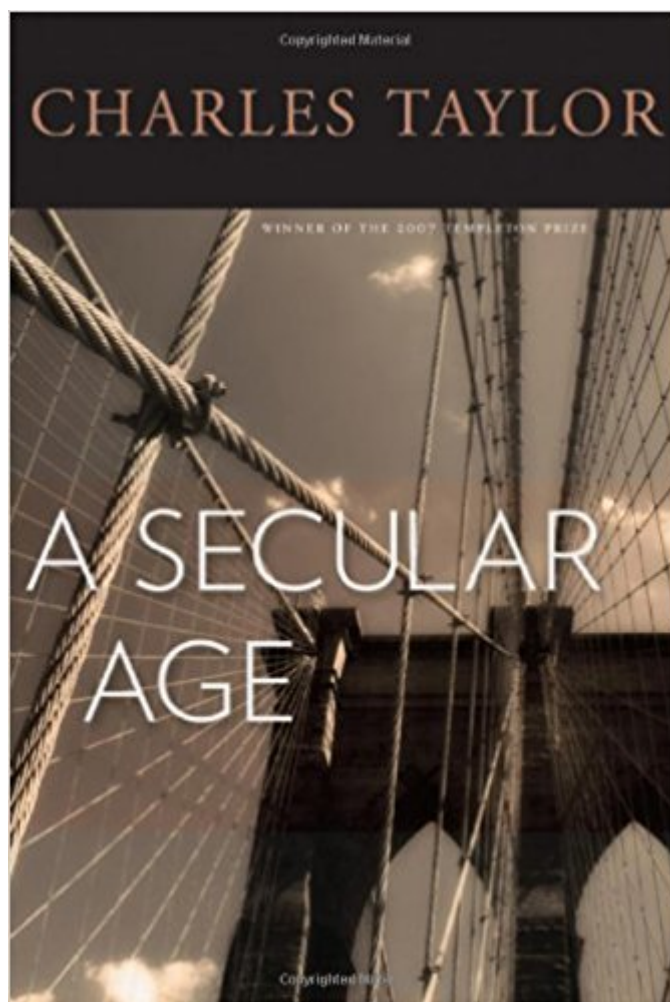


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A Secular Age



Synopsis

What does it mean to say that we live in a secular age? Almost everyone would agree that we--in the West, at least--largely do. And clearly the place of religion in our societies has changed profoundly in the last few centuries. In what will be a defining book for our time, Charles Taylor takes up the question of what these changes mean--of what, precisely, happens when a society in which it is virtually impossible not to believe in God becomes one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is only one human possibility among others. Taylor, long one of our most insightful thinkers on such questions, offers a historical perspective. He examines the development in "Western Christendom" of those aspects of modernity which we call secular. What he describes is in fact not a single, continuous transformation, but a series of new departures, in which earlier forms of religious life have been dissolved or destabilized and new ones have been created. As we see here, today's secular world is characterized not by an absence of religion--although in some societies religious belief and practice have markedly declined--but rather by the continuing multiplication of new options, religious, spiritual, and anti-religious, which individuals and groups seize on in order to make sense of their lives and give shape to their spiritual aspirations. What this means for the world--including the new forms of collective religious life it encourages, with their tendency to a mass mobilization that breeds violence--is what Charles Taylor grapples with, in a book as timely as it is timeless.

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Customer Reviews

Charles Taylor is a Canadian philosopher who has written extensively on the interplay between the religious and secular attitudes towards life. His recent book, "A Secular Age" explores this relationship in great and thoughtful detail from both a historical and a deeply personal perspective. The book is based in part on the Gifford Lectures that Taylor delivered in Edinburgh in 1997. (William James, a philosopher Taylor admires, also delivered a set of Gifford Lectures which became "The Varieties of Religious Experience".) But the book was expanded greatly from Taylor's Gifford lectures, and he aptly advises the reader "not to think of it as a continuous story-and-argument, but rather as a series of interlocking essays, which shed light on each other,, and offer a context of relevance for each other." (Preface) Taylor's book received the 2007 Templeton Prize. The Templeton Prize is awarded "for progress toward research or discovery about spiritual realities." It carries with it the largest cash award of any major prize or honor. A good deal of Taylor's book is devoted to understanding the nature of secularism and the different contexts in which the word "secularism" is used. For the larger part of the book, Taylor describes a "secular age" as an age in which unbelief in God or in Transcendent reality has become a live option to many people. He describes our age as such a "secular age" especially among academics and other intellectuals. He wants to give an account of how secularism developed, of its strengths and weaknesses, and of its current significance. Taylor's book is written on a personal, historical, and contemporary level. Taylor is a believing contemporary Catholic, and much of his treatment of religious belief reflects his own Catholic/Christian commitments.

As someone who spends much of my time as an undergraduate teacher of theology and church-based adult educator, I regularly run up against what Taylor calls the "subtraction theory" of why secularism has largely replaced Christian faith in the Western world as the default starting point for educated people. Taylor's painstaking, detailed journey through the past five hundred years shows the constructed nature of this implicit "common sense" and then thoroughly demolishes it. Anyone who has sought to engage "atheists" or "agnostics" on why they presume (rather than express a reasoned basis for their view) that religion is for "fools" or children owes a deep debt of gratitude to Taylor's work. Other reviewers have noted several of the stylistic flaws, such as the tendency toward repetition, the assumption that readers speak French, and so forth. I'd simply like to add a brief note of two substantive limitations. First, Taylor's definition of "religion" is narrow, and thus misses the "religious" aspects of other forms of social/cultural bonding that function as "religions" in our world, from the relatively trivial (such as sports partisanship) to the more serious (such as patriotism and scientism). His argument is thus directed between "belief" and "unbelief,"

rather than between various forms of belief systems. As he notes (but does not discuss in detail), scientism functions religiously for many, including such popular authors as Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens, famous for their supposed "debunking" of "religion." This diminishes the power of his argument to refute some of the more powerful forms of "belief" in our world today.

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