

THE NARRATIVE OF secularism is stirred by a unifying logic, much like Christianity's. Both narratives are rooted in Augustine's philosophy of history, which celebrated the triumph of Christianity over paganism by reinterpreting and absorbing ancient philosophy within the structure of monotheism. The achievement of Augustine's strategy was double: giving a religious unity to the geo-political space of the empire, and putting an end to religious pluralism. In late twentieth century, the unity of Christian/secular Europe has once again served the cause of the unity of the West. In Samuel T. Huntington's eloquent words, "Western Christianity is historically the single most important characteristic of Western civilization;" its dualistic mark (first as a dualism between Caesar and Christ, then as one between the City of God and the City of Man, and finally as one between spiritual and temporal authority) has made secularism flourish along with liberalism and democracy. Thus the West speaks in one voice and this voice is religion; one religion above all, Christianity. Within this unified narrative, all voices that are not religious and not Christian were (are) destined to disappear or to remain irrelevant and tolerated. This is also the message of Charles Taylor's book, *A Secular Age*.

A splendid illustration of a strategy to counter or forestall any subversive interpretation of this Christian/secular narrative, Taylor's main argumentative tactic is to incorporate (and thus resolve) the main threats against that narrative that the West has incubated within itself, namely an "exclusive humanism" and the most radical aspects of its religious expression, Reformation. This project is extraordinarily relevant and Taylor accomplishes it in a magisterial way, with an astonishing profusion of subtle arguments and meditations that testify to his philosophical ingenuity. Some parts of the book, as for instance the pages on the phenomenology of the enchantment, are a decisive contribution to the understanding of modern society and psychology. *A Secular Age* is certainly one of the most comprehensive and innovative attempts in our time to reconstruct the spiritual and cultural identity of Western civilization.

To fulfill his argumentative strategy, Taylor constructs a dialectic between two opposite trends: on the one hand, a pre-modern religion in which believers "belonged to God" and their faith was identified

* About Charles TAYLOR, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 2007).

with rituals, church practices, and hierarchies; and on the other, an assault against that old faith in the name of the emancipation of the human mind from all externality. The overcoming of that opposition resulted in the victory of religion as a “phenomenon of belief” – one in which “God belongs to us” as creatures that long for eternity and transcendence. The proclamation of the autonomy of the self culminated with Kant’s “radical freedom of the moral agent” and the declaration of reason’s self-sufficient power (p. 9). The celebration of the individual as the sovereign in her inner citadel was the liberating opportunity for religion to take root again. Humanism, Taylor argues, served the cause of religion and in this sense secularity was a religious work, the necessary condition for the old religion to disappear and the new one to celebrate its renaissance in the human heart. The apex of the secularist challenge turned into religion rebirth. In a move that reminds us of Joseph de Maistre’s astute way of reading the French Revolution as the necessary evil for achieving a new resurrection, Taylor makes Humanism an instrument in the service of a divine design: the restoration of a supra-mundane spirituality through a re-location of the divine itself, which is now the terrain of a permanent search that each of us makes autonomously within ourselves.

Humanism was thus the beginning of religious renaissance because, Taylor explains, in disengaging reason from external authorities (old religious rituals or communal traditions) it inaugurated a new avenue for the spiritual search for transcendence. Secularism delivered the religious spirituality of the moderns and, in this sense, saved and actually renewed religion. Thus the rise of an “exclusive humanism” (also in the Enlightenment) brought two things: it brought secularism, but it also created a theoretical and social context that put “an end to the naïve acknowledgment of the transcendent, or of goals and claims that go beyond human flourishing”. The age of secularism has opened us to new conditions for religious belief and made religion a permanent phenomenon of the search for meanings that transcend the empirical normality of our ordinary life (pp. 20–21). Taylor’s dialectical move is subtle and astute because it advances the conclusion that secularism produces the unintended consequence of making reason and autonomy (the most distinctive products of the secular age) instruments in the service of faith. Because it is certain that the religious faith is glorified as the fruit of individual free choice instead of the result of tradition and church authority (this corresponds to Taylor’s “secularity 3”).

In the Grand Narrative of Taylor’s philosophy of history, however, it is history that is sacrificed, the nuanced richness of modern history

above all. In Taylor's book the West is deprived of some of its most important components. For instance, it is deprived of its continuous and vital relation with ancient philosophy and especially of politics, the civilized and noble art of political foundation and lawgiving that has marked the extraordinarily rich experience of early Humanism. Also marginalized in Taylor's account is a critical analysis of the nineteenth century, the age in which the construction of the ideology of secularism took place. Secularism consolidated itself in an age in which historiography and sociology acquired the status of sciences: one of the most effective examples of the secularist narrative as a fatal affirmation of the rational order over and against all religion creeds is to be found in August Comte's *Système de politique positive*. The other important factor that propelled the ideology of secularism was the making of the nation-state, a project that began after the defeat of Napoleon's imperial project. As Taylor has shown in a previous book on Hegel, the nineteenth century was a celebration of the manifestation of reason in the state form, of the law as the language of reason. The construction of the nation-state was the highest moment in a *longue durée* trajectory that begun with the Renaissance and the Reformation, as a gradual process of immanentism. In the words of Herbert Spencer, perhaps the most authoritative positivist philosopher of the second half of the nineteenth century, "now that moral injunctions are losing the authority given by their supposed sacred origin, the secularization of morals is becoming imperative". Thus, whereas the eighteenth century was the century in which the priority of lawmaking and the rationalization of legal codes took root, rationalism and secularism merged in the nineteenth century, in coincidence with the making of the nation-state and the industrial society. Yet the nineteenth century plays no relevant role in Taylor's book, which pivots essentially around the Enlightenment.

Taylor's target is indeed the spirit of the Enlightenment. In relation to that spirit, which is the most daring achievement of a secularist/immanentist approach to modernity, he considers all other historical experience as either a preparation (early humanism and the civic age of politics) or as a consequence (nineteenth century positivism and the building of a secular nation-state). Taylor has some good reasons to focus on the eighteenth century because the antagonism toward religion as the human soul's thirst for transcendence was certainly the most precious child of the Enlightenment.

The Enlightenment became the torment of several generations of counter-revolution and traditionalist philosophers. Beginning with Burke and Maistre, Bonald and the Religious Romantics (Schlegel,

Schleiermacher and Manzoni), the ambitious project of a radical humanism was frontally countered in the name of authority, tradition, the mystery of miracles (the enchantment that Taylor longs for) and the receptivity toward non-rational powers, such as love, community and the divine. Taylor's book belongs in this tradition. It belongs in the rhetoric of *les anti-lumières*, to paraphrase the title of Zeev Sternhell's most recent book. Certainly, religion is the strongest voice against the humanistic project of moral autonomy; not any kind of religion, but above all Catholicism. Catholicism has been, since Giordano Bruno's and Galileo Galileo's attack against heteronomy, the most subtle of the Christian churches in understanding the real danger coming from modernity: relativism as the corollary of a truly egalitarian society, both in the domain of morality and of politics. Catholicism has been (and still is) the most radical and consistent attempt to contain the claim for individual autonomy. Taylor's book is a Catholic book. Its task is neutralizing the radical claim for autonomy made by "extreme humanism". It does so not through a frontal attack but with the same strategy of incorporation and metabolism that Augustine perfected. In Antonio Gramsci's words, we may say that this is a truly hegemonic project, a magnificent attempt to absorb the lymph from its adversary in order to enjoy a total power over it, for *saecula saeculorum*.

The last chapter on "Conversions" contains the political key of this extraordinary book. This chapter proposes the political revivalism of Catholicism in the tradition of Jacques Maritain, the founder of Christian Democracy, and of Ivan Illich, the witness to the critical conscience of Christianity against the corruption of civilization and modernity. Maritain and Illich positioned Christianity in the political scenario of a society that was fatally progressing toward democracy, materialism and consumerism. Reversing the anti-liberal and anti-democratic role that the Church had played in the nineteenth century, Maritain, Taylor writes, "sought a unity of Christian culture on a global scale, but in a dispersed network of Christian lay institutions and centers of intellectual and spiritual life" (p. 744). Yet acceptance of modernity needs to be counterbalanced with a critical sharpness that only a sincere religious faith is able to nourish. Hence Illich has relentlessly opposed the morality of the norm of the moderns and praised subversion against any attempt to transform the Gospel in a "codes of rules enforced by organizations erected for this purpose" (p. 737).

On the occasion of a recent meeting of an important Catholic organization (Comunione e Liberazione), the chief of the Italian Episcopal

Conference, Cardinal Angelo Bagnasco, declared that time is now ripe for the Church to play a direct political role and break with secularist and liberal taboo. More or less on the same line of thought, Taylor concludes his monumental book with a call for political activism of religion in “societies where the general equilibrium point is firmly within immanence, where many people have trouble understanding how a sane person could believe in God” (p. 770). The idea that secularism’s offspring is the rebirth of religious faith changes invariably the way of interpreting liberalism and the liberal state. Indeed, as Maritain and the political leaders and intellectuals of Catholic parties and movements have persistently maintained (more recently Ernst Wolfgang Böckenförde), the liberal state receives its strength precisely from religion, the source of civic values like charity and solidarity without which our individualistic society could not persist. There is thus no better way to end this review than quote what Karl Marx wrote in *On the Jewish Question* concerning the secular state (or the separation between the public and the private) as the most formidable strategy for making religion in perfect agreement, not in contradiction, with liberalism and the liberal state: “If we find in the country [the United States] which has attained full political emancipation, that religion not only continues to *exist* but is *fresh* and *vigorous*, this is proof that the existence of religion is not at all opposed to the perfection of the state”.

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