REVIEW ESSAY/ESSAI RENDU

Possibilities for post-secular sociology?

Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007, 896 pp. $US 39.95 hardcover (978-0-674-02676-6)

In this hefty tome renowned Canadian social and political theorist Charles Taylor explores what it might mean to say ours is a "secular age." Here's his thesis: Once, especially in Europe but also elsewhere, one could hardly live without encountering God. Present in many practices including the political, God had to be reckoned with in everyday life. It was hard *not* to believe. But today, says Taylor, the conditions of experience are markedly different. Not only is belief in God challenged, it is an option, "one opinion among others," and this has consequences right across the social board. In this climate, what is the place, and what are the prospects for and contributions of faith and the faithful?

The changing conditions of belief are Taylor's primary focus and a profoundly sociological theme. Both the widespread expansion of "exclusive humanism" and ongoing signs of the "search for the spiritual" have been examined sociologically for decades but Taylor wants to give them a new twist. While he acknowledges two other major strands of secularization theory — the idea that religion is steadily evacuated from increasingly autonomous social spheres, or that "modernity" is accompanied by a general falling off of religious belief and practice — he strives to carve out a distinctive third approach. Here, the conditions of belief, or what makes it possible or plausible to believe, is the *problematique*.

In fact, one might argue that this is fairly familiar territory for Taylor. Themes reappear from his early work on *Hegel*, the magisterial *Sources of the Self* and the well-known Massey lectures, *The Malaise of Modernity*. What he calls a "nova effect" is first the splitting off of Deism — the "halfway house" — as the prelude to full exclusive humanism as alternatives to belief in God, and then some further splintering that produced numerous new positions in the 19th and 20th centuries. While this affects mainly elites at first, Taylor suggests that by the end of the 20th century a generalized culture of expressive individualism encourages people

to "find their own way." Today, following a spiritual or moral path is largely decoupled from larger ensembles such as state or church.

A major fault-line discerned by Taylor lies between the "porous" and the "buffered" self. The porous self knows no particular boundary between the inside world of thought and the outside world of the physical, of nature. But the modern self, he claims, is increasingly buffered as, in a disenchanted world, the pores have closed as reason becomes disengaged and varieties of Norbert Elias's "civilizing process" are set in train. Fewer moments exist for cross-overs and complementarities than, for example, when Carnival offered this chance. The gains are a sense of self-possession, invulnerability, knowledge, self-worth, and power. But Taylor notes, and laments, the loss ledger, too. The buffered self has a sense that there's something missing, a certain flatness, a dearth of meaning that still spurs the search for alternatives, although not necessarily "religious" ones.

So what really makes this book distinctive? Its major themes, as summarized above, are fairly familiar to anyone versed in sociology and very much so for those in the sociology of religion. The mildly nostalgic backward reach to a world we have lost (again, not unknown in sociology!) is at least partly counterbalanced with some strong acknowledgements of and grappling with contemporary realities. Taylor tells a story of secularization as the changing conditions of belief and while he uses philosophy and the social sciences to support his case it is also a personal probe into the meaning of those circumstances. The parallel plot is Taylor's own quest for a satisfactory way of reconnecting inner and outer worlds. This is seen, for instance, in his pointed use of poetry (from Jeffers to Hopkins). The first two secularization stories, though containing some insights, have to be carefully qualified (and indeed, some of their 1960s proponents such as Peter Berger have recanted in the face of evidence, and declared their earlier work mistaken). The third, that assumes the partial truth of the others, but also their exceptions, leads to the question of what a "post-secular" situation might look like, and how post-secular perspectives could contribute in the academy.

This is a vital part of this book's achievement. It is also an astonishingly erudite history of ideas containing nuggets of wisdom in stratified layers whose veins will not quickly be exhausted. The shape of the book is a little harder to describe, comprising stories, vignettes, debates, analytical investigations, and fascinating side-paths that offer different angles of vision on the taken-for-granted and on the thinkers we thought we knew. And although one's hold on Ariadne's thread can be tenuous at times (there are 874 pages!) the book's overall movement is clear. Starting with the "bulwarks of belief" it moves through a range of "modern so-

cial imaginaries" to the "turning point" ushering in the new "impersonal order" that soon gives way to the "nova effect." The "narratives of secularization" highlight "mobilization" and "authenticity" bringing us at last to the "immanent frame," "cross pressures," "dilemmas," and "unquiet frontiers of modernity" that constitute today's "conditions of belief."

Those "modern social imaginaries" (explored similarly in his 2004 book of this title) also illustrate the deep thrust of the book. Taylor offers the term as a way of pushing the envelope way beyond "intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in a disengaged mode" (p. 171). He is dissatisfied with what philosophy and the social sciences all-too-often offer. A social imaginary captures how people imagine their social existence, fit and relate with others, and "normative notions and images" informing mutual expectations. These would not be expressed in theoretical terms by "ordinary people" but in stories, anecdotes, and legends that may be shared across broad swathes of a given population and that ultimately underlie common practices and a sense of what is appropriate. Although Taylor examines explicitly only the ideas of "objectified economy," the public sphere and the sovereign people as elements of modern imaginaries, the shadows of this concept may be discerned throughout the rest of the book.

This kind of nuanced analysis helps Taylor to avoid many of the pitfalls awaiting secularization theorists (such as the assumption of some age of faith preceding the declension, or the inevitability of modern "loss of faith") but more importantly to add richness and subtlety to the pictures he paints. He moves from his depiction of the closed "immanent frame" of Western modernity to discuss what alternatives might exist, to which aesthetic, ethical, and active objections point. Theoretical assumptions that the world is "proceeding towards an overcoming or relegation of religion" are, he urges, framed by immanence. Those, Christian or otherwise, who question this, start elsewhere, producing different kinds of theories with different conclusions. Nowhere does he idealize, still less privilege, "Christian" practices, some of which he recognizes, regretfully, as being compromised, counter-productive, or plain corrupt. But he does plead for a particular version of "transcendence" which has much resonance with Christian commitments.

This leads to a puzzle (for this reviewer) over what exactly "Christianity" is for Taylor. Clearly it is Catholic and "transcendent" and something more than "personal commitment." But given the huge historical and cultural sweep of this book, or, for that matter, work on the "politics of recognition" that has clear Christian analogues, why does Taylor, while rightly shrinking from "global solutions" say that Christianity can "only show ways in which we [*sic*] can, as individuals and as churches,

hold open the path to the fullness of the kingdom"? The clue comes in the "conversions" chapter where Ivan Illich is acknowledged as a key mentor. Church is seen by Illich as a "network, not a categorical grouping; that is, a skein of relations which link particular, unique enfleshed people to each other" (p. 739). Categorical corruptions, though they (whether denominations or welfare states) may be catalyzed by Christianity, are in the end denials of it. The network, on the other hand, comes alive through *agape* and, as Taylor says, this message may be transposed from Christianity to "modern civilization."

Enough. To engage appropriately with Taylor requires more than a mere book review. Of course, I want to know why Taylor does not discuss Berger's "plausibility structures" or Bauman's *Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies* or Levinas' ideas on the formation of self-for-others — and many more — that would sit so nicely with his theses. One might also ask why the comments on "creation" that inform earlier sections of the book are not carried through as strongly as, say, "transcendence," especially as this concept speaks so clearly to other matters such as the body that are vital to Taylor's case. ("Creation" does come across in Hopkins' poems, quoted late in the book, but not in relation to the body, violence, or politics.) But for all the frustrations of this book — odd omissions, quirky connections, summary dismissals, and uneven pacing — there is much, much more of solid worth here. It is weighty in the best sense.

Questions of post-secularity are with us to stay, and this book deserves more than a hurried hearing in that context. The reasons for the "post-secular" turn are various. They include persistent postempiricist questions erupting from the critiques of modernity (and postmodernity) and thus of received secularization theories. But equally relevant are the multicultural and multifaith situations of global modernities and especially the fallout from 9/11 that has helped to place the understanding of religious responses to exploitation and violence much higher on the public agenda than in the heyday of the "immanent frame." While in these contexts Taylor will be received differently according to the grids through which his work is read, one virtue will be recognized by all; his treatment of those with whom he disagrees is never abrasive or acerbic. This sets a standard that comports with his claims.

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