James K.A. Smith


In acting as a guide to Charles Taylor’s *Secular Age*, Smith reprises the role of cartographer, having previously mapped out the contours of Radical Orthodoxy. Desiring to prime the reader for Taylor’s tome, Smith summarizes Taylor’s thoughts with the aid of helpful illustrations and a definition guide. This method is well-illustrated in the introduction in which Smith distills the situation at hand: we all inhabit a secular age that is haunted by doubt. This “cross-pressure” on one’s commitments is what defines the secular age, in contrast to the secularization thesis that claims society will shed its religious beliefs as it modernizes.

Smith argues that Taylor offers a three-fold definition of the secular. Secular₁ exemplifies the classical division between the earthly (secular) and priestly (sacred). Secular₂ is the assumption of the secularization thesis, that the secular is a neutral sphere. What Taylor means by the secular age, however, is represented by secular₃, the cross-pressures on one’s conditions of belief due to the plethora of different belief options, especially the option of exclusive humanism.

These definitions are part of Taylor’s three guiding themes. Another theme is his examination of changes in one’s conditions of belief. The third theme is the power of narrative. Arguing that the secularization thesis is as much a story as a thesis, Taylor offers a counter-narrative. Smith explicates Taylor’s narrative of how the secular age and the option of exclusive humanism came to be, being attentive to show that this journey was not a straight one. Surprisingly, the principle catalyst was the theological shifts within reform movements. First, the distinguishing between transcendence and immanence in late medieval and Renaissance eras emphasized the incarnational affirmation of immanence. Second, nominalism eliminated inherent essences. The loss of essence and a turn to immanence led to a mechanistic universe in which final causality was wholly replaced by efficient causality.

Yet, such an immanent world still requires meaning. This meaning was found in mutual economic (and political) benefit, in which God’s providential care was reduced to economic order. Since reason could discern such an order, however, theism was reduced to deism. Once the moral order was divested of God with an immanent understanding of altruism, an immanent *agape*, society’s plausibility structure changed, so that the achievement of exclusive humanism as a live option was made possible.

However, this immanent social imaginary is haunted by the sense of loss created by disenchantment. With the loss of the enchanted world of transcen-
dence, there arises multiple options for meaning, which create cross-pressures and nova effects, the attempt to relieve these pressures. Taylor notes that this search is sought in immanence and is found in art. Whereas art was interwoven with religion, the immanentist turn to art divests transcendence from art, so that art could now be merely appreciated. Where mystery used to be found in transcendence, the loss of transcendence and the resulting pressure to find mystery and meaning led to an immanent solution, an immanent art with its immanent mystery.

Having taken us through this history, Smith shows that Taylor challenges the standard story of the secularization thesis. This story is undergirded by its own presuppositions, what Taylor calls “unthought.” Because it has discounted religion as false and irrelevant, it has replaced other-worldly transformation for individual expression. This expressive individualism is the hallmark of what he calls the “Age of Authenticity.” Compared to previous eras, the “ancien régime” in which religion and politics are intertwined, and the “Age of Mobilization” that still carried obedience to God’s creational order in the right construction of society, the current Age of Authenticity is characterized by individual choice without the constraints of an outside force, such as God. Religion and the sacred in this age is one of individual significance, even if it leads to a communal religion. Therefore, the secular age is not one of subtraction of religion. Rather, it is the replacement of presuppositions. Religion should not put constraints on individuals, but individuals can be religious.

According to Smith, Taylor is not merely satisfied with detailing and critiquing the secularization thesis. He shows that secular, along with an “immanent frame” and its “closed world structures” that point one’s experiences toward the closing of transcendence, is just another “take” on the world, albeit one that is overly confident. However, Taylor argues that people feel the pressure that there is something more, a fullness that exclusive humanism has difficulty answering. Taylor uses this concept to take an apologetic turn. However, Taylor does not provide rational arguments for transcendence. Rather, his apologetic is existential.

Everyone feels this tension. However, this tension, this maximal demand for a higher transformation that does not denigrate the body, is impossible to meet. This levels the playing field for everyone. Taylor then argues that Christianity can better account for our experiences than exclusive humanism, even if there remains tension. It is an existential type of a transcendent argument. To be pulled by Taylor’s argument is to feel its pull. So we are back to the beginning: the power and ubiquity of narrative.

Smith is the right person to have undertaken this project. While he offers his disagreements at times, there are moments in which one wonders how