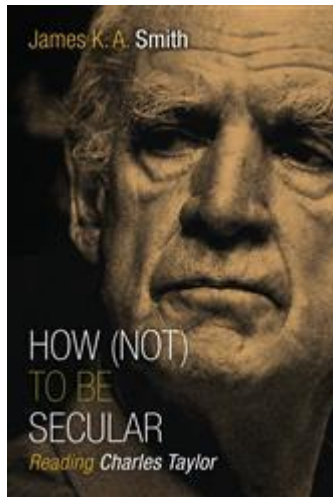


James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2014). Paperback: 152 pages. ISBN: 0802867618

Jamie Smith's new book *How (Not) To Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* had me with the preface's opening words: "You're a pastor or a church planter..." Here is a book that deals with the deep secularism confronting those of us involved in front-line church planting mission and that takes the practitioner seriously. Contained within the title is not only an exposé of Taylor's work, but an exposé of the struggle that we all face: "naïve belief", and thereby "naïve evangelism", is no longer making the grade.



Don't let that subtitle put you off. This is indeed a reading of the great Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor and, more pertinently, a reading of his magnum opus *A Secular Age* (henceforth ASA), but it's not the Cliff's Notes version—the cram-it-for-the-exam overview of straight news reportage. No, this is more like an Op-Ed piece—and an evangelical one at that—explaining and exploring Taylor in all his magnificent brilliance, peeking behind his owl-like eyebrows (prominent on the front cover) to the brain that created chapters such as 'The Age of Mobilisation and the Age of Authenticity.' If you, like me, dip into Taylor's massive book as a series of essays as the best way to manage and understand it, Smith's book will provide you with a reason to read more of Taylor's work, not an excuse to read less.

Smith's early chapters help expose our *social imaginary*. A social imaginary is not "a set of "ideas" but the captivating imagination that "enables" and "mak[es] sense of the practices of a society". These chapters are most helpful for anyone who has door-knocked or evangelised in the wealthiest suburbs through to the most poverty-struck ones in any Western city. I have done exactly that. And what have I found? Just what Smith says I will find—a *social imaginary* that is resistant to the gospel. It presents itself as a *subtraction* story: the superfluous 'faith' bit has been sucked out and we are supposedly left with 'secular', 'natural' bedrock. And guess what? Apparently, it's all okay! In fact, it's more than okay, as meaning itself has not been removed but changed. Put that in your "God-shaped-hole-in-your-heart" pipe and smoke it! Taylor and Smith can help us understand what is happening here: significance has not been *lost* but *hasmigrated*. Tracing the history of our social imaginary helps us see how Christian elements in our culture have not been 'rejected' outright but redefined.

Smith and Taylor would surely echo Miroslav Volf's memorable summary of affluent modern life:

The idea of flourishing as a human being has shrivelled to meaning no more than leading an experientially satisfying life. The sources of satisfaction may vary: power, possessions, love, religion, sex, food, drugs - whatever. What matters the most is not the source of satisfaction, but the experience of it - my satisfaction. Our satisfied self is our best hope (M. Volf, *A Public Faith*, Brazos Press, p. 99).

Whether it's an Audi in the driveway or five old bangers rusting on the front verge, the response to evangelism house to house is pretty much the same: "Why would I bother with that?" There is no sense of lack. There is however a sense of the problem "of the buffered self". The 'porous self' is characterizes pre-modern human beings: open to God, the gods, nature or spirit and touchable or even overwhelmed by realities or entities that transcend us. The modern 'buffered self' imagines it must create its own meaning through science, technology, and reform projects. Such a self is constantly "aware of the

possibility of disengagement” (Smith p. 31, quoting Taylor, *ASA*, pp. 41-42). Related to this is Taylor’s sense of what our culture’s ‘disenchantment’ means:

Taylor’s account of disenchantment has a different accent, suggesting that it is primarily a shift in the *location* of meaning, moving it from “the world” *into* “the mind”. Significance no longer inheres in things, rather, meaning and significance are a property of minds who perceive meaning internally” (p. 28-29).

Perhaps that’s what makes evangelism and mission in our context so confronting. As Smith helpfully summarises in exploring the oft-asserted notion of the disenchantment of our culture, the ghost has been removed from the machine. Taylor pushes this notion further, and as Smith explains it, all those of us who have ever tried to “break in” past the veneer in a gospel conversation with a non-Christian get that ‘aha moment’.

Where is the evangelism strategy, or the evangelism program, or indeed the evangelical preaching in Australia that exhorts people to share the gospel with their mates; that takes this notion seriously? I wanted to get on the phone and ask a few organisations who keep telling us to get out and do it the old way: Please explain! Our evangelistic strategies are failing to address this.

And so is our discipleship strategy. Remember that Taylor’s book starts with the question of why unbelief is the ‘naïve’ option and why it is that belief itself is the difficult position to hold—a radical shift from the world of 1500 where it was the exact opposite. For the Western Christian, the world out there is now a cold, hard place, devoid of the background of the Christian liturgical framework that shaped everyday life and would enhance the Christian message. As Smith has explained in other works (*Desiring the Kingdom* and *Imagining the Kingdom*) our society is shaped now primarily by ‘secular liturgies’ designed to provide all of the meaning one would need for a happy life. Church planters and pastors, perhaps that’s why we find even our churches’ core groups are lured so easily away—the cultural liturgies offer, in Smith’s language, a vision of the good life that aims to trump our own liturgy. Have we come to terms with this?

That’s not to say it is all plain sailing for the secular person in these times. The problem with living in the *immanent frame* (rather than under a transcendent order of meaning) is that structurally it fails all of the spiritual OH&S requirements. It is creaking under the cold winds of modernity. The immanent frame is not capable of holding up the whole edifice without serious stress fractures appearing. This brings us to Smith’s best section: “The Malaise of Immanence: The ‘Feel’ of a Secular Age.” Smith explains Taylor’s resistance to any narrative that states that the loss of the transcendent has resulted in a more rational, and thereby more confident, modern experience. Smith observes that the result is not a “monolithic” secularism, but rather one marked by “tensions and fractures”. This is comforting in an odd sort of way. From a distance, Uluru looks marble-smooth, impenetrable and unyielding. But up close, it is riven with fissures and crevices that time and water will only further erode. Besides all that, Smith is confident that the Uluru of our immanence is hollow at the centre:

So we live in a cross-pressured space... plural and complicated - unlike the supposedly secure and dogmatic zones one would expect if one believed the so-called war between belief and unbelief. Most of us, Taylor argues, do not live in the confident camps of such a war; rather, most of us live in this cross-pressured no-man’s-land between them (p73).

This point was driven home recently by a poetry competition offered by Australian press, Inkerman and Blunt, entitled 'Prayers of a Secular World'. At the outset, the submission identifies the tension of this cross-pressured world:

[We] are looking for poems of wonder and celebration, poems that mark the cycle of the day—dawn, midday, evening, night—the seasons, the progression of planets, the evolution of weather; poems of becoming—first steps, first words, transitions, epiphanies and inspirations; poems of belief and of doubt, pleas for protection, poems of remembrance and blessing, of forgiveness and redemption, poems of gratitude.

'Hey, how's that immanence working out for you?'

It's a tension which can be found in a crowd-pleaser movie like *Finding Nemo* in which finding oneself and finding one's family, indeed finding oneself *through* finding one's family, is the highest calling. Though even there, the tension of self-discovery remains fraught. Escaping the fish tank wasn't all it was cracked up to be, and the movie ends with the simple question that Inkerman and Blunt are trying to answer: "Now what?"

Taylor, as a Catholic writer, lays much of the blame for the current state at the feet not of the Enlightenment, but of Reform. In Smith's reading of Taylor, the fractured disenchantment of our day can, at one level, be traced to that pesky driven desire—in the face of a corrupt Roman Church—to 'change up'. And faced with such a daunting task—one that Rome leavened via its intermediary structures—the general European populace was pushed one of two ways. The result? A Christianity in which the religious life in its most zealous iteration is foisted upon us all. In that scenario, what's a peasant who likes to drink a bit, smoke a bit, and carouse a lot supposed to do? Smith says that Taylor hints at another possibility:

[He] seems to suggest that it was the first strategy of higher expectations that might have driven some to the latter strategy of lowered expectations. By railing against vice and "cranking up the terrifying visions of damnation", Protestant preachers effectively prepared "the desertion of a goodly part of their flock to humanism." (p75). One strategy of levelling the two-tier problem might occasion a very different strategy that would ultimately become exclusive humanism (p. 38).

Yet Smith is no hagiographer. He pushes back:

Are there ways that Protestants can recognise this mixed legacy of the Reformation and yet also affirm it as a renewal movement within the church catholic? If the Protestant Reformation opened a door to exclusive humanism, did it not also open the door that led to Vatican II? (p. 39)

Ultimately it is Smith's own high understanding of the church that gives this book its 'oomph'. In light of Smith's other works, this reviewer determined to read the book *liturgically* and in the context of community. The reading group around this work consists of pastors, theologians and educated lay people struggling to come to terms with what it means for pastors and planters alike adrift on the sea of modernity. We pray about it; acknowledge the transcendent framework in light of the alternative; ask God for strength to live liturgical, faithful lives in the immanent frame; to ensure that each other's belief remains robust and communal in our fractured experiences.

And that is perhaps Smith's greatest strength. He has taken Taylor's daunting text that, in its formidable scope and sheer size, restricts its readership, and has brought it into the secular market place of ideas in which we all live. Tim Keller (surely the most popular and erudite of today's prophets speaking into the immanent frame), says in his back cover review, "As a gateway into Taylor's thought, this volume (if read widely) could have a major impact on the level of theological leadership that our contemporary church is getting."

Taylor has written deeply: Smith gives us the opportunity for him to be read widely. It's an opportunity well worth it.

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