

**BEYOND DECLINE: CHARLES TAYLOR'S CONSTRUCTIVE ACCOUNT OF
SECULARIZATION IN THE MODERN AGE**

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Abstract

Taylor as a believer, historian of culture, and of course as a philosopher is so dedicated to correct the notion that secularity in our society is caused by the advancement of science and reason. In his view, the thinking is too simplistic and cannot offer any explanation as to why people would abandon their faith. There are basically two reasons we have chosen to reflect on Taylor's thought on secularization: the first purpose is because Taylor presents a very specific understanding of secularization in modernity that contrasts with other views about secularization, especially in the modern period. He integrates into his theory the precedent narratives and he combines them into a new more comprehensive account. Because of the originality of Taylor's approach, we have analyzed it more closely. Secondly, by his analysis of secularization, Taylor intends to indicate the conditions of belief that are in the time of modernity different from those that there were in the 16th century period. The problem this paper seeks to solve is to help us realize that in the 21st century, societies around the world are witnessing a rise in diverse belief systems, cultures, and ideologies. Rapid globalization and technological advancements have interconnected people from various backgrounds, leading to a heightened awareness of differences. The prevalence of secularism further accentuates the challenge of finding common ground and fostering unity amidst the absence of shared religious norms. Against this backdrop, the study is set to explore the relevance and applicability of Charles Taylor's philosophical concept of secularization in promoting understanding and cooperation among individuals with differing beliefs and cultural affiliations. The hermeneutic method is employed in this work because it encourages an exploration of the social and cultural contexts shaping individuals' perceptions of the secular age. By acknowledging the intricate interplay between human experiences and broader societal dynamics, this research offers a holistic lens to analyze the practical implications of Taylor's ideas. At this point we have seen clearly that Taylor's thought about secularization draws us a step closer to freedom and expressive fullness.

Keywords: Secularization, Charles Taylor, Culture, Modernity, Transcendence

Introduction

Being one of the greatest contemporary political philosophers, Charles Taylor is considered above all a relentless commentator of our time: modernity. In his masterpiece, *Sources of the Self*, he argues:

‘Secularization’ ...this is a concept that is mostly used to describe the modern society; and it is sometimes even offered as a partial explanation for characteristics of this society. But it is more a locus of questions than a source of explanations. It describes a process which is undeniable: the regression of belief in God, even more, the decline in the practice of religion, to the point where from being central to the entire life of Western societies, public and private, this has become sub-cultural, one of many private forms of involvement which some people appreciate.¹

Here Taylor bases his understanding of the modern age on the idea that it forms the cradle of a historically specific culture and should not be considered as an obligatory evolutionary step that is universally valid in a supposed progressive history of humanity. For this reason, Taylor was able to focus his attention on those changes of mentality and imagination that he sees as many structural transformations of the moral frames of reference within which modern individuals align their choices and actions. Taylor’s emphasis on the inner life of individuals and on the ordering propensities of human reflexivity, the revaluation of daily activities and the ethical redemption of common life, the development of an original understanding of nature as a moral source and the ideal of authenticity, for him they are the foundation of this cultural transformation that has led to the birth of an identity that is both rich and fragmented and has no equal in human history. This compounded and polycentric identity is both the product and the cause of a troubled and conflictual history that even today has not ceased to plague and intrigue the most restless minds of our modern society.

There are basically two reasons we have chosen to reflect on Taylor’s thought on secularization: the first purpose is because Taylor presents a very specific understanding of secularization in modernity that contrasts with other views about secularization, especially in the modern period. He integrates into his theory the precedent narratives and he combines them into a new more comprehensive account. Because of the originality of Taylor’s approach, we will analyze it more closely. Secondly, by his analysis of secularization, Taylor intends to indicate the

¹ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989, p. 309.

conditions of belief that are in the time of modernity different from those that there was in the 16th century period. At this point we see clearly that Taylor's thought about secularization draws us a step closer to freedom and expressive fullness, which will also help us search for an answer to Hegel's concern.

The Different Shades of Secularization

To understand what secularization is, is to view it in relation to the problem it creates, we should realize that Taylor's problem since his early days in the 1960s was the very same problem Plato² faced for thousands of years past, as to how to understand what was happening in "the present age"³ and to discern its consequences for human "fullness" or "the transcendent horizon" in individual lives in contemporary culture. With this in mind, for Taylor the question is, in what sense can our generation be called a secularized era? First of all, it is important to clarify what in Taylor's view secularization is not: it is not the final stage in an evolutionary process of rationalization of human beliefs. Instead, secularization should be seen as a complex historical phenomenon that includes different things that should be kept duly distinguished.⁴ What Taylor tries to do is to remind us that secularization has various meanings, where you can be a secular society that the church and the state are sharply divided and yet have a high incidence of religious practice. He strongly believes that what is at fault with the Enlightenment vision of progress is the theory of secularization that lies behind it. That theory is the "subtraction" theory of secularization – the notion that what science has achieved in the modern world is a stripping away of needless, primitive superstitions revealing the essential, rational core of humanity. This obviously is false. In fact, Taylor insists that secularization is a paradigm shift. Because its origins lie within religion itself, especially in the Reformation drive to crumble the difference between the "higher flourishing", implicit in the religious lives of monks and priests, and the "lower flourishing" of lay people that are involved in their daily activities. Taylor asserts that secularism has left us leading hollow, atomized lives that is devoid of what he terms "fullness".⁵

Part of the complexity is contained in his book, *A Secular Age*, where he begins his analysis with a carefully nuanced account of secularization by distinguishing three distinct renderings of what secularization means: first is the withdrawal of God

² Robinson D, & Groves J, *Introducing Plato*, London: Faber & Faber, 2000, p. 3. Here we notice that the authors argue that "Plato said 'all philosophers must soar with unwearied passion until the grasp the true nature of things as they are.'" And I argue that this sounds pretty much like the question Taylor asked: "what the hell is going on here?"

³ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Present Age*, New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1962, p. 33.

⁴ Hans, Blumenberg. *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, Cambridge Ma.: MIT Press, 1983.

⁵ John A. Barrie, "Probing Modernity", *Quadrant*, Vol. 40, no. 5. Pp. 82-83, 1996.

from “public spaces”; secondly, a decline in religious practice; and third is a move from a society in which belief in God is unchallenged and in fact unproblematic, to a society where belief in God is understood to be an option among others, and more often to embrace it becomes even more difficult.⁶ Many analyses of secularization are of course less differentiated than this and tend to lump different elements together. For this reason, we discover that Taylor’s work on secularization is to respond to two distinct understandings of the rise of secularization. The initial understanding considers the rise of secularization as a clear sign of decline, a falling away from religious belief and practice, and a collapse into moral relativism and social and cultural decay.⁷ This kind of understanding is normally found among Church figures who desire to promote a return to the past, in which religious belief went in tandem with strong moral and cultural norms. They concentrate more on the decline the presence of God in the public sphere and bemoan the falling away of religious practice. The second understanding which is also opposed is found among those who view secularization as a narrative of progress, a sloughing off of the coercion of the past, especially religious restrictions which are seen as so much superstition and fanaticism.

At the end, the dead hand of tradition is substituted by the march of progress driven by science and technology. Obviously, these thoughts focus largely on the dwindling in religious practice as a natural consequence of science and modernization. And that is what Taylor describes as “subtraction stories”, they see the rise of modern world in terms of liberation from “certain earlier confining horizons.”⁸ He refutes both understandings of the rise of secularization, and proposes a new narrative for its rise as involving elements both of decline and progress. What Taylor intends to do is to unravel the moral core at the heart of the rise of secularization, a moral core which itself springs from the Christian tradition.⁹

Taylor’s conviction is that a society can actually withdraw God from the public spaces and yet have relatively high rates of religious practice. Though Taylor’s greater concern is as he succinctly points: “the change I desire to explain and trace is one which brings us from a society where it was practically impossible not to

⁶ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007, p. 9.

⁷ Andre van der Braak, *Reimagining Zen in a Secular Age: Charles Taylor and Zen Buddhism in the West*, Boston: Brill Rodopo, 2020. Online review from:
<https://secularbuddhistnetwork.org/a-review-of-reimagining-zen-in-a-secular-age-charles-taylor-and-zen-buddhism-in-the-west/>

⁸ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 11.

⁹ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, p. 312.

believe in God, to the society where faith, even for the most ardent believer, is one possibility among others Belief in God is no longer axiomatic. There are alternatives.”¹⁰ This assertion is especially apparent in its appeal to the criteria of authenticity and interiority. Because both have strongly Christian antecedents in the unfolding modern sense of identity.¹¹ In this way Taylor wishes to refute an understand that sees the present situation simply in terms of decline. Taylor on the other hand counters the subtraction stories of modernity by highlighting that decline in religious practice is not uniform and is not a necessary consequence of the advancement of modern science. What at the end is necessary is a nuanced account of the dynamics which have led to the present and will continue to shape our future and not any kind of condemnation or outright praise.

Secularity as Withdrawal of God from Public Spaces

Talking about the withdrawal of God or religion from the public spaces may sound vague because its meaning is very broad. Before the present modernity, the political organizations and institutions were somehow linked to or are based on faith, religion, or adherence to a belief in God. The presence of God and religion were felt in every nook and cranny of the society. Looking at secularity as the withdrawal of religion from the public spaces, there is a shift of understanding of what society is grounded on. And gradually, these shifts found their own inherent rationality, not necessarily founded on religion. Rather, people begin to seek new foundations that are based on shared opinion and exchange of new ideas. In his account of the history of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Taylor considers these periods as the framework where such a process is conceived.¹² Additionally, he explains this withdrawal in terms of structure and anti-structure. This is a terminology Taylor borrowed from Victor Turner.¹³ Taylor reechoes the definition of Turner of structure as the code of behavior of a society, where different roles and statutes are defined, likewise their rights, duties, powers, and vulnerabilities. As the pressure of these codes becomes very forceful, people tend to look for relaxation and relief. The stronger a particular structure with its limiting code is, the stronger the anti-structure with its anti-code grows. Through the anti-structure and anti-code, members of a particular society can find new ways to express themselves and to realize their potential. Shifting from a certain structure and codes to their anti-structure and anti-codes does not necessarily involve the destination of the structure and codes. The shift might be an expression of the need

¹⁰ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 10.

¹¹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 12.

¹² Blumenberg Hans, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, Cambridge Ma.: MIT Press, 1983.

¹³ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure and Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*, London: Aldine Transaction, 2008, pp. 45-51.

to discover a new equilibrium amid the tension emerging within society and individuals. Taylor gives a simple example referring to Carnival and other similar festivities – Saturnalia in Roman times, Aztec renewals of the world – when ordinary order is upturned, allowing people to enjoy a reversal of their normal life.

This explanation or anything similar for Taylor is not satisfactory for the withdrawal of religion from the public sphere, because the explanations are too *functionalist*. Their interest is on the idea that the entire dynamic between structure and anti-structure is centered on the preservation of society. He did not particularly mention that behind the idea is the Marxist's conception of reality and society, where the material reality assumes the ontological function. Even though Taylor does not categorically criticize this position, but such mindsets and theories based on materialism remain unacceptable to him. The main reason for Taylor's rejection of these theories is that they do not give an answer to the question of where the power for the anti-structure comes from. For him, the origin of this power cannot be material or limited to the function of preserving society. He insists that the power comes from "the sense that all codes limit us, shut us out from something important, prevent us from seeing and feeling things of great moment".¹⁴ He goes further, "a human code exists within a larger spiritual cosmos, and its opening to anti-structure is what is required to keep the society in tune with the cosmos, or to draw on its forces."¹⁵ What Taylor implies with this puzzling statement is that human structures taken in themselves cannot express and exhaust completely the meaning of human life; they cannot provide the ultimate reason for the existence of society. There comes a time when individuals and members of society experience discomfort in the face of the same structures of society or of the present codes of behavior. The worries and discomfort they experience faced with the *temporal*, which is insufficient as such, and calls for something deeper, more spiritual, and other-than-temporal. This is the very same worries and discomfort which unbelievers living in a secular time might experience when dealing with religious matters. At the end, facing either social or temporal or secular structures, people yearn for something more meaningful and desire to transcend their present existence. As a consequence, their quest for the anti-structure is an expression of a much deeper human need, which cannot be expressed in simple terms of opposition to the official, socio-political structures or particular historical events of their era.

Taylor is more concerned about a change in thinking than in the change of social reality, as he explores secularity in terms of a withdrawal from the public sphere.

¹⁴ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 50.

¹⁵ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 50.

As he examines thinking, Taylor discovers the reason that fails to acknowledge that aspect of human nature which provokes the construction of the anti-structure. The anti-structure is much more than the opposed or complementary part of the structure, because it is an expression of the human longing to create a better world, where a person can transcend the structures that are inflexible, and unjust and that stifle human dreams. Taylor, for this same reason, finds the narratives based on the structure and anti-structure model unsatisfactory, and speaks about the “eclipse of anti-structure”.¹⁶ Eventually these theories do not explore the motivations and aspirations on which they are based. Because the very same secularity, in this case understood as ‘withdrawal of religion from public space’, is an expression and a deeper desire, which has not been taken adequately into account; this is the main point of Taylor’s argument. The second part of secularity takes us through Taylor’s reflection on how the mainstream secularization theory neglects or avoids this part of human nature. The desire and search for something deeper never ceases to exist in human history, because they are part of the human nature. The desire will be seen again strongly in the modern era within the private domain agent seeking new ways to express what he bears within.¹⁷

Secularity as Decline in Religious Practice

Taylor argues that he does not wish to debate as much as he desires to understand what it is like to live as a believer or an unbeliever in the world today. He writes, “belief and unbelief are lived conditions.” These are what he is talking about by focusing on “changed conditions of belief.”¹⁸ Religion at this point consists of particular old beliefs and practices that are now in retreat. Changes which take place in the social, political, economic, religious, and spiritual spheres were pushing both individuals and entire societies to explore new ways of coexistence. These external changes reflect the shift taking place in individuals who are now searching for a different kind of self-perception, trying to find their place in the new social context. Achieving of the human’s own good, happiness, well-being, and flourishing are the goals of a new principles of ethical life. As a consequence, the transcendental dimension of religion becomes less central and religious practices become less important. What happens is that a secondary element replaces the center that God occupied earlier. This is what Taylor terms as

¹⁶ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 51.

¹⁷ Allan Ryan, “Charles Taylor’s Hegel and Modern Society, A Liebig’s Between Ideology and Utopia: The Politics and Philosophy of August Cieszkowski” (review), *Bulletin of the Hegel Society of Great Britain* Vol.1, Issue 1, no. 1 pp. 35-40, 1980.

<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/hegel-bulletin/article/abs/charles-taylor-hegel-and-modern-society-cambridge-university-press-1979-pp-xii-180-950-pb-295/4690EF2FB0E03E85F4909F8A93C31144>

¹⁸ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 8.

anthropocentric shift. Taylor also points out sociological changes – those that some secularization theories adopt as their foundation.¹⁹ The differentiation process is one of those factors. Because a number of social functions crystallize and separate social places, each with their own norms, roles, and institutions. We see for example, where the church provided an educational and health care system; but some secular institutions have now taken over these systems, making religious institutions to lose their social influence. Other changes in the society deeply thwarted the religious life of the people, their traditional practices, as well as the role of the religious institutions, for example, urbanization, the disappearance of community, the democratization process, the industrial revolution and the weight of wars.

Considering secularity as the decline and falling off of religious beliefs and practices was hugely influenced by the rise of other beliefs, especially those of science – evolutionary theory, Darwinism, neuro-physiological explanations of mental functioning. At the time of Enlightenment, belief in science encouraged the fast spread of secularization in all ramifications. Even though, the rise of natural sciences, with their rational approach to reality, together with the many changes in social life, are not in Taylor's thinking the primary reasons for the emergence and growth of secularity. What Taylor claims is that religious doctrines and practices simply became less relevant for scientific explanations and social organization; and as a result, they were put aside.

In any case, this does not imply that religious and spiritual characteristics of human nature were put aside. Taylor believes that the same religious and spiritual components, in effect, triggered the entire process of secularity. People experienced a kind of uneasiness and discomfort when they have to deal with far reaching changes, and living with the differentiation process of existing structures and codes. At that point, they do not deliberately cut off from traditional ways of believing and practicing religion – they only look around for new meaningful answers that might be found elsewhere – maybe in Deism, exclusive humanism, and Marxism. These and other similar forms became in their mind viable alternatives to traditional Christianity. They usually develop novel religious practices and spring up in response to new spiritual directions they are taking in search of an easing of their discontent.²⁰ But in Taylor's thinking, the discomfort and unease is not something entirely new in the 18th or 19th centuries; the same unease had been moving Christianity in its constant process of reformation from its very start to till date. Renaissance humanism, the scientific revolution, and the

¹⁹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 425.

²⁰ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 436.

Protestant Reformation and Catholic counter-reformation are just some of this recurring reforming.²¹

Furthermore, what Taylor thinks in terms of withdrawal from religious belief and practices is not really something linear as the mainstream secularization argues to be the case. We do not have to view secularity as the time in which belief and religious practices will eventually decline – it should rather be seen as a time that undermines previous forms and creates space for new ones. As soon as the traditional ways of professing belief and realizing practices become insufficient – i.e., inability to offer compelling answers – people tend to look for new, creative practices and belief-systems, with the hope that they will offer meaningful answers.

Consequently, Taylor claims that more important than external social changes is the power and energy triggering these changes.²² So his aim is an analysis and understanding of the conditions, characteristics and potentials of religious belief today. His argument is that the conditions of belief determine the nature of belief – if the relevant conditions of two beliefs are different, it follows that these beliefs are likewise different. For instance, today people make reference to the fact that in the past people had strong believe unlike today.

Secularity as the Change in the Conditions of Belief in the Society

This third aspect is the true subject of Taylor's interest; and it is the age which is secular in this third sense that is the subject of his famous *A Secular Age*. It is a matter of the integral context of understanding where our modern, spiritual and

²¹ Taking a look at the assessment of Taylor of the history of the Catholic Church, the concepts *reform* and *reformation* entail something always present in Christianity. Right from the start, the Church has been in the process of changing and looking for new forms of professing its faith. Therefore, the meaning of the concepts *reform* and *reformation* is determined in their historical context. When Taylor for example, speaks of the Catholic Reform in the High Middle Age, he means the many attempts in the Church to instill a deep, personal devotion to God, through Christ or Mary. The priest proclaimed, and persuaded, sometimes even pushed their charges towards a new, higher orientation, away from traditional forms of the scared and sanctity. Some have hoped to bring people by fear to reshape them up at least slightly. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 496.

²² Taylor gives two meanings to term Middle Age. When he uses the word "Reform" that begins with a capital R, he implies a growing dissatisfaction and uneasiness of a whole lot of believers who cannot accept the demands of perfection of their time. In this case, "Reform" refers to many attempts to narrow the gaps between simple believers, and élite, and clergy in their approach to the demands of perfection. While the "reform" with a small r designate different attempts of dedicated people and various religious movements which were spreading new forms of religious practices and devotions, whose aim was to convert more people to the higher demands of religion. The difference from Reform is that they do not make effort to delegitimate less dedicated forms, rather they only convert more people from these to the higher traditional forms. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, pp. 61-63.

religious experience takes place. Bearing this 'context' in mind, Taylor means not only the things to which almost everyone would explicitly point – as for instance, a plurality of options – but also the elements which are a part of the implicit, 'hidden' part of this context.²³ Basically, this is the background of our experience and (spiritual) searching to which mostly we do not pay attention. Taylor argues – in a Heideggerian manner – about the 'pre-ontology' of this searching.²⁴ Whether a society is secular or not in this third sense, it only depends on the conditions under which the experience and (spiritual) searching of their members take place. Taylor explores the origin of this type of secularity in terms of *nova effect*²⁵, what he defines as "spawning an ever-widening variety of moral/spiritual options, across the span of the thinkable and perhaps even beyond".²⁶ Juxtaposing this phenomenon to a similar effect in astrophysics, we have an image of an increasingly expanding number of options and alternatives in the field of religion, like that of the stars. Consequently, the believer, facing this steadily widening gamut of options, finds himself in a very intriguing choice-making process, which is now in modernity much more complex than it was in the past. Faith and religious life become one option among many others – e.g. unbelief, atheism, materialism, exclusive humanism – and for many people ultimately an unviable one.

For Taylor, the difference between secular and religious view consists in where they put the origin of fullness of human life.²⁷ He also expresses the same point when he asserts that today we can live a spiritual life in different ways, that the strength and fullness of life can take different forms, and the "exiles" as well.²⁸ "Belief in God is not quite the same thing in 1500 and 200",²⁹ because of the changed condition of belief. Philosophers, especially influenced by Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and Polanyi call these conditions "background". Which means that people cultivate all their beliefs inside the frame which usually remains tacitly assumed, but the subject or the agent of belief may not acknowledge it because this

²³ Mark Redhead, *Charles Taylor: Thinking and Living Deep Diversity. Twentieth-Century Political Thinkers*, Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002.

²⁴ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 3.

²⁵ *Nova* as a term is adopted by Taylor from astrophysics and he uses it as an adequate example to explain the "explosion" of new possibilities and options in modernity. *Nova* in astrophysics describes the nuclear explosion caused by the accretion of hydrogen onto the surface of a dwarf star, which ignites and starts nuclear fusion in a runaway manner. In modernity, something like this happens when we have an explosion of new options of how and what to believe. In the third part of his *A Secular Age*, Taylor gives a more detailed analysis of this phenomenon.

²⁶ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 299.

²⁷ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, pp. 10-11.

²⁸ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 11.

²⁹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 13.

frame is never explicitly formulated. Hence, what Taylor has in mind here are not some changes of belief at the propositional or discursive level ("decline" of hell, new understanding of atonement etc.), consequently the changes through which even orthodox Christianity has gone. That is not the case, even in the issue of the identical propositions of belief, a belief now (in the secular age) and before are – because of the changed background – different. About the disruption of the earlier background, Taylor argues that these changes become most visible if we focus on some distinctions – for instance between immanent and transcendent, natural and supernatural etc. – which today practically everyone understands, not minding whether they accept them or refuse the second term of the pairs.³⁰ Therefore this third understanding of secularity refers to the change or shift in the background of belief: "It is this shift in background, in the entire context in which we experience and search of fullness, that I am calling the coming of secular age, in my third sense".³¹ And Taylor immediately adds:

How did we move from a condition where, in Christendom, people lived naively within theistic construal, to one in which we all shunt between two stances, where everybody's construal shows up as such: and where moreover, unbelief has become for many the major default option? This is the transformation that I want to describe, and perhaps (alas very partially) explain in the following chapters.³²

Concurrently, the sense of fragility of meaning, the search for an overarching significance, the felt flatness of our attempts to solemnize the crucial passages of human lives, and the utter flatness, and emptiness of the ordinary, become more and more evident. This is what Taylor calls "malaises of immanence," which have risen up with the eclipse of transcendence.³³ Usually, people do not necessarily seek the cure for these malaises through a return to transcendence. Their quest for meaning takes place through a different understanding of the same immanence. This task is in no way an easy one, but only through identifying changes as changes of lived experience, we can start raising the right questions properly, and avoid myopic views and accounts on all sides as are the following: non-belief is only a fall away of every sense of fullness or its betrayal (what theists sometimes are attempted to think about the atheists); a belief is only a set of theories which try to make sense of experiences which we all have and which nature can be understood entirely immanently (what atheists are sometimes tempted to think

³⁰ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, pp. 13-14.

³¹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 14.

³² Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 14.

³³ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 309.

about theists). However, we must, as Taylor insists, understand the differences between these options not only in terms of creeds, but also in terms of differences in experiences and sensibility.³⁴ In reality, what has happened is a massive change in the entire background of belief and unbelief, which consists in disappearance of the 'naïve' frame and establishing of the 'reflective one'. We should remember that after this change, both believers and non-believers experience their worlds very differently.³⁵

The feature of the secular age is that it happened first time in the history of humanity that self-sufficient humanism became a viable option. Self-sufficient humanism – or exclusive humanism, these are synonyms for Taylor – is a standpoint which doesn't accept any final ends beyond human flourishing and no commitment to anything beyond this flourishing. This is not true about any previous societies.³⁶ Taylor observes that humanism has appeared already in the past, but it was not self-sufficient or exclusive. Again, he recognizes that there were also exclusive humanisms before the present secular age – Epicureanism in the Antiquity for instance. However, only in the secular age did exclusive humanism become so widely spread and accessible option. This was true only about some small elite which itself was a minority in the past.³⁷ We should never forget that this third interpretation of secularity is neither identical nor equivalent to exclusive humanism. It is rather a condition where experience and searching for fullness of both believers and non-believers to happen. Furthermore, exclusive humanism is not the only alternative to religion. Today we have intellectual currents which we can consider non-religious anti-humanism which for Taylor today appear under various names for instance *deconstruction* and *post-structuralism* and which are rooted in some very influential texts of 19th century, especially in Nietzsche. Taylor considers deep ecology as something that tries to find non-exclusive humanism on a non-religious basis. This deep ecology takes a different form though.

What is most interesting in the distinction Taylor brings out in his three definitions is that the first two can be viewed as exogenous effects of certain societal changes in the public or social imaginary, whereas the third can only be seen as a change in personal options and therefore endogenous choices in which the stakes are personal. This is "an apples and oranges" situation where the definitions are comparing totally different and only partially related phenomena. The first

³⁴ Charles Taylor, 'Précis of The Sources of the Self', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 54, 1994

<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/action/doSearch?AllField=Pr%C3%A9cis+of+The+Sources+of+the+Self+charles+taylor>

³⁵ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 14.

³⁶ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 18.

³⁷ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 19.

definition is political. The second is sociological. And the third is spiritual. For the latter reason, we suggest, Taylor quickly makes clear that the stakes he is talking about in discussing secularity revolve around the issue of the “place of fullness” in our lives.³⁸ In any case, we should realize that Taylor’s third definition of secularity can also be considered as posing a problematic definition because it does not correspond with the meaning ascribed to the word *secular* in general vernacular or academic parlance today. In effect or intentionally, Taylor seems to be trying to change the terms of the secularity debate by changing its premises. What he is saying is that common or routine definitions of the phenomenon are accurate within narrow boundaries but they are misleading in important ways. This, risks confusing understanding of the debate about secularity and its meaning precisely because of an “apples and oranges” situation, where interlocutors may end up using the same words without knowing they are talking about quite different things – a confusion that, for example, can confuse *causes* (i.e. the third definition of secularity) and *effects* (the first and the second definitions of secularity). In summary, the secular age finished the period of myopic religious belief. Its deciding feature is coming of exclusive humanism on a sociologically relevant scale. For the very first time in history “the eclipse of all goals beyond human flourishing becomes conceivable; or better, it falls within the range of an imaginable life for a huge number of people”.³⁹

“Fullness”⁴⁰ as Taylor Understands it

There was an initial curiosity as to why Taylor discusses “fullness” immediately after his reflection on his three-part definition of secularization. As we have noted above, fullness has come to be central to Taylor’s understanding, not of public secularization as implied by the first two definitions, but to his understanding of the third definition of secularization. It is the vital word and variable in his description of three categories or lived conditions of modern “moral/spiritual life” on a spectrum ranging from belief through to unbelief. These three categories are

³⁸ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 6.

³⁹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 20.

⁴⁰ The reflection of Taylor on “fullness” in *A Secular Age* has nevertheless been the subject of sustained debate, and many interpreters have assumed he meant to evoke a specially religious form of experience. Taylor said in an interview, “I have used this as a generic term on the grounds that I think everyone has some sense of, and desire for, a fantastically realized life, a life realized to the full. But in discussing with people and reading reviews of the book, I have found that I am often completely misunderstood on this. They thought that fullness could only be applied to explicitly religious positions, while the entire point was that I was looking for a generic term that applied to all people, whether religious or non-religious. But fullness made people shudder, which might show that the quest for a universally acceptable term might be mission impossible. Confer, Ronald A. Kuispers, ‘The New Atheism and the Spiritual Landscape of the West: A Conversation with Charles Taylor’, *The Other Journal*.

“identifications of fullness, modes of exile, and types of middle condition.”⁴¹ While fullness in ordinary language is a broad term with a variety of nuanced meanings, for Taylor it describes:

...that place (activity or condition) [where] life is fuller, richer, deeper, more worthwhile [sic], more admirable, more what it should be ...this is perhaps a place of power: we often experience this as deeply moving, as inspiring ... [or] this sense of fullness is something we just catch glimpses of from afar off ... [or] it is an experience where ‘ordinary reality’ is abolished and something terrifyingly “other” shines through ... it ... has a negative slope; where we experience above all a distance or absence, an exile ennui or captivity in the monstrous.⁴²

This means that the idea of fullness is important in understanding the meaning of secularity in the reflection of Taylor. Taylor’s is, “for believers, the account of the place of fullness demands reference to God, that is, to something beyond human life and/or nature; where for unbelievers this is not the case.”⁴³ Though this is focused on the concept of belief, whereas as we have noticed, Taylor’s central concern, he makes clear, is the actual lived human experience of belief and unbelief. Therefore, he goes on to make a remarkably clear affirmation that the word “fullness” can be experienced at different stages of both belief and unbelief.⁴⁴ In some comments suggesting that he may be speaking from his own lived experience, he argues,

For believers, often or typically, the sense is that fullness comes to them, that it is something they receive in something like a personal relation, from another being capable of love and giving; approaching fullness involves among other things, practices of devotion and prayer (as well as charity, giving); and they are aware of being very far from the condition of full devotion and giving; they are aware of being self-enclosed, bound to lesser things and goals, not able to open themselves and receive/give as they would at the place of fullness. So, there is the notion of

⁴¹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, pp. 7-8.

⁴² Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, pp. 5-6.

⁴³ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 8.

⁴⁴ German McKenzie, “Interpreting Charles Taylor’s Social Theory on Religion and Secularization”. *Sophia Studies in Cross-Cultural Philosophy of Traditions and Cultures*. Vol. 20. Cham, Switzerland: Springer. 2017.

<https://link.springer.com/search?newsearch=true&query=Interpreting+Charles+Taylor%E2%80%99s+Social+Theory+on+Religion+and+Secularization&dateFrom=&dateTo=&sortBy=relevance>

receiving power or fullness in a relation; but the receiver is not simply empowered in his/her present condition; he/she needs to be opened, transformed, brought out of self.⁴⁵

A particularly remarkable forthright declaration sounds more like the testimonies of personal epiphanic experiences by St. Paul, St. Augustine, Martin Luther and some many others. This is possibly why Taylor concludes this discussion offering the example of a mystical experience of Bede Griffiths, a “seeker” which illustrates Taylor’s detailed description of the experience of fullness in the first chapter of *A Secular Age*, page 5 to be precise. It appears very significant that later on, Taylor chooses to conclude this lengthy book with a similar mystical account, in the twentieth chapter “Conversions” by Vaclav Havel.⁴⁶ He was an unbeliever though not actually an exclusive humanist either as an artist and politician who undertook mortal risks to his potentially flourishing life under the Czechoslovak communist dictatorship in pursuit of moral freedom and truth. These experiences seem to represent Taylor’s belief that the potential transforming experience of fullness is not limited believers alone. It reflects what seems to be his most important message on the issue of secularity: it is a term that loosely describes changing conditions for the pursuit of fullness in human life which is open to anyone, believers and unbelievers alike, “dwellers” or “seekers,” sinners as well as the righteous. Of course, this sounds a lot like the message of Jesus in modern terms. By reinforcing the importance of fullness in what it means to be human, and the potential for personal conversion and therefore transformation, we suggest that Taylor is here providing a strong warrant for the hypothesis of this work:

If I am right that our sense of fullness is a reflection of transcendent reality (which for me is the God of Abraham), and that all people have a sense of fullness, then there is no absolute point zero. But there is a crucial point where many come to resist in our civilization, defined by a refusal to envisage transcendence as the meaning of this fullness. Exclusive humanism must find the ground and contours of fullness in the immanent sphere, in some condition of human life, or feeling, or achievement. The door is barred against further discovery.⁴⁷

The Place of Transcendence in Modernity

The question we ask at this point is: what does this complex social transformation mean for religious experience? Religion for Taylor offers a transformation which goes beyond human perfection. By this Taylor defines religion by the concept of

⁴⁵ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 8.

⁴⁶ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 728.

⁴⁷ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 769.

transcendence. He provides three features of transcendence, and religion combines all three. The example of Christianity can help us explain these dimensions. This is what we discover: 1. Good (of man) which transcends ordinary human prosperity. This is *agape*, love, that God has for us and which we can partake through his love. Hence, this love has offered us a possibility of transformation which leads beyond simple human perfection. We can become super-natural, more as merely human(s); 2. A higher, transcendent power (God) which reaches beyond human perfection and is understandable to humans – makes sense – only in the context of belief in a higher, transcendent God of faith, who appears in the majorities of the definitions of belief; 3. Posthumous life, a life beyond this life. The hope we have about the potential transformation through *agape* requires us to see our lives as extending beyond the ‘natural’ scope between birth and death, that is to say, beyond “this life”.⁴⁸

Summarily, for Taylor (Christian) transcendence and religion have three characteristics: a good which surpasses the mere human perfection, the power which makes possible human reaching of this perfection, and the belief that our life extends beyond this life (beyond our birth and death). At first glance a lot of things would appear to confirm the pioneering diagnosis of James when he states that religious life is in fact becoming more and more subjective and personal. Taylor summarizes it this way, “the religious practice of which I become part must not only be a fruit of my choice, but must also speak my language; it must make sense in terms of my spiritual development as I understand it.”⁴⁹ At this point, membership in a larger church thus become totally secondary. There is hardly any intrinsic connection between the spiritual and the social dimensions. The particular phenomenon of pluralization and fragmentation of moral frames of reference that at the start of modernity was restricted to few intellectual elites now becomes a mass phenomenon, consequently, the number of atheists and agnostics grows exponentially in our societies. In fact, the supporters of intermediate positions that combine in varied and personalized ways, only some elements of the traditional faith increase.

The number of lovers of esoteric religion and models of spirituality that are as colorful as they are indecipherable increases. We should be careful to think that Taylor’s diagnosis is some rigid philosophy of progressive history. Because he is fully aware that in the contemporary context there are trends and countertrends in often very unstable balance. In some countries born at the end of socialist

⁴⁸ Quentin Skinner, “Who Are ‘We’? Ambiguities of the Modern Self” *Inquiry*. 34 (2): 133-153, 1991.

⁴⁹ Charles Taylor, “The Validity of Transcendental Arguments”. In *Philosophical Arguments*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995, p. 25.

regimes, the neo-Durkheimian model of “sacralized” social bonding for example, has still found numerous and more or less violent examples.

However, what is important is that when secularization is understood in these terms, it no longer seems to be the ultimate outcome of necessary historical process of evolution, but as the product of a culturally specific history open to different results. In Taylor’s understanding, modern identity manifests an unprecedented complexity and uncertainty because it is an outcome of a process of *pluralization* of moral sources. Actual and demonstrable progress happens in this process according to Taylor (to the extent that such progress can be demonstrated within a practical reasoning), but its result is far from obvious. The crisis facing modern civilization does not contain in itself the germs of an inescapable destiny, rather, it represents a scenario where a “contagious struggle” takes place between different options and strategies.⁵⁰ The only thing that remains firm in this discourse is the “formal” structure of the moral experience of individuals and that is precisely what also guarantees religion a role in modernity. Paolo Costa argues that individuals are inevitably oriented towards the goods, and those goods are strong “incarnate” evaluations, expressions of the ontological structure of man as a moral animal, as a being, that is, who is able to live only in a universe that is articulated in qualitative distinctions endowed with intrinsic value.⁵¹ For this reason, they express a kind of transcendence with respect to facticity, with respect to the self, and, at least potentially, also with respect to life. In line with this, Taylor says that openness to transcendence is “guaranteed” anthropologically, even in its most radical and absolute form and the most difficult to accept for a culture that has grown in suspicion of every form of aspiration to the transcendence of life.

Taylor points out that in order to comprehend the struggle, rivalry, or debate between religion and unbelief in our culture, we must understand religion as blending all these dimensions of transcendence. There are many options in our culture which are somewhere between the option which affirms these dimensions, and their blatant denial, thus a complete denial of religion.⁵² But the debate in our society, which otherwise involves different worldviews, is basically shaped by two “extremes”: transcendent religion on one hand, and its outright denial on the other hand. In his claim, Taylor argues that this is a fact about the modern culture. But in general, the naivety is not possible (anymore) for anybody in the secular age.

⁵⁰ Charles Taylor, “Language and Society”. In A. H. Joas, *Communicative Action: Essays on Jurgen Habermas’ “The Theory of Communicative Action”*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991, p 31.

⁵¹ Paolo Costa, *Verso un’ontologia dell’umano. Antropologia filosofica e filosofia politica in Charles Taylor*, Trezzano: Unicopli, 2001, p. 213.

⁵² Charles Taylor, ‘A Most Peculiar Institution’, in J. E. J. Altham & Ross Harrison, *World, Mind and Ethics: Essays on the Ethical Philosophy of Bernard Williams*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

This situation includes different environments where there may be different default options than in others although those who inhabit those environments are well aware of the default options preferred by others and they cannot anymore dismiss them as an unexplainable exotic error.⁵³ In line with this, Taylor speaks about the “mutual fragilization” of beliefs or “worldviews” in the secular age.⁵⁴ Thus, the third definition Taylor gives for secularity is not a term opposite to the term “religious” it rather denotes the whole frame in which today all viewpoints are situated. It is the outcome of the transformation of society from one in which to not believe in God is impossible, into society where belief in God is just one among other “worldviews” or beliefs. Taylor believes that the secular age is irreversible:⁵⁵ there is no possibility of return to pre-secular condition. Before the secular age, the natural order, the societal order, the family, and the lives of individuals were explained with a reference to God. Believe in God has been a self-evident frame. While in the secular age, after the change, nature, society, and lives of individuals, are all explained without any reference to God. It is still possible to do it, but they don’t have to because they can explain and interpret the entire world from the immanent world itself. But generally, a belief, and other beliefs or non-beliefs are only one interpretation among many. This is exactly where we insert the critical wedge of Taylor’s thinking.

Conclusion

The sense of unease experienced within the secular age has been an additional factor pushing the human agent into the search for a deeper meaning. Be it as it may, Taylor analyzes those forces of modernity which are moving the modern agent in his quest for something deeper within the secular age. At the end Taylor says that we need to rediscover a time lived beneath or beyond the secular time, that will let us to connect our present with our past and open ourselves to the future. Again, a religious interpretation based on our Christian tradition can offer a meaningful answer. We have analyzed the description of Taylor’s disenchantment process and about the mainstream secularization theory earlier in the work. We have as well looked at his shift from living in a world ordered by a higher time which coordinates the daily routines of the agent, to a world of secular time, where the agent’s awareness of the higher time lost its ordering function. As long as the society is organized in a hierarchical order, with privileged persons – kings, priests, churchmen – whose position was founded on a higher level and in some regular time. The immediate thing that came after was that the entire society

⁵³ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 21.

⁵⁴ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 303.

⁵⁵ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989, p. 401.

was based on this hierarchical order. But with modernity, the hierarchical perception of society and people's life gives its place to a horizontal perception of time and social life; a perception that becomes the main feature of secular time. At this stage, time becomes a homogenous container, indifferent to its content, with no place for alteration or complementarity between the opposed values, without relation to anything higher. Time is an instrument, which can be managed and regulated for certain pre-established reasons. Human life, as well as time, is measured by the accomplishment of these pre-established purposes.

Taylor also includes the experience of discomfort of an agent when faced with death in his reflection about the search for meaning within secular age. There is no possibility of escaping this reality about life, which appears to deny a sense of meaning to our life and happiness. The natural questions we raise about the meaning of death and life after death should necessarily be looked into. For Taylor the experience of death is the privileged site from which the meaning of life can be understood, and in which the scattered moments of our life can be gathered into a new whole. Of course, the question of death is so significant – especially when the deceased is our beloved – that it makes us more sensitive for eternity. Keeping the memory of the death of a dear one alive and returning to the joyful shared moments can be seen as expressions of our striving for eternity. The very act of holding something in memory makes the present and the past even more alive.

Taylor totally refutes the epicurean solution as the answer to where to find the meaning of death, i.e., to celebrate a continuous enjoyment of the present moment as the deepest, most powerful kind of happiness and meaningfulness. Such a solution does not pass critical examination because it subordinates too rigidly the meaning of life to happiness and temporary enjoyments, which lose their meaning in the face of death. However, Taylor uses the struggle of the epicurean to justify his position as a further example of how important the question about death and eternity is, and how those locked within secular time cannot find a meaningful answer to it. Therefore, Taylor's conclusion is that "...death, in particular the moment of death, is the privileged site from which the meaning of life can be grasped", finds the normal site because it pushes us to go beyond unbelief, confusion, and the distraction of life and opens the door to something transcendent, beyond flourishing, a life beyond this life. Taylor describes this paradoxical idea "immanent transcendence". But even in the case of this paradoxical idea, explanations based on religion remain valuable sources of exploration, because they can point to new sources of life. Death and the moment of death have an indelible place in religious traditions: "...death as the giving up of everything, of one's very self, in Christianity; the hour of death as a crucial moment, therefore ("pray for us now and at the hour of our death"); a status it has

as well in the Buddhist traditions. In Christian terms: the locus of death, as the place where a person has given everything, is the place of maximum union with God; and therefore, paradoxically, the source of most abundant life”.

By and large, we can now see how Taylor interprets certain experiences – violence, suffering, sexuality, perception of the human body, ordinary human desires, life within secular age, and the experience of confronting death – which stimulate the quest of an agent for a deeper meaning, which goes beyond the realm of exclusive humanism and remains open to a possible answer from the religious standpoint. With each of these experiences, Taylor tasks the modern quest for meaning with an interpretation based on religious dimensions, especially those of Christianity. Because if Christianity is among the formative forces of Western civilization, then modernity has to take into account its interpretation; or else, the modern search for meaning remains in its search inexplicably selective, if not ideological.

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