

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

ISBN 13:978-0-674-02676-6; 10:0-674-02676-4

My reading of Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* consisted of two distinct phases: the first can be likened to a pilgrimage – the struggle for a higher state of being or knowing along a difficult and unfamiliar path – the second to a series of lectures in which the consequences of the thoughts and acts of our ancestors are applied to contemporary social practice to explain Western life; specifically 'North Atlantic' life. As I read, I envisaged myself walking the rugged slopes of the *Camino de Santiago de Compostella* with Taylor at my side imparting his broad knowledge of history and philosophy, always oriented towards the manner in which religion was understood 'then' – whichever 'then' we were currently focusing on – in order to eventually consider the deceptively simple question that the book begins with:

One way to put the question I want to answer here is this: why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable? (p.25)

As I progress at snails pace through the centuries and the chapters headed with such descriptive titles as 'The Bulwarks of Belief', 'The Great Disembedding', 'The Spectre of Idealism', I stumble frequently upon the language of philosophers and historians and am constantly challenged by Taylor's vocabularic virtuosity. Yet as I struggle onwards, I come to enjoy the constant weight of a comprehensive dictionary by my side, and to revel in the fact that the twenty-first century is the era of the internet via which – courtesy of the many millions of generous gestures on the parts of mostly anonymous individuals – I can immediately get up-to-speed on such things as who the Jacobins were, or what the Axial age actually comprised of. To Taylor himself, I feel an increasing gratitude, the gratitude of an apprentice for a master who slowly unravels his life's work and then gathers it up again.

I learn that it would be a misprision to believe my twenty-first-century social imaginary, my overarching conception of the society I live in, would be

comprehensible to the inhabitants of the sixteenth-century Western world; a world which would not have understood what I meant by 'society' or 'civilisation' because such words represented only fledgling concepts in late medieval times; eventual realities that emanated from a desire to create order via the anthropocentric shift of humanism. As Taylor divulges, at every stage of humanity's forward trek through chronological time 'myriad individual actions concatenate' (p.181) within an 'inextricable interweaving of plural motivations' (p.216), so that no one historical master-narrative can be made to fit all situations. And yet Taylor does not countenance the postmodern view of the total collapse of the efficacy of the master narrative; rather he notes that postmoderns are utilising the trope themselves by 'declaring the reign of narrative ended: ONCE we were into grand stories, but NOW we have realized their emptiness and we proceed to the next stage' (p.717; author's emphasis). Further, Taylor reminds us that 'the narratives of modernity have been questioned, contested, attacked, since their inception in the eighteenth century.' In his view the constant thread running through these attacks are:

the spectre of meaninglessness; that 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. Human happiness can only inspire us when we have to fight against the forces which are destroying it; but once realized, it will inspire nothing but ennui, a cosmic yawn. (p.717)

But there is nothing boring to yawn at in *A Secular Age*, despite its 776 pages of complex text, 75 pages of notes, and 21 pages of index. Thankfully, the index is sufficiently comprehensive for re-navigation, with the main concepts, historical events, philosophers and philosophies, scholars and theses, ideologues and ideologies – not to mention other personages of note – all having entries. The structure of the book is fundamentally chronological, with my pilgrimage phase ending in Chapter 13 'The Age of Authenticity' where I find myself in the familiar terrain of 'my time' – the second half of the twentieth-century. For me this is the least engaging chapter: I know what now is like. But it is nevertheless satisfying, and a bit of a relief after the complexities of the road I have travelled thus far, to be able to nod

through this brief chapter and say ‘yes, that’s how it was/is.’ But equally, I am no longer able to revel in the sense of being given insight into an otherwise unknowable past; my critical faculties are engaged, and I am now prepared to challenge what is written.

In the final chapter of the historically-oriented Parts I to IV of the book Taylor extemporises upon the theme of ‘Religion Today’ before moving into Part V ‘Conditions of Belief’. And here we are in the classroom, contemplating both the theories and the frameworks that Taylor has put forward in the course of his historical ambulation, and those of others engaged in the polemical debate that has plagued secularisation theory in the past few decades. Taylor maintains a fairly neutral stance throughout, only very occasionally proselytizing the desirability of Christianity remaining in the Western World’s spiritual and cultural landscape.

One of Taylor’s more innovative contributions is the concept of the modern ‘buffered self.’ As described by Taylor, early humankind was porous to all stimuli; believing that everything they saw and felt was externally generated. Gradually, through the developments of science and reason, the world becomes ‘disenchanted’ – mysteries are no longer mysteries; miracles can be explained. Experiences are filtered through a buffer of knowledge, and the human psyche is increasingly less permeable. Eventually, ‘it comes to seem axiomatic that all thought, feeling and purpose, all the features we normally can ascribe to agents, must be in minds, which are distinct from the ‘outer” world’ (p. 541). This burgeoning framework of immanence was a fertile breeding ground for the twin features of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries of Enlightenment and social Reform – the affirmation and fostering of the virtue of self-discipline by social elites, and the anthropocentric shift toward individualistic autonomy – to create an increasingly egalitarian Western world where social structures begin to function horizontally rather than vertically. Now, in a contemporary world where everything is considered potentially explicable, and we are taught that self-sufficiency is a virtue, it is not surprising that large numbers of people are turning away from religion, and that we in the West live in a primarily secular age.

It would be a refutation of Taylor's multi-faceted and mammoth effort to suggest that this précis is a Hawkins-like 'big-bang' summary of everything contained in the book, but any attempt to cover even a small proportion of the ideas Taylor affixes to his basic framework is beyond the scope of this review. Reading the book was like peeling the cover off a golf ball: slowly each densely-packed rubber thread could be followed as it wove its way amongst countless and multifarious others. But there are so many of them; the ambit is so wide, that it is impossible after only a single reading for an apprentice to be able to comprehend the whole. Nevertheless, I suggest anyone interested in understanding why our Western society operates in the way it does – particularly with regard to our religious and spiritual selves – reads Taylor's offering. Those well steeped in history and philosophy may find that, with judicious use of the index, they can start at Part V.

The book won Taylor the prestigious US\$2,000,000 Templeton Prize in 2007. This prize 'honours a living person who has made an exceptional contribution to affirming life's spiritual dimension, whether through insight, discovery, or practical works.'¹ I won't win any such prizes, but I feel as if I have achieved something of note in having completed reading *A Secular Age*, and look forward to revisiting its pages in the imminent (and immanent) future.

Stephanie Rocke

**Centre for Studies in Religion and Theology,
School of Historical Studies, Monash University.**

¹ Templeton Prize, <http://www.templetonprize.org/purpose.html>, accessed 28 September 2008.