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Review of "A Secular Age" by Charles Taylor

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highly technical character of much of this book will limit its interest primarily to scholars. Again, ISM's interdisciplinary and ecumenical aspirations have resulted in a collection so eclectic in content and method that even most scholars will not be interested in the work taken as a whole. And finally, the book fails to include brief biographies of its authors; these would have been a welcome help in situating and contextualizing their contributions.

Loyola College in Maryland DANIEL M. RUFF, S.J.

A SECULAR AGE. By Charles Taylor. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 2007. Pp. x + 874. $39.95.

Since the publication of *Sources of the Self* (1989), Taylor has increasingly focused on articulating the circumstances of belief and unbelief in contemporary Western culture. His ambition is as massive as the volume he has now produced. *A Secular Age* challenges the regnant explanatory paradigm of secularity in which "science refutes and hence crowds out religious belief" (4). T. offers an alternative account that claims to be more attentive to the complex sources of the intellectual and cultural conditions that—even as they effected "a move from a society in which belief in God is no longer unchallenged . . . to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace" (3)—have also made belief and unbelief alike subject to disquieting moral and spiritual cross-pressures that render them each equally fragile. Most important among these cross-pressures are deep human impulses to violence, disquietude about possibilities for discerning "sources of deeper meaning in our lives" (711), and the high moral stakes involved in the commitment of the modern moral order to benevolence, solidarity, and justice.

A major thread in T.'s account—one that *Sources* started to draw out in articulating the "buffered identity" of the modern self—traces the moral factors enabling the rise of a "self-sufficient humanism" that accepts "no final goals beyond human flourishing nor any allegiance to anything beyond this flourishing" (18). New to his current account is the emphasis placed on "Reform" as "a drive to make over the whole society to higher standards" (64). T. presents Reform as a deep energy emerging in later medieval Latin Christendom that helped propel disenchantment with a two-tiered cosmos and dissatisfaction with hierarchically ordered society. In so doing, Reform prepared the way for the displacement of human flourishing from its prior referencing to a transcendent order into the wholly immanent frames of meaning now demarcating the forms of exclusive humanism that constitute one important field of options for unbelief. Reform, in concert with the emergence of the anthropocentric shift encompassed by the "providential Deism" of the 17th and 18th centuries, played a key role in giving what T. terms "the modern moral order" both its impersonal shape and its narrow focus upon an "order of mutual benefit" shorn of a horizon of transcendence. On T.'s account—and herein lies

a crucial difference from standard narratives of secularity—the space of meanings opened by the rise of an exclusive humanist alternative to Christian faith has not been a mere "subtraction story" (22) about the loss of a transcendent frame of reference. There has been instead an expansion into an increasingly wider set of options for both belief and unbelief beyond those encompassed in the classical polemics between atheism and theism as these emerged in the 18th and 19th centuries. T. designates this expanding space of meaning as "the nova effect," "a steadily widening gamut of new positions—some believing, some unbelieving" (423), that from its initial outbursts in the upper strata of Euro-American society has become widely and deeply diffused throughout contemporary culture. The account of secularity T. offers thus does not recite the decline of religion *tout court,* but tells "also of a new placement of the sacred or spiritual in relation to individual and social life" that provides "the occasion for . . . new ways of existing both in and out of relation to God" (437).

T.'s attendance to the complex contemporary interplay between belief and unbelief is marked by his characteristic intellectual generosity that seeks to articulate the best in the positions he vigorously disputes; it results, however, in a layered expository style that may tempt some readers to lose patience with his efforts to chart the moving dynamics of that interplay. A more central concern is how effective T.'s project will be in promoting productive conversation along and across the fault lines he detects crisscrossing the landscape of belief and unbelief. As his project has moved forward, he has more explicitly articulated important theological concerns that could be glimpsed only fleetingly in earlier publications. These now come into open display throughout part 5, "Conditions of Belief," and get focused in chapter 20, "Conversions," with Charles Péguy and Gerard Manley Hopkins serving as lenses for a robustly incarnational Catholic optic.

There are undoubtedly those among the contemporary cultured despisers of belief for whom T.'s open avowal of a theological agenda will provide reason for walking away from the conversation. But there may be others for whom T.'s description of "ways in which our modern culture is restless at the barriers of the human sphere" (726) resonates in such a way that it can open for them possibilities for spiritual exploration beyond "the immanent frame." This is surely one of T.'s main hopes, but it stands on a par with a hope he has for readers standing with him on the side of belief: that we better "understand religious/spiritual life today in all its different thrusts, resistances, and reactions" (776), not merely in our own experience but as those thrusts, resistances, and reactions play out even where they seem most absent in our secular age.

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