

Believe it or not

By [Robert Westbrook](#) in the [December 16, 2008](#) issue

In Review



A Secular Age

Charles Taylor
Belknap

If you are, as I am, often puzzled by the landscape of contemporary religious belief and unbelief, you will regard Charles Taylor's huge and hugely rewarding intellectual

history of the secularization of European and North American culture as a marvelous gift. *A Secular Age* is a first-class map of the spiritual terrain of Western modernity as well as the road that got us here.

Secularization is generally taken to mean the decline of religious belief among modern peoples or its detachment from political authority in modern states. For proponents of both these definitions, the U.S. poses difficulties. Among the most modern of societies by all the sociological measures that have been proposed as explanations for secularization, its population has remained stubbornly wedded to religious belief and only grudgingly and fitfully renounced the claim to Christian nationhood. At the same time, the resurgence of political Islam and the militant Christian response it has engendered in some quarters have raised doubts about the confident assertion of secularization theorists that the process is irreversible, even in the West. Not least of the symptoms of this crisis of secularization theory is the recent aggressive campaign to resist “desecularization” by best-selling atheists such as Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens.

Taylor, a Canadian Catholic who ranks among the half-dozen most important philosophers at work in our time, offers a third, and better, understanding of secularization. “The shift to secularity,” he contends, consists in “a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace.”

In other words, a secular society is not one in which unbelief has necessarily triumphed nor even one in which it is ascendant but one in which belief is no longer hegemonic yet remains a reasonable option. As he says, “The change I want to define and trace is one which takes us from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others. I may find it inconceivable that I would abandon my faith, but there are others, possibly including some very close to me, whose way of living I cannot in all honesty just dismiss as depraved or blind or unworthy, yet who have not faith (at least not in God, or the transcendent). Belief in God is no longer axiomatic. There are alternatives.”

As a consequence of this transformation, religious belief is not the same thing in 2000 as it was in 1500. If unbelief can no longer be simply said to be insane or perverse, then belief can no longer claim indubitability. “We cannot help looking

over our shoulder from time to time, looking sideways, living our faith also in a condition of doubt and uncertainty.”

Defining secularization in this way resolves the difficulties of the other two definitions. The persistence of belief in a modern society like the U.S. does not require explanation, though the relative balance of belief and unbelief here and elsewhere does. The detachment of religious belief from political authority in modern liberal states is linked to the inability of any particular belief (or belief as such) or unbelief to assume persuasive hegemony. Only governments—religious and secular alike—that deploy repressive power to coerce belief (or at least silence) can attempt to establish a state religion (or irreligion like communism). Pluralism is the modern liberal norm; the separation of church and state is as much a religious as a secular project.

Taylor’s understanding of secularization calls for a historical narrative that explains both the emergence and legitimation of unbelief and the endurance of belief in its wake. There is, of course, a familiar narrative that accounts for these developments—the one found in the atheist tracts to which I alluded. It holds that unbelief is the default position for all rational human beings and that, beginning in the 17th century, modern science has put pay to centuries of ignorance and superstition that held it in check. The only explanation for the survival of belief is the persistence of ignorance and superstition. Religious belief is a pathology that invites psychoanalytic speculation and that, if all goes well, is doomed to extinction.

This story, which Taylor calls the epistemic narrative, conceives of the contest between belief and unbelief as a battle over warranted knowledge. Religious belief is seen as a set of truth claims about the world that fails to meet the standards of modern scientific plausibility. It is also what he calls a subtraction story: secularization is the process of simply casting off unscientific ignorance. The legitimation of unbelief can easily be explained “by human beings having lost, or sloughed off, or liberated themselves from certain earlier, confining horizons, or illusions, or limitations of knowledge. What emerges from this process—modernity or secularity—is to be understood in terms of underlying features of human nature which were there all along, but had been impeded by what is now set aside.”

Taylor, like many believers, says in passing that he finds the epistemic challenge to religious belief of atheists like Dawkins unconvincing even in its own terms, and this assertion marked one of the rare moments in reading this very long book in which I

wished he had more rather than less to say on a subject. (Readers interested in what this sort of argument looks like might consult Thomas Nagel's splendid review of Dawkins's *The God Delusion* in the *New Republic*.) But Taylor's aim is less to argue directly with the triumphalist narrative of unbelievers than to supplant it with a more persuasive history that does not require that one impugn the sanity of either belief or unbelief.

Enter the ghost of Max Weber. Much as Weber did in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Taylor argues that modernity was ironically forged out of rather than against religious belief. His story is more multidimensional than Weber's and begins much earlier—in the late medieval period rather than the Protestant Reformation—but it is likewise a story of reformers setting about to remake religious belief and unwittingly building the foundations of a modern selfhood and society in which unbelief is a readily available alternative.

Taylor's narrative, like Weber's, is not epistemic but moral—the story of a dramatic shift in the social and cosmic “imaginaries,” or taken-for-granted background assumptions, of Christendom over the last 800 years or so. It is difficult for me to recapitulate this sprawling history compactly in a brief review. I think Taylor himself could have done a better job of concision than he does. Suffice it to say here that for him the heart of the matter lies in a dynamic of “disenchantment,” “disengagement” and “disembedding” that he describes and analyzes in great detail. (As these terms suggest, Taylor's own narrative is something of a subtraction story.)

In the name of the greater glory of God and well before the Reformation, Catholic reformers, such as the Franciscans and the Brethren of the Common Life, began to strip the world of pagan residues, all the benign and malign spirits that joined God in crossing the highly permeable boundary in medieval society between the natural and supernatural. They displaced an enchanted nature with a disenchanted impersonal order of matter and force governed by causal laws and subject only to the purposeful agency of human beings and the supernatural Being that had created it.

Reformers, among whom Descartes was the culminating genius, then proposed to people this disenchanted nature with “buffered selves” who were no longer subject to the play of a host of hidden spirits—human beings now able to disengage themselves from the world around them, to observe its workings and to bring them under their controlling will. No longer at the mercy of an animated world, these

selves, animated by God's grace, were enjoined to engage and discipline nature, self and society. Such selves not only tortured a disenchanted nature on the rack, as Bacon put it, but saw themselves "as agents who through disengaged, disciplined action can reform their own lives, as well as the larger social order. They are buffered, disciplined selves. Free agency is central to their self-understanding."

By the 17th century, disenchantment and disengagement had enframed not only the scientific revolution but the emergence of modern individualism and political liberalism, which Taylor terms the Great Disembedding. By this he means a new conception of moral order that began with the assumption of individuals disembedded from any particular function in a normative social hierarchy. It then conceived of political society as an instrument for fostering the freedom and mutual well-being of these individual agents. Witness, for example, the Declaration of Independence, which owed much to one of the great disembedders of the 17th century, John Locke.

So in the 17th century belief was decidedly different from that in the 12th. As Taylor puts it,

Once disenchantment has befallen the world, the sense that God is an indispensable source for our spiritual and moral life migrates. From being the guarantor that good will triumph, or at least hold its own, in a world of spirits and meaningful forces, he becomes 1) the essential energizer of that ordering power through which we disenchant the world, and turn it to our purposes. As the very origin of our being, spiritual and material, he 2) commands our allegiance and worship, a worship which is now purer through being disintricated from the enchanted world.

What Taylor terms the providential deism of the late 17th and 18th centuries—the work of figures such as the Abbé de Saint Pierre, Benjamin Franklin and Matthew Tindal—then served as an important half-way house on the way to defensible unbelief. It launched an anthropocentric shift in the understanding of God's purposes, identifying them strictly with the fostering of human flourishing in an impersonal, divinely created order whose moral shape was within the grasp of reason and sentiment. Once God's purposes were identified solely with human flourishing, people could worship him simply by pursuing the goals of freedom and mutual benefit, which proved not terribly difficult to authorize without God. And so too, with growing confidence in human capacities (to which science and

disenchanted social engineering contributed mightily), the energizing power of grace seemed to some less essential. In this fashion, “Space had been created for a shift, in which the power to order will be seen as purely intra-human.”

“Exclusive humanism” thus required two major conditions for its appearance: disenchantment of the world and a viable conception of the highest spiritual and moral aspirations that some human beings could conceive of pursuing without God. Both of these conditions were unintentionally provided by religious reform. Eventually the course of disenchantment and disengagement zigzagged to a point near the end of the 18th century at which some elites could begin plausibly to argue that if the flourishing and mutual benefit of disengaged, disembedded individuals in a disenchanted world was the point of life, it might just as well (or better) proceed without God. In other words, an ethos that in its origins was inconceivable without God and was designed to serve God paved the way for a modern, exclusive humanism—a social imaginary placed on a wholly horizontal, “immanent” plane without transcendence, in which human well-being is entirely the province of human beings.

If unbelief was possible by the turn of the 19th century, it was not necessary. The transformation Taylor traces meant only that it was now a competitor with various forms of belief. In some places like the United States, deism quickly lost ground in the face of the Second Great Awakening, and exclusive humanism has yet to become more than an elite phenomenon. And even in France, belief did not die out with the Enlightenment and Revolution but resurged and peaked around 1870. Taylor says relatively little about popular belief, though he repeatedly implies that from the outset it trailed well behind the ambitions of reformers. (Some have argued that the ineffectuality of unbelief in the U.S. owes a good deal to the marginality of intellectuals and academics in this society.) But why, among intellectual elites, did unbelief not simply supplant belief, as some unbelievers confidently predicted?

Here again Taylor rejects the explanation of the atheists’ epistemic narrative (unremitting ignorance and superstition) in favor of a moral alternative. To his credit, he does not deny the great attraction of the ethic of freedom and mutual benefit that drives the disengaged self of exclusive humanism or “the sense of freedom, power, control, invulnerability, dignity, which it radiates.” He is guilty of no reactionary nostalgia for the lost world of hegemonic Christian belief.

Yet, Taylor argues, exclusive humanism has been burdened with some decided competitive disadvantages. Chief among these is what he terms a distinctively “modern malaise,” a threatened loss of meaning. The buffered identity of unbelief “ensures our invulnerability. But it can also be lived as a limit, even a prison, making us blind or insensitive to whatever lies beyond this ordered human world and its instrumental-rational projects. The sense can easily arise that we are missing something, cut off from something, that we are living behind a screen.”

Not all unbelievers have suffered this malaise, but many have. And resurgent conventional belief is not the only response with which it has been met. Indeed, as Taylor shows, many, “among them the best and most sensitive minds,” have felt “cross-pressured” and have found themselves looking for a “third way.” This quest was pioneered by Romantic poets such as Wordsworth, and has resulted since the early 19th century in what Taylor calls a nova effect. Rather than settling the contest of belief and unbelief, exclusive humanism and its accompanying malaise have spawned “an ever-widening variety of moral/spiritual options, across the span of the thinkable and beyond.”

At the heart of this increasingly crowded competition is the question of how to construe a phenomenological feature of human experience that even some confirmed naturalists (such as John Dewey) have been moved to call religious. Taylor characterizes this experience (much as Dewey did) as one of “fullness”:

We all see our lives, and/or the space wherein we live our lives, as having a certain moral/spiritual shape. Somewhere, in some activity, or condition, lies a fullness, a richness: that is, in that place (activity or condition), life is fuller, richer, deeper, more worth while, more admirable, more what it should be. This is perhaps a place of power: we often experience this as deeply moving, as inspiring. Perhaps this sense of fullness is something we just catch glimpses of from afar off; we have the powerful intuition of what fullness would be, were we to be in that condition, e.g., of peace or wholeness; or able to act on that level, of integrity or generosity or abandonment or self-forgetfulness. But sometimes there will be moments of experienced fullness, of joy and fulfillment, where we feel ourselves there.

We argue, as William James said, over what sort of “overbeliefs” we will attach to such experiences. When in the early 1930s Dewey ventured to characterize such

“consummatory” experiences as religious and even to attach the word *God* to those conditions and activities that evoked them, liberal theologian Henry Wieman rushed (in the pages of this magazine) to welcome him to the theistic fraternity. Dewey, who would acknowledge only “natural piety,” fiercely rejected the invitation, and Taylor acknowledges that he had every right to “understand fullness in terms of a potentiality of human beings understood naturalistically.”

Taylor himself, though, has a “theistic hunch.” Although he reads Wordsworth with great feeling, he points out that the poet who so movingly wrote in *The Prelude* of his sense that “Our destiny, our nature, and our home, / Is with infinitude—and only there,” left the source of this feeling “ontologically indeterminate.” Taylor’s greater sympathy lies with Gerard Manley Hopkins, who straightforwardly declared, “The world is charged with the grandeur / of God.”

On occasion, Taylor will try to nudge his readers into the believer’s corner. At some points, he even resorts to the sort of (ironically humanist) “will to believe” sort of argument that James made famous—and notorious. That is, in the absence of conclusive evidence of how best to construe the experience of “fullness,” why not, given the stakes, opt for that construal that best serves one’s conception of human well-being?

On this count, Taylor argues, exclusive humanists might consider that their most admirable humanitarian convictions might be better served by religious belief because it better fosters what Reinhold Niebuhr called the “spiritual discipline against resentment” that the pursuit of their highest ideals of mutual well-being requires. As Taylor says, effective humanitarianism requires that we answer the question of “how to have the greatest degree of philanthropic action with the minimum hope in mankind.” To this question, he contends, Christian belief offers an answer that exclusive humanism cannot match: “It can be described in two ways: either as a love or compassion that is unconditional—that is, not based on what you the recipient have made of yourself—or as one based on what you are most profoundly, a being in the image of God.”

But at his best, Taylor acknowledges that one cannot be argued into belief or unbelief or any variety thereof. Each requires a leap of faith. Something of a communitarian, he worries that the consumer culture of “authenticity” and expressive individualism that pervades modernity in our own time is leading to religions of “believing without belonging” in which, at their limit, each of us pursues

our own idiosyncratic spiritual muse. “We are now living in a spiritual super-nova,” he says, “a kind of galloping pluralism on the spiritual plane.” But though we may slow the gallop of pluralism, Taylor leaves no doubt that we cannot escape it. It is a fate, as Heidegger put it, from which perhaps “only a god can save us.”

Whether or not one shares Taylor’s theistic hunch, his characteristically generous book will enable his readers to more self-consciously place themselves in this secular age and very possibly find a soul mate among the many sensitive minds he engages here with unfailing fairness.

Nonetheless, for all its virtues, this book is not a gift without a price. It is terribly and unnecessarily long and taxing, probably a good month’s worth of work for even the most diligent reader. Periodically Taylor restates and summarizes his controlling arguments before proceeding. On the one hand, the reader is grateful for the assistance. On the other hand, it raises the suspicion that the author, like the reader, has lost track of the main thread of the story while pursuing this or that intriguing byway.

Taylor followed two earlier 600-page tomes of considerable significance, *Hegel* and *Sources of the Self*, with much briefer volumes laying out their main arguments. One hopes that he will do the same for *A Secular Age*. This volume was preceded by compact books—*Modern Social Imaginaries*, *Varieties of Religion Today* and *A Catholic Modernity?*—that forecast some of its central themes. I would particularly recommend *Varieties of Religion Today*—a dialogue with James and his *Varieties of Religious Experience*—to those weighing the costs and benefits of a season spent with a 900-page book. I suspect that it will entice and embolden more than a few to take the plunge into the deeper waters of *A Secular Age*.