</sup> Thereby *The Children Act* eludes not only the possibility of non-authoritarian, spiritual-religious phenomena in late modernity but also the multidimensionality of religion and its inner tensions between institutionalization and spiritual search, authority-building and ethical transformation. In particular, art replaces, in McEwan's novel, religion's claim to transcendence and meaning: music in particular is a universal idiom carrying the aspiration of overcoming barriers of communication, and providing “ecstatic” or transformative experiences in a godless world.

In the following, I proceed in three steps. First, I briefly draw on Taylor's comprehensive theory of religion in modernity, as it provides useful categories for contextualising and making explicit the assumptions of the narrative in *The Children Act* (I). Then, I consider the two dimensions of the religious problematic represented in McEwan's last novel: the legal decision dealing with the refusal of blood transfusions (II); and the ethical-existential predicament of converting to atheism and finding new anchors of meaning in a secular society. The protagonist's conversion to atheism leads him, in McEwan's narrative, to a cul-de-sac, i.e., to the failure of finding meaningfulness in a disenchanted world devoid of religious “fables” (III).

## 2. Immanent Frame and Secularist Humanism

In his magnum opus, *A Secular Age*, Taylor begins with the observation that “every person, and every society, lives with or by some conception(s) of what human flourishing is: What constitutes a fulfilled life? What makes life really worth living? What would we most admire people for?” (Taylor 2007, p. 18). “Fullness” refers to the sense that some aspects of our life are deeper, richer or more significant and, thus, are interconnected to

ethical and spiritual exploration and transformation. In aspiring to fullness, we adopt and interpret beliefs about the meaning of human life and death, the cosmos, suffering, love, good and evil. The constitution of strong beliefs draws on different (non)religious sources and depends on historical context. For Taylor, there is a deep gap between the experience of believing in 1500 and nowadays: the “lived experience” (Taylor 2007, p. 7) of belief in modernity has drastically changed. In the Western world in particular, there is a shift “from a world in which the place of fullness was understood unproblematically outside or ‘beyond’ human life, to a conflicted age in which this construal is challenged by others which place it . . . ‘within’ human life” (Taylor 2007, p. 15). Briefly stated, modernity has entailed a gradual yet decisive shift from transcendence and supernatural to the affirmation of immanent life and human welfare. The *differentia specifica* of the West consists in the adoption and generalization of an immanent frame that shapes the formation of beliefs and identity, and thus the quest for fullness and meaning. Modern science, individual rights and the reliance on instrumental reason and action in secular time are keystones of the immanent frame. The modern “buffered identity” emerges within this complex frame made of various dimensions of immanence (science, materialism, individualism). In contrast to traditional identity, modern identity is not porous to a world of magical and spiritual forces (Taylor 2007, p. 566).<sup>9</sup>

This modern transformation does not exclude religious fundamentalism and practices that reject elements of the immanent frame; the thrust of Taylor’s argument is that these phenomena occur and are configured within the domain of the immanent frame. In effect, *The Children Act* focuses on a totalizing community of belief—the Jehovah’s Witnesses. Jehovah’s Witnesses aspire to live, at least in part, in a parallel society under the millenarist expectation of the imminent end of the world (Beckford 1975). It makes a significant difference, however, that such religious beliefs are formed and practiced in a society where the immanent frame is dominant. In these circumstances, strong religious beliefs are, as Taylor persuasively argues, more pressured, exposed and thus unstable. This is, as we will see, precisely the case in *The Children Act*: Adam and his parents have difficulties in holding firm to their faith under the pressure of the outside dominant society.

Opposite stances on religion emerge as well from within the immanent frame. For secularist or exclusive humanism, the “primacy of life” (Taylor 2007, p. 123) understood as the pursuit of individual and collective welfare becomes the only legitimate choice. This stance focused on immanence has benefitted from the immense success of techno-science and has led to the devaluation of the spiritual-religious search for meaning. Such a mindset has become widespread in Europe: the pursuit of fullness is often equated with the concern to preserve life and bring about wellbeing and material prosperity (Taylor 1999, p. 20). The resulting culture of the body and materialism is linked to the attempt of pushing back the “frontiers of death and suffering” (Taylor 2007, p. 23). Meaningfulness is connected to the affirmation of corporeal life and welfare; in turn, suffering, death and the aspiration for (self-)transcendence are externalized as negative or devoid of meaning.

Secularist humanism goes beyond the liberal stance concerned with the right to freedom of religion and state neutrality towards (non)religious worldviews; it is hostile to religion and can seek the privatization or the uprooting of religion from society. Secularist humanism does not, however, exhaust the possibilities of reaching fullness. This humanism represents, as Taylor points out, one specific spiritual orientation fixated on immanence. Yet there is an “ineradicable bent” “to respond to something beyond life” (Taylor 2007, p. 27).<sup>10</sup> The call of the “beyond life” can take different religious and spiritual forms; the idea is that “the point of things isn’t exhausted by life, the fullness of life, even the goodness of life” (Taylor 1999, p. 20). Suffering and death, for instance, are not necessarily the negation of life, “but also a place to affirm something that matters beyond life, (and that) doesn’t matter just because it sustains life . . . ” (Taylor 1999, p. 21). The openness to transcendence can involve “being called to a change of identity” (Taylor 1999, p. 21). Christianity is, for example, premised on a transformative call for the decentering of the “I” in relation to God and others. In Buddhism, the self-transformation that is called for does not depend on a

belief in God, but it is equally far-reaching, from self to “no self” (*anatta*). Notwithstanding its various forms, the spiritual-religious quest for meaning and fullness often involves self-transcendence and self-transformation. These processes are irreducible to the “truth of immanence”, yet they inspire and shape our understanding of social life and welfare. From the inclusive-humanist perspective, life and welfare are not opposed to religion and spirituality but can be in a fruitful interaction (consider Gandhi’s “experiments with truth”<sup>11</sup> or Martin Luther King’s religion-driven social activism).<sup>12</sup>

To return to McEwan’s novel: *The Children Act* stages a conflict within the immanent frame between the freedom of religion and children’s rights, faith and the search for meaning in a secular age. I maintain that, while in his representation of the conflict concerning religion, McEwan pays lip service to the liberal idea of the right to religious freedom, his portrayal of the Court’s decision is built on secularist premises as it pits welfare and life against religion. To substantiate this interpretation, I turn now to McEwan’s representation of Adam’s trial (II) and his failed conversion and death (III).

### 3. *The Children Act* (1): The Representation of the Legal Conflict

McEwan’s literary vision is built on retrieving reality from its dissolution into radical perspectivism in the postmodern novel. Written in a direct and sober style devoid of stylistic ornaments, *The Children Act* is an exploration of a *slice of reality*—viz., the family crisis of a judge (Fiona May) against the conflictive interplay between law and religion in today’s British society.

Fiona is a woman of age who has dedicated all her life and energies to a successful career in law. Her prestige derives from dealing with high-profile legal cases involving religion. In portraying Fiona, McEwan’s alternates descriptions of her life with “immersions” into her and her husband’s consciousness.<sup>13</sup> Fiona’s and Jack’s interior monologues bring to mind the modernist focus on the stream of consciousness and its interest in subjectivity and subjective time;<sup>14</sup> in turn, McEwan’s interest is the constitutive relation between internal and external reality, i.e., the reality of Fiona’s dealing with her family problems and exploring with actual legal and societal conflicts in late modernity.

Fiona takes no interest in religion outside the field of legal conflicts. She is married to Jack and has no children: it was her decision to focus on the career. As it occurs with other novels by McEwan, music plays a key role in the narrative of *The Children Act*. McEwan uses music to portray Fiona’s personality and her relation to law and life.<sup>15</sup> She is a good amateur piano player. At the beginning of their relationship, Jack admired her musical skills and courted her with jazz: “... he thought he might further seduce her with jazz. He admired her playing but wanted to prise her loose from the tyranny of strict notation and long-dead genius. He played her Thelonious Monk’s ‘Round Midnight’ and bought her the sheet music. It wasn’t difficult to play” (McEwan 2014, p. 45). However, Fiona is unable to feel the life pulsating in jazz improvisation; her sense of music is limited to pre-given notation and rules:

her (Fiona’s) version (of Monk), smooth and unaccented, sounded like an unremarkable piece by Debussy. She listened again, she persisted, she played what was in front of her, but she could not play jazz. No pulse, no instinct for syncopation, no freedom, her fingers numbly obedient to the time signature and notes as written. That was why she was studying law, she told her lover. *Respect for the rules.* (McEwan 2014, p. 45)

Fiona’s ambition and dedication to law and career take their toll. Her relation to Jack is becoming undone. Jack still loves Fiona but asks her to accept his relationship to another woman: this may well be his last chance to get a bite at life. Fiona is in disarray. Against the background of this crisis, she is confronted with a life-and-death legal conflict: a near-adult called Adam refuses, together with his parents, to have a blood transfusion essential for his survival.<sup>16</sup> Their motivation is religious: as Jehovah’s Witnesses, they reject blood transfusions as a sacrilegious act against God’s will. Adam’s medical condition is

grave; making a decision is a matter of emergency. In Court, the judge interrogates the contending parts, i.e., Adam's parents and medical specialists. The case in favour of the blood transfusion is, from a medical perspective, clear-cut: Adam would most certainly die without a blood transfusion. In turn, Adam's parents appeal to their freedom of religion. Their life as family and believers is inextricably bound to their religious community; it is the religious community that actually saved Adam's father from a life of drugs, drinking and utter hopelessness. Their integrity, composure and sober refusal of the blood transfusion is all the weightier given the deep affection and love for their son.

Upon listening to both parts, Fiona takes an uncommon decision: she resolves to go to the hospital and meet Adam. Once there, the judge ascertains that Adam is a remarkable teenager: he is a passionate believer, full of life and talent, intelligent and sensitive. Adam writes poetry and, his medical condition notwithstanding, has taken up violin in hospital; after a short period of practice, he is already capable of playing violin relatively well.

Music plays a key role in the portrayal of their encounter. To the surprise of the assistance, Fiona and Adam spontaneously engage in a duet in his hospital room, thus breaking the judge's rules of decorum. The improvised musical experience is an eerie moment of grace and "ecstatic" fusion between the two. They play Mahler, the third of the Ruckert-Lieder, "I am lost to the world" (*Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen*):

I am dead to the world's tumult,  
And I rest in a quiet realm!  
I live alone in my heaven,<sup>17</sup>  
In my love and in my song.

In playing Mahler's lied, Fiona and Adam have an ecstatic encounter overcoming the norms of social life: their "heaven" is a momentary experience of intimacy and elevation, beyond any reference to theological concepts and religious belief. Music is capable of piercing through the armour of Adam's religion and Fiona's rules of protocol: their "epiphanic" togetherness through music is what is left of the divine grace in a godless world. Mahler's lied thus symbolizes a universal "idiom" of communication and transformation between two solitudes, an idiom which transcends the barriers of religion, social roles and age.

Back in her office, Fiona must confront the reality of Adam's grave condition and quickly pass a reasoned decision. McEwan soberly registers the exchange of legal arguments linked to the specific juridical context in Great Britain. The judge notes that the defence of Adam's refusal of medical treatment rests on the following arguments: Adam is almost eighteen, very intelligent and in full knowledge of the consequences of his decision. Then, Adam's faith is deep and sincere; it is thus worthy of respect as required by the right to freedom of religion. Given these circumstances, Adam should be treated as an adult, and therefore benefit from the right to refuse medical treatment.

However, in her reasoning, the judge disagrees with the defence and rules in favour of the blood transfusion: Adam is not completely aware of the implications of the refusal of the treatment. While he is an "exceptional child" and "possesses exceptional insight for a seventeen-year-old", she underscores out that "he has little concept of the ordeal that would face him, of the fear that would overwhelm him as his suffering and helplessness increased. In fact, he has a romantic notion of what it is to suffer" (McEwan 2014, p. 80). Most importantly, the main thrust of her verdict is based on the 1989 Children Act, which establishes the primacy of the child's welfare (McEwan 2014, p. 80). The judge's specific interpretation of the concept of welfare is, I argue, based on secularist assumptions, and it echoes what Taylor calls "exclusive humanism": at one level, the judge pays lip service to the standard liberal position on religion—she invokes the respect for religious freedom and the neutrality of the Court. The judge also points out that the argument from welfare does not apply to adults, since it is a basic right of adults to reject medical treatment: "To treat an adult against his will is to commit the criminal offense of assault" (McEwan 2014, p. 81). She further recognizes that Adam "is close to the age when he may make the decision for himself"; his readiness to "die for his religious beliefs demonstrates how deep they are";



and his parents' readiness "to sacrifice a dearly loved child for their faith reveals the power of the creed to which Jehovah's Witnesses adhere" (McEwan 2014, p. 81).

The Court's liberal stand is, however, *ambivalent*. The judge claims *not* to take an evaluative stand on religion's merits and demerits, yet this is exactly what she does. The decision is ultimately based on a restrictive view of human welfare: "his welfare—writes the judge—is better served by his love of poetry, by his newly found passion for the violin, by the exercise of his lively intelligence and the expressions of a playful, affectionate nature, and by all of life and love that lie ahead of him" (McEwan 2014, p. 81). The Court's stand *opposes welfare to religion*: it is striking that activities such as cultivating art, exercising the intellect and others regarding emotions are portrayed as serving Adam's welfare, while religion is excluded. Such an evaluative dichotomy characteristic of secularist humanism does not stand: first, it is a truism that religion can foster art, solidarity and intelligence (Adam is a case in point); second, the evaluative dichotomy is disrespectful of Adam's and his parents' profound religious quest, and it is at loggerheads with the Court's declared and required neutrality. The spiritual-religious quest for fullness deserves respect even when aspects of it are questioned for interfering with basic rights such as the (child's) right to life.

The judge further points out that "this Christian sect" does not "encourage open debate and dissent among the congregation at large"; in relation to this, she underscores: "I do not believe that Adam's mind, his opinions, *are entirely his own*. His childhood has been an uninterrupted monochrome exposure to a forceful view of the world and he cannot fail to have been conditioned by it" (McEwan 2014, p. 81). However, this argument relies on an evaluation of the worthiness of Adam's religion rather than on children's rights. Had a minor been exposed to other points of view, the Court would still have to support the compulsory character of transfusion given her minority condition. The crucial question is, therefore, one of rights; in contrast, *The Children Act* represents the legal case by assuming the unworthiness of religious belief.

The judge claims to give due weight to Adam's religious beliefs, yet she sums up her reasoning as follows: "In my judgment, his life is more precious than his dignity" (McEwan 2014, p. 81). This conclusion is symptomatic for the Court's ambivalent liberal stand. In particular, McEwan's representation of the legal reasoning is built on a hierarchical dichotomy between religious belief/dignity and life: bare life must be protected above one's religion and dignity. Once again, despite the judge's claim to neutrality, she assumes a tacit evaluation of religion, establishing its value on an axiological scale, and placing life at the top. However, from a liberal viewpoint, it is *not* the minor's life devoid of dignity and severed from his beliefs that needs to be protected; quite to the contrary, it is the minor's rights and dignity that need to be protected until he can make his *own* existential-religious choices. McEwan's ambiguous depiction of the legal case and reasoning remains thus shaped by the tension between liberal assumptions (respect for the rights of the believers and nonbelievers) and comprehensive secularist ones (i.e., an exclusive humanism that devalues religion).

#### 4. *The Children Act* (2): Adam's Revelation and the Kiss of Judas

Adam breaks away from religion shortly after the legal verdict. The trigger is his parents' reaction to the final verdict: whereas the parents reject the transfusion at the risk of their son's death, they are immensely relieved and happy at the Court's decision. Adam is deeply struck by what he perceives as his parents' incoherence. He explains:

When I saw my parents crying like that, really crying, crying and sort of hooting for joy, everything collapsed. But this is the point. *It collapsed into the truth*. Of course they didn't want me to die! They love me. Why didn't they say that, instead of going on about the joys of heaven? (McEwan 2014, p. 106)

Once the religious veil comes down, the "truth of immanence" and ordinary life emerges with crude simplicity. For Adam to think that it was about God "was just silly"; arriving at this realization "was like a grown-up had come into a room full of kids who

are making each other miserable and said, Come on, stop all the nonsense, it's teatime!" (McEwan 2014, pp. 106–7). McEwan's representation of Adam's falling out of religion makes use of the familiar adjectives that secularist humanism employs to characterize religious claims: meaningless, stupid, childish and false. Religion resembles smallpox—it's a children's disease; overcoming it is like becoming healthy or growing up. The whole fuss about transfusion and God's will turns into "an ordinary human thing" (McEwan 2014, p. 106). Adam explains his religious faith as the posturing of an "idiot":

I was really pumped up. I liked it that my parents and the elders were proud. At night when no one was around I rehearsed making a video, like suicide bombers do. I was going to do it on my phone. I wanted it on the television news and at my funeral. I made myself cry in the dark, imagining them carrying my coffin past my parents, past my school friends and teachers, the whole congregation ... Honestly, I was an idiot. (McEwan 2014, pp. 104–5)

McEwan has Adam make a comparison between his religiosity and a mental illness (anorexia). Adam comments on his "vile mental distortions"<sup>18</sup> as follows:

it was mostly about the delicious adventure I was on, how I would die beautifully and be adored. This girl I know at school had anorexia three years ago, when she was fifteen. Her dream was of wasting away to nothing—like a dried leaf in the wind, was what she said, just fading gently into death and everyone pitying her and blaming themselves afterward for not understanding her. Same sort of thing. (McEwan 2014, pp. 104–5)

Paradoxically, Adam's faith turns out to be at once strong and fragile. In a secular society where the immanent frame is dominant, strong religious beliefs are, as Taylor argues, naturally unsteady. The huge relief of Adam's parents unveils an inner split poorly camouflaged by their apparently firm beliefs. The verdict liberates them from the agonizing conflict between the pressure of the mundane and the belief in authoritative religious rules. Likewise, that a fissure in the behaviour of Adam's parents has a major "catastrophic" impact on his faith has a double significance. First, the abruptness of Adam's atheist revelation points to the instability of his faith: rigidity and fragility are the two sides of the same coin. Second, it is telling that what determines Adam's revelation is his parents' attitude. Adam's religious belief in God is, in McEwan's scenario, an adornment of the dependency of a sensitive nature on parental authority. God is a symbolic-phantasmatic extension of Adam's relation to his parents. The certitude of Adam's faith is unveiled as an immature teenager's blind investment in authority.

Adam grows out of religion without growing up: his revelation or atheist conversion entail a sudden transference of authority from his parents to Fiona. By means of a transfer mechanism resonant of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis—a central focus of McEwan's earlier work<sup>19</sup>—the judge-therapist is projected as the authoritative source of meaningfulness and certitude. In addressing the judge after his turn to atheism, Adam echoes her justification of the verdict, and the opposition between religion and life:

You were the grown-up. You knew all along but you didn't say. You just asked questions and listened. All of life and love that lie ahead of him—that's what you wrote (in the judicial decision). That was your 'thing.' And my revelation. (McEwan 2014, pp. 106–7)

Once freed from the "poison" of religion (using a medical metaphor, Adam tells Fiona: "My parents' religion was a poison and you were the antidote", (McEwan 2014, p. 118)), Adam attempts to adapt to the reality of the secular world and continue his University studies. He writes regularly to Fiona, but she does not answer. Obsessed with the judge, Adam follows her in a trip outside of London. In an uncanny scene, she turns down Adam's bizarre proposal of coming to live with her and her husband. Driven by an unexpected impulse, she kisses him on the lips: the kiss expresses a parallel transference<sup>20</sup> from Fiona to Adam and the yearning to overcome a life marked by unfulfilled love. After they part, in reflecting on Adam's fixation with her, Fiona finds consolation in the thought that she is

only a passing fad: Fiona believes that “(s)he would fade in his thoughts” and “become a minor figure in the progress of his sentimental education” (McEwan 2014, p. 118).

Not long after this meeting, Adam sends her a strange poem associating her with Judas, and her kiss with the kiss of Judas. In “The Ballad of Adam Henry” he interprets in verses his encounter with Fiona:

My life was narrow and godly . . .  
Then a fish rose out of the water with rainbows on its scales  
Pearls of water were dancing and hung in silvery trails.  
“Throw your cross in the water if you’re wanting to be free!”  
So I drowned my load in the river in the shade of the Judas tree  
I knelt by the banks of that river in a wondrous state of bliss  
While she leaned upon my shoulder and gave me the sweetest kiss.  
(McEwan 2014, p. 160)

Fiona is, initially, Adam’s saviour: she opens Adam’s eyes to the reality hidden by the mask of religious mental distortion. However, the promise of certitude and happiness beyond religion is illusory: from the voice of truth and liberation, Fiona becomes a Satanic tempter. The relation of transference between the sick patient (the faithful) and the judge-therapist turns out to be fundamentally ambivalent<sup>21</sup>:

But she dived to the icy bottom where she never will be found . . .  
And Jesus stood on the water and this he said to me,  
“That fish was the voice of Satan, and you must pay the fee.  
Her kiss was the kiss of Judas, her kiss betrayed my name . . .  
(McEwan 2014, p. 160)

Adam’s poem becomes a distortive mirror of reality—the expression of a troubled consciousness that does not find recognition in Fiona and is unable to cope with and find meaning in a disenchanted secular world. She is naturally alarmed at the poem’s message, yet she does not act. Life goes on for her. Fiona and Jack attempt to reconcile; she is shown as rehearsing for a piano concert in front of her peers for the Christmas Revels (McEwan 2014, p. 116). Later on, during the concert, she plays the song that she improvised with Adam, viz. Mahler’s “I am lost to the world.” Her experience is at once uplifting and terrifying: she manages to give an extraordinary performance and reach a rare moment of artistic grace and “ecstasy”. Yet during her transportation she is overcome by the fear and certitude that something is terribly wrong with Adam.

Immediately after the concert she finds out that Adam has passed away: he had a recession, and, this time, as an adult he refused the transfusion. Fiona feels terribly guilty: “on a powerful and unforgivable impulse, she kissed him, then sent him away. Then ran away herself. Failed to answer his letters. Failed to decipher the warning in his poem. How ashamed she was now of her petty fears for her reputation” (McEwan 2014, p. 136). In a decisive passage, McEwan constructs Fiona’s regretful reflections in a secularist key:

She thought her responsibilities ended at the courtroom walls. But how could they? He came to find her, wanting what everyone wanted, and what only free-thinking people, not the supernatural, could give. Meaning. (McEwan 2014, p. 136; my it.)

In *The Children Act*, religion is ultimately portrayed as incongruous with the search for meaningfulness in modern society and life. Fiona is persuaded that she has failed to comply with the 1989 Children Act and provide for Adam’s welfare. In her guilty ruminations, welfare is, again, severed from its possible link to religion, and is instead depicted in immanentist terms as essentially social:

Adam came looking for her and she offered nothing in religion’s place, no protection, even though the Act was clear, her paramount consideration was his welfare. How many pages in how many judgments had she devoted to that term? Welfare, well-being, was social. No child is an island. (McEwan 2014, p. 136)



The overprotection of a holistic religious education makes so that Adam is unprepared for the revelation of the secular world. What he finds in the new world is solitude and incertitude; he is incapable of adapting without the safety net of religion and the anchor of authority and meaning—his parents, God or Fiona. In an inversion of the new testamentary symbology, the kiss of Judas represents a betrayal; the kiss symbolizes the temptation of the secular world devoid of religious “fables” but at the same time the incapacity to reconstruct bonds of love and recognition for love and recognition. Adam finds himself trapped between the disenchantment with a closed and authoritarian community of belief on the one hand and the disenchantment with a godless secular society on the other. Once religion is unveiled as a fable, Adam’s return to the previous form of faith proves impossible.<sup>22</sup> Now he becomes literally “lost to the world”. Adam’s second refusal of a blood transfusion is not an affirmative act of faith, but a suicidal abandonment.

Ironically, Adam’s deeply religious parents and the atheist Fiona fail him in the same ethical point: his parents regiment the spiritual-religious quest through the fixation on controlling rules or rule fetishism at the expense of “just” love; likewise, Fiona refuses life due to a fixation on her “(r)espect for rules”. The suicide is readable as an implicit double refusal of two worlds that are the inverted mirror of each other—that of religious authoritarianism and secularist alienation.

## 5. Conclusions

“Only a God can save us”: Heidegger’s (1966) enigmatic injunction refers not to the return to believing in God and salvation, but to the retrieval of the poetic mode of existence under threat in the modern technological age. Art substitutes God in McEwan’s *The Children Act* and moments of artistic “epiphany” take the place of religion. Yet for McEwan the scientific look into reality is irreducible to a calculating rationality that can alienate us from the world; to the contrary, the rigorous interest in the reality of consciousness, law and society is capable of giving a new mysterious depth to human experience<sup>23</sup> and overcoming religious authoritarianism.

*The Children Act* is “religiously unmusical”<sup>24</sup>; as such, the novel can be situated within a literary trend that unmasks religion. This trend is made of literary explorations that regard religious experience as a relic of the past and as reducible to a secular reality<sup>25</sup>—thirst for power in Saramago’s (1996) *The Gospel according to Jesus Christ*, neo-totalitarianism in Sansal’s (2015) *2048: The end of the world* or patriarchal authoritarianism in Atwood’s (2020) *Testaments*; a compensatory mechanism for the misfit in Tóibín’s (2012) *The Testament of Mary* or an instrument the perpetuation of society in Houellebecq’s (2015) *Submission*. In turn, in the depiction of the legal conflict in *The Children Act*, there is an implicit depreciation of its complexity, transformations and inner conflicts between power and institutional authority, on the one hand, and spiritual quest and ethical transformation, on the other. Briefly stated, religion is portrayed as opposed to life and welfare; in *The Children Act*, the religious quest for meaning emerges as anomalous in a secular and plural world. McEwan’s condenses his secularist humanism in an earlier interview: “Faith is at best morally neutral and at worst a vile mental distortion”<sup>26</sup>. This vision overlooks, however, the continuous relevance of the spiritual-religious experiences in late modernity; as Taylor argues, these experiences can meaningfully shape socio-ethical life and the understanding of welfare. Similar to art, the spiritual-religious quest can convey experiences of “transportation” and meaningful (self-)transformation without being interwoven with authoritarian sources of power and dogmatic certitudes (Ungureanu and Monti 2018).

*The Children Act* is, nevertheless, accurate in posing the problem of totalizing world-views and their unstable place in a secular age. Therefrom emerges the ethical question whether it is legitimate for parents to educate children into a totalizing worldview (religious or secularist). Children such as Adam, raised in a “parallel” strong community, find themselves in a taxing position as they are exposed to the conflict between their minority closed community and the dominant secular society in which they live. They are equally

vulnerable to the tension between two forms of insensitivity and intolerance—religious and secularist—that can be so unbearable as to lead them to self-destruction.<sup>27</sup>

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> For the passage from the secularization theory to desecularization, see for instance [Berger \(1967\)](#); [Berger \(1999\)](#).
- <sup>2</sup> For a panorama see, for instance, [Zucca and Ungureanu \(2015\)](#).
- <sup>3</sup> Taylor also analyses the specific camp of neo-Nietzschean anti-modernism (Bataille, Derrida, Foucault). The inclusion of Derrida and Foucault in the anti-modern camp is misleading, yet this discussion goes beyond the limits of this article.
- <sup>4</sup> Here I focus only on McEwan's *The Children Act*. Religion and faith play a role in novels, short stories and public interventions (e.g., [McEwan 1992, 2006](#)). For a comprehensive perspective on McEwan's work see ([Head 2007](#), esp. pp. 40–41, 113–16, 124–25, 190–91; [Groes 2013](#); [Malcolm 2002](#)).
- <sup>5</sup> [McEwan's \(2012\)](#) *Sweet Tooth* is dedicated to Christopher Hitchens (who had just passed away).
- <sup>6</sup> Quoted in [Zalewski \(2009\)](#). McEwan defended himself by arguing that he had been criticizing only Islamism and religious extremism. It is noteworthy that, in his earlier period, McEwan used to be more open to spiritual matters. However, different events (the fatwa against Rushdie; 9/11; the separation from his first wife), entailed a more polemic distancing from religion. McEwan notes "I was *always* interested in science . . . I explored mysticism as much as I could, but it never added up for me" (quoted in [Zalewski 2009](#)).
- <sup>7</sup> It is important to distinguish between "secularism" and "secular". "Secularism" refers to a theory and ideology that has one or two of the following dimensions: at the *empirical* level, it predicts the fatal decline of religion in modernity; at the *normative* level, it constructs an opposition between religion and modern emancipation. In turn, "secular" refers to the socio-political process whereby religion stops playing a totalizing role in society and becomes one element of the broader social system. In this modern-secular society, there is constitutional separation between the legal-political and the religious spheres. Whenever I speak of "secular society" or "secular age" in this article, I use the term in this socio-political sense, which is largely congruent with Taylor's theory. Finally, "atheism" is not necessarily accompanied by "secularism": one can be atheist and defend an anti-secularist stand. Think of Auguste Comte's positive religion devoid of the belief in God; or of Michel Houellebecq's recent stand against modernity and counter-Enlightenment ([Ungureanu 2017](#)).
- <sup>8</sup> See also [Hadley \(2014\)](#) and [Salas \(2015\)](#).
- <sup>9</sup> This section relies on [Ungureanu and Monti \(2018\)](#), which discusses closely Taylor's political philosophy and view of religion.
- <sup>10</sup> Taylor speaks of a "spiritual reality" and a "religious longing": "I hold that religious longing, the longing for and response to a more-than-immanent transformation perspective, what Chantal Milon-Delsol calls a 'désir d'éternité', remains a strong independent source of motivation in modernity" ([Taylor 2007](#), p. 530). Taylor is unclear about the status of what he calls "spiritual reality" (for a critique, see [Ungureanu and Monti 2018](#)).
- <sup>11</sup> The phrase "experiments with truth" is [Gandhi's \(1983\)](#).
- <sup>12</sup> In the final analysis, argues Taylor, what pushes us towards different options "is what we might describe as our over-all take on human life, and its cosmic and (if any) spiritual surroundings. People's stance on the issue of belief in God, or of an open versus closed understanding of the immanent frame, usually emerge out of this general sense of things" ([Taylor 2007](#), p. 331).
- <sup>13</sup> This procedure is common in McEwan. See, for instance, *Saturday* and *Amsterdam*.
- <sup>14</sup> Head makes a suggestive analogy: "McEwan is . . . trying to produce, perhaps, a diagnostic 'slice-of-mind' novel—working towards the literary equivalent of a CT scan—rather than a modernist 'slice-of-life' novel" ([Head 2007](#), p. 192). I am not sure whether McEwan's final stand on the relation between consciousness and matter is reductionist or not.
- <sup>15</sup> Music is central in McEwan's novels such as *In Between the Sheets*, *Amsterdam* (which is focused on a composer commissioned to The Millennium Symphony' for the celebrations in 2000). On music in McEwan, see also [Head's \(2007\)](#), pp. 44–45, 71–72, 146–50) observations and [Nicklas \(2010\)](#).
- <sup>16</sup> For the official explanation of the refusal of transfusions, see the web of the [Jehova's Witness \(n.d.\)](#). See also [Elder \(2000\)](#), pp. 375–80) and [Wilson \(1993\)](#), pp. 93–111).
- <sup>17</sup> *Himmel* in original.
- <sup>18</sup> The phrase comes from one of McEwan's interviews. See below.
- <sup>19</sup> Zalewski points out: "At first, he (McEwan) studied perversity; now he studies normality. His first god was Freud. Now it is Darwin" ([Zalewski 2009](#)).
- <sup>20</sup> I thank Benoit Challand for this suggestion.
- <sup>21</sup> For Freud, any transference comprises positive (affectionate) as well as negative (hostile) attitudes towards the therapist, who as a rule is put in the place of one or other of the patient's parents, his father or mother ([Freud 1949](#), pp. 45–55).

- 22 Atheism (or a form of it fetishizing rules and unable to generate meaningful experiences of fullness) proves equally fragile.
- 23 The final paragraph from Darwin's *The Origin of Species* is invoked by Perowne in McEwan's *Saturday*, p. 255. See also Head's enlightening analysis (Head 2007, pp. 191–92). McEwan sometimes notes also the “spiritual” dimension of scientific research (Head 2007, pp. 71–72). Although an atheist, Einstein formulates the affinity between scientific research and religiousness in a way that is not underlined by secularist premises. Einstein says: “To know that what is impenetrable to us really exists, manifesting itself as the highest wisdom and the most radiant beauty which our dull faculties can comprehend only in their most primitive forms—this knowledge, this feeling, is at the center of true religiousness. In this sense, and in this sense only, I belong in the ranks of devoutly religious men.” (Einstein et al. 1931, p. 6; for a discussion, see Dworkin 2013).
- 24 This phrase is famously used by Max Weber.
- 25 For a broad panorama of the relation between literature and religion, see for instance Hass et al. (2007).
- 26 Quoted in Ed Pilkinton, “McEwan's import: Novelist reveals how he gave Rushdie shelter in a Cotswold cottage just after fatwa was issued” (16 February 2006), available at <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/feb/16/rushdie-mcewan-fatwa-books> (accessed on 1 March 2021).
- 27 I thank Benoit Challand and three reviewers for comments on a previous version of this article.

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