

## Article Review

# Theology in a Subjunctive Mood: Reflections on Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*

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Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* is by any account a monumental work. It has spawned a cottage industry of comment which should not abate for a long time to come. While social theorists have engaged Taylor's arguments from the very moment the book appeared, theologians seem to have been slower to comment. Recently, however, two important theological assessments have appeared in the *Journal of Religion and Modern Theology*.<sup>1</sup>

In what follows, I shall offer some reflections as a kind of preface to the philosophical and theological practice which Taylor enacts in *A Secular Age*. And I hope that what I present here may spark an interest in what I describe as theology in a subjunctive mood. Much of what follows rehearses remarks that I made as part of a panel on the book which included Charles Taylor at the American Academy of Religion in November 2007, shortly after the book appeared. I append to these remarks some more recent comments at a colloquium at the Center of Theological Inquiry at Princeton in April 2010.

To begin with, Charles Taylor frames the story he tells in *A Secular Age* with a simple question: 'why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable?'<sup>2</sup> Let me proceed, then, with a short story which brings Taylor's question to life. Just as I had begun reading *A Secular Age*, I received a letter from a friend in which she reported a conversation between one of her children and their father. The little boy had been reading a book on Greek mythology and apparently had some questions. I recount the conversation.

Tristan: Dad, did everyone believe in the Greek gods 2,000 years ago?

Dad: Yes.

Tristan: Now no one believes in them, right?

Dad: Right.

Tristan: In 1000 years could everyone stop believing in the Christian God?

The father hesitates, there is some silence; and then he responds:

Possibly.

<sup>1</sup> See *Journal of Religion* 90 (2010), pp. 367–406; and *Modern Theology* 26 (2010), pp. 321–416.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 25.

The conversation between father and son frames the debate about the future of the gods and the Christian God somewhat differently than the way Taylor frames his history of our secular age. But I tell the story not to offer a counter-narrative or an alternative argument but rather to probe certain aspects of the secular which I believe resonate with some of Taylor's deliberations, especially in the latter half of *A Secular Age* when he is not doing history or offering a narrative but a description of our current condition and the existential challenges of being human in this world.

Back to Tristan: on the face of it, Tristan's piece of analogical reasoning suggests that time may not be on the side of the Christian God. One can also read his father's hesitant response as either a hedge or an opening. If it is a hedge, it is merely because Tristan's father knows enough about Tristan's penchant for asking tough questions. He does not want to leave himself open to further questioning. If, on the other hand, the 'possibly' is more than just an attempt to preclude further questioning, it suggests that Dad is saying that it remains an open question whether people would have stopped believing in the Christian God by then. (I have not tried to find out yet what his father was actually thinking when he said what he said. Why let the facts get in the way of a good story.) For the moment I shall take the father's hesitant response as an opening; a willingness not to foreclose on the future. This willingness can be interpreted as a characteristic of the condition which I describe as the post-secular. But then what exactly do I mean by the post-secular?

It is something like this: I take 'the secular' as a mood which engulfs people whenever they acknowledge to themselves that they no longer believe what it is they are supposed to believe in their respective traditions, societies or cultures, especially if 'believing' requires what Taylor describes as enchantment. The post-secular condition is a mood which characterises a particular form of being in the world. When it is directed against secularism itself (or emerges out of a secularist posture) the post-secular presupposes that secularism itself does run its course even for some secularists (a point Taylor also underscores). So, without necessarily positing a religious alternative, it is possible to become disenchanted with secularism. At the same time, the post-secular condition has a religious analogue, which is characterised by a chastened sense of the fallibility of the religious traditions in question. In either case, the post-secularist or the chastened believer possesses a belief in something transcendent in the form of hope, whether it is construed as a better humanity or an after-life. The post-secular condition, then, is characterised by a sense of humility which may also have great benefits for social life. That is the concept in a nutshell.

If the way I am describing it sounds a bit odd, we can take Taylor's version of it on p. 534 of *A Secular Age*, where he expresses a certain hope about a

'post-secular' future of Europe. He writes: 'I use this term not as designating an age in which the declines in belief and practice of the last century would have been reversed, because this doesn't seem likely, at least for the moment; I rather mean a time in which the hegemony of that mainstream master narrative of secularization will be more and more challenged.' That is Taylor's hope.

Since *Sources of the Self*, a number of Taylor's critics have been deeply troubled, however, by his hunches and his hopes. From the concluding pages of *Sources of the Self* to the mood of the Marianist Lecture at the University of Dayton in 1996 (which was later published as *A Catholic Modernity?*) it is clear that Taylor is not just telling the story of how we have become what we are, but is pointing the way most forcefully to our possible redemption; although some of us may not want to be redeemed. He had made some such gesture in 1994 in his replies to the essays which make up *Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism: The Philosophy of Charles Taylor in Question*. And yet some may have felt that the position in the Marianist lecture said more than they surmised from his replies.<sup>3</sup>

Quentin Skinner was among those who objected. William Connolly expressed reservations in what he designates as his 'nontheistic appreciation' of Taylor's Catholicism and philosophy. If Skinner plays the role of the classic secularist, Connolly claims not to be a secularist after all, or to put it another way, Connolly speaks like a reformed secularist. For Skinner, the trouble with Taylor is that he remains locked in a way of thinking (and believing) which is at best regrettable. And although I have not found a reference to Quentin Skinner in *A Secular Age*, a number of the arguments which Taylor presents can be read as responses to Skinner's blistering and sometimes uncharitable criticism of Taylor. What makes Skinner's attitude towards Taylor so interesting too is that Skinner claims to speak as an admirer. I shall come back to this strange notion of admiring someone whose religious believing you consider to be a delusion.

In stating his view or hunch that 'there is a scale of affirmation of humanity by God which cannot be matched by humans rejecting God',<sup>4</sup> Taylor puts the accent on human beings rejecting God and not on his subsequent utterance that he was 'far from having proof'. In so doing he puts the focus on 'rejecting God' as the differential in the scale of affirmations. But one might say it is God who has rejected us and not the other way around. A slightly different way of getting at what Taylor may be up to is to say that there are

<sup>3</sup> James Tulley and Daniel M. Weinstock, *Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism: The Philosophy of Charles Taylor in Question* (Cambridge: CUP, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 226.

certain types of human flourishing which would be missing from human experience if people did not believe in God or the transcendent. That is to say, there is no other ground for those affirmations other than belief in God. And to that extent those affirmations leave open the possibility of God or the transcendent.

The point is this: we do encounter people of remarkable character whose virtues are unintelligible without their religious beliefs. And although we may have serious questions about what it is they believe, we cannot overlook the goodness that marks their lives, lives self-consciously lived out of the moral sources of the religious traditions whose claims we doubt. We are compelled then to make this distinction: that on the one hand we cannot believe as they do, but on the other hand, they are remarkable human beings, and that they are remarkable human beings precisely because they believe as they do. Skinner seems incapable of making this distinction either by temperament or prejudice. Connolly, for his part, seems also incapable of this or at least hesitant because of his consistent Nietzschean reflex which tends to view all forms of Christian morality and spirituality as based on resentment and slave morality.

Let me return to the original charge against Taylor as Quentin Skinner stated it. In the way Taylor discusses it in *Sources of the Self* and repeats it in his replies in *Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism: The Philosophy of Charles Taylor in Question*, Taylor's conception of the transcendent sounds optimistic, as Skinner suggests, and I think rightly that the denouement is unexpected and perhaps disappointing from Skinner's standpoint. The burden will always be on those who believe in the transcendent. And this is not because of the moral and practical failures of religious traditions and the destruction and harm they have visited on some untold numbers of people and communities. The point is that at best the forms of life that we should miss because they are characteristic of religious devotion merely point to the possibility that the claims to transcendence which come along with these lives could be true (not that they are true). One need not even assume that the greater majority of religious people will necessarily be virtuous or admirable. If they are, that is as well, but if they are not, those who exemplify the forms of life we admire still give us reason to think the transcendent possible. On the whole I think Taylor's arguments support such a reading.

At the same time, it requires us to attempt a much more judicious interpretation of religious history and the historical record to separate the real from the fictive and to be able to say with some intellectual honesty that, even if we do not believe what religious people believe, we can understand religious traditions well enough to be able to know even as sceptics and atheists those who practise their religions and those who do not. The

unwillingness of the sceptic to grant even the possibility that there are some who do in fact live out their creeds admirably, and others who do not, seems remarkable. Taylor for one is prepared to do just that about Christianity when he states that, 'there are clearly wrong versions of Christian faith. But it does not mean that we can give a single right version to replace it'.<sup>5</sup> But in Skinner's conception it is not even worth the effort, nor are there any good versions as such. Hence Skinner's caution that Taylor's recommendation for re-adopting a theistic perspective is 'likely to strike anyone familiar with the historical record as a case of offering a cure for our ills potentially worse than the disease'.<sup>6</sup> He quotes Taylor as saying that it is a mistake to think that 'a good must be invalid if it leads to suffering or destruction'.<sup>7</sup> Skinner proceeds:

The historical record of Christianity gives us no reason to doubt its value or applicability. But the fallacy of this line of reasoning is surely obvious. It is only true that we have no reason to fear the Christian faith if we can be confident that the horrors perpetrated in its name were unconnected with its character or aspirations as a creed. Once again, however, it is hard for an historian to offer such reassurances. The historical record makes it all too evident that Christianity has often proved an intolerant religion, and that some at least of the wars and persecutions with which it has been associated have partly followed its character as a creed.<sup>8</sup>

Skinner's use of Taylor's words to introduce this long passage seems somewhat misleading, as the citation is made to say something different from what Taylor meant in his text. Interestingly, Taylor chose not to comment on it, except to say that he and Skinner approach these issues from such different perspectives, even though he goes on to concede the rest of Skinner's contention in the passage about fearing Christianity. Still Taylor was expressing himself in relation to the 'various naturalist and Nietzschean critiques of self-immolation'. It is in this respect that he states that 'Characteristically, these take the self-destructive consequences of a spiritual aspiration as a refutation of this aspiration. They make once again what I believe is that cardinal mistake of believing that a good must be invalid if it leads to suffering or destruction'.<sup>9</sup> Taylor implies by 'suffering or destruction', the self-destructive consequences of spiritual aspirations

<sup>5</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 643.

<sup>6</sup> Tulley and Weinstock, *Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism*, p. 47.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47, quoting *Sources of the Self*, p. 519.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 519.

gone wrong. This is not a reference to the historical cruelties perpetrated on others in the name of Christianity. Furthermore, Skinner clearly shows that he is capable of distinguishing between different expressions of Christianity, while at the same clearly preferring to see the tradition in its worst forms. But suppose Skinner tried to make the argument that in fact the horrors perpetrated in the name of Christianity were unconnected with its character and its truest aspirations, would that require a revision of his position? He claims that the historian is prevented from this. But is that really what the historical record sustains? Is the historian's task so simple? Certainly it is one thing to predict what the future portends, but it is hardly credible to say, as it is often said, that the historical record only offers evidence of terror, violence and horror.

The difference, as Skinner points out, is that non-theists like him need to be convinced, especially because he, and others who consider themselves descendants of Hume, take it for granted that one does not need God to appreciate human life in its full significance. If theists like Taylor believe the contrary then they have to convince him. The question remains, though, as to what would count as proof for Skinner, if together with Hume and his descendants he believes theism to be a 'dangerously irrational creed'<sup>10</sup> This is where Skinner's admiration of Taylor looks so interesting. Is Taylor among the 'dangerously irrational?' And if so why does Skinner admire him? Or is it just that, although Taylor has a beautiful mind – and here I borrow from Alan Greenspan – he has an 'irrational exuberance' for the transcendent? Should we then suffer his irrationalism as a pathology of an otherwise rational soul?

It is interesting that Skinner draws attention to the historical record of the last two centuries (c. 1794–1994). In spite of my own reservations about using it, it may not be indecent to press the point: can Skinner and others really be so indifferent to the horrors perpetrated by militantly anti-Christian and secular movements? This is at least what Taylor alludes to when he refers to those secularists who quickly redefine the terms of the debate, 'moving the goal posts', as Taylor calls it, when they revise their language to say that, after all, communism was a religion.

I turn now to Connolly, beginning with his review of *Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism: The Philosophy of Charles Taylor in Question* in the *American Political Science Review* 90/1 (March 1996). Connolly states glowingly: 'Everybody takes issue with Charles Taylor, if not on one crucial theme, then another. Why, then, has he been such a compelling and inspiring political theorist in North America over the last third of the twentieth century?' His answer is the range of Taylor's thinking on metaphysics, epistemology, politics and ethics and the

<sup>10</sup> Tulley and Weinstock, *Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism*, p. 47.

interconnected nature in which he pursues them, leading Connolly to call him 'perhaps our most complete theorist'.<sup>11</sup>

In his review Connolly mentions Taylor's agreement with Quentin Skinner that we have reason to be afraid of Christian faith.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, Connolly finds Taylor's hunch that there is a scale of affirmation in human experience which cannot be matched by rejecting God somewhat alarming.<sup>13</sup> And he worries too that Taylor too quickly dismisses certain nontheistic sources of affirmation. 'Why not, for instance, extend the pluralist embrace more actively to nontheistic perspectives irreducible to several contemporary forms of theism or secularism? If Christianity is dangerous, does it not need to be checked, countered and contested from perspectives outside it?'<sup>14</sup> He acknowledges that Taylor accepts secular challenges, but then Taylor takes great pains to demonstrate their limitations. It is from this standpoint that he begins to suspect a lack of interpretative generosity in Taylor. He believes Taylor's generosity 'falters most dramatically' when Taylor's 'religiously anchored pluralism encounters pluralist commitments that also challenge his most fervent hunch. Those who "reject" a specific god (or is it a hunch?) in the name of a positive appreciation of the diversity of being are placed under suspicion from the start. It is the way they are interpreted prior to ethical engagement that is telling, as the disjunction between hunch and rejection already suggests.'<sup>15</sup>

Connolly takes Taylor to task for a not-so-generous assessment of Foucault. Connolly offers a rejoinder which suggests an almost unbridgeable gulf between his own Foucaultian sensibilities and Taylor's. He argues that 'the intercultural diversity' which Foucault 'opens up in the domains of gender, sexuality, and faith is both more bountiful and more promising in its interconnections than anything Taylor' has proposed.<sup>16</sup> This is a strong objection and challenges the humanity of Taylor's proposals. While Connolly takes Foucault's work as bountiful affirmation, Taylor raises questions about what it is that ought to be affirmed as good or estimable.

If it is to Foucault that we owe the future of our being, then clearly Taylor has long ceased to be relevant. And yet one can wonder how many of us have the opportunity to make our lives works of art in the way that Foucault claimed for himself. Connolly's existential faith, with its commitment to affirming any and every difference, does not have the moral resources to

<sup>11</sup> William Connolly, *American Political Science Review* 90 (1996), p. 181.

<sup>12</sup> Tulley and Weinstock, *Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism*, p. 225.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 226.

<sup>14</sup> William Connolly, *American Political Science Review* 90 (1996), p. 182.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

suggest a way of discriminating between possible goods and by extension the lives that express these goods. So we may have no way of saying what is good, less good, bad, wicked or evil. Unless I am mistaken and have misunderstood him, Connolly's existential faith lacks a coherent ethical posture. Equally peculiar, and altogether surprising, is Connolly's turn to Bartolomé de Las Casas, the sixteenth-century Spanish missionary in the New World, as a witness for this Foucaultian present and its future hopes for Christianity. According to Connolly 'Christian interpretations of pagan idolatry, sacrifice, and sodomy seemed to vindicate harsh responses; but as Bartolome de Las Casas finally recognized, they themselves reflected more the shock the Other posed to Christian self-confidence than the light-headedness of the perspectives engaged.' 'Las Casas', Connolly contends, 'revised his Christianity in the light of these hard lessons'. And so he asks: 'Are contemporary, minority explorations of mystery without a specific god and of respect for a protean diversity of things still so hard to bear? Even during a time when Christian faith is a hunch and Christian fundamentalism a danger?' Connolly's appeal to Las Casas is doubly perplexing, and the notion of Las Casas revising Christianity almost unintelligible.

Less problematic but just as revealing is his challenge to Taylor about Christian faith being a hunch. Connolly held out the hope of a rapprochement, as 'the fundamentalist assault on diversity gets louder and uglier'.<sup>17</sup> But is such a rapprochement possible with Foucault, among other things, standing between them? If I had the time I would go into more detail about Connolly's appreciation of Taylor's Catholic philosophy and see how it reads in light of *A Secular Age*. My supposition is that Taylor's arguments make Connolly's supposed rehabilitation of secularism untenable. Although Connolly, I am sure, would insist that his notion of agonistic respect allows him his 'existential faith', with its openness to a plenitude of human self-creation but not to any kind of conversion such as Taylor proposes for the transcendent as being something beyond life.

But in spite of the difficulties attending the arguments of his secular and neo-Nietzschean critics, Taylor's arguments also lend a hand to a genuine agnosticism: one which believes without believing. That is, it is a form of believing which is open to the possibility of the transcendent, but does not have the confidence to profess anything like Taylor's Christian confession. This kind of agnosticism seems to me eminently Taylorian. And it lacks the self-authorisation that Taylor decries. At the same time, it stands a far distance from any kind of cynicism, the kind of cynicism which could express itself in a paraphrase of Michel Foucault by saying: 'we have been waiting for the

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.



word for 2,000 years and look at where it has gotten us'. But waiting can weary the heart. And time may not be on our side.

Let me return to Tristan's question in the conversation I recounted at the beginning of my review: 'Will people believe in the Christian God 1,000 years from now? That depends. If they happen to read any of what Charles Taylor has written in this masterpiece of a book called *A Secular Age*, then I think they are likely to hold out the transcendent as a promise. But, of course, a promise can always go unfulfilled. Taylor can be right about everything he has said and still turn out to be wrong; Skinner, Connolly and others can be wrong about their arguments and still turn out to be right. After all, the future does not belong to any of us.

It is perhaps not surprising that so far Skinner has not joined the conversation engendered by *A Secular Age*. Connolly, however, continues to be part of the conversation, and even seems to believe that, Taylor's criticism of naturalists notwithstanding, there is still much agreement between the two of them. It is possible that Connolly sees more agreement than is in fact the case. In any event, his plea for an open naturalism may even have its religious analogues. Recall my earlier comment about the post-secular condition.

To explore this I shall call on two historical figures of the Christian tradition who are often presented as great examples of Christian faith: Augustine and Pascal. Some of the questions both men asked about time, space and eternity evoke some of the themes that Taylor presents in his work. I bring them into the conversation to inflect the nature of the question Tristan posed, which I rephrase: a thousand years from now will people believe in the Christian God?

One of the most-often quoted passages from Pascal comes from his *Pensées* §233: 'The eternal silences of these infinite spaces terrifies me.'<sup>18</sup> This short statement evokes Pascal's sense of the terror that engulfs him when he thinks about the vast expanse of space, its eternal silences, which haunt his sense of being in the world. I shall quote another passage (*Pensées* §102) which elaborates on that sense of the infinite smallness of the human being compared to the vastness of space and time.

When I consider the short span of my life absorbed into the preceding and subsequent eternity, like the memory of a one-day guest, the small space which I fill and even can see, swallowed up in the infinite immensity of spaces of which I know nothing and which knows nothing of me, I am terrified, and surprised to find myself here rather than there, for there is no reason why it should be here rather than there, why now rather than

<sup>18</sup> Blaise Pascal, *Pensées and Other Writings*, trans. Honor Levi (Oxford: OUP, 1995).

then. Who put me here? On whose orders and on whose decision have this place and this time been allotted to me?

In Taylor's scheme, Pascal clearly fits the model of one who lives after 1500, and for whom the possibility of non-belief or atheism (I shall not equate the two) was a more live option than for someone who lived before 1500; and not because those who lived before 1500 could not have been terrified by the darkness or immensity of space. But it is not clear they would necessarily have thought of it as infinite; save perhaps Aristotle and some of his friends. As a mathematician, and as someone knowledgeable about the physical universe, and a contributor to probability theory, Pascal felt keenly what those infinite spaces said to him about his own existence. Today, our knowledge of the physical universe clearly exceeds what Pascal knew. In what sense then do the conditions of our believing make the faith of today's Christians similar to or the same as Pascal's? And in what sense is the faith of someone like Augustine, who lived so long before Pascal, different from both Pascal's faith and ours?

Listen, for example, to the question posed by some of Augustine's contemporaries. Augustine mentions in his *Confessions* 11.12.14 that there were some people (probably Manichaeans) who, in order to unsettle some Catholic Christians, would ask them what God was doing before he created the world. According to Augustine someone (probably a Catholic) came up with the retort that God was preparing hells for people who ask questions like that. Augustine, of course, thought the retort uncharitable and badly conceived. Moreover it was a very trite response to a very serious question.

For our purposes, we could rephrase the Manichaean jibe into another question: not 'what was God doing before he created the world?' but rather 'what has God been doing between the creation of the world and now?' Better yet: following the cosmologists, 'what was God doing between the big-bang and the beginning of biblical history?' Here is the rub: much of recorded human history covers a historical period which stands in relation to the history of the universe as we understand it today in a ratio of roughly one to a million. So, while other topics like the problem of evil or suffering might be thought great challenges to theistic belief, time is what poses the greatest challenge to the notion of transcendence which Taylor seeks to defend. And so, it is the problem of silence or divine absence which poses the greatest threat to a non-atheistic future. And it is from this standpoint that I shall raise the question of theological discourse.

Here then is my proposal. Since there is so much that we do not know, is it not more appropriate that we conceive of theological discourse in a subjunctive mood, by which I mean the following. When we speak in the

subjunctive mood we speak about what *might be* the case and not of what must be, or is the case. So instead of theological utterances expressed in the language of certainty, shouldn't our theology be articulated in the language of what could possibly turn out to be the case, and not necessarily what we know to be the case?

Understandably, some would find such an approach lacking in the very virtue that they consider essential, namely faith. But it is not clear to me that faith, even as it is described in scripture, is ever founded on the language of certainty and not on promise, hope and expectation. And isn't the subjunctive mood actually truer to the self-understanding of faith than its alternative? Furthermore, theology in the subjunctive mood inherently nurtures the virtue of humility. Such faith always awaits the full disclosure of truth; and is always conscious of the possibility of being mistaken. A good deal of what Taylor enacts in *A Secular Age* reads to me like just the kind of theology I am pointing to. It is mostly in the subjunctive mood.

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