

The Secularization Project

A precis of the life and work of Charles Taylor.

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Charles Taylor is Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at McGill University in Canada. He is a practicing Catholic who has no qualms about speaking from his considerable religious background. After many years of teaching, writing and speaking on the philosophy of the human person, he gathered his best thought together in a series of lectures which became the book *A Secular Age*, 2007, 874 pp. The book drew a worldwide following, including positive reviews from David Brooks (NY Times columnist) and Ronald Rolheiser (spirituality columnist). He spent the rest of his career developing his ideas in academic and popular ways, in articles, including critiques of popular culture, including music. His bibliography is enormous, as well as all the books and other writing about him. (Google it)

A little history. Francis of Assisi lived in the midst of the age of enchantment. The religious sphere was mostly the only framework in which life and events were expressed. Whatever is unusual is a miracle, which can happen at any time, as expressed in the folklore stories of Francis' life. This was simply reality, as people experienced and interpreted it.

By the time we get to the Enlightenment (18th century) things are different. Beginning with astronomy (Galileo) as a science in its own right, all the disciplines began peeling off on their own separate from ecclesiastic supervision, not only standard disciplines like philosophy, history, and literature, but eventually government, politics, industry, trade, etc. The biggest of these to emerge eventually was capitalism. Religious belief continued through this time, but in a gradually diminished way and a general splintering of churches. An example: Thomas Jefferson, one of the founders of our country, clipped out all the miracles of Jesus in his New Testament, while praising him as a good teacher to help build good citizens. (Obviously, no resurrection.)

Taylor presents many views on history up to today, a growing history of secularization, and he does provide a general critique of individualism, consumerism and materialism. As he puts it, going to church on Sunday morning is followed by a trip to the big box store and the immersion in consumerism. Which activity is the climax of the day?

Moving in and out of his discussion of culture is the area of human sexuality, in which almost all the clergy of the Roman Catholic Church are embedded in celibacy and a moral theology of sexuality that is centuries old, while almost all the laity practice a sexual life relatively open to ongoing scientific and cultural development. This is an area of dislocation which will be with us for a long time, if not indefinitely.

He does have a chapter on charismatic people. Francis of Assisi is there, but only his conversion. The same with Ignatius of Loyola, Dorothy Day, Ivan Ilich, and others. And Gerard

Manley Hopkins is one of his favorite poets because he recreates the enchantment of former ages for our own times. Taylor has little regard for Rules of Life that have followed monastic founders, because he thinks they tend to water down the charisma. Rather, we need to foster and to find charismatic leaders who can lead us through secularization in our times. And as with so many historians of human thought, he is much better at tracing how we got where we are now than charting paths of future development.

In his later years, Taylor developed a more popular approach in talks, videos, television shows, tracing instances of the sacred and secular (available mostly in Canadian markets, which I have not accessed). Here, for study purposes, are the lyrics of a famous Beatles song, written by John Lennon. Music available on the Web.

IMAGINE

Imagine there's no heaven
It's easy if you try
No hell below us
Above us only sky
Imagine all the people
Living for today... Aha-ah...

Imagine there's no countries
It isn't hard to do
Nothing to kill or die for
And no religion, too
Imagine all the people
Living life in peace... You...

You may say I'm a dreamer
But I'm not the only one
I hope someday you'll join us
And the world will be as one

Imagine no possessions
I wonder if you can
No need for greed or hunger
A brotherhood of man
Imagine all the people
Sharing all the world... You...

You may say I'm a dreamer
But I'm not the only one
I hope someday you'll join us
And the world will live as one