

Charles Taylor and the Future of Secularism

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I began to read Charles Taylor's acclaimed work, *A Secular Age* (2007) just after I had finished writing a manuscript of my own about modern secularism—*Hallowed Secularism* (2009). Naturally, given Professor Taylor's reputation and learning, I studied his book for help, and I learned a great deal from the book about the "main story behind secularity" (Taylor 2007, 774). In other words, I learned how we in the West came to be in a secular age.

But I did not learn very much about secularism. Specifically, I learned nothing at all about how one might be secular in a secular age.

In retrospect, the reason for this is obvious. Taylor is not a secularist. He is a believing Christian. Taylor considers "secularity" (his term) a mistake that we would do well to reverse.

I know that this characterization of his position directly contradicts the stated thrust of the book, which is to examine how the "conditions of belief" in the West moved, between the years 1500 and 2000, from a condition where almost everyone believed in God to a condition in which it is problematic to believe in God. A change in understanding that fundamentally changes the kinds of experiences that people can have. Thus, it would not seem to be the kind of change that could be reversed. Indeed, the impossibility of traditional belief in the old way is part of what it means to live in a secular age. All this is stated in *A Secular Age*.

Nevertheless, at the end of the book, Taylor presents the reader with two possible futures for this secular age. In one, religion continues to shrink because it is not plausible, while atheism continues to grow. In the other, "we all have some sense" of the fullness of human life that is a "reflection of transcendent reality" that cannot be completely grasped within the "exclusive humanism" of the immanent frame. This leads to "conversion," "breaking out into the broader field" (2007, 768–769).

Which future will be our future? Taylor is prepared to say only this: where there is only immanence, so that “many people even have trouble understanding how a sane person could believe in God,” subsequent generations will develop “a sense of living in a ‘waste land,’” and many young people will begin to explore beyond immanence, perhaps to a state in which they acquire “in some fashion a sense of God.” This is the condition for which Taylor had earlier in the book borrowed Mikhail Epstein’s term: “‘minimal religion’” (533).

So, these are our choices for the future. Conversion to what amounts to orthodox biblical or theistic belief or an atheist waste land so bereft of hope for deep human fulfillment that our descendants will be driven by despair to take up the religious quest again. There is no doubt that Taylor means religious conversion quite literally since he calls the last chapter of the book “Conversions” and describes experiences such as Walker Percy’s conversion to Catholicism. Nor is there any reason to doubt Taylor’s sincerity when he calls secularity a waste land. He really means it.

Why are these stark alternatives the only futures that Taylor allows? There is a quite specific reason for this. Though he puts it as a question, Taylor does not believe that an “intermediate position” is viable (606). The intermediate position he is rejecting is one in which the “phenomenology of universalism—the sense of breaking out of an earlier space and acceding to a higher one, the sense of liberation” that many people experience despite the secular age—is ultimately frustrated by an ontology of immanence (609). Secularists cannot live deeply because they live immanently. And the only alternative ontology Taylor acknowledges is “belief in some transcendent source or power” that “for many people in our Western culture” means “the choice...whether to believe in God” (600). It’s God or the waste land.

In Taylor’s terms, the manuscript I wrote was an attempt to describe a viable intermediate position that seeks to avoid just these unacceptable alternatives of traditional belief in God or empty secularism. My book tries to portray a secularist way of life that remains in the neighborhood of the fulfillment of human possibility promised by traditional religion while rejecting traditional religious dogmas, including the existence of the biblical God.

Before delineating the two errors I think Taylor makes in rejecting the possibility of an intermediate position, it is important to acknowledge the validity of his insistence on the human need for transcendence. A secular society that reduces reality to materialism or exclusive humanism will indeed descend into despair. The anti-religion writings of the group called The New Atheists, including Christopher Hitchens' bestseller *God Is Not Great* (2007), demonstrate no appreciation of this truth. Those writers are heedless that they are leaving their followers without a path for human flourishing.

Taylor's first error is his insistence that belief in God is still a choice in this secular age. Taylor (2007, 600) asserts that belief in God is a choice the culture of imminence leaves open. It is not surprising that Taylor feels this way. He believes in the God of Abraham, which is the way he describes his own religious orientation, and, of course, so do billions of other people. Taylor also acknowledges that, for many secularists, belief in God does not seem like a choice. But they are mistaken. Belief in God "is not foreclosed by undeniable arguments" in the secular context (600).

Taylor is confident in the possibility of belief because he does not fully engage the scientific challenge to theism. Science does not just rule out miracles in the sense that miracles don't seem to happen any more. Science rules out miracle in principle. That means science rules out the kind of God who could perform miracles. This is no longer even Deism, in which God creates the world and then steps back. This is no God at all, in the biblical sense.

As a citizen of this secular age, Taylor cannot bring himself actually to defend miracle as a category. He says only that "[i]t is perhaps precisely the ordinary operation of things which constitutes the 'miracle'" (548). But as C.S. Lewis has written, Christianity is "precisely the story of one grand miracle" (1970, 80). To be blunt, the resurrection either happened or it did not. And whatever the resurrection was—and I know that there is no simple answer to that even within Christian orthodoxy—it was definitely not "the ordinary operation of things" (1970, 80). To be viable, Christianity needs more than that. Christianity needs at least the possibility of miracle.

I am not criticizing anyone's faith. I am criticizing Taylor's blithe in-

sistence that both a closed and an open immanence are equivalent leaps of faith. The openness to the biblical God in a secular age is particularly problematic. Faith for the secularist is a leap of its own, but it is one that attempts to accommodate in principle a scientific worldview.

This first error suggests that the intermediate position is more necessary than Taylor believes, if a destructive secularity is to be avoided. Society-wide conversion in Taylor's terms does not seem at all likely in a secular age. But, of course, it does not follow that, just because the intermediate position is necessary, it is also viable. Taylor suggests that it is not.

I think Taylor is wrong about this as well. Actually, Taylor says so many different things about the immanent frame that it may be unfair to conclude that he ultimately rejects transcendence from within immanence. He writes, for example, of "our sense of wonder that something like ourselves arose out of lower nature. There is a mysterious process here; something deep to understand. We are very drawn to this; we want to explore it" (547). That sounds like transcendence outside theism. But in the very next few pages, Taylor describes the open site of William James where "you can feel the winds pulling you, now to belief, now to unbelief" (549). As I suggested above, that "belief" for Taylor is ultimately a belief in something like a traditional God, because only that belief grounds the ontology necessary for transcendent mystery. Once again, it is immanence, with all its ills, or God.

This kind of either/or is being challenged today on a number of fronts, particularly in science. In his recent book *Reinventing the Sacred*, the theoretical biologist Stuart Kauffman writes that "one view of God is that God is our chosen name for the ceaseless creativity in the natural universe, biosphere and human cultures" (2008, xi). Similarly, the British paleontologist Simon Conway Morris, in *Life's Solution*, is willing to look at the religious tradition directly:

[G]iven that evolution has produced sentient species with a sense of purpose, it is reasonable to take the claims of theology seriously. In recent years there has been a resurgence of interest in the connections that might serve to reunify the scientific world-view with the religious instinct. (2003, 328)

The challenge of doing this is daunting, writes Conway Morris, but "it

will be our lifeline” (328).

These two scientists exemplify Taylor’s sense of wonder from the study of the natural world. Neither of them, however, is moving in the direction of the supernatural. Both seem to feel that the transcendent can be approached from within the immanent.

There are various other indicators of a new permeability between religion and secularism. In philosophy, Jürgen Habermas in *Between Naturalism and Religion* (2008), Susan Neiman in *Moral Clarity* (2008) and James C. Edwards in *The Plain Sense of Things* (1997) are, in different ways, describing a secularism open to religious insights. In theology, a kind of secularist religion is emerging in the work of Michael Hampson in *God Without God* (2008) and John Shelby Spong in *Jesus for the Non-Religious* (2007). These are all examples of various forms of the intermediate position.

Austin Dacey is a particularly important example of this new tendency. In his book *The Secular Conscience* (2008), Dacey, though passionately opposed to organized religion, calls on his fellow secularists to reject relativism and accept the place of belief in public political debate. Dacey argues this from the position of the objectivity of values, a position that Taylor might suggest Dacey lacks the proper ontology to hold.

Even Abraham in Genesis, whose God Taylor invokes, lived in the intermediate position in a sense. The promise to Abraham—that his descendants will be a blessing to all humanity—is a promise from within immanence. Abraham is not promised that he will survive death, and he does not. He is not promised that the world will be redeemed—a blessing is not a Messiah. Abraham’s position is not all that different from that of the revolutionary Marxist who believes that his work today will one day bring blessing to suffering humanity.

Taylor seems to be suggesting that ultimate value requires the existence of God. But even the Bible is ambiguous about this. In the famous story of Abraham’s confrontation with God over the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham confronts God with a species of the universal moral law: “Far be it from thee to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! ... Shall not the Judge of all the world do right?” (Gen. 18:25

RSV). God himself is bound by a norm of which the ground is unclear. The requirement of justice seems to be simply built into reality.

This is my general response to Taylor's suggestion that the intermediate position is not viable. A God may not be needed in order for the good, the true, and the beautiful to be real. Perhaps the promises of the Bible, which correspond basically to the liberation of the slaves in the Book of Exodus, can be true and reliable even though there is no one behind them. These promises can be built into the order of things. They can be transcendent in the midst of immanence. Maybe there is no ontological barrier to the intermediate position.

At one point, Taylor seems to acknowledge the possibility of transcendence outside traditional theism. He quotes with approval Steve Bruce's definition of religion: "actions, beliefs and institutions predicated upon the assumption of the existence of either supernatural entities with powers of agency, or impersonal powers or processes possessed of moral purpose, which have the capacity to set the conditions of, or to intervene in, human affairs'" (Taylor 2007, 429). The objectivity of values might fit into this definition as an impersonal process.

But more representative of Taylor's position is his contrast of ordinary human flourishing with "religious faith in a strong sense," which he defines as "the belief in transcendent reality, on the one hand, and the connected aspiration to a transformation which goes beyond ordinary human flourishing on the other" (510). He is suggesting here that secularity can never attain the deepest promptings of human life, that it can never get beyond mere bourgeois satisfaction—a kind of feel-good superficiality that is present in much new age spirituality. Taylor is doubting whether the secularist can really experience "full-hearted love of some good beyond life" (639).

This is the fundamental challenge to the intermediate position. But I think—actually I hope, since I am personally one of these secularists—that the secularist can experience ultimate fullness by living in radical trust in reality despite the absence of a personal God. Once again our model can be Abraham, or for that matter Jesus on the cross. Taylor would admit that the traditional religious believer has no guarantee that reality is trustworthy just because he or she believes in God. Abraham dies without certainty. Jesus cries out that he is forsaken.

The secularist is in the same condition, but is no worse off. The secularist can also trust radically, and risk life itself, in pursuit of the truly good. The intermediate position can lead to strong faith.

Though they pale in importance compared to the question of faith, there are political and legal consequences that follow from the failure or success of the intermediate position. If the only alternatives for the secular age are traditional religious belief, on the one hand, or materialism and exclusive humanism, on the other, then the culture wars and the New Atheist attacks on religion will continue. Politics will continue to be us-them. The Republican Party will continue to be the Party of Faith and the Democrats the Party of unbelief. Political community cannot be built that way, as we can see from the reaction to President Barack Obama's graceless comment about guns and religion in American small towns.

In law, this divide between religion and atheism will support the attempted continuation of the separation of church and state and government neutrality toward religion. At the same time, religious believers will continue to press for recognition of their beliefs in the public square in opposition to the New Atheism. We will continue to fight, for example, over the words, "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance.

But, if the intermediate position is viable, a new possibility in American public life will emerge. There will finally be nonbelievers who nevertheless share spiritual life to a great extent with traditional religious believers. If secularism were to rediscover the language, symbols, and images of traditional religion, now reinterpreted along naturalistic lines, this cultural divide could be bridged. Women and men of good faith could think once again of a broad progressive coalition among religious believers and nonbelievers, which, though it could not agree on all issues, would undoubtedly find a lot of political common ground. Indeed, such a coalition might renew the American radical tradition that has languished since Marxism was discredited.

In American constitutional law, as well, a melding of church and state might become possible. It would still, of course, remain unconstitutional for government to endorse any particular religion, but it would not be seen as unconstitutional for government to endorse transcendence from within immanence, the intermediate position. Government

support for the values of the intermediate position is especially important since, without it, the social demoralization—the waste land—that Taylor describes as resulting from secularity will become much more likely.

We owe Charles Taylor a great debt. He has shown how we arrived at our current situation, at the secular age. He believes that we are at something of a dead end and that we should, to the extent we can, retrace our steps. Unfortunately, that is not possible. Fortunately, the context he describes is not as dire as he suggests. We are not going to be religious in the old way, but we can be religious all the same, seriously and in a meaningful way.

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