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Book Reviews

***A Secular Age*. By Charles Taylor. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007. 874 pp. $39.95 cloth**

***The Law of God: The Philosophical History of an Idea*. By Remi Brague, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008. 365 pp. $35.00 cloth, $22.50 paper**

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Reexaminations of modernity are, by now, commonplace. Primarily we are treated to unalloyed paeons to the glories of the modern age or, by contrast, to grumpy lamentations that the world has gone to hell in a handcart. Years ago Charles Taylor dubbed these positions as the "boosters" and the "knockers," respectively. Neither a booster nor a knocker, Taylor has, for years, attempted to weave a complex, nuanced pattern of engagement with modernity that criticizes and compliments, challenges and cherishes. Indeed, at times, he seemed to bend over backwards to say many positive things about modernity knowing that if one does not genuflect, one is placed immediately in the company of reactionary knockers. He is most animated, however, by critique. The challenge is what sort of critique and to what ends? He has plowed this ground for years. *A Secular Age* is his culminating if not final work on the subject. One always knows that Taylor is conjuring the next project as soon as the previous project is at the publisher.

A Secular Age is a massive, encyclopedic work that displays in abundance Taylor's erudition, his familiarity with a vast array of texts, histories, art, and music, and his humility — a humility that is at home with forthright articulation of better and worse alternatives as he sees them. Reviewers of this work have complained at its length and at Taylor's numerous side-trips into the tributaries, departing from the main stream as he does so. A few have suggested, pointedly, that he requires a "good editor" to help him say what he has to say but in

fewer words. I doubt whether this is possible. Taylor is one of those thinkers who see everything at once, so to speak. He has before him the vast panorama. His challenge is to convey what he has seen to the rest of us . . . and in detail. Taylor requires the length and the vastness in part because he refuses to take refuge in what he calls various "codes," whether of a deontological or utilitarian nature, that offer too few ideas to deal with the complexity of the human condition in late modernity. He cannot with ease pronounce summary judgment because he does not *a priori* circumscribe his material, does not pare it down to fit with a predetermined grid.

Those familiar with Taylor's work will find much that is familiar, including his view of human beings as self-constituting (that is, we are what we make of what we find in our own natures and cultural contexts). This does not mean we are infinitely malleable — by no means — even as we are never wholly determined by external forces. Instead, we self-constituting creatures carve out meaning and purpose in a complex dialectic between what is given and what can be created. Taylor opposes all strict determinisms of any sort but he eschews radical existentialism as well. He is sympathetic to Camus' struggles with belief and unbelief; unsympathetic to Sartre's absolutist certainties. His attunement to language as expressive is also on display here as elsewhere. A simple designativist view of language will not do. What does that mean? It means that there is a kind of latency embodied in language that becomes manifest. Language is mysterious and enigmatic, this by contrast to the designativist who sees language as transparent and simple. In discussing language, and much else, Taylor is fond of the image of a spider's web: you touch one part and it sets the whole thing to quivering.

For Taylor, in *A Secular Age* and elsewhere, there is a tremendous amount at stake as we sort out what has been deeded to us as modernity; indeed, nothing less than the twentieth, and now twenty-first, centuries' concerns about meaning. This concern reflects a largely inarticulate sense of ourselves that is very widespread. What this comes down to in the last decade of Taylor's work is whether or not we embrace narratives and accounts of meaning that remain open to transcendence . . . or not. That is, the question and his answer is that narratives that remain open to transcendence provide the richest account of the full gamut of human experience. How he arrives at that conclusion and how he defends it is the heart of the matter.

What kind of master narrative is accessible and intelligible to us now? How did a master thesis that "made sense" for centuries become

impossible to some, and improbable to most? In his words: ". . .why is it so hard to believe in God in (many milieux of) the modern West, while in 1500 it was virtually impossible not to?" (p. 539). The medieval and early modern centuries were God-drenched eras. Time was measured by sacred intervals and interventions, guided by church bells and sacred litanies and devotion to saints, punctuated by pilgrimages and suffering given meaning within the frame of this potent meaning-giving narrative. No more. What has come to replace this particular narrative in which the immanent and the transcendent are linked in myriad sturdy and mysterious ways? A family of theses emerged to take its place but the contenders, or some of them, especially the simplistic terms of the so-called secularization hypothesis, have themselves come under withering critical assault . . . and been pounded by historic realities.

In examining the question of narratives, Taylor assumes "human nature" as a constant, but a variable one. I noted earlier that his view of nature is that it is neither wholly determined nor wholly malleable. What we find, inevitably, is that human beings seek to secure meaning and to find their purposes in their own time and place. We can simply assume this. One must here add the caveat that, for Taylor, there is a "something" in human beings that opens us to the possibility of transcendence. And if not that, then we will be tempted to absolutize or sacralize the immanent — even if what we are absolutizing is the loss of meaning or the impossibility of meaning itself. If we trace the contours of the present that define the moral space within which deliberation and contestation take place, we will find, Taylor suggests, three or four positions: exclusive humanism, neo-Nietzscheanism, and those who keep alive space to respond to the transcendent within our immanent frame. Exclusive humanism and neo-Nietzscheanism are captured exclusively within an immanent frame; the openness to transcendence seeks to break the bonds of the exclusively immanent. (Within the forms of exclusive humanism, we find a character Taylor calls the "buffered self," a self closed off to more radical possibilities of transcendence.) What Taylor's analysis demonstrates is that aggressive forms of secularism, forms that present themselves as having broken free of prior restraint and superstitution, actually substitute a secular religion for what has gone before. The "gods" of this religion differ from the God of the Judaeo-Christian narrative, of course, but gods there be.

Along the way, as he discusses the fate and nature of various narrative contenders to the transcendent theism of centuries of Western history, Taylor speaks of what he calls "ratchet effects," namely, the insistence

you cannot go back once you go up a notch. The notion is that we make ongoing epistemic progress and this progress applies across the board so that cultural developments everywhere will be the same; hence, there is one standard narrative of "modernity." Taylor argues, persuasively, that this picture is not sustainable and has been disproved by events themselves: there is no single account of modernity, no single route to modernity, and no single definition of modernity.

Similarly, the so-called "subtraction stories," those that hold that as you move you remove various barriers and so we have moved from the darkness into the light, have also lost much of their persuasiveness. Many phenomena that were supposed to have disappeared, simply melted away before the onslaught of enlightenment, especially religion, have stubbornly refused to do that. And there is what I will call the "everything falls apart" perspective, those who see modernity as a disaster with a loss of limits and an undermining of meaning, selves, and purposes that is destructive and relentless.

Taylor's Hegelianism tells him that there is a "moment" of truth in each of the grand narratives he rejects. Each pushes certain insights that we dismiss at our peril. This, surely, is one reason Taylor proves frustrating to so many readers: what does he *really* think? Well, he really thinks all of these things, understanding that no reasonably complex reaction to the potent constellation of forces he identifies and unpacks can be *wholly* false. No "single account of the world" can possibly account for the world.

One area that has elicited considerable controversy is Taylor's discussion of "Fragilizing the 'We'" and the "Evidence of Experience;" in other words, whether the decline in religious belief is as pronounced as Taylor suggests. To this end, critics have advanced data suggesting the self-identified "spiritual" orientation or proclivities of persons in surveys demonstrate that belief remains robust. Such criticisms are not fully persuasive, in large part because the "spiritual" is not identical to what Taylor calls "the religious." Religious belief is always practiced and sustained by communities of some sort — it is not an individualistic pursuit. When Taylor speaks of the decline of serious religious belief in the contemporary West, it is surely this radical emptying of places of worship he has in mind (although the United States is at least partially anomalous in this respect). Given that Christianity, for example, is much less subscription to a set of metaphysical principles than a lived life, one would want to look at that sort of evidence and, if one does, it supports Taylor's argument.

One arrives at the conclusion of Taylor's massive work with a sense of relief and gratitude — relief that one has made it all the way through;

gratitude for all that he has done. When one closes the book's cover, however, it strikes me that we remain stuck with a dilemma Taylor identified many years ago now — a "rotten deal intellectually," in his words, that we have been dealt. What is that "rotten deal?" What we see in public life is the dominance of scientistic and objectivist language; in private life we can have expressive fulfilment. This is, a "rotten deal" became it combines the crude aspects of scientism or objectivism with subjectivist expressionism. . .and both sides are wrong. When we attempt to move beyond this "deal," we find we are stuck within its dominant terms, at least most of the time. Exclusive humanism of the neo-Nietzschean or some other sorts is no alternative; rather, it is an example of this phenomenon at work in many respects (at least in its subjectivist and nihilistic moments).

Our best bet is the frame that leaves us open to transcendent meaning and possibility, but this position is under constant pressure to succumb to one version or another of exclusive humanism. Remarkably, Taylor presents all of this in a tone that is neither upbeat nor downcast. He is always hopeful, never optimistic. He makes often severe judgments but in a way that is not harsh, not ugly. The many "partlys" and "maybes" and "much of the time" that taxes reviewers and readers speaks to his heroic efforts to be not only comprehensive but fair. We walk along with him, slouching toward Jerusalem not knowing fully the shape of the beast to be.

As one turns to Remi Brague's account of the fate of the idea of "the law of God" over a period of thousands of years, one is struck by how familiar portions of the argument seem. A number of scholars have been traversing similar terrain of late (I do so in my Gifford lectures, for example.). Brague aims for comprehensively and not a new synthesis. He lays various traditions — Judaism, Christianity and Islam — side by side, so to speak, and demonstrates how each tradition has dealt with dauntingly difficult, if not intransigent, questions: "I have chosen as a unifying thread the notion of "divine law" because the idea — or in any event, the expression — can be found in the three worlds, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim, that I will need to investigate in order to grasp the choices, basic and successive, that each civilization made. Divine law, in fact, reveals what Judaism, Islam, and Christianity think and know about themselves" (vii).

Brague's aim is to understand how human law got disentangled over time from Divine Law, to the extent that it did. As he does so, he punctures one of the conceits on which modernity prides itself, namely, that it has got rid altogether of heteronomy ("the enemy that must be eliminated") in favor of radical autonomy ("that defines the ideal to be realized in an ever more

radical manner"). The familiar part of Brague's thesis — or newly familiar given that a number of recent books examine the matter — is that the notion of will, both God's and man's, comes to supplant reason and love. One might call this the Ockhamist triumph over Thomism in theology. But human self-understanding could not but be effected by this change of emphasis in theology. With the Reformation, one can begin to see traces of the move to will and willfulness with its full triumph visible in what I call "self-sovereignty" and Brague calls radical autonomy.

Brague notes that questions of divine law can be "posed in several ways." By operating within a "premodern framework," Brague shows us that he wants to answer the question of what permitted "or even caused" the "rupture" of the premodern relationship with divine law that we find in modernity. The theologico-political "problem," as he puts it, lurks here. One might add that this is a problem both in the philosophical sense, as Brague takes it up, but also on the level of discourse itself, as most contemporary political and legal theorists are woefully ignorant of the theological backdrop to their own understandings. Be that as it may, Brague rightly insists that, to do justice to the story of the West, one must treat equally its two sources — both Athens and Jerusalem. Our understanding of our own culture is radically truncated because we have largely abandoned the Jerusalem wing of our heritage. An example of this would be the now defunct, but proposed, European Constitution, that, in its preamble, noted everything that went into the forging of the West — save centuries of Christianity! Why this almost hysterical rush to negate and to deny? Doing so "robs us of millennia." Brague aims to be balanced in his account — and in this he succeeds admirably — by avoiding both "naïve acceptance and polemics," precisely the measured stance I have already identified in relation to Charles Taylor.

Challenging the "sacred to profane" trajectory as inexorable, Brague argues that modern democracies rely on an anthropology they cannot acknowledge, because it makes use of what they deny, namely, Christian anthropology and ecclesiology. Is it possible for this backdrop to be acknowledged and renewed? If our aim is understanding rather than parsing legalistic points, slogans like "separation of church and state" are less than helpful (especially if one adds Islam to the mix, for the notion of the Islamic nation, or *umma*, does not comport with the modern state, nor with ideas of separation with which the West is familiar and on which much of modernity rests). But it is with such slogans that we have increasingly cast aside the complexities of the "Christian solution" to multiple sources of law and authority, to the point of "abandoning it as

a source of law, often going so far as to reject any idea of a law that is not of human origin."

With these provisos and challenges as backdrop, Brague moves into his narrative, tracing, first, the Greek backdrop to the "theo-political" problem, prior to moving to the heart of the matter, the notion of divine law. A brief section delineates the "historic conditions of alliance," namely, the meeting of Hellenism with the forces identified with Israel, Christianity, and Islam. Christianity set itself outside the political domain in many respects rather than constituting a politics *per se*. Still and all, there are political dimensions and features to the three great religious traditions although one, Islam, holds that "the separation of the political and the religious has no right to exist." A provisional conclusion is here suggested as to how these traditions might meet one another without warring. Brague suggests that there can be a detente, but it is too much to expect a meeting of the minds on the hard rock of foundational principles. This is not his primary concern, but it is a concern nonetheless for such encounters and clashes are inevitable.

Brague presents the bulk of his text as a series of parallel structures, demonstrating similarities and differences as he goes over features of the divine law and traces their fates in the three traditions. It is impossible to offer a summary of this discussion. What emerge most clearly through his method of textual and historic comparison are the startling and fascinating differences between and among traditions. How did each tradition constitute a politics or effect politics? What principles of legitimation for political authority appear in each? He concludes one section by insisting that a "comparison among the three religions shows a profound difference in how each one articulates the connection between religion and the political structure."

From origins and early development, Brague moves through time, noting, as he does, the nascent beginnings of the notion of "autonomy" that he locates in St. Paul (Romans 2:14). The idea originally is "primarily political," he contends, for the word "designates the way in which a political community governs itself, even when it lacks complete authority." Autonomy is not yet tied to any notion of "liberty," communal or individual. Tracking the divine law as enforced, as represented in medieval thought, where the apogee of divine law was reached, as the aim of law in Islam, and as the end in Judaism, Brague's schematic treatment is extraordinarily illuminating but, at times, frustrating, because his narrative method proscribes going into serious depth on any single period or point or development. That is simply the way of it: one can aim for comprehensivity and lose much of the concrete and the specific along the

way, or eschew comprehensivity knowing, as one does so, that this means much supporting material must go by the board. Still and all, one accedes to the frustration given just how helpful Brague's detailing of divine law as encapsulated in traditions is.

What is the fate of divine law in modernity? Nothing less than its destruction, according to Brague. Again, he is "highly schematic," in his own terms, because he hopes to alert us to the overall pattern of things. The trajectory he identifies tracks from God to nature — both, initially, external commandments or discernments. We move in the West from the moral law as God's law or natural law to the moral law in its absolute purity as an internal principle, a development Brague finds both extraordinary and intelligible. The upshot is that we are "free" from natural law. Eventually we wind up with a "law that is nothing but human." Brague calls this the "anthropological reduction" and his analysis here maps onto Taylor's discussion of exclusive humanism. At this point, the Christian tradition moves further apart from both Judaism and Islam, traditions for whom the "idea of law. . .remains central and continues to constitute one of the points on which those two religions, each in its own way, differ from Christianity."

So, we confront head-on the problem of a need for the divine nature or origin of norms that govern the entire field of human conduct — the theio-practical realm. It is the fact of this need, Brague concludes, that helps us to appreciate various separations and distinctions in the late middle ages and modernity. When law became the expression of "will," the temptation to absolute and unlimited power grows apace, encapsulated in the hegemony of a sovereign state freed from any constraints or limits by the sovereign God.

Brague concludes this admirable text in a typically measured but direct way:

> The idea of divine law is *one* model of the articulation of the theio-practical. It does not exhaust the question, however: the idea of norm is not the only way in which the divine can enter into a relation with practice. . . . Becoming conscious of the manner in which the divine appears at times as a norm for action permits us to investigate other possibilities and grasp their pertinence. Perhaps it is even when one ceases to believe that the normative modality of the relation to the divine is the only possible one that such a relation to the divine in general has a chance of appearing as necessary to the full deployment of human action (264).