New-time religion

reviewed by Robert N. Bellah in the May 22, 2002 issue

Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited.
By Charles Taylor. Harvard University Press, 144 pp., $19.95.

Among widely influential philosophers today I can think of only two who are self-professed practicing Christians: Charles Taylor and Alasdair MacIntyre, both Roman Catholics. Like MacIntyre, Taylor is unusually knowledgeable about the social sciences (he has taught in a political science department) and is primarily concerned with the intellectual, ethical and religious meaning of modernity. Like MacIntyre, he is an indispensable companion for Christians who would make sense of the world in which we live, and he has deeply influenced my own work.

Taylor's usual method is to publish a major treatise and then follow with a brief book that makes his argument available to a wider audience. He followed his major opus *Hegel* (1975) with the much more accessible *Hegel and Modern Society* (1979). His magisterial *Sources of the Self* (1989), tracing the historical origins of the modern notion of the self, was followed by *The Ethics of Authenticity* (1992). But on this occasion Taylor has reversed his usual practice and published the smaller book first. The larger book, on which he is still at work, grows out of his 1999 Gifford Lectures and is concerned with the question "What does it mean to call our age secular?" *Varieties of Religion Today* is a brief meditation on that question, central for understanding modernity, and takes as its point of departure the work of William James, particularly *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (James's own Gifford Lectures).

Why James? Because on one critical point James turned out to be remarkably prescient. Indeed, as Taylor points out, James's argument is completely contemporary. Though James would not have used today's jargon, he would in substance have affirmed what many Americans say today: "I'm not religious but I'm very spiritual." James divides religion into two "branches," the personal and the institutional. He chooses to focus entirely on personal religion, leaving the institutional aside, since it lives "at second hand upon tradition." Institutional religion

is identified with "church," so that "when we hear the word 'religion' nowadays, we think inevitably of some 'church' or other; and to some persons the word 'church' suggests . . . hypocrisy and tyranny and meanness and tenacity of superstition."

It is James's purpose to rescue the word "religion" in its personal sense (apparently the word "spirituality" was not yet available as a contrasting term), since he largely shares the negative view of church held by "some persons." In 1902, when *Varieties* was published, such a view was probably held only by an intellectual elite, but by the end of the century it had become much more general. A 1995-96 survey found one-third of Americans holding a rather extreme form of it. They believe that "people have God within them, so churches aren't really necessary."

Taylor points out that this preference for personal religion obscures something that has existed not only in almost all premodern cultures but, to varying degrees, still survives among contemporary Americans--the conviction that "the locus of the relation with God is (also) through the community, and not simply in the individual. But this is the way that the life of the Christian church has been conceived, among many Protestants as well as Catholics; and also the way Israel and the Islamic umma have been conceived."

What the Jamesian view of religion as personal further obscures is the quintessentially Catholic notion of the church as a "sacramental communion" through which God's life penetrates ours. Protestantism had already narrowed and marginalized the sacraments; for this newer view not only have the sacraments in the liturgical sense become superfluous, but a sacramental understanding of the religious life has become unavailable.

One more problem with James's view arises from his idea that personal religion is based exclusively on feeling and not on cognitive belief. Statements about God, creation, Christ and the like no longer have any defining place in the religious life, though individuals may hold whatever such views they choose. Here again Taylor points out the disjunction between James's view, shared by many contemporaries, and any form of historic Christianity.

Taylor identifies several inherent problems with James's ideas. The concept that religious experience is purely one of feeling, Taylor points out, is undermined by the problem that "the very idea of an experience that is in no way formulated is impossible." More fundamentally, Taylor argues, "all experiences require some

vocabulary, and these are inevitably in large part handed to us in the first place by our society, whatever transformations we may ring on them later." The languages and vocabularies of religious experience "are never those simply of an individual." Personal religion, then, is not in any ultimate sense personal, but is the product of a certain kind of society, which, like all other kinds of society, imposes itself on individuals. My coauthors and I discovered as much in our interviews for *Habits of the Heart* when questions about individuality triggered some of the most stereotypical language we encountered: it seems that "we're all unique; we're all different" in exactly the same way.

The fact that for so many people religion today has become entirely personal and private has had an important consequence. We can call our age secular in the sense that there is no societywide institutional basis for religion. Taylor contrasts our situation with two earlier ones and denominates all three sociologically according to the degree to which they conform to Émil Durkheim's notion that any coherent society must be at base a religious collectivity. In the pre-modern West people lived in what one might call an "enchanted world" (in contrast to the disenchanted world Max Weber believed we now inhabit). Not only was the religious life the focus of a great deal of activity in such societies (the cathedral was central to the life of every major city, for example), but political society was closely linked to it, the king being regarded as a manifestation of God's will on earth. This pervasively sacred world Taylor calls "paleo-Durkheimian."

Protestant societies marked "a shift from the enchanted world to a cosmos conceived in conformity with post-Newtonian science," in which the world, though no longer permeated with sacred meaning, nonetheless "declares the glory of God" in its "design, its beauty, its regularity, but also in its having evidently been shaped to conduce to the welfare of God's creatures, particularly of ourselves." God's presence in the world is no longer mediated by a king, but remains evident in the moral order and in a constitutional order, based in the American case on the explicit notion that all people are created equal and are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights. This resulted in a quasi-established Protestant church combined with a strong sense of national destiny--in a word, civil religion. Taylor calls this understanding "neo-Durkheimian."

But today, although remnants of neo- and even paleo-Durkheimianism survive, society is basically post-Durkheimian, Taylor argues. A highly personal and individual understanding of religion, shared by many who continue to go to church, has

difficulty extending solidarity beyond the single individual. Sympathy for others may be easily roused, as in the outpouring of donations for the families of the victims of September 11. But sustained commitments beyond the moment of sympathy have become rare, as became evident when many local charities found themselves strapped for donations after September 11. Their usual donors did not give to New York victims in addition to their local obligations but instead of them. Still, one wonders what Taylor would make of the recrudescence of neo-Durkheimian rhetoric in presidential statements and public flag-waving after the events of September 11. Is this a temporary aberration, or a genuine shift in by now long-term trends? I would think, and I suspect Taylor would agree, that the former is more likely the case.

The deeper question that I, a Durkheimian sociologist, would ask Taylor is whether a post-Durkheimian society is ultimately viable. Without some degree of consensus, without something like a "common faith" even in John Dewey's diluted sense of the term, is a coherent society possible? This question is particularly salient at this historical moment when the U. S. is not only a superpower but the center of the world's only empire. People in much of the world have, culturally, two nationalities, the one they were born with and American. We have become not *a* nation, but *the* nation, yet a nation whose citizens feel no lasting solidarity beyond themselves and their families. Is that a situation too incoherent to last?

Taylor is quite right to argue that there is no use hankering for paleo- or neo-Durkheimian revivals. We don't really want to go back to either of those earlier solutions. He is also right to remind us that within the post-Durkheimian ambiance, many individuals will still choose to reaffirm paleo- and neo-Durkheimian solidarities within their own particular groups. But without some degree of ethical and religious consensus, the burden of social coherence must rest entirely on economic, political and military structures--just the structures that our highly individualist society most abhors. Religious individualism, then, leads to a purely secular society which can be held together only by external coercion. A contradiction indeed. One hopes that Taylor's expanded book will shed more light on this disturbing conundrum.