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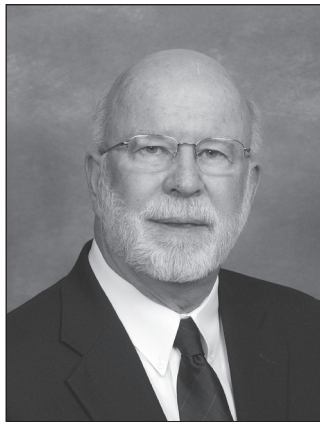
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How Far Does Charles Taylor Take Us in Developing a Christian Understanding of the Secular Age?



by James W. Skillen

Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*¹ is a remarkable book that has received much praise and many reviews since its publication eight years ago. Many

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Christian scholars have been among its sympathetic and even enthusiastic readers. James K.A. Smith thinks *A Secular Age* is so important that he wrote a book just to guide readers through it.² The greatest strength of Taylor's book, in my estimation, is its descriptions and categorizations of a wide range of developments in the West during roughly the last five centuries. I have some questions, however, about the author's approach to the subject and about what we are left with in the end. In what follows I engage Taylor critically on two fronts: first, the way he develops his primary concern with the "conditions for belief" as those conditions relate to transcendence, and second, what he misses in his account of American civil religion.

Conditions of Belief

Taylor makes clear at the outset that his focus will be on the "conditions of belief" in a secular age, not on the separation of church and state or the purported decline of religious belief and practice (2). His aim, he writes, is to try "to define and trace" the change that has taken 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" (3). It is clear from this statement of intent as

well as from all that follows in the book that he does not focus on the content and truth claims of particular faiths, including Christianity.

Taylor contends that our age is no longer religious in a pre-modern sense and that religious belief is now a matter of choice. He explores a variety of such choices in order to assess the conditions for them. At the outset he says he will speak of *religion* and religious belief as referring to transcendence and will speak of the *secular*, in the modern sense, as referring to immanent reality. A secular age, therefore, “is one in which the eclipse of all goals beyond human flourishing [within immanent reality] becomes conceivable.... This is the crucial link between secularity and a self-sufficing humanism,” which he also calls “exclusive humanism” (19-20). In this age, those who reject a transcendent deity live by unbelief, he says, in contrast to those who live by belief in God.

Taylor writes, “I want to talk about belief and unbelief, not as rival *theories*.... Rather what I want to do is focus attention on the different kinds of lived experience involved in understanding your life in one way or the other, on what it’s like to live as a believer or an unbeliever. As a first rough indication of the direction I’m groping in, we could say that these are alternative ways of living our moral/spiritual life, in the broadest sense” (4-5). Taylor believes that in some broad sense everyone’s life takes “a certain moral/spiritual shape.” The unstated implication here is that there is more to life than its moral/spiritual shape, the other dimensions presumably being what most Westerners refer to as their daily work and experiences (their “secular” life?) and which Taylor elsewhere refers to as “ordinary human flourishing” (510).

Enlarging his description of the moral/spiritual shape of life, Taylor says, “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” (5). Those experiences in certain places, activities, or conditions “help us to situate a place of fullness, to which we orient ourselves morally or spiritually. They can orient us because they offer some sense of what they are of: the presence of God, or the voice of nature, or the force which flows through everything, or the align-

ment in us of desire and the drive to form” (6).

In a way, Taylor says, “this whole book is an attempt to study the fate in the modern West of religious faith in a strong sense. This strong sense I define, to repeat, by a double criterion: the belief in transcendent reality, on one hand, and the connected aspiration to a transformation which goes beyond ordinary human flourishing on the other” (510). Near the end of his book he says, “I have told a long story because I believe that one can only get a handle on this if one comes at it historically...[for] one’s story only makes sense in the light of a certain understanding of the place of the spiritual in our lives” (768). As we look to the future of our different stories, he says, there is one view, “which flows out of mainline secularization theory” that “sees religion shrinking further and further”:

I see another future, based on another supposition. This is the opposite of the mainstream view. In our religious lives we are responding to a transcendent reality. We all have some sense of this, which emerges in our identifying and recognizing some mode of what I have called fullness, and seeking to attain it. Modes of fullness recognized by exclusive humanisms, and others that remain within the immanent frame, are therefore responding to transcendent reality, but misrecognizing it (768).

By the end of his book, in other words, Taylor offers a more subtle and qualified understanding of the difference between belief and unbelief. The moral/spiritual shape of the believer’s life is a consciously intended response to transcendence and is thus religious. But the moral/spiritual shape of the unbeliever’s life, though not emerging from a religious response to transcendence, does in fact respond to it but “misrecognizes” it in the quest to experience some kind of fullness. Belief and unbelief are both responses to transcendence, but belief recognizes it, and unbelief misrecognizes it.

If we pay close attention to Taylor’s word usage, we can hear the shifts in meaning, the equivocations that try to bridge between old and new cultural contexts and between diverse modes of reasoning and believing. For example, on the one hand, he believes that all humans do respond to “a transcendent reality,” which is what religious

belief is all about, at least in the traditional sense of those terms. On the other hand, those who do not believe in anything transcendent (“exclusive humanists” and those who “remain within the immanent frame”) are acting spiritually (religiously?) insofar as they are seeking to attain a “fullness” or “richness” of life. An experience or sense of fullness may be brought on by an entirely immanent experience, perhaps hearing the voice of nature, but from Taylor’s point of view it has a religiously parallel or equivalent character even if the person having the experience misrecognizes the meaning of

Taylor contends that our age is no longer religious in a pre-modern sense and that religious belief is now a matter of choice.

it. What is the relation, then, we may ask, between the structure of reality, which apparently includes immanence as well as transcendence, and the different human responses to that reality? Who is qualified, and on what basis, to judge between the recognition and misrecognition of transcendence?

At the start, Taylor says he wanted to get at the difference between a life of belief and a life of unbelief, but in passages like the ones just quoted he compares an experience of the presence of God with an experience of hearing the voice of nature or feeling “the alignment in us of desire and the drive to form.” Should we take it that all of these experiences are equivalent in some way and that all are equally legitimate? Does the difference between belief and unbelief not matter? Or does the misrecognition of transcendence by unbelievers—or at least some unbelievers—present a problem that ought to be overcome?

Recognition and Misrecognition of Transcendence

Taylor says he wants to “focus attention on the different kinds of lived experience” rather than on theories about experience (4-5). Yet he doesn’t really focus on lived experience in the full-orbed

sense of that term but only on “alternative ways of living our moral/spiritual life.” However, is it not precisely the relation of the spiritual to the ordinary (the religious to the secular) that is the central question in debate today about the character of life in the modern world? Can he get away with setting aside the non-spiritual dimensions of lived experience and still present an adequate account of the secular age? Taylor takes for granted the duality of spiritual/ordinary, religious/secular, without offering a justification for his stance. Then he works to avoid the problem presented by denials of transcendence by simply affirming that those denials are the consequence of a misrecognition of transcendence.

By speaking of “misrecognizing” transcendence, however, Taylor has shifted to another level of characterization and categorization. The duality of “recognize/misrecognize” is quite different from the dualities of religious/secular and belief/unbelief. First of all, it conveys a normative judgment about what constitutes a person’s recognition or misrecognition of transcendence. In ordinary language that contrast conveys a judgment that the former is correct and the latter is a mistake. But that’s not a consideration Taylor chooses to confront. Yet the normative judgment that a person has recognized or misrecognized the transcendent would seem to call into question the axioms and assumptions that undergird secularist thinking of the exclusive humanist variety, because that framework is built on the belief that there is no transcendence. From the standpoint of those who believe there is nothing transcendent, couldn’t it be said that Taylor misrecognizes the truth about reality by projecting an indefensible belief in transcendence? Taylor’s normative judgment about recognition and misrecognition, consequently, calls for a self-critical account of his own most basic suppositions and assumptions about the nature of reality. He believes there is, in fact, no completely self-enclosed, self-sufficient immanent reality, as exclusive humanists believe, and therefore to hold such a belief would appear to be more than a mere visual, mental, or moral mistake but rather an *errant* belief, something fundamentally problematic.

Taylor’s belief (that such a belief is errant) leads directly to another very important question,

namely, what is entailed in the *recognition* of transcendence? Is it sufficient, in Taylor's mind, for a person to profess that there is something transcendent? Or is the identity of true transcendence important? He states at several points that he is a Christian. How much of his Christian understanding of reality, then, should he divulge in order to account for the grounds of his judgment about the recognition and misrecognition of transcendence? Based on traditional Christian teaching and presuppositions, might we not expect him to believe that a good and healthy life, including a healthy moral/spiritual life, depends on orienting oneself to the love of the true God and the concomitant love of neighbors, as the Bible urges again and again? It would not be surprising, one would assume, for Taylor himself to believe that there are some quests for fullness or richness that are seriously misdirected, perhaps destructive, or even evil.

As far as I can see, these are not questions Taylor wants to engage. One consequence is that some of his most basic suppositions and beliefs about the nature of reality remain undisclosed. What he does divulge is that he has *chosen* Christian faith for himself as others have chosen to follow other paths of belief or unbelief. Does this choice imply that each person's choice of faith is so personal, so confined to the shaping of his or her moral/spiritual experience, that each choice and experience has little to do with making judgments about the normative ordering of society? If that is true, then to what extent does *A Secular Age* help in providing a critical Christian assessment of our secular age, of the full range of lived experience in our day?

Discerning Idolatry?

Taylor makes an even sharper judgment (than the one about recognition/misrecognition) when he criticizes those who think "they have got God right" or who think they are pure and right. Such judgments are clearly idolatrous, he says, and "idolatry breeds violence" (769). Here he sounds very much like those modernists who are convinced that strong religious claims spell danger and lead to violence. Yet Taylor also sounds very postmodern in his objection to anyone who makes a claim to certainty about universal truth. How

then can he be sure he is right in criticizing those who claim to have gotten God right? What moral norms ground that judgment and what is the root of those norms? To speak of idolatry in the strong sense sounds pre-modern, not modern or post-modern. But Taylor is clearly not using the word "idol" to mean what it means in the Bible or in traditional Christianity. "Idolatry" is a charge he levels at those who exhibit an immodest *attitude* when they draw an "unambiguous boundary between the pure [themselves] and the impure" (769). He is not joining a debate about the true God and false gods. Rather, he is asserting an unqualified judgment about the boundary between modest from immodest attitudes and social behaviors: it is pretentious and self-righteous (from Taylor's point of view) for anyone to make the claim that they can draw an "unambiguous boundary" or get God right. He is sure he is right about that.

Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit shine some light, indirectly, on Taylor's position here in their book *Idolatry*.³ The authors point to three kinds of modern discourse on idolatry that replace, extend, or invert the biblical meaning of idolatry. With regard to "replacement" and "extension" modes of discourse they say, "The complementary concept to idolatry is no longer a proper God but something else. Thus the category of idolatry is maintained, while what is in opposition to it changes. A second, more radical modern use of the language of idolatry occurs when the category of idolatry is extended to include any competing opposite, even what was supposedly conceived as the right God himself" (241).

Taylor gives no account of how he came to his exclusivist judgment about idolatrous belief, and throughout the book he mostly avoids expressing such definite, unqualified opinions. More typical of his manner and style is to object to some position by merely suggesting an alternative, as when he makes the case for his minority view of the secularization process. He is not convinced by the argument of secularization theorists that the decline of religious belief will continue until religions whither away. He suggests another possible future of the secular age, one in which choices of shaping moral/spiritual life will continue to exhibit religious liveliness as long as people continue to aspire

to “a transformation which goes beyond ordinary human flourishing”:

Thus, my own view of “secularization”, which I freely confess has been shaped by my own perspective as a believer (but that I would nevertheless hope to be able to defend with arguments), is that there has certainly been a “decline” of religion. Religious belief now exists in a field of choices which include various forms of demurral and rejection; Christian faith exists in a field where there is also a wide range of other spiritual options. But the interesting story is not simply one of decline, but also of a new placement of the sacred or spiritual in relation to individual and social life. This new placement is now the occasion for recompositions of spiritual life in new forms, and for new ways of existing both in and out of relation to God (437).

Even if Christian faith has lost the public status and influence it had when it was the all-encompassing cultural glue of medieval Christendom, Taylor believes that Christian faith is still a possibility today for those who choose it. Yet the secular age appears, in this affirmation, just to be there, serving as a religiously neutral, society-wide platform on which many different faiths, demurrals, and rejections can be chosen and celebrated in personal ways with or without God.

But what is the origin, character, and motivational dynamic of the secular age as an *age*, as an identifiable *era*? Taylor, it appears to me, underestimates the institutional and social shaping power of modern secularist beliefs that have done so much to shape and organize all areas of public and not only personal life. The secular age did not appear out of thin air as a new social environment in which people are free to operate. The shaping of life in the West from the time of the crisis of medieval Christendom has been one of conflict, often with violent struggles over the most basic beliefs about how to organize and govern society and about the very meaning of human society. Among the visions and drives competing to shape the “new world,” the most influential across wide swaths of public as well as private life has been modern secularism—exclusive humanism, or self-sufficing humanism—expressed through a wide range of philosophies and ideologies to be sure,

but also through organized political, economic, and popular cultural movements. The wide range of socially gripping ideologies has included materialism and freedom-idealism, individualism, and collectivism. To be sure, the secularizing efforts of all of these have not yet succeeded altogether. Large numbers of people even in the West continue to believe in one or another transcendent reality in the personal-choice way that Taylor describes. But many believing Christians and people of other faiths do not treat their religious commitments as merely a choice they make. They are not willing to accommodate to the public secularizing onslaught without a fight. So political, economic, and educational struggles continue within many societies on many fronts across much of the world.

It seems to me, therefore, that it is a mistake to categorize exclusive humanism as either a non-religious point of view or one among many possible personal beliefs in the open field of our secu-

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lar age. While most of today’s Western societies are more pluralistic with regard to both personal belief and freedom, for synagogues, mosques, and churches to operate, the dominant belief that has been shaping the life of nations, economies, education, and more is neither private nor neutral. Its aim, we might say, has been to establish one or another kind of “secularism” to fill the vacuum of disintegrated Christendom. Taylor continues to speak of religion in the narrow sense of that term—as the shaping of moral/spiritual experience that individuals and private communities choose for themselves. He gives far too little attention to how various belief systems, including self-sufficing

humanism, contend with one another as spiritual-moral-cultural driving forces competing to shape entire societies.

American Civil Religion

In the light of my criticism of Taylor's lack of attention to the full range of lived experience, another valuable point of entry to his discussion of the secular age is his description of American civil religion that is found in the fourth major section of his book, in which he considers "the age of mobilization." This is the age, he writes, in which "whatever political, social, ecclesial structures we aspire to have to be mobilized into existence" (445). Beginning in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, he argues, Westerners no longer accepted assigned stations under a naively assumed sacred canopy as they did in ancient regimes. They found themselves "persuaded, pushed, dragooned, or bullied into new forms of society, church, association" (445). They not only adopted new structures but also changed their view of the world and the moral order. The age of mobilization still finds room for God, but unlike the "ancien regime model," the newer order is no longer hierarchical. Human authority is no longer bound up directly with God's authorization through some sacred unction or representative figure or institution. If the old order might be called "enchanted" (Max Weber's term), then the new order moves toward "disenchantment," often expressed religiously in deism. Taylor explains:

Now with advancing disenchantment, especially in Protestant societies, another model took shape, with relation both to the cosmos and the polity. In this the notion of Design was crucial. To take the cosmos, there was a shift from the enchanted world to a cosmos conceived in conformity with post-Newtonian science, in which there is absolutely no question of higher meanings being *expressed* in the universe around us. But there is still, with someone like Newton himself, for instance, a strong sense that the universe declares the glory of God. This is evident in its Design, its beauty, its regularity, but also in its having evidently been shaped to conduce to the welfare of His creatures, particularly of ourselves, the superior creatures who cap it all off. Now the presence of God no

longer lies in the sacred, because this category fades in a disenchanted world. But He can be thought to be no less powerfully present through His Design (446-47).

This new idea of divine presence through design in the *cosmos* also significantly influenced the idea of divine presence via design in the *political order*, argues Taylor. Divine design is found in the moral law, a natural law, that holds for human responsibility, as expressed, for example, in the American Declaration of Independence: "Men have been created equal, and have been endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights" (447). Taylor goes on to say, "The idea of moral order which is expressed in this Declaration, and which has since become dominant in our world, is what I have been calling the Modern Moral Order.... Its members are not agents who are essentially embedded in a society which in turn reflects and connects with the cosmos, but rather disembedded individuals who come to associate together. The design underlying the association is that each, in pursuing his or her own purposes in life, acts to benefit others mutually" (447).

This argument overlaps with Eric Nelson's in *The Hebrew Republic*.⁴ Nelson traces in detail the work of some influential European thinkers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries who sought to find in ancient Israel's "constitution" a model for a modern republic. They were looking for a normative *design* that could endure over time and serve any rational people as the model for their political order. In locating the right design, they obtained all they needed, politically speaking, from the Bible. The work of those thinkers had great influence in the founding era of the American republic. The people no longer needed a transcendent, personal authority to be active in human affairs. Sacred history could be separated from secular history. The biblical story in its particularity was no longer needed as the context for the mobilizing efforts Taylor describes. Those who were not yet ready to dispense with God altogether could appeal to an original designer of the cosmos (deism) with its natural and moral laws, including laws for the human moral order.

Taylor's assessment of America's civil religion,

it seems to me, depends too much on this design argument and too little on what lies more deeply beneath it, namely, the new-Israel myth, which I believe was the more potent force molding the self-understanding of the people as a nation. The national new-Israel myth, with its roots in Puritanism, often functioned in tension with, or in contrast to, early American ideas of *government* (448). The secular-religious contrast Taylor draws is between the political system (connected indirectly to God through design) and “free churches,” in which members experienced and expressed their

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personal relation to the God whose salvation opens the way to eternal life. The latter is what Taylor calls *religious*, and the former is the *secular*. That distinction reflects the now-standard sacred-secular view of America’s identity as a *secular* republic, which supports the private *religious* freedom of churches and individuals. The churches function to “sustain the Godly ethos which the [secular] Republic requires” (453).

However, this description hides from view the *civil-religious* dynamics of the nation, which precedes the design of the Constitution and its First-Amendment protection of religious freedom for individuals and churches. The motivating vision that drew Americans together into revolution against England was the vision of themselves as a new, divinely chosen *nation*. In my reading of *A Secular Age*, the closest Taylor comes to acknowledging this vision is in his discussion of religious denominationalism in the United States:

Just because one’s own church does not include all the faithful, there is a sense of belonging to a wider, less structured whole which does. And this can find at least partial expression in the state. That is, the members of mutually recognizing denominations can form a people “under God”, with the sense of acting according to the demands of God informing and maintaining their state, as in the case of the American “civil religion” alluded to above. Indeed, insofar as the divine Design includes freedom, this can be interpreted as calling for an openness to a plurality of denominations. This sense of a providential political mission has been very strong among American Protestants, and remains alive till this day (454).

Notice that in getting close to recognizing the trans-denominational nation under God with its “providential political mission,” Taylor lays emphasis on the design argument and the constitutional protection of religious freedom for a diversity of denominations. He then associates the meaning of the nation “acting according to the demands of God” with “the state.” From the beginning, however, Americans were leery of the state and particularly of a strong central government. They wanted to hold their state governments accountable to the people and to hold the federal government accountable to the states and the people. The American civil religion was (is) not mediated by or through the *state* but through the free people as a *nation* whose originating covenant with God gives it its identity and mission in the world.

The American civil religion, I am contending, has functioned as the nationally unifying public faith of a people who also, by their political constitution, assure themselves of freedom to practice their denominational faiths privately. At one level of consciousness this view represents a sacred-secular distinction between, on one side, the sacred life of the churches, oriented toward the transcendent, and, on the other side, the self-governing republic busy with its “secular” affairs. But it is the religiously grounded *nation* that undergirds the whole, making room for private modes of worship as well as the work of a constituted government that is to serve the people and the nation. Sacredness, therefore, is not confined to the life of churches and religious denominational freedom.

Religious sacredness characterizes the nation in its core identity through the myth of its public origin, mission, and destiny in covenant with America's *god*. This is a new, *nationalistic* religion that borrows a few elements from the Bible and Christian tradition but is not a traditional religion in any Christian or Jewish sense.

Christians, it seems to me, should be able to recognize that America's god is not the biblical God, and that the American civil-religious way of life is not fully compatible with a biblically directed way of life. From a Christian point of view, America's idea of itself as a new Israel comes from a secularized, nationalized misappropriation of parts of the biblical story. Christians and Jews should recognize the blasphemy of a modern nation identifying itself as the new Israel, while at the same time they can appreciate many of the country's constitutional features, such as the rule of law, limited government, and more.

Taylor again comes close to recognizing the religious character of the nation's self-understanding when he says that, on the one hand, "a denominational identity tends to separate religion from the state. A denomination cannot be a national church, and its members can't accept and join whatever claims to be the national church," but, on the other hand, "the political entity can be identified with the broader, over-arching 'church', and this can be a crucial element in its patriotism" (454). However, what Taylor refers to as the over-arching "church" is not a national church at all, as he recognizes. The *national* bond, which Taylor senses is religious in a significant sense, is the common public allegiance to America's god, who has chosen their *nation* to be a light to all nations. What makes this look like an "over-arching" national church is precisely the *religious* character of the myth of the nation as a publicly covenanted community under its god. The nation was, in that sense, constructed as a religio-political community.

This means that if we are to talk about religion and the moral/spiritual shape of human experience, it is necessary to talk about modern nationalism, communism, and a number of other organized movements that may have arisen from within the immanent frame of reference but which

function as displacement religions. Their aim is to displace Christianity, for example, from its place as the publicly recognized and supported religion of a state or empire. But these movements are not thereby un-religious or non-religious. Rather, they function as displacement faiths, as what August Comte called the religion of humanity, or what John Dewey called the religion of democracy, or what we know of in America as the American civil religion. And the gods these secularized religions create are, from a Christian point of view, false gods—idols.

A few days before the Fourth of July, 2011, *The Washington Post* published an op-ed piece by Leon Kass⁵ in which he expressed worries about America's increasing "thoughtlessness" about the meaning of Independence Day. He offered as an antidote some quotations from President Calvin Coolidge's address on the 150th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence in 1926. That declaration, said Coolidge, "represented the movement of a people...a great mass of independent, liberty-loving, God-fearing people who knew their rights, and possessed the courage to dare to maintain them." What was the source of the ideas held sacred by Americans? It was, says Coolidge, their faith in "the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man. They justified freedom by the text that we are all created in the divine image, all partakers of the divine spirit." And, "Unless the faith of the American people in these religious convictions is to endure, the principles of our Declaration will perish." Did Coolidge's faith in America's god border on intolerance? Not at all, says Kass, because America's civil religion includes support for religious freedom. Coolidge "was no religious fanatic. He appreciated our constitutional strictures against religious establishment and religious tests for office, limitations crucial to religious freedom and toleration, also principles unique to the American founding. But he understood that free institutions and economic prosperity rest on cultural grounds, which in turn rest on religious foundations." America, that is, is a religiously grounded nation, which supports denominational religious freedom, as Coolidge and Kass have summed it up. Two uses of the word "religion" must be distinguished: the nonsectarian

national religion, on the one hand, which supports freedom for the practice of private *denominational religions*, on the other.

At one point, Taylor says that until the 1960s the American way of life was supported by three sides of a triangle: “the family was the matrix in which the young were brought up to be good citizens and believing worshippers; religion was the source of the values that animated both family and society; and the state was the realization and bulwark of the values central to both family and churches. And this was all the more starkly underlined by the fact that American freedom needed to defend itself against ‘Godless Communism’” (506). First, notice Taylor’s identification of religion with one side of the triangle, the side that generates values for family and society. The state, too, is only one side of the triangle. *But what is the identity of the triangular unit as a whole?* Is it not the American nation? Taylor does not identify the triangular unit as religious, however, even though he points out that America’s role in the Cold War was to defend itself and the world against godless communism. As the words suggest, that defense amounted to much more than a military campaign against Soviet military aggression. It was understood as a religiously deep national crusade against a religiously antagonistic enemy. It was a mission by the god-chosen nation to save the world from destruction by an anti-godly communist nation seeking world domination.

Civilizational States

Peter J. Katzenstein sheds light on this drama in his discussion of the complex and multifaceted nature of “civilizational states” such as the United States, Japan, Russia, and China in particular.⁶ The civilizations from which such states arise and which they carry forward in ongoing development have deep religious roots that are often ignored by modern scholars. The fact is that “different religious traditions act as cultural sources for the enactment of different programs of modernity.” And today through its war on terrorism, Katzenstein continues, “America’s religiously rooted sense of nationalism has become a defining element. Varieties of secularisms and religions remain a vital force in world politics and the foreign policies of

the civilizational state we call America.”

Modern civil religions, America’s included, function as part of historically extended civilizational dramas that often include violent as well as nonviolent conflict. Taylor’s account of the emergence of the secular age is largely limited to descriptions of what now exists that has reset the “conditions of belief” as he interprets them. Traditional religious institutions and cultic practices largely accommodated themselves to those changes over time. But Taylor’s descriptive categorizing does not quite capture the contentious drama of civilizational forces in the way that Katzenstein describes them. Just as there were violent struggles among Roman Catholic, Protestant, and secular modernist movements from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries in Europe, and just as there have been all-or-nothing battles between Western nations and empires driven by competing ideologies and ambitions in the nineteenth through the twentieth centuries, so there continue to be religiously deep struggles among nationalist, fascist, communist, and other secular-humanist movements seeking to establish dominance in societies where people of traditional faiths may be seeking to gain or recover positions of social and political

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influence or control. Such conflicts are especially evident today on many fronts in many parts of the world and not only in the West.

The American effort to organize a coherent social and political order, says Taylor, was made possible because the diverse private faiths of citizens had a “consensual relation to the common civil religion. Go to the church of your choice, but go.

Later this expands to include synagogues. When imams also begin to appear at prayer breakfasts, along with priests, pastors, and rabbis, the signal is that Islam is being invited into the consensus. That means that one can be integrated as an American through one's faith or religious identity" (534). These comments capture only one side of the process at work in the United States through much of its history. Insofar as Christians and eventually Jews and Muslims have found encouragement from their respective faith communities to take part in the American way of life, their different faiths have indeed given positive encouragement for civic integration. But what is the attracting force from the public side? What is it that citizens of diverse faiths become integrated into? What draws or drives them into it? Taylor refers to that public draw as simply America—becoming an American. But this draw—becoming American—does not bring to light the civil-religious bond of the nation that supports the so-called "sectarian" religious bonds of the denominational faiths.

One way to show how the American civil religion has made its demands of diverse religious groups (now typically referred to as sectarian) is to look at the school wars of the nineteenth century. From its founding until about World War II, the American experiment depended more on a Protestant-deist moral consensus at the heart of its civil religion than on the durability of its political institutions, which, of course, did not manage to stave off the Civil War. The gradual disestablishment of churches in the new States of the union depended on the *religio-cultural* consensus created by White Anglo-Saxon Protestantism (WASP). That is why it took some time before Jews and others were accepted as full Americans and allowed to hold office. For African Americans it took even longer to be included. Catholics represented a particular threat from the 1830s on into the twentieth century because large-scale Catholic immigration challenged the WASP public-moral consensus. The biggest battles arose over schooling.

When Catholics (and some Baptists) in New York City in the 1840s asked for the type of public subsidy for their schools that was extended to WASP schools, the New York *Free School Society*, with encouragement from the New York City

Common Council, changed its name to the New York *Public School Society*. That organization then decided that public funds should henceforth be distributed only to "nonsectarian" schools and not to what the society labeled "sectarian" schools. This decision had nothing to do with trying to establish a Protestant church or to enforce a uniform confession of ecclesiastical faith on the entire population. What the New York Public School Society did was to monopolize public funding for the "common schools" that represented and taught the WASP way of life as the American way of life. These were the schools that eventually came to be called public schools. All children were welcome to attend them without charge (for they were tax supported), but in them children would read the King James Bible, hear Protestant (or deist) prayers, and receive an education that would guide them onto the right path of the American way of life. If parents wanted their children to attend Catholic schools, they were free to organize them at their own expense, for such schools were considered sectarian and not representative of America's nonsectarian public ethos.

If one thinks of religion in a narrow sense as a matter of ecclesiastical institutions, liturgies, and personal beliefs, then Catholics did not experience religious discrimination in New York and Massachusetts and beyond. However, if one recognizes the broader meaning of religions as ways of life, some of which can integrate the public life of a community and even of a nation or civilization, then the American way of life in the nineteenth century was certainly religious in a WASPish way. The cultivating of national values was not entrusted to families and churches alone. Catholic schools would not be granted public funding and equal public-legal recognition because they used the wrong version of the Bible and acknowledged as their highest earthly authority an ecclesiastical official (the pope) who was not subject to the American constitution and the mores of America's civic faith. Making no public-legal room for self-funded sectarian schools sealed the distinction between the public character of the American way of life and the private character of denominational religions. This nonsectarian/sectarian framework remains in place today, largely defining the terms

of countless debates and court cases involving schooling, welfare services, health-care delivery, and more.

Taylor's book may be lauded in different ways, but in my estimation his description and mapping of what makes this a secular age works with too narrow a view of religion and the conditions of belief that characterize the age. *A Secular Age* does not take us far enough into a critical account of the public, religiously deep civilizational dynamics that have been uniting and dividing, integrating and disintegrating societies, including modern societies, for a very long time.

Endnotes

1. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

Page numbers of quotations from the book are placed in parentheses in the text.

2. James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014).
3. Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, *Idolatry*, trans. Naomi Goldblum (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).
4. Eric Nelson, *The Hebrew Republic: Jewish Sources and the Transformation of European Political Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).
5. Leon Kass, "What Silent Cal Said about the Fourth of July," *The Washington Post*, July 1, 2011.
6. Peter J. Katzenstein, "Civilizational States, Secularisms, and Religions," in *Rethinking Secularism*, edited by Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Jonathan Van Antwerpen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 155, 162.