

## Academic Roundtable

### On Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*

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### Secularism's Fragile Buffered Selves

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This is an extraordinary book. It is extraordinary because it is authored by a profound thinker, addresses and attempts to answer a defining question of our era, and does so with a breadth and depth that are rare in contemporary political theory. It is the sort of book that will engender conversations for years to come and create ripples in literatures across several disciplines. It is an unhurried work that does not shy away from delving into exquisite detail while steadily working toward an overarching argument. It will be one of those landmark books that scholars and students will feel compelled to acquaint themselves with even if they do not read it cover to cover.

What is the defining question that Taylor addresses, and what is his overarching argument? The question is rather simple. Almost everyone in Western society in the beginning of the sixteenth century believed in God, and society was ordered with this in mind. Not believing in God was hardly a plausible option. Over five hundred years later, it seems that belief in God is one option among many, and an increasingly unnecessary option at that. How has this come to be the case?

It is helpful to think about Taylor's answer to this question on two levels. The first level is Taylor's basic approach to the subject. One hallmark of Taylor's approach and argument is that the story of how Western culture moved from a God-soaked society in early modernity to a secular contemporary society is a dizzyingly complex narrative. He is

interested not merely in what we might take to be the obvious criteria whereby we measure the loss of religious influence—religious presence in the public square, church attendance, survey results, etc.—but in the underlying “conditions of belief” that lie beneath the surface.

Taylor takes issue with the standard Enlightenment account of the rise of secularity, what he calls the “subtraction thesis” (26). This is the simple notion that religion and its influence retreated with the rise of science and its Newtonian, mechanistic account of the world. Subtract religion, and rational modernity fills the void. A major theme of the work is Taylor’s insistence that this is a self-congratulatory and simplistic account that obscures much and reveals little. What, then, does account for the shift?

Here we move to the second level of Taylor’s argument. Given his criticism of the Enlightenment’s subtraction thesis as overly simple, we can expect Taylor’s retelling to be complex, and so it is. Indeed, his account defies a quick summary, but the following three aspects of his argument will have to do.

The first component is Taylor’s description of how certain cultural realities shifted such that elites and then the common people viewed religion less and less as the necessary framework holding society together. In short, society became disenchanting, undergoing massive programs of “Reform,” and people came to understand religion as personal and not first and foremost corporate.

Disenchantment was a process whereby people became what Taylor calls “buffered selves.” They no longer believed that spiritual beings or magical objects, like relics of saints, could affect them directly. They began to see such beliefs as superstitious. “Reform” is what Taylor calls the attempts of religious elites to standardize the high demands of religious faith. No longer would the lofty moral life demanded of believers be expected only of priests and monks, but the laity must be made moral as well. Finally, the Reformation was the culmination of an ongoing process whereby faith was seen as something that “I” have as an individual. In addition to these factors, Christians began to emphasize the dignity of the natural world as opposed to a purely “otherworldly” approach that denigrated creation.

What is so welcome in Taylor’s account, in contrast with the subtrac-

tion thesis, is that such developments did not lead to a loss of faith in a straightforward linear fashion. The mistake of the simple Enlightenment account is to equate disenchantment with irreligion. Taylor convincingly argues that disenchantment, "Reform," the personalization of faith, and an appreciation of the natural world were all motivated by religious reasons and had some very positive consequences for believers. At the same time, these developments made possible an "immanent" view of the world in which God became decreasingly necessary.

The second aspect of Taylor's thesis is that God's diminishing role in society creates more and more possibilities for how we account for morality, meaning, and humanity's place in the world. Taylor notes that the fracturing of the pre-Reformation understanding led to a "nova effect" (299). Going well beyond a matter of belief or unbelief, Christian or atheist, a spectrum of possibilities emerged, which has only expanded into modern times in what Taylor aptly coins a "supernova." Perhaps the chief thread that unites the at-times remarkably eclectic meanderings in Taylor's book is the tracing of how the various possibilities exploded from a more-or-less accepted and common pre-Reformation framework.

Finally, the third helpful aspect in Taylor's account is his delightful problematizing of the standard transcendent-Religion contra immanent-Enlightenment narrative. The standard story, perhaps best expressed by Rousseau, is that Enlightenment humanism rescues the earthly goodness of human life from Christianity's denigration of human nature given its doctrine of original sin and its therefore unfair and impossibly lofty moral demands. The people must be saved from their erstwhile ecclesial saviors, and the Voltaires, Spinozas, and Rousseaus are employed in the delicate task of dismantling the Christian edifice for the sake of the equality, freedom, and elevation of the masses.

But here the plot thickens. For just when it appears that a this-worldly Enlightenment has a transcendent Christianity up against the ropes, a third figure enters the ring and complicates matters. This third figure is Nietzsche and those who have followed in his wake. Taylor refers to their position as the immanent counter-Enlightenment. Disposing of God is not enough. God's morality and the consequent commitments to equality and the precious "masses" must also be jettisoned (636). There are

echoes of Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* in Taylor's account here.

In this new situation, any two may gang up on a third. Both Enlightenment humanism and transcendent religion reject Nietzsche's celebration of destruction and disdain for humanity. Christians and Nietzscheans alike find the Enlightenment project unsatisfactory, tepid, and small-minded. And Nietzscheans and Enlightenment humanists reject the claims of faith as sad, outdated relics of humanity's childish past. The jostling of these three perspectives makes up an important part of our current situation.

Of course, these three aspects leave out a great deal in Taylor's story. Yet they offer some idea of the sort of thesis Taylor defends, and the manner in which he goes about making his case. Things are not as easy as we might think, Taylor insists over and over, and we would do well to delve more deeply into not only what beliefs changed, but what cultural shifts made those beliefs and the changes possible in the first place.

A project this ambitious and far-reaching cannot help but provoke disagreement. Atheists and agnostics will likely find Taylor's unique claims for a reconsidered Christian faith unpersuasive. Orthodox Christians, and conservative Catholics in particular, will balk at some of Taylor's descriptive and prescriptive claims about Christianity's future. One virtue of the work is that Taylor's sympathetic reading of all sorts of positions requires one to reject what he describes as a naïve view of faith or atheism. We ought not view our position—whatever it may be—as simply axiomatic. Epistemic humility requires us carefully to consider other positions in the emerging supernova.

Nevertheless, there are two related criticisms I want to raise briefly with regard to Taylor's book. First, I question whether Taylor is right in his description of the extent to which secularism has taken hold of Western culture; second, I question his assertion that a non-transcendent ethic can sustain a society over generations.

It is undeniably the case that there has been a massive shift from 1500 to the present day, and the orthodox believer owes Taylor a great debt for debunking the simple myth about the rise of reason at the expense of religion. But how to measure the extent of the shift? Taylor is nothing if not careful and circumspect in his observations, and he is surely correct to note that many believers recognize their faith as one option

among many, and recognize this in a way that seems entirely anachronistic to ascribe to believers in the sixteenth century (31). Modern believers, Taylor argues, no longer understand themselves as open to external spiritual forces or seek objects which impart divine favor.

I'm not so sure. Because Taylor is interpreting underlying conditions of belief, he cannot rely on surveys or social science to support his claims. This is both a strength and a weakness. The strength is that Taylor can investigate those elements of our culture not amenable to statistical measurement; the weakness is that he seems often to resort to his own sense of things. One wonders how ubiquitous the "we" is that he employs when describing the modern mindset.

My own sense of things is that where one stands makes a great deal of difference. Buffered selves living in an immanent world probably make up the vast majority of people living in Western Europe, Canada, and the academy. This is less the case in the "bellicose, hegemony-loving parts of U.S. society" that voted for George W. Bush (283). Leaving aside Taylor's (rare) partisan jab here, there are tens of millions of people who understand themselves to be open to spiritual realities outside their autonomous selves: Catholics who take in the real presence of Christ in communion, Calvinists who believe God chooses them before they respond to God, Mormons who perform baptisms for their deceased loved ones, and particularly the Pentecostals that Taylor frequently mentions. Pentecostals, after all, are distinguished from other Christians by their belief that the Spirit of God speaks through them in an angelic language. This understanding of the self is hardly closed off to outside spiritual forces.

Another characteristic common to Pentecostals, Mormons, and many Catholics introduces my second criticism of Taylor's project. Unlike the mainline denominations in the U.S. and elsewhere, Pentecostals, Mormons, and many Catholics churches are bursting at the seams. This is due in large part to their emphasis on missions and evangelism, but also because these believers are simply having more children than their mainline, and secular, fellow citizens.

While I am loathe to criticize Taylor for leaving anything out of such a robust book, it is remarkable that he does not address the capacity for non-transcendent societies to pass on their way of life to future generations.

With one exception in which he endorses the world-changing power of raising children (700), Taylor does not address this rather key element of any sustainable way of life. Certainly it is the case that any individual, indeed millions of individuals, may live what seems to be a satisfactory life without transcendence or a belief in God or the afterlife. But Taylor too easily assumes that societies that have abandoned transcendence can inculcate the social goods necessary to maintain themselves.

We see this in his rejection of the Christian claim that civilization needs religion to ward off immorality and disorder (471, 638). But it is not only the Christian claim. While Christians may claim religion is necessary because it is *true*, Taylor ignores the august company of philosophers who claim religion is necessary because it is *useful*. Hobbes dedicates the second half of *Leviathan* to the quixotic task of reconciling his system with the Bible. Spinoza avers that religion is a crucial tool in the hand of the enlightened sovereign in his *Theologico-Political Treatise*. Locke claims that belief in an afterlife is essential and so denies civil standing to atheists. Rousseau creates a civil religion because no society has been founded without religion as its base. Even Nietzsche at times seems grateful for religion's role in keeping the deluded occupied.<sup>1</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville perhaps makes the strongest claim on this matter.<sup>2</sup>

Taylor may very well be correct that Tocqueville and the rest are unfair to individuals, but how does he counter the wider societal claim? He could very well point to the democratic states of Western Europe and Canada, but, to borrow a phrase from Chinese premiere Zhou Enlai when asked about the French Revolution, "it's too soon to tell." One need not be an alarmist to note that Western Europe's demographic reality does not bode well for the future of a secular Europe. Barring a tremendous reversal of cultural mores and birthrates, the secular phase of Europe's history will be sandwiched between her Christian past and her Islamic future. Perhaps there is a connection after all between religion and the societal cohesion.

Taylor does address the religious "exception" of America given its modernity and resilient religious identity, though he acknowledges that Europe may very well be the exception (522–529). Taylor follows Tocqueville in part by attributing America's religious flourishing to the separation of church and state and robust religious freedom. While this

is true so far as it goes, there is another complementary explanation latent in his work.

Taylor persuasively argues that the “buffered self” previously mentioned is now the norm for some Western societies. The buffered self is autonomous; the self chooses what goods, spiritual or otherwise, it will make part of its life, and denies the power of external forces to violate its autonomy by impacting its life without its consent. While I have questioned just how widespread this self-understanding is, at least in the United States, there does seem to be something to it with regard to more secular citizens.

But what does this have to do with religion and childbearing? If I might take a page from Taylor’s own approach, it seems to me that childrearing is one modern exception to the secularist’s buffered understanding. For as Stephen Macedo has noted, the modern democratic citizen does not spring up from the ground fully grown, liberal, and secular. Raising children means, almost by definition, inculcating beliefs, virtues, character, and an appreciation of human goods in the children under one’s care. Children are not autonomous (yet) and cannot choose the goods that will give their life meaning. They are vulnerable to the imposition of external values from actors other than themselves.

But if the buffered self living in a disenchanted world is the norm for secular Western societies, then raising the next generation creates a tension in that the secularist must engage in the sort of external imposition of value that she rejects as a possibility for her (adult) self. The secularist buffered self does not believe that angels and demons, or the Holy Spirit, can intervene in her life without her permission; indeed, such a possibility is demeaning to the dignity of human choice, and those who still cling to such a view are misguided. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that secular societies populated by buffered selves will hold rather ambiguous views about childrearing.

This is admittedly speculative, and there are undoubtedly other factors involved.<sup>3</sup> Regardless of the underlying reason, the traumatic decline in birthrates among industrialized Western welfare states should give us pause about Taylor’s too easy dismissal of the necessity of religious transcendence for the health and continued survival of Western nation-states.

Charles Taylor has done us all an inestimable service by working through this project. He invites us to join him as he considers one of the most interesting and important questions of our time. His manner is learned, but inviting and conversational. Whether agreeing or disagreeing—perhaps especially in disagreeing—one cannot help but come away from his book better informed about the various beliefs that animate our lives together and the underlying conditions that make those beliefs possible.

## Notes

1. He has kind things to say about Hinduism in particular as it provides a pyramid structure for society. It's hard to appreciate those strong spirits who can breathe the mountain air unless one has the deluded masses for comparison.
2. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (2000), Volume II, Part 1, Chapter 5:  
 When religion is destroyed in a people, doubt takes hold of the highest portions of the intellect and half paralyzes all the others. Each becomes accustomed to having only confused and changing notions about matters that most interest those like him and himself; one defends one's opinions badly or abandons them, and as one despairs of being able to resolve by oneself that greatest problems that human destiny presents, one is reduced, like a coward, to not thinking about them at all. Such a state cannot fail to enervate souls; it slackens the springs of the will and prepares citizens for servitude.
3. Almost by definition, a secularist is not going to put much stock in an afterlife. Given this, one understandable read is that one must make as much of this life as possible. While children can be seen by religious believer and secularist alike as an integral component to a flourishing life, taking care of children properly also requires an incredible amount of work and closes off many other life possibilities.

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