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December 5, 2009: Charles Taylor and the Future of Secularism

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Title: Charles Taylor and the Future of Secularism

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12/5/2009--I was asked a question the other day that shocked me, how could I not have taken account of Charles Taylor, and his opus, *A Secular Age*, in writing about secularism? It shocked me because I don't think you can and I thought I had. I thought I had because I wrote a review of the book for Expositions, the magazine of the Villanova Center for Liberal Education ([Vol. 3, No 1](#)). But since most of you don't have access to it and since you have to pay to read it (don't bother), I thought I would post my opening here. It tells you enough. I found that Taylor knows nothing about secularism because he has no interest in it. He is interested in reversing the way the church contributed to bringing us to this secular age.

I began to read Charles Taylor's acclaimed work, *A Secular Age* just after I had finished writing a manuscript of my own about modern secularism—*Hallowed Secularism*. Naturally, given Professor Taylor's reputation and learning, I studied his book for help. And I learned a great deal from the book about the "main story behind secularity." (774). In other words, I learned how we in the West came to be in a secular age.

But I did not learn very much about secularism. Specifically, I learned nothing at all about how one might be secular in a secular age.

In retrospect, the reason for this is obvious. Taylor is not a secularist. He is a believing Christian. Taylor considers "secularity" (his term) a mistake that we would do well to reverse.

I know that this characterization of his position directly contradicts the stated thrust of the book, which is to examine how the "conditions of belief" in the West that moved, between the years 1500 and 2000, from a condition where almost everyone believed in God to a condition in which it is problematic to believe in God. A change in understanding that fundamental actually changes the kinds of experiences that people can have. Thus, it would not seem to be the kind of change that could be reversed. Indeed, the impossibility of traditional belief in the old way is part of what it means to live in a secular age. All this is stated in *A Secular Age*.

Nevertheless, at the end of the book, Taylor presents the reader with two possible futures for this secular age. In one, religion continues to shrink because it is not plausible, while atheism continues to grow. In the other, "we all have some sense" of the fullness of human life that is a "reflection of transcendent reality" that cannot be completely grasped within the "exclusive humanism" of the immanent frame. This leads to "conversion", "breaking out into the broader field." (768-69).

Which future will be our future? Taylor is prepared to say only this: where there is only imminence, so that “many people even have trouble understanding how a sane person could believe in God” subsequent generations will develop “a sense of living in a ‘waste land’” and many young people will begin to explore beyond immanence, perhaps to a state in which they acquire “in some fashion a sense of God.” This is the condition for which Taylor had earlier in the book borrowed Mikhail Epstein’s term: “minimal religion” (533).

So, these are our choices for the future. Conversion to what amounts to orthodox biblical or theistic belief or an atheist waste land so bereft of hope for deep human fulfillment that our descendants will be driven by despair to take up the religious quest again. There is no doubt that Taylor means religious conversion quite literally since he calls the last chapter of the book “Conversions” and describes there experiences such as Walker Percy’s conversion to Catholicism. Nor is there any reason to doubt Taylor’s sincerity when he calls secularity a waste land. He really means it.

Why are these stark alternatives the only futures that Taylor allows? There is a quite specific reason for this. Though he puts it as a question, Taylor does not believe that an “intermediate position” is viable. (606) The intermediate position he is rejecting is one in which the “phenomenology of universalism—the sense of breaking out of an earlier space and acceding to a higher one, the sense of liberation” that many people experience despite the secular age is ultimately frustrated by an ontology of imminence. (609) Secularists cannot live deeply because they live immanently. And the only alternative ontology Taylor acknowledges is “belief in some transcendent source or power” that “for many people in our Western culture” means “the choice...whether to believe in God. (600). It’s God or the waste land.

In Taylor’s terms, the manuscript I wrote was an attempt to describe a viable intermediate position that seeks to avoid just these unacceptable alternatives of traditional belief in God or empty secularism. My book tries to portray a secularist way of life that remains in the neighborhood of the fulfillment of human possibility promised by traditional religion while rejecting traditional religious dogmas, including the existence of the biblical God.