

‘A SECULAR AGE’ IN A MISSION PERSPECTIVE: A RESPONSE TO CHARLES TAYLOR’S MAGNUM OPUS

In some ways, my task today is comparatively easy. I am invited to present a condensed version of the thoughts on secularism of Charles Taylor, an eminent Roman Catholic, Canadian philosopher. I do not, therefore, have to advance my own theories, but attempt to be faithful to the thinking of another. On the other hand, the book I will review is no ordinary tome: it is nearly 800 pages long and full of intricate analysis and debate.¹ How does one do justice to such a mammoth discussion in about 40 minutes? I attempt to summarise the discussion under a few headlines and offer a brief discussion of the material under each.

The purpose of the study

At the outset, it is interesting to note that Taylor’s book is as much about religion as it is about a secular age. Thus, he sets out to trace the process by which most Western societies have shifted from a position, where it was impossible not to believe in God to one in which faith is merely one possibility among others (p. 3):

‘In a way this whole book is an attempt to study the fate in the modern West of religious faith in a strong sense. This strong sense I define...by a double criterion: the belief in transcendent reality, on one hand, and the connected aspiration to a transformation which goes beyond human flourishing on the other’ (p. 510). (We will return later to the idea of human flourishing).

At the same time, he wishes to engage with the secularisation debate, in order to offer a different account of secularity from the one known as the subtraction theory. In other words, he is not content to define secularity mainly in terms of a society that believes it is feasible, and desirable, to eliminate an infinite, personal God as the source of human self-understanding:

‘This (latter interpretation) radically under-describes what I’m calling modern humanism. That I am left with only human concerns doesn’t tell me to take universal human welfare as my goal; nor does it tell me that freedom is important, or fulfilment, or equality’ (p. 572).

So, there is more to secular humanism than the absence of the divine in human affairs:

‘What we are dealing with...are often called “master narratives”, broad framework pictures of how history unfolds. These have come under considerable attack in our time, and are thought to be (ideally) a thing of the past. But my contention will be that, so far from being passé, these master narratives are essential to our thinking. We all yield to them, including those who claim to repudiate them’ (p.573).

His main aim is to say something, from an historical perspective, about secularity as an open plurality of beliefs. Secularism is much more than an absence of religious belief and practice; it is itself a more or less conscious belief system that supposes that it is eminently possible (and beneficial) to live a fully examined life, based on a wholly materialist account of the universe.

¹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

Taylor's motive in writing is not purely descriptive or analytical. It is also, in part, apologetic. He deliberately raises questions about existential issues and concerns that he believes can never intrinsically be adequately addressed from within an imminent worldview:

'ways in which our modern culture is restless at the barriers of the human sphere...: the search for meaning, the deepening of our sense of life through our contact with nature and art, death as a denial of the significance of love...finding the moral sources which can enable us to live up to our very strong universal commitments to human rights and well-being, and finding how to avoid the turn to violence...' (p. 726).

The implication is that true human flourishing demands a knowledge, understanding and wisdom that come from another, non-human reality.

The history of secularisation

Disenchantment

Starting from a general description of pre-modern societies as 'enchanted' realms, that is domains that are open to the influence of unseen forces – good and evil – which are causally responsible for commonplace events in the world, Taylor describes the factors that brought about disenchantment, or what he calls the bounded or "buffered" self. The process may have started earlier than the 16th century Reformation, but Taylor sees this movement as the first and in many ways the most powerful instrument for the transformation of the way humans have come to understand their place in the world:

'The Reformation as Reform is central to the story I want to tell – that of the abolition of the enchanted cosmos, and the eventual creation of a humanist alternative to faith' (p. 77).

In brief terms, the Reformation was instrumental in diminishing the space between the sacred and profane areas of life, no longer does

"the power of God...operate through various "sacramentals", or locations of sacred power which we can draw on...The sacred is suddenly broadened: for the saved, God is sanctifying us everywhere, hence also in ordinary life, our work, our marriage, and so on" (p. 79).

The Reformation marked a break with all forms of magic, emptying the world of enchantment. The fear of magical power and the dominion of the priestly order that went with it are conquered. Authority is removed from the hierarchy and placed back in the Bible, which the people now have in their own language. The sacraments tend to become purely symbolic and the mass of the baptised are more easily distinguished from the true community of the saved (p. 74). This caused a radical change to popular piety as practised in the Middle Ages. Salvation was now understood to be individual, personal, unmediated, and no longer controlled by the church.

The drive to reform and the rage for order

The Reformation was but the beginning of what Taylor calls 'the drive to reform'. Lay vocations were now on a par with the erstwhile superior, religious ones. Moreover, high moral standards were expected of everyone, not just those with an allegedly special calling:

‘Radical Protestantism utterly rejects the multi-speed system, and in the name of this abolishes the supposedly higher, renunciative vocations; but also builds renunciation into ordinary life’ (p. 81).

After the invalidation of the sacred-secular divide, the second main consequence of reform was ‘the rage for order’ and the rise of the disciplined society. In order to control common human vices, it was necessary to pursue a disciplined personal life and also put in place a well-ordered society. Here we come to the crux of Taylor’s initial exploration of secularisation. He believes that originally it was thought that only the power of God could bring about this discipline and order:

‘We had to recognize our own helplessness, and turn to God in faith, in order to achieve this...It was...necessary that one’s inner stance to all this be correct. One had to avoid building this on a sense of one’s own unaided powers...But at the same time, one had to avoid the sense that one was indeed, powerless, because in the irrevocable grip of sin. The sanctified necessarily had a sense that they were saved by God, empowered by God to build the godly order’ (pp. 82-83).

However, in the course of time, express belief that only God’s power makes this possible gave way to a gradual confidence that

‘People like us, successful, well-behaved people, in our well-ordered society, are beneficiaries of God’s grace – as against those depraved, disordered classes, marginal groups, Papists, or whatever’ (p.84).

Therefore, it is basically up to us to enforce the changes.

‘The goal of order is redefined as a matter purely of human flourishing. We no longer see the pursuit of it as a way of following God, let alone glorifying him...The power to pursue it is no longer something that we receive from God, but is a purely human capacity...The new understanding is frequently expressed in terms of “nature”, following the philosophical tradition which comes down to us from the ancients’ (p. 84).

The rise of the disciplined society

Congruent with his belief that secularisation has religious antecedents, Taylor links the turn to nature to the new religious interest in the lay world:

‘It is not altogether surprising that this attempt to bring Christ to the world, the lay world, the previously unhallowed world, should inspire a new focus on the world...Though it couldn’t be clear at the time, we with hindsight can recognise this as a major turning point in the history of Western civilisation, an important step towards that primacy of the individual which defines our culture’ (p. 94).

People began to turn their attention from heaven and the life to come to this world and this life. They became interested in nature for its own sake, not just in relation to God. This produced, among other things, a new form of art as the imitation of nature, with concern for proper proportions, space and colour.

This movement also coincided with and was partly instrumental in stimulating the natural sciences:

‘This...is at first in the service of God’s purposes; but the shift will not be long in coming to a new understanding of being, according to which all intrinsic purpose having been expelled, final causation drops out, and efficient causation alone remains. There comes about what has been called “the mechanisation of

the world picture.” And this in turn opens the way for a view of science in which a good test of the truth of a hypothesis is what it enables you to effect. This is the Baconian view ‘(p. 98).

Now, just as science was conceived as the way to control nature for the material benefit of humankind, so began attempts to discipline the whole population:

‘The drive to reconstruction was not inseparable from the move to mechanism...the practice of self-refashioning is applied to society as a whole, when the nascent state becomes more and more an engineer of morals and social practice’ (p. 114).

Taylor refers to this new perception of the human calling to subdue nature and train human nature as civility. Civility is understood as a refined life in contrast to the savage existence of life in the forest. It is rational and morally excellent, and resists abandoning life to uncontrolled desires. Taylor points out, by way of example, how restrictions on bodily intimacy, such as nakedness, touch and toiletries, were raised into cultural tabus. Along with this, the demand for self-discipline and self-control were guided by a new range of manners and conventions in the forming of good habits:

“‘Civilized’ societies, as the very word implies, were governed in an orderly way; they had a state, law and order, internal peace, unlike “savage” tribes’ (p. 394).

We might say that the great enemy of the fresh drive for a civilised life is anything deemed wild, primitive, turbulent or untamed, and therefore outside of the bound of what can be controlled, made to function and put to use.

From theism, via deism, to natural law

The turn to nature (empiricism) and the increasing faith in rational processes as the guiding and defining principle of human flourishing (rationalism) did not immediately mean a neglect of God. God was still the creator of an ordered cosmos. This truth, after all, made scientific discovery possible. God is still the source of the *ratio* on which we base our lives. Moreover, everything that happens comes about through the providence of God. The early scientists at least saw their work as increasing the knowledge of God, through knowledge of his creation. They believed that exploration and experimentation glorified God.

However, increasingly, special revelation became marginalised from public discourse. It is true that we live in a universe that functions according to prescribed laws. It is also true that God set down these laws, which are binding upon us because this is the way that God has configured reality. ‘But we didn’t need revelation to tell us what the rules (for his products) are. They are plain, given the nature of these products’ (p. 127). From this shift in emphasis towards natural knowledge of the universe and its creator, the slide to Deism was inevitable. Taylor singles out three interrelated facets of this move. First, there is an anthropocentric shift in the late 17th century to providential deism. This encompasses the belief that we are able to fulfil God’s purposes for us exclusively by realising our own good. Secondly, there is a shift towards the primacy of an impersonal order:

‘God relates to us primarily by establishing a certain order of things, whose moral shape we can easily grasp, if we are not misled by false and superstitious notions. We obey God by following the demands of this order’ (p. 221).

Thirdly, the notion of an original natural religion, which has become obscured by speculative additions relating to salvation and grace, arises.

This changed understanding of God and his relation to the world fitted well into the shift by which the sacred realm became peripheral to normal life:

‘Insofar as the figure of Christ, as divine, stands behind claims to sacral authority, while the issue whether Jesus was God or simply a great prophet or teacher is not relevant to the question whether God is the Designer of the order of mutual benefit, there is a temptation to abandon either the question or the doctrine of Christ’s divinity’ (p. 238).

So, there was a drift towards treating God as the architect of a universe that functions according to unchangeable laws, to which humans must conform. But the slide to Deism was also due, Taylor believes, to a deep-seated moral distaste for the old religion that sees God as an agent of history. The idea of God as a personal agent is deeply threatening. Taylor makes the point that this negative stance towards a supernatural religion is not the result of empirical discovery but of the pre-existing framework of belief many have accepted (p. 274). Deism represents a shift in the perception of the human predicament. As crystallised in Unitarianism, it tries

‘to hold on to the central figure of Jesus, while cutting loose from the main soteriological doctrines of historical Christianity. What is important about Jesus is not that he inaugurates a new relation with and among us, restoring or transforming our relation to God. That is not what salvation can mean. What it properly amounts to is our acceding to rational principles of conduct in law and ethics, and our becoming able to act on these. Jesus’ role in this is that of a teacher, by precept and example’ (p. 291).

It was not a big step from this perception of God and the world to a view that the investigation of natural laws could do everything that religion had hitherto claimed to achieve. Natural laws define the workings of nature, including human nature, and encompass all that rational human beings can discover for themselves about life as sociable beings. There is no need for revelation to know the truth. It is embedded in the way things are, as discoverable by the light of reason. It is the source of natural rights and obligations. Importantly it avoids the conflict of interpretations that inevitably arises over revealed law. It offers, therefore, a basis for rational agreement. If it is possible to read off nature the way we ought to conduct our lives in society, we are delivered from endless controversies and disputes about doctrines. In accordance with the optimism of the time, it was believed that

“the harmony of interests is written into human nature from the start. Sympathy, and a community of interests, should have been enough to establish a non-conflictual order of things” (p. 130).

Imminence and exclusive humanism

So far we have been tracing a succession of intellectual moves that start with God being an ever-present reality in human affairs, bringing salvation from sin, order out of chaos and the healing of body, mind and soul, to a God that has created an intricate and balanced natural order, from which he has stepped back and told his creatures they are in charge, and the route map to their providential destiny can be found within the imminent order itself. It is not surprising that the final destination of this train of thought is the disposal of God altogether, as an entirely unnecessary hypothesis.

This is the point where the secularising process, understood as the gradual removal of the sacred from the public square, becomes secularism. This latter is an attempt to

reconstruct the whole of reality from the conviction that the universe is closed in on itself and has, therefore, to be self-explanatory within its material limits. What is now becoming evident is that for many this view is taken as a default position. What Taylor calls “closed world structures” are taken as obvious and unchallengeable:

‘They function as unchallenged axioms, rather than as unshakeable arguments...and they rely on very shaky assumptions...often grounded on illegitimate naturalizations of what are in fact profound cultural mutations, and in general survive largely because they end up escaping examination in the climate in which they are taken as the undeniable framework for any argument’ (p.590).

In other words, in a highly secularised intellectual climate, the burden of proof has now shifted on to those who wish to claim that there is another reality beyond the material that impinges directly upon the physical one. This is a clever manipulation of the discussion away from what we have a right to assume:

‘It is only when the order is “spun” in a certain way that it seems to dictate a “closed” interpretation’ (p. 594).

God has been replaced by nature and the highest living organism within the natural world (which is the only world) is the human being. Therefore, there is no possibility of transcending ordinary human experience. This is where exclusive humanism takes the stage:

‘There needed two conditions for its appearance: the negative one, that the enchanted world fade; and also the positive one, that a viable conception of our highest spiritual and moral aspirations arise such that we could conceive of doing without God in acknowledging and pursuing them...The points at which God had seemed an indispensable source for this ordering power were the ones which began to fade and become invisible. The hitherto unthought became thinkable’ (p.234).

And, we might add, the *only* thought which is thinkable. We can still talk about morality and spirituality, but only as internal, imminent resources. There is simply nothing there beyond the powers of human reason, self-love, the moral will and rightly-guided education:

‘Conditions have arisen in the modern world in which it is no longer possible, honestly, rationally, without confusions, or fudging, or mental reservation, to believe in God. These conditions leave us nothing we can believe in beyond the human – human happiness, or potentialities, or heroism’ (p.560).

There is, of course, what we might call a price for accepting this whole redefinition of reality. The universe is nothing more than a vast machine, without any intrinsic purpose whatsoever. There is no human destiny beyond that which we self-referentially determine for ourselves:

‘As a result of the denial of transcendence, of heroism, of deep feeling, we are left with a view of human life which is empty, cannot inspire commitment, offers nothing really worth while, cannot answer the craving for goals we can dedicate ourselves to... (There is the) sense of imprisonment in the routine...articulated by the great Weberian image of the iron cage. This is a kind of imprisonment in the banal’ (pp. 717, 719).

The consequences of secular humanism

Here, we only have the space to list a few of the main outcomes that spring from the immense intellectual and cultural shifts that we have been outlining.

Changed perceptions of time

By definition, secular means being embodied in ordinary time. However, as a result of the processes we have been describing, secular has also come to mean the rejection of higher time. If there is no transcendence, there is no eternity. And, if there is no eternity, then chronological time is all that is left to us. Time, then, becomes a commodity. Its use is measured instrumentally. There is an urge to quantify and control it, in order to achieve something in the limited span that we have at our disposal. There have, of course, been attempts to invest ordinary time with some extraordinary significance – the most notable case being Marx’s conception of the kingdom of freedom, arrived at somehow beyond routine history. Such a view, however, proved to be a sleight of hand, given that secular history, to which he was wedded, has no power, within its imminent processes, to transform. Nevertheless, there has been a massive attempt to ameliorate the utter emptiness of profane time by investing it with what appear to be semi-mystical categories:

‘What is peculiar to the modern world is the rise of a modern outlook where the single reality giving meaning to the repeated cycles is a narrative of human self-realization, variously understood as the story of Progress, or Reason and Freedom, or Civilization or Decency or Human Rights...’ (p.716) ².

Impressions of death

It is a notorious commonplace to affirm that our secular culture is unable to handle death properly. This, however, should not be surprising. Taylor mentions four reasons why this should be so: firstly, death denies human flourishing, it must therefore be held off till the very last moment; secondly, the Freudian speculations on a death wish ‘put a severe limit on any hopes for improvement...they tend to cast doubt on the idea that we are in charge of our fate’ (p. 638); thirdly, death constitutes a meaningless truncation of human relationships and human achievements, they are all swept away; fourthly, death as the final act, beyond which there is nothing, denies any possibility of resolving the twin problems of suffering and evil; ‘the need to rescue those who were trampled (on) in history’ (p. 722) is not realizable.

Ethical predicaments

This is a vast subject that can only be touched on here in a very limited fashion. There are two basic problems for exclusive humanism to solve: the question of adequate foundations for moral decision-making and the question of adequate motivational sources for a commitment to being and doing good. If one assumes that a closed-order, materialist universe is the only source for making sense of our experience, how does one achieve a basis for moral worth and virtue out of an impersonal, evolutionary process whose only interest and reward is the survival of the fittest? Taylor rightly concludes, what must seem evident on reflection, that ‘a purely materialist ontology, as

² Part of the mystery is conveyed by using capital letters for the categories. This, however, is part of the mystification.

well as a utilitarian account of ethics, cannot make sense of our moral experience' (p.607).

The usual recourse to altruism in evolutionary ethics is hardly moral in the accepted sense, since co-operation is apparently genetically wired into our system through the evolutionary process, so that for the sake of survival we are deceived into being benevolent towards others. The question of survival and reproduction as the chief end of humanity is fraught with difficulties; as a motivation for ethical action it does not come anywhere near the concept of unconditional *agape*. How on earth (literally) did the kind of unselfish, self-sacrificing, disinterested love of which the New Testament speaks so eloquently, and which we have glimpses of in acts of extreme selflessness, ever arise out of a process in which survival is the only driving force? To risk death, for example, in order to save people from drowning, violence, starvation, earthquakes or hurricanes would make no sense. To minister to the needs of the most vulnerable members of society – the disabled, the starving, and the incapacitated elderly – would be wholly illogical. Their lives are expendable; as long as the human race as a whole goes on breeding, let them die. Evolution, as a mechanism for replenishing the gene pool, is only interested surely in the species as such, not in individuals within it.

A mission perspective

Assuming that Taylor's interpretation of the historical process that has led to a secular age is, by and large, correct – I do have some caveats, but agree with the analysis in general terms – , what stance should the Christian community take to the culture in which we now live? What is our response? What does it mean to follow our risen Lord in our particular context?

It would be easy to say that our commission is to go on proclaiming faithfully and fearlessly the eternal gospel. It alone has the power to attract, convict and convince people of the truth about God and about themselves. Every age has flaunted its particular brand of unbelief (or, as Lesslie Newbigin would say, false belief); this one is no different, even if it considers itself more sophisticated than anything that has gone before. Therefore, let us simply announce, from the side of London buses if need be, that there definitely is a God, that he has come to dwell among us, that "his eternal power and divine nature...have been understood and seen through the things he has made" (Rom. 1.20), and that he continues to address us through his word.

There is something to be said for this stance. It probably helps avoid the subtle temptation to adjust the message so that it fits more comfortably into the presuppositions and prejudices of a population fed with notions that religion is based on blind belief not on evidence,³ and therefore has to be taken out of the public sphere (especially schools, hospitals and civic occasions). Nevertheless, almost instinctively such an attitude to social reality seems to be wrong. Christian mission is nothing if it is not about communication, and communication is about translation. Hence the word of God must be in the language of the people. And the language of many of our contemporaries is devoid of reference to anything beyond the mundane; or is it?

The evidence for a thoroughly secularised society is ambiguous. Taylor paints quite a stark picture. He is concerned to explain the phenomenon of exclusive humanism –

³ The main argument, for example, of Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror and the Future of Reason* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2006).

humanity alone in the universe; as Karl Marx once said, “man is the highest being to man”. This phenomenon, partly because of the rise of fundamentalist religion (Christian, Muslim and Hindu), has become more shrill and combative in recent years.

It is probably true, though the evidence may be largely circumstantial and anecdotal, that the majority of the white population in Britain today would consider itself to be Christian but not religious. By this is meant, I think, that the majority do not practice the external forms of traditional religion and do not act, in the daily routine of life, on the basis of a consciousness of the living God. At the same time, surveys consistently report that the majority of the population do believe in some kind of divine being, a belief that people are willing to disclose to an anonymous questionnaire, but probably not to their work colleagues or intimate friends. I have a theory, though not demonstrated by scientific sampling, that what we are witnessing in our contemporary culture is a version of the ‘god-of-the-gaps’. By this I mean the willingness to insert god into situations, precisely where normal human explanations and resources are inadequate, such as bereavement, severe illness, natural tragedies, gratuitous violence, especially against innocent bystanders, and unresolved conflict. These are instances in which death occurs, usually in unexpected and horrifying circumstances.

If there is anything in this attempt to explain the paradox of residual belief within a thoroughly secular age, then it would support Taylor’s thesis that exclusive humanism is dumb before the final conclusion of life. Further, it would support his view that this is one of the most profound dilemmas that secularism is unable to solve, given that it has no eschaton. However, we have to be careful with using a god-of-the-gaps approach to engaging with secular culture. Part of the secular humanist belief is that the sciences will be able ultimately to give an adequate explanation of all human experience. In the natural world this may well be true. It is, however, in respect to ourselves as humans that we witness the limits of our understanding. If we are to approach a secular age with the message of God in Christ by starting from the human experience of being human, we have to be sure that we are dealing with matters that intrinsically cannot be accounted for on the basis of a naturalistic philosophy.

I think that Taylor gives us two clues that merit further exploration. The first one refers to the inherent impossibility of a naturalistic evolutionary theory to explain the existence of human beings. As we have already seen in the case of moral values, so to with conscience, self-consciousness and aesthetic appreciation, there is nothing in the evolutionary thesis of survival by adaptation through natural selection that could account for our own experience of ourselves:

‘On an evolutionary premise, human beings seem to be grossly over-elaborated: why, for example is the appreciation of Handel’s *Messiah*, Bach’s *B Minor Mass*, the beauty of Michaelangelo’s *Pieta* or the subtle combination of colours in a sunset necessary for survival?’⁴

Of course, this affirmation needs to be argued. It cannot be demonstrated, for that would involve proving a negative hypothesis. So, in the same way as Dawkins and his London bus adverts (though with a reverse intention), we are in the land of the probable. What is at stake here is what it means to be human. Christian mission, among many other things, has the task of challenging the propensity of our culture to try to explain all human behaviour in terms of our alleged evolutionary past. Most of it is pure speculation, given credence by the reputed assured results of biological evolutionary

⁴ J. Andrew Kirk, *The Future of Reason, Science and Faith: Following Modernity and Post-modernity* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2007), p. 137.

theory. It amounts to an absurd reductionism that cannot be defended on the basis of simplicity, as it simply fails to explain.

The second clue comes in his treatment of the current and much talked about notion of human flourishing. I have always taken this concept as a place where the Christian faith can engage with contemporary culture with a starting point that both sides can agree is significant. Taylor, however, is less convinced, mainly because he believes that the idea has been already hijacked by exclusive humanism and interpreted in terms of the secular values of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. The latter in particular is often pursued in deliberate contradiction to the Christian notion of what makes a human being human:

‘The pursuit of happiness has come to seem not only not to need a restrictive sexual ethic and the disciplines of deferred gratification, but actually to demand their transgression in the name of self-fulfillment’ (p. 493).

It may well be that, even where there might appear to be a common ground for dialogue and debate with secularism, Christians are in fact swimming against the stream. One of Taylor’s basic concerns, and I think it is an excellent place to begin, is to convince our secular age that the ultimate good in life is not human flourishing understood in terms of embracing all life’s pleasures or the release of humanity from outmoded tabus into expressivist sensuality, but human flourishing understood as the transformation of human nature by the grace of God. In other words, our mission engagement with a secular age is executed in part by showing rationally, spiritually and practically how it is incapable of offering genuine human flourishing or fulfilment:

‘There is a crucial point where many come to rest in our civilization, defined by a refusal to envisage transcendence as the meaning of this fullness. Exclusive humanism must find the ground and the contours of fullness in the immanent sphere, in some condition of human life, or feeling or achievement. The door is barred against further discovery’ (p. 769).

Maybe, a crucial part of the contemporary challenge for mission is to attempt in ‘bold humility’⁵ to prise open the door.

J. Andrew Kirk

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⁵ A phrase coined by the late South African missiologist, David Bosch.