

---

# Charles Taylor and the Modern Immanent Frame

*Hans Boersma*



*Hans Boersma is J. I. Packer Professor of Theology Regent College.*

**T**his past Christmas I finally got around to reading the tome that is Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*. It had long been staring at me from the bookshelf above my desk—I think ever since it was published just over ten years ago. But the 874 pages had always been too daunting, and other, more immediate and less formidable challenges kept jumping the queue. I nonetheless finally managed, and so I now have a clearer sense of what people mean when they bandy about terms such as “social imaginary,” “immanent frame,” and “buffered self.”

Let me not jump ahead of myself, and instead begin with a few comments about what it is that Taylor sets out to do in this book. His main goal is to undermine the common “subtraction story” about secularization. This story is one way of explaining why it is that in modernity belief in God is no longer self-evident and axiomatic, and why instead it is that people experience faith in God as just one option among many—an option that we always seem to question in the light of other possibilities. Taylor explains that especially people who have adopted the “exclusive humanism” of the Enlightenment and have rejected every sense of transcendence buy into the subtraction story. The story is basically a self-congratulatory narrative: once we lived in an enchanted world of god(s), spirits, and demons, but thanks to modern scientific developments, we've been able to rid ourselves of all that superstition. In other words, having subtracted irrational religious

beliefs from our overall sense of reality, what we have left is a truthful, strictly this-worldly, closed, “immanent frame,” without anything that transcends it.

Taylor doesn't suggest that the story is without merit. There is such a thing as disenchantment in our modern world, and this development does link up with scientific developments. Still, Taylor—writing as a Catholic philosopher—believes that exclusive humanists present an account of secularization that is overly hasty. (And he suggests it is overly convenient too: it is a story that modern unbelievers tell themselves in part because it makes their secular stance in the world—their “social imaginary”—the only sensible option.) Taylor is convinced that the subtraction story blinds us to the moral animating forces that positively drive exclusive humanism. This moral outlook is focused on universal justice and benevolence, values at which one arrives not simply by way of subtraction. Modern humanism has its own set of moral priorities: liberty, power, mutual benefit, and reason (578). There's not just a subtraction, according to Taylor; there's also a substitution of something new.

The question that Taylor raises—increasingly forcefully as he shows his theological hand more and more openly as the argument unfolds—is whether these benchmarks of the new, modern order (and the social imaginary that it entails) can actually withstand rigorous critique. Taylor doesn't just ask the question; he also answers it. The “closed” immanent frame of exclusive humanism is grounded on

“very shaky assumptions,” and they survive mostly “because they end up escaping examination in the climate in which they are taken as the undeniable framework for any argument” (590).

The subtraction story of secularization is blind also to the continuing strength of religion in contemporary society. Taylor makes the case—a strong one, in my opinion—that the *désir de l'éternité* continues to find expression through numerous religious venues, both Christian and otherwise. The last chapter offers a glimpse at some of the numerous people who “broke out of the immanent frame” by way of conversion (728), people such as Charles Péguy and Gerard Manley Hopkins. At this point it is clear that Taylor sets his sights not just on erroneous, self-affirming accounts of secularization. He is actually preaching, making a case for the plausibility of the Christian faith in the modern world.

It is not my purpose to give a fulsome overview of the contents of Taylor's book. Readers who don't have the time to wade through the hundreds of pages of his argument are advised instead to pick up James K. A. Smith's brief and helpful introduction to it in *How (Not) To Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Eerdmans, 2014). Nor can I here evaluate every aspect of Taylor's account. Let me just offer a few scattered comments, before focusing on one key aspect of the book. On the positive side, I want to mention the following: this tome is a brilliant account of secularization. The immense learning (and literary mindset) of the author shines through on every page. The book resists easy caricatures and consistently avoids strawmen while roundly acknowledging potential pitfalls and weaknesses in Christian (and Catholic) appropriations of the faith. The main thesis (debunking the subtraction story) is in good part—not entirely, as we will see—convincing. In short, this is a masterful alternative account of how to understand modern secularism.

On the more critical side, I don't share Taylor's embrace of René Girard's scapegoat

theory, which stamps both Taylor's understanding of atonement theology and his view of how religious and other groups are prone to violence as they shape their identities. (As I make clear in chapter 6 of my book *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross*, I do not see how, from a Christian perspective, mimetic violence could possibly lie at the origin of human culture.) Further, while I agree with Taylor's rejection of a strictly code-based moralism (which he rightly traces to the modern era of Reform), his opposition to such “code fetishism” or “nomolatry” lacks nuance. Perhaps it is Taylor's somewhat visceral reaction against an erstwhile moralistic Catholic culture (with Pius IX singled out repeatedly for particularly sharp criticism) that drives his opposition to moralism. But one cannot build virtuous character without having some inkling of the contents of good and evil, and Taylor's moral theology is far too situation-driven. Finally, as a bit of an aside, I should mention that the publisher could have done a much better job editing the book: numerous spelling mistakes, grammatical errors, and other infelicities should not mar a landmark treatise such as this.

### Advocating Open Immanence

One aspect of the book requires a bit more attention, and for this I want to turn to the epilogue. Here Taylor compares his narrative of the genealogy of secularism, which he calls the *Reform Master Narrative* (RMN), with the account common in the circles of Radical Orthodoxy, among others, for which Taylor provides the moniker of the *Intellectual Deviation* (ID) story. The two accounts and perspectives are similar, so much so that Taylor acknowledges them to be “complementary, exploring different sides of the same mountain, or the same winding river of history” (775). And it is true, both ID and RMN focus on the new instrumental stance of human agency that characterizes modernity, and both caution continuously against a separation between nature and the supernatural.

For Taylor, however, the ID story is not enough and needs supplementing. ID focuses just on theological developments, which doesn't explain either how exactly secularity has become a mass phenomenon or why people turn on Christianity with such vehement anger. Moreover, Taylor maintains that while the loss of Platonic forms may be a problem, this loss has not led to secularity; after all, faith commitments

*Taylor maintains that while the loss of Platonic forms may be a problem, this loss has not led to secularity; after all, faith commitments*

perdure despite the loss of Platonism (775). Taylor warns, therefore, that the ID story may tempt us to adopt a solution that is too facile, namely, that of simply trying to fix the theoretical (theological) problems identified by ID as the cause of modern secularism. Though Taylor is far too gentle a writer to put it this starkly, he seems worried that the ID story has unwittingly espoused its own kind of subtraction story, this one not of the self-congratulatory exclusive humanist kind, but of a Christian kind. Here, the subtraction is lamented rather than celebrated. For the ID account, therefore—and Taylor is thinking especially of John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Rémi Brague—the solution to the problem of modernity would be to undo the subtraction. The ID account advocates a robust retrieval

of an earlier, Christian Platonist metaphysic, with nature closely linked to the supernatural by way of participation.

By the time we get to the epilogue, we're hardly surprised that Taylor has his reservations with regard to Radical Orthodoxy. While I suspect he genuinely values the significant insight the ID story offers, Taylor's RMN asks us to do justice to what it is

that, positively, makes exclusive humanism tick. The loss of a realist epistemology and of a Christian Platonist metaphysic doesn't explain the rise of the social imaginary of contemporary secularity, on Taylor's reading of the historical development. And so, the concluding sentence of the book is an understandable one: "Thus we need both ID and RMN to explain religion today" (776).

Taylor's muted critique of the ID story leaves me unconvinced. Now, I probably should be cautious here, since Taylor draws the ID-RMN comparison in just a few pages, in his epilogue, and he doesn't elaborate much beyond what I have just sketched. It seems to me, however, that despite the gentle character of his critique, Taylor's RMN is less compatible with the ID story than he suggests: strictly speaking, the RMN should reject the ID story for the same reason it rejects exclusive humanism's genealogy of modernity. Neither does justice, in Taylor's understanding, to the positive characteristics that make up modernity's moral "social imaginary," and therefore both are reliant on a subtraction account of secularity. As a result, Taylor muses optimistically about the possibilities of a renewed sense of transcendence from within modernity's "immanent frame," while Milbank and other theologians of the Radical Orthodoxy persuasion reach for the sledge hammer when faced with the philosophical moorings of modernity.

Taylor suggests that we don't need to interpret the "immanent frame" of modernity as entirely closed to transcendence. Some view it that way, especially people in the tradition of Gibbon, Voltaire, and Hume. On a strictly materialist standpoint, science would exclude any and all sense of transcendence (546–47, 555). But such a "closed" reading of immanence isn't the only one possible. In fact, such a reading is a particular, secularist "spin" that some like to put on the immanent frame (550–51). Such a closed perspective isn't at all the obviously correct one, claims Taylor. The immanent frame of modernity, with its focus on disciplines, individualism,

instrumental reason, and secular time can indeed move to closure, but it can also, instead, be “open” in character: within the immanent frame, “some are open to transcendence, and some move to closure” (566). As a Catholic, Taylor decisively opts for open immanence and treats the closed approach as illusory. As a result, he sees no need to issue a call to retrieve to some earlier, perhaps golden age of Christianity. He repeatedly warns more traditionalist-minded Christians that there is no way back to an earlier pre-Enlightenment form of Christianity. In no way does the immanent frame of modernity truly close us off from transcendence, according to Taylor.

### Retrieving Christian Platonism

But how warranted is this optimism? Taylor defines the “immanent frame” as follows:

The buffered identity of the disciplined individual moves in a constructed social space, where instrumental rationality is a key value, and time is pervasively secular. All of this makes up what I want to call “the immanent frame”. There remains to add just one background idea: that this frame constitutes a “natural” order, to be contrasted to a “supernatural” one, an “immanent” world, over against a possible “transcendent” one. (542)

Let’s bracket for a moment the details of what constitutes Taylor’s sense of “buffered” identity. (Basically, it’s a separate self, unaffected by any spirits, demons, etc.) And let’s also leave aside the notions of “instrumental rationality” and “secular time.” Taylor has fascinating, insightful discussions on both. It’s clear, however, that neither is compatible with orthodox Christianity—nor, for that matter, is a buffered self. Each of these notions is predicated on the idea of two entirely separate orders, a natural and a supernatural one, where the natural (immanent) world has secluded itself from the supernatural (transcendent) one.

If this is how we are to understand the immanent frame of modernity—and I think Taylor’s depiction is spot on—then what would give us confidence that the immanent frame is amenable not just to a closed reading but also to an open one? Now, I do have the impression that Taylor agrees that a closed reading fits modernity’s immanent frame better than an open reading. He acknowledges, for example, that in one sense it is true that “living within this [immanent] frame is living according to the norms and practices that it incorporates” (555). This seems to suggest that when we live in a culture shaped by the immanent frame, the allure of a closed perspective tends to be strong. Taylor, however, suggest that the problems of the immanent frame “awaken protest, resistances of various kinds,” so that people turn again to an open perspective (555). And so, he concludes, “While the norms and practices of the immanent frame may incline to closure, this neither decides the effect that living within the frame in fact will have on us, nor even less does it justify the closed take” (556). In short, while a closed reading fits the immanent frame best, it is nonetheless possible to escape it through an open reading.

All this seems right: modernity may come and go, and indications abound that religion is alive and well. The immanent frame doesn’t need to have the final say, and in faith I trust that it won’t. Still, the immanent frame—as per Taylor’s description above—is inherently and deeply problematic from a Christian perspective. That is to say, its strict separation of nature and the supernatural (and ultimately its denial of the latter) is a revolt against transcendence. The reason the immanent frame must be rejected root and branch is that it has isolated nature from the supernatural (and tossed out the latter). Or, again, the reason to rebuff the immanent frame is that in modernity we have replaced a realist epistemology (in which natural objects participate in eternal forms) with a nominalist view (for which Platonic forms are merely names and do not actually exist).

At many points in his magnum opus, Taylor displays a broadly sympathetic attitude toward Platonism and its impact on the Christian faith—including the significance of eternal forms. And this is understandable, seeing as Taylor aims to open up the immanent frame toward transcendence. Christian Platonism unites nature and the supernatural by asserting that creation participates in eternal realities. The loss of such a realist perspective means the dissolution of the union between nature and the supernatural—a dissolution that Taylor agrees undergirds the immanent frame. To me, it remains a puzzle, therefore, why in the epilogue he explicitly resists linking the loss of Christian Platonism with the rising dominance of secularity and of the immanent frame. His call for a reintegration of nature and the supernatural would seem to require that we blame the rise of the immanent frame on the loss of Christian Platonism. Equally, it remains a puzzle to me why Taylor wouldn't embark on a retrieval project that aims to recover a (Christian Platonist) metaphysic that traditionally closely linked nature and the supernatural through a participatory metaphysic—unless, of course, he is isn't

quite persuaded of such a participatory account, after all.

It is no doubt true that the immanent frame (or exclusive humanism) has its own, positive constituent elements. But we should not overplay its originality. Modern liberal democracies are, positively, based on “justice, equality, liberty, and even solidarity,” as Taylor suggests (577). But these are not notions originating in modernity. The contemporary, often aberrant, takes on these notions originate from within the Christian tradition. In other words, many of the values of exclusive humanism are knockoff products. In that sense, they are the watered-down (dare I say, “subtracted”) versions of key aspects of traditional Christian faith and morality. And it is questionable how long contemporary society can sustain these values without the Christian convictions that initially grounded them. Taylor's gentle and sophisticated questioning of the Enlightenment's immanent frame is a wholesome correction to unwarranted claims of its inevitability and finality. But let's not beat around the bush: the reason the immanent frame will not have the final say is that its nominalist metaphysic is false, while the earlier tradition of Christian Platonism is true. **X**