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*A Secular Age*. By Charles Taylor. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007. xii + 878 pp. \$39.95 cloth.

Any scholar who is content to be seen as *nur ein gewöhnlicher Historiker*, “only an ordinary historian”—Hegel’s phrase used to dismiss von Ranke—will have difficulty reviewing *A Secular Age*. Those of us historians of Christianity who compare notes have commiserated with each other through two or three seasons, as we grappled with it. The problem need not be Taylor’s, though I believe this is less “intellectual history,” as it is sometimes billed, than “philosophy of history.” The issue of genre is there, though not as acute as the one posed by Jacob Burckhardt about philosophies of history. The Basel historian said that “philosophy of history is a centaur, a contradiction in terms, for history co-ordinates, and hence is unphilosophical, while philosophy subordinates, and hence is unhistorical.” I would prefer to say that the ordinary historian has very much to learn from Taylor’s use of history, but cannot transport that learning to the study and writing of history without undertaking a significant act of translating and organizing the material.

Historians today are not easily classified as “coordinators,” as they roam the methodological ranges from “people’s history” to “elite history,” from “cliometrics” to “ethnography.” Not all professional historians are charmed by linear, diachronic, narrative history, yet most of them do resort to some version of storytelling. Linearity is anything but what Taylor manifests. Instead of a narrative line, he takes up topics, drops them, and comes back to them, treating them as it were in ever-enlarging spirals. They appear and reappear, sometimes in a main plot line and at other times allusively and almost elusively. One sometimes wishes he would take up a subject, let time and pages march and turn on, and then be done with it, the way most historians would. Taylor does not, as he exercises philosopher’s rights. He after all, and first of all, is a philosopher—not a theologian, he insists!—and as distinguished as any Christian philosopher in our day, so he has the privilege of writing as one.

Why not just shelve the book, if he frustrates the historian who is in any way a plot-seeker? Doing so would deprive such a historian of many treasures. Taylor has taken up one of the most alluring and urgent topics available to intellectual historians of the West, namely the relation of so much of what gets labeled “secular” to so much that is marked “religious.” I was tempted to write “everything” instead of “so much” twice in that sentence. Doing so would be somewhat hyperbolic, but this is a very rich and, let’s face it, overlong book, which demanded some editorial cutting and rearranging that it did not receive.

Eugen Rosenstock-Huussy wrote that “one book is about one thing, at least the good ones are.” Here we have the problem of being faced by a good book, but the reviewers with whom I compared notes all had difficulty bringing to coherent statement what the one thing is in *A Secular Age* about which Taylor writes. The first temptation, then, is to damn the book with faint praise, or praise the book with faint damns. That will not do; it merits too much praise. But suppose we entertain the possibility that here the mode matches the theme, and reckon that in the nature of the case and in support of Taylor’s theses, the writing about the juncture of “secular” and “religious” events, ideas, artifacts, and phenomena has to be, at least at this moment when Taylor is presenting his *Summa*, somewhat messy, repetitive and, as noted, circular if not spiraling. Taylor covers centuries and seems to have read and can draw on myriad substantiating writings. He knows as much about these topics and authors as does a specialist in any “sub-age” within the “secular age.” It is not a book to which one would turn in order to get a systematic view of, say, Hegel or Kant. It is a book to which one eagerly turns to get Taylor’s spin on giants like those, and that turning can be immensely rewarding.

To face the book itself, a reviewer has to learn from and then bypass a book-length sheaf of printouts from blogs by noted academics, some of them near-peers of the peerless Professor Taylor. One way of condensing the theme of *A Secular Age* is to say that it deals with the shaping of an ill-defined but all-pervasive secularity. Taylor faces the problem of tracing how this secular age was shaped through several centuries, not around the globe but in a province that can be labeled “Latin Christendom.” While he is an awesomely ecumenical visionary, generous in his judgments of others and critical of his own home base, it is clear that he views the changes from the perspective of a (believing, he confesses) Catholic’s worldview. Confessing that in no way narrows his vision; for dealing mainly with that Catholic province does not make him a provincial. Still, readers will have to turn elsewhere to learn how secularity arrives and whether it thrives in non-Christian or non-Western cultures.

Taylor knows and shows that the conventional secularization theories of the twentieth century do not do justice to the tangle of worldly-otherworldly and material-spiritual oppositions that were long associated with them. Modernization did not evolve on the schedule foreseen by Renaissance and, most of all, Enlightened thinkers, and it did not mean the extinguishing of religion as the bearded God-killer quartet of Darwin, Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud thought it would. The religious impulse takes protean forms. Suppress it in one regime or during the prevalence of one school of thought, and it turns up in another or, better, many others. Taylor does take most seriously the challenges of science but avers that he is not “without resources on the

issue whether what science has shown about the material world denies the existence of God. Because,” he adds, “I can also [as a layperson in both science and religion] have a religious life, a sense of God and how he impinges on my existence, against which I can check the supposed claims to refutation” (567). Some critics have seen the argument surrounding such claims to mean that he has written subtle apologetics, but I think Taylor can legitimately defend himself against that charge, if it is a charge. (Let’s assume that writing apologetics is a legitimate if chancy venture.)

He seems more ready to keep the questions open, to use his awesome erudition and his allusive resources to keep the door open across scientific and religious boundaries, to raise questions against glibly stated ideologies, and to promote a conversation that will take centuries to further, with no promise of a satisfactory solution. He sees many representatives of both “sides,” if one can reduce the contenders to two camps, as mutually disdaining mystery, something that aggressive scientific agnostics with some right had set out to do, but adds that “hostility on the part of the defenders of religion is rather strange,” to say the least.

If he is set to keep the doors between science and religion open, he also wants to widen the window to transcendence, some sense of the “beyond” that secular thinkers have tried for centuries to close. He is what we might call a “Christian humanist” and is therefore critical of what he calls “exclusive humanism.” Surprisingly, in a formal book like this, he draws on the classic popular singer Peggy Lee and her song to summarize the world of exclusive humanism and the unwillingness to deal with mystery and any sense of a beyond: he questions the world of “Western modernity” and “the malaise of immanence” by asking, as Lee did in a song title, “Is that all there is?”

Among the delights along the Charles Taylor way are any number of provocative designations to match “exclusive humanism.” Among these are “the closed immanent frame,” “the narratives of secularity,” “the buffered identity,” and “fragilization,” along with easier-to-grasp categories for development, such as, simply, “loss” and “disenchantment.” If some of those terms suggest that Taylor’s is, overall, a pessimistic book, I have not done justice to it, as full of realism and hope alike as it is. In a way, *A Secular Age* has to be seen as being so rich, entangling, and full of loose ends that the only way one could do justice to it is to write another book based on his themes and addressing him. No doubt such books are under way, as there is now a Taylor Industry that includes an agenda which historians cannot overlook, even if they are not fully at home with it. They are not likely to shelve *A Secular Age*, but will keep learning from it and gaining inspiration for their own tasks.

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