

## Review Article

### A SECULAR AGE

by Charles Taylor

Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2007

The Canadian Catholic academic Charles Taylor—Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at McGill University, Board of Trustees Professor of Law and Philosophy at Northwestern University in Chicago, and author of nearly twenty books—is undoubtedly one of the world’s most influential and respected intellectuals. His work on the roots of modern selfhood, encapsulated systematically in his *magnum opus*, *Sources of the Self*, has established him as a front-ranking philosopher, numbered by the American philosopher Richard Rorty as “among the dozen most important philosophers writing today, anywhere in the world”.<sup>1</sup> Taylor’s contributions to the subject of multiculturalism have also been widely influential, and his expertise in that area was surely a large contributing factor in his appointment in 2007 as Co-Chair (along with Gérard Bouchard) of Quebec’s Consultation Commission on Accommodation Practices Related to Cultural Differences. This was not Taylor’s first foray into Canadian political life. He had four unsuccessful bids as an NDP candidate in federal elections, with his most noteworthy defeat coming in 1965 in the riding of Mount Royal—a loss that came at the hands of future Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau.

All of this is to say that Charles Taylor has long been an influential figure in the academic study of philosophy and politics, and a notable presence in Canadian public life. However, for much of his academic career, the topic of religion has been a subtle or implicit facet of Taylor’s programme, with religious or

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<sup>1</sup> Adam Begley, “The Mensch of Montreal,” *Lingua Franca* (May/June 1993), 39.

theological themes rarely fleshed out in any systematic way. We do find significant religious claims at important junctures in *Sources of the Self*, as for example, in the closing pages, the suggestion that “the potential of a certain theistic perspective is incomparably greater” than secular humanism as a foundation for the modern commitment to universal, unconditional benevolence. But this explicit theistic assertion is preceded by the confession that he has refrained from a more robustly theistic argument in his analysis of unconditional benevolence “partly out of delicacy, but largely out of lack of arguments.”<sup>2</sup> Taylor’s lecture “A Catholic Modernity?” does engage theologically with the theme of unconditional benevolence, but it is notable that it was delivered to the Society of Mary. Taylor concedes that many of the religious themes explored in this address “have been at the centre of my concerns for decades. They have been reflected in my philosophical work, but not in the same form as I raise them [here], because of the nature of philosophical discourse (as I see it anyway), which has to try and persuade honest thinkers of any and all metaphysical or theological commitments.”<sup>3</sup> To be sure, Taylor’s Marianist Award lecture represents a significant stage in the development of Taylor’s religious thought, but there is also little doubt that the article, “A Catholic Modernity?” has had a much more limited readership than the very widely-read *Sources of the Self*.

It is the publication of the book, *A Secular Age*, that has placed Taylor at the centre of many contemporary debates about religion and secularity. The book is the product of roughly a decade of

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<sup>2</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 517-518.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Taylor, “A Catholic Modernity?” in *A Catholic Modernity? Charles Taylor’s Marianist Award Lecture*. James L. Heft (ed.) (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 13.

research, much of which arose out of his Gifford lectures, entitled “Living in a Secular Age,” which were delivered in Edinburgh in 1998-1999. These lectures also led to the publication of two other books—*Varieties of Religion Today* and *Modern Social Imaginaries*—though many of the central arguments of these texts are folded into the expansive narrative of *A Secular Age*. This decade of research on the subject of religion and secularity earned Taylor the highly prestigious 2007 Templeton Prize—a monetary award (valued at £1,000,000 sterling) recognizing individuals “who [have] made an exceptional contribution to affirming life’s spiritual dimension.”<sup>4</sup> *A Secular Age* (2007) is surely the culmination of the research that earned him the Templeton.

The book opens with a description of two basic ways of understanding or accounting for the phenomenon of secularization. The first (which Taylor refers to throughout the book as Secularity 1, or simply S1) emphasizes the fracturing of society into two distinct spheres, the public and the private. Religious belief is pushed out of public institutions—that is, *privatized*—within secular societies. Unlike pre-modern cultures, which were permeated by religion, secular societies present modern individuals with a new reality: now “you can engage fully in politics without ever encountering God.”<sup>5</sup>

The second way of conceptualizing the rise of the secular in western modernity (Secularity 2) emphasizes a general decline of religiosity, both in practice and in belief. On this account, the modern world has undergone a “turning away from God,” and moderns thus seek to root their moral and political commitments

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<sup>4</sup> Templeton Prize. [http://www.templeton.org/prizes/the\\_templeton\\_prize/](http://www.templeton.org/prizes/the_templeton_prize/) (accessed September 27, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2007), 1. Further references to *A Secular Age* are cited parenthetically.

not in the explanatory power of religious narratives, but in “secular” foundations, such as cool calculative reason (2).

Alongside these two prevailing views on secularization, *A Secular Age* seeks to posit a third way of understanding the movement towards secularity which focuses on the “conditions of belief.” These conditions of belief set the parameters for what he calls “fullness.” Before our secular age, it was not simply the case that these parameters included the “religious,” but rather that fullness was incomprehensible without reference to religion. By emphasizing shifts in the conditions of belief, he endeavours to explore secularization as a process by which religious belief is set aside as a *de facto* position for understanding the aspiration to human fullness. More to the point, in our secular age, religious faith has become an option that is *chosen*. Taylor asks, “How did we move from a condition where, in Christendom, people lived naively within a theistic construal, to one in which we shunt between two stances, in which everyone’s construal shows up as such; and in which, moreover, unbelief has become for many the major default option?” (14). What make this development all the more astonishing for Taylor is that it is unique to our epoch and to the context of post-Latin-Christendom. How did this development arise?

Taylor’s response to this question follows many well-established theories of secularization and points to the role of disenchantment as a major causal factor in the slide to secularity. However, Taylor’s exploration of disenchantment departs from these theories in a unique and significant way. Taylor’s approach is one that attempts to deconstruct the explanatory power of what he calls “subtraction theories,” defined as “stories of modernity in general, and secularization in particular, which explain them by human beings having lost, or sloughed off, or liberated themselves from certain earlier, confining horizons, or illusions,

or limitations of knowledge” (22). In other words, disenchantment, and thus secularization more generally, are the consequence of the “subtraction” of the authoritative role of religion for understanding the world, or as the foundation for ethical and political discourses—a subtraction that contributes constructively to the march of human progress. These subtraction stories fail to account for the fundamental role that religion itself has played in the slide to disenchantment—a factor which of course problematizes the simpler dominant thesis that pre-modern, pre-secular society *minus religion* equals modern secularity. The new story that Taylor wants to tell is much more complex, much less linear, and centres largely around the matrix of what he calls the work of “Reform.”

Taylor argues that Reform arises from “a profound dissatisfaction with the hierarchical equilibrium between lay life and the renunciative vocations” (61). According to the perspective of Reform, these interdependent multiple “speeds” of belief and practice are problematic for the “equilibrium involved accepting that masses of people were not going to live up to the demands of perfection. They were being ‘carried,’ in a sense, by the perfect” (62). Taylor emphasizes that this movement of Reform is quite different from “small ‘r’” reform, through which the higher speeds work through proselytism and renewal movements “to convert more people from these [slower speeds] to the higher ‘speeds.’” But whereas small-r reformers sought to spread their “forms of practice and devotion, by preaching, encouragement, example,” Reformers sought to *delegitimize* the slower speeds. Taylor identifies motivating factors that underlie the attempts by both reformers and Reformers to restore and revitalize lives of the faithful, including a new form of highly devotional piety, as well as a suspicion of “magic.” But unlike groups like the Brethren of the Common Life, a confraternity that

strove to cultivate a strong meditative and devotional life, but allowed followers to retain their secular vocations—thus remaining at the stratum of “small ‘r’ reform”—“large ‘R’” Reformers felt compelled to “smash the old dispensation” of multi-speed, hierarchical religious life (76).

A fundamental part of the smashing of the multi-speed dispensation was the rooting out of “magic,” including the misuse of the sacraments. However, to understand the primacy of magic for the epoch before the rise of our secular age, one first needs to understand the shift in our conceptions of subjectivity. For moderns in the context of secularity, Taylor observes, meaning is situated exclusively within the human mind, “in the sense that things only have the meaning they do in that they awaken a certain response in us, and this has to do with our nature as creatures who are thus capable of such responses, which means creatures with feelings, with desires, aversions, i.e., beings endowed with minds, in the broadest sense” (31).

This stands in stark contrast to conceptions of meaning in an enchanted cosmos. Taylor highlights how people living in the enchanted world experienced the cosmos as one filled with “extra-human agencies,” such as demons and spirits. These were understood to have power independent of the minds of humans. Another extra-human locus for “power and meaning” could be found in certain objects and places. Relics or holy places of pilgrimage and healing were commonly understood to be sites of ontological significance independent of the human experience of those objects and places (32). Taylor describes the human subject in an enchanted world as a “porous self”—a conception of subjectivity that is open to the causal powers of extra-human agencies or enchanted (or “charged”) objects—in contrast with what he terms the “buffered self,” the modern self that is englobed by sharp boundaries. The porous self of the enchanted

world felt threatened by demonic extra-human agencies, and it wasn't uncommon for the medieval Christian to turn to magical means to protect herself, using religious relics or even the Host as prophylactic devices.

The suspicion of magic plays a central role in the work of Reform, contributing to disenchantment in general, but also to what Taylor calls "disenfleshment." While the reining in of corrupt practices pertaining to various aspects of sacramental life was a positive consequence of this suspicion—the rooting out of the selling of indulgences being one obvious example—Taylor argues that the demagification of society was the most powerful factor that confronted and undermined medieval popular piety. The masses were now pulled by a "[gravitation] towards a quite different form of liturgy and church life, in which the sacraments tend to become purely symbolic, authority slides away from a hierarchy, and is placed back in Scripture, and the visible church is more sharply distinguished from the true community of the saved" (74).

Taylor notes that, though these historical shifts have been referred to as a series of "Proto-Reformations," a fundamental element of the Reformation is absent - Luther's doctrine of *sola fide*. Taylor contends that justification by faith found fertile ground in the field of fear that characterized the pre-Reformation period, as believers were inundated by the hyper-dread of damnation that went hand in hand with the corrupt system of the sale of indulgences (which added to the already significant fears of demonic extra-human agencies that impinged on the porous selves of that "enchanted" era). By articulating a doctrine that could assuage these fears, Taylor argues that "Luther was touching on *the* neuralgic issue of his day . . . In raising his standard on this issue, Luther was on to something which could

move masses of people, unlike the humanist critique of mass piety, or the rejection of the sacred” (75).

Unsurprisingly, the Protestant Reformation is described as one of the central mechanisms of Reform, with its contribution being twofold: first, the Reformation had a massive role in the disenchantment of the cosmos; and, second, primarily through Calvinist streams, the Reformation gave rise to a new order of *discipline* that sought to make over the world. Beginning with the first of these, Taylor notes how disenchantment contributes to a change in the “centre of gravity of religious life,” with an increased internalization:

The power of God doesn’t operate through various “sacramentals,” or locations of sacred power which we can draw on. These are seen to be something we can control, and hence blasphemous. In one way, we can see that the sacred/profane distinction breaks down, insofar as it can be placed in person, space, time, gesture. This means that the sacred is suddenly broadened: for the saved, God is sanctifying us everywhere, hence also in ordinary life, our work, in marriage, and so on. But in another way, the channels are radically narrowed, because this sanctification depends entirely now on our inner transformation, our throwing ourselves on God’s mercy in faith (79).

As the Reformation deepened its disenchantment of Christendom, it eventually reached a point where the sacraments themselves are redefined—the movement is away from the “magical” sacramentality associated with the corrupt hierarchical church, to purely symbolic sacraments. With this rejection of the traditional Catholic notion of sacramentality, the Reformation can be understood to be renouncing a mode of Incarnationality, as present in the Eucharist (for example), thus taking a dramatic step away from what might be described as a more enfleshed

Christianity.

Throughout the middle sections of *A Secular Age*, Taylor describes a number of movements toward secularity, including the rise of deism, changing conceptions of time (the exclusion of sacred time in favour of secular “empty” or “homogenous” time—a conception borrowed from Walter Benjamin that describes chronologies that are not punctuated by “higher” times<sup>6</sup>), the proliferation of “unbelieving” perspectives like exclusive humanism, and the emergence of an “immanent frame” (which encapsulates all the previously mentioned movements). I can only mention these in passing, since it would require a much longer review to discuss them in any detail.

But what does require further mention is how these sections explore the importance of Descartes in establishing the new subjectivity mentioned above, according to which humans are now primarily defined as minds. Taylor’s philosophical work in general seeks to call into question Cartesian anthropology, particularly because of its disembodied implications (“I think, therefore I am”)—and *A Secular Age* continues that work. But Taylor’s treatment of the modern occlusion of the body is unique in that he examines the role of Christianity, especially Reform Christianity, in the movement towards excarnation.

At a conference at Yale University in 2008 that had *A Secular Age* as its focus, Taylor divulged that the last sections of the book were written specifically for his co-religionists and fellow Catholics. Notably, the closing sections represent, with perhaps the exception of “A Catholic Modernity?” Taylor’s most explicitly theological work. One of the major themes of the book is Taylor’s position that “mainstream Christianity” has undergone an “excarnation,” moving away from enfleshed forms of religious

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<sup>6</sup> See Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (London: Fontana, 1973), 263.

life, including physical practices such as “creeping to the Cross,” Candelmas, practices that accompany the liturgy as well as the sacraments, and of course (among some Protestants) the celebration of the mass itself.

But the slide to excarnation is also accompanied by a different conception of ethical life. The pre-Reform multi-speed, hierarchical system, acknowledges that all cannot uphold the renunciative standard of monastic orders—so it sets different standards for the laity. And this is one of the ways it remains connected to the primacy of the body (643). The single-speed system, on the other hand, sets a high moral standard for the laity, and this was done through the erection of a rigid set of rules governing moral behaviour. Taylor discusses how, in striving for a disciplined society, these rules become fetishized—both within Christianity and in the secular realm. This nomolatriy—literally “worshipping of rules”—has contributed to the supplanting of the body in western moral life.

Drawing upon the work of the Catholic writer and priest Ivan Illich, Taylor explores how the Gospels—and in particular the parable of the good Samaritan—point to a different ethic that is irreducible to a set of rules. Following Illich, Taylor argues that when we attempt to systematize or institutionalize *agapê*, the original motivation becomes corrupted through a nomolatriy that overshadows the fundamentality of the face-to-face encounter with the neighbour. Both Illich and Taylor emphasize enfleshment in this regard, especially because they both understand pity as something that proceeds “from the guts,” as exemplified in the Gospels language of *splangnizesthai* (to have “pity”), a term which is cognate to the Greek word for “bowels.” Compassion, pity, and *agapê* ramify outwards from our bowels, from the moral intuition that arises deep within us as we encounter the broken Jew on the roadside. And he is our

neighbour, according to Illich's reading of the parable of the Good Samaritan, precisely because we choose to respond to the visceral motivation that the face-to-face encounter elicits in us.

According to the reading of the parable advocated by Taylor, what the parable articulates, or rather discloses, is a new mode of human *inter-relationality*. By responding to the gut-response, the Samaritan is able to break out of the strictures of divisive ethnic particularities, but the response also affords him the opportunity to respond in love to *this particular enfleshed other*. Taylor sums up the magnitude of the new agapeic proportionality that "comes from God" through Incarnation: "The enfleshment of God extends outward, through such new links as the Samaritan makes with the Jew, into a network, which we call the Church. But this is a network, not a categorical grouping; that is, it is a skein of relations which link particular, unique, enfleshed people to each other, rather than a grouping of people together on the grounds of their sharing some important property" (738).

So what this account highlights is that the visible church is constituted by actual embodied persons who are "called out"—the literal meaning of "*ekklesia*"—to respond in love to other enfleshed persons. But one source of the degeneracy of this network arises from the institutionalization of charity and the consequent displacement of the body. Through the institutionalization of charity, the enfleshed character of *agapê* is pushed aside and the philanthropic activities of the Church become "living caricatures of the network life." When charity is institutionalized, what is lost is the encounter between enfleshed beings—the call to love the neighbour becomes excarnated (739). Similarly, when the face-to-face enfleshed encounter is displaced in favour of a code of proper conduct, something fundamental to moral life becomes lost. The "gut-driven" enactments of *agapê* cannot be legislated or captured by a set of rules, and it is only

once the body is excluded as criterial for moral life that the slide to ethics as mind-centred calculation becomes more conceivable.

While this line of critique may be extremely important for the realm of ethics, what is unclear is how this all translates to politics and law—two arenas which seem to require extensive sets of rules. More to the point, as it relates to the proliferation of *agapê* in these realms, many institutions, rules and laws have been established to ensure that the other is protected and cared for when agents may choose not to love the other. (After all, in the parable only the Samaritan obeys the demand for action that is conveyed through the gut-response). The British theologian John Milbank is critical of *A Secular Age* on a related point, and wonders what the consequences are if we follow the Taylor-Illich critique of moral codes and institutions. He asks: “How do we acknowledge the truth of Illich’s insights while still saluting the uniquely *practical* bent of Latin Christianity? How do we allow that some procedure and institutionalization is required, without destroying the interpersonal?”<sup>7</sup> Milbank’s point is that these institutions and codes are *necessary*; it would be utterly impracticable for societies to operate purely at the face-to-face level, with citizens acting in accordance with their fleshly intuitions. Taylor in some way anticipates this potential criticism. He points out that Illich does not fully dismiss the importance of institutions or codified rules for behaviour (743). What is crucial, he argues, is that we recognize how limited the code-fetishist perspective is, how institutionalized charity stifles something fundamental to *agapê*—though the point is not that we must eliminate institutions and codes. But how, for Taylor, do we strike a balance between the primacy of the interpersonal and the

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<sup>7</sup> John Milbank, “A Closer Walk on the Wild Side: Some Comments on Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age*,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 22/1 (2009), 103.

necessity of the institutional? Or, to rephrase Milbank's question, how according to the Illich-Taylor model, does one comport oneself in an enfolded way *vis-a-vis* institutions or codified rules? If institutions and rules are inescapable for earthly politics and ethics, how does Incarnation reshape them agapeically? Or, alternatively, what does an "embodied" institution or law look like?

I think these are important questions to ask of the Taylor-Illich perspective, not simply to point out the shortcomings of the view, but rather to identify possible points of departure for further political, moral or theological engagements. Of course, we should not be surprised that Taylor offers no easy answers here given his recognition that the eschatological character of Christianity implies that humans live in the "not yet," in a time when the extent of God's reconciliation in the world remains not fully disclosed.

Though it may be a shortcoming of *A Secular Age* that it does not provide any straightforward answers on this issue, the book does present an interesting point of departure for those interested in the various intersections of religion and politics. At the very least, one major achievement of Taylor's book is that it highlights the ways that Christianity itself is implicated in the sidelining of the body, characteristic of secular modernity, and equally importantly that it directs its readers to valuable religious resources that can remedy the movement to excarnation. In all of this, he departs radically from those who conceive of secularity in terms of the mere subtraction of religion, a view which *A Secular Age* demonstrates to be far too narrow.

— Carlos Colorado