

Notes on Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*
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Some Orienting Remarks

1. Taylor is a philosopher, but a philosopher who thinks the discourses and practices of societies/cultures need to be studied carefully in order to discover their 'deep background' or 'inescapable frameworks' that facilitate their 'embedded sense-making' practices and ways of understanding.
2. Taylor is a philosopher, therefore, who investigates such inescapable frameworks as they appear historically—hence, how did it come about that at one point in the Western Latin Culture believing in God was a virtually inescapable practice, whereas 500 hundred years later believing in God was inescapably an option only?
3. The very title of his book indicates that he is taking aim at a sociocultural condition that every one of us has had our nose bludgeoned repeatedly under the rubric of *secularization*. It has been in the forefront of our minds and in the interstices of our hearts as we have struggled to interpret Xn faith for ourselves and for others—and many are the differences therein among us!
4. But, as a philosopher, Taylor is closer to Hegel and Weber than he is to, say, Peter Berger, but also closer to Wittgenstein and some postmodern philosophers.
5. Further, Taylor thinks most theories of secularization assumed it was more like a 'subtraction process'—the rise of modern science and democratic political forms subtracted from the previous inescapable framework of Xn belief and practice, thereby producing a secular age. Taylor will argue that this way of construing secularization obscures i) the role Xn discourses and practices themselves played in such sociocultural change and ii) intelligent ways in which religion [Xnty?] might engage secularity.
6. Remember as well that T is interested not only in tracing the secularity but also probing within it to identify possibilities of religious beliefs and practices that clearly understand that they are an 'option' culturally but now an option for which persons can opt, under no illusions that all 'reasonable contemporaries' will admire and agree with their option; in putting this way, I am reminding you that T will not be adopting the program of Schleiermacher—that what the cultured despisers of religion despise is indeed despicable but not quite what 'true religion' is! It might help to remember that T is a practicing Roman Catholic.
7. Bear clearly in mind as you read:
 - a. T is discussing Western Latin Culture only; not any and all cultures.
 - b. T will be repetitious in how he discusses his topic, but don't get bored—it might help to be reminded.
 - c. Yet, one critic did say that T's book was "preposterously long" for a philosophical discussion, even one that investigates matters historically.
 - d. Still, notice how T employs a bunch of qualifiers—"I am suggesting that..."—which 'suggest' that he understands the difficulties and pitfalls of his program.
 - e. Nevertheless, T is making a case, advancing an argument and is thereby inviting us to test his case, to raise questions, to make counter-proposals: does he help us Xns understand better or more adequately our sociocultural situation and what implications might it have for how we actually live and how we understand Xn faith in relation to the current sociocultural situation?

Some Matters on My Mind as We Read and Discuss, but which do not need to be discussed at the beginning of our study—only noted.

1. My Grammar already presupposes that T is mainly right in his analysis of contemporary secular thought-forms and frames of reference.
2. Hence, I i) eschew some liberal forms of apologetics; ii) emphasize the distinctive character of Xn 'discourses and practices' that do not depend on the secular world for their intelligibility or

- persuasiveness; iii) construe systematic theology as ‘confessional’ in character; iv) reconstrue what I call the ‘dialectic between church and world’; v) rethink the character of the church as a voluntary community of believers for whom justification and sanctification are sequential rather than simultaneous; vi) reinstall the defining character of discourse about God as Triune, a High but Kenotic Christology, the priority and sufficiency of grace, and multidimensional character of salvation talk.
3. You might note that I am already a bit uncomfortable with his apparent ease in using the word ‘God’ as though it throughout has a common syntax and semantics. But, of course, in ways T does not discuss until late in the book, it matters greatly just what we mean by ‘God’. Remember, up until the Constantinian revolution, Xns had no doubt that they meant and used ‘God’ in ways different from their surrounding and dominant culture.

Introduction

1. First question: in what does ‘secularity’ consist? Three interrelated answers:
- i) Secularity as presupposed in ‘public spaces’—politics, economics/business, educational institutions, law, etc. [**Secularity 1**]
Belief in God is not presupposed or necessary to occupying these public spaces. 1
 - ii) Secularity as the sheer numerical decline in religious belief and practice—going to church. [**Secularity 2**]
 - iii) Secularity as those diffuse conditions of belief and judgment in which religious belief is considered *optional* rather than presupposed and culturally embedded. [**Secularity 3**]
Assumed that reasonable persons can disagree about God and religious belief.
It is this aspect of secularity that T intends to trace historically—how does it come about that religious belief was once axiomatic for cultural life and is now only optional. 3
2. T says he is interested in ‘belief’ and ‘unbelief’ not as *rival theories*, i.e. not in terms of theological beliefs or creeds, but as different kinds of *lived experiences* involved in a person’s life in one or another—as alternative ways of living our **moral/spiritual life** in the broadest sense. 2-3
T proposes that these moral/spiritual dimensions of our experience can be detected in:
- i) deeply moving experiences of life’s fullness and richness, rising beyond ordinariness. 3
 - ii) deep experiences of absence, exile, misery, loss, emptiness.
 - iii) a kind of *stabilized middle condition* of ordinary fullness and happiness and fulfillment—not much beyond, no heights or depths—living well and fully is all life is about. T thinks this middle condition just is the sort of non-despairing life many unbelievers actually live—no need for any ‘more’ beyond life now. 7
- T thinks belief and unbelief are just such lived experiences in our secular age.
The modern unbeliever reaches for fullness *within* life, under the power of rational agency, exercising autonomy. 8
“We live in a condition where we cannot help but be aware that there are a number of different construals, views, which intelligent, reasonably undeluded people, of good will, can and do disagree on. We cannot help looking over our shoulder from time to time, looking sideways, living our faith also in a condition of doubt and uncertainty.” 11
[Note well T’s use of ‘we’ here and repeatedly throughout his text. An old philosopher once told me to be mindful and careful of the ‘we’ speakers and writers often invoke in their speaking and writing. Whose the ‘we’?]
3. T contends that in our secular age the *default position* among academics and intellectual elites is more and more the presumption of unbelief—that beliefs have to be defended and explained.
Hence, ‘belief in God isn’t quite the same thing in 1500 and 2000.’

All important human beliefs, T proposes, are held within “a context or framework of the taken for granted, which usually remains tacit...and never quite formulated.” 13

Can call these frameworks the ‘background’ of sense-making.

How does it come about, then, that such frameworks or background beliefs can change over time?

It is this shift in background—in the whole context in which we experience and search for fullness—that T is calling *the coming of a secular age*. 14

We need to understand these shifts not just in terms of beliefs and reasons but in terms of lived experience—in terms of differences of experience and sensibility.

4. But what do we mean by ‘religion’ as that which i) is retreating from public space; ii) is a type of belief or practice which is or is not in regression; iii) a certain kind of belief or commitment whose conditions in this secular age are being examined?

T admits the huge difficulties of defining religion, but nevertheless will opt for the distinction between finding fullness of life in the *immanent* world at hand and finding fullness in a *transcendent* world beyond.

The religion that is in retreat is the religion of transcendent fullness and salvation. 15

5. Consider the ways in which humans have repeatedly talked about *flourishing*—what constitutes a fulfilled life, a life genuinely worth living.

Note well: throughout T’s discussion the notion of flourishing and differences in what counts as flourishing is a decisive marker between 1500 and 2000.

Flourishing is a matter of *how* a person lives her life and not a matter of what transcendent reward or destiny she might have earned. 16-17

[Note: issues of flourishing are indeed interesting and important matters, but for folk who believe in the Xn God, it is daunting to confront the shape of issues the problem of evil raises—before God what is the status of those who have died early or violently or completely bereft of anything approximating flourishing? Is it just the case immanently and ultimately that some folk flourish and many are they who did not flourish? We will need to see how T handles these questions when in the later chapters he attempts to find some ‘space’ for religion. For those interested such issues as these I schematically discuss in GCF, pp. 328-331.]

6. **T’s main historical thesis:** Modernity in the sense of secularity 3 is coterminous with the rise of a society in which for the first time in human history a **purely self-sufficient humanism—exclusive humanism**—comes to be a widely available option.

Exclusive humanism accepts that there are no final goals of human life beyond flourishing in time. 18

Previous humanisms—Platonisms, Stoicisms—seemed to post a relationship with some depth or transcendent dimension of human life. 19

Yet modernity is coterminous with secularity 3 but not with exclusive humanism.

T’s point and project: exclusive humanism arises in modernity and secularity 3 and is the condition in which **our** [we—believers and nonbelievers alike] experience of and search for fullness occurs—but, T is not claiming that exclusive humanism offers the only alternative for religion.

“secularity 3 came to be along with the possibility of exclusive humanism, which thus for the first time widened the range of possible options, ending the era of ‘naïve’ religious faith. **Exclusive humanism**...crept up on us through an intermediate form, **Providential Deism**; and both the Deism and the humanism were made possible by earlier developments within orthodox Xnty. Once this humanism is on the scene, the new plural, non-naïve predicament allows for multiplying the options beyond the original gamut.” 19

7. Concerning the meaning of ‘religion’ in the context of T’s study of secularity:

‘**Religion**’ is to be understood in terms of ‘**transcendence**’, but now transcendence in three senses.

In much secularization theories, the crucial sense of transcendence is in relation to a transcendent God—an agent or power transcending the immanent order. Hence in such theories, **secularity 1** is the story of this God’s displacement from public space; **secularity 2** is the story of the decline of the belief in a transcendent God. Yet T’s concern is with transcendence in **secularity 3** in which religion might be a sense of a higher human good than human flourishing—herein T mentions Xn understanding of agape as the power of a good not reducible to immanent human flourishing. It is this latter sense of transcendence that T will explore later in his book when he comes to testing the limits of secularization theories that emphasize only secularity 1 and 2. 20

9. Putting a point on T’s project: **modern secularization theories** claim that modernity had to bring about ‘the death of God’ and there are no live alternatives for intelligent, educated folk than exclusive humanism; it is this claim that T is challenging, but now challenging by way of examining the historical trajectory of secularity and religion as understood in the context of what he variously calls Western, Latin Christendom, North Atlantic worlds. 21

Briefly going on to Part One: The Work of Reform

Read carefully on your own.

Ch. 1: The Bulwarks of Reform

1. Exploring in brief the embedded conditions of belief that made it virtually impossible to not to believe in God and how such came to be dis-embedded.
2. For T the key development was the Reformation rejection of the distinction between the *religious life*—the life of the priests, monks, nuns—and the *secular life*—the life of ordinary believers who took care of everyday life unburdened by the more stringent conditions of the really religious life. For T the Reformation hammered this rejection home but it was preceded in previous centuries by the need to discipline and order social life. Hence, the religious life itself becomes the living in the ordinary everyday world of commerce, politics, farming, crafting, etc.
3. The movement from the loss of the enchanted world to the rise of disciplinary society to rise of the modern **buffered self**.

Ch. 2: The Rise of the Disciplinary Society

The various ways in which society itself is viewed as needing discipline in order to restrain the recalcitrant vagaries of human beings.

T will come back to these themes repeatedly.

Ch 3: The Great Disembedding

T elaborates further on the concept of disembedding that which was previously embedded and what was embedded was that given framework that made-sense of life in particular times.

Disembedding is related to the concept of **social imaginaries**.

Ch 4: Modern Social Imaginaries

1. A social imaginary is not primarily the ways in which persons might reflectively consider and critique their social world; rather **a social imaginary is more nearly the actual ways in which persons concretely live in and construct their social worlds.**

Again, a social imaginary is that deeply embedded way in which persons ‘construe’ [my word] their world as present in how they live.

In calling this an imaginary—as distinct from a developed theory—T wants us to have regard for how persons live in their social spaces—how they do it and therewith what they depend on to frame their living and doing—their actual living discourses and practices.

T will repeatedly invoke this concept of social imaginaries as he discerns and critiques the various patterns of living over time.

2. Lots of good material in this chapter.

Ch 5: The Spectre of Idealism

T here worries about whether his use of embedded frameworks and social imaginaries are a duplication of Hegel's much criticized theory that human history itself is the dialectical and therefore repeated but developing repetition of those deep and necessary rational forms of life.

Interesting but technical in character. Remember, T did write a very early book on Hegel and attempted to blunt the standard critique that Hegel made history conform to his theory rather than making his theory conform to history and its historical changes.

Yet like Hegel, T is concerned to read history in terms of discourses and practices and their development over time and discerning the rationale for their development—it is that indomitable human curiosity that asks: how is it that this state of affairs came about rather than some other?

Unlike Marx—who thought socioeconomic powers drive human historical forms—Hegel and Taylor think the powers that drive history are more nearly embedded social imaginaries of a moral/spiritual nature, which, of course, also includes economic powers.