





*Book reviewed in this essay:*

Charles Taylor. *A Secular Age*.  
Cambridge, MA: Harvard University  
Press, 2007.

# MORAL CONSENSUS IN A SECULAR AGE

A judicious reading of secularity and religion

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THE RETURN OF PUBLIC RELIGIONS was one of the most significant events of the late twentieth century. The potency and global character of religious revival was widely discussed, and compelled scholars and politicians traditionally dismissive of religion to start paying attention. Then, just when the collapse of communism portended the end of radical atheism and even the most fervent advocates of secularization theory were rethinking their position, secularism and atheism re-emerged on the public stage.

Over the past few years, books both critical of religion and explicitly antireligious have become overnight best-sellers, including Sam Harris's *The End of Faith*, Daniel Dennett's *Breaking the Spell*, Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion*, and Christopher Hitchens's *God Is not Great*. Hitchens, particularly, contends that the popularity of everything secular happened because people got fed up with everything religious. The renaissance of secularism in an increasingly religious world, Hitchens, like many others, argues, is the result of a power struggle between religious and secular worldviews.

This argument is not without foundation. In the world of politics, secular elites from the U.S. to France, from Turkey to India, are in fact confronting the rise and sometimes hostile demands of public religions. A power struggle argument is also appealing because it is simple, cogent, and precise. But is it too simple? Must the relationship between religion and secularism be characterized by animosity and confrontation?

To address this question critically, we need non-ideological books that offer judicious readings of the meaning of secularity and its relationship to various forms of religion and modernity. Fortunately, these books exist and include Talal Asad's *The Formations of the Secular*, Jacques Berlinerblau's *The Secular Bible*, and Oliver Roy's *Secularism Confronts Islam*. Add to this list Charles Taylor's 800-page tour de force, *A Secular Age*. It is indispensable for appreciating the relationship between secularity and religion in the West.

At first glance, the book appears a reiteration of an old sociological story—how modernity enabled the very possibility of



unbelief and the pluralism of worldviews. Taylor asks: how did we, in the West, lose the enchanted world of our ancestors and arrive at a condition in which, even when we believe, we are “never, or only rarely, really sure, free of all doubt, untroubled by some objection”? Not much seems to be novel in this line of inquiry, especially to those acquainted with Peter Berger’s notion of the “heretical imperative.” But Taylor moves beyond the usual explanations of the path to secular society, which point to the effects of the scientific revolution, Renaissance humanism, the rise of the “police state,” or the Reformation. He is concerned to illuminate the moral sources of a secular age.

In his characteristically patient and charitable manner of narration, Taylor traces key philosophical, theological, sociological,

and historical developments in the rise of Western modernity and the growth of secularity. At the heart of both, he argues, is a “drive to Reform.” Contrary to what might be expected, Taylor does not see this drive beginning with the Protestant Reformation, though he does see the Reformation as the most radical religious expression of it. Rather, he locates the drive to Reform in the late medieval period, originating in a deep discontent “with the hierarchical equilibrium between lay life and the renunciative vocations.” In response to this discontent, the church translated the norms of religious life for application to lay believers in order to draw the laity closer to the life of religious elites.

Although profoundly embedded in the theological and historical developments of Western Christianity, the unintended and gradual consequences of the drive to Reform were radically secular. Shaping the view that what human beings owe to God is the achievement of their own good, the drive to Reform contributed to the fading of the sense of mystery. It inaugurated a vision of human agency as able to construct and reconstruct the world, a belief that each human being can work on herself to achieve a good life and collectively shape a good society. The drive to Reform was, one could say, a process of the democratization of virtue and, above all, it embodied confidence in the ability of human beings to create conditions of human flourishing: freedom, mutual welfare, and equality.

The drive to Reform fostered a gradual movement from transcendence to immanence. It created a “disenchanted world” wherein secular humanism was possible and religious faith, while still turned toward the transcendent, increasingly focused on the prosperity of human kind. The transformation Taylor documents is nicely captured in the change that occurred within the Roman Catholic Church between the papal documents *Syllabus of Errors* and *Rerum Novarum*. With these two documents, published in the span of four decades in the nineteenth century, the Catholic Church moved from condemning everything modern to encouraging the lay faithful to actively participate in the modern world.

In Taylor’s rich, multilayered, and sometimes too pedantic account of the moral origins of contemporary beliefs and unbeliefs, the novelty of his claims can be easily overlooked. He not only suggests that a secular age does not imply the death of God; he also says that it makes a wide range of beliefs and unbeliefs exist simultaneously without negating each other. He

does more than remind us that the origins of secular humanism are in Western Christendom; he also tells us that the only way to counter “the immense force of religion in human life” is to use “a modality of the most powerful ethical ideas, which this religion itself ha[s] helped to entrench.” Most importantly, Taylor shows that *both* modern Western Christianity and modern Western secularity were shaped by the same moral drive—the impulse to reform individuals so that they might apply themselves to creating a better world.

According to Taylor, the moral sources embodied in the drive to Reform continue to animate contemporary religious faiths and forms of secular humanism. To retrieve them, I would argue, is particularly pertinent for our world, in which the only *modus operandi* between secularisms and religions appears to many to be conflict. To be sure, the differences between secular humanism and religion are immense, especially in their view of the source of ultimate authority. For the secular humanists, authority is in each one of us; for religious people, it belongs in the realm of transcendence. To complicate things further, there

are various forms of secular humanism and they greatly differ among themselves. And, of course, religion comes in many modes and expressions.

The seriousness of these differences notwithstanding, the shared moral sources of secular humanism and religion in the West (and arguably beyond) must not be ignored. When attended to and drawn upon, they can have remarkable influence. Some leaders of the Catholic Church and the political Left in Poland seemed to have understood this in the last decades of the twentieth century, when they worked together against the communist regime and for democracy. Viewed within the framework of power relations, their agreement appears to be merely a pragmatic compromise to fight a common enemy. But, as the writings of Polish religious and secular elites show, theirs was also a moral consensus—about the dignity of the human person and the nature of a good society. *A Secular Age* sets the recent Polish experience in an even larger and deeper moral context. One may hope it does not remain an exception. ■

