



Living and Managing without Reference to God

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Let's begin with a simple premise. The secular is more than one thing, but for our purposes, in its most popular usage, it is living and managing without reference to God. We might call this self-sufficient humanism. It is this most common understanding of the secular that looms in the majority of our cultural analyses. If we have concerns about the separation of church and state, if the decline of religiosity raises our anxiety, if we struggle to find ways to meaningfully include devotion to God in our investment strategies and household chores, it all comes down to the simple truth—by and large we get along just fine with no reference to God. Secular humanism is working.

There are other definitions of the secular. One of those, popularized by Charles Taylor, refers to the conditions for belief.¹ Secular, in this sense, describes a space in which belief is no longer axiomatic, where it is one option among others. In secularity of this type, it is not that the world becomes irreligious, but rather that the plausibility of either believing or not believing becomes contested. In this secular space, belief and unbelief duke it out, jockeying for position, becoming more polarized, at least potentially, as each stakes out its position.

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

Life without God is often defined by religious leaders as a life lacking something: God, belief, religious practice, etc. But many who live without God do not feel this lack. So what might be best is to listen to those “secular” people to hear from them about their lives and longings.

Early indication of this polarization includes a recent Pew Forum study. They write:

Is the American public becoming less religious? Yes, at least by some key measures of what it means to be a religious person. An extensive new survey of more than 35,000 U.S. adults finds that the percentages who say they believe in God, pray daily and regularly go to church or other religious services all have declined modestly in recent years. But the Pew Research Center study also finds a great deal of stability in the U.S. religious landscape. The recent decrease in religious beliefs and behaviors is largely attributable to the “nones”—the growing minority of Americans, particularly in the Millennial generation, who say they do not belong to any organized faith. Among the roughly three-quarters of U.S. adults who do claim a religion, there has been no discernible drop in most measures of religious commitment. Indeed, by some conventional measures, religiously affiliated Americans are, on average, even more devout than they were a few years ago.²

All three changes indicated in this paragraph illustrate the rise of secularism in Taylor’s sense of the term. Belief is no longer axiomatic, so increasing numbers of people do not report being religious. Simultaneously, many report stability in their religious belief, and by some measures those who are religiously affiliated are even more devout than previously. It’s hard to see how growth in devotion is not related somehow to the decline of religiosity, and a response to it. Local faith communities across the country are noticing this shift in action. They have less total members, but many of the members who remain are more active and involved than previously, when membership was larger.

So the rise of the secular in this sense, and awareness of it, can assist faith communities in better grasping the transitions they are undergoing. Decline is not *the* story, and in a way not even a story at all. Instead, in a secular age, the story is the expansion and diversification of the plausible. In secularity, self-sufficient humanism is on the rise; secularity, stability, and considered commitment to belief remains an option; and in secularity, increased devotion remains as yet another option in response to the increasing contestability of any particular system of belief.

With this greater diversity of plausible systems of belief, it becomes increasingly difficult to discern appropriate methods for presenting the plausibility of any given system. Charles Taylor, in his *A Secular Age*, makes the attempt via a lengthy exposition of the era of secularity he perceives, and then an impassioned plea for the catholic faith he holds dear. In a follow-up work, he argues, “the best way to speak to one’s own era, and to read the signs of the times, is to be deeply rooted in the whole tradition of the Church, through many epochs and civilizations.”³ How-

²“U. S. Public Becoming Less Religious,” *The Pew Research Center*, November 3, 2015, <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/11/03/u-s-public-becoming-less-religious/> (accessed January 11, 2017).

³Charles Taylor, “Foreword,” in *At the Limits of the Secular: Reflections on Faith and Public Life*, ed. William Barbieri (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014) viii.

ever, “this doesn’t make the task easy. Indeed, those great theologians [from Vatican II] may turn out to be a hard act to follow. In fact, certain tendencies in the contemporary world may render our task even harder. For instance, Vincent Miller explores in depth a trend to fragmented, narrowly defined, and often mutually hostile identities which is encouraged by the present shape of the electronic public sphere. This does not create a propitious environment for a sacramental union, uniting people of very different cultures, who feel bound to each other and want to know each other more.”⁴

GETTING TO KNOW ONE ANOTHER

Do we want to know each other more? One assumption of this essay is that we do, although this desire to know each other arises from a more basic impulse—to be known. Christians lamenting the loss of Christendom, in their fear and anger and confusion, just want to be understood. But so do the newly secular, the atheist, the agnostic, the neo-Pagan, the immigrant. The rise of the secular introduces the complex scenario in which a larger range of worldviews present themselves, seeking our attention, and so while we ourselves are hoping to be understood, even hoping to understand ourselves, the demands of the multiple require not only our sympathy and attention but also our own openness to greater complexity of thought.

No wonder then, an observable trend toward more fragmented, narrowly defined, and mutually hostile identities. Such fragmentation and even hostility may be the best survival strategy—attempts to bunker down in communities small enough to know, safely and sufficiently like-minded enough to decrease the challenge of contested plausibility structures. Make the community small enough and the walls high enough and one might even get the illusion that the world is all that is contained within one’s self-constructed hermetic space.⁵

Within these fragmented, narrowly defined identities, quite a lot of complex identity formation takes place. In fact, some of the most complexly rigid theological systems reside in tiny hermetic containers. Ideas about God, especially as most churches and theologians present them (inasmuch as they inhabit such containers), are hopelessly complex hypotheses that simply aren’t needed in the pursuit of a full and fulfilling life. So not only do most of these systems alienate others inhabiting a different plausibility structure because of their complexity and distance, they also fail at the level of empathy, because in their systematic presentation of the full content of their system of belief, they fail to notice the extent to which the other who they believe needs to hear their beliefs actually simply wants to be known themselves.

Pair all of this with the cynicism of our age and our quest for authenticity, and more and more people will be passing on the idea that religion clarifies matters

⁴Ibid., ix.

⁵Think here of Jonathan Haidt’s *The Righteous Mind* or Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together*.

of ultimate importance. Secular humanism has a clear advantage because it begins from what so clearly already is the case, no extra layers of transcendence necessary. The world and all there is, the vast breadth of breathing humanity, these are enough, sufficient for a capacious invigorating humanism, not to mention struggling enough to make struggle itself or the escape from it sufficient cause.⁶

Being in and speaking to any age is no simple matter, says Taylor. “We have to hold in balanced tension two stances towards our world, the two kinds of catholicity which Robert Schreiber articulates in his essay: one concerned with reading the signs of the times and reaching out to our world in solidarity and communication—with particular concern for the poor and deprived in all dimensions; the other more focused inward and concerned with maintaining the full integrity of the deposit of the faith.”⁷ The rise of the secular age results in greater attention to the signs of the times than to the deposit of the faith, because the bright and shiny and new always captures more attention than the already deposited. And yet, if we are to take Taylor at his most earnest, we cannot overlook his profound insight, that to hold these two in balance is the best way not only to maintain the deposit of the faith, but honestly to read the signs of the times.

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GETTING BETTER AT DESCRIPTION

The academics may be strangling reflection on the secular. Secular, secularism, secularities—these are words captured by the academy and by implication not available for common or popular conversation. At the level of practical discourse, the secular is lived out in concrete implications. Examples include decline in religious affiliation and commitment, and increasing numbers of people who identify as secular, as “nones” or as “dones.” We know secularity is at hand because so many of us, even those of us who identify as religious or even work for religious institutions, still share with other human beings an historically unique perspective: we have learned to live and manage our affairs without any reference to God.

In this newly secular context, the word God still appears. It is printed on our currency and spoken in our pledges, named in some of our prayers and referred to in time of need. Even so, with all the ways God is still named, life itself, the daily practice of life, even for many religious folks, is lived and managed “as if” God were unnecessary. We do not need to refer to God. Just sometimes we do, or expect oth-

⁶Think here of Christopher Hitchens’s *The Portable Atheist*, for example.

⁷Taylor, “Foreword,” viii.

ers to. In fact, often the shrill nature with which some demand the continual naming of God illustrates, ironically, the extent to which we have learned to live and manage our affairs without God. Hyperbolic rhetoric and apocalyptic anxiety replace God qua God.

It remains remarkable, for all of that, how little and how infrequently we directly reflect on the secular. Perhaps it goes by other names, so the secular is encompassed in many other discourses we engage more regularly. By secularity, we may mean things like pluralism, globalization, public, networks, democracy, capitalism, etc. It is remarkable, though, how little descriptive language is available to us to describe all of those many people who are secularizing.

Notice that secularization is described primarily by what it isn't. People who are secular are "nones"—they do not have a religious affiliation. They are "dones"—they have left a religion. They are non- or ir-religious. They are a-theist, or a-gnostic. All of these are negations, descriptive only by absence or opposition. Yet the vast majority of those classified as "nones" are in fact living full and vital lives, weaving together a pastiche of spiritual and human practices in many ways similar to the lives of those who identify as religious.

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Most remarkable of all, in spite of the difference in labels, the daily lives of those who identify as religious and those who identify as secular are, in most respects, the same. Follow a Roman Catholic around Manhattan for a day, then follow an atheist around town the next day, and by and large you will see similar habits and cultural commitments. Or, if differences do appear, they will likely be the result of other factors, like race or class or aesthetic preferences. However one looks at it, it seems increasingly arbitrary to even distinguish statistically between a large group, the "unaffiliated," and those who affiliate with specific religious traditions, without gaining facility with a larger repertoire of terms to describe the nuances of "unaffiliated." We have language to describe the many kinds of Roman Catholics. Isn't it about time we describe with greater accuracy the fastest-growing group in our nation? Can you imagine if we lumped all Christians into one sociological category: "Not Buddhist"?

Continuing the comparison between those who are religious and those who are unaffiliated, the actual shared dynamic is a paucity of language on either side of the aisle. Sociologists of religion like Christian Smith have long observed widespread inarticulacy regarding religion *among the religious*.⁸ Unaffiliated folk also

⁸Christian Smith's two volumes on the spiritual lives of teenagers and emerging adults, *Soul Searching* and *Souls in Transition*, both describe a context where the majority of the religious lack the ability to articulate their faith and generally identify as Moralistic Therapeutic Deists.

lack the verbal equipment to describe their own a-religiosity. It is as if, regardless of religious commitment or non-commitment, the shared dynamic is failure of words.

But the absence of words is not the absence of that for which the words serve notice. A feeling often arrives that is in search of a word to describe it.⁹ What is frustrated in the absence of language is the opportunity to articulate the feeling. What is frustrated in the shift to secularity is the opportunity to adequately articulate the complex culture that makes up our new milieu. It's like we have found ourselves in a brand new place, and have a phone available to call our friends, but then can't describe where we are in language anyone can fathom. As a result, not only do our friends have trouble imagining where we are, or visiting us, the reality is that we cannot yet see as clearly as we would like the very place in which we find ourselves. This secularity in which we find ourselves appears to us fuzzy, vague, evasive, and receding even while it intrudes. We can't make it out and we can't look away.

Those of us attempting to focus our gaze may be readying our fight-or-flight response. If the secular is dangerous (and it may be) then many of the various responses to the rise of secularity are in order. Run away, retreat to another moment in history dredged up from the annals of the everlasting nostalgia, and hope the secular will not make an appearance. Or hide, exercising an athletic ability to act as if the secular never arrived in the first place, or can be held at bay by contrarian conservation. Alternatively, some few brave souls among us make out the arriving secular and run to it with open arms, embracing it like a long lost love that never was.

The faithful are baffled by the problems that have come with the loss of the conceptual vocabulary of religion, and, more generally, of the language that can speak of and for the radical, solitary, time-bound self. The authority of a model of reality that excludes the former on principle and the latter out of a simplistic confidence in the adequacy of its own terms, its own small sphere of reference, has distracted and demoralized the faithful, as it would not have done if they were inclined to reflect. They are not alone in being talked out of the meaningfulness of their own experience, but they are perhaps more at fault for it than others, having had their souls as a conscious and in theory a cherished and cultivated part of their inwardness. If they have displaced the Holy Ghost with the zeitgeist, the choice is entirely their own.¹⁰

SECULARITY HAS NOT BEEN TRIED AND FOUND WANTING

Returning to our failure of words, it is notable that in the English-speaking world, the great exploration of the secular age arrived as a massive tome, a door-stop more widely mentioned than read, Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*. There is

⁹Linda A. Mercadante, *Belief without Borders: Inside the Minds of the Spiritual but Not Religious* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

¹⁰Marilynne Robinson, *The Givenness of Things* (New York: Picador, 2016) 88–89.

plenty to be said about this book, plenty to be repeated from it, but first of all it is a book that offers language for that which we have struggled to describe. It is a guide to the secular age that makes sense “of our situation not by didactically explaining it, and certainly not by explaining it *away*, but by giving us words to name what we’ve *felt*.”¹¹ Taylor is unique in that he both offers us language for what we are already feeling, and he also explores the possibility of real secularism.

It is not that secularism has been tried and been found wanting. Secularism has not yet been tried. Even in the secular age, most seculars are still mythical at some level or another. We have not yet been nonreligious. Any account of secularization need take account of the multiple secularities, many of which are transitional secularities on the way to the fully secular. Some of the secularization secular theorists theorized has not come to pass—in particular, the complete decline of religiosity.¹² What has happened, as Taylor makes clear, is a shift in the conditions of belief. Full secularity is now plausible. We can begin to imagine it. “For the first time in history a purely self-sufficient humanism came to be a widely available option. I mean by this a humanism accepting no final goals beyond human flourishing, nor any allegiance to anything else beyond this flourishing. Of no previous society was this true.”¹³

Does it matter whether Christianity offers anything different or other than secular humanism?

For those of us retaining religious commitments but interested by the rise of secularism in this sense, the opportunities lie in at least two directions. First, how might our kind of religiosity partner with secularism in its goals of human flourishing? Second, to what degree does (in my case Christian) religiosity retain some advantages for human flourishing over secularity? And does it matter? Our response to the first question likely rests in gaining greater facility with the lexicon, keywords, geography, textures of the secular itself. We cannot know our shared goals for a robust humanism until we know each other better.

For the second question (which is really two), we do need to answer the most fundamental question: *Does it matter whether Christianity offers anything different or other than secular humanism?* Here we come alongside the classic Grundtvigian dictum: Human first, then Christian. The world increasingly recognizes shared interests across multiple religious and secular perspectives. Christians share much in common with the interests of secular humanism, and should not worry themselves overly much on finding themselves appearing to operate out of largely the same

¹¹James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) To Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014) 4.

¹²In fact quite the opposite. By most accounts, religious affiliation is actually on the rise as a percentage of the total global population. See Miroslav Volf, *Flourishing: Why We Need Religion in a Globalized World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).

¹³Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 18.

commitments as secular people. There will be many shared “ends” even if the faith behind the ends differs.

Yet for Grundtvig, there is still “then Christian.” What is this “then Christian”? My own suspicion is the answer hovers around issues of sin and forgiveness, the true weakness of God in Christ, and similar resources in Christianity not as clearly present in many kinds of humanism. Some forms of secular humanism seem particularly vulnerable to co-optation by neoliberalism and middle class values, and Christianity contains within itself unique resources focusing Christians on a preferential option for the poor, and radical neighbor love that overturns the morality of capitalist self-interest.

That being said, there are likely forms of secularism that might articulate a nonreligious moral vision quite similar to my Christian one, and that is just fine. Given that real secularity still emerges from the Christian context even as it transcends it, separating religious and secular trajectories in order to compare them functions more like the examination of a weave in a rug than gazing at two separate and disparate objects.

HINTING AT PRIVATE AND PUBLIC

Finally, the answer to these questions will of necessity relate to one other issue, the issue of diverse publics and complicated subjectivity. Faith is both more private and more public than ever. Secularity has greater access to the public inasmuch as religion has been privatized and divorced from shared forms of democratic rationality. But we are not used to considering the secular at the level of subjective experience, which illustrates how much—although humanism is considered in secular spaces—the effect of the secular on the human, and who the human is becoming, is an embrangement of a curious sort.

In this sense, then, the study of the secular and religious can helpfully inform both the public discourse, perceived as it is as a largely secular milieu, and overcome the privatization of faith. We might say the best outcome here, and a very important one for the future of secular and religious life coexisting in this age, is a shift to better understandings of the private nature of our secularity, and the public nature of our religion. Inasmuch as spirituality can be re-publicized and secularity can inform the daily human, our social imaginary will be strengthened and offer more compelling resources for all of us who find ourselves living, in various ways, “without reference to God.” ⊕

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