

**“The Place of Religion in a Secular Age: Charles Taylor’s Explanation of  
the Rise and Significance of Secularism in the West”  
By Douglas H. Shantz, PhD**

My lecture this evening focuses on the latest book by Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor entitled, *A Secular Age* (2007).<sup>1</sup> The book has been attracting wide attention in the scholarly community and, I think, justly so. He offers valuable insights into the complex factors that have given rise to secularism in the West. Taylor also offers insight into the continuing strength of religious faith in our day and explains why many secularization theorists, who prophesied the demise of religion, have been wrong. It is in a spirit of respect and appreciation that I offer my reading of Taylor’s new book.

**Introducing Charles Taylor: A Canadian Thinker on the World Stage**

Charles Taylor, longtime professor of Political Science and Philosophy at McGill University, Montreal, has been called “the most interesting and important philosopher writing in English today” and “one of the most influential and prolific philosophers in the English-speaking world.”<sup>2</sup> He is one of the best-known Canadian academics on the international stage.

Charles Taylor has dined in Rome with the Pope, discussed the break-up of Czechoslovakia in Prague with Vaclav Havel, debated in Montreal with Pierre Trudeau. He has lectured in Berkeley, Frankfurt, Oxford and Jerusalem, Vienna and New York...<sup>3</sup> His wide recognition and international appeal are not surprising. He writes in English, French, and German and he engages with thinkers and traditions of thought in all three

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007). 874 pages.

<sup>2</sup> Ruth Abbey, *Philosophy Now: Charles Taylor* (Princeton: Princeton University, 2000), p. 1; Ben Rogers, “Charles Taylor,” *Prospect Magazine* Issue 143 (Feb. 2008): <http://www.prospect-magazine.co.uk/printarticle.php?id=10025>

<sup>3</sup> Mark Brender, “The Multi-Faceted Charles Taylor,” *McGill News* (Summer 2000). In the 1990s, Taylor was consulted by President Vaclav Havel when Czechoslovakia split into two countries. At home, he counted among his friends Pierre-Elliott Trudeau.

languages.<sup>4</sup> His books are widely read and discussed both within and outside of academic circles, including works such as *Sources of the Self* (1989), *The Malaise of Modernity* (1991), *Varieties of Religion Today* (2002), and most recently, *A Secular Age*.

One example of Taylor's reach and influence is the invitation he received to bring the 1991 Massey Lectures. Entitled "The Malaise of Modernity," the talks were broadcast on CBC's *Ideas* series. Taylor reflected on the "greatness and danger" that mark the modern age. He argued that the modern preoccupation with human rights, individual freedom and self-fulfillment, and the ethic of authenticity contains a "powerful moral ideal" of self-responsibility.<sup>5</sup> The danger is the loss of a sense of community and corporate belonging.<sup>6</sup> Here is a scholar who speaks to Canadians and to our current political realities.

In 2007 Taylor received the Templeton Prize for Progress Toward Research or Discoveries about Spiritual Realities.<sup>7</sup> The \$1.7 million award, more lucrative than the Nobel Prize, is in recognition of Taylor's passionate devotion to examining "the most distinctively human issues of our time." As John Templeton recognized: "Dr. Taylor has staked an often lonely position that insists on the inclusion of spiritual dimensions in discussions of public policy, history, linguistics, literature, and every other facet of humanities and the social sciences." Taylor sees humans as religious beings who live in awe of the mystery of the world. We all live by a larger narrative, not just by facts. We

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<sup>4</sup> Ruth Abbey, *Charles Taylor*, p. 1. Taylor's writings have been translated into Swedish, Dutch, Norwegian, Polish, Greek, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Chinese, Japanese and Turkish.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity: The CBC Massey Lectures 1991* (Concord: Anansi Press, 1991), pp. 13-21, 74, 78, 93f, 119-121. Taylor criticizes Alan Bloom's book, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987) for missing the powerful moral ideal at work in modern individualism and its idea of self-fulfillment.

<sup>6</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity*, p. 119. Canada, with its federal system, has avoided the strong centralization of the U.S. model. Canada affirms difference and diversity among its peoples and regions.

<sup>7</sup> The Templeton Prize website states that the prize "honours a living person who has made an exceptional contribution to affirming life's spiritual dimension, whether through insight, discovery or practical works."

live in an anxious age that is desperate for forms of security and belief. “We need trail-blazers [like Taylor] who will open new or retrieve forgotten modes of prayer, meditation, friendship, solidarity, and compassionate action.”<sup>8</sup>

To celebrate Taylor’s Templeton award, the Social Science Research Council in New York City convened a virtual round table of leading social scientists and invited them to discuss Charles Taylor as an intellectual and as a person, and how his works have influenced their thinking. A common theme was their respect for his learning and humility and for his ability to write clearly about difficult matters. They admire the way Taylor challenges society’s assumptions about religion, identity, and secularism.<sup>9</sup>

Taylor’s 2007 book, *A Secular Age*, has prompted wide engagement within the academic community. University of Chicago church historian Martin Marty observed, “The people with whom we hang out are almost of one mind in showing enthusiasm for *A Secular Age*. I know of humanities and divinity faculties that are studying it for a year, so provocative is it.”<sup>10</sup> Just last month Charles Taylor held a public lecture at the University of Chicago Divinity School that was packed out, with standing room only.<sup>11</sup> Last year a Canadian philosopher of religion, Professor Ronald Kuipers, taught a graduate course devoted to an in-depth study of Taylor’s book.<sup>12</sup> Kuipers guided students in considering

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<sup>8</sup> “Interview with Dr. Charles Taylor,” *John Templeton Foundation* (January 2008):

[http://www.templeton.org/questions/spiritual\\_thinking/](http://www.templeton.org/questions/spiritual_thinking/)

<sup>9</sup> “Roundtable: SSRC Salutes Charles Taylor, 2007 Templeton Prize Winner,” *Social Sciences Research Council*: <http://www.ssrc.org/features/taylor060807/>

<sup>10</sup> Martin Marty, “When Secular Answers Fail,” *Context Newsletter* (April 2008).

<sup>11</sup> Posted on a blog by Chad Lakies on February 17, 2009:

<http://livedtheology.wordpress.com/2009/02/17/charles-taylors-ratchet-effect/>

<sup>12</sup> The course was taught at the Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto, ON. It was entitled, “Charles Taylor and the Religious Imaginary.” The course syllabus is available at:

[http://www.icscanada.edu/faculty/syllabus/?f07/rk\\_ra07f.htm](http://www.icscanada.edu/faculty/syllabus/?f07/rk_ra07f.htm) Last year Samuel Moyn, Professor of History at Columbia University, New York, taught a course on “Secularization and Modern Intellectual History.” Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age* was required reading along with Callum Brown, *The Death of Christian*

Taylor's views on the place of religion in a pluralized global society and how Taylor's Roman Catholic religious commitment has influenced his thought. Kuipers conducted an extended interview with Taylor about his new book and published the transcript in an online journal.<sup>13</sup> Kuipers is convinced that *A Secular Age* will long remain a landmark text in the fields of secularization theory and philosophy of religion. Taylor and his book clearly deserve the attention of Calgary churches, clergy, and academics.

### **Taylor's Background: the Making of a Scholar who Seeks to Change the World**

#### *Bilingual, Roman Catholic Upbringing in Montreal*

Charles Taylor was born in Montreal in 1931 to a Francophone mother and an Anglophone father. He says that his upbringing opened his eyes to cultural differences and to the way in which differences in language condition different worldviews. He has used this insight from his background to work towards greater mutual understanding between Canada's two national identities.<sup>14</sup> His sister, journalist Gretta Chambers, says that bridge-building runs in their genes. Their English and French backgrounds have led them to "a great openness of mind and spirit."<sup>15</sup> As a thinker, Taylor is uniquely gifted in his ability and desire to understand the position of others. A longtime friend described him as "intelligent, tolerant, simple, open to difference, attentive to others, warm."

Taylor's Roman Catholic faith has profoundly shaped his views and writings. His beliefs have influenced his interest in *the question of secularity*. There is something distinctly Catholic in Taylor's depiction of our searching modern souls and elusive

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Britain, Owen Chadwick, *The Secularization of the European Mind in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*, Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World*, among others.

<sup>13</sup> Ronald A. Kuipers, "A Conversation with Charles Taylor," *The Other Journal: An Intersection of Theology and Culture* Issue #11 (June 12, 2008), Issue #12 (June 23, 2008), Issue #13 (October 9, 2008): <http://theotherjournal.com/print.php?id=375>

<sup>14</sup> Frederic Denoncourt, "Charles Taylor: A Marriage of Cultures."

predicament. He is convinced that life lacks meaning without belief in God. As he gets older, his beliefs become more explicit in his writing.<sup>16</sup> In *A Secular Age* Taylor is open about his own faith perspective. In chapter 12 he says: “I freely confess that my views have been shaped by my own perspective as a believer, but I would also hope to defend [them] with arguments.”<sup>17</sup> Indeed, he expects that his description of the rise of secularism will be acceptable to non-believers and, in large measure, he has succeeded in this. His own faith is clear in his description of what he means by religious faith: it not only includes beliefs and actions but also participation in the love of God for human beings which has potential to transform human existence.<sup>18</sup> In the final chapter of the book, “Conversions,” Taylor treats faith transformations as testimony to an objective spiritual reality, not simply to subjective experiences.<sup>19</sup>

### *Education and Academic Setting*

Taylor completed a B.A. in history at McGill in 1952. He went to Oxford on a Rhodes scholarship and there completed his MA and PhD. His mentor at Oxford University, Isaiah Berlin<sup>20</sup>, called him a “hedgehog” who knows one thing—not a fox who knows many things.<sup>21</sup> Taylor’s work is marked by his tenacious challenge to naturalism and insistence on the important place of religion in the modern world.

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<sup>15</sup> Mark Brender, “The Multi-Faceted Charles Taylor.”

<sup>16</sup> Ruth Abbey, *Charles Taylor*, p. 212. “Taylor’s religious beliefs are assuming a more obvious presence in his more recent writings.”

<sup>17</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 437.

<sup>18</sup> Taylor, p. 430.

<sup>19</sup> Ben Rogers, “Charles Taylor,” *Prospect Magazine* Issue 143 (February 2008). See also Ruth Abbey, *Charles Taylor*, p. 212.

<sup>20</sup> Michael Ignatieff wrote a biography of Isaiah Berlin: *Isaiah Berlin: A Life* (Toronto: Penguin Books, 1998). He mentions Charles Taylor on p. 230.

<sup>21</sup> See Isaiah Berlin’s essay, “The Hedgehog and the Fox,” *Russian Thinkers* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), pp. 22-80. Berlin identified two kinds of thinkers and writers: “those who relate everything to a single central vision, a single, universal, organizing principle...and those who pursue many ends, often unrelated and even contradictory.” Famous hedgehogs include Plato, Lucretius, Dante, Pascal, Hegel,

In 1961 Taylor returned to teach at McGill University. He loves Montreal and its bilingual culture, observing that “it is one of the few places in the world where you can do whatever you want in two languages.” “That is something very special about Montreal which you can never get over if you’ve had it in your life. You love it.” McGill has long been a home for scholars who have made it part of their life’s work to promote reconciliation and understanding between French and English cultures in Canada.<sup>22</sup>

*A Socially and Politically Engaged Scholar*

Taylor has never been content with the role of an academic. His identity is that of a public intellectual who seeks to address key intellectual problems that relate to practical issues in our democratic society.<sup>23</sup> In 1992 the Quebec government awarded Taylor the Prix Leon-Gerin, the highest honour given for contributions to Quebec intellectual life. He has been an active member of the federal NDP party, serving at one time as the Party’s vice-president. On four occasions he ran as the NDP candidate in the federal riding of Mount Royal, Montreal. Taylor recognizes Quebec as a distinct society but is against its secession from Canada.<sup>24</sup>

In 2007 Quebec Premier Jean Charest appointed Taylor as Co-Chair of a Consultation Commission to study the social accommodation of religious and cultural minorities in Quebec society.<sup>25</sup> The report concluded that “a democratic society must take into con-

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Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, and Ibsen; famous foxes would be Herodotus, Aristotle, Erasmus, Montaigne, Shakespeare, Moliere, Goethe, Balzac and Joyce. (pp. 22f)

<sup>22</sup> Mark Brender, “The Multi-Faceted Charles Taylor.” For Taylor, “McGill offers a certain angle on things, a certain perspective.”

<sup>23</sup> Daniel Philpott, “Roundtable: SSRC Salutes Charles Taylor.” *Social Science Research Council*: <http://www.ssrc.org/features/taylor060807/index2.html>

<sup>24</sup> Ruth Abbey, *Charles Taylor*, p. 6. Taylor ran against Pierre Trudeau in the riding of Mount Royal in the 1965 federal election.

<sup>25</sup> See the final abridged report: <http://www.accommodements.qc.ca/documentation/rapports/rapport-final-abrege-en.pdf>

sideration the legitimate identity demands of cultural groups.”<sup>26</sup> In our pluralistic age it is essential that various cultural communities in Canadian society be recognized socially and politically. Taylor opposes a political liberalism that promotes homogeneity rather than recognizing plurality.<sup>27</sup>

### **Reading *A Secular Age***

It is an entertaining exercise to canvass the many reviews and blogs produced by readers of *A Secular Age*. A professor of Humanities referred to Taylor’s “sprawling, ambitious, exasperating, confusing and profoundly important new book.”<sup>28</sup> A graduate student confessed to reading the work “at snail’s pace, constantly challenged by Taylor’s vocabularic virtuosity.” Her constant companions were a large dictionary, Google, and the internet. In the end she felt “the gratitude of an apprentice for a master who slowly unravels his life’s work and then gathers it up again.”<sup>29</sup> Ben Rogers mentioned the book’s intimidating length: “Seasons waxed and waned in the time it took me to read it.”<sup>30</sup> But the exercise was worth it. A blogger complained, “Everyone is having trouble slogging through this thing!” He suggested that Taylor divide the book into three volumes: The Fellowship of Secularism, The Two Secularisms, The Return of Secularism.<sup>31</sup> Just this morning a colleague expressed to me frustration with Taylor’s book: “I’ve been trying to

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<sup>26</sup> Frederic Denoncourt, “Great Promoters of Tolerance: Charles Taylor: A Marriage of Cultures,” *Tolerance.ca The Tolerance Webzine* (September 15, 2007). <http://www.tolerance.ca/Article.aspx?ID=95&L=en>

<sup>27</sup> Dene Baker, “Philosopher of the Month: May 2003, Charles Taylor,” *TPM Online*: [http://www.philosophers.co.uk/café/phil\\_may2003.htm](http://www.philosophers.co.uk/café/phil_may2003.htm)

<sup>28</sup> Wilfred M. McClay, “Uncomfortable Unbelief,” *First Things: The Journal of Religion, Culture and Public Life* (May 2008).

<sup>29</sup> Stephanie Rocke, “My reading of Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age*,” *Eras* 10 (November 2008).

<sup>30</sup> Ben Rogers, “Charles Taylor,” *Prospect Magazine* Issue 143 (February 2008).

<sup>31</sup> 2008 March 15, Augustinian permalink: <http://jeestunautre.wordpress.com/2008/03/13/reading-a-secular-age/>

read it, but something about the way it's written—it just doesn't go into my brain. I have to go back every few minutes and re-read what I just read. It's very frustrating.”

These comments raise the question: what is the best way to read *A Secular Age*, a book that threatens to overwhelm readers by its length and complexity? First, I recommend reading Charles Taylor with the help of Ruth Abbey, who studied under Taylor and has written the first major study of his thought. Her book has been of assistance to me in writing this lecture.<sup>32</sup> Second, there is a method of active, strategic reading that is useful for discerning the main lines of Taylor's argument without getting lost. It is a method discovered eventually by graduate students as they plough through their massive reading lists, and is explained concisely in Mortimer Adler's classic, *How to Read a Book*.<sup>33</sup> The key principle is the importance of first finding the main argument of a book, a sense of the whole, so we are not overwhelmed by the details and supporting information. This is best done by systematic “pre-reading.” First, read the book's full title, preface, table of contents, and publisher's blurb. Just this information alone often gives an idea of the book's concerns and main points. Second, examine the introduction and conclusion of the book; here the author usually sums up the book's main argument and contribution to knowledge. Third, “pre-read” each chapter. Read the opening and closing paragraphs of the chapter because these often provide summary statements. Skim the chapter, reading the first line of each paragraph, dipping in, looking for clues as to the author's main

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<sup>32</sup> See Ruth Abbey, *Philosophy Now: Charles Taylor* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000). Also see Ruth Abbey, ed., *Contemporary Philosophy in Focus: Charles Taylor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2004). Abbey, MA'89, PhD'95 (McGill), captured the McGill Governor General's Gold Medal as top PhD student in the human sciences under Taylor's tutelage.

<sup>33</sup> Mortimer Adler and Charles Van Doren, *How to Read a Book, Revised and Updated Edition* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972). The book was a bestseller when it was first published in 1940.



point.<sup>34</sup> Write down these clues and main arguments as you encounter them. This kind of active reading is invaluable for getting a sense of a book's overall shape and argument. After this pre-reading, go back and read chapters and sections that seem especially important and interesting.

### **Pre- Reading *A Secular Age*: The Book's Purpose, Scope, and Main Argument**

#### ***Taylor's Purpose and the Scope of the Book***

Charles Taylor's purpose in *A Secular Age* is to tell the story of the rise of modern secular society in the West and to tell a better story than the one widely offered till now.

One 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?<sup>35</sup>

In 1500 there were three modes of "God's felt presence in the world." These included a sense of God's providence, seeing the great events of the natural order as acts of God; a society in which the gatherings of guild, city council, and parish were "interwoven with ritual and worship"; and a vivid sense of living in an enchanted world filled with spiritual forces for good and evil.<sup>36</sup> By contrast, we now live in a society in which, for the first time in history, "a purely self-sufficient humanism has come to be a widely available option."<sup>37</sup> While our ancestors lived with faith "naively," we must live it "reflectively." "It is this shift in background, in the whole context in which we experience and search for fullness, that I am calling the coming of a secular age," says Taylor. The difference is not just one of creeds but of experience and sensibility.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Mortimer Adler and Charles Van Doren, *How to Read a Book*, pp. 32-36. This method involves strategic reading, not speed-reading.

<sup>35</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 25.

<sup>36</sup> Taylor, pp. 25f.

<sup>37</sup> Taylor, p. 18.

<sup>38</sup> Taylor, pp. 13f, 25.

But why this dramatic cultural shift? It is important, says Taylor, to get this story right, because our sense of where we are is defined in part by the story of how we got here. Taylor opposes the orthodox version of secularization theory that sees the decline in religious belief and practice in our day as caused by the incompatibility of modernity with supernatural religion. Secularization theorists typically focus on a feature of modernization—such as urbanization, or industrialization, or development of class society, or the rise of science and technology—and see it working to undermine religious faith. For Taylor, the reality is not so linear. In Britain, urbanization and industrialization led to new forms of religion that flourished, such as John Wesley’s Methodism.<sup>39</sup> The present scene is marked by an unprecedented pluralism of outlooks, religious and non-religious. “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.”<sup>40</sup> Once the actual order of events and processes in Western society becomes clear, says Taylor, mainstream secularization theory becomes less plausible.

Taylor’s project is a massive undertaking, as he recognizes: “The story of what happened in the secularization of Western Christendom is so broad and multi-faceted... that one can only touch on some of the major transitions.”<sup>41</sup> Taylor describes both why some move away from Christianity to a materialist worldview and again why others forsake the immanent perspective and convert to Christianity.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Taylor, pp. 432, 436.

<sup>40</sup> Taylor, p. 437.

<sup>41</sup> Taylor, p. 29.

<sup>42</sup> Taylor, pp. 737-765. “The book describes what it is like to move away from Christianity...and to be excited by Deism, by Jacobinism, by Nietzsche, and others.” Taylor also describes “what it is like to convert out of this view as well, and into Christianity...”—pointing to people such as Vaclav Havel, Ivan Illich, Charles Peguy, Flannery O’Connor, and Gerard Manley Hopkins.

The result is a kind of intellectual travelogue spanning five hundred years of Western cultural history, explaining how we got from the 16<sup>th</sup> century, when belief was assumed, to our day when unbelief seems to many a reasonable option. Taylor describes his method of investigation as “tacking back and forth between the analytical and the historical.”<sup>43</sup> The book is a fascinating and ambitious combination of cultural and intellectual history, philosophy of religion, and social-anthropology.

### ***Main Argument***

Taylor’s main argument has two aspects: explaining what happened historically to produce such massive changes in the place of religion in our world, and then explaining the continuing strength and appeal of religion in our modern secular situation.

#### *1. The two main Engines of Secularization: Reformation and Modern Science*

For Taylor, certain conditions had to obtain to create the kind of culture in which we now live. Somehow the three “bulwarks of belief,” the three modes of God’s felt presence in the world, were undermined. Taylor identifies a five-fold process that contributed to the loss of our ancestral world of 1500 AD.

I. *Disenchantment*, the undoing of the enchanted world ruled by spiritual and moral forces. In the enchanted world the self is porous, vulnerable to spirits, demons, cosmic forces. The individual needs a protector. The modern “buffered self” is taken out of this world of fear.<sup>44</sup> The world is entirely predictable and under control.

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<sup>43</sup> Taylor, p. 29.

<sup>44</sup> Taylor, p. 38.

II. *The undoing of a social world interwoven with ritual and worship*, in which communities and societies saw themselves as standing together before God. Any offence against the religious code was a threat to the whole community.<sup>45</sup>

III. *The undoing of the way earlier society could hold profound tensions in equilibrium*. Our ancestors in 1500 saw religious faith as making different claims on different social groups. The religious orders, such as the Benedictines, were considered the embodiment of true Christian faith and spiritual transformation. But such a devout, disciplined life was impractical for the majority of people, burdened by the demands of everyday life. There was built into society what Taylor calls anti-structure and festival, to provide people with a release from the pressure of religious codes. Our modern society is egalitarian, with the same expectations for all, removing the sense of play and acceptance of a lower level of piety among the people.<sup>46</sup>

IV. *The undoing of a Christian understanding of time*. For people living in 1500, time was organized and given meaning by “higher times.” The Church’s liturgical year re-enacted what happened when Christ was on earth and God entered into human time.<sup>47</sup> Unlike our ancestors, we live our lives solely within the horizontal flow of secular time.

V. *The erosion of the old idea of cosmos*, replaced by the modern universe.<sup>48</sup> The cosmos of our ancestors was “limited, ordered, hierarchical, and meaningful.” We find ourselves in a universe that is no longer limited, hierarchical, or meaningful. The

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<sup>45</sup> Taylor, pp. 42-45. There was great pressure towards orthodoxy.

<sup>46</sup> Taylor, p. 53. “We lack this play of structure and anti-structure. But the call to anti-structure is still strong, and expresses itself in revolution, protest and calls for utopian projects. The aim of revolution is to replace the present order.”

<sup>47</sup> Taylor, pp. 56-59.

<sup>48</sup> Taylor, p. 29.

scientific revolution describes a universe whose features are a challenge to Biblical religion and its notions of cosmos.<sup>49</sup>

Taylor highlights two main engines of secularization that contributed to this five-fold process, undermining the enchanted world of our ancestors: first, the late Medieval drive to Reform and remake European society, culminating in Protestant movements such as the Reformation, Pietism, and Methodism; second, the appeal of Modern Science.

Taylor begins, not with the Protestant Reformation, but with late Medieval dissatisfaction with religious hierarchy and structures within Latin Christendom. There were attempts to narrow the gap between lay life and religious elites, and a drive to discipline the whole society to higher standards.<sup>50</sup> This push for religious renewal had a threefold expression: more inward and intense personal devotion, uneasiness with sacramental religion and church-controlled magic, and the idea of salvation by faith. One instance of this reform was a new religious movement called the Brethren of the Common Life, represented in the devotional classic *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas a Kempis (1380-1471).<sup>51</sup> Another example was the Christian Humanism of Erasmus whose *Handbook (Enchiridion) of the Christian Soldier* (1503) called for inner devotion to Christ, Bible reading, and a Christ-like life. The Christian is defined as one who reads the word of God and keeps it. The best weapons for spiritual combat are knowledge of Scripture and prayer. Mere observance of external ceremonies does not make a Christian

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<sup>49</sup> Taylor, p. 60.

<sup>50</sup> Taylor, pp. 61f.

<sup>51</sup> Taylor, pp. 75f.

nor attain God's salvation.<sup>52</sup> The Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century was "the ultimate fruit of the Reform spirit, producing for the first time a true uniformity of believers."<sup>53</sup>

The Protestant Reformation is central to the story of the abolition of an enchanted cosmos. It was the main "engine of disenchantment,"<sup>54</sup> especially in its Calvinist expression. Calvin rejected the sacramental religion of Roman Catholicism, the elements of magic in the old religion, in a way that Luther did not. Calvinist Reform also focused on the re-ordering of society. This included three levels of order-building: a disciplined personal life, a well-ordered society, and the right inner attitude.<sup>55</sup> There was more and more criticism of popular culture and rejection of accommodation to Carnival.<sup>56</sup> We see the confidence of early modern elites that they could bring about a new order and new humanity, resulting in the accompanying loss of an enchanted cosmos.<sup>57</sup>

Taylor points to a number of breakthroughs in the long process of Reform in Latin Christendom and the growing emphasis upon lay piety. Unfortunately, along the way important facets of spiritual life were side-lined through a process of "ex-carnation." In its fear of idolatry, the Reformation brought a disembodiment of spiritual life; religious life expressed itself less and less in meaningful bodily forms and more and more "in the head." Taylor also critiques the Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century for its tendency to homogenize and reduce Christianity.

The Reformation helped to produce today's secular world, where renunciation is not just viewed with suspicion, but is off the radar altogether, just a form of madness or

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<sup>52</sup> Anne M. O'Donnell, "Rhetoric and Style in Erasmus' *Enchiridion militis Christiani*," *Studies in Philology* 77:1 (Winter 1980), pp. 40f.

<sup>53</sup> Taylor, pp. 77, 85f. See Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009).

<sup>54</sup> Taylor, p. 77.

<sup>55</sup> Taylor, pp. 82f.

<sup>56</sup> Taylor, pp. 85f. See Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*.

<sup>57</sup> Taylor, pp. 112, 119.

self-mutilation. We end up from all this with a narrower, more homogeneous world of conformity to a hedonic principle.<sup>58</sup>

It brought intensified persecution of marginal groups and an increase in anxiety.

Taylor also credits the appeal of Modern Science for remaking our worldview in the direction of an immanent one. As science and technology developed, the whole stance and form and epistemology of materialism, framed in general laws, seemed more advanced, while faith in a personal God seemed to belong to a less mature standpoint.<sup>59</sup> When people abandon religion and convert to science, says Taylor, what makes science more attractive is not scientific proofs but the *whole package*. One whole package (science) beats out another whole package (religion).<sup>60</sup> Science, for some, seems to offer a more convincing story about one's intellectual and moral life.

## 2. *Explaining the Continuing Strength and Appeal of Religion in our Secular Age*

The second facet of Taylor's main argument has to do with the continuing strength and appeal of religion in our day. Taylor observes that people have a need for a sense of fullness and that this sense of fullness is a reflection of transcendent reality. The longing for a more than immanent perspective remains strong in the modern age. "Our age is very far from settling in to a comfortable unbelief."<sup>61</sup> Taylor portrays the "exclusive humanist" or atheist as blinkered and refusing to recognize deep-seated human needs and the mystery that characterizes our world.<sup>62</sup>

Taylor acknowledges a great difference between Europe's experience of secularization and that of the USA. There have been efforts to explain this difference in terms of

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<sup>58</sup> Taylor, pp. 771f..

<sup>59</sup> Taylor, p. 363.

<sup>60</sup> Taylor, p. 366.

<sup>61</sup> Taylor, p. 727.

<sup>62</sup> Taylor, pp. 768f.

immigration but they are not convincing. Another explanation is that the unbelief of elites affects the masses to a greater degree in Europe than it does in America. Also, American religious life grew up in the Age of Mobilization whereas Europe is still reacting against aspects of the old regime.<sup>63</sup> Finally, the kind of American patriotism that sees America as a nation under God is still strong. Those who oppose this identity are not that numerous. This “reigning synthesis of nation, morality and religion” is less strong in Britain and Europe.<sup>64</sup>

Taylor emphasizes that the contribution of modern science to a godless mindset is *not* inevitable. The new scientific interest in nature was not necessarily a step outside of a religious outlook. The “straight path account” of modern secularity cannot be supported. An interest in nature is not always the same thing; it can be part of a Theistic worldview or a non-Theistic worldview. It can be different depending on the background understanding and inclination of the individual.<sup>65</sup>

What has changed is not a lack of religious belief in our day but the *conditions of belief* in the modern age. Religious belief no longer enjoys unchallenged status as in earlier centuries. The modern world is a pluralist one in which many forms of belief and unbelief jostle, unsupported by social structures. Belief in our age is marked by the experience of being cross-pressured, prone to doubt. With an unheard of pluralism of outlooks, religious and non-religious, it is harder and harder to find a niche where belief or unbelief “go without saying.” We have a spirituality of *quest*.<sup>66</sup> We also have the

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<sup>63</sup> Taylor, p. 525.

<sup>64</sup> Taylor, pp. 526f. “It seems that the fusion of faith, family values and patriotism is still extremely important to one half of American society, [and] that they are dismayed to see it challenged.”

<sup>65</sup> Taylor, p. 95.

<sup>66</sup> Taylor, pp. 530-533. “The fate of belief depends much more than before on powerful intuitions of individuals radiating out to others.”



phenomenon of minimal religion, people who declare themselves “just Christians” without denominational affiliation. Their faith is lived within the immediate circle of family and friends rather than in churches.

Taylor is far from longing for an ideal Christian past. Initially, this was where I thought that the book was going. If only we could reclaim the enchanted, embedded world of earlier times where faith was part of the fabric of society. But that is not his argument. Taylor is emphatic that we can’t go back and he is critical of those who would want to do so. He sees something commendable about belief in cross-pressured times: it is free, unconstrained, self-critical. To those who long to go back to an earlier age of faith, Taylor says: “*We shouldn’t forget the spiritual costs of various kinds of forced conformity: hypocrisy, spiritual stultification, inner revolt against the Gospel, the confusion of faith and power, and even worse.*”<sup>67</sup>

### **Key Terms, Chapters and Supporting Arguments in *A Secular Age*: Understanding Secularization’s Rise and Significance**

The following arguments are best seen as elaborating upon the main argument described above. I will sometimes cite Taylor’s own words to give a sense of his language and argumentation.

#### ***Key Terms: Taylor’s “Vocabularic Virtuosity”***

Taylor is creative in inventing and borrowing capsule expressions of his key ideas and arguments. Terms of analysis that he mentions repeatedly include: Bulwarks of Belief, Conditions of Belief, the Great Disembedding, Social Imaginaries, Axial Religions and Post-Axial Religions, the Enchanted World, Disenchantment, the Porous

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<sup>67</sup> Taylor, p. 513.

Self and the Buffered Self, the Nova Effect, Exclusive Humanism, Max Weber's "Iron Cage," the human experience of Fullness, the Immanent Frame, Closed World Structures (CWS, pp. 557f), Cross-Pressures (pp. 596f), Excarnation (pp. 614f), Pioneers of New Itineraries, the Mystique of a real living tradition (p. 748). He describes the three Ages through which the West has moved since the Middle Ages: *Ancien Regime*, Age of Mobilization, Age of Authenticity.

### ***German Pietism and English Methodism***

As we saw above (p. 9), Taylor identifies three features of the medieval world that made atheism and unbelief almost inconceivable—three "bulwarks of belief."<sup>68</sup> By 1800 the three modes of God's felt presence in the world had begun to fade. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries there arose "a new Christianity of personal commitment."<sup>69</sup> In German Pietism and English Methodism the stress was upon feeling, emotion, and a living faith, reflecting the logic of Enlightenment "subjectification."<sup>70</sup> Given the options of orthodoxy and unbelief, many opted for a third way. Pietism and early Evangelicalism helped to undermine the features of traditional religion and were in turn impacted by a world that had lost its sense of enchantment and of God's providence.<sup>71</sup> The predicament of these believers was "spiritually unstable" and marked by melancholy and doubt.<sup>72</sup> Reform, disenchantment, and personal religion went together.

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<sup>68</sup> Taylor, pp. 25f.

<sup>69</sup> Taylor, pp. 143f.

<sup>70</sup> Taylor, pp. 77, 300, 488. The emphasis shifted from the object of faith to the genuineness of the feelings.

<sup>71</sup> Taylor, p. 143. "One clear reason for this connection between disenchantment and personal faith is that in the beginning the latter drove the former through its 'rage for order.' Later on, the causal arrow will also move in the other direction: Christians in a world which less and less reflects God are thrown back on their own resources."

<sup>72</sup> Taylor, pp. 302f

My own research into Pietist autobiography has largely confirmed Taylor's picture of subjectivity and melancholy among the Pietists. The autobiographies of Adam Bernd (1676-1748) and Johann Georg Hamann (1730-1788) reflect an enthusiasm for self-representation, a world in which the experience of God's presence has begun to fade, and a deep-seated melancholy and *angst*.<sup>73</sup> Adam Bernd began writing his autobiography in 1736, at age sixty. His story is organized around the six psychological crises that he experienced over the course of his life, between 1695, when he was just nineteen years old, and 1736. He discussed what it is like to experience compulsive suicidal thoughts and impulses. He prayed that his book might comfort at least one other person who suffered from the same trials.<sup>74</sup> He also hoped to aid physicians in better understanding and treating patients who shared his affliction of mind. Johann Georg Hamann was a man "who saw and who felt in his own life the unsolved problem of the modern world—how to be a Christian in full integrity of being" and to live a life of faith in revolutionary times.<sup>75</sup> Hamann described his experiences as a *Wallfahrt*, a pilgrimage prompted by his "adventurous mindset and way of life." He found in himself and the world only misery and melancholy. For a long time he bore a deep inner unrest, "an unhappiness and inability to put up even with myself." He wrote the autobiography for himself and for his

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<sup>73</sup> Douglas H. Shantz, "Pietist Autobiography and the Rise of Secular Individualism." Paper read at the Annual Meeting of the *Canadian Society of Church History*, The Congress of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, B.C., June 2, 2008. [unpublished]

<sup>74</sup> Adam Bernd, "Vorrede," *Eigene Lebens-Beschreibung*, ed. Volker Hoffmann (München: Winkler Verlag, 1973), p. 15.

<sup>75</sup> Ronald Gregor Smith, *J.G. Hamann, 1730-1788: A Study in Christian Existence* (London: Collins, 1960), pp. 18-21.

father, brother, and closest friends in hopes that reading the account of his spiritual discovery might be an encouragement to them.<sup>76</sup>

### ***The Great Disembedding (Chapter 3)***

In the religious life of ancient societies, humans lived in small-scale communities where the forms of life “embedded” individual members in three ways:

1) *Embedding Socially*, as religious life is inseparably linked with social life; members share a common religious capacity. The primary agency of religious action was the social group as a whole, a kind of collective ritual action. In terms of an individual’s identity and sense of self, one observes the inability to imagine oneself outside a certain social matrix and social reality. There is an acceptance of the order of things. The social order is sacrosanct, along with the roles within it. Here is a social imaginary which sets limits to the sense of self.<sup>77</sup>

#### 2) *Embedding in the Cosmos.*

Humans must deal with cosmic spirits and powers embedded in things. The gods may be identified with some feature of the world, such as animals or plants. A geographical location or particular place can be considered sacred.

#### 3) *Embedding in the understanding of the human good.*

God’s purposes relate to promotion of human flourishing and prosperity. People ask the deity for health, long life, fertility, good crops. This is the sum total of the benefit offered by the Divinity.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Johann Georg Hamann, *Sämtliche Werke, II. Band* (Wien: Verlag Herder, 1950), pp. 9-54. “Ich habe diese Gedanken über meinen Lebenslauf für mich selbst oder für meinen lieben Vater und Bruder aufgesetzt; und wünsche daher, daß selbige den letztern oder meinen nächsten Freunden zur Durchlesung dienen mögen.” (p. 22)

<sup>77</sup> Taylor, pp. 147-150.

<sup>78</sup> Taylor, pp. 150f.

The religions of the Axial Age brought a break in all three dimensions of embeddedness: social order, cosmos, and human good.<sup>79</sup> Between 800 and 200 B.C. new prophets and teachers arose in China, India, the Middle East, and Europe whose revolutionary teachings gave rise to the major religions and philosophies in our world today. They taught the importance of the individual conscience, guided by compassion and justice, and were critical of priestly religion and ritual.<sup>80</sup>

The Axial changes opened up new possibilities of disembedded religion: new kinds of sociability and new kinds of flourishing pursued by individuals on their own.<sup>81</sup> There grew a new understanding of social existence that gave primacy to the individual.<sup>82</sup> The New Testament, for example, is “full of calls to leave or relativize solidarities of family, clan, society” in order to join the Kingdom of God. In post-Axial religions, such as Buddhism and Christianity, there was also “a notion of good which goes beyond human flourishing,” such as Christ’s self-sacrifice on the cross. While Christianity operates much like any Axial spirituality, the Christian attempt to remake society “was much more pervasive and multi-tracked.”<sup>83</sup> The buffered identity (sense of self) and project of Reform (project for social change) contributed to the disembedding.

#### ***Modern Social Imaginaries (Chapter 4)***

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<sup>79</sup> Taylor, p. 151.

<sup>80</sup> Karl Jaspers coined the term “Axial Age” to describe the period from 800 to 200 B.C. because it was so pivotal in the spiritual development of humanity. This period saw the emergence of Confucianism and Taoism in China, Buddhism and Hinduism in India, monotheism and the Hebrew Prophets in the Middle East, and Greek philosophy in Europe. Key figures included Confucius (551-479 BC), the Buddha (563-483 BC), the prophets Isaiah (who began to prophesy in 740 BC) and Jeremiah (who prophesied in 605 BC), Socrates (469-399 BC), Plato (427-347 BC), and Aristotle (384-322 BC). See Karen Armstrong, *A Short History of Myth* (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), pp. 79-81.

<sup>81</sup> Taylor, p. 154.

<sup>82</sup> Taylor, p. 146.

<sup>83</sup> Taylor, p. 155.

By “social imaginary” Taylor refers to the ways in which people imagine their social existence and the expectations and normative notions that accompany them. This is a better term than social theory because theory only applies to a small intellectual minority.<sup>84</sup> Three forms of social self-understanding are crucial to our modern, horizontal social imaginary, each of them drawing upon the theories of John Locke and Hugo Grotius.<sup>85</sup>

### *1) The Economy*

Our society depends upon ordinary people working steadily in a profession. People come to see their society as an economy, a set of activities of production, exchange, and consumption.

### *2) The Public Sphere*

Taylor defines this as “a common space in which the members of society are deemed to meet through a variety of media” and are linked in a common discussion. In the public sphere a common mind can be expressed and come into being without the mediation of the political. Political power can be checked by something outside it. Power can be tamed by reason. This is a central feature of modern secular society.<sup>86</sup>

Jürgen Habermas recently observed that the public sphere is shrinking. Markets and bureaucracies are taking over wide decision-making functions and “expelling social solidarity.” It is harder and harder to motivate people on the basis of communal social norms and values. Habermas speaks now of “post-secular society.”<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Taylor, p. 172.

<sup>85</sup> Taylor, pp. 176-207.

<sup>86</sup> Taylor, p. 185. See Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962).

<sup>87</sup> Jürgen Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger, *The Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006), pp. 36, 45f. Habermas fears that, “The democratic formation of a common opinion and will is losing its functional relevance.”

3) *Democratic Self-Rule: the Sovereign People.*<sup>88</sup>

Under this new idea of order, each is able to pursue freely their life and well-being in such a way that the individual pursuits harmonize with one another. It is a politics of virtue, the fusion of individual and general will.<sup>89</sup>

Taylor asks how the modern theory of moral order gradually came to transform our social imaginary. He says that it came about by a process by which new practices developed among certain groups and strata of the population or were launched by elites who then recruited a larger base in the population.

***The Nova Effect: The Expanding Universe of Unbelief (Chapter 10)***

The “Nova Effect” is Taylor’s term for the “galloping pluralism on the spiritual plane,” for “the steadily widening gamut of new positions which have become available options for us.” A plurality of options arose first among social elites, among the intelligentsia, in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>90</sup>

The principle characteristic of the religious landscape of today is not that faith or religion has declined, but that it has diversified.

The modern cosmic imaginary is uncapturable by any one range of views. It has moved people in a whole range of directions from the hardest materialism through to Christian orthodoxy, passing by a whole range of intermediate positions. The salient feature of the modern cosmic imaginary...is that it has opened a space in which people can wander between and around all these options without having to land clearly and definitively in any one.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Taylor, pp. 196-207.

<sup>89</sup> Taylor, pp. 201, 207.

<sup>90</sup> Taylor, p. 423.

<sup>91</sup> Taylor, p. 351.

This is the result of the cross-pressure felt by the modern buffered self. Our common situation has three features: great variety, great movement, and great potential to be shaken by other positions.<sup>92</sup>

The Romantic period brought two innovations: First, the identification of *beauty as the key* to restoring our lost unity, with artistic creation as the highest domain of human activity; Second, the *growth of subtler languages* as the earlier languages of objective reference, correspondences to the Great Chain of Being, become unavailable.<sup>93</sup> The attempt to create subtler languages shows how difficult it is to remain in the buffered identity. People turn to the arts for the experience of fullness. They listen to concerts with an almost religious intensity.

### ***Three Ideal Types of Religion and Three Social Imaginaries***

Taylor identifies three Ideal Types of Religion:

*1) The Ancien Regime matrix (pre-Revolutionary French monarchy)*

Here collective ritual has a large place, with many rituals rooted in pagan custom. Pre-axial and post-axial religious elements co-existed with ease.<sup>94</sup> Popular religion in Europe had a festive dimension: saints' days, pilgrimages to shrines, celebrations, banquets, dancing.

These community forms were disrupted by the Reformation, usually under the power of the elites. Popular religion is especially vulnerable to the defection of the elites.<sup>95</sup> One example of this is the Reformation in England.

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<sup>92</sup> Ronald A. Kuipers, "A Conversation with Charles Taylor (Part One)."

<sup>93</sup> Taylor, pp. 357f.

<sup>94</sup> Taylor, p. 438.

<sup>95</sup> Taylor, p. 441. "The process of elite-engendered destruction and popular recreation happened again and again in the following centuries."



2) *The Age of Recruiting and Mobilization (19<sup>th</sup> century American Republic):*  
1800-1960<sup>96</sup>

The Age of Mobilization is a time when “people are persuaded, pushed, dragooned, or bullied into new forms of society, church and association.”<sup>97</sup> The common people are induced by government and church elites to adopt new structures, to alter their social imaginaries. The Catholic church began organizing and recruiting people into membership in organizations with a definite purpose. Protestant Evangelicals created new Denominations—free churches set up as instruments of mutual help.<sup>98</sup> New forms of religious life developed to fit the age, successfully recruiting and mobilizing large masses of people. These forms of faith wove together four strands: spirituality, discipline, political identity, and civilizational order. These had been present in elite religion in preceding centuries; they now became a mass phenomenon.<sup>99</sup>

There were two ways in which religious faith re-established itself after the break with the *Ancien Regime*. *First*, God’s design could be understood to define the political identity of the society as a whole. Religious belonging is central to political identity. This sense of a providential mission has been strong among American Protestants up to the present day. *Second*, in believers’ churches religious organizations could serve as instruments of mutual help.<sup>100</sup>

The following contrasts and differences can be found between the *Ancien Regime* (AR) and the Era of Mobilization (M):

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<sup>96</sup> Taylor p. 471.

<sup>97</sup> Taylor, p. 445.

<sup>98</sup> Taylor, pp. 450-454.

<sup>99</sup> Taylor, pp. 471f.

<sup>100</sup> Taylor, p. 453.

(a) AR forms are based on a pre-modern idea of order grounded in the cosmos; M is related to the modern idea of Moral Order based on mutual benefit.

(b) The world of AR is an enchanted world; the move towards M involves greater and greater disenchantment.

(c) AR forms of society and hierarchies are pre-existing, time out of mind; forms of society in M are a model that requires human agency to put into effect.

(d) AR forms assume an alliance of clergy and state; the age of M means the loosening of clerical control.<sup>101</sup>

These two ideal types clarify the transition to modernity and secularity in France and the Anglo-Saxon countries.<sup>102</sup>

### *3) The Age of Authenticity: 1960s to the Present*

We live now in the social imaginary of “expressive individualism.” The transition to this new age, The Age of Authenticity, has happened in the last half century, after the Second World War. The 1960s provided the hinge moment. “The cultural revolution of the 1960s destabilized earlier forms of religion, followed by the development of new forms” including the ethic of authenticity.<sup>103</sup> Since WW II, limits on the pursuit of individual happiness have been most clearly set aside, particularly on sexual mores.<sup>104</sup> What is new is that this has become a mass phenomenon.<sup>105</sup>

Our social imaginary has added a fourth form of social self-understanding: the space of fashion.<sup>106</sup> Our personal self-expression gains great import in a society marked

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<sup>101</sup> Taylor, p. 467.

<sup>102</sup> Taylor, p. 460.

<sup>103</sup> Taylor, p. 526.

<sup>104</sup> Taylor, p. 485.

<sup>105</sup> Taylor, p. 473.

<sup>106</sup> Taylor, p. 481, 486.

by “mutual display.” These spaces lie between solitude and togetherness, sometimes transforming into common action.<sup>107</sup>

In the Age of Mobilization, the choice of denomination took place within the faith of the broader church and the creeds—a framework of belief. But in the Age of expressive individualism, religious practice is not only a personal choice but it must make sense in terms of one’s spiritual development. “The focus is now on my spiritual path, and what insights come to me.” Finding a place in the broader church is no longer relevant.<sup>108</sup> This kind of individualism “destabilizes us and provokes conflict.”

### ***Religion Today (Chapter 14)***

People today, says Taylor, move some distance from their ancestral churches but without breaking away entirely. This alienation from the Church is more “Christian nominalism” than secularism. It is believing without belonging. “The spiritual identity of masses of people still remains defined by religious forms from which they keep themselves at a good distance.”

People may retain an attachment to a perspective of transformation which they are not presently acting on; they may find themselves losing sight of it from time to time. The reception fades in and out, like a city FM station in the countryside. When they see or hear of people’s lives which seem really to have been touched by these sources of transformation, they can be strongly moved.<sup>109</sup>

This is also true in terms of our national identity. “It remains powerful in memory,” as a kind of reserve fund of consolation.<sup>110</sup>

Taylor argues that believers need a new way of “inhabiting [their] faith.” He calls for a more honest and authentic faith, one genuinely open to the other. We need to learn

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<sup>107</sup> Taylor, pp. 478, 481f.

<sup>108</sup> Taylor, p. 486.

<sup>109</sup> Taylor, p. 521. On this point, see Reginald W. Bibby, *Restless Gods* (Toronto: Novalis, 2004).

<sup>110</sup> Taylor, p. 522. “The religious reference doesn’t so much disappear as change, retreat to a distance.”

to be sympathetic and understanding towards people and positions different than our own—“where you really have a desire to know what it’s like to be the other person and live their kind of spiritual life.”<sup>111</sup>

### ***What Pushes People in the Direction of Unbelief?***

What pushes people to go in the direction of “closure towards the transcendent”? What are the sources of the attraction of immanence? Taylor suggests several things.

1) One is the sense of being menaced by religious fanaticism.<sup>112</sup> Christianity is seen as undercutting reason; the transcendent is seen as a threat and distraction. Religion is understood as leading to rejection of our sensual and earthly life. The focus on the transcendent betrays this life, says Martha Nussbaum.<sup>113</sup>

2) There is a strong attraction to the idea that we are in an order of “nature,” part of a greater whole.

3) There is a sense of wonder: we are part of a mysterious process of evolution.

4) The colossal success of natural science and the benefits of technology can lead us to feel that it can unlock all mysteries and explain everything. Many people feel cross pressured between two basic orientations: they want to respect science, but cannot help believing that there is something more than the immanent. This was the case with Williams James, who stood “in that open space where you can feel the winds pulling you, now to belief, now to unbelief...”<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Ronald A. Kuipers, “A Conversation with Charles Taylor (Part Two).”

<sup>112</sup> Taylor, p. 546.

<sup>113</sup> Taylor, pp. 625-631. Martha Nussbaum is Professor of Law and Ethics at the University of Chicago Law School. She is author of *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (1997), *Liberty of Conscience: In Defense of America’s Tradition of Religious Equality* (2008) among other books.

<sup>114</sup> Taylor, pp. 547-549.

Why does the closed perspective hold an illusion of obviousness? What are some of the worlds within which religious belief seems strange and unjustifiable?<sup>115</sup> People who inhabit “Closed World Structures” (CWS) are closed to transcendence; they see no alternative. Certain conditions in the modern world make it impossible for many to believe in God. There are four of these, all of them a variation on the narrative of coming of age, moving from a childlike to an adult consciousness.<sup>116</sup>

*1) The results of modern science (pp. 561-566)*

This makes the claim that science has shown that religion is irrelevant to life and that God does not exist. It claims that materialism is the view of courageous adults.<sup>117</sup> This is based upon epistemological claims. The paradigm example of valid knowledge is science and what science can know.

*2) The shape of contemporary moral experience (pp. 569-575)*

Our secular society is concerned solely with human goods. The traditional beliefs and reference points of a static rural society have been lost. Humanity has shed false and harmful myths. This is a narrative of subtraction.<sup>118</sup>

*3) The rise of modern political-moral spaces of stranger sociability (pp. 575-580)*

Instead of being subject, the people are sovereign, with a sense of collective power. Modern conceptions of justice as equality take hold. Society is now a utopian space of comradeship, freedom, and equality.

*4) The creation of values by the autonomous self (pp. 580-589)*

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<sup>115</sup> Taylor, pp. 557-590.

<sup>116</sup> Taylor, p. 589.

<sup>117</sup> Taylor, p. 574.

<sup>118</sup> Taylor, p. 572.

Once human beings took their norms and values from outside themselves, from God; now they have to establish their norms and values for themselves.<sup>119</sup>

These are various narratives of secularity. Taylor says, “I tell these stories to show what is attractive to their proponents about various forms of unbelief.”<sup>120</sup>

### ***Preserving the Language of Transcendence in a Secular Society***

Taylor laments that with secularization “the level of understanding of some of the great languages of transcendence is declining...massive unlearning is taking place.”

Taylor’s remedy is to encourage believers today to reconnect with the converts and examples of earlier times. He argues that “the Christian faith can be lived better and more fully by links with other ages than our own, and so we read Augustine or about the lives of the Saints and so on.”<sup>121</sup> These conversion stories can mediate meaning and hope to the rest of us.

None of us grasps the whole picture. None of us could ever grasp alone everything that is involved in our alienation from God and his action to bring us back. But there are a great many of us, scattered through history, who have had some powerful sense of some facet of this drama.<sup>122</sup>

Our faith should be open to a conversation that ranges over the whole of the last twenty centuries. This is the Communion of Saints and it includes their itineraries towards God.

Christians today need to identify and emulate those who “have radiated some sense of direct contact” with fullness. “We need to enlarge our range of examples of what this more direct contact [with God] might involve.”<sup>123</sup> They experienced a transformation, either as an encounter with God’s *power* or as participation in God’s

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<sup>119</sup> Taylor, p. 580.

<sup>120</sup> Taylor, p. 600.

<sup>121</sup> Ronald A. Kuipers, “A Conversation with Charles Taylor (Part Two),” *The Other Journal: An Intersection of Theology and Culture* Issue #12 (June 23, 2008).

<sup>122</sup> Taylor, p. 754.

*love*. Some examples would include saints, prophets, and charismatic leaders such as St. Francis, St. Teresa, John Wesley, Jonathan Edwards, Bede Griffiths, and Vaclav Havel.

Taylor points to “pioneers of new itineraries” in Western modernity in the last 200 years, people who offer “striking examples of a surprising new itinerary.”<sup>124</sup>

Many great conversions involve a transformation of the frame in which people thought, felt and lived. They bring into view something beyond that frame. Things make sense in a wholly new way.

They had an intuition that “the immanent frame was confining, even stifling, and left something vital out...”<sup>125</sup> At least four “Mystiques” have inspired human beings to make a new beginning: Greek thought; Jews and Judaism; Socialism; Christianity.<sup>126</sup>

The poet Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889) offers an example of a surprising new itinerary in his search to recover “an aesthetic dimension” in life. Ordinary language had been “flattened, emptied...as though its only function were the instrumental one.” This incapacity of language corresponds to an incapacity of our being as our lives too are reduced and flattened.<sup>127</sup> Hopkins felt “the sordidness of things” in the urban industrial England of his day. He celebrated the creative and unique force of particular existing things in relation to God.<sup>128</sup> He sought a new poetic language that would help show people the way back to the God of Abraham.<sup>129</sup>

Besides highlighting *literary* figures, Taylor also points to examples of those who explored new itineraries through *prayer and action*: John Maine, Jean Vanier, Mother

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<sup>123</sup> Taylor, p. 729.

<sup>124</sup> Taylor, p. 755.

<sup>125</sup> Taylor, p. 734. Taylor includes the stories of Walker Percy, Dostoyevsky, G.K. Chesterton, T.S. Eliot, Jacques Maritain, and Thomas Merton. Taylor focuses especially upon Charles Peguy (pp. 745-752) and Gerard Manley Hopkins (pp. 755-765).

<sup>126</sup> Taylor, p. 749. Taylor suggests that “more than one such animating ideal can fit together into one life.”

<sup>127</sup> Taylor, pp. 758, 761.

<sup>128</sup> Taylor, pp. 761f.

Teresa. At a place like Taize people can get in contact with these languages of transcendence in their own way. These various itineraries cannot be identified with any one age or paradigm. It is wrong to give decisive priority and paradigmatic status to one historically-embedded order of Christian life, past or present. All of them remind us of “the rich variety of paths to God.”<sup>130</sup>

### **Critiquing Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age***

#### ***Strengths***

##### *1) Taylor is a master teacher.*

In many ways *A Secular Age* is a one volume introduction to some of the great thinkers and issues in Western intellectual history. The book is an intellectual travelogue, as we join Taylor on a fascinating tour of the last five hundred years. It is not dull.

Ruth Abbey observed: “Taylor’s position is worked out in conversation and contest with some of the major figures of the western philosophical tradition.” She spoke of Taylor’s “immersion in the history of western thought.” Among those who have impacted his thinking are Aristotle, Hegel, Rousseau, Herder, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein.<sup>131</sup>

Taylor’s book helps us to understand modern Western habits and ways of thinking, knowing, and organizing ourselves socially, politically, and religiously. He offers a “philosophically and spiritually rich history of the present.”<sup>132</sup>

##### *2) Taylor has a deep practical Christian concern.*

It is Taylor’s hope that his project will “open doors for people” to the spiritual traditions that we are losing.<sup>133</sup> Although not every Christian will find the book to their

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<sup>129</sup> Taylor, pp. 755, 757.

<sup>130</sup> Taylor, pp. 765f. “There is no one single paradigm of Christian order.”

<sup>131</sup> Ruth Abbey, *Charles Taylor*, p. 5.

<sup>132</sup> Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, “Roundtable: SSRC Salutes Charles Taylor.”



taste, Taylor speaks to the situation of every Christian living in the West today and does so as a fellow Christian.

3) *Taylor's A Secular Age* "could well shape a new generation of social scientific analyses into the social locations and living practices of secularism," according to members of the Social Science Research Council Round Table in New York City in 2007.<sup>134</sup>

His vision of human beings is compelling. For Taylor, human beings are deeply social and historical, self-interpreting, strongly evaluating, ethical animals who are... prone to ever-richer articulations of their own condition.<sup>135</sup>

Taylor insists that we must resist a narrow vision that prevents us from being open to other traditions, outlooks, and cultural resources. Taylor unsettles many of our society's dearly held beliefs and assumptions about religion, violence, and secularism.<sup>136</sup>

4) *Taylor is a public intellectual who cares for our democratic society.*

Taylor's most important contribution as a public intellectual has been his invitation to Western audiences to reconsider the importance of religion, nation, ethnicity, and community. "Taylor is concerned not only with abstract intellectual issues but also with the importance of key intellectual problems related to the better understanding of practical issues in a democratic society."<sup>137</sup> He combines relevance and timeliness with a refusal to reduce complex thought to formulas.

### ***Weaknesses***

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<sup>133</sup> Mark Brender, "The Multi-Faceted Charles Taylor."

<sup>134</sup> Courtney Bender, "Roundtable: SSRC Salutes Charles Taylor," *Social Science Research Council*: <http://www.ssrc.org/features/taylor060807/index2.html>

<sup>135</sup> Rajeev Bhargava, "Roundtable: SSRC Salutes Charles Taylor."

<sup>136</sup> Saba Mahmood, "Roundtable: SSRC Salutes Charles Taylor."

<sup>137</sup> Daniel Philpott, "Roundtable: SSRC Salutes Charles Taylor."

1) Charles Taylor's assumption of uniform belief in the Middle Ages is lacking in nuance. He seems to agree with the view of Lucien Febvre and others who argue that "it was only after Descartes that reason began, at first hesitantly, to tell against faith."<sup>138</sup>

There have been several studies in the last twenty-five years that offer insightful discussions of medieval unbelief, but Taylor does not engage with them. In "Unbelief in Early Modern Europe," David Wootton raised an important interpretive point: the main reason that there are so few atheists to be found in the late Middle Ages and the sixteenth century is "not because there were no atheists, but because the atheists themselves believed that they were obliged to pretend to be Christians."<sup>139</sup> There were in fact "bad kings" whose faith was non-existent. And some medieval authors expressed skepticism about the work of the "Three Imposters," Christ, Moses and Mohammed, and dismissed Christianity, Judaism and Islam. Classical civilization offered alternative religions and philosophies to Christianity that Medievals were aware of. The thirteenth century Averroist philosophers denied the creation of the world and the immortality of the soul. It is significant that the first temptation discussed in the *Ars Moriendi* is that of unbelief. Medieval people were confronted with the possibility of questioning Christian beliefs and knew some who did.<sup>140</sup> Wootton concluded that by the mid sixteenth century "there

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<sup>138</sup> David Wootton, "Unbelief in Early Modern Europe," *History Workshop Journal* 20 (Autumn 1985), p. 85. James Turner suggested that "Searching for full-fledged deniers of God before the 18<sup>th</sup> century sometimes resembles hunting for the unicorn." See James Turner, *Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1986).

<sup>139</sup> David Wootton, "Unbelief in Early Modern Europe," p. 88.

<sup>140</sup> Wootton, pp. 89f. The *Ars Moriendi*, the art of dying, was a popular medieval genre.

existed a coherent culture, both oral and literate, both popular and intellectual, of irreligion.”<sup>141</sup> The absolute contrast that Taylor postulates between 1500 and today is overdone.

More recently John Arnold has argued that “there was no one medieval lay faith but a spectrum of faith, belief and unbelief.”<sup>142</sup> Arnold speaks of “a medieval discovery of the individual.” Already in the twelfth century the church expected the laity to be personally involved in their salvation, illustrated in the new practice of private confession and the increasing availability of vernacular religious texts.<sup>143</sup> There were always limits to the church’s hegemony and control over individual minds and hearts.

It seems that Taylor has exaggerated the contrast between 1500 and today. One must ask how much of the contrast is due to the unavailability of evidence for unbelief in Medieval and Early Modern times as compared to now.

## 2) Is there a place for critique of religion in the West?

Taylor provides evidence and arguments for the idea that our secular age is far from settling into comfortable disbelief. He shows that the desire people have for experiences of fullness leaves them open to the religious option. But are all religious options equal? Surely some of these options are more satisfying for moderns than others. Some are more overtly anti-intellectual than others. Taylor fails to address this matter of discrimination and critique as it applies to religion. Can and should our secular age help to discredit some religious options and thereby allay some of the criticisms of people such as Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens?

## 3) Is the Enchanted Cosmos really gone for Westerners?

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<sup>141</sup> Wootton, p. 98. Carlo Ginzburg claimed that there existed in sixteenth century Italy a strong popular tradition of unbelief and irreligion. See Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982).

<sup>142</sup> John H. Arnold, *Belief and Unbelief in Medieval Europe* (London: Hodder Arnold, 2005), p. 230.

Taylor seems to ignore the remnants of an enchanted worldview that persist among many in Western society. He interprets followers of New Age religion in our day as reflective of the human potential movement in an Age of Authenticity. But could it not be that they are returning to life in an enchanted world and are experiencing the world as “porous” selves? In Iceland much of the population still believes in Elves and the Hidden People. Almost everyone knows someone who has had an encounter with them. Icelandic culture is not simply that of the modern buffered self.

4) Does Taylor speak to the average believer?

One Catholic critic observes that Taylor situates himself with William James in a position of ambivalence, at the “mid-point of the cross-pressures that define our culture.” While this may be an appealing position for an academic, for the corporate life of the Christian church it is problematic.<sup>144</sup> To what extent is Taylor’s discussion of the experience of being cross-pressured relevant to only a small academic elite among believers?

5) Taylor’s *A Secular Age* is unnecessarily long and undisciplined. This is unfortunate because Taylor has limited his readership. A public intellectual should do a better job of meeting his readers halfway.

## **Conclusion**

Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age* offers readers an intellectual travelogue through five hundred years of western cultural and religious history. While not everyone will be inclined to join him for the long and bumpy ride, the book’s message is for everyone. It is

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<sup>143</sup> Arnold, *Belief and Unbelief in Medieval Europe*, p. 186.

<sup>144</sup> Wilfred M. McClay, “Uncomfortable Unbelief,” *First Things: The Journal of Religion, Culture and Public Life* (May 2008). “A critical mass of consciously shared and historically grounded belief and practice” is necessary for a healthy Christian community.

an encouraging book for people of faith. Taylor affirms a future for religious belief and encourages young people to “explore beyond the boundaries” offered by the immanent framework of exclusive humanism.<sup>145</sup>

In closing, I agree with Ruth Abbey’s observation: “Even Taylor’s most theoretical writings have a practical purpose... Taylor hopes that his large-scale analyses of modern western culture will contribute to the self-knowledge of its members and influence the way people think about themselves and others.”<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Taylor, pp. 768, 770.

<sup>146</sup> Ruth Abbey, p. 8.

## Appendices

*The Iwaasa Lecture on Urban Theology,  
March 16, 2009, Foothills Alliance Church, Calgary*

**“The Place of Religion in a Secular Age: Charles Taylor’s Explanation of  
the Rise and Significance of Secularism in the West”  
By Douglas H. Shantz, PhD**

*Introducing Charles Taylor: A Canadian Thinker on the World Stage*

*Taylor’s Background: the Making of a Scholar who Seeks to Change the World*

1. Bilingual, Roman Catholic Upbringing in Montreal
2. Education at McGill and Oxford and Academic Setting
3. A Socially and Politically Engaged Scholar

**Reading A Secular Age**

***Pre- Reading A Secular Age: The Book’s Purpose, Scope and Main Argument***

Charles Taylor’s purpose in *A Secular Age* is to tell the story of the rise of modern secular society in the West and to tell a better story than the one widely offered till now. “One 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?”

Taylor identifies two main “Engines” of Secularization. First, there was the late Medieval drive to Reform and remake European society, culminating in Protestant movements such as the Reformation, Pietism, and Methodism. Second, there was the appeal of Modern Science and the immanent frame. Taylor shows that the longing for a more than immanent perspective remains strong in the modern age. What has changed is not a lack of belief in our day but the *conditions of belief*. The modern world is a pluralist one in which many forms of belief and unbelief jostle, unsupported by social structures.

***Key Terms, Chapters and Supporting Arguments in A Secular Age***

***Critiquing Charles Taylor’s A Secular Age: Strengths and Weaknesses***

***Conclusion***

“Even Taylor’s most theoretical writings have a practical purpose... Taylor hopes that his large-scale analyses of modern western culture will contribute to the self-knowledge of its members and influence the way people think about themselves and others.” (Ruth Abbey)

## ***Author says secular world not a threat to religion's future***

**BY GRAEME MORTON, CALGARY HERALD** MARCH 21, 2009

It's not the easy, breezy read you'd take on your next beach vacation. But few recent books are more important to those interested in spiritual issues than Charles Taylor's epic *A Secular Age*, according to Douglas Shantz, the chair of Christian thought at the University of Calgary.

Shantz examined Taylor's massive, 874-page study of religion's role in our secular era during last week's Iwaasa Lecture on Urban Theology, which drew a large crowd to Foothills Alliance Church.

"Taylor denies the popular idea that it is inevitable that religion will disappear as secularization increases around the world," Shantz said. "He suggests that, in reality, a religious 'nova effect' is taking place, that religion is remarkably adaptive and is expressing itself in all kinds of new forms, rather than diminishing."

Taylor, a 77-year-old Canadian philosopher and former McGill University professor, has legions of fans around the world. Shantz says part of Taylor's attraction is that his works are read by academics and the public alike.

However, Shantz cautions that *A Secular Age* will stretch the intellect, not to mention the patience, of many readers.

"It's a massive, meandering, intimidating book that examines the last 500 years of Christian life," says Shantz. "But I liked the way Taylor says to the reader, 'This is the world we have, this is the Christianity we have, now run with it.' "

Shantz notes Taylor is a practising Roman Catholic who talks about religion from an experiential, not theoretical stance.



"In the 1500s, Taylor says faith was much more of an 'enchanted' practice, where there was mystery deeply ingrained in it. Today, faith for a lot of people is chiefly a mental practice," says Shantz.

Taylor also notes the growing phenomenon of "minimal religion," where an individual will say "I'm a Christian, but don't try to put me into a denomination and don't try to get me inside a church."

Shantz calls *A Secular Age* a positive force for people of faith, despite the upheavals and uncertainty facing organized religion.

"Taylor says in modern society, people are hungry to find some outlet for the desire for fullness in their lives," says Shantz.

"He says it's a wonderful time in history, when people of faith shouldn't be on the defensive or feel guilty. But he also cautions Christians not be smug, to be better listeners to others with different views, to welcome variety, not feel threatened by it."

Taylor's interests have stretched far beyond the academic world. He ran a number of times for the NDP in federal elections, including an unsuccessful race against a young Liberal candidate named Pierre Trudeau in a Montreal riding in 1965.

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