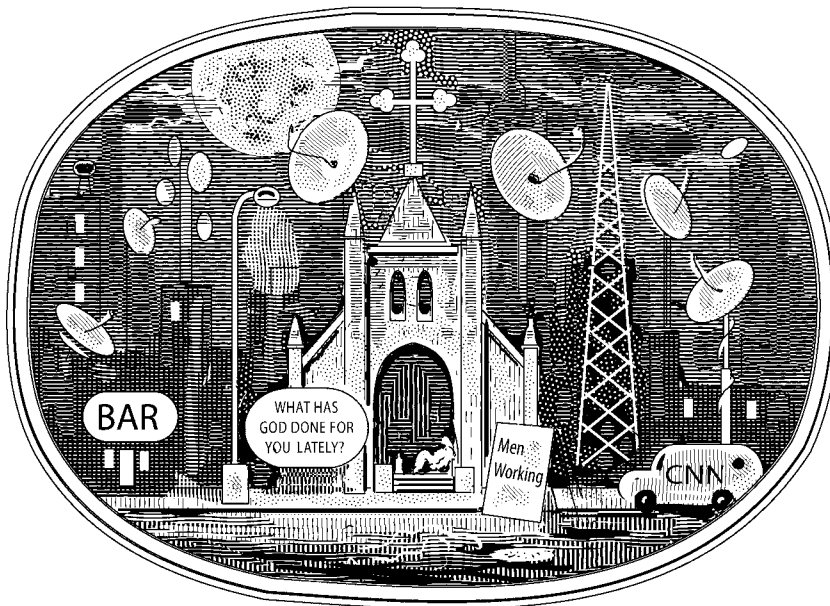


THE PERSISTENCE OF RELIGION

A Secular Age, by Charles Taylor,
Belknap Press, 896 pages, \$39.95



EVERYONE KNOWS THAT WE LIVE IN A secular age. But what exactly does it mean to say that our age is marked by a decline in religious belief and practice? What brought about faith's decline? What has become of the spiritual needs to which religion once provided an answer? How does a secular age affect our understanding of human nature and human flourishing? Has the decline in religious belief and practice liberated and enriched, or narrowed and impoverished, the human spirit? And what has been its impact on the religions that have survived, indeed multiplied, in our time?

Merely to ask such questions is to cast doubt on the conventional wisdom that represents secularism as the triumph of morality and reason over priestly authority and popular superstition. It is to admit that our secular age may *not* be the solution to the human predicament or the highest and final stage of human progress. But if secularism is none of the things it is so confidently asserted to be, then what is it?

One could hardly find a better guide to such timely questions than 2007 Templeton Prize winner Charles Taylor. It's true, also, that his extraordinary new book, *A Secular Age*, is dauntingly long and suffers from loose organization. It visits too many out of the way places and lingers there too often. It roams and rambles. And yet with Taylor's easy conversational prose, wealth of learning, openness to life's ends, capacity to distill philosophical controversies, and ability to render striking judgments, thoughtful readers will recognize their interest in forging through

to the final page. *A Secular Age* is one of those rare books that put familiar and defining features of our world in a better, brighter light.

In a sense, he has been writing this book all his professional life. One of our greatest living philosophers, Taylor, now 76, is a professor of philosophy at Northwestern University and a professor emeritus at McGill University in Montreal. Before that, in the 1970s and 1980s, he taught moral and political philosophy at Oxford. Throughout his career, he has defended claims of classical philosophy and religious faith against the criticism of modern philosophy, and he has defended modern claims against the criticisms of classical philosophy and religious faith. He seeks a philosophical account that gives all parties their due in the great debates about human nature and the good life.

His early writings include seminal papers criticizing the social sciences and exploring the limits of the liberal tradition. In 1975 he published a long, sweeping volume, *Hegel*, which examined the ideas and sentiments behind the great philosophical synthesizer's work. That book was followed by a short, focused one, *Hegel and Modern Society*, spelling out the significance of Hegel's political and social doctrines. In 1989 Taylor published *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, a formidable volume tracing many of modernity's proudest achievements back to pre-modern religious sources. A few years later, his brief *The Ethics of Authenticity* defended individual freedom but insisted that the self's satisfactions in choosing its own ends

and fashioning its own life were inextricably tied to goods found in community and beliefs about transcendence that modernity sought vigorously to suppress. One hopes that Taylor will soon follow up *A Secular Age* with a more succinct work that makes explicit the nerve of the argument.

IN THE MEANTIME, HIS NEW BOOK, AN OUT-growth of his 1999 Gifford Lectures at Edinburgh, provides an excellent point of departure for future thinking about morality, politics, and religion. Taylor begins with a straightforward question: "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?" Although the pre-modern unification of religion and politics greatly assisted religious belief, Taylor is not concerned really with explaining the separation of church and state. Rather, his interest is in "the conditions of belief," or the "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." The aim is to reconstruct and assess the "whole context of understanding in which our moral, spiritual or religious experience and search takes place."

According to the conventional account, the rise of secularism is simple to explain: modern science refuted religious belief, fair and square. But the theories of Newton, Darwin, and Einstein, monumental achievements though they are, tell us nothing about what, if anything, lies



beyond the natural world, argues Taylor. Extraordinary experiences of wholeness or harmony, of joy or exaltation, remain available to believers and unbelievers alike. And nothing we have learned from the natural sciences, according to Taylor, prevents believers from interpreting these experiences as gifts that come from a power outside of nature or beyond the self. At the same time, they know that otherwise reasonable and decent people will reject this interpretation as self-deluded or worse.

IN CONTRAST, BEFORE 1500 IN LATIN CHRISTENDOM and stretching back throughout the history of mankind, belief was the default option; the natural world was assumed to be shot through with spiritual causes. Since 1500, unbelief has become the presumption, or at least the default option. That story is familiar enough. What distinguishes Taylor's analysis is his exploration of modern unbelief's roots in, and persisting dependence upon, pre-modern belief, and his illumination of the opportunities for faith to which modern freedom and pluralism give rise.

"Exclusive humanism" is the name that Taylor gives to the form that unbelief takes now in Western civilization. A crucial early step towards it was the overthrow of the Aristotelian understanding of the cosmos as an ordered whole. Another closely related step was the development of modern science, driven by the ambition to master and control nature, to purge nature of the spiritual and reduce the world to the natural.

While science is typically seen as responsible for, in Weber's famous phrase, the "disenchantment of the world," Taylor emphasizes instead the new ethical stance that emerged as both a cause and effect of modernity. In the modern dispensation, reason is disinterested, disengaged, and merely instrumental. Though incapable of authoritatively ranking ends, reason is able—and declares it obligatory—to construct a political order that recognizes the right of all citizens to pursue their self-chosen ends, provided that they respect the right of others to engage in the same pursuit. Reason presses also for increasingly inclusive definitions of citizenship. This is part of its larger demand for laws that recognize the freedom shared equally by all humanity. And thanks to the uses to which individuals put their newfound freedom, many understandings of human flourishing proliferate. Nevertheless, exclusive humanism recognizes limits: it resolutely understands freedom in this-worldly terms.

Taylor shows brilliantly that the modern conceptions of reason and the modern moral order stem partly from the Protestant Reformation. Though a believing Catholic, Taylor insists that the Reformation responded to genuine problems arising out of the division between a cloistered clergy and a lax laity. By rejecting Church-sanctioned hierarchy, proclaiming a priesthood of all believers, and discovering religious significance in the ordinary life of work and family, production and reproduction, Protestantism laid the foundations for modern morality. It also brought Catholicism into closer harmony with the original Christian promise of a humanity transformed by *agape*—the love of God that is inseparable from love for our fellow human beings.

Exclusive humanism, however, long ago lost sight of its religious spirit. Once the individual had been liberated from the Church's authority, modern philosophy turned its sights on all forms of belief that might limit the individual's complete freedom to define his own happiness in this world. Thus as the recent bestselling polemics in praise of atheism by Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens have illustrated, exclusive humanism, in its current incarnation, seeks to wipe out faith in all forms. Emblematic of this determination is the progressive Left's fascination with Nietzsche, whom they often revere as the supreme authority on the critique of religion.

BUT NIETZSCHE WAS NO FRIEND OF THE Left, and Taylor rightly criticizes crude readers of Nietzsche like University of Chicago professor Martha Nussbaum, who embrace only his debunking and dismantling of conventional religious belief and who wish to complete the job in the name of a healthier humanism. In Taylor's estimation, such a goal is undesirable and may not even be possible:

In view of the importance of Christian universalism and *agape* in the constitution of the modern idea of moral order, ought we really to hope for the utter uprooting of all the beliefs and desires which Christianity has inculcated in our civilization? Perhaps Nietzsche saw the full scope of this question, and was ready to give an affirmative answer, because he wanted to jettison not only body-hatred, but pity, the relief of suffering, democracy, human rights. But how many are ready to follow him the whole way?

Surely not progressives like Nussbaum who nevertheless promiscuously appeal to his authority. And surely not Harris, Dawkins, and Hitchens, who resemble the German theologian David Strauss, whom Nietzsche mercilessly vivisects in his *Untimely Meditations* for rejecting conventional biblical faith but clinging to conventional morality, without providing a reasonable alternative ground for it.

Taylor gently points out that attention to what Nietzsche actually wrote dissolves the progressive conceit that exclusive humanism offers the last, best word on the human condition:

Nothing gave Nietzsche greater satisfaction than showing how morality or spirituality is really powered by its direct opposite; e.g., that the Christian aspiration to love is really motivated by the hatred of the weak for the strong. Whatever one thinks of this judgment on Christianity, it is clear that modern humanism is full of potential for such disconcerting reversals: from dedication to others to self-indulgent, feel-good responses, from a lofty sense of human dignity to control powered by contempt and hatred, from absolute freedom to absolute despotism, from a flaming desire to help the oppressed to an incandescent hatred for all those who stand in the way. And the higher the flight, the greater the potential fall.

Contrary to their pretensions, exclusive humanists can neither refute religion's claims nor establish their own moral superiority.

Nonetheless, this is not cause for believers to disdain exclusive humanism, according to Taylor. For exclusive humanism, itself a secularized interpretation of Christian love, has served to educate the Church about the moral and political imperatives of individual freedom and human equality in the modern age. By a different route, Taylor has come to a conclusion that overlaps with Leo Strauss's momentous contention that through its radical questioning of all things including religion and tradition, modern thought had made all things questionable, including modernity's confident repudiation of religion and tradition.

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