

---

# REVIEWS

---

Charles Taylor. *Modern Social Imaginaries*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004. 215p.

JOHN ROTHFORK  
NORTHERN ARIZONA UNIVERSITY

Charles Taylor now teaches at Northwestern University. A decade ago the Catholic thinker Michael Novak recognized that Taylor was “gaining status as the world’s premier philosopher of modernity, the most judicious, the one who makes the most apt and discerning distinctions.” Novak went too far in writing that Taylor “has a deeper and richer philosophical mind than [Richard] Rorty’s,” but the comparison suggests the stature of Charles Taylor’s work. *Modern Social Imaginaries* makes it clear that Novak was even further from the mark in writing that Taylor “is subverting modernity from within” (see <http://www.firstthings.com/ftissues/ft9305/novak.html>). Taylor offers no hope of an alternative to modernity or a return to what he calls an “enchanted world” view. Instead, he explains how modernity is itself a religious expression. Perhaps the most attractive feature of his new book is that it continues Taylor’s pragmatist explanation of why facets of American culture cannot be as stark and clear-cut as demagogues and cultural conservatives insist they should be. Readers who know Taylor’s work will be interested in what this new work reveals about how Taylor balances or reconciles his Catholic faith with the outlook provided by pragmatism. One of Taylor’s famous works is devoted to Hegel and we see the influence in Taylor’s explanation of how the secular and profane dimensions of modernity are, Taylor says, manifestations of the opposite. Paradoxically, he explains how they are moral and even religious expressions.

How can this be? Isn’t it obvious that religious and secular outlooks are fundamentally opposed? Taylor does not allude to Kierkegaard, but his notion of how a militant atheist continues a dialogue with God and is therefore more religious than a complacent and unconcerned churchgoer provides part of the answer. Another part of the answer is provided by the pragmatist recognition that process (experience) precedes and produces theory (theology). The charismatic tradition dedicated to the indiscernible Paraclete, the mystical tradition going back to Meister Eckhart, and the Society of Friends (Quakers) are features of the Christian tradition that endorse the Hindu notion of *Shakti* or divine energy. A third part of the answer relies on Reformation thinking, especially that of Calvin, apparent in this explanation:

---

“Modernity is secular, not in the frequent, rather loose sense of the word, where it designates the absence of religion, but rather in the fact that religion occupies a different place, compatible with the sense that all social action takes place in profane time” and everyday life (194). Taylor’s thesis might be described as how we can be religious (or moral) in a world no longer invested with ritual magic.

Taylor says his “thesis tries to link the undoubted primacy of the individual,” as individual, in 18th-century Enlightenment theory “to the earlier radical attempts to transform society along the principles of axial spirituality” that relied on revelation, prophecy, and the efficacy of ritual (64). Taylor’s view is scientific or modern—without the possibility of recourse to magic—in explaining how the post-Enlightenment secular view is moral and even religious. Science “disembeds us from the social sacred,” the world of medieval magic and ritual, to offer “a new relation to God as designer” in Newton’s cosmology (65). This view accords with Einstein’s famous pronouncement that “in this materialistic age of ours the serious scientific workers are the only profoundly religious people,” apparently because they continue physically to investigate the Other or the *logos* rather than simply express their Romantic feelings.

In a review of another of Taylor’s books, Edward Oakes identifies the dialectic at work in Taylor’s outlook. Oakes says, “the Enlightenment view of human nature stresses the inherent, and thus abstract, equality of every human person,” which means that no one, in essence, can be distinguished above others. “What muddies the picture is the Romantic gloss on the Enlightenment view of human nature: that each human being is not just equal but also unique” (<http://www.firstthings.com/ftissues/ft9304/oakes.html>). In Jean Jacques Rousseau’s famous words, “If I am not better, at least I am different.” Taylor elaborates a philosophic rather than literary “thick description” of the Romantic view located within the context of abstract Enlightenment social theory. As Rousseau’s *Confessions* illustrates, this usually involves autobiography, biography, or fiction; personal narrative about how “I feel” rather than social philosophy. Taylor says, “The mistake of moderns is to take” their Enlightenment understanding of the free individual “so much for granted that it is taken to be our first-off self-understanding ‘naturally’” (64). As a pragmatist, Taylor recognizes that “On the first level, we are always socially embedded” by the operations of the very language we use to elaborate theories of origin and by the discourse community contexts that govern who we speak to, about what topics, and in what tone. “We learn our identities in dialogue” and “by being inducted into a certain language” (65). Einstein’s scientist is not beyond culture. Quite the opposite: having received a PhD, a research scientist is profoundly cultured. Imagining radi-

---

cally free individuals who can choose, for example, their religion is a historically recent and highly theoretical possibility that seems plausible only in the experience of contemporary Westerners.

Taylor defines “social imaginaries” as discourse community technique or paradigm methods for associating data to form a gestalt image or pattern; “it is what enables [narrative or discourse], through making sense of, the practices of a society” (2). Foucault simply calls this technique. Taylor’s imaginaries refer to “the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows” (23). Taylor is specifically interested in the social imaginaries that provide the context to unify us as Americans in spite of the many beliefs that divide us. He begins with Enlightenment era beliefs about human nature: “Human beings are rational, sociable agents who are meant to collaborate in peace to their mutual benefit.” This may seem innocuous or even self-evident, but in the 18th century and in the context of the unfolding Renaissance program against medieval magic, this secular definition of human nature militated for a paradigm shift so that moral conversation becomes “about us humans” and this world “rather than one touching God or the cosmos” (11). Morality came to be seen as an agenda we discuss in the *agora* instead of an ontic recognition of the way things are and what God wants.

Unfortunately, Taylor does not specifically write about ritual in ways that Joseph Campbell’s great work illustrates. More concrete illustrations of orthopraxical lifestyles (following injunctions of the *Hadith*, for example) and ritual acts that religious communities believe invoke and produce spiritual effects would help us recognize that the enchanted outlook no longer informs or characterizes Western, day-to-day, secular life. “The modern order gives no ontological status to hierarchy or any particular structure of differentiation” to invest some people—such as priests or kings—with magical powers and to expect some rituals—such as the Catholic Mass or absolution—to have supernatural effects. Secular society allows us to “serve each other’s needs,” even though “the particular functional differentiation” needed to perform a job or offer a service “is endowed with no essential worth” as such (12). Modern professions have no ritual agency. Their value is secular and measured in terms of enhancing security and prosperity (13). Taylor’s account relies on the largely English Enlightenment informed by Newton, Locke, Calvin, and Adam Smith who did not, like Voltaire and Cervantes, directly attack religious ritual as gross superstition. The English model—more thoroughly worked out in America than in Britain—simply made prayer and ritual private and hence irrelevant to planning for secular security and prosperity. Science redefined ritual as subjective, as poetry and myth that have only an aesthetic place in public.

---

Taylor helps us recognize that, except on Sundays—which is to say, except for a special discourse community that no longer constructs or sets the terms for our day-to-day ordinary life—we live in a different world from that of the enchanted outlook, which recognized “spirits or forces or powers” (51) and elaborated rituals to invoke and control these powers. When Ben Franklin and others left the church, they literally contracted with one another to construct new social forms. But Taylor’s account is philosophic rather than historic. If we are no longer embedded in an enchanted worldview and no longer guided by ritual, what are the terms of our social imaginary? Taylor mentions three “forms of social self-understanding which are crucial to modernity”: the capitalist economy, the public sphere of knowledge and civility, and the techniques of democratic self-rule (69).

Taylor offers Reformation glosses on the economy from John Calvin and Max Weber. First we rejected the enchanted view that recognized the supernatural power of priests and the ritually holy life of monastic celibacy. Then we redefined secular life as involving vocation and stewardship. Instead of offering ritual adoration, we do God’s work in the world by helping others. Taylor says this Reformation shift “has two facets: it promotes ordinary life as a site for the highest forms of Christian life, and it also has an anti-elitist” and democratic thrust (74). There are other implications. For example, the Great Chain of Being hierarchy is ignored by the model of an economy that supplies “resources we collectively need in household or state” and that “defines a way we are linked together” in mutual dependence (76). The new model also imparts a spirit of entrepreneurship and exploration, a sense that the economy is somewhat arbitrarily constructed and always in development rather than “deducible from a telos at work in human society” (80).

The public sphere offers a model for the conversation held “outside of the polity, as it were, from which to judge its performance.” In the Enlightenment model, reason controls power. Only modern states “must win the consent of the governed—not just originally, but as ongoing condition of legitimacy” (87). To be moral, Rousseau’s social contractual state must enact “what has already been emerging out of enlightened debate among the people” (88) in the public sphere where individuals engage in a kind of discourse “emanating from reason and not from power or traditional authority” (90). But the voice of reason in this model remains disturbingly idealized. There are no actual or literary conversations about colonialism, racism, sexism, and the like. There is only European philosophical talk including an Enlightenment claim for “a discourse of reason outside power, which nevertheless is normative for power” (91). Do we still believe this after reading Nietzsche and Foucault? Taylor says we do not merely believe in it, we expect the public sphere to operate in this way.

---

The point here is a somewhat tortured product of Rousseau's theory that is crucial for the theory of democracy. Bentham's Utilitarianism was descriptive in claiming that human nature is an instinct to avoid pain and consume pleasure. Consequently, Utilitarianism can claim only a qualified morality centering on the freedom of the individual to make choices about what appears to be pleasurable or painful. If democracy is simply a battle to get as much and give as little as possible, it forfeits any claim to virtue. Rousseau's model of the state requires us to legislate on behalf of all citizens according to the dictates of reason. This ideally creates "a politics of virtue, as the fusion of individual and general will" (125). It is not simply that "the people are sovereign" in essence. The general will must be worked out in "conversations" held in the public sphere. "In projecting a public sphere, our eighteenth-century forebears were placing themselves in an association, this common space of discussion, which owed nothing to political structures but was seen as existing independently of them" (92). We expect such idealism to be deconstructed, but Taylor's interest is confined to noticing the paradigm shift from the enchanted world view to the secular world of social construction; how Rousseau's thinking liberated us from the traditional view in which "People could see themselves only as constituted into" a social group or state "by something action-transcendent, be it a foundation by God or a Chain of Being" (96) that stretched back to "a 'time of origins,' as [Mircea] Eliade calls it" (97). Taylor is interested in the authority of "modern secularization" that, as Rorty also notes, rejects the supposition that mythic "time" is more real than our profane temporal experience (98). Paradoxically, the public sphere as "an extrapolitical, secular, metatopical space" (99) creates a moral dimension for modernity.

In the postmodern view, traditional religion is irreligion and "the ordinary is sanctified, or put in other terms, the claims to special sanctity of certain types of life (the monastic) or special places (churches) or special acts (the Mass) were rejected as part of false and impious belief that humans could in some way control the action of grace" through ritual (102). Having forgotten the enchanted world and the rituals that gave access to it, "we live our ordinary lives, work in our callings, sustain our families in profane time. In the new perspective, this is what God demands of us, and not an attempt on our part to connect with eternity," to help sustain being or virtue by making blood sacrifices or by engaging in more abstract rituals of the Atonement. Language no longer conjures a public mystery.

The techniques of democratic self-rule are familiar to us as praxis but strangely formulated by Taylor's concern to see these as post-Reformation expressions of moral concern. Morality does not have to ritually repeat a divine script or pattern. "The modern social imaginary no longer sees the greater translocal entities as grounded

---

in something other, something higher, than common action in secular time” (155). The general will does not need to be validated or confirmed by a power greater than reason. It does not need to be mimetic in the sense of supposing that an “ordinary sequence of events touches” or repeats events grounded in something eternal or holy. We no longer need “privileged persons or agencies, such as kings or priests, who stand and mediate at such alleged points” of ritual (157). Instead of going to church to hear a Latin Mass, we talk to each other in the public sphere. Rousseau told us that a dedication to citizenship must be greater than any allegiance to a special group based on gender, race, religion, politics, or other factors, but it is strange for a pragmatist to endorse this idealization as more real than our actual experience based in gender, race, etc. That is not quite right; Taylor explains that we do have actual experience of the public sphere, but it is more tacit and recognizable in retrospect than evident in specific, intentional experiences. Ultimately, Taylor’s sense of authentication in the public sphere relies on the linguistic dimension, on our involvement with each other to talk about our experience and to *care* about meaning in Heidegger’s sense, rather than to rely on mimesis or the repetition of a holy pattern, which in orthopraxy and ritual performance seem to more resemble training than dialogue.

The public sphere is not simply a place where we speak. It is also a place where we listen. The rhetorical situation of addressing an audience is an important part of the public sphere. The moral dimension becomes obvious when we recognize that we speak to others assuming that they care about what we say. Taylor illustrates this in the model of fashion, of being seen, of noticing that we are being noticed. Who do we hope to impress with stylish clothes or cars or prose? Probably not anyone specific, but “It matters to each of us as we act that others are there, as witnesses of what we are doing and thus as codeterminers of the meaning of our action” (168). We speak to others to literally make sense of our experience. If there were no others, language and meaning could not exist. Transcendence offers the illusion of a single speaker, of someone speaking without *care* or speaking without addressing an audience of fellow speakers. We may pray to God, but we talk to each other. “The meaning of our participation” in discourse community events “is shaped by the whole vast dispersed audience we share it with” (169).

“The sacred is no longer encountered as an object among other objects, in a special place, time, or person”: an object we might possess or a power we might ritually control. Meaning and depth are not magic; they are socially created by the process of language. Identity is conferred by narrative. Taylor says, “God’s will can still be very present to us in the design of things, in cosmos, state, and personal life” but “the design of things” is not found or revealed. It is socially constructed.

---

“God can seem the inescapable source for our power to impart order to our lives, both individually and socially” (193). If so, this power is not an object of worship. It is better rendered or remarked on as a verb, as *Shakti*, as a temporal and secular, if not Hegelian process. ✱