

# Synopsis of Charles Taylor's, "A Secular Age"

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*Retired McGill Philosopher Dr. Charles Taylor has written a major new work which is on the best-seller list. At 800+ pages, it is a month-long read. What follows is a few pages of my notes, which provides a synopsis of this significant work.- James Murray, Nov 25 2007.*

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We all know we live in an age of secularism. Few of us have a philosophical and theological vocabulary which helps us to describe what it means to live in such an age. Naming one's context is the first step in learning how to deal with it. The future direction of the Christian Church depends upon how we will react to this current age. Being able to accurately describe what this age consists of affects what are the possible future directions which are open to us.

Taylor notes there are three kinds of secularism.

1. The first stage is characterized by the withdrawal of the religious world-view from the public sphere. This is the result of much more than just the rise of scientific world-view. This is the disenchantment of the cosmos. Secularism is the move from the enchanted reality to the de-enchanted reality - this freed science to follow its own trajectory. In an enchanted worldview science, politics and religion all shared the same world view. When that enchanted world-view disappeared science became free to follow its own rationale.
2. The second stage is seen in the decline in personal religious practice and commitment. This is an individual's withdrawal from the community. People shift the source of meaning away from external 'eternal' sources to more personal choices.
3. The third stage is the most recent development, which has caused a fragmentation of our ideas of social order. This is the shift in the culture away from assuming Religious Faith is the norm, or the default expectation of how to live your life. Faith is now one option among many. This is society living in a universe which has no central point around which it revolves.

Secularism is a world view, a philosophy like any other. It is not necessarily an accurate description of reality. It is currently the most powerful world-view at play in Western society.

It is the philosophical outcome of 500 years of the Enlightenment and the Reform movements of both Protestantism and Catholicism. The events of the 1950's and 1960s were just the time when these ideas made the leap from the intellectual elites to the public social sphere.

Secularism does not negate the existence of God- it just pushes God into the transcendent realm, which is considered supernatural, and therefore 'unbelievable'. It pushes God into a realm outside the objective knowable scientific world, making it difficult for belief in God to have ultimate claim on our lives.

The second stage of Secularism is a reaction against the philosophical inadequacies of providential deism. (That is, of a good God who provides for our needs.) The argument for Atheism is a specific rejection of the God of providential deism.

The Secular narrative states that to be a fully actualized individual who seeks the higher goal of self-realization one must leave behind the childish attitude of faith in God. Since much of Christian thinking does not offer positive moral guidance in the fields of modern sexuality, self-fulfillment in relationships, technology and commerce, it is easy to see how this coming of age narrative became popular. In the secular world-view, people no longer need to look beyond themselves to find their norms, their goods, their standards of ultimate value. Taylor asserts this 'coming of age' narrative has done more to push the advance of Secularism than the advance of scientific thinking has.

In a secular age, as a result, God is reduced to the margins of life. This gives rise to the concept of God as 'providential deism'. God is thus pictured as a distant deity, who is the unknown other, the unmoved mover, the absent clockmaker of the universe. Such a deity can only be known through the providential design of the world. The order of the universe is the 'proof' of God, which gives rise to Natural Law. To go to church is to show you recognize and support God's providential order. Prayer is the act of conforming your will to God's design. To join the church, and serve on a committee becomes the way we join God's ruling order. Being a Christian is reduced to 'being good'. Upholding the moral codes of social conformity and obeying the rules such as the ten commandments is how one lives the Christian life. This is the civil religion practiced by the UCCan among many other liberal mainline churches for most of the 20th Century.

It is not a stretch to go from seeking to be good for the sake of God to 'being good' as a goal for its own sake. When human flourishing becomes reduced to a simple code, God can quickly drop out of the rationale for the code. As God becomes less of a philosophical category, or personal reality, there are many more options to choose from beyond the simple belief-unbelief dichotomy. We now live in an age where there are many moral alternatives as a result, and Christianity is not the default option. The concept of the sacred is no longer the foundation of our social or political order. This leads to the third stage of secularism, where there is a fragmenting of the common order.

We now live in an expressive age, where personal experience is the foundation of people's moral systems. Religion is one factor among many in those moral systems. A religion which relies upon its doctrines rather than personal spiritual experience as the foundation for its moral claims and its dreams of controlling the moral order of society will have a difficult time being heard in this climate. Taylor suggests the failure of the Christian faith to move away from an authoritative model, to one which encourages personal self-fulfillment, has caused many people to become alienated from the Church. Much of what he says comes from his perspective as a practicing Catholic, and from his experience as a philosopher, which draws heavily from the French schools of post-modernity, and contemporary Thomist moral thinking (which is interestingly enough starting to embrace the Virtue Ethics of Alisdair McIntyre, whose endorsement is on the back cover of this book).

The fact that so many find secularism to be flat, without an engaging picture of the purpose of life shows it to be an incomplete picture of reality. In time it will be questioned more, and the possibility of transcendence will be more acceptable again in the social understanding of our life together.

While worship is how we connect with God in a liturgical context, this explosion of cultural change is so immense that a simple tinkering with the techniques of how we worship will not be sufficient to bridge this gap. It is our understanding of the Christian life which must evolve. Taylor notes how our modern understanding of human sexuality has never really been fully embraced by our spirituality in a healthy way.

Taylor notes that at the heart of the Christian faith is the message of incarnation. God becomes human, so the human can become divine (this is from the Catholic and Orthodox catechisms).

Incarnation involves the whole body and the spirit as one. The goal of the religious life is communion, to share in God's love. To be a Christian is not about following the rules. It is to heal the world (The Hebrew concept of *tikkun olam*). The Church is to be a network of *agape*, of healing supporting relationships. Our acts of outreach are acts of communion, for charity is something only the elites can do for others. *Agape* is something we can all do for everyone. (*Agape* is the Greek word used in the New Testament for God's love. Unlike other Greek words for love: friendship (*phileos*), sexual attraction (*eros*), and generosity of spirit (*caritas*); *Agape* is unconditional, self-giving for the good of the other. How this "good" is now understood is part of the challenge of the secular age to traditional religious understandings.)

Much of our religious tradition practiced excarnation, the denial of the body. Judgment is not the purpose of religion. Taylor says one positive effect of secularism is the eliminating the use of Hell as a primary religious motivator. Death should not undermine the meaning of life. Resurrection should be the final word, but it only makes sense if there is first a strong belief in incarnation.

We must learn how to deal with the religious understanding of violence, and evil, which allows for true freedom of will and choice, and the resulting ownership of the consequences. Taylor notes how the loss of religion in our culture has resulted in a loss of meaning and purpose. This does not mean the purpose of religion is to give meaning – a loss of meaning is the trace which is left by the absence of religion. Religion gives us much more than just meaning.

Taylor describes our current problems with theodicy as being one of secular thinking having us ask the wrong question. The rational thinker asks “Why did this bad thing happen?”. We look for a logical reason. Finding none, we become angry with God. Taylor argues that the real question of theodicy is “Something bad has happened – so what is our response to be?” Will we choose revenge or forgiveness, judgment or reconciliation. If the goal of the life of faith is restoring communion then we will know how to respond to every unjust situation.

Taylor shows how secularism is a narrative, which tries to describe the world we live in, and which gives an explanation as to why the transcendent should be excluded. It is not the only narrative of our life together. History is the memory of our experience. History is not an objective science. Our experience of the transcendent reality of God cannot be forgotten. Secularism is a reaction to that experience.

It is secularism which has led to the “flatness of modern civilization which sees the final triumph of the Hollow Men, who, knowing the price of everything and the value of nothing, have lost the ability to feel or think deeply about anything.” (“Hollow Men” refers to a 1925 poem by T. S. Eliot. “Knowing the price ... value of nothing” is Oscar Wilde’s definition of a cynic.)

The hold of the former Christendom on our imagination is immense. So the sense can easily arise that the task of breaking out of the dominant secular immanentist orders today is already defined by the model of Christianity. Of course the issue remains open of how much we can actually go back, but this earlier civilization gives us both our paradigm language, which we are seeking, and perhaps also the model of a society and culture which is not in tension with, but fully expresses the faith. (P. 735)

The truth is we can’t simply turn back the clock and pretend the past five hundred years didn’t happen. Just as liberalism leads to providential deism which leads to secularism and which can lead to atheism, a Conservative world-view can lead to fundamentalism which can lead to a denial of the scientific reality of the world. Neither extreme pole is a helpful position.

Resurrection only makes sense to us when we take seriously incarnation, and overcome excarnation.

“We should find the center of our spiritual lives beyond the code (of morals and laws) deeper than the code, in networks of living concern (agape) which are not to be sacrificed to the code, which must even from time to time subvert it.” p. 743

“Authentic freedom, which links us to and continues our past, is seen as freedom. It is the highest freedom to be moved by one’s mystique (one’s experience of the Holy Spirit) as against being organized and mobilized and constrained by political authority to follow the rules.” p749 Taylor notes that Christianity is a living tradition, which changes and adapts in each new age. We are to be faithful to the tradition, and not to the past.

### **Who is Charles Taylor?**

Charles Taylor was born in Montreal, and educated at Oxford. He ran for the federal NDP several times during the 1960s. In retirement, he resides in Montreal. He also teaches at North Western University as Professor of Law and Philosophy. Taylor is the former Chichele Professor of Moral Philosophy at Oxford and is Professor Emeritus of Political Science and Philosophy at McGill

University. Among his publications are *Sources of the Self, and Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited*. He delivered the Massey Lectures in 1991 on "The Malaise of Modernity". Along with Gerard Bouchard he is currently chairing a commission on Reasonable Accommodation of religious & ethnic minorities in Quebec. In 1999 he delivered the Gifford Lectures entitled "Living in a Secular Age." This book contains those lectures, plus further thoughts on social and political theory having to do with multiculturalism, secularization, and alternative modernities and their impact on theology and how we live the Christian faith today. Taylor is a practicing Catholic and writes as one who has hope for the future of the Church.

### **Who Are James Murray and George Hermanson?**

James and George are friends and colleagues in ordained ministry in the United Church of Canada. The Rev. Dr. George Hermanson, [www.georgehermanson.com](http://www.georgehermanson.com), currently serves part-time at Edwards (Knox) United Church and is also director of the Madawaska Institute. The Rev. James Murray currently serves full-time at Montreal West United Church, [www.mwuc.org](http://www.mwuc.org).