

Our Secular Age: Ten Years of Reading and Applying Charles Taylor

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ENDORSEMENTS

“As Christians, we sometimes misunderstand not only the answers our secular neighbors have but the questions they are asking too. No philosopher has offered more insight regarding the state of belief in the modern age than Charles Taylor. In *Our Secular Age*, first-rate evangelical scholars and practitioners deliver 13 essays in which they explore and apply Taylor’s thought. This work will benefit all Christians by teaching them to communicate the gospel to a secular culture with neither ignorance nor fear.”

RUSSELL MOORE, president, Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention

“To be secular, says philosopher Charles Taylor, is to have no final goals beyond this-worldly human flourishing. This is only one of the many insights from which pastors can profit from Taylor’s work in their ministry of the gospel to an age that has substituted spirituality and authenticity for religion and doctrine. The essays in this helpful volume do more than borrow from Taylor: they engage, question, develop, and occasionally criticize his influential account of our complex cultural moment in which we all—moderns and postmoderns, millennials and non-millennials—are trying to live, move, and have our being as disciples of Jesus Christ. Reading and applying the insights of those who have read and applied Taylor is a salutary exercise in understanding oneself and others in an age that is not only secular, but fragile, frustrated, and confused.”

KEVIN J. VANHOZZER, research professor of systematic theology, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

“Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age* is a landmark book, and the essays collected here ponder it intelligently and charitably. Some echo Taylor, some extend his ideas, some contest his claims, but all engage his argument with a seriousness that the book deserves—and that Christ’s church needs.”

ALAN JACOBS, distinguished professor of humanities in the honors program at Baylor University and author of *How to Think: A Survival Guide for a World at Odds*

“Easily one of the best books I’ve read this year. Here is wisdom from Taylor, received with appreciation and appropriate criticism, with application for Christians on mission in North America in the 21st century.”

TREVIN WAX, Bible and reference publisher at B&H, author of *This Is Our Time: Everyday Myths In Light of the Gospel*

“The ‘social imaginary,’ the ‘buffered self,’ and the ‘immanent frame’—these Charles Taylor neologisms and more are illuminated and expounded (and critiqued) in this helpful collection of essays, shedding light on aspects of our present age, from theology to politics and from art and to medicine. After reading these chapters, I was compelled to do two things: (1) I revised the sermon I was to preach the next day, and (2) I went online and ordered *A Secular Age*. I want to know more!”

BILL KYNES (PhD, Cambridge), senior pastor of Cornerstone Evangelical Free Church, Annandale, Virginia

“Though this book will help you to understand, appreciate, and critically engage with Charles Taylor, that’s not its real benefit. Read it mainly for a dozen fascinating conversations about a different area of the church’s life, and learning how to better engage our culture in our present secular age.”

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1

HOPE IN OUR SECULAR AGE

COLLIN HANSEN

It wasn't the first time a young evangelical woman had lamented to me the aimless, rebellious character of her younger brother. Growing up together their home had tended toward the fundamentalist end of the Protestant spectrum. Church was mandatory; doubt was discouraged. In college and afterward she found her way into an evangelical congregation that tended toward Reformed theology. But her younger brother never seemed to grow up. He deliberately antagonized his parents and sister.

She described to me one scene in particular that typified his protest. While gathered together in the living room, as the rest of the family watched television or read a magazine, her brother flaunted his copy of a Richard Dawkins screed against religion. Only he didn't seem to be actually reading the book. Rather, he peered over the pages to see what kind of reaction he was inciting.

Classic case of a "subtraction story," I told her. A what? The term comes from the 2007 book *A Secular Age* by the Catholic philosopher Charles Taylor. Her brother probably couldn't explain any sophisticated scientific or philosophical

objections to Christianity. But he found in Dawkins a “hero narrative” to explain his “coming of age,” his maturation away from the childish religion of his youth and family.¹

“The core of the subtraction story consists in this,” Taylor writes in *A Secular Age*, “that we only needed to get these perverse and illusory condemnations off our back, and the value of ordinary human desire shines out, in its true nature, as it has always been.”²

Fundamentalism could not protect this young man from the forces of modernity that make faith increasingly implausible. Indeed, an intellectually restrictive fundamentalism might have even made his reaction more likely, because as Taylor observes, the “more childish one’s faith, the easier the flip-over.”³

Evangelical apologists have traditionally responded with biblical proofs and technical counterpoints to scientific materialism as popularized in the last decade-plus by the so-called New Atheists, including Dawkins. But what if science, reason, and logic aren’t the problem or solution to firm faith? What if the challenge runs far deeper?

What if the problem of our secular age is more fundamental?

NOTHING MORE FORMATIVE

Probably no book published in the last 10 years has been so formative for my thinking and ministry as Taylor’s *A Secular Age*. Taylor (b. 1931) challenges my own faith as much as he

1 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 365.

2 Ibid., 253.

3 Ibid., 307.

equips me to counsel other believers swimming upstream in cultures not conducive to belief. I regret that the length of his work (nearly 900 pages) and the density of his prose preclude most pastors and other Christian leaders from even picking up the book. Yet I remain convinced that taking up the challenge of Taylor would equip Christians with invaluable historical, theological, sociological, and philosophical context as they carry out the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18–20) in our secular age. Pastors, missionaries, and social workers in particular would benefit.

“In fact, these are the core audience for this book precisely because I believe Taylor’s analysis can help pastors and church planters understand better the contexts in which they proclaim the gospel,” writes James K. A. Smith, who teaches philosophy at Calvin College. Probably no author has done more than Smith to popularize Taylor for the benefit of the church. “In many ways, Taylor’s *Secular Age* amounts to a cultural anthropology for urban mission.”⁴

The purpose of this book, then, is to read and apply Taylor to various aspects of the church’s life and mission. Interpreters and practitioners will assess Taylor from multiple perspectives, including his reading of the Reformation and medieval philosophy, and apply *A Secular Age* to everything from healthcare to liturgy to pop culture and politics. In this introduction I aim to familiarize readers, many of whom will never pick up *A Secular Age*, with Taylor’s basic arguments and also with a key interpreter from the last decade. And I seek to demonstrate one particular way Taylor has deepened my understanding as a writer, parent, and church leader.

4 James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), xi.

WE'RE ALL THOMAS NOW

Nothing is easy about faith in a secular age.

“Faith is fraught, confession is haunted by an inescapable sense of its contestability,” Smith writes. “We don’t believe instead of doubting; we believe *while* doubting. We’re all Thomas now.”⁵

Religion in a secular age is a private affair. That’s why the courts, media, and other cultural gatekeepers respond with incredulity when believers claim constitutional protection for their right to practice religion in the public square. Especially before the 16th-century Reformation but for a long time afterward, religion had been commonly known as a collective practice with communal accountability for the sake of the whole. Conformity was necessary.

“In a world of indigence and insecurity, of perpetually threatening death, the rules of family and community seemed the only guarantee of survival,” Taylor writes. “Modern modes of individualism seemed a luxury, a dangerous indulgence.”⁶

Today, though, religion is the luxury, the dangerous indulgence. Faith is now more difficult than unbelief. We’re adrift in stormy seas of doubt—every man, woman, and child fighting for the lifeboat of belief. Something fundamental has shifted in Western culture that runs deeper than outward changes in technology. So what happened? That’s the question Taylor seeks to answer.

“How did we move from a condition where, in Christendom, people lived naively within a theistic construal, to one in which we all shunt between two stances, in which every-

5 Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 4.

6 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 168.

one’s construal shows up as such; and in which moreover, unbelief has become for many the major default option?”⁷

The world has changed. And religion changed with it.

GOD AS GOD

Less than one year after Taylor published *A Secular Age*, I published *Young, Restless, Reformed: A Journalist’s Journey with the New Calvinists*.⁸ In this book I sought to describe an unexpected shift in the beliefs and practices of young evangelicals. At the same time that moralistic therapeutic deism came to be known as the default religion of American teenagers,⁹ a significant minority of evangelicals had gone looking for an older, more countercultural theology. They found it in Calvinism.

In travels around the United States I asked young and old, lay and clergy, “Why?” I’ll never forget one pastor who answered, “Because it’s true.” Granted, I said, but why would it suddenly be popular after a steady decline since at least the early 1800s?¹⁰ I published the book without a sufficient answer. But Taylor helped me find that answer—and a warning.

Taylor provides historical and philosophical explanations for what Christian Smith and his colleagues with the National Study of Youth and Religion have revealed in their research. The decreasing numbers of Western youth who practice religion are indoctrinated into a version that empha-

7 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 14.

8 Collin Hansen, *Young, Restless, Reformed: A Journalist’s Journey with the New Calvinists* (Wheaton, IL: 2008).

9 See Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York, NY: Oxford), 2005.

10 See Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale, 1989), 171.

sizes God as distant and uninvolved, though concerned with our good behavior. Mostly he just wants us to be happy. Religion aims to give us what we want, in material or therapeutic terms. Of course, that's not how the Bible portrays God or how Christians have historically understood him.

The key theological question for our secular age, then, is this: Does God get to be God? The answer, even for many self-described Christians, is, "No, only on our terms." You'll see many young adults who grew up in evangelical churches try to argue that unless we recast biblical and historical notions of God, we'll lose the next generations. And for them that ultimatum makes sense. In our secular age they couldn't possibly hold on to orthodox faith. A God who is not for us, they say, cannot be against us. As Taylor says of these arguments in *A Secular Age*, the turn to self has fundamentally reconfigured Christianity:

And hence what was for a long time and remains for many the heart of Christian piety and devotion: love and gratitude at the suffering and sacrifice of Christ, seems incomprehensible, or even repellant and frightening to many. To celebrate such a terrible act of violence as a crucifixion, to make this the centre of your religion, you have to be sick; you have to be perversely attached to self-mutilation, because it assuages your self-hatred, or calms your fears of healthy self-affirmation. You are elevating self-punishment, which liberating humanism wants to banish as a pathology to the rank of the numinous.¹¹

¹¹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 650.

I mentioned that Taylor helped me answer, "Why Reformed theology today?" Here's how: You really only have two options in a secular age. Either God is for you, on your own terms, or God sets the terms. And Reformed theology, with doctrines such as unconditional election, reveals in the triune God as transcendent and inscrutable, yet immanent and sympathetic. God is no mere cosmic butler. To read about a God who doesn't merely cater to our whims, you'll need help from theologians of earlier generations. At least for a growing minority of young evangelicals, 18th-century Reformed theologian Jonathan Edwards is still their homeboy, more than 10 years later.¹²

"This is what makes Jonathan Edwards not only unthinkable but reprehensible to modern sensibilities: Edwards's God is *about God*, not us."¹³

APOLOGETIC HOPE

Calvinism would not be gaining popularity in our secular age, though, if it were merely counterculture. You can't just turn back the clock to 16th-century Geneva or 18th-century Massachusetts. The conditions of belief have changed. To see Taylor applied today, you need to visit Timothy Keller in his thoroughly secular Manhattan context.

Compared to our ancestors, we have a bigger problem with evil and suffering. They lamented evil and suffering—and they experienced more of it than we do. Meanwhile, we demand answers from God and engage in theodicy. Why do

¹² Collin Hansen, "Young, Restless, Reformed: Calvinism Is Making a Comeback—And Shaking up the Church," *Christianity Today* (September 2006): 32–38.

¹³ Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 115.

we, unlike our ancestors, believe the existence of evil could disprove God?

“Ancient people did not assume that the human mind had enough wisdom to sit in judgment on how an infinite God was disposing of things,” Keller explains in his most recent apologetic work, *Making Sense of God*, a title Taylor would surely note with interest.¹⁴ Taylor describes how the same philosophy that gave us modern medicine also gave us modern skepticism:

The great invention of the West was that of an immanent order in Nature, whose working could be systematically understood and explained on its own terms, leaving open the question whether this whole order had a deeper significance, and whether, if it did, we should infer a transcendent Creator beyond it.¹⁵

Given these conditions, Keller aims to give modern skeptics a reason for God.¹⁶ And Keller’s apologetic approach closely resembles Taylor’s. Smith describes Taylor’s apologetic in three steps. First, level the playing field with secularists by pointing out the problems faced on both sides. Second, show how “immanentist” accounts fall short of solving the problem in an emotionally and intellectually satisfying manner. Third, reveal how Christians might better explain human experience.¹⁷ Compare that approach to Keller’s three-step process:

14 Timothy Keller, *Making Sense of God: An Invitation to the Skeptical* (New York, NY: Viking, 2016), 37.

15 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 15.

16 See Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York, NY: Viking, 2008).

17 Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 120.

enter the culture, challenge the culture, and then appeal to the culture.¹⁸

Unless you read all the way through *A Secular Age*, you may get the impression that Taylor sees little hope for the future of Christianity. But he and Keller both see a limit to how much longer secularists can demonize the religion of our Western inheritance. Because as religion goes away, evil does not, contrary to the projections of Dawkins and his cohort. And secular hopes for universal justice and benevolence can’t be built on a mere “subtraction theory.”¹⁹ The more we expect of others, the more they will disappoint us, Taylor argues: “Our age makes higher demands of solidarity and benevolence on people today than ever before.”²⁰ It’s not sustainable. God continues to haunt this secular age with our desire for goodness. Taylor writes:

Our age is very far from settling in to a comfortable unbelief. Although many individuals do so, and more still seem to on the outside, the unrest continues to surface. Could it ever be otherwise? The secular age is schizophrenic, or better, deeply cross-pressured. People seem at a safe distance from religion; and yet they are very moved to know that there are dedicated believers. . . . It’s as though many people who don’t want to follow want nevertheless to hear the message of Christ, want it to be proclaimed out there.²¹

18 Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 120.

19 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 576.

20 Ibid., 695.

21 Ibid., 727.

Take heart, church. But beware. Taylor sees trouble in our camp.

ONE MORE COPING MECHANISM?

While many Reformed readers have read Taylor with profit, that doesn't mean he necessarily sympathizes with their project. Further chapters will examine his critique more closely. To summarize, Taylor faults the Protestant Reformation and modern evangelical Christianity for disenchanting the world and turning the focus on the self rather than on God through shared religious rituals.²² He laments the shift from embodied to intellectual faith in what he calls Reform, described by Smith as "Taylor's umbrella term for a variety of late medieval and early modern movements that were trying to deal with the tension between the requirements of eternal life and the demands of domestic life."²³

I wouldn't expect a practicing Roman Catholic like Taylor to commend the Reformation. And there's no doubt the Reformation unleashed a torrent of practices and beliefs that the magisterial Reformers did and would condemn. If nothing else Taylor helpfully corrects believers in both Geneva and also Rome when he says, "Perhaps there is no 'golden age' of Christianity."²⁴ So even as I object to Taylor's critique, I want to hear him out. And with Taylor's help, we see a major problem ahead for the young, restless, Reformed.

The "restless" component of the moniker has attracted the most attention in the last decade, and for good reason. It doesn't seem to fit when juxtaposed with "Reformed." But

²² Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 774.

²³ Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 142.

²⁴ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 745.

that's the point. Writing in 2007 I didn't know how things would shake out. Taylor captures why the "God as God" theology of Edwards and modern apologetics of Keller would appeal to many young evangelicals trying to buck a secular age. At the same time, Taylor showed me why Reformed theology would offer an enticing "coming of age" story for youth who grew up in pragmatic or liberal congregations. Something like the young man reading Dawkins, reading Edwards became for some of them a convenient, even safe way to create an individual identity apart from their parents and home church. But might their own children in our secular age rebel in yet another direction? We don't yet know, then, whether the children of the "young, restless, Reformed" will imbibe more of the *restless* or the *Reformed*.

Has the preaching of their churches and teaching of their parents weaned them off a need for individual authenticity?

Or has Reformed theology become just one more tool for coping with our secular age?

TEST OF FAITH

That's no abstract question. It is a test of genuine faith. If pure, undefiled religion is about God and not just our own flourishing, then it will lead us "to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world" (Jas. 1:27). Where you see holiness, sacrifice, and love, you see religion that delights in God, religion that can survive a secular age. Edwards would say these are sure signs of religious affection. In our modern language, they're signs that we're following the risen Christ and not just treating our therapeutic needs.

Whether he recognizes it or not, Taylor aligns with at least one key aspect of the evangelical tradition. The Refor-

mation may have risked anarchy and secularism, but it did so in search of this pure religion. Evangelical renewal movements have been seeking the same thing ever since. And not even Taylor seems willing to turn back that clock:

If ours tends to multiply somewhat shallow and undemanding spiritual options, 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. Even if we had a choice, I'm not sure we wouldn't be wiser to stick with the present dispensation.²⁵

Yes, we risk succumbing to faddish theological trends. Yes, we struggle to escape the self. Yes, we need a more embodied religion to hold us accountable.

But after 10 years of reading and applying Taylor, I'm confident.

There is hope in our secular age.

²⁵ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 513.

2

TAYLOR'S COMPLEX, INCOMPLETE HISTORICAL NARRATIVE

CARL TRUEMAN

Postmodernism famously proclaimed the death of all master narratives (except, of course, that one). Taylor is no postmodernist in that sense, but he knows history is complicated, and that any account of how we have arrived at our present state requires the interweaving of multiple narratives. Thus, as he set himself the task of answering the question of why it was almost impossible not to believe in God in 1500 and yet an easy, perhaps even the easiest, option in 2000, he assumed a task of massive and multifarious historical complexity.

In approaching this topic, what Taylor does is historically interesting. Master narratives may be dead, but most people still think in terms of simple, straightforward accounts of why religion is in such trouble. Darwin proved we came from the apes. Science has disproved religion. Religion is responsible for most of the world's ills. And so on. From the (relatively) sophisticated accounts offered by such as Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens to the rather more concise but floridly expressed versions offered by Manhattan