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Book Review

Our Secular Age: Ten Years of Reading and Applying Charles Taylor

edited by Collin Hansen

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Our Secular Age:
Ten Years of Reading and Applying Charles Taylor
Edited by **Collin Hansen**

Publisher: **The Gospel Coalition (Deerfield, Illinois, USA)**

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It's been a decade since Charles Taylor published *A Secular Age*, his magisterial 800-page account of secularization in the West, and readers and scholars are still wrestling with his tome. One of the most recent entries to the growing bibliography of responses is *Our Secular Age: Ten Years of Reading and Applying Charles Taylor*. Published by The Gospel Coalition, an organization of conservative evangelical churches, pastors, and writers who align themselves with Reformation theology (a movement also known as New Calvinism), this short book offers a distinctly Protestant take on Taylor's Catholic historiography. As the word "applying" in the book's title suggests, the thirteen essays collected here aren't scholarly pieces like you'd find in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, though many of the contributors are professors, theologians, and seminarians—one's even a physician. *Our Secular Age* belongs on the shelf next to more popular guides such as James K. A. Smith's *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor*. Both are handbooks for Christian laypersons and pastors who may be too busy or intimidated to read Taylor's book but want to know how its insights can help them live and minister faithfully in a secular age.

All of the essays gathered in *Our Secular Age* agree that what makes Taylor's account of secularization so compelling is his ability to describe what it feels like to be a believer today. And Taylor should know: he's a practicing Roman Catholic. Collin Hansen begins the book by summarizing the plotline of *A Secular Age* and relating how it makes sense — existentially and theologically — of how we got to now. He stresses a point

that's repeated throughout this collection: Taylor's critique of the Protestant Reformation as the engine of disenchanted and disembodied religion. Hansen assures his mostly young, restless, and Reformed readers that in spite of Taylor's questionable portrayal of the Reformation, *A Secular Age* has immense apologetic value for Christians under siege by New Atheism.

Most of the book continues in this vein, offering short, succinct essays on various areas of Christian life and ministry in which *A Secular Age* applies. Many contributors end up offering more of a summary than an analysis of Taylor, which seems appropriate given the book's audience and purpose. John Starke recapitulates Taylor's concepts of the "buffered" and "authentic" selves to help pastors tailor their preaching to today's churchgoers, and Derek Rishmawy explains how the internet — the quintessential symbol of past modernity — facilitates a hyper-individualism that erodes traditional religious authority. Brett McCracken revisits Taylor's account of how the West went from valorizing conformity and authority to celebrating personal freedom and autonomy, and he describes the chaos this has caused both socially and spiritually. McCracken spends some time criticizing America's culture of "church shopping" but seems unappreciative in regards to Taylor's perspective on forced conformity in the past, which at times produced grim spiritual, political, and personal consequences. Greg Forster's essay complements McCracken's by defending the Reformers' emphasis on personal religion. Although Forster disagrees with Taylor about the inherent worth of the Reformation, they agree that secularity, with its "social orders based [...] on an ethic of equality and freedom," is much better than anything that came before (107). Alastair Roberts considers the effects secularization has had on worship, observing that even though liturgy may not have changed, the social imaginary has. Christians today view religious experience differently than they did in the past. Bruce Riley Ashford likewise recognizes the importance, and the difficulty, of the church being a community today. Even in our secular age, the church still has political power, Ashford argues, not primarily in social activism, but in the gospel: "Sunday morning public worship [...] prepares us for Monday morning public life" (92). Picking up this theme, Bob Cutillo laments the effects of "excarination," Taylor's term for the turn away from

embodied religion, on the medical profession. Abstract knowledge of the human body has replaced the loving care of human beings, but Cutillo reminds the church that the doctrine of the incarnation ascribes great worth to the body.

Most intriguing were Alan Noble's and Mike Cospers' essays on Taylor's theory that art is able to represent the tension of living in the immanent frame. Noble argues that Christians have a responsibility to be interpreters of the larger culture, and he glosses well-known stories by Flannery O'Connor, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Graham Greene to show how literature (among other forms of art) can be a "disruptive witness" to transcendence. Similarly, Cospers explicates a 2016 performance by Kanye West and begins to tease out the "cross-pressures" of immanence and transcendence that can be felt throughout the rapper's oeuvre.

Our Secular Age is not simply a celebration of Taylor's influence; the book's strongest, most stimulating essays are also the most critical of Taylor. Carl Trueman points out several gaps in Taylor's "explanation of how elite ideas came to shape the social imaginary of ordinary people" (17). He questions why material conditions (the printing press, urbanization, the shift from an agrarian to a production economy) and technological innovations (birth control, the automobile, mass media) play a relatively small role in Taylor's zigzagging story. This concern about Taylor's methodology raises larger concerns about his theology. While Taylor suggests that the formation of secularity over the last 500 years can't be reduced to mere happenstance, he doesn't offer a clear explanation as to why some ideas have stuck while others haven't. Marshalling Augustine and his doctrine of original sin, Trueman proposes that the answer to why the West became secular can be explained theologically: "The ultimate dynamic driving this secular age is the denial of our creatureliness and the assertion of our autonomy" (21). This might help explain why technological innovations, for instance, had such a profound effect on shaping the social imaginary of modernity: "Technology in and of itself brings with it a certain ontology. It carries with it a sense of control, of power, of the ability to manipulate the world and overcome nature" (18-19). These feelings "surely reinforce what Taylor calls the buffered self,"

the template for the modern identity and the secular humanism it engendered (19).

Michael Horton's heady essay tackles Taylor's theology directly, and as a result it emerges as a significant contribution to scholarship on the Canadian philosopher. A close reading of *A Secular Age* leads Horton to conclude that it "reveals a complex and perhaps even contradictory set of theological assumptions" (25). Taylor is critical of disenchantment and secular humanism, but Horton questions the extent to which Taylor's own views can be considered *Christian*. He detects an aversion to Christian doctrine (which Taylor sometimes misconstrues to boot), though he's keen to point out that Taylor offers his own rendering of traditional teachings. "[W]hatever Taylor disagrees with doctrinally," Horton explains, "becomes a candidate for contributing to exclusive humanism" (30). Because Taylor clearly "admires a broadly participatory folk religion," Horton wonders if his "problem isn't with the Reformation but with the 'anti-sacred' movement rooted in the Bible itself" (32, 34). To a Calvinist like Horton who affirms *sola scriptura*, this is inexcusable; it seems Taylor has adopted the secular mindset he expertly vivisects. Ultimately, Horton and Trueman are persuaded less by the storyline of *A Secular Age* than by Steve Bruce's neo-secularization thesis, which posits that modernization inevitably leads to secularization.

Our Secular Age has some minor imperfections. Almost every contributor finds an opportunity to criticize Taylor for his interpretation of the Protestant Reformation. At times the constant stream of criticism in virtually every essay seems heavy across the entire volume, even to the point of overwhelming the subtleties of each writer's independent reflections. Frequently, various authors use the term "Christianity" as a synonym for Reformed Protestantism, thereby disassociating themselves from Taylor despite their several commonalities. Occasionally in these essays the terms *secularism* and *secularity* are used interchangeably, terms Taylor distinguishes with a precision that's lost here. Most disconcerting is that, of the book's thirteen essays, only one is written by a woman, Jen Pollock Michel, who constructively explicates "a secular age" not as a decline in religious belief but as a proliferation of competing definitions of "fullness." As a Protestant I'm saddened but not surprised by this disparity,

which extends into the publication house behind *Our Secular Age*; The Gospel Coalition’s leadership council, a 61-member board that directs the organization, includes no women at all. And though TGC’s council exhibits some racial and ethnic diversity, all of the contributors to *Our Secular Age* appear to be demographically homogeneous; it seems like a serious deficiency to include only the dominant cultural perspective on “our secular age.”

Our Secular Age will appeal most to readers who locate themselves comfortably within the Reformed tradition, though specialists and scholars of Taylor will benefit especially from Horton’s article. For people new to the conversation, a useful introduction may be *How (Not) to Be Secular*, which offers a comprehensive overview of Taylor as a precursor to TGC’s volume. But books like these can only do so much. *A Secular Age* deserves to be read on its own terms. If the book’s reception over the previous decade is any indication, it will continue to inspire and challenge readers — whether they’re Christians, spiritual but not religious, or one of America’s growing religious “nones” — for another decade to come.

Josh Privett is a third-year Ph.D. student in literary studies at Georgia State University in downtown Atlanta. He is currently writing a dissertation on secularism, religion, and contemporary American fiction.