Book Review/Compte rendu

Michael Warner, Jonathan Van Antwerpen and Craig Calhoun, eds., *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010, 352 pp. $US 45.00 hardcover (978-0-674-04857-7).

This book is a series of appreciative but trenchant responses to Charles Taylor's intellectual blockbuster, *A Secular Age* (2007). While, like Taylor, they deal in philosophical issues, the specific perspectives include anthropology, history, political studies, sociology, and theology. The challenge to sociology is profound. The new ways of conceiving the "secular," expounded at length by Taylor, are variously explored, probed, questioned, criticized, and affirmed by the authors, all but three of whom (from France, the UK, and of course Taylor himself, from Canada, who responds in an Afterword) teach at American universities.

Taylor's fresh take on secularity focuses on the long-term changes in the conditions for belief. Once, in the West, belief in God was taken for granted. Now it's an option that has to be justified. He sees this not necessarily as negative, but certainly as complicating life for both believers *and* unbelievers. And he sees it, moreover, as a product of reform movements within Western, especially Latin, Christianity, which is his chief referent. Secularity is today a nonoptional "way of being, knowing, inhabiting the world" (Wendy Brown, p. 87). A cultural "nova" appeared in which "new knowledges, faiths, orientations, styles of life and identities proliferated" (Simon During, p. 106) between which Taylor's autonomous and privatized "buffered selves" were increasingly permitted to make choices. Indeed, they have to.

As Jon Butler observes, Taylor employs the concept of "social imaginaries" — social practices by which sense is made of the world and our place in it — to assess changes in the conditions of belief. Butler notes that despite Taylor's well-meaning attempt to avoid the apparent elitism of trickle-down versions of the social imaginary by saying they constitute how "ordinary people 'imagine' their social surroundings," his actual examples often sound like a history of ideas. Nonetheless, markets, democratic citizenship, and the public sphere are important aspects of modern social imaginaries, and they do have "unthought" but shared meanings embedded within them. Social imaginaries could yet have considerable sociological purchase.

Sociological treatments of secularization frequently depend on other modes of secularity from which Taylor distances himself. He rejects mere "subtraction" accounts that remove transcendence, leaving immanence to rule. What Taylor calls "secularity 1" concerns the retreat of religion from spaces such as politics, science and the market, while "secularity 2" is declining belief and practice, often seen as a consequence of modernity. In these, secularity is absence of religion, as in the separation of church and state. Taylor wants us to understand the rise of secularity in its own right, beyond religious compartmentalizing or decline.

Taylor understands the emergence of this secularity 3 in quite Western and Christian terms, which frustrates several authors of *Varieties of Secularism*. Belief in God is no longer axiomatic, in Taylor's view, and believers now have to think reflexively of their position as one among others, which, like them, needs justification. As the new default option, secularity is seen as natural. Nonetheless, John Milbank buoyantly asserts that "nothing in Taylor's radical insistence on the historical rule of contingency would seem to preclude…" a future in which a "festive Christianity" could be "true enlightenment and true romance" (pp. 81–2). Others more cautiously question the completeness of Taylor's account by means of some serious analysis beyond the bounds of Christianity.

Nilüfer Göle, for instance, objects that the "civilizing missions of the secular are manifested in the shaping of non-Western historical processes by means of colonialism and Orientalism" (p. 244). To bring Islam into the picture also disturbs the universalist pretensions of the secular and, she adds, is a field with an existing literature, unremarked by Taylor. Illumining the headscarf wrangles in France and Turkey to reveal the gender dimensions of secularity, Saba Mahmood weighs in with further questions about Christianity's relations with its "others" which, she insists, are at best underplayed in Taylor's otherwise (!) erudite text. It is hard to disagree with her challenge that missionary work in colonial regions did not simply extend a Christian essence into foreign traditions but "was transformative of Western Christianity itself." In a world where geopolitical conflict has patently religious dimensions, Taylor's apparent openness to other faith traditions should, she says, go beyond Christian language to seek "mutual accommodation across practices of difference" (p. 297).

Some putative and perhaps plausible connections are made here between Taylor's thesis and the recent academic intervention of "postsecularism." José Casanova, for example, asks whether Taylor will be remembered as the definitive philosopher of the immanent frame and triumphant exclusive humanism or the prophet of a dawning postsecular age who contributes to the destabilizing of that immanent frame. Like

Mahmood and Göle, Casanova is bothered by the lack of non-Western analysis, seeing the decentring of Western European experience as further undermining the secular age without contributing to Taylor's hope of transcendence. The editors, however, doubt the salience of any notion of the postsecular. As they rightly observe, for Taylor the postsecular could only have meaning in relation to the definitions of secularity that he sidelines. Secularity 3 comprehends religious waxing as well as waning.

Although this one offers some fine lines for debate, no book of responses could possibly "do justice" to the magisterial sweep of Taylor's *opus*, let alone point up all the possible roads not taken in *A Secular Age*'s 874 pages. But in addition to the queries of *Varieties of Secularism* I would like to add a couple on which neither Taylor himself, nor his critics, make much comment. Some of the long-term changes in the conditions of belief are today accentuated and inflected by their association with the consumer phase of capitalism and by novel interactivities dependent on new media. A Zygmunt Bauman (liquidity) or Manuel Castells (network) may help here (though each tends towards a modernist account of residual religion). These are arguably key items for sociological conversations with Taylor.

The final issue is where Taylor stands within his own arguments, both because in the final part of *A Secular Age* he comes clean about his (understanding of) Catholicism and because several authors question his stance. Jonathan Sheehan, for instance, says the only name for such a combination of theological argument and historical framework is "apologetics." While it is true that Taylor allows his faith (and hope and love for that matter) to inform and give shape to his argument, this is never simplistic, uncomplicated or, dare one say, without some seemingly contradictory nuance. Gesturing briefly to colonialism and Islam he finally reiterates his intention to "explain the phenomenon of modern secularity and the nova of ever more varied positions in a way in which we could go on having a conversation about it that bridges these differences" (p. 320). That's the spirit.

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