



Charles Taylor on Secularization

Introduction and Interview

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Introduction

In 1999 Charles Taylor delivered a set of Gifford lectures in Edinburgh, in which he tried to come to grips with the question: “What does it mean to call our age secular?” These lectures, on the basis of which he recently published a book,¹ are part of a larger research project of Taylor concerning the theme of secularization. His new book on this subject is forthcoming, and will be of comparable magnitude to *Sources of the Self*². In 2001 Taylor attended a conference on René Girard in Antwerp and we saw this as a good opportunity to ask him some questions on the subject of his present research. To introduce the interview, we start with an outline of Taylor’s position on secularization.

Taylor observes that the notion ‘secularization’ has two different meanings: a) the decline of religious belief and practice; b) the retreat of religion from the public space.³ This enables him to differentiate between two kinds of theories on the process of secularization. The first kind of theory claims that the decline of personal faith is the engine of secularization, and sees the disappearance of religion from the public space as a consequence of that. The other kind of theory reverses the relation. Here it is claimed, that the marginalization of religion in social life was the main factor, resulting in the decline of personal faith. In the first theory, science is invoked as the major force that made religious belief increasingly problematic;

the paradigmatic example is Darwin’s theory of evolution. In the second theory — concerning the retreat of religion from public space — institutional changes in the modern world are seen as the main cause of secularization. In this view, the process of functional differentiation led to a diversity of relative autonomous subsystems (economy, politics, science) that took many facets of social life out of the purview of the church institutions. Instead of an overarching framework, religion became simply another parallel subsystem.⁴

Taylor opposes the usual one-sidedness of these explanations. The ‘science-beats-religion’ thesis is problematic not because it is entirely untenable, but because it cannot be the whole story. Although there was a genuine battle between Theology and Science in the modern era, and although Darwin blew a gaping hole in the religious argument from design (natural design as proof of God’s existence), to really understand the transition to unbelief we should pay attention to the *moral* appeal that a certain outlook had on people. According to Taylor, we have to take seriously the drawing power of scientism. This is not a neutral stance toward the world, but rests itself on a moral framework with a certain ethics of belief: one *ought* not to believe what one has insufficient evidence for (SOS, 403-404). The other explanation for the process of secularization suffers from the same problem, namely that the spiritual and moral force of secularization are not taken into account. Here,



the waning of belief is simply presented as a value-indifferent consequence of institutional complexity.

This critique sets the stage for Taylor's alternative account. Whereas the age of belief can be characterized as the age in which all credible moral sources involved God, the process of secularization sets in when people start to realize that there are *alternative* moral sources: "[...] people no longer feel [...] that the spiritual dimension of their lives was incomprehensible if one supposed there was no God" (SOS, 310). Because of alternative moral sources, such as reason or moral sentiments, God was no longer inescapable to make sense of people's moral predicament.⁵ The point here is that secularization is not so much a process that has developed on neutral epistemic or institutional grounds, but rather on moral and spiritual grounds.⁶

This becomes even clearer when Taylor traces secularization to its *religious* sources, namely the process of Reformation and the turn to personal religion (VR, 13). One of the central points of the Reformation was the rejection of any form of external mediation. Instead, the concentration shifted towards the *inner* personal commitment of the believer (SOS, 215 ff.). In this process the real locus of religion became identified with the *individual experience*, and not with corporate life (VR, 7 ff.). The stress on the inner commitment together with a rejection of external conformity made it possible that religious traditions became fragile and contested. This fits a broad cultural pattern that arose during modernity and that Taylor refers to as the *ethics of authenticity*.⁷ Firstly, this ethics facilitated the move of many Western societies towards multiculturalism.⁸ That in itself implied a further erosion of the project of Christendom, namely the attempt to fuse Christian faith with a particular society — an attempt that Taylor rejects as dangerous for faith itself.⁹ Secondly, and more importantly, the ethics of authenticity introduced a new kind of individualism that has severely eroded the institutionalized shape of Christian religion in the West. As each person had to realize his or her own individual originality, the conformity to a model posed from outside — by society, the previous gen-

eration, or religious authority — became less attractive. This led not only to a rise in new kinds of religion and spirituality, but also in the number of people who are declaring themselves to be atheist or agnostic (VR, 83 ff., 106-107; SOS, 158).

Taylor makes a crucial distinction between two phases in Western history that mark a difference in the way that God was present in public space. He describes this gradual shift as one from hierarchical, mediated-access societies to horizontal, direct-access societies.¹⁰ In the first type of society, the earlier one, people understood themselves as being connected to an enchanted world in which there was a strong contrast between the sacred and the profane (VR, 65). God's presence in this society was mainly in the loci of the sacred. By 'sacred' Taylor means certain places like churches, certain times like high feasts, and certain actions like religious rituals where the power of God was more present and could be approached by humans (VR 65; SOS, 216). In this social imaginary, certain people and agencies — such as kings and priests — were on a higher plane. They were seen as being able to mediate between the profane and the holy, between ordinary time and higher time. The political society was closely connected to this structure, and could itself be thought to exist on a higher plane. As an example in European history, one could think of the French Kingdom where "the king himself could be one of the links between the planes, represented respectively by the king's mortal and undying bodies" (VR, 65).

The second type of society came about by a process where the vertical and hierarchical orientation slowly transformed into a horizontal order without an explicit place for the sacred. This type of society was for a large part a consequence of the Reformation. The rejection of mediation implied the rejection of both the social hierarchy and the role of the sacred in society (namely as an *external* point of contact with God). Society became structured around a more horizontal social imaginary in which God's presence is not in the sacred, but in the form of a providential design that affects everyone in the same way. The divine is no longer located in the priest or the king, but instead resides in the design



that structures the whole society. The paradigmatic example here is the United States: “This mode of presence can be filled in with an idea of moral order that is seen as established by God, in the way invoked, for instance, in the American Declaration of Independence: men have been created equal, and have been endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights” (VR, 67).

Today there is both continuity and discontinuity in this ‘social imaginary’. What continues is the importance of a moral order, but “the rift comes from the fact that what makes this order the right one is, for many though not by any means for all, no longer God’s providence” (VR, 70). At the same time a lot of people who no longer believe in God, are dissatisfied with the exclusive humanism of modernity and its rejection of any notion of transcendence. This resistance is what Taylor refers to as an “immanent revolt”: it is the “revolt from within unbelief [...] against the primacy of life.” (CM, 26-27). According to Taylor, this points to an ontological feature of selfhood, namely that human beings aspire to go “beyond life”, to have contact with something of intrinsic value beyond human flourishing (CM, 20, 109). This human need to go beyond life is not without its dangers, whether it manifests itself outside of traditional religion or within it. In the first case, Taylor refers to a modern fascination with death and violence and in the second case, to human sacrifice and intercommunal massacres (CM, 28, cf. 18). Notwithstanding these darker sides of the longing to go beyond life, Taylor claims that humans aspire to some form of transcendence, whether this aspiration takes shape in religion, in a fascination with the sublime, an interest in the wilderness, or in art, where people also look for a quasi-spiritual nourishment.¹¹

Taylor’s reflections on secularization are to be seen as part of a broader project that attempts to reframe the questions concerning the self-understandings of our age. Instead of advocating for either the “boosters” or “knockers” of modernity, he argues for a position that combines the fruits of

modernity with a dialogical self-understanding and a perspective in which transcendence is acknowledged. In an attempt to clarify his position, Taylor gives a rough sketch of the debate concerning modernity, in which he essentially distinguishes between three different positions: the secular humanists, the neo-Nietzscheans, and those who acknowledge some good beyond life. Taylor places himself neither into the camp of the ‘secular humanists’ nor into that of the ‘neo-Nietzscheans’, who both reject religion and any value beyond life (CM, 29). At the same time, there is a certain overlap with *both* these positions. Taylor agrees with the secular humanist that the idea of the human good is of crucial importance, first and foremost in the shape of the modern rights culture. Hence both Taylor and the secular humanist reject the antihumanism of Nietzsche and his heirs. But Taylor’s position at the same time has an affinity with neo-Nietzscheanism, namely with regard to the assessment that the “buffered self”¹² of secular humanism leads to dissatisfaction and a sense of meaninglessness. The difference, according to Taylor, is that neo-Nietzscheans do not seem to have an alternative moral vision. A bleak universe remains, ‘beyond good and evil’. Taylor’s philosophy instead tries to articulate moral sources that have the potential of empowering people to act morally and provide orientation to their lives. Not everybody in the modern world will agree with the specific theistic interpretation Taylor gives of these moral sources. Taylor is the first to acknowledge this. However, that doesn’t make his reflections on this subject less relevant. The twentieth century might be called the secular age, but it is yet unclear what this amounts to in practice. As Taylor puts it, the history of this age can be read either in a perspective of mounting horror or in one of great moral achievement (CM, 37). It is the century of Auschwitz and despotic socialism, but also of democracy, Amnesty International and Médecins sans Frontières. Thus for both believers and non-believers, the secular age doesn’t lend itself easily to a comfortable resting place.¹³ At the beginning of a new century, we can only look back in bewilderment.



Interview

Mr. Taylor, at the present moment you are carrying out research centred on the issue of secularization, that somehow completes and extends the perspective of Sources of the Self. As far as we can see, you try to move away from any sort of reductionism. Now, what is your stand concerning the very meaning of secularization? Normally it is understood in a dual perspective, and in both cases as something negative: either as the disappearance of personal beliefs or as the disappearance of the presence of God in the public space.

Taylor: Well, I am interested in a third phenomenon, without being disinterested in either of these which is: how do we have construals of our world that develop and become institutionalized where it becomes very difficult to think of the transcendent, to accept the transcendent, to talk about the transcendent? And, of course, talking about the transcendent becomes very complex because there are different media in our society and some are more framed by these ways of understanding the world, by these construals, than others. But what are these ways of understanding our world, how do they arise, that's what really interests me and I think that understanding that helps you to understand the development of secularization in the two other senses, that is, the retreat from the public sphere and/or the decline of faith and/or practice. So I'm writing a book whose focus is on that. I want to be able to trace things like the development of a clear immanent/transcendent distinction or a natural/supernatural distinction, not just in the intellectual culture, where it starts very far back, but in the whole understanding of our world, that is, the understanding of a kind of natural moral order without a reference to the cosmos or to the beyond. The focus of my research is on the question of how that understanding developed, particularly in the understandings of modern natural law which is issued in our sense of the importance of human rights today, and also on how people have reacted differently to that. That is what I am trying to find

and trace and so on. It is rather difficult for it involves history and sociology and philosophy and theology, all at some kind of intersection point.

Could one then say that your new project is even more historical than Sources of the Self?

Taylor: In that sense, yes.

How do you think that both dimensions, personal beliefs and the presence of God in the public sphere, have been reshaped in modernity? How do you see the major transitions here that seem essential to understand modernity itself?

Taylor: Well, there is a big shift in modernity as a whole in the last 300 years. On the one hand, there is the understanding of the presence of God in the public sphere through some understandings of the sacred, a kingship that is somehow linked with the coronation unction — like the French monarchy up until the revolution. On the other hand, there is the notion of the presence of God in another paradigm case, which is the American republic as it was set up, where the idea is not that there is a presence of God, the presence of the sacred in some particular locus or some particular figure, but rather the idea of divine design, providential design (really providence is the word here), which this republic is meant to be based on. Thus you get the idea that God has created men equal and endowed them with certain inalienable rights, and then you have the setting up of a republic which follows this design. But there has been a falling off in belief among many Americans, so they are uncomfortable with that formulation. Yet, then, other Americans are uncomfortable when that formulation is sidelined, because for them that is the way in which God is present in their public sphere. Of course, that is totally different from the other paradigm, the French monarchy before the revolution, with the idea of coronation and the whole conception of the king's two bodies, and so on. Hence we have had a radical shift in modernity to another notion of the presence of God, a notion which is then contested too.



This kind of approach is against very simple attempts to write this story as one in which you move from the sacred kingship directly into the naked public sphere. This is not the way it worked at all. You move through this intermediate form, and this intermediate form is not totally different from certain atheist or agnostic forms, like French Jacobinism for instance, which has something like the same idea of a proper design, only now not attributed to God but attributed to nature or whatever, and the republic being the locus of our allegiance because it realizes this design. That constitutes the whole French republican tradition, namely that there is a certain proper way of being and this is realized in la République Française. There is a kind of continuity of forms here that one sees before one in modern times where there is not a total shift from one to the other. Therefore, there can be even some kinds of ambivalences, like in the United States today, where there is kind of an agreement on what the form is, the American way of life, the American constitution in detail — everybody says, “stay by the constitution and interpret the constitution” — but there are theistic understandings of that and non-theistic understandings of that which are coexisting. So, a lot of people do not quite know which one they really are belonging to. Now I want to see this whole series of possibilities in their complex relation rather than as a simple on/off.

But what about the other pole of the question on secularization, namely, the way the very notion of transcendence as lived by individuals has been reshaped?

Taylor: I think that this can be understood in relation to this other evolution. We are coming to a point where it is evident that there has been a kind of death of Christendom, of course this would be a very dramatic way of putting it. By ‘Christendom’, I mean something like *la chrétienté* in French, I mean the idea of the whole civilization or society which is impregnated in Christianity, and this has been I think severely undermined by this shift that

we are talking about. Now, regarding faith itself, I don’t think that this ideal of *la chrétienté* lies along the path of the main spiritual creations or renewals of our days, which are much more taking into account the different spiritual paths that people are spontaneously induced to follow, and that’s where I think the living spirituality is. And these forms of spirituality — these are plural — are actually hindered by the attempt to hang on to the Christendom ideal. The kind of culture wars you see in the States, for instance, are very negative from a Christian point of view, for they are not helping the development of new spiritualities, but rather hindering them by getting everybody into camps, fighting, and so on. And then of course within the Christian camp people who want to engage in this fight are extremely intolerant to any kind of new initiatives or semi-dissent inside their camp. They are always on the lookout for any deviation, for there are some people that do things that are very far outside the traditional box, like homosexuals, who want to have some kind of spiritual life; well, let’s see how that develops. We are not here to say to people “get out”, but rather to see how people can be led to God, put in common with God. But there is a certain attitude, this whole mentality that is involved in these culture wars, that is really clinging to something which is more of a hindrance than a help for today. Of course, I’m not talking about the 14th century. We have to take account of very different historical circumstances.

This question might be a bit of a transition, but it relates to what you just said about cultural pluralization. Do you think it is possible that the phenomenon of cultural difference itself holds a potential for the positive experience of the “beyond life” that you have written about in relation to the notion “transcendence”? Cultural otherness is in a way beyond our own lifeform. Can people experience this kind of meaning in culture-contact, for instance, when they travel?

Taylor: Yes, they can. This can be very superficial in the sense of exoticism and so on, but it can be



very profound: that is the sense that we all belong in this world, that we are all part of this world, that there is something very positive and important about understanding the other, about really getting oneself out of one's own world and touching the human across that distance. Because in that Catholic modernity text it was not an accident that I choose Matteo Ricci as the image,¹⁴ because that was one of the great attempts of the Jesuits to make a profound distinction between the faith that they tried to communicate and their own culture. They really saw that faith is for everyone; that means that it can not simply be reduced to one culture. And there is a lot of that in the world today. Now people are getting a kind of insight that we all belong together in the world. Despite the fact that there is a very common reaction of the opposite kind, totally disoriented, there is a lot of — among many young people today — this other reaction that could be a path towards something positive

Do you think the 'backlash' against multiculturalism, like in Western Europe today, could be related to the process of secularization?

Taylor: Yes, that can be the case; although they are different processes they may compound each other, you are quite right. Because when you get any kind of big change in what we thought was our identity — I mean, we as society — that can be a source of insecurity. Again take the American case: people there have this very strong theistic view of being an American and then other Americans are standing up and are saying, “we don't need to do this”, so they feel *insécurité*, they feel very shattered in their identity. That's one thing, and then, added to that, you also have the presence of all the Muslims and Hindus, and so on, who are a further reason to reinterpret the society as not totally Christian. All these things together can make them react very negatively to these new kinds of people they weren't used to before, and that's happening in all western societies which used to be Christian or Christian and

Jewish and nothing else but now have a great number of Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, particularly Muslims and so on. And this is very unsettling, you see this in Germany and also right in this city.

What seems to be missing in political theory today is a conceptual understanding — not a justification — of the sources of these sometimes extreme, negative reactions against immigrants.

Taylor: Yes, I agree with you. With a certain amount of sympathy and understanding, as tough as one wants to be with these leadership types like Jörg Haider, I think you have to try to have a sympathetic understanding for why more people are sucked in and vote for them. Because you could really speak to them and help them out of that role instead of just condemning them.

Could the notion “strong evaluation”¹⁵ play a positive role here? One could think of developing a critical stance towards feelings of fear and unease against a background that is structured by a sense of the moral importance of recognition.

Taylor: Yes, that's right. But on the other hand it is not going to be sufficient to create in people the feeling of unease at their own attitudes of rejection, and that is what a lot of the policies of liberals consist of. They are trying to shame these people, by discourse like “this is like Hitler” and so on, which is the way of shaming the people in our contemporary part of the world. But you also have to offer them something more, communicate the positive side of what it would be to live in this new kind of democracy. It is only if you can get that across that you can turn people around.

A fundamental idea in your work is that human identity is embodied in an external medium, like cultural practices and institutions. How does this notion relate to the notion of “transcendence”? Can we define the “transcendent” as that aspect of reality which seems to escape embodiment, that aspect which we cannot see as part of our own horizon of understanding?



Taylor: Well, it does and it doesn't. Transcendence escapes embodiment in the sense that, on the one hand, I do know that my present way of reaching God, understanding of God or whatever, is inadequate; it does not do justice to reality and I hope that I will somehow be able to climb further. But, on the other hand, there is no way in which I will have a relation to God which is not in some way or the other embodied. It is just like when I am writing a poem and I am trying to find the right word and I feel all the time this is not the right word, but what I am trying to do is to find the right word, so there is no way of me getting that written without finding the word.

Why are you so ambivalent about the use of the notion "transcendence"? You write about a "grudging rehabilitation... [in the] hope of finding a better term" (CM, 105-106).

Taylor: Well, it is just that this notion is so fluid, that is the problem, it can mean all sorts of different things. I have tried to find a generic term for what people are missing, for what is beyond.

And that is not necessarily only God?

Taylor: It's not necessarily only God. When I say there is a hunger for this, it could take different forms. People, for instance, can become touched by Buddhism where there is no conception of God at all.

... or notions like the sublime in the Romantic period?

Taylor: Yes, that's right, these are all part of this hunger which I think is definitively inscribed as a

reaction to this modern moral order; it is this hunger to go beyond.

But in any case, is the process of secularization an irreversible phenomenon?

Taylor: Well, yes, because it is also the process of our creating a world in which Christendom is disappearing from the horizon, so you can not get it back to 1750, you just can't. There is no way that it can be done.

And in that sense it has created a unique situation in history?

Taylor: Yes, there's never been a society without the equivalent of Christendom; that is an established religious form that structures everything and gives sense to everything.

One last question: how do you think that this situation may alter the shape of Christianity in the future?

Taylor: Well, it's not going to be that different from the way it started; we started in the Roman Empire as a small group, not established, nothing to do with the established religion, just spreading the word. It's a kind of return to, in some ways, for us, a more authentic predicament. Constantine's Christianity was important and it did a lot of good things, but — and this is a slight exaggeration — deviation through Constantine for the 18th century was kind of the wrong road. That is, of course, an absurdly oversimple way of putting it, but we are back home in a certain sense.

Notes

1. C. Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today; William James Revisited* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002). Abbreviation VR.

2. C. Taylor, *Sources of the Self; the Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989). Abbreviation SOS.



3. C. Taylor, "Foreword," *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion*, M. Gauchet (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), ix-xv, ix-x. This is by the way a somewhat different contrast from the one Taylor draws in *Sources of the Self*, namely between the regression of belief in God and the decline in the practice of religion (309).
4. L. Laeyendecker, "Een maatschappelijk tekort? Over de vraag naar zin," in *Vragen naar zin; beschouwingen over zingevingsproblematiek*, ed. G.A. van der Wal en F.C.L.M. Jacobs (Baarn: Ambo, 1992), 11-39, 19; Cf. SOS, 310, 402.
5. B.E. Benson, "What it Means to be Secular? A Conversation with philosopher Charles Taylor," *Books & Culture* 8/4 (2002): 36; SOS, 314.
6. C. Taylor, "Iris Murdoch and Moral Philosophy," in *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness*, eds. M. Antonaccio and W. Schweiker (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 24-25; R. Abbey, *Charles Taylor* (Teddington: Acumen, 2000), 200-204.
7. C. Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991).
8. C. Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," in *Multiculturalism; Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. A. Gutmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 25-73.
9. "There can never be a total fusion of the faith and any particular society, and the attempt to achieve it is dangerous for the faith. Something of this kind has been recognized from the beginning of Christianity in the distinction between church and state" C. Taylor, "A Catholic Modernity?" in *A Catholic Modernity? Charles Taylor's Marianist Award Lecture*, ed. J.L. Heft (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 17. Abbreviation 'CM' stands for this keynote lecture and for Taylor's response to the 4 comments, 105-125; "[...] we shouldn't forget the spiritual costs of various kinds of forced conformity: hypocrisy, spiritual stultification, inner revolt against the Gospel, the confusion of faith and power, and even worse" (VR, 114).
10. C. Taylor, "Modes of Secularism," in *Secularism and its Critics*, ed. R. Bhargava (Dehli: Oxford University Press, 1998), 39 ff.; VR, 64 ff..
11. CM, 105 ff.; Abbey, 211; N.H. Smith, *Charles Taylor: Meaning, Morals and Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), 228.
12. The "buffered self" is a notion in Taylor's recent work that refers to the modern view of the self as far less vulnerable to forces beyond the individual's control than was the case in the enchanted world of spirits and demons. More generally, it presupposes a tightly bounded notion of selfhood, with boundaries between self and world, inner and outer, that are far less porous than they did in the enchanted world where there was a strong sense that things and agencies 'outside' the mind helped to constitute the self emotionally and spiritually. As Ruth Abbey points out: "Here Taylor's reading dovetails with that offered in *Sources of the Self* of the disengaged, punctual self for at the core of these developments is an emphasis on instrumental, rational self-control" (Abbey, 206-207; 203-204; VR, 98, 102; Smith, 205, 227-228).
13. Abbey, 212.
14. Matteo Ricci was a Italian Jesuit missionary who introduced Christian teaching to the Chinese empire in the 16th century. He lived there for nearly 30 years and is considered a pioneer in the attempt at mutual comprehension between China and the West (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1996). In CM, Taylor takes Ricci's project as a model for a conversation between Christians and those who turned away from Christian belief, because he — like Ricci — wants to affirm the valuable achievements of the non-Christian culture and at the same time using these as points of contact for presenting the gospel (CM, p15-16; G. Marsden, "Matteo Ricci and the Prodigal Culture," in *A Catholic Modernity? Charles Taylor's Marianist Award Lecture*, ed. J.L. Heft (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 84.
15. *Strong evaluation* is the evaluation of one's own feelings, desires and choices against a background of certain values that one identifies with because they are seen as constitutive of the person one wants to be. In Taylor's article "What is Human Agency?" this type of evaluation is distinguished both from *weak evaluation*, when one is simply weighing different alternatives ("What do I desire *most*?"), and *radical evaluation*, when part of the value-horizon itself becomes the subject of critical evaluation. C. Taylor, *Human Agency and Language; Philosophical Papers 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), chapter 1.



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