

## Books in Review

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*A Secular Age*, by Charles Taylor. Cambridge, MA:  
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*A Secular Age* sets out with the impressive ambition of explaining how “the modern secular world emerged from and out of the more and more rule-bound and norm-governed Reform of Latin Christendom” (pp. 741–42). Or, with a more individualistic spin, how it became possible for many Europeans and their cultural heirs around the world “to experience moral fullness, to identify the locus of our highest moral capacity and inspiration, without reference to God, but within the range of purely intra-human powers” (pp. 244–45). Taylor proposes this framing as an alternative to “subtraction stories” of modernity in which superstition and belief are understood to have finally withered away, leaving room for modern science and humanism to flourish uninhibited by metaphysical constraints. In place of this well-worn narrative, he offers a tremendously rich and multifaceted genealogy of the creation and discovery of new moral sources that comprise what he calls “secularity 3,” which differs in significant ways both from the retreat of religion in public life (secularity 1) and the falling off of religious belief and practice (secularity 2). Secularity 3 refers to a modern context of understanding in which belief and unbelief coexist uneasily, in which one believes or refuses to believe in God, a cross-pressured condition “in which our experience of and search for fullness occurs” (p. 19). Taylor insists that transformative political and spiritual changes, rather than merely economic ones, have contributed to the constitution of this modern moral order, leading him to argue that “God-forsakenness” was part of “a move from one religious life to another, long before it came to be (mistakenly) seen by some as a facet of the decline of religion altogether” (p. 553). This new religious life under “secularization” is thus characterized by both a continuous destabilization and recomposition of religious forms (p. 461).

This is a magnificent book. Diverging from both mainline accounts of secularization as well as more critical accounts exemplified in recent work on political theologies,<sup>1</sup> Taylor develops a third position that will contribute to an interesting dialogue between these accounts by emphasizing the intimacies between secularism and religion, while also defending to some extent the emergence of exclusive humanism understood as “a novel form of moral self-understanding, not definable simply by the negation of what preceded it” (p. 571). Taylor offers a compelling portrait of the enchanted world before the development of the buffered self (and the abolition of the

porous self in favor of a humanist alternative), and a rich discussion of the multidimensional and differential premodern modes of perceiving time. He explains how many historical developments associated with secularization occurred not through and out of opposition to religion but were inherent to and deeply intertwined with developments associated with Reform within Christianity, such as the sanctification of ordinary life as a site for the highest forms of Christian life and the exultation of the humble at the expense of the monastic and contemplative vocations (p. 179). To cite one example of this religious inheritance in modern secular forms, Taylor describes the “drive to beneficence in modern humanist moral psychology” as the “historical trace” of Agape (p. 247). He concludes forcefully that the

main motor of the drive for order and disenchantment was the religious one . . . the movements which could draw masses of people, cultivated or not, into the slipstream of disenchantment were the religious ones, Catholic and Protestant . . . as a result of this, the new humanism bears the mark of its origins . . . not only in being committed to goals of active, instrumental ordering of self and world; but also in the central place within it of universalism and benevolence. (pp. 807–8, n3)

Chapter 12 offers a thought-provoking discussion of religiously defined political identity mobilization, including the introduction of an important new set of typologies. I particularly like the concept of “neo-Durkheimian” polities, in which, as Taylor suggests, “God is present because it is his Design around which society is organized,” such that British and American national identities have been based in part on “a self-ascribed pre-eminence in realizing a certain civilizational superiority” (p. 456). The discussion of “closed world structures” in chapter 15 is also outstanding, as are Taylor’s insights into the parallel tensions, dilemmas, and contradictions faced by both modern forms of belief and unbelief (p. 674), which he describes provocatively as “brothers under the skin” (p. 675). In what follows I focus on three dimensions of the argument that left me with concerns, in what is otherwise certain to be one of the most important books published in our time.

It is because Taylor draws on such a rich historical and literary repertoire, and writes with such philosophical dexterity and generosity, that his repeated dismissal of what he calls the “immanent counter-Enlightenment” (chapter 10) strikes me as somewhat out of place. It seems that this dismissal is related to his (in my view reductive) construal of the transcendent/immanent distinction such that what he identifies as the “place of fullness” is either: (1) outside or *beyond* human life, the position of “religious” transcendents, who also believe in a higher power and that our lives extend

beyond “this life” (p. 20); or (2) *within* human life in a variety of ways, making “no reference to transcendent reality,” (p. 415) “without interventions from outside,” (p. 832, n.7) also described as those who, in his reading, lack faith (immanentists). Those who are “religious,” then, approach fullness as transcendence in this *particular* way. Other ways of approaching the immanent-transcendent relationship fall by the wayside, with significant implications for theorists of immanence, as we shall see in a moment. Religious faith in Taylor’s “strong sense” is defined as and by “belief in transcendent reality” along with the “connected aspiration to a transformation which goes beyond ordinary human flourishing” (p. 510). So “religion,” at least in the historical European experience, is defined as, essentially, Christianity.<sup>2</sup>

Fair enough, until you get to the implications for those who fall outside the bounds of both “religion” and exclusive humanism. These radical theorists of immanence trouble Taylor throughout the book insofar as, in his view, they “stress reception over against self-sufficiency; but they are views which intend to remain immanent, and are often as hostile, if not more so, to religion than the disengaged ones” (p. 10). These dissenting perspectives cannot be accommodated in the “face-off” (p. 321) between conventional forms of faith and secular humanism so richly described in this book because they are not playing the same game—which in this case translates to either endorsing “religion” or eschewing metaphysics altogether. Though Taylor wrestles with the need to adjust his categories and amend the rules of the game such that a three-way face-off between these contestants becomes a genuine possibility, he struggles with the implications of doing so, and fears losing hold of the intimacy between religion and secularism that he seeks to capture. And so he never quite commits to that path. Instead, he consigns a range of “unbelievers” to living in a “universe whose outer limits touch nothing but absolute darkness,” in which there is

a sense of an absence; it is the sense that all order, all meaning comes from us. We encounter no echo outside . . . a race of humans has arisen which has managed to experience its world entirely as immanent. In some respects, we may judge this achievement as a victory for darkness, but it is a remarkable achievement nonetheless. (p. 376)

Although I sympathize to a degree with Taylor’s misgivings about the unreflectively anti-Christian strains of modern unbelief, I hesitate to transfer them to all modes of believing or unbelieving (the categories themselves become problematic here) that fall beyond the bounds of *both* “religion” as he defines it and exclusive humanism. There are many such alternatives, as

Taylor readily acknowledges with his figure of the “supernova.” Yet despite this acknowledgment, he repeatedly criticizes not only anti-Christian polemics and tendencies in modernity, which is understandable given his position, but also a variety of alternative modes of belief/unbelief that operate outside of and differentially in relation to the Christian categories that animate his otherwise extraordinarily rich analysis. It is as if he is pulled so strongly toward his version of the transcendent that what becomes defined as most threatening are not those exclusive humanists who “close the transcendent window” (p. 638) (they are relatively easy to counter) but rather the potential of their “nonreligious” rivals to represent an alternative to *both* a philosophy of transcendence *and* a philosophy of radical atheism. These radical immanentists are threatening because unlike exclusive humanists, who share (though in a different register) Taylor’s commitment to “fullness,” the former take a very different approach to this fundamental set of concerns. Deleuze’s transcendental empiricism comes to mind in this context, though it makes no appearance in this book; instead, a very particular reading of Nietzsche appears to stand in for the various thinkers associated with the immanent counter-Enlightenment. For non-Christian metaphysicians such as Deleuze, the transcendental field is differently configured; as William Connolly notes, “it is transcendental in residing above or below appearance, but not in being unquestionable or in authorizing a morality of command.”<sup>3</sup> Can the field of immanence also be “experience-far,” can it also hold mystery, and, if so, does this not alter the calculation somewhat? What about religious practices that experience the religious and the sacred immanently? I would have appreciated a more nuanced engagement with these alternatives, rather than their dismissal as “not in any sense a return to religion or the transcendent” but as “resolutely naturalist” (p. 369).

Though open to the insights of non-Western traditions, evidenced by his interest in Buddhism, Taylor appears less willing to open the door to alternative possibilities that emerge from within Western experience itself. It is as if exclusive humanism is seen as the legitimate and rightful heir (through the processes of Reform) of Christianity, whereas the immanent revolt is shunned as “a resistance against the primacy of life, but which has abandoned these traditional sources” (p. 372). The revolt is the illegitimate offspring of Reform. It is shunned not only because it rejects outright (Taylor’s mode of) transcendence (though this matters too), but because in equating a diverse tradition with a particular reading of Nietzsche the revolt becomes nearly synonymous with proclivities toward fascism and fascination with death and violence (pp. 637–38). Condemned both politically and metaphysically, Taylor bypasses an opportunity for a fascinating engagement between rival metaphysical positions.

A second concern involves the place of history in Taylor's account of the emergence of exclusive humanism. It was as if there could be no alternative, as if (as Taylor half-jokes at one point) "we might even be tempted to say that modern unbelief is providential" (p. 637). As I was reading *A Secular Age*, a bridge I had crossed hundreds of times as a child in Minneapolis collapsed, drawing my attention to the bridge on the cover which symbolizes the multiple, zigzag trajectories leading Europeans away from their ancestral Christian faith(s) and into the secular age, with stops or "ante-chambers" (p. 624) (impersonal religion, Romanticism, etc.) along the way (the bridge metaphor appears in the discussion of Carlyle on p. 378 and again on p. 387). Were there no historical ruptures, epistemic collapses, breaking the tight chain of historical evolution that binds his narrative over many centuries? Do these bridges ever collapse? Taylor comes close to acknowledging such a rupture in his discussion of the devastating effects of World War I on Europeans (pp. 416–19), but there persists a sense in which his narrative comes to feel inevitable, as if one were moving inexorably toward a destination that is a foregone conclusion. You can't get off the bridge. And it definitely won't give way beneath you.

Finally there is the question of global politics, and particularly colonial and postcolonial politics and history. A genealogy of the secular age requires grappling not only with developments within Latin Christendom, as Taylor undertakes so impressively, but also relations between Europe and other societies. The West has never existed outside and above the rest of the world but has always already included the non-Western via travel, trade, migration, colonization, etc. *A Secular Age* confirms Zachary Lockman's observation that

exploration of how the modern West has in crucial ways been shaped, if not constituted, by its interactions with other societies is still at an early stage and remains vastly outweighed by the huge scholarly and popular literature that takes for granted the West's self-conception as a distinct and self-generated civilization and then focuses on the West's impact on the rest of the world.<sup>4</sup>

I have argued, for instance, that more than any other single religious or political tradition, Islam has come to represent the "nonsecular" in European and American political discourse. Modern Euro-American traditions of secularism have been consolidated in part through opposition to the idea of an antimodern, anti-Christian, and theocratic Islamic Middle East. Representations of Islam as antimodern, anti-Christian, and theocratic are not a coincidental byproduct of an inert, pre-given secular political authority—they actually help to constitute it. Secularist political authority is produced through our

actions and beliefs, and cannot be understood absent this global perspective.<sup>5</sup> To understand the history and significance of various European forms of modernity at the macro level, as Taylor aspires to do, requires at least some level of engagement with global history and politics that is missing from this account. As Peter van der Veer, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Tomoko Masuzawa, and others have shown,<sup>6</sup> Europe has never existed in a vacuum; it is rather through Europe's historical and contemporary relations with the rest of the world that the contested and evolving categories, modes of order, and ways of life associated with European modernity—including modern varieties of secularism—have taken shape. This means that Taylor's project calls out for an encounter on the one hand with radical immanentism and on the other hand with Islam and other non-Christian beliefs and traditions in their historical settings. By illustrating the intimate connections between Christianity and humanist secularism, two worldviews normally cast as oppositional, Taylor models how to go on to specify these fascinating connections between places, times, and worldviews that are too often assumed to be mutually exclusive and at odds.

## Notes

1. On the former Taylor cites among others the work of Steve Bruce, including *Religion in the Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); on the latter see Hent DeVries and Lawrence E. Sullivan, eds. *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006).

2. The force of this set of guiding assumptions is confirmed near the end of the book when Taylor asserts that "in our religious lives we are responding to a transcendent reality. We all have some sense of this, which emerges in our identifying and recognizing some mode of what I have called fullness, and seeking to attain it. Modes of fullness recognized by exclusive humanisms, and others that remain within the immanent frame, are therefore responding to transcendent reality, but misrecognizing it. They are shutting out crucial features of it" (p. 768).

3. William E. Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 41.

4. Zachary Lockman, *Contending Visions of the Middle East: The History and Politics of Orientalism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 62.

5. Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, *The Politics of Secularism in International Relations*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), chap. 3.

6. Peter van der Veer, *Imperial Encounters: Religion and Modernity in India and Britain* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000, 2007); Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

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