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CRITICAL NOTICE

Charles Taylor's new book has generated intense academic discussion and debate. The reviews here offer different perspectives on its central themes.

Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007). 896, price £25.95 hb.

Richard Amesbury, *Claremont School of Theology*

The 8 April 1966 issue of *Time* magazine featured a black cover emblazoned in red letters with the question, "Is God Dead?" According to the cover article, "Secularization, science, urbanization – all have made it comparatively easy for the modern man to ask where God is, and hard for the man of faith to give a convincing answer, even to himself." The article goes on to quote various theologians associated with the "death-of-God" movement, whom it credits with "waking the churches to the brutal reality that the basic premise of faith – the existence of a personal God, who created the world and sustains it with his love – is now subject to profound attack."

To judge by other articles in the same issue – which, for example, discuss the creation of Medicare, excoriate the "handful of youngsters who actively oppose the nation's draft," and probe the safety of rectal thermometers – the rest of the world seemed curiously unfazed by this startling news. But perhaps that is what we should expect, for according to one influential version of secularisation theory, a secular age is characterised precisely by the differentiation of religion from other spheres of life – the economy, politics, science, etc. Although individuals may care about religion in their private lives, our public institutions and discourses are said to be indifferent to its claims.

Some 43 years later, however, the rumours of God's death seem more than a little exaggerated. Indeed, many of the predictions made in the

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Time article – like the lamentation that "millions . . . in Africa, Asia and South America, seem destined to be born without any expectation of being summoned to the knowledge of the one God" – are likely to appear as charmingly naïve in retrospect as those science-fiction films of the same era that imagined a future in which we would all by now be dressing in aluminum foil. Far from retreating to the domain of private life, religion seems to be asserting itself publicly in many parts of the world, and while Christian churches may be waning in some parts of Europe, they are proliferating in the Global South. At the same time, few would deny that something significant has changed in our culture's religious sensibilities over the last several centuries and that belief in God is no longer axiomatic.

Consider the recent rise of what is sometimes called the "New Atheism" – the complex of ideas and attitudes associated with Dawkins, Dennett, Hitchens, and Harris. On the one hand, the existence of this kind of strident anti-religiosity testifies to the continued and perhaps resurgent role of religion today. On the other hand, it is indicative of the possibility of resolutely immanent, "naturalised" ways of conceiving of and being in the world – ways that were not live options for our medieval forebears, for whom belief in God was not one possibility among others but part of the conceptual framework of thought itself. What is going on here?

In *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor tries to make sense of this ambivalence by tracing the change in the West from an age in which "it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others."[1] At the beginning of Chapter 1 he writes: "[o]ne way to put the question that I want to answer here is this: why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable?"[2] Perhaps not surprisingly given such an ambitious project, Taylor's answer is complex enough to require nearly 900 pages. The result is a remarkable book – a worthy sequel to Taylor's *Sources of the Self* and a strong rival for the claim of "magnum opus." Although Taylor is a philosopher, *A Secular Age* is in some obvious (if unconventional) sense a work of history. Moreover, it pays relatively scant attention to the history of philosophy as such, focusing instead on a

1. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007), 3.
2. Taylor, p. 25.

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"level of understanding prior to philosophical puzzlement"[3] – the level of those background beliefs and practices that constitute the horizons of "lived experience." Like Michel Foucault's efforts to conceive history without subjects, Taylor's is a gripping historical drama largely devoid of proper names.

Although Taylor's aim is to offer a narrative of secularisation in the West, he is rightly critical of accounts of this process that ascribe to it historical necessity. The latter view, sometimes called the "secularization thesis," is nicely captured by Freud's claim in *The Future of an Illusion* that "a turning-away from religion is bound to occur with the fatal inevitability of a process of growth."[4] Freud was neither the first nor the last to propound this dogma: something like it has been articulated by numerous thinkers over the past three centuries and serves as the presupposition of much "death-of-God" theology. But God has an irritating habit of resurrecting, albeit not always in an expected form. Consider Thomas Jefferson's prediction in 1822, in the midst of the Second Great Awakening, that "there is not a young man now living in the United States who will not die an Unitarian."

Among the many problems that attend the secularisation thesis is the difficulty of saying just what one means by "religion." As Taylor puts it, "We can't just identify 'religion' and twelfth-century Catholicism, and then count every move away from this as decline."[5] Given a sufficiently generous understanding of what counts as "religion," it turns out that some of the societies commonly singled out as paradigm cases of secularisation are in fact rather religious. For example, Iceland has been called the most fully secularised nation in the world, but recent studies suggest that religion has not so much disappeared as reincarnated. While it is true that only around 2 per cent of Icelanders attend church weekly, 81 per cent "express confidence that there is life after death, 88 per cent say they believe humans have a soul, and 40 per cent believe in reincarnation."[6]

On the other hand, the difficulty with overly broad definitions of "religion" is that they tend to render real changes in belief and practice invisible: even if Icelanders are no less "religious" now than they ever were, there are obviously important differences between, e.g. Norse pagan-

3. Taylor, p. 30.
4. Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton, 1961 [1927]) p. 55.
5. Taylor, p. 427.
6. Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000) p. 72.

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ism and the Church of Iceland – as well as between the "atheism" of Hrafnkels Saga and that of a contemporary lapsed Lutheran. Somewhat stipulatively (although not arbitrarily, given the nature of the changes with which he is concerned), Taylor proposes to define "religion" as involving belief in a transcendent combined with a striving for something beyond purely immanent human flourishing.

If it is difficult to define "religion," it is for obvious reasons equally difficult to define "secularisation," and different thinkers use the term in quite different ways in relation to distinct phenomena. One of the many virtues of Taylor's book is its careful effort to disambiguate these meanings. One meaning is political: here "secularisation" denotes the emptying of public spaces of religious references. It is in this sense that we can speak of the USA, France and India as all being "secular states."

In a second sense, "secularisation" refers to "the falling off of religious belief and practice," e.g. to "people turning away from God, and no longer going to Church."[7] As Taylor points out, there is no necessary connection between secularisation in the first sense and secularisation in the second. Consider the USA: "[o]ne of the earliest societies to separate Church and State, it is also the Western society with the highest statistics for religious belief and practice."[8]

However, Taylor also identifies a third sense of "secularisation," which has to do with the *conditions* for religious belief. "The shift to secularity in this sense consists, among other things, of 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."[9] To suggest, in this third sense, that ours is a secular age is to say *not* that it is irreligious but that no single perspective – whether "religious" or otherwise – enjoys the status of a "default option." Believers of varying stripes jostle with one another and with unbelievers – not just in society at large but within families and among friends – and individuals often find themselves conflicted and uncertain. It is secularisation in this third register that Taylor takes as his focus in *A Secular Age*.

In order to appreciate what is distinctive about his account, it will help to contrast it with two other ways of telling the story. The first of these, which Taylor calls "subtraction theories," are exemplified by the secularisation thesis. On this telling, secularity is what is left over after human

7. Taylor, p. 2.
8. Taylor, p. 2.
9. Taylor, p. 3.

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beings have managed to liberate themselves from the illusions or epistemic limitations of religion. One common variant of this view attributes secularisation to the rise of modern science and the disenchantment of the universe. The history of secularisation is on this account a story of progress that can be told only from the perspective of its final destination. Against this kind of story, Taylor argues that "Western modernity, including its secularity, is the fruit of new inventions, newly constructed self-understandings and related practices, and can't be explained in terms of perennial features of human life."[10] On Taylor's view, secularisation involves the displacement of one social imaginary by another – or rather, a series of such displacements. However natural and unremarkable it may seem to us, secularity had to be invented.

This latter view – that secularity was invented not discovered – is shared by a second kind of account with which Taylor's view can – in certain other respects – also be contrasted. This is the view developed by John Milbank and associated with Radical Orthodoxy. On this account, secularisation is the outgrowth of an intellectual error, a theological mistake. The culprit, on Milbank's version of the story, is Duns Scotus, whose "univocal" conception of being collapsed the difference in kind between God and creatures into a difference in degree. From there it was a slippery slope to deism, Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* and Dawkins. Taylor calls this view the "Intellectual Deviation" story. In contrast to subtraction theorists, who associate secularisation with progress, deviation theorists view it as decline. Taylor acknowledges that some such developments may be part of the story, but he argues that they cannot be the whole – or even the most important part – of it. Milbank's account is far too intellectualist to explain how secularity "emerges as a mass phenomenon."[11] As a different critic of Radical Orthodoxy, Jeffrey Stout, puts the point: "[i]ntellectual errors do sometimes have significant social and political consequences, but history rarely works in the theory-driven way that philosophers and theologians imagine."[12]

It is also clear that Taylor's tone differs importantly from that of Milbank and other critics of secularity. Readers of *A Secular Age* will detect none of the nostalgia for the past or denunciation of the present that

10. Taylor, p. 22.
11. Taylor, p. 775.
12. Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004) p. 101.

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characterise most Radical Orthodoxy. While there are many features of our times of which Taylor is critical, he seems on the whole to think that the trade-offs have worked to our advantage. "Even if we had a choice," he writes, "I'm not sure we wouldn't be wiser to stick with the present dispensation."[13] Contemporary forms of spirituality and religious life – although prone to distinctive and familiar kinds of corruption – are not necessarily as shallow and frivolous as their detractors like to make out, and in any case there is no possibility of turning back the clock.

Indeed, if the story Taylor tells is correct, there is something ironic about efforts to reform our wayward age, for on Taylor's account – which he calls a "Reform Master Narrative" – it was precisely the drive by elites to make better Christians of the masses that helped to produce a secular age in the first place: religious Reform, not science or an intellectual error, is the engine that drives secularisation. The Protestant Reformation is one example of what Taylor calls "Reform" (with a capital *R*), but it is hardly an isolated phenomenon. Beginning in the Middle Ages and continuing down through the temperance movements of the 19th and 20th centuries, religious reformers undertook the challenge of disciplining and reordering society, purging it (as best they could) not simply of perceived vices like the dancing, drink, and sex that attended community festivals like Carnival but also of the "superstitions" and "excesses" of popular religion. This process naturally generated resentment and animosity against Christianity's institutional forms and its clergy, which in turn helped to facilitate the emergence of exclusive humanism in the 18th century; but it also gave rise to new forms of belief characterised by discipline and disenchantment. As Taylor puts it, "the interesting story is not simply one of decline, but also of a new placement of the sacred or spiritual in relation to individual and social life. This new placement is now the occasion for recompositions of spiritual life in new forms, and for new ways of existing both in and out of relation to God."[14] These developments were far from linear and resulted in very different outcomes in different countries, times, economic and social classes, political systems, etc. "The pattern of modern religious life under 'secularization' is one of destabilization and recomposition, a process which can be repeated many times."[15]

During the "expressivist revolutions" of the 1960s, with their emphasis on authenticity and self-realisation, the pendulum swung back in the other

13. Taylor, p. 513.
14. Taylor, p. 437.
15. Taylor, p. 461.

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direction, away from the buffered identities and moral orders characteristic of Reform, breaking the link between Christianity and civilisational order in the West. This has had the effect of weakening certain forms of religiosity (those Taylor calls *neo-Durkheimian*) and strengthening others (the post-Durkheimian, in which religion is disconnected from national or collective identity). The familiar result – dramatised by Robert Wuthnow's distinction between "seeking" and "dwelling" – are two distinct styles of contemporary religious sensibility: "those which underlie respectively the new kinds of spiritual quest, on one side, and the prior option for an authority which forecloses them on the other."[16] Of course, the vast majority of religion is lived somewhere between these ideal types, and it is also possible to live one's life completely outside religion.

The net effect of the past five centuries is not, for Taylor, the withering away of belief but a shift in its conditions – of what it is *to believe*. The characteristic feature of our secular age is what Taylor calls its "immanent frame": life is lived within a self-sufficient, "natural" order that can be explained and "envisaged without reference to God."[17] God is manifest neither in discrete instances of the sacred as distinct from the profane nor in the moral order on which civilisation is said to depend. To say that the world can be understood apart from God is not, however, to say that it must be understood as *closed* to transcendence – for the immanent frame can be conceived as open to something "supernatural." Indeed, the very distinction between the "natural" and the "supernatural," like the modern conception of a miracle as a violation of a law of nature, belongs to the immanent frame – to a world understood in terms of an order from which God's presence has receded.

"Is this all there is?" "There must be more to life than *this*!" These are characteristically modern expressions that presuppose that *this* – what Taylor is calling the immanent order – can be identified without reference to God. They are also expressions of a sensibility open to the possibility of transcendence. The immanent frame does not require such openness – indeed, that is part of what sets it apart from older, pre-secularised ways of thinking – but neither does it require closure. On Taylor's account, "both open and closed stances involve a step beyond available reasons into the realm of anticipatory confidence."[18]

16. Taylor, p. 512.
17. Taylor, p. 543.
18. Taylor, p. 551.

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Although Taylor is an exceedingly charitable interpreter of those with whom he disagrees, he does little to conceal his own sympathies, which lie decidedly on the side of transcendence. Indeed, *A Secular Age* can be read as a religious work – one that attempts to do justice to the past even as it acknowledges the ways in which social location inevitably shapes one's interpretation of history. "Being in one or other perspective makes it easier for some or other insights to come to you," he writes, "but there is still the question of how these insights pan out in the actual account of history."[19] By reframing an old question and initiating a vigorous inter-disciplinary debate about the place of religious belief in the contemporary world, Taylor has performed an extraordinary service to believers and unbelievers alike.

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19. Taylor, p. 436.

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