

## Revisiting Charles Taylor

# Is it possible to speak of God today?

### Francesco Cosentino

*How do we speak about God in our western society when God has become almost 'foreign', even from people's own self-awareness? Among those reflecting on this question is Canadian philosopher and 2019 Ratzinger prize winner, Charles Taylor, author of A Secular Age (2007). Francesco Cosentino, professor of theology at the Pontifical Gregorian University and officer of the Vatican Secretariat of State, reflects on Taylor's contribution below.*

How can we speak of God today in a society where God seems to have become almost 'foreign,' and the winds of indifference and the conscience of humankind have carried God to the margins?

In Western cultural contexts so characterized by secularization, we need to ask such questions. Once Christianized countries are now living an era of disaffection around the 'problem of God' that is characterized "by the eclipse of the light of heaven, by the eclipse of God"<sup>1</sup>, with little or no religious restlessness. Thus, the crucial question is: How does one speak of God today in a secularized, even post-atheistic, society?<sup>2</sup> God seems to have "fallen into oblivion...and we simply do not remember God anymore", as if in a constant state of forgetfulness.<sup>3</sup>

To respond, we need to focus first on what is meant by secularization.

### Secularization?

A path of discernment asks the meaning of living in a secular age. Taylor is correct in saying that it is 'not so clear in what this *secularity* consists of.'<sup>4</sup> In fact, it is necessary to free our imagination, and thus free ourselves from imprecise language that can attribute negative connotations to the word "secularization".

In Taylor's prestigious work, *A Secular Age*, he interprets this phenomenon by going beyond usual understandings that affirm two alternative readings on this topic. The first sees secularity as a process which reduces the socio-cultural weight of religion and its institutions, thus relegating religion to the private sphere and weakening its public and political role. A second reading instead sees "secularity consist[ing] in the falling off of religious belief and practice, with people turning away from God and no longer going to Church."<sup>5</sup>

But Taylor also sees an additional, *third* way of understanding secularization that overcomes risks of remaining stuck in "external" analyses that see this phenomenon from a focus on numbers, public relevance and ongoing solidity of religious institutions. Taylor writes: "This (third way) would focus on the conditions of belief. The shift to secularity in this sense consists, among other things, of a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace."<sup>6</sup>.

The intention was to more deeply explore societal changes impacting our ability to believe, where secularity is understood as "a matter of the whole context of understanding in which our moral, spiritual or religious experience and search takes place."<sup>7</sup> It is where the "context of understanding" refers both to explicit life choices and the "implicit, largely unfocused background"<sup>8</sup> relative to our search for meaning and a full life. It is necessary to examine those dimensions and aspects at work in "understanding your life in one way or the other"<sup>9</sup> and which determine belief or unbelief.

We can say that Taylor seeks to shift the secularization debate from external, visible aspects to more profound, interior changes affecting our modern sensitivities and "social imagery"<sup>10</sup>. Both faith and secularity are connected to hidden desires, deep hopes, the understanding of our existence and the cultural and spiritual imagery through which we interpret reality and orient our lives in fulfilling our hopes and desires.

Taylor invites a focus on how secularization affects our interior and spiritual realms and a "deepening the agenda of discussion from the world of ideas to the more hidden world of self-images...insisting that Western modernity's loss of faith is less a crisis of faith or epistemology than one of ethics or imagination..."<sup>11</sup> Thus it is about our own images of self, reality and of God.

This is the crux of the crisis. Since personal and social imagery has changed, language and symbols of Christian faith are perceived as obsolete, unreal and at times oppressive. The implicit and hidden assumption dwelling within secular humanity is that there can be no modernity of religion. Thus, to be modern would require one to be non-religious because modernity and religion are irreconcilable. It is here where secularity has pervaded people's conscience today, more than through the loss of social or political relevance.

## Challenges and Opportunities

Yet all this can be a wonderful opportunity and attractive challenge for religious faith. If it is true that societal approaches to life no longer fit into a singular framework today (unlike in previous eras where connection to God and religion was encouraged), it is equally true that this can also represent a great opportunity. In the past, it could be said that there was the risk of our transition to faith taking place on 'automatic pilot', with little personal awareness. It was 'natural' to believe, and almost impossible not to do so. But this did not guarantee a living faith rooted in the Gospel, one capable of affecting life and society. Today, however, "the whole background framework in which one believes or refuses to believe in God"<sup>12</sup> has changed. But precisely this escape from a "naturally Christian" environment is the precondition for *learning and returning to believe* in a new way and with new awareness. It demands a reflective spirit and an openness to the questions of life. Thus, the crisis can then be providential and become a "generative" place. Some forms of religion are breaking down and Christianity is invited to seek and imagine new modalities, new ways of

incarnation and new language for the spiritual life. Thus, Christian faith is transformed through a process of "destabilization and recomposition"<sup>13</sup>.

One can agree with Taylor's affirmation that the current crisis may be an opportunity to recompose spiritual life in ways better integrated with current sentiments and with a person's desire for growth and happiness.

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<sup>1</sup> M. Buber, *Eclipse of God: Studies in the Relation between Religion and Philosophy*. Princeton University Press, 2016: 23. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvc777pc>.

<sup>2</sup> J. Vernetto, *L'ateismo (Atheism)*, Xenia, Milano 2000; 1.

<sup>3</sup> A.W.J. Houtepen, *God: An Open Question*, Bloomsbury Publishing, New York, 2002: 13.

<sup>4</sup> C. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2007, pg. 3.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 3.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pg.4.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 4.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 4.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 5.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. the reflection of M.P. Gallagher, *Charles Taylor's Critique of 'Secularisation*. *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 97, no. 388 (2008): 433-44.

<sup>11</sup> M.P. Gallagher, *Maps of the faith. Dieci grandi esploratori cristiani*, Vita e Pensiero, Milano 2011: 142-143.

<sup>12</sup> C. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, cit., p. 13.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 474.