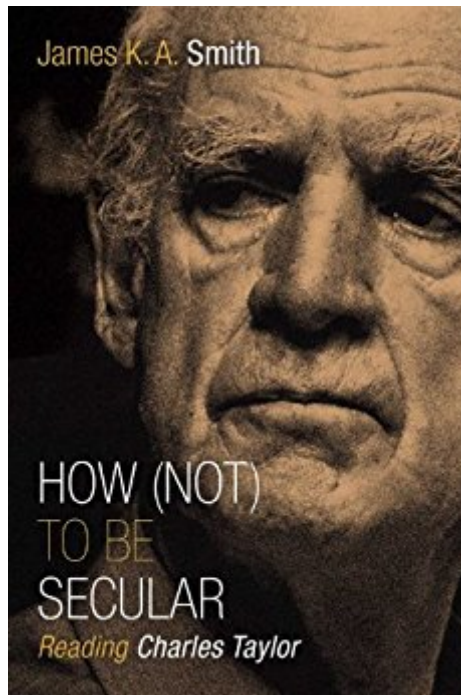




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How (Not) To Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor



Synopsis

What does it mean to say we live in a “secular” world? Charles Taylor’s landmark book *A Secular Age* provides a monumental history and analysis of what it means for us to live in our post-Christian present – a pluralist world of competing beliefs and growing unbelief. This book by Jamie Smith is a small field guide to Taylor’s genealogy of the secular, making it accessible to a wide array of readers. Smith’s *How (Not) to Be Secular* is also, however, a philosophical guidebook for practitioners – a kind of how-to manual that ultimately offers guidance on how to live in a secular age. It’s an adventure in self-understanding and a way to get our bearings in postmodernity. Whether one is proclaiming faith to the secularized or is puzzled that there continue to be people of faith in this day and age, this is a philosophical story meant to help us locate where we are and what’s at stake.

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Customer Reviews

It feels a bit strange to be so high on a book that appears to be adapted notes from

undergraduate/graduate level class. I'd say that feels about right; reading this book is like sitting in on a few classroom sessions with James K. A. Smith, listening to him give you a pretty full walk-through of Taylor's *A Secular Age*. As someone who loves that kind of learning environment, this book was right up my alley, but if that's not really your style this book could be more of a challenge for you. Just a few highlights for me. Smith works through Taylor's subversive intellectual history of Western Civilization as it attempts to undermine modern "subtraction theories" (that the modern world is just the old world after a God-ectomy). He maps the developments toward mature exclusive humanism as not inevitable, but resulting in many cases from developments within Christianity that are not faithful to the narrative of science displacing religion. The idea is that we can't just subtract God from society without constructing an entirely new way of imagining life and significance and meaning. Exclusive humanism then, is not just society without all the God stuff, not just the neutral frame absent ancient or medieval mythology and superstition, it's a whole new "take" on human life. Taylor's somewhat apologetic tactic here is to paint exclusive humanism as a "take" in the same way that contemporary society considers Christianity a "take" to be criticized, evaluated, and accepted/rejected. He moves on to argue that this modern disenchanted world where exclusive humanism is the water we swim in can be at times less than satisfying, as many feel a kind of loss or doubt about meaning and significance absent transcendence. This creates a fundamental point for Taylor, the idea of "cross-pressure." While everything around us focuses on the imminent, the here and now, there are still hints, hauntings, of transcendence that create this pressure on us. Somehow, many of our major strivings, goals, or achievements seem to lack something, to be more flat than they could be. Taylor is very big on this kind of gutsy, feeling type argument. Smith portrays him as dependent upon his readers sharing the vague feelings he describes as so essential to the modern world. Smith reinforces this by showing how this cross-pressure may be evidenced in literature and music that resonates with us. Living in a "cross-pressured" world is true for everyone, we feel pulled by the pressure to "grow up" and face the "reality" that transcendence is a myth and we must make meaning for ourselves, while still sometimes dealing with the internal call that there might be more "fullness" or "weight" to be had than

just what can be humanly created and attained. Smith's book, *Why People Believe What They Believe*, looks at Taylor's book, *A Secular Age*. Taylor's book can feel a bit apologetic to be sure, there are several points where it is clear that the aim is to "level the playing field" between exclusive humanism and Christianity by showing some of the primary criticisms lobbed at Christianity can also impinge upon exclusive humanism. One of the more significant sections deals with the question of whether Christianity/Exclusive Humanism better handles the "maximal demand": how to achieve our highest aspirations while not crushing the essentials of ordinary humanity. The ascetic and moral demands of religion easily fall upon this critique, but Smith/Taylor argue that humanism also may either underestimate capabilities of reform ("just victims" of environment) or may set the transformation bar too high allowing for a kinds of ends-justifying-means mode of achieving all that humanity could/should be. Smith/Taylor state that the playing field is level more than a few times, and I, even as a Christian, did not find myself fully convinced that it was actually level, though certainly more level than fundamentalist humanists would care to concede. In the end, this book provides a helpful window into the assumptions behind modern belief systems. If you can handle the sometimes apologetic tone, it provides some great questions of fundamentalisms (both Christian and humanist, though mostly of humanist). How do we as a society and as individuals deal with the big issues of shared morality, significance, and meaning in a world where religion is no longer anything like a default option? We need to examine our assumptions and this book is a good start for that. Highly recommend.

Not every book about a book is a good book. This book about a book is not only a good book... it is a great book! Smith handily summarizes Charles Taylor's complex argument on secularity in his magnum opus, *A Secular Age*. You can read Smith's book as a chapter by chapter commentary on Taylor's book (it is that). But the book also stands alone as a summary presentation of Taylor's overall argument. It also stands alone as an introduction to secularity and contemporary philosophical reflection on it. In other words, you don't have to read Taylor while reading Smith. You can read Smith, and with great benefit. This book originated in a class Smith hosted with students, a focused reading of *A Secular Age*. Readers could do a lot worse than assemble a group of sympathetic souls, and read Smith and Taylor together over a summer or semester. On the other hand, if you've been curious about Taylor but intimidated by the heft of *A Secular Age*, Smith offers here a handy and wonderful primer. One of the most helpful parts of the book is Smith's glossary. He offers simple definitions of some of Taylor's technical terminology. I believe these will solidify some of the terminological discussions around Taylor's work. See the definition of things like Age of

Authenticity, Buffered Self, Cross-Pressure, Social Imaginary, the Unthought, and Excarnation. This is a handy, helpful, and wonderful short read. You will not be disappointed.

Starting last year I have been paying a lot of attention to James KA Smith (Jamie). The first book of his that came across my radar screen was *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview and Cultural Formation*. (I still haven't actually read that one, it is on my list for this summer.) But I did read *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works*. And it really did fundamentally change my perspective on liturgy and worship. Since then I regularly read Smith's editorials (he is the editor of *Comment* magazine) and I have slowly been reading some of his other books. *How (Not) to Be Secular* is the type of book I wish were more popular. For important ideas to really take hold, we need good authors to popularize those important ideas into formats that a general public can understand. Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* is a massive and important book, but at 900 pages it is too long (and too dense) for most readers. (And more than a few people have suggested Taylor is not the most readable author.) So Jamie Smith has put together a 148 page companion that covers the basics of the argument and includes relevant contemporary examples. The basic idea of *A Secular Age* is to explain what it means to live in a secular age and how we have come to this place in culture. "We are all skeptics now, believer and unbeliever alike. There is no one true faith, evident at all times and places. Every religion is one among many. The clear lines of any orthodoxy are made crooked by our experience, are complicated by our lives. Believer and unbeliever are in the same predicament, thrown back onto themselves in complex circumstances, looking for a sign. As ever, religious belief makes its claim somewhere between revelation and projection, between holiness and human frailty; but the burden of proof, indeed the burden of belief, for so long upheld by society, is now back on the believer, where it belongs." Taylor's innovation is how he reframes discussion about secularization from what it has lost (belief in God) to how the very nature of belief claims have changed. "...these questions are not concerned with what people believe as much as with what is believable. The difference between our modern, 'secular' age and past ages is not necessarily the catalogue of available beliefs but rather the default assumptions about what is believable. It is this way of framing the question that leads to Taylor's unique definition of 'the secular.'" There is no good way to summarize this book. Smith already has condensed a 900 page book into 148 pages and I can't condense that 148 pages into 700 words. But there are a couple points that really struck me as important. First, it is a good

reminder that our world is not the only possible world. We have one 'take' on the world, that is not the same one that our pre-modern ancestors had, and it is not the only possible one that could have come about. Second, part of how secularization came about is that God moved from the being that controlled everything, to the being that put everything into place. So where pre-moderns saw God's hand in everything, we tend to see God as a step removed. The sun rises not because God told it to rise, but because God put into place a natural world that makes it appear that the sun is rising. It is probably more important for Christians to understand how our world has changed than non-Christians because our very belief systems now have to take into account not only the reality of God in the world, but the reality of God in a world that has moved God yet another step away. Third, as has been noted by a number of books I have been reading lately, the real incarnation of Jesus as human becomes even more important (and in some ways more unbelievable) because of the way that modern culture understands God as other. And fourth, we cannot turn back. "So shouldn't authentic Christianity want to turn back the clock? Isn't the answer easy? Just undo the anthropocentric turn" (p. 651). Not so fast, cautions Taylor. First, even if we wanted to, there's no simplistic going back. The anthropocentric turn is in the water; it's increasingly the air we breathe.³¹ Not even orthodox Christians might realize the extent to which we've absorbed this by osmosis. Second, for Taylor, we shouldn't want to. "If you are interested in my take aways, Smith did do an interview with his publisher about the book that I think does a very good job introducing the book and giving you a good jumpstart on Taylor. [...] If you are frustrated with the way that apologetics are done in the church, or with how many seem to be missing the point (both inside and outside the church) of what it means to believe in something this might be a helpful book.

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