

Jeff Applegate
Houston Christian University
History of Christianity 5330

Dr. Randy Hatchett
April 15, 2023

How (Not) To Be Secular, Reading Charles Taylor
Book Review

James K.A. Smith's 148-page book, *How (Not) To Be Secular, Reading Charles Taylor* is written as "an homage and portal to Charles Taylor's monumental *Secular Age*."¹ Smith's book is a companion to help translate and unpack Taylor's commentary on postmodern culture that is inaccessible to most readers. Mr. Smith is a professor of philosophy at Calvin College and award-winning author of several books on postmodernism, worldview, and faith formation. Smith's book is written for social scientists, theologians, philosophers, religious studies scholars, and all persons feeling the cross-pressures of our secular age. The five chapters correspond to the five parts of *A Secular Age*.

In the introduction, Smith places us on a map of this "present age," an existential map to help orient ourselves in our secular age. Our secular age is a "cross-pressured" place where we find ourselves between the era of faith in a transcendent supernatural God and the "immanent frame," that frames our lives entirely within a natural order. This space haunts the believer with constant challenges to their faith and haunts the atheist with temptations to believe in transcendence. Author Julian Barnes aptly describes this cross-pressured place for agnostics in the opening line of his book, "I don't believe in God, but I miss Him."²

Charles Taylor poses the 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?"³ Taylor seeks to answer this question by explaining how conditions in western society could shift, moving from something being believable to being unbelievable. Taylor asserts the essence of "the secular" is a matter of believability.⁴ He then classifies "secular" into three eras. The medieval era associates the *secular*₁ with temporal or "of the earth" commonly

¹ Smith, *How (Not) To Be Secular, Reading Charles Taylor*, ix.

² Smith, 5.

³ Smith, 19.

⁴ Smith, 20.

referred to as a sacred/secular divide. The believability of God is assumed in *secular*₁. In the Enlightenment era, *secular*₂ became characterized by decreasing religion in society and creating religious or areligious spaces. Taylor defines the postmodern *secular*₃ where religious belief in God is just one option and belief in God is contestable. This belief opens the door for “Exclusive Humanism” whereby humans are fully self-sufficient and have no need for God to flourish. Where the enlightenment era tells a story of progress and science shedding belief in the transcendence through “subtraction,” Taylor offers history as a narrative to counter subtraction theory of how we came to *A Secular Age*.

What conditions would have to change to dislodge belief in God so rooted in society that in only 500 years theism is almost unbelievable? Taylor contends that in medieval times there were three obstacles that had to be removed to allow movement from belief to unbelief.

1. The natural ordered world signals there is something more than nature.
2. Society took for granted that it was grounded in a higher reality.
3. People lived in a world that accepted and open to the supernatural and were not closed and self-sufficient.⁵

These convictions have vanished and opened the door for secular₃ humanism. It was accepted that diseases are not demonic, the body does not have a soul, and spirits do not exist leaving us with machinations of matter. For exclusive humanism to become an available consideration, not only did we need to abandon the world of spirits and demons, but we shift to a self-sufficient ordered life that is explained by nature and disconnected to any transcendent being. Premodern society lived in communion working together for the collective good. This communitarianism had to be removed and replaced by individualism, disconnecting individual

⁵ Smith, 27.

decisions and thoughts from the community allowing individuals to be free to be an atheist. Finally, society had to lower the standards to allow what was previously not accepted to be accepted. Taylor attributes these shifts to Reform Christendom. Beyond the protestant reformation, Taylor cites a “two-tiered” world, that raised expectations for the sacred and thereby unintentionally drove others to humanism. The protestant simplification and the deconstruction of sacraments and supernatural world led to disenchantment and opened the door to naturalism. The path to secular humanism is not a straight line, but a zig zag line starting with the Christian’s devotion to God and interest in creation and then stripping the transcendence of Christ as he is brought into this immanent natural world, and landing at exclusive humanism. What we once took for granted is now contestable.

Now that the obstacles for unbelief have been removed, we can begin to examine how belief in God is exchanged for belief in other things. Taylor argues that we do not get here by subtraction, just falling away from belief, but the belief in the transcendent is eclipsed by the immanent. He describes a fourfold process as “immanentization” that transcendence is exchanged for the natural. “Further Purpose” is the first recognition that there is more to life than just human flourishing and there is a judgment at the end of life that governs our behavior.⁶ Taylor submits Adam Smith and John Locke foster the idea that economics orders the world for mutual benefit replacing God’s plan with human plans. God’s goals for humans are reduced to order of mutual benefit that He designed for us. Theism becomes humanized.⁷ Taylor describes the second process of immanentization as the eclipse of grace. Since God’s providence is reduced to an economic order and since that order is discernable by reason then humans could rise to realize it. Labeled as “providential deism,” God may have gotten it started, but is now

⁶ Smith, 48.

⁷ Smith, 49.

uninvolved opening the door for exclusive humanism.⁸ The third eclipse occurs as the mystery of God fades and is replaced by human reason progressing to intolerance of the mystery of God. Finally we are satisfied in ourselves and lose any idea that God may have a greater plan for humanity.

So, what is the force driving these shifts? The economy of ordered peaceful and productive activity becomes the goal for human flourishing.⁹ We become so focused on the immanent that we lose sight of the transcendent. The provident God is relegated to creation and the Christian aspects of Christ, prayer and worship are diminished and unnecessary for exclusive humanism. Nothing is not knowable. Previously we dealt with a problem of evil and needed a Savior, but now we have it figured out. Once we have reduced God to a provident creator, then He is insignificant enough to be eliminated without consequence and now exclusive humanism can replace deism as a more viable spiritual alternative. What was previously unthinkable is now thinkable.

To complete the theological shift to immanence it must also be accompanied by a political shift. Taylor describes a “modern moral order” as the ordering of society for mutual benefit and a new religion.¹⁰ Still connected to a deistic God, we have unhitched from Christian doctrines and our moral order can be independent from any specific claims by God. If religion is independent from doctrinal authority, so can the state and political be separate. Taylor describes the emergence of a “polite society” that is buffered from God and finds their own reasoned standards for social, moral, and political life.¹¹ This is not a scaling down or reduction of God from the political, but a transaction exchanging the transcendent for the immanent. Once we are

⁸ Smith, 50.

⁹ Smith, 51.

¹⁰ Smith, 53.

¹¹ Smith, 54.

here, we can now say we do not have a need for grace because we can achieve moral order on our own.

Taylor contests that exclusive humanism was only conceivable through Christianity. The order of mutual benefit is where tenants of Christianity are acknowledged and turned into self-sufficient human capability and proclaimed as an “achievement” in human history.¹² The next step is to wholly reject God’s personhood in the involvement in the order of mutual benefit as interference in our “buffered identity.”¹³ When we deny God’s person then we can excarnate Him from our lives, removing religious rituals such as attending church, prayer and communion from our lives clearing the way to atheism.

We are now in a secular₃ age where theistic belief is not the default, and it is acceptable to contest belief in God. Taylor describes culture fractures resulting from transitioning from secular₂ to secular₃ as “the Nova Effect.”¹⁴ The Nova Effect provides more than a binary choice but at the intersection of cross pressures creates an explosion of options for belief and unbelief which he names, “pluralization” and “fragmentation.”¹⁵ Described as the “malaises of immanence” the modern buffered-self is sealed off from significance and brewing in a stew of pluralistic options.¹⁶ Culture laments the loss of transcendence and the emptiness that conflicts with the immanence of exclusive humanism. A loss is felt, but it is not known what was lost. This feeling is especially present in the life experiences of birth, marriage, and death.

In the nineteenth century, Taylor asserts a fundamental change happened in how people “spontaneously imagine” themselves in a cosmic context.¹⁷ Instead of perceiving themselves as

¹² Smith, 57.

¹³ Smith, 55.

¹⁴ Smith, 62.

¹⁵ Smith, 62.

¹⁶ Smith, 65.

¹⁷ Smith, 70.

part of a designed, ordered, and shepherded cosmos they perceive themselves in a vast anonymous universe. In the anonymous universe material and self-sufficient reason is all there is. However, there remains a counter pressure to transcendence. Taylor argues most people end up in a neutral space between the immanent and transcendent.¹⁸ In the 19th century universe, art and music are disconnected from religion to stand on their own. Taylor argues that those who converted from belief to unbelief never had a strong faith and buy into science claiming they matured beyond religion to accept the fact that the universe has no meaning. If the universe has no meaning, we have lost our sense of purpose and are liberated from any responsibility. God is essentially dead so the humanist can decide what goals to pursue. We have arrived at a new place in human history: “A race of humans has arisen which has managed to experience its world entirely as immanent.”¹⁹

At this point, Taylor has brought us to the present and directs his analysis to account for the decline of religious practice in the West and the decoupling of religion from society and its institutions. He does not buy into the classic subtraction theory that contends that religion must decline because it is either proved false by science, has become irrelevant in our modern age, or modern individual authority has superseded religious authority. He does not accept the insistence that religion is merely phenomenal beliefs in supernatural entities incapable of truly motivating human action and disappears in conditions of modernity. Taylor describes a “transformational perspective” that is a way of life beyond a set of beliefs or epistemology that motivates human action, leads moral order, and advances human flourishing. Taylor’s explanation for the decline of religious practice in the West is not just the denial of supernatural entities, but the denial that it is possible to pursue a way of life that values things beyond human flourishing. Taylor

¹⁸ Smith, 73.

¹⁹ Smith, 78.

illustrates his theory in tracking movement in four eras from unbelief of the elite in the eighteenth century to mass secularization in the twenty-first century. In the first era, “Ancien Regime” (AR), church membership was united with the community or nation. The elites who ruled the communities had the power to restrict or end religious rituals. From 1800 – 1960 AR was displaced, by the “Age of Mobility” (AM). Society and governments were built upon a moral order seen as established by God. Today, we are in the Age of Authenticity (AA) characterized by a belief that the individual chooses how to realize humanity and “the only sin that is not tolerated is intolerance.”²⁰ In the AA, individual expression of religion prioritizes individual *feelings* over orthodoxy undermining the link between Christian faith and ordered civilization of the AM. Taylor speculates the age of mass secularization in which we live remains haunted by transcendence and will be increasingly challenged.

In chapter 5 Taylor addresses two dynamics of the “Immanent Frame,” analyzes Closed World Structures (CWS), and Cross Pressures of the inadequacy of closed immanence. Two dynamics for the Immanent Frame.

1. Why do secularists just assume that their perspective/frame is “just the way things are?”
2. How are Christians to live in the “immanent frame” that creates a boundary between natural/immanent and supernatural/transcendent?²¹

First, the immanent/closed perspective is so embedded in culture that people do not have the thought or ability to consider or imagine the transcendent/open perspective. It is just a background or “water we swim in.” Belief in the secular or transcendent both require a leap of faith. Each perspective has a “take” that recognizes contestability of our “take” of things or we have a “spin” where we simply dismiss those who disagree with our perspective. Taylor

²⁰ Smith, 85.

²¹ Smith, 92.

encourages Christians to live in the individual experiential sense of the immanent world that is in neutral territory.

Taylor describes CWS as “takes” on contemporary experience that clouds perspective and insulates them from the fragilization of our secular age. CWS seek to rationally eliminate the plausibility of God by assuming science tips to materialism and resisting any instinct that would lead to religious beliefs. In a closed world there is no meaning unless we create our own meaning. With the subtraction of God, humans are the only authorizing agency remaining.

Taylor identifies Cross Pressures within the Immanent Frame as the tension between closed immanence and its own inadequacy. The emptiness of materialism begs the question, “Is that all there is?” He appeals to three “fields” of cross-pressure challenging secularism.

1. Agency – The sense we are not simply determined.
2. Ethics – The sense that we have higher spiritual ethics beyond biology.
3. Aesthetics – The sense that art moves us with a sense of meaning.

Can the closed Immanent Frame provide fulfillment? Is there any option for an intermediary position that provides for transcendence? Can we account for moralism only within the confines of materialism? How do we define our highest spiritual or moral aspirations without denying our humanity? Taylor dubs “maximal demand” as the competition between high moral aspirations and humanity that Christianity and Exclusive humanism struggle. So, we ask the question, “What does it all mean?” Taylor responds by asserting that human nature is not enough to sustain the ethical code or meet the modern moral order. Could transcendence bear the load of our ethical predicament? He concludes, “If you think there is a God, then your entire picture of our ethical predicament has to be different. If we open ourselves to God, we have vastly greater resources to

address the fragility of life that is common to all.”²² The moral source for Exclusive Humanism is an altruistic call to a social code of behavior, but codes of conduct are inadequate as moral sources. Religion cannot completely fix the problem, but once we recognize that Exclusive Humanism and Religion are cross pressured in the same way, Taylor can suggest that Christianity is more plausible.

Smith concludes with Taylor’s optimism by reflecting on those who escaped the immanent frame. Taylor suggests that conversions are actually re-conversions going back to a past social imagery. He explains, all people pursue full lives, even those living in the Immanent Frame, but they respond unknowingly to a transcendent reality. Those entrenched in immanence blame the religious past for their current woes, but in time will begin to explore the boundaries. The meaningless secular age coupled with the cross pressure of transcendence that cannot be explained away will push them to question if the strange rituals of Christian worship are the better answer to their human aspirations.

Abstract

Smith’s work, *How (Not) To Be Secular, Reading Charles Taylor*, is an effort to make Charles Taylor’s monumental work accessible to a broad audience. In Taylor’s, *Secular Age*, he seeks to answer the 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?” Taylor does not buy into the often-cited theory of “subtraction,” whereby religious belief was simply discarded; however, Taylor maps out the shifts in beliefs in the transcendent to belief in the immanent contained in Exclusive Humanism. Tragically, we find western society has not only denied the supernatural but denied that it is possible to pursue a way of life beyond

²² Smith, 127.

human flourishing. Taylor submits that those who are captive in the Immanent Frame are haunted by the question, “Is this all there is?” In time, they will explore boundaries to find the hope of the transcendent and return to a belief in God and a fulfilled life that transcends human flourishing.

Reflections on Other Reviewers

In his review of Smith’s work for Denver Seminary, Darren Cronshaw raises essential questions for Christians, “How can we help a new generation of secular people who so value “authenticity” and making their own meaning, to understand that the supernatural is possible, and that pursuing something beyond human flourishing is imaginable?” and “In what ways can churches offer mystical experiences?”²³ The Apostle Paul declares Romans 8:6-6 says “For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace, because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so; and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.” Exclusive Humanism has no hope, but Paul proclaims that a mind set on the Spirit is life and peace. Cronshaw’s call to action provides a vision for something more and a tangible way to recognize a transcendent supernatural power providing hope for a better life and peace in that life will draw people out of the secular age.

Sara Evans, writing for the Baptist Union of Victoria, also provides practical instruction in challenging Christians to “seek something broader than apologetics in how they describe or defend the faith. Instead of devaluing experience, feelings, and narrative readers are given a chance to identify how these affect the experienced faith and even offer defense for it.”²⁴ Our

²³ Cronshaw, 4.

²⁴ Evans, 7.

individual stories of redemption and abundant life in Christ are authentic, powerful, and attractive to this generation who appreciate individual experience.

Personal Reflection

In my own reading, I admittedly had to stretch to comprehend Smith's effort to comprehend Taylor's, *Secular Age*. As a Christian, studying the anthropology of secular humanism is disheartening but extremely valuable to fathom the dynamics of how western culture became satisfied in the immanent. I am encouraged by his study of conversions from the Immanent Frame concluding the Spirit of transcendence ever calls mankind to look beyond the immanent to find that there *IS* more to life than human flourishing. Scriptures that leap to my mind during reflection, "do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind"²⁵ and "Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him."²⁶

²⁵ Rom. 12:2

²⁶ Jam. 1:12

Bibliography

Smith, James K.A. *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor*, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014.

Evans, Sara E. “Denver Journal Book Review by Denver Seminary Alumna Sara E. Evans.” Review of *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor*, by James K.A. Smith, *Denver Journal*, Volume 18, 2015.
<https://denverseminary.edu/the-denver-journal-article/how-not-to-be-secular-reading-charles-taylor>.

Cronshaw, Darren. “Book Reviews, Baptist Union of Victoria.” *How (Not) to be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor*, by James K.A. Smith, Baptist Union of Victoria.
<https://www.buv.com.au/book-reviews/how-not-to-be-secular-reading-charles-taylor/>