

A Secular Age by Charles Taylor. Cambridge, MA: The Bellknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007. 896pp., hardback, \$39.95 / £25.95, ISBN 9780674026766.

Charles Taylor has been described as “arguably the most interesting and important philosopher writing in English today,” and this significant new work will confirm many in such a judgement. One of the central questions Taylor sets out to address is: “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?” (25). In seeking an answer Taylor argues that three key factors played a role in preserving faith: (i) the natural world testified obviously to divine purpose and action in creation and natural disaster; (ii) God was deeply implicated in society since a kingdom could only be conceived as grounded in sacred order; (iii) people lived in a pre-modern, “enchanted” world of spirits, demons and moral forces. During the intervening 500 years our social and intellectual framework, including these three elements, changed out of all recognition, leading to the present secular age.

According to Taylor the phenomenon of secularization itself should also be understood in a nuanced way. First, it can refer to the way in which public spaces have been emptied of God or of any reference to ultimate reality. Second, it can mean the falling of religious belief and practice, particularly as found in the countries of Western Europe. Third, it speaks of the complete change in society whereby belief in God is no longer axiomatic but is just one option among many. It is this latter process which Taylor seeks to describe in the term “the great disembedding,” which has led to the transformation of our “social imaginary,” or “the collective social practices which make up our common life” (172). One outcome of this has been that faith is often seen in terms of a dualism between “religion” and “spirituality.” This search for meaning

has been a widespread response to the world created by Western modernity over at least the last two centuries. We might borrow as its slogan the title of a song by the American singer Peggy Lee, “Is that all there is?”. There has to be more to life than our current definitions of social and individual success.... When these fall away, this search occurs for its own sake. It is a personal search, and can easily be coded in the language of authenticity: I am trying to find my path, or find myself. (507)

It is against the background of this “Peggy Lee response” that Taylor moves on to discuss implicit religion.

He contends that much contemporary religious life is lived out between the spiritual stances identified by Robert Wuthnow—of “dwelling” and “seeking.” In other words, there are those who continue to dwell within a faith tradition which provides meaning and structure to their lives, and there are others who spend their lives seeking such meaning and structure. Taylor makes an appeal for the middle ground, which involves both dwelling and seeking, and asks: “where will the access lie to practice and deeper engagement with religion?” (515). His answer is that, presently, access to this middle ground comes through such things as meditation, charitable work, study groups, pilgrimage, special forms of prayer and, in particular, different experiences of “festival.” Thus, he believes, many people,

have taken a distance from their ancestral churches without altogether breaking off. They retain some of the beliefs of Christianity, for instance and/or they retain some nominal tie with the church, still identify in some way with it... Sociologists are forced to invent new terms such as “believing without belonging,” or “diffusive Christianity,” to come to grips with this. (518)

In this volume such important social changes are linked to Grace Davie’s concept of “vicarious religion,” Mikhail Epstein’s notion of “minimal religion,” and Taylor’s own understanding of “folk religion.”

Against the background of extensive change in our social imaginaries, which Taylor calls the “nova,” he argues that: “our world is ideologically fragmented, and the range of positions [grows] as the nova effect is multiplied by expressive individualism” (727). Yet “the secular age is schizophrenic, or better, deeply cross-pressured. People seem at a safe distance from religion; yet they are very moved to know there are dedicated believers” (727). So what is the future for faith? Taylor identifies a number of places where religion may continue to reside, for example: (i) in self-authenticating, “epiphanic” experiences such as the one recounted by Bede Griffiths with which he begins his book:

A lark rose suddenly from the ground beside the tree where I was standing and poured out its song above my head, and then sank still singing to rest. Everything then grew still as the sunset faded and the veil of dusk began to cover the earth. I remember now the feeling of awe which came over me. I felt inclined to kneel on the ground, as though I had been standing in the presence of an angel; and I hardly dared to look on the face of the sky, because it seemed as though it was but a veil before the face of God. (5)

(ii) in the communion of the saints and the human search for meaning in the face of death; (iii) in poetry, which is itself “potentially world-making”

(756). As he seeks to draw his wide-ranging narrative to a conclusion Taylor speculates on the future of faith, and, whilst he admits that no one can predict how the story will continue to develop, he suggests that Epstein's notion of minimal religion "may turn out to be prescient" (770). He has earlier defined this as:

a spirituality lived in one's immediate circle, with family and friends, rather than in churches, one especially aware of the particular, both in individual human beings, and in places and things which surround us ... it seeks to honour the "image and likeness of God" in the particular people who share our lives. (534)

There is a great deal more in *A Secular Age* than one review can highlight. The book is a demanding read, not only because it represents the culmination of a lifetime's erudition but because it could also have benefited from a tighter editorial hand to draw the arguments closer together. Nevertheless it certainly repays careful study, because its insights will continue to shape, for some time to come, our understanding of how the contemporary social imaginary has emerged over the last 500 years.

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