Book review: a secular age: Charles Taylor, a secular age

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A SECULAR AGE*

PEOPLE TEND TO THINK of secularism as the absence of religion, not something in itself. Or they think of it simply as a strong separation of church and state – creating again, a zone of absence. These two views are at the core of the standard sociological story of secularization. This is understood in some combination as the decline of religion and/or the compartmentalization of religion in its own private sphere so that it is excluded from public life and indeed markets.

This perspective misses much. Charles Taylor's remarkable (but somewhat unwieldy) new book, *A Secular Age*, is perhaps the single most important resource for trying to develop a better understanding. But it should be read together with other texts, for enormous as it is, it does not cover everything. In particular, it is a philosopher's account, so it does much better analyzing the writings of intellectual elites than broader popular culture or social structure (though it does have interesting and innovative things to say about each). It is also an account of secularism in Latin Christendom and its successor societies, especially Europe and North America. The issue here is not just that it doesn't deal with the rest of the world, but that it doesn't very strongly engage the impact of colonialism and other links to the rest of the world on Europe and America. Surprisingly, it doesn't draw on Talal Asad's deeply interesting exploration of *Formations of the Secular*, even though it partially overlaps its terrain in considering transformations of subjectivity. Asad's work and that of other anthropologists such as Saba Mahmood remains an important complement to Taylor's project.

Taylor begins by distinguishing three different senses of the secular. I've mentioned the first two already, the exclusion of religion from public spaces and the decline of religion. He has useful things to say about each of these. Most importantly, I think, he criticizes what he calls ''subtraction stories''. These are accounts in which authors trace the decline or compartmentalization of religion without seriously considering the transformations this entails – not just in religion but in everything else as well. Some of the best parts of Taylor's book are lengthy discussions of the ways in which ideas of personhood and subjectivity, social relations and moral obligations, material well-being and economic pursuits have been changed by both (a) changes in the

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ways in which religion shapes each and (b) reductions in the extent to which religion shapes each.

But the most searching and original – but also unsettled and unsettling – parts of Taylor's book concern what he calls ''Secularism 3''. This focuses on ''a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace'' (p. 3). Secularism is not just a net reduction in religious belief or practice, therefore, but a change in the very conditions of belief. Taylor is clear that in many ways secularism makes belief harder, but he doesn't see only negatives on the balance sheet. Secularism has come about alongside changes that we should value, like a deeper notion of self and subjective agency and a more egalitarian social order. Moreover, though belief may be problematic in new ways, it is also possible for it to be meaningful in new ways.

Taylor really means belief. He doesn't want to see religion as just a number of engaging practices or quasi-ethnic customs. It turns centrally on belief in God or at least something larger and perhaps better than mere this-worldly human flourishing that defines religious faith. But Taylor steers clear of some of the common complaints against a belief-centered account of religion. He does not mean belief in specific doctrines. Nor does he understand belief as an abstract intellectual commitment to the truth of a propositional statement. Rather, he devotes considerable effort to showing how that sort of narrowed ''epistemological'' approach is part of a package of cultural and intellectual changes that make religious belief hard, even while they make for advances in other domains like science.

The epistemological approach turns on a strong separation of the knowing mind from culture, social relations, even body and perhaps ''spirit'' – that is, aspects of our mental activity not readily rendered in rational-propositional terms. Taylor joins with those who have argued for the importance of other forms and dimensions of understanding, of tacit knowledge, and of the embeddedness of each of us in language and culture. We are only able to engage in the kind of disembodied reason moderns value against a background of understandings we often don't recognize. Among these are some commitments that are deeper than others, more fundamentally shaping of our thought and outlooks. Here Taylor builds on his argument from *Sources of the Self*, where he called these ''hypergoods''. We are all committed to such higher goods, Taylor suggests, even those who claim not to be (reflecting their commitment to ''objectivity'' and perhaps ''rationality'' as principles

more fundamental than some others). It is not only the religious who have some ''beliefs'' beyond the conclusions of ordinary reason, indeed orienting for that reason.

So one move for Taylor is trying to change the way we think about belief. Taylor starts out by evoking a subjective experience, what he calls ''fullness''. It is an experience of life and the world as imbued with meaning, beauty, and connection. Crucially, it is a subjective experience in which the fullness is understood to be objective – the way the world is, or at least can sometimes be – not merely a result of subjective attitude. Our subjective stances may afford us more or better access to fullness, but it is not merely an interior state. Indeed, it is a reflection of our individualistic, psychological orientation and also our rationalistic epistemological criteria for knowledge that try to grasp fullness entirely in terms of subjective states; we say we have moments of transcendent experience, thus, rather than moments when we experience transcendent character of reality.

Fullness is not in itself a belief, it is the sense of something larger or more deeply meaningful about which we may have beliefs. Nor is the sense of fullness derived only from a perception of reality and meaning beyond this world or only interpretable in religious terms. This sense of heightened meaning and connection is always possible within humanist and naturalist frames of reference. But to most moderns, this strong sense of the fullness of the world, of the wonder of it that goes beyond everyday concerns about health, material prosperity, politics, even justice, is only available occasionally. Some people may seem to have more consistent access to it and this may be a source of their inspirational leadership, extraordinary commitments, or saintliness. But it is typically episodic, available only for moments, perhaps aided by ritual but sometimes just surprising us. And fullness is less available now than it used to be when it seemed routinely the case that the material world was not all that there was.

Here there is an interesting twist to Taylor's argument, for he thinks this isn't all bad. Fullness is harder to achieve but it can be wonderful in new ways. If we can work through the various obstacles to having a sense of living amid transcendence, we can experience it in richer ways. Here Taylor's argument is loosely Hegelian (not surprisingly since he is one of the greatest interpreters and analysts of Hegel). We start out with easy access to a sense of fullness, but don't know very well what we have. We grow in knowledge (or as Rousseau would say, in arts and science), but in ways that cut us off from full relationships to nature, our own lives, other people, and God. Yet there is potential

for returning to a sense of fullness informed by poetry and philosophy as well as religion.

Making the idea – and experience – of transcendence sensible is one of Taylor's central goals. Acknowledging that religion can be defined in a variety of ways, his interest in it is defined by this – or rather by the relationship between ''immanence'' and ''transcendence''. And as importance as transcendence is, most of his book is devoted to trying to understand immanence. Taylor sees the modern West as shaped deeply by the idea of a natural order understandable without reference to anything outside itself (unless perhaps human consciousness is understood this way, though as Taylor notes, it is often understood as one more natural phenomenon). Indeed, he suggests that this is ''the great invention of the West'' (p. 15). It is constitutive for an ''immanent frame'' within which one can set aside questions of divine creation, marking off a sharp boundary with the transcendent. The orderliness of the world is now impersonal, perhaps set in motion by a watch-maker-God, but working of itself.

A central historical phase in the movement towards this modern understanding of self and others in the world is the late 17th and 18th century spread of Providential Deism. Taylor offers a brilliant account of the way in which this paved the way for exclusive humanism even though its protagonists did not understand themselves as leaving the realm of religion, and indeed understood themselves as solving problems within existing Christianity. A secular perspective grew within religion before it was taken up by the irreligious. This was already evident in Augustine, of course, but it took on new dimensions in the early modern era. Growing secularism meant at first a greater religious engagement with human relationships and other affairs of ''this world''. It responded to a new affirmation of the virtues of ordinary life, including not least the happiness and this-worldly nurturance of family life. It responded to a new sense of historical time, anchored partly in the self-consciousness of early moderns as inhabiting a new era in which older forms of religion might no longer suffice. But growing secularism also meant the understanding that ''this world'' moved according to an impersonal order of causes and effects within it. And this helped to underwrite the rise of modern science. Though at first this meant reading the word of God in nature rather than ancient texts, it often became disengaged from religious connections to the idea of a larger, transcendent whole.

By the transcendent, Taylor generally means sources of meaning which lie beyond this world – at least as we can grasp it in either

anthropocentric-humanistic or naturalistic terms. Taylor articulates three dimensions in which we go ''beyond'': a good higher than human flourishing (such as love in the sense of *agape*), a higher power (such as God), and extension of life (or even ''our lives'') beyond the ''natural'' scope between birth and death (summarized on p. 20).

Taylor indicates that the God of Abraham who orients his faith is only one way to grasp this transcendent reality. He is open, thus, to the potentially equal value of grasping the transcendent in Hindu and Muslim terms (and he may mean to include Muslims when he makes reference to believing in the God of Abraham). He is open to new theologies that transform the meaning of the term God, trying to rid it of anthropocentric, or patriarchal projections (though in fact theology as such doesn't figure very strongly among the many intellectual sources Taylor engages in *A Secular Age*). But Taylor's usage seems consistently focused on that which is beyond nature by virtue of the actual contemporary existence of some other or additional reality. But when we ask of the world as it exists ''is that all there is'' we are also asking about the future. Indeed, part of what Taylor sees as limiting in the immanent frame is the tendency towards both deterministic and instrumental approaches to human life: we are led to accept too much of what exists as the fixed character of reality, and then adapt ourselves to it.

In any case, the immanent frame is basic to secularism as we know it. We cannot make sense of the decline of religious practice (where this has occurred), the compartmentalization of religion as private, or even declarations of doctrinaire atheism without it. The very term ''super-natural'' expresses something of a point. The natural is the unmarked category and there is a sharp division from that which is outside or above it. And ironically, it is in significant part religious leaders who promoted this immanent frame and its sharp boundary. They did so in order to ''clean up'' the inherited beliefs and practices of pre-Christian folk religion and focus believers' attention in a proper way on God. They sought to purge it of the magical and festive. Early modern clerical elites – notably in the era of the Reformation but on both Catholic and Protestant sides – sought to enforce among parishioners broadly standards of piety and orthodoxy previously only deemed important for elites. In doing so, they came to define the phenomenon of belief in a new and sharp enough way to make declarations of explicit unbelief – atheism – far more prominent than in earlier times (when people might have shown little interest in religion, dissented from specific teachings, or deviated from orthodox practices without

asserting an epistemic denial of God). These early modern religious elites helped set in motion a continuing purification of thought which would eventually take an anti-religious turn in the Enlightenment. But it starts out with an effort to get people to be better Christians.

The disciplinary revolution familiar to sociologists as part of a Weberian account of the rise of capitalism is also a central part of this story of religious transformation. ''Training in a disciplined, sober, industrious life'' helped to shape both the instrumental character of modern secular society and its productivity. But it also helped to produce the very sense that society and self could both be remade. It was thus an ''experience on the part of elites of success in imposing the order they sought on themselves and society'' (p. 228). Moreover, the disciplinary revolution coincided with the civilizing process (Taylor draws on Elias) to create new kinds of sensitivities and values within secular culture. If this became less violent, though, it also became oriented in new ways to a rule-governed approach to morality.

Taylor traces the growth not just of ''secularism'' in the abstract but even more of a secular culture with specific content. The rise of exclusive humanism, for example, involved the notion that human flourishing defines the comprehensive good towards which human beings should be oriented. It was thus secular and limited. But it was also the source of tremendous advances in care for fellow human beings. Taylor would challenge the limitation of the good to human flourishing, but not reject the advances that humanism brought. Likewise, secular culture grew with thinking about society in terms of new social imaginaries like market, democracy, and public sphere. Each was shaped by humanism, but also by notions like the equality of human individuals aggregated in one way or another in an impersonal order. The kind of simplistic opposition of religion to ''secular humanism'' drawn today by some religious leaders is thus very misleading according to Taylor. Not only would it be unfortunate to jettison the goal of human flourishing. It would impoverish rather than improve religion to try to cleanse it of engagement in the secular world.

Here we return to the story of Reform (Catholic as well as Protestant) as it helped create the secular age. Initially, Reform was a project of producing purer religion, and demanding more widespread lay adherence to high (even monastic) standards of purity. The effort to ''cleanse'' Christianity of folk beliefs and practices is one part of this story. So was the rise of new morality governed by self-discipline but also ever-proliferating rules, the religious counterpart to the manners prized in the civilizing process. The Reform effort also helped shape

the rise of an understanding of an impersonal natural order into which God intervened less frequently (if ever) and which could be the object of a purely natural science. It shaped equally a transformation of the self to create individual subjects – ''buffered selves'' – able to take a distanced view of everything outside the mind. This meant not only ceasing to understand the self as ''porous'' such that demons or God could enter it but also gaining ability to act instrumentally in relation to the external world and to one's own body. Reformers created a sharper division between the spiritual and the physical.

The rise of a secular age obviously transformed attention to the temporal, material world. But it also transformed the spiritual. It brought about what Taylor calls the ''excarnation'', the development of the notion that the spirit was radically other to and potentially contrary to the body. We see this in the epistemological attitude, ''the exaltation of disengaged reason as the royal road to knowledge, even in human affairs'' (p. 746). It appeared also in theology, devotions, and morality. Rather than pursuing the ''enfleshment of God'' (p. 739) Taylor sees the dominant versions of modern Christianity seeking distance from the flesh. This left a large field open – initially to innovations within a Christian frame and then with movement outside it. Starting with deism, thus, there was new attention to ''the body, history, the place of individuals, contingency, and the emotions. That is, it integrated these as essential dimensions of our understanding of human life, but it excluded them altogether from our relation to God'' (p. 288). In this Taylor sees a distancing from core Christian teachings centered on the Incarnation of God in man.

It is not slighting this huge book to say that it won't be the last word. It has its own internal tensions, incompletenesses, and openings to divergent interpretations. It is a less completely crafted whole than Taylor's other books; it takes a number of side-tracks, and sometimes it doubles back on itself. It is also full of rich and fascinating explorations in pursuit of both empirical understanding of our history and present and better orientation to the normative issues in future choices.

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