



A Secular Age

By Charles Taylor

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What does it mean to say that we live in a secular age? Almost everyone would agree that we--in the West, at least--largely do. And clearly the place of religion in our societies has changed profoundly in the last few centuries. In what will be a defining book for our time, Charles Taylor takes up the question of what these changes mean--of what, precisely, happens when a society in which it is virtually impossible not to believe in God becomes one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is only one human possibility among others.

Taylor, long one of our most insightful thinkers on such questions, offers a historical perspective. He examines the development in "Western Christendom" of those aspects of modernity which we call secular. What he describes is in fact not a single, continuous transformation, but a series of new departures, in which earlier forms of religious life have been dissolved or destabilized and new ones have been created. As we see here, today's secular world is characterized not by an absence of religion--although in some societies religious belief and practice have markedly declined--but rather by the continuing multiplication of new options, religious, spiritual, and anti-religious, which individuals and groups seize on in order to make sense of their lives and give shape to their spiritual aspirations.

What this means for the world--including the new forms of collective religious life it encourages, with their tendency to a mass mobilization that breeds violence--is what Charles Taylor grapples with, in a book as timely as it is timeless.

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What does it mean to say that we live in a secular age? Almost everyone would agree that we--in the West, at least--largely do. And clearly the place of religion in our societies has changed profoundly in the last few centuries. In what will be a defining book for our time, Charles Taylor takes up the question of what these changes mean--of what, precisely, happens when a society in which it is virtually impossible not to believe in God becomes one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is only one human possibility among others.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Starred Review. In his characteristically erudite yet engaging fashion, Taylor, winner of the 2007 Templeton Prize, takes up where he left off in his magnificent *Sources of the Self* (1989) as he brilliantly traces the emergence of secularity and the processes of secularization in the modern age. Challenging the idea that the secular takes hold in a world where religion is experienced as a loss or where religions are subtracted from the culture, Taylor discovers the secular emerging in the midst of the religious. The Protestant Reformation, with its emphasis on breaking down the invidious political structures of the Catholic Church, provides the starting point down the road to the secular age. Taylor sweeps grandly and magisterially through the 18th and 19th centuries as he recreates the history of secularism and its parallel challenges to religion. He concludes that a focus on the religious has never been lost in Western culture, but that it is one among many stories striving for acceptance. Taylor's examination of the rise of unbelief in the 19th century is alone worth the price of the book and offers an essential reminder that the Victorian age, more than the Enlightenment, dominates our present view of the meanings of secularity. Taylor's inspired combination of philosophy and history sparkles in this must-read virtuoso performance. (*Sept.*)

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Review

Taylor's book is a major and highly original contribution to the debates on secularization that have been ongoing for the past century. There is no book remotely like it. (Alasdair MacIntyre)

This is Charles Taylor's breakthrough book, a book of really major importance, because he succeeds in recasting the whole debate about secularism. This is one of the most important books written in my lifetime. I am tempted to say the most important book, but that may just express the spell the book has cast over me at the moment. (Robert N. Bellah)

If the author had accomplished nothing more than a survey of the voluminous body of 'secularization theory,' he would have done something valuable. But, although Taylor clearly articulates his disdain for the view that modernity ineluctably led to the death of God, he goes far beyond a literature review... In addition to its conceptual value, this study is notable for its lucidity. Taylor has translated complex philosophical theories into language that any educated reader will be able to follow, yet he has not sacrificed an iota of sophistication or nuance. A magisterial book. (*Kirkus Reviews (starred review)* 2007-06-15)

In his characteristically erudite yet engaging fashion, Taylor takes up where he left off in his magnificent *Sources of the Self* (1989) as he brilliantly traces the emergence of secularity and the processes of secularization in the modern age... Taylor sweeps grandly and magisterially through the 18th and 19th centuries as he recreates the history of secularism and its parallel challenges to religion. He concludes that a focus on the religious has never been lost in Western culture, but that it is one among many stories striving for acceptance. Taylor's examination of the rise of unbelief in the 19th century is alone worth the price of the book and offers an essential reminder that the Victorian age, more than the Enlightenment, dominates our present view of the meanings of secularity. Taylor's inspired combination of philosophy and history sparkles in this must-read virtuoso performance. (*Publishers Weekly (starred review)* 2007-06-11)

One finds big nuggets of insight, useful to almost anybody with an interest in the progress of human society... A vast ideological anatomy of possible ways of thinking about the gradual onset of secularism as experienced in fields ranging from art to poetry to psychoanalysis... Taylor also lays bare the inconsistencies

of some secular critiques of religion. (*The Economist* 2007-09-08)

Sophisticated, erudite...with excursions into history, philosophy and literature, *A Secular Age* is a weighty and challenging tome. It is also a brilliant account of the 'sensed context' in which secularization developed. And a moving meditation, by a believer, on the 'ineradicable bent' of human beings to respond to something beyond life, to keep open 'the transcendent window.' (Glenn C. Altschuler *Baltimore Sun* 2007-09-09)

A salutary and sophisticated defense of how life was lived before the daring views of a tiny secular elite inspired mass indifference, and how it might be lived in the future. (Michael Burleigh *New York Sun* 2007-09-12)

[A] big, powerful book... [Taylor's] book is massive in its historical and philosophical scope. Penetrating and dense, it would take months to fully digest. Loosely structured, it's crammed with original insights. Taylor, 75, can pack more into one of his complex paragraphs than most prevaricating, deconstructing academic philosophers can say in a chapter, or even a book... The book explores the immense ramifications of how the West shifted in a few centuries from being a society in which 'it was virtually impossible not to believe in God' to one in which belief is optional, often frowned upon. (Douglas Todd *Vancouver Sun* 2007-09-17)

In *A Secular Age*, philosopher Charles Taylor takes on the broad phenomenon of secularization in its full complexity... [A] voluminous, impressively researched and often fascinating social and intellectual history... Taylor's account encompasses art, literature, science, fashion, private life—all those human activities that have been sometimes more, sometimes less affected by religion over the last five centuries. (Jack Miles *Los Angeles Times* 2007-09-16)

The real genius of this erudite and profound book resides in its grandeur of theme and richness of detail. For all its imposing intellectual density, it is a delight to read; at times, it was literally impossible to put down. Yet it is also a work that ought to be read by degrees—one chapter at a time, with ample pause for reflection. (Lorenzo DiTommaso *Montreal Gazette* 2007-09-22)

In an idiosyncratic blend of the philosophical, the historical, and the speculative, Taylor describes the shift from a world brim-full with spirits and magic to a world where divinity is absent. His account resists the idea that the rise of secularism is a process of subtraction, of loss, and of disenchantment. Rather, Taylor describes secularity's birth as the migration of ideas, subtle changes in those ideas, and the opening of new possibilities. If Taylor's communitarian scholarship celebrated historical and social rootedness, *A Secular Age* is an encomium to the sheer happenstance of how those circumstances arose. (Azziz Huq *American Prospect* 2007-10-02)

Taylor's masterful integration of history, sociology, philosophy, and theology demands much of the reader. In return you will be convinced that Charles Taylor is one of the smartest and deepest social thinkers of our time. (Tyler Cowen *Slate* 2007-10-31)

A culminating dispatch from the philosophical frontlines. It is at once encyclopedic and incisive, a sweeping overview that is no less analytically rigorous for its breadth. Its subject is a philosophical history of the past, present and future of Western Christendom. As such, it begins with a deceptively simple question: How did it become possible for anyone to not believe in God? ...*A Secular Age* recounts the history of an idea, in other words, but in it the past is not an inert, settled fact, but a reservoir to be drawn upon to shatter the sameness and the apparent inevitability of the present. As a history it clarifies crucial intellectual and theological divisions that continue to structure debates about divinity, but with the aim of reforming the way

we think about them, 'to show the play of destabilization and recomposition.' Though this isn't a book you take to the beach, it remains eminently readable. As philosophers go, Taylor is a kind of behaviorist, more concerned with elaborating the implications of a way of thinking than with showing its contradictions. Unlike most philosophers, though, Taylor seems at pains to remain accessible to a general audience to capture complex philosophical debate in ordinary language. An important part of Taylor's argument is that religion and the belief in God, most particularly the experience of transcendence, are not at all outmoded... Though it avoids predictions or prescriptions, *A Secular Age* leaves us with the sense that the future will be a far poorer, less human place, if we do not discover some expression for that transcendent otherness. (Steven Hayward *Cleveland Plain Dealer* 2007-11-18)

A Secular Age is a towering achievement... It shows the ways we have traveled from the automatic certainties of 1500 to the fragile alignments of today. It transforms the secularization debate. (David Martin *The Tablet* 2007-12-01)

A Secular Age is a work of stupendous breadth and erudition. (John Patrick Diggins *New York Times Book Review* 2007-12-16)

[A] thumping great volume. (Stuart Jeffries *The Guardian* 2007-12-08)

Very occasionally there appears a book destined to endure. *A Secular Age* is such a book... *A Secular Age* is an important and deeply interesting work. Its central thesis is that secularization must be understood not simply as the decline of certain beliefs and institutions, but as a total change in our experience of the world... There are subtle, original discussions of the modern self, of changing conceptions of time, of the religious landscape of art, and much else besides. Taylor has a great gift of empathy, an ability to inhabit and bring to life the mental world of both believers and unbelievers. A true Hegelian, he sees the goal of philosophy as understanding, not judgment. (Edward Skidelsky *Daily Telegraph* 2007-12-08)

Though this essential Canadian intellectual may overstate the triumph of secularity, his huge and elegant work takes on the transformation of the world from 1500, when it was almost impossible not to believe in a Creator, to 2000, when religion was simply one choice on a menu of belief systems. He finds the answer in 'exclusive humanism,' which sees 'no final goals beyond human flourishing, nor any allegiance to anything else beyond this flourishing.' (Donald Harman Akenson *Globe & Mail* 2007-12-01)

Taylor's gargantuan philosophical history of modernity, which complicates the flattering and simplified story we like to tell ourselves about secularization, is a major intellectual event. (Jonathan Derbyshire *Prospect* 2008-01-01)

It is refreshing to read an inquiry into the condition of religion that is exploratory in its approach. Charles Taylor, a Roman Catholic as well as one of the world's leading political theorists, does not aim to attack or defend any system of belief in his new book, *A Secular Age*. Rather, he wants to elucidate the very idea of a secular world. For Taylor, the difference between the pre-modern Western world and the modern West is not simply that beliefs held then are no longer accepted today; it is that the entire framework of thought has changed. (John Gray *Harper's* 2008-01-01)

Taylor makes a strong case for the presence in ordinary moral life of something like Plato's idea of the Good, however little acknowledged... *A Secular Age* carries the story further, into the question of the role of religion in constituting a person's identity. Taylor wants to lay out what it takes to go on believing in God, in the absence of any equivalent to the intellectual, cultural and imaginative surroundings in which pre-modern religion was quietly embedded. This is what he calls our 'social imaginary': how we collectively sense what

is normal and appropriate in our dealings with one another and with the world around us. This is something deeper and more diffused than philosophical theories or thought-out positions. (Fergus Kerr *The Tablet* 2007-09-22)

Taylor reminds us that we remain spiritual creatures in our most essential natures, and that what we take for granted—our age's lack of religious faith—is, in fact, an anomaly of history. Our forefathers did not live this way and our grandchildren might not either. Considering the doubts about extreme secularism, it is possible we are entering a new Age of Spirit. If so, Taylor's latest magnum opus serves as a comprehensive guide to the reemergence of religious sensibility. (Robert Sibley *Ottawa Citizen* 2008-01-20)

Taylor is arguably the most interesting and important philosopher writing in English today... What makes Taylor so important? Over more than 40 years, four large books, four or five slimmer essays and several volumes of articles, he has worked out a distinctive network of arguments and an exceptionally rich analysis of the modern self and its values—an analysis that reveals us to be altogether deeper and more interesting, but also less self-aware, than we tend to suppose... *A Secular Age* sets out to offer a richer characterization of secularization and the nature of contemporary belief, both religious and skeptical... Taylor writes brilliantly about the new social forms—the nation state, the market economy, the charitable enterprise—and the ideals of altruism and public service that have emerged with them... *A Secular Age* is effectively a polemic against dogmatic atheism... It is full of insights, and many of its component parts—notably Taylor's discussion of the 'pressures' that make a settled view on the big ontological questions hard to sustain—are as good as anything by this magnificent philosopher. (Ben Rogers *Prospect* 2008-02-01)

A Secular Age represents a singular achievement... Taylor is somehow uniquely able to combine chutzpah and good manners, making bold and imaginative claims, yet always attending respectfully to the whole range of disciplines that touch on the philosophical trajectory being drawn, whether that be history, sociology, theology, art theory, cultural studies, anthropology or social theory... *A Secular Age* succeeds in the same way as his previous work: in illuminating through complicating. At the same time, this book seems to step up the ambition somewhat: by attempting to provide a final definitive account of all the narratives and complications that make up our contemporary age, as they implode on themselves and interact with one another... Hegel knew, of course, that 'the owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of the dusk'; or, in other words, that philosophy can only fathom the truth about an age in hindsight, when the day has passed. But then again, that didn't stop Hegel having a go; and we should be glad that it hasn't stopped Charles Taylor, either. (Christopher J. Insole *Times Literary Supplement* 2008-02-01)

It is, simply, the most comprehensive account of the process and meaning of secularization... Taylor's depiction of the past two centuries is rich with insights and subtle analyses... Familiarity with Taylor's book is now the entry ticket for any serious discussion of secularization. (Peter Steinfels *Commonweal* 2008-05-09)

[*A Secular Age*] may become an enduring contribution to understanding religious belief, the evolution of the secular order, and the defining characteristics of modern secularism and contemporary spirituality. Like Charles Taylor's earlier books, it is a product of prodigious erudition. Its 874 dense pages brim with original observation, cogent argument constructed from sources in a wide array of disciplines, and generous ecumenical gestures, even towards humanists. His story is complex, somewhat repetitious and yet unflaggingly interesting: it is loaded with so much novel detail and insight that the reader will be grateful for each scrap of familiar ground. (Tamas Pataki *Australian Review of Books* 2008-04-01)

The focus here is neither on the role of religion in public institutions nor on the extent of religious belief, but rather on its conditions... It is the slow emergence of secularity in this sense that Taylor sets out to explain,

at formidable length, and in remarkable historical and philosophical detail. Binding all that detail together is an argument that Taylor manages to sustain over nearly eight hundred pages. Simply put, *A Secular Age* is a magisterial refutation of what Taylor calls the 'subtraction story' of secularisation. (Jonathan Derbyshire *Philosopher's Magazine* 2008-01-01)

In a determinedly brilliant new book, Charles Taylor challenges the 'subtraction theory' of secularization which defines it as a process whereby religion simply falls away, to be replaced by science and rationality. Instead, he sees secularism as a development within Western Christianity, stemming from the increasingly anthropocentric versions of religion that arose from the Reformation. For Taylor, the modern age is not an age without religion; instead, secularization heralds 'a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others.' The result is a radical pluralism which, as well as offering unprecedented freedom, creates new challenges and instabilities. (*London Review of Books* 2008-08-14)

Charles Taylor's remarkable book *A Secular Age* achieves something quite different from what other writers on secularization have accomplished. Most have focused on decline as the essence of secularism—either the removal of religion from sphere after sphere of public life, or the decrease of religious belief and practice. But Taylor focuses on what kind of religion makes sense in a secular age... Taylor is asking not only how secularism became a significant option in a civilization that not so long ago was explicitly Christian, but what that change means for the spiritual quest, both of those who are still religious and those who consider themselves secular. I doubt many people have even perceived that aspect of secularism, and Taylor's book should be as much of a revelation to them as it was to me. (Robert N. Bellah *Commonweal* 2008-09-12)

Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* offers a uniquely rich historical and philosophical overview of how we came to take a disenchanted world for granted—quietly inviting us to reflect that if disenchantment and the absence of the divine were learned habits of mind, they might not necessarily be the self-evidently rational truths so many think they are. (Rowan Williams *Times Literary Supplement* 2008-11-26)

A Secular Age offers an invaluable map of how the modern religious–secular divide came into being. (Andrew Koppelman *Dissent* 2008-12-01)

If you are, as I am, often puzzled by the landscape of contemporary religious belief and unbelief, you will regard Charles Taylor's huge and hugely rewarding intellectual history of the secularization of European and North American culture as a marvelous gift. *A Secular Age* is a first-class map of the spiritual terrain of Western modernity as well as the road that got us here. (Robert Westbrook *Christian Century* 2008-12-16)

A rich, complex book, but what I most appreciate is [Taylor's] vision of a 'secular' future that is both open and also contains at least pockets of spiritual rigor, and that is propelled by religious motivation, a strong and enduring piece of our nature. (David Brooks *New York Times* 2013-07-08)

Grapples with the Christian-secular relationship, and with admirable nuance (unlike most theology). (Theo Hobson *The Tablet* 2013-12-07)

About the Author

Charles Taylor is Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at McGill University.

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