



Our Secular Age: Ten Years of Reading and Applying Charles Taylor

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Probably no book published in the last decade has been so ambitious as Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*. He seeks nothing less than to account for the spread of secularism and decline of faith in the last 500 years. Now a remarkable roster of writers—including Carl Trueman, Michael Horton, and Jen Pollock Michel—considers Taylor's insights for the church's life and mission, covering everything from healthcare to liturgy to pop culture and politics. Nothing is easy about faith today. But endurance produces character, and character produces hope, even in our secular age.

Our Secular Age: Ten Years of Reading and Applying Charles Taylor Details

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From Reader Review Our Secular Age: Ten Years of Reading and Applying Charles Taylor for online ebook

Kyle Hatfield says

Should be required reading for any Christian leader or artist.

Barry says

A collection of thoughtful essays that discuss how the ideas in Charles Taylor's "A Secular Age" should influence our views of culture, art, evangelism, and how we experience the world. I think that James K. A. Smith's "How (Not) to Be Secular" is a better introduction to these ideas, but this book is more accessible and still very worthwhile to a reader not familiar with Taylor's work.

Here's an excerpt from Mike Cosper's chapter on music, regarding how people look for love/meaning/significance/ quasi-transcendence within the immanent order:

"This leads to a search for satisfaction in other ways: through consumption, pleasure, or a certain kind of tribalism, all of which have a way of temporarily distracting us from our longing for eternity. A malaise sets in, which Taylor says is one of a secular age's most notable characteristics. He identifies three specific kinds of malaise:

'(1) the sense of fragility of meaning, the search for an overarching significance; (2) the felt flatness of our attempts to solemnize the crucial moments of passage in our lives; and (3) the utter flatness, emptiness of the ordinary.'

To expand these slightly: (1) We long for an overarching account of the meaning of life, our purpose here on earth. (2) We don't know what to do with life's big moments -- weddings, childbirth, funerals, and so on -- because our secularist account for them is inadequate for the deeper sense of meaning we intuit about them. (3) Daily life always feels like something is missing."

Ivan says

I worked on this book at The Gospel Coalition, so I'm probably biased. Because of that conflict of interest, I'll avoid giving it 5 stars. But I think this is an important book because it deeply engages the work and thought of Charles Taylor, specifically his monumental work, *A Secular Age*. Not everyone will read that tome, but pastors and church leaders should have a working knowledge of it to properly understand our times. Few have given much thought to understanding our "secular age" than Charles Taylor, and so I'm glad to see this work with contributions from authors like Carl Trueman, Michael Horton, Collin Hansen, Jen Pollock Michel, and many others.

Josh Stowers says

I think Alan Jacobs endorsement on the back describes this book most accurately.

"Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* is a landmark book, and the essays collected here ponder it intelligently in charitably. Some echo Taylor, some extend his ideas, some contest his claims, all his argument with a seriousness that the book deserves – and that Christ church needs"

I think you could really give each individual chapter ratings for their differences that seem to show tension with others, but probably not as far as a blatant disagreement. I have a hard time believing this book will be a classic; if so we have done a great disservice devoting the last chapter to Kanye West.

Andrew Perschbacher says

An excellent book for either wetting the appetite to read Charles Taylor or for enlightening the expansive and manifold fields of thought Taylor's argument can apply to. A couple of the chapters over generalize Taylor's definitions. Overall, this book is helpful and enjoyable.

Adam Shields says

Short Review: At some point I will actually read the original *Secular Age* book. But 900 pages is daunting. Although at this point I have now read four books largely about *A Secular Age* and I think those add up to more pages than the actual book.

Part of the problem with my reading of this is that I haven't read the original, although I think I basically understand the argument. Some of the chapters are arguing for or against minor points and I don't know how to evaluate those chapters because I don't have the background. Other Chapters are more implications of a *Secular Age* and those are easier to think about. Starke's chapter on preaching and McCracken's chapter on church shopping were helpful, although especially McCracken's chapter I am not sure I agreed with most of the time. But it was still helpful to work through the ideas.

This was put together The Gospel Coalition, although not everyone that contributed would line up with all of TGC's positions. But this is mostly conservative and reformed authors (and all white and all but one male). The essays are not universally affirming or condemning of Taylor. There are disagreements, but I would be interested in a slightly more diverse opinion.

My only slightly longer review is on my blog at <http://bookwi.se/our-secular-age/> ?

David says

Charles Taylor's book *A Secular Age* is truly a magnificent, and a must-read for anyone wanting to understand our culture. Those who seek this understanding certainly includes pastors. At the same time, pastors, like most non-academics, do not have the time or energy to process a 700 page (or 800...or 900) book. There are exceptions; I read *A Secular Age* and know a few pastors who have. Thankfully there are books like this one that summarize and apply it for everyone else.

That said, this book is uneven. If you are a Reformed Christian, then perhaps much of my criticism will not be relevant for you. While this book is for all Christian ministry leaders, it at times reads like it is only for

Reformed. It was early in the first chapter where I mused, "Didn't expect that Calvinist arrogance this early!" The writer had just mentioned you have two options: God on God's terms or your terms. Of course, the implication is that only those who follow Jonathan Edwards have God on God's terms. What about other centuries long traditions such as Roman Catholicism or Eastern Orthodoxy? I'll mention the Anabaptist tradition too since even most Reformed people do not want "God's terms" when Jesus (God in the flesh!) is calling for nonviolence.

But, I'm used to other Christians trumping some sort of Biblical literalism while being blind to their own explaining away. In other words, it seems everyone is a biblical literalist until we get to the words of Jesus.

That said, the book is good. I do think it is worth reading (though Jamie KA Smith's book on Taylor is still better). What I wrestle with as I read this book is whether we can hope to break out of this secular age. One chapter ("Church Shopping with Charles Taylor") by Brett McCracken suggested that church and ministry leaders need to lead their congregations in breaking out of this individualistic faith! I agree! Yet, I also think its impossible. I mean, is it possible to NOT be a church shopper? Short of the good old days when people couldn't read or encounter ideas and mostly stuck to whichever church they grew up in (good old days here = pre 1500) we all know we are choosing (which is a symptom of our secular age). I think McCracken knows this and his call that people embed in a community and stay there is worthwhile. But even then...the option for something else is always there!

I'd say a challenge for my Reformed friends is to wrestle with whether when cherished theologies are threatened, is it a questioning of something wrong or merely age of authenticity. It seems a temptation of some writers here is to brush off any challenge to Reformed theology as, "well, you just don't like how this feels...you're following your desires, wanting to be true to yourself!" Is it this simple? I mean, its not like NT Wright's challenge to Reformed view of justification was not profound and rooted in scripture. The annihilation view of hell might for some people be seen as rooted in rejecting a distasteful belief, but it also is rooted in scripture. Again, how many of these Reformed writers are preaching Jesus-style nonviolence? If they're not, is it because they do not find it satisfying (which begs the question, if our natural inclination is to violence, maybe we should be skeptical of it?).

I guess I am harping on this Anabaptist thing. I wish this book was more clearly for Christians of all traditions and not so rooted in Reformed world. Of course, kudos to these Reformed guys for reading Taylor...maybe other Christian traditions need to follow. The best chapter in the book was "Free Faith: Inventing New Ways of Believing and Living Together" by Greg Forster. There were also some strong chapters on politics, art and liturgy.

In closing, I like this book and think it is worth a read for any pastor or ministry worker. I know it made me want to go back and re-read Taylor (maybe next summer). It is helpful and the writers succeed in distilling tough subjects to easy to understand ideas. A glossary or even a first chapter summarizing Taylor's argument would perhaps have been nice. Instead each author offers brief definitions, so some terms get defined over and over while others get defined once or twice. I guess, if you only read one book on Taylor, read Smith's. If you read two, read this one. But ultimately, read Taylor's original work even if it takes you a year.

Toby Neal says

I started this book with high expectations. The impact and insight of Charles Taylor's, *A Secular Age*, is hard to ignore. I was expecting a book which restated and engaged with Taylor's argument, and applied it's

principles to life and ministry in a secular age.

I was however disappointed in reading this book.

The chapters were brief and light. All of Taylor's words were paraded—cross pressured, fragilised, immanent frame, mutual display, buffered self etc—but few of these words were given adequate interpretation, illustration and application to the experience of ministry and life in a secular age.

This is the second work (after James K. A. Smith's, *How (Not) to be Secular*) I have read seeking to popularise Taylor's insights. So far I have been persuaded that there are deep things to be learnt from Taylor but I am waiting for someone to show how they intersect in tangible ways with the age in which we live.

John says

The premise of *Our Secular Age* doesn't have strong curb appeal: evangelical Christians grappling with the contribution of a contemporary philosopher's nearly 900 page tome. Despite the fact that one of my favorite authors, James KA Smith has been significantly influenced by Charles Taylor, I still have yet to pick up Taylor's *A Secular Age*.

Despite the less-than-enticing premise, *Our Secular Age* is a book that should be broadly read by Christian leaders. Even for the reader (like myself) who has no first-hand experience with Taylor, his theses are laid out clearly and the wide-ranging impact of his thought is explored and at times critiqued.

Taylor's central thesis is that the secular world is a world that has turned its focus on the self and lost its sense of the transcendent. Colin Hansen says that Taylor traces the beginnings of this age to Martin Luther: “Taylor faults the Protestant Reformation and modern evangelical Christianity for disenchanting the world and turning the focus on the self rather than on God through and turning the focus on the self rather than on God through shared religious rituals.”

In the words of Carl Trueman, “The ultimate dynamic driving this secular age is the denial of our creatureliness and the assertion of our autonomy. The psychological self is the latest stage, allowing us to repudiate all forms of external authority – even that of our own bodies.” In the secular world, the immanent becomes the transcendent.

The payoff of this is that those in the secular world judge themselves in a mirror. John Starke says, “According to Taylor, ‘I mean by this a humanism accepting no final goals beyond human flourishing, nor any allegiance to anything else beyond this flourishing. Of no previous society was this true.’ The secular individual is buffered from the transcendent: ‘A buffered self ‘sees itself as invulnerable, as master of the meaning of things for it.’ That last sentence is important: The self becomes the ‘master of the meaning of things.’”

Religious belief and God himself is subject to the buffered self. In Starke's words, “If one is to believe in God or a god, it must primarily be in service to human flourishing.” It's not hard to see how this has infected the American church. One needs only look at the bestsellers in Religion or Spirituality at Amazon to see the way in which God has been reduced to this buffered secular vision. In the words of Michael Horton, “Now we must become masters of our own destiny, keeping danger at bay by our own collective and calculative reasoning. Even if God plays a role, it is a supporting one, helping us to achieve ‘our best life now.’” More

succinctly, Jen Pollock Michel says, “In the secular age, God becomes the guarantor of our best life now.”

But such a vision of spirituality is as unsatisfying as a diet of Starbucks macchiatos. Brett McCracken asks, “Can such an approach to eclectic faith, where spirituality is as customizable as a Spotify playlist or a Chipotle burrito, ever be conducive to spiritual health?” McCracken points out that, “Just as we eventually grow tired of a trendy restaurant or favorite clothing brand because our tastes inevitably change, so we will eventually tire of a church that initially connects with our unique ‘spiritual path’ but then fails to sufficiently track with our evolving beliefs.”

Worse still, Christianity isn’t just a nuisance to this version of spirituality, it is a threat. Jen Pollock Michel says, “It is not simply that Christianity is an alternate ethic in the secular age; it is an enemy.” Brett McCracken agrees: “Christianity doesn’t work on the terms of consumerism. Jesus calls his followers not to comfort and convenience, but to deny themselves and take up their cross. Christian discipleship is not consumer-friendly.”

John Starke points out just how powerful the buffered self is against the call of the gospel: “The authentic self says, ‘This is me; you must accept me as I am.’ The vulnerable self says, ‘This is me; take me and transform me.’ The vulnerable self comes in the form not merely of confession but of repentance. It looks not to self for power and affirmation, but to divine help and deliverance.”

Our calls as Christians is to engage this secular world with an awareness not just of the infection “out there” but in our own hearts and to call the world to a God who loves us so deeply that he will not allow us to be buffered from him.

God pursues us like Jesus pursued Thomas and in Colin Hansen’s words, “God continues to haunt this secular age with our desire for goodness.” “Christians still have an opportunity to present the gospel as a beautiful alternative to the cramped ideologies of immanence that dominate our landscape,” Derek Rishmawy promises.

We need look no further than the way in which our secular world struggles with faith. Mike Cosper analyzes Kanye and concludes that Kanye is “haunted by faith.” “I’m looking for more,” Kanye says. And the opportunity for the church in a secular age is to greet that thought with joy. Because there is so much more.”

That sounds pretty relevant to us, does it not?

Our Secular Age does not merely take Charles Taylor as he is, though. Taylor finds the root of our secular age in the Reformation. Trueman and Horton, especially, challenge this story and particularly Taylor’s dark reading of the Reformation. Horton believes that at times it appears that Horton is really choosing the enchantment of the pre-modern world over the disenchantment of the modern world, not a biblical world over a secular world. Horton asks: “[H]as Taylor himself lost confidence in the power of the Christian story – including its systematic truth claims – to determine and invigorate our practices?”

I commend Our Secular Age to you and invite you to consider yourself, your church, and your neighborhood in light of its incisive theological assessment.

David Batten says

This book does not stand on its own. If you have never heard of Charles Taylor, then don't start with this.

However, if you have encountered Taylor's ideas, then this collection of essays by various authors engaging with some of Taylor's most noteworthy ideas is a great addition. I especially appreciated that variety of tone, with some cautioning against wholesale acceptance of Taylor's ideas, and others showing how very applicable those ideas are to their own contexts. My favorite contributions were those by Derek Rishmawy, Alistair Roberts, and Greg Foster.

Note: If you have encountered Taylor's ideas, but are a bit fuzzy on some of his terms, I'd recommend starting with the final essay by Mike Cosper, as it defines and connects a number of them.

Samuel Kassing says

This was an interesting read. I had the privilege of reading it alongside a couple mentors of mine which made it even more enjoyable. If you do read it I'd recommend finding a group to discuss it with.

It's a collection of essays. Some are better or more accessible than others. You don't need to read Taylor's work to understand this volume. There are a couple essays where it would be beneficial, but it isn't necessary.

My favorite chapters were by Rishmawy, Roberts, McCracken and Starke. Those chapters engage the topics of Millennials, Liturgy, Church-shopping and preaching.

I'd recommend reading this because of the insights into our times and how helpful it can be in framing many ministry philosophy and methodology questions.

Josh Sieders says

I had been wanting to read this for a while. Working at a Christian University, Charles Taylor has been "haunting" the hallways for a few years. I had the chance to read James K.A. Smith's, *How (Not) to be Secular*, so I've been fairly primed and brought up to speed on all the terms that Taylor has created and works with. It seems he's everywhere, wherever I read...

Overall I appreciated it. I don't know if I'll ever be smart (or dumb?) enough to attempt Taylor's 8-900 page tome myself, so this was another good companion/summary, and it had lots of application. Some of the articles were more engaging than others. I was grateful for Michael Horton's critique of Taylor's indictment of the great evil Reformation for our age's ills. I wished he had found more of the positives to point out, but it was a necessary chapter in this book for me.

The book was worth reading for Derek Rishmawy's chapter alone on Millennials and the Nova effect. I practically highlighted the whole thing, not realizing quite how much of a millennial I am (I'm actually a Xennial :) Brett McCracken on Church Shopping and Jen Pollock Michel on flourishing rounded out my favourites.

I heartily recommend, if you've heard of Taylor or not. The authors introduce the concepts and necessary

vocab as needed and if you're paying any attention, you'll feel that what they say (in summarizing Taylor and applying him) eerily matches the malaise of your social imaginary as a buffered individual in the immanent frame....

Daniel Goodman says

This book aimed at simplifying and applying the complicated ideas of Charles Taylor into the context of ministry and Christian engagement. The writers largely succeed at this novel task, but the finished product seemed too simple. While some of the chapters were excellent at summarizing and drawing concise applications from Taylor, others felt rushed or scattered.

If you are already familiar with the ideas of Charles Taylor (even at an elementary level) then you will most likely not glean anything new from this book except for a few short notes of application scattered throughout the essays.

Victor Labrada says

This is the kind of book that depletes a highlighter. So much accessible insight from different angles of Charles Taylor's **The Secular Age**. Especially helpful were ch.4 "Preaching to the Secular Age", ch.7 "Church Shopping with Charles Taylor", ch.9 "Free Faith" and the final chapter which is a very enjoyable essay by Mike Cosper dissecting pop music that reaches for the transcendent. If you are just starting with Charles Taylor, pick up Jamie Smith's **How (not) to be Secular** as a primer before perusing these essays.

Steve says

If you have read "A Secular Age" by Charles Taylor then you will greatly benefit from this set of essays exploring various facets of Taylor's enormous book.
