

## *The New Atheism and the Spiritual Landscape of the West: A Conversation with Charles Taylor (Part One of Three)*

by  
Ronald A. Kuipers

### **Introduction**

The eminent Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor recently agreed to sit down with Ronald Kuipers on behalf of *The Other Journal* to have an extended conversation about the many issues he raises in his latest book, *A Secular Age*. The two philosophers discussed such topics as the relationship between religion and politics, faith and philosophy, and the matter of carrying forward a religious tradition in what Taylor has described as an “age of authenticity.” In what follows, the first of a three-part interview, Taylor fields questions about atheism in particular, including how the so-called “new atheism” features in the spiritual landscape of contemporary Western society.

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**The Other Journal (TOJ):** I want to ask you about your thoughts on atheism in general, and explore what you have to say about atheism at the end of *A Secular Age*.<sup>1</sup> I’m referring in particular to what you say on pages 768-69 of *A Secular Age*, where you describe two possible futures for the development of religion in the West. The first future flows out of mainline secularization theory, and predicts the continuous erosion of the public relevance of religious traditions. The second future, however, foresees religious traditions remaining an important aspect of people’s ongoing spiritual search for meaning.

**Charles Taylor (CT):** My money is on future number two, that is, the second of the two alternatives I outline in my book. I don’t really think that religion is going to fade away and that religiously defined alternatives will be less and less common. On the contrary, well...I don’t know if you’ve read the whole book or not, given that it’s so darn long [laughter].

**TOJ:** I’ve read it twice actually, and taught a thirteen week graduate seminar where we worked through the entire book quite closely [laughter].

**CT:** Wonderful, there is at least somebody then [laughter]. As I was saying, in my final chapter I suggest that future number two is much more likely, and I hope that the previous chapters will have prepared the reader to see why I believe that religious alternatives will proliferate rather than fade away.

So we are going to have something like the pattern that I was just describing, which is not only a pattern of great variation and constant innovation, but also a pattern of different views between the generations. I mean, it’s not uncommon now for children to break from the religious views of their parents. As a matter of fact, this is the case in many Western societies, independently of whether there are very high rates of religious belief and practice, like in the U.S., or very low levels, as in countries like Sweden. This same pattern is tending to occur. For example, in the

U.S. there is a recent Pew report suggesting that one in three people have changed their religious affiliation in the course of their lives. Now this may be something that is relatively trivial because Americans have a great variety of denominations and you can move from this denomination to that denomination without there being any kind of great transition or conversion. Nevertheless, it does indeed say something about the nature and future of Western societies.

**TOJ:** Could you elaborate further on this second future? You seem to suggest that this future is one in which human beings continue to struggle with religious questions, and more broadly with the deep sense of the basic religiousness of life.

**CT:** That's how I would describe it, and the thing is that we really don't have a generally accepted language or term to describe what this is. I think I would call it a sense of, say, eternity, but I know that there are people on the other side of my tradition who would react negatively to that term.

**TOJ:** So you've tried the word *fullness* as a word that might be more universally accepted?

**CT:** Yes, I've used this as a generic term on the grounds that I think everybody has some sense of, and desire for, a fantastically realized life, a life realized to the full. But in talking with people and reading reviews of the book, I've found that I'm often totally misunderstood on this. They thought that fullness could only be applied to explicitly religious positions, while the whole point was that I was looking for a generic term that applied to all people, whether religious or non-religious. But fullness made people shudder, which might show that the search for a universally acceptable term might be mission impossible.

**TOJ:** Maybe that happens because you talk about fullness as something very generic that everyone can relate to, but then you proceed to offer your unique take on fullness as something that involves a sense of transcendence. So there are secularists, atheists, or non-religious people who might not have a problem with the language of fullness per se, but who are strongly opposed to a notion of fullness that leans on the language of transcendence. It seems that it is transcendence that they really have a problem with.

**CT:** Well, what I tried to do in the book, and again it is so hard that it may be mission impossible, is to lay out a picture of the scene in which we are all involved, a scene that people could agree on even if they are coming from different positions. But I also wanted to add that I think we should also have full-disclosure, that is, communicating where I am coming from, where I am situating myself in the scene, and how I would then read the scene from that position. So while I do think we can come to a general agreement on the scene—the scene I just described a minute ago that's characterized by spiritual fragmentation and proliferation—I don't expect my readers to all agree with my more particular reading of the scene.

So I think everyone who is really open and honest will acknowledge that this is our scene, or our common situation, and that it has these three features that I outline in my book: great variety, great movement, and a great potential to be deeply shaken by other positions. I think everyone could agree to that, I think everyone should agree to that. This is a description in which I am very

well-invested. But of course this scene is lived from different positions. And I think in a book like this one should do a variety of things, both describing general features that all can agree to, and being open and honest about one's own unique position, what I describe as full-disclosure, or disclosing one's particular way of looking at things. Sadly, however, my attempt at full-disclosure at the end of the book seems to have polluted the entire book for some people.

**TOJ:** I really want to talk more about this idea of full-disclosure. It seems like as soon as you do something like that as a religious philosopher, the academy immediately assumes you're doing theology rather than philosophy, and that you've gone too particularistic and are no longer talking universally.

**CT:** Or they think you are trying to pull one over on them.

**TOJ:** Right, yes, something like that. I mean I think [in the Immanent Frame blog Jonathan Sheehan did quite a good job of appreciating your book](#), but even he comes to a point where he says that "by the time the reader reaches chapter twenty it becomes clear that the book is an explicit brief for a theological critique of secularism."<sup>2</sup> It appears that he also felt like you turned from philosophical description to theological confession, and in that way you really were trying to pull one over on him. Sheehan's critique is operating on a certain assumption, and I am curious to hear what you think about this widely held assumption, according to which secular philosophers consider themselves not to operate with the same type of 'fiduciary' spin that religious philosophers do?

**CT:** I think that people who react like Sheehan have a huge a priori operating. [I've actually written on this in the Immanent Frame very recently](#), but I've been working on this issue with Habermas and others for years.<sup>3</sup> That is, they have what is to me this weird idea that there is such a thing as reason alone, or bare reason. In other words they assume that there are two kinds of people, those who operate on the grounds of secular reason, who reason with reason alone, and those who operate on the grounds of religious reason, who reason from extra premises derived from revelation that are uncontrolled rationally.

So when you admit you have religious faith then you immediately get scrutinized to make sure you're not slipping in stuff. And I suppose that in my book it looks for a long time as if I'm not slipping in stuff, but then I do this full-disclosure thing at the end that makes them suspicious.

**TOJ:** But this is strange because it's no secret that you're a religious person.

**CT:** I know.

**TOJ:** If I can speculate, I guess what is maybe a little disarming is that, while your views are present in your previous writings, in *A Secular Age* you really come out much more strongly in terms of a thick description of your worldview.

**CT:** Yeah, that blows their minds. I should have told them not to read chapter twenty [laughter]. Or maybe I shouldn't have put chapter twenty in the book, but I do think it really is something you ought to do. I mean the subject matter lends itself to this kind of disclosure because all

throughout the book I am describing positions other than my own. So at some point it's proper to disclose where I am in the scene I've been describing.

**TOJ:** Would it be fair to say that you're describing in a general, and therefore broadly acceptable way, the history of religious development and the development of secularization in the West...

**CT:** That's right...

**TOJ:** And one of the conclusions you come to is that what you have is this incredible proliferation or fragmentation of spiritual options or orientations, and then in chapter twenty you say, "Ok now this is the one I inhabit." You are switching registers here are you not?

**CT:** Yes I'm definitely switching registers. But I spent a lot of time in the book describing phenomenologically what it was like to move away from Christianity, to reject Christianity really, and to be excited by Deism, by Jacobinism, by Nietzsche, and then more recently by Bataille, by Robinson Jeffers, and others. So why wouldn't I describe what it's like to convert out of this view as well, and into Christianity, which is really what chapter twenty is all about. What I want to describe is a certain form of life shared by various people, people who begin stuck in a closed reading of the immanent frame but who then break out of this closed reading. I mean take someone like Charles Péguy, who was originally an unbelieving socialist, but ended his life a practicing Roman Catholic. And someone like Flannery O'Connor, who articulates the experience of beginning to see this other dimension of existence. Or Gerard Manly Hopkins, who moves through the poetics of post-Romanticism and then into Christian faith. So all these people are people who have been in this kind of boundary situation, which is where I identify myself. This is simply another kind of experience and there is no reason why this shouldn't also be part of the phenomenological description in the book, except that full-disclosure requires me to say, "These are all very interesting positions, but I am here."

**TOJ:** That reminds me of Jeffrey Stout's *Democracy and Tradition*.<sup>4</sup> One of Stout's main arguments in that book is that we really want full-disclosure of people's religious positions in these kinds of public conversations, because what we want is to be able to have 'abnormal' conversations (conversations between people inhabiting radically different perspectives), and as long as we keep needing to check these differences at the door, so to speak, then we'll never actually get to talking about what it is we really need to talk about. So I guess I'm just affirming the legitimacy of providing full-disclosure, even within a book that is predominantly philosophical; at least, I hope that such disclosure wouldn't make the book non-philosophical, anyway. Do you have an opinion on the relationship between faith and philosophy, or on the assumption that, when you switch a register and provide full disclosure, all of a sudden you're not doing philosophy anymore but you're doing theology?

**CT:** I think that last conclusion is totally unfounded. What you need to do is to be aware of where your interlocutors are standing, and be able to distinguish between things that it ought to be possible to come to agreement on; and it's important, if we are to go on living our lives together, that we are aware that the fact that we disagree on these fundamental issues does not mean that we need to be total enemies. And my book is really an exercise in this, in that it paints a picture of the condition of the world we are living in, and in a way that I think I can get people

to agree on. And I have persuaded some people to agree on it, even though they are coming from a totally different position.

**TOJ:** Right. I think a lot of what your book does is a sort of immanent critique, in that when you come to discuss the views you don't hold, you still try to describe how things might look from those perspectives, including what is actually attractive about them. And I think the service you're doing by including chapter twenty is saying something like, "From within the view I actually inhabit this is what I find attractive about it." And it's not some kind of logically airtight argument, but rather a rhetorical move to say, "This is why it persuades me and I leave it to you to determine whether you find it a persuasive picture or not."

**CT:** Exactly, exactly.

**TOJ:** Just to bring us back to the topic of atheism, I wonder if you have any opinion regarding those who are being called the "New Atheists," say Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, and Sam Harris, who happen to be quite militant in their rhetoric.

**CT:** Yes, I happen to have quite a negative view of these folks. I think their work is very intellectually shoddy. I mean there are two things that perhaps I am just totally allergic to. The first is that they all believe that there really are some knock-down arguments against belief in God. And of course this is something you can only believe if you have a scientific, reductionist conception and explanation of everything in the world, including human beings. If you do have such a view that everything is to be explained in terms of physics and the movement of atoms and the like, then certain forms of access to God are just closed. For example, there are certain human experiences that might direct us to God, but these would all be totally illusory if everything could be explained in scientific terms. I spend a lot of time reflecting and writing on the various human sciences and how they can be tempted into a kind of reductionism, and not only would I say that the jury is out on that, but I would argue that the likelihood of that turning out to be the proper understanding of human beings is very small. And the problem is that they just assume this reductionistic view.

The second thing I am allergic to is that they keep going on and on about the relationship between religion and violence, which on one level is fine because there is a lot of religiously-caused violence. But what they consistently fail to acknowledge is that the twentieth century was full of various atheists who were rampaging around killing millions of people. So it is simply absurd that at the end of the twentieth century someone would continue to advance the thesis that religion is the main cause of violence. I mean you'd think these people were writing in 1750, and that would be quite understandable if you were Voltaire or Locke, but to say this in 2008, well it just takes my breath away.

But then what we need to do, and this is something many religious people fail to do, is to consider why this phenomena of the new atheism is happening at this time. Atheists are reacting in the same way that religious fundamentalists reacted in the past. They are people who have been very comfortable with a sense that their particular position is what makes sense of everything and so on, and then when they are confronted by something else they just go bananas and throw up the most incredibly bad arguments in a tone of indignation and anger. And that's

the problem with that whole master narrative of secularization, what's called the secularization thesis, that people got lulled into—you know, that religion is a thing of the past, that it's disappearing, that it did all these terrible things but it's going to go away and so on—because when it comes back people are just undone.

**TOJ:** Or when they realize it never went away....

**CT:** Yeah right, not only did they not notice that it was always there and never really went away, but phenomenologically in their experience it came back suddenly. Religion returned! And why? Well, for no apparent reason. It doesn't make any sense in light of the secularization thesis. And it's wrecking the whole universe they had tidily built. So they get terribly angry. And that makes for a very curious kind of atheism. So this tells us something about the zeitgeist, about what's happening, about people's having bought very deeply into a particular master narrative, namely the secularization thesis that religion is on its way out, and from which they are getting a certain degree of spiritual comfort, and now that this has been disrupted they are reacting with rage.

**TOJ:** That's very interesting. So if I'm hearing you correctly you're saying that the extreme atheist reaction to the return of religion is actually a spiritual reaction to an interrupted spiritual narrative.

**CT:** Exactly, and people are very deeply invested, I mean we're all deeply invested in our spiritual narratives, but we don't all have this sense that history is on our side. It's terrible in that sense.

**TOJ:** In *A Secular Age* you suggest that there is a parallel between these militant atheists and really dogmatic religious people. Would it be on that score?

**CT:** Exactly, exactly. The militancy is stronger in the U.S. than in Canada because there is this sense among many American Christians, more so among Protestants than Catholics, that America is founded on a certain kind of inter-denominational Protestant Christianity. I mean we know that a lot of these founders were closet Deists, like Thomas Jefferson, but for the majority of Americans it really was about a providential carrying out of God's plan and so on. And America is now split between people who hold onto this kind of national identity and others, a much smaller but more influential group who dominate the media and the universities and so on, that have a completely different read. The same constitution and the same constitutional rules are read in a secularist light; that is, there is no privileged position and that all religions are equally to be abstracted from. And the upshot is that each of these groups thinks the other has betrayed America, and is being un-American.

**TOJ:** So would you see both the religious fundamentalists and the militant atheist then as reactionaries? You know, driving wedges between people and leading to more misunderstanding and demonization?

**CT:** Absolutely.

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## Notes

1. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).
2. [http://www.ssrc.org/blogs/immanent\\_frame/2008/01/14/framing-the-middle/](http://www.ssrc.org/blogs/immanent_frame/2008/01/14/framing-the-middle/)
3. [http://www.ssrc.org/blogs/immanent\\_frame/2008/04/24/secularism-and-critique/](http://www.ssrc.org/blogs/immanent_frame/2008/04/24/secularism-and-critique/)
4. Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

## ***Religious Belonging in an "Age of Authenticity": A Conversation with Charles Taylor (Part Two of Three)***

by  
Ronald A. Kuipers

The eminent Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor recently agreed to sit down with Ronald Kuipers on behalf of *The Other Journal* to have an extended conversation about the many issues he raises in his latest book, *A Secular Age*. The two philosophers discussed such topics as the relationship between religion and politics, the relationship between faith and philosophy, and the matter of carrying forward a religious tradition in what Taylor has described as an “age of authenticity.” In what follows, the second of a three-part interview, Taylor discusses his understanding of *authenticity* as something that deeply influences contemporary Western life, including the issue of how religious life is best lived in such an “age of authenticity.” In suggesting ways in which the representatives of religious traditions should respond to people “where they are at,” Taylor echoes the themes of such twentieth-century educational theorists as Paulo Freire and John Dewey.

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***The Other Journal (TOJ)***: Another one of the discussion areas I want to probe is the notion of authenticity, which is kind of a troubled concept in that it means so many different things in different contexts, and even just within philosophy itself. In *A Secular Age*<sup>1</sup> you seem to suggest that the mass adoption of the expressive individualism of the Romantic era has both gains and costs. And I guess I am not sure if in that affirmation you were also affirming something of what [Martin] Heidegger meant by authenticity.

**Charles Taylor (CT)**: No, it’s unfortunate that it’s also Heidegger’s word. It’s not that Heidegger’s notion is millions of miles away, but he did mean something different. For Heidegger, the difference between authenticity and inauthenticity is in whether you simply accept a routine version of your tradition or whether you go back to its very bases and roots and make a resolute decision for it. So what he’s really talking about is resolute decisiveness, whereas I’m using authenticity as shorthand for the background idea that everyone has their own particular way of being human and that you can then be either true to that or untrue to that. And I think this is a background idea that’s shared by large regions of Western society, which is why I refer to our present age as *an age of authenticity*. It became sort of absolutely universal in our society in the 60s, after having been a very common notion for the previous century and a half among the cultural elite.

And this idea has become the common background from which people work out their lives. From that point of view one reaction is to say, “Listen, we’re neither for nor against authenticity; it’s simply where we’re at.” From another point of view, there are certain gains and losses associated with living in an age of authenticity. On the one hand, a trivialization of authenticity is readily



available that can make people quite unserious about certain very important issues; and on the other hand, authenticity can introduce the opportunity for discovering better and more profound ways of living and engaging with these issues.

**TOJ:** So would you say that one of the things that's better about an age of authenticity is that, instead of people taking up any particular position for traditional reasons and just carrying on a tradition unthinkingly, now people are more self-consciously saying, "Here I stand." Are you saying that's a good thing?

**CT:** That's certainly one way of looking at it—though that's more of the Heideggerian way of looking at it, perhaps. It's more that you get people really asking themselves what their particular spiritual direction is.

There is a lot of spiritual seeking going on today. For example, if you were to visit the ecumenical community of Taizé in France,<sup>2</sup> you'd meet people who are really seeking, and there is something really admirable about this. It's not that there haven't always been such seekers, it's that now there are a lot more. That's one of the good products of the culture of authenticity, which gets paired with the bad products of trivialization and "I'm just doing my thing" and all that kind of stuff.

**TOJ:** I've just finished co-teaching a two-week summer seminar entitled "Ethics After Auschwitz,"<sup>3</sup> which focuses on the work of Theodor Adorno and Emmanuel Levinas, and one of the things that has come up is that not only is Adorno critical of authenticity in Heidegger, but he's also critical of this seeking that you seem to be describing, because of its tendency to end up in trivialization. For example, let's take something as simple as consumerist fashion trends; what Adorno would argue is that people think they are going for individualism, authenticity, and cultural transformation, but in reality they're just capitulating to the domination of the capitalist system and the culture industry. So not only do their actions not bring about any real substantive structural change, but there isn't any real subjectivity or authentic personhood at work here either.

**CT:** Yes, well, we have to make two separate criticisms here. Because one criticism arises out of the political perception that there really would be a possibility of revolution if only people could be called away from that kind of trivialization. And the other is this very profound point that in lots of cases people end up rushing in herds toward a certain definition of authenticity. That definition of authenticity is terribly derivative, and it makes people virtually indistinguishable from each other as they pick up some trend. I think both these criticisms are bang on.

But the place where many people make a mistake, or I should say, where they have a totally different framework in which to see this than I am proposing, is that they see it as just a kind of contemporary fad, a fad about fads, which we could call people back from and get back into the old days when people were recruited into massive battalions, either Marxist revolutionary in Adorno's case, or orthodox Protestant or Catholic in other cases. I think this is really a massive mistake. It's analogous to the Catholic Church prior to Vatican II, which failed to see that something happened in the French Revolution that made it impossible to go back to tightly knit Catholic societies ruled from on top, yet they were always trying to reestablish these kinds of

societies. Of course, there was more realism in the Vatican than that, but they didn't really want to give their blessing to or acknowledge the theoretical acceptance of a new era in which states were ruled democratically by people and in which there was freedom of religion. It's not until Vatican II that they came around to that.

Now, one could argue, I suppose, that there were lots of things wrong with modern democracy. And of course this is true, but I would like to say two things. The first is that you can make the judgment that in the transition to modern democracies more has been gained than has been lost. But even independently of that, you can criticize all those people for the simple fact that they didn't see what the hell was going on; they didn't see what kind of world they were talking to. Now again, they had excuses for that because they were so viciously attacked in some cases by the representatives of the new order and so on, but—

**TOJ:** So what I here you saying is that, first, we should accept the fact that this is simply the way the world is, and second, that there really have been gains.

**CT:** Yes, and further, that the proper stance toward it is not saying something like, "let's roll it back."

**TOJ:** So it seems like you would almost want to make a normative distinction in an age of authenticity between inauthentic authenticity, where the quest for individuality leads ironically to a new conformity, and something like authentic authenticity.

**CT:** Yes, the way I have worded it is in terms of better and worse ways of living in this age. And we should direct our efforts toward trying to maximize the better ways rather than pretending to ourselves that we can roll it back.

**TOJ:** I'd really like to talk about the relationship between religion and memory, or religion and tradition, because I think it's an important question to consider in an age of authenticity. You suggest in *A Secular Age* that "through secularization processes the level of understanding of some of the great languages of transcendence is declining" and that because of this decline "massive unlearning is taking place." In this context, how do you still see yourself as, say, "a link in a chain of memory," if I could use Danièle Hervieu-Léger's phrase? What does it mean to continue to identify with an ancient tradition in our age of authenticity?

**CT:** Well, my idea of Christian faith is very much something that doesn't simply belong to this age. This is something I try to articulate in the last chapter of my book, that the Christian faith can be lived better and fuller by links with other ages than our own, and so we read Augustine or about the lives of the Saints and so on. And I would say that almost any kind of religious life that I can conceive of would require this in order to be deepened—both because these links can serve to deepen the religious life and because through these links one can begin to pry oneself loose from too close of an identification with one's age.

Now, I'm saying what sounds like two opposite things, but I believe they can be put together. One is to really learn the nature of your age if you want to talk to it. And the other is, if you really want to deepen your religious life, you should learn to loosen yourself from too close of an

identification with this age. And so it's very important that those languages be kept alive; and once again, a place like Taizé comes to mind, where seekers can get in contact with these languages of transcendence in their own way.

**TOJ:** So in a sense, in an age of authenticity, someone's individual seeking quest can take them in a direction of relearning, or repeating forward, a great language of transcendence.

**CT:** Exactly.

**TOJ:** So it's not necessarily that in an age of authenticity we would be so forward-looking that we would cut ourselves off from our religious past.

**CT:** Right, right. Sorry to give such a trivial example here, but one sees this even on the level of fashion, where in these different waves of fashion that have a retro character people still tend to dress themselves quite uniformly. There really isn't any level in this age where there is a total cutting with the past.

**TOJ:** I think you also say in *A Secular Age*, on the fashion example, that in one sense it's a trivialization, faddish, and conformist, but it's also a code or a language that kind of pierces the lonely crowd, sending out messages to other people and so forth.

**CT:** Sure, so what I would like to draw attention to is the fact that Christians need to think about how to speak to this age, what this age needs, and what they have to offer this age.

**TOJ:** And to do that you're saying they need to learn—

**CT:** Yeah, they need to understand this age. Take something like Taizé, where they don't ask you to sign allegiance to any doctrine, rather they come and listen to your questions and then offer various kinds of prayer sessions that you are welcome to attend. Have you been to Taizé?

**TOJ:** No, I haven't. Have you?

**CT:** Oh, yes, and I was really deeply impressed by it. A couple of my kids also went, so I know of their experience as well. I think Taizé is an excellent example of people responding to where people are, as they say, living and loving in a way that makes up for some of the lacks and losses that come along with our age of authenticity.

**TOJ:** I guess if Christianity is what it claims to be, then it should be able to be, without making people sign on to any kind of belief system, something like what Taizé accomplishes; there should be a basic confidence that you will be able to discover something relevant here for your contemporary life.

**CT:** That's right, and you wait to see what their questions are, what their search is, and then you try to respond to them in as creative a way as possible. That is a way to look at this age and act toward this age. And I regret the fact that so many church people are dedicated to rolling it back.

**TOJ:** Some have read chapter twenty as sneaking in a kind of apologia for Christianity, but in fact you actually put a very significant challenge to Christians and the current state of affairs in Christianity in the West. Would you agree with that?

**CT:** Absolutely!

**TOJ:** Because I actually think that, in terms of you talking about agapistic networks and other thick normative notions that come from Christianity, there is a sense in which you are saying at the end of your book that Christianity itself has failed to live up to this vision.

**CT:** I mean, I'm not saying this in a highly moralistic tone, because it is almost impossible to conceive of a very large-scale church totally living up to it, but there definitely is an insufficient awareness of how far we have fallen below that vision. That's what I find at least. So many people are simply satisfied with where we're at and simply want to recruit people and normalize people into this way of being without sufficient awareness. I'm not saying that we should put on sackcloths and ashes and keep pounding ourselves for being below our level of aspiration; it just means that we should be aware that there really is a gap.

**TOJ:** The recognition of that gap is very important to me too. The basic argument of my last book, *Critical Faith*,<sup>4</sup> was that an appropriate faith should allow for this moment of critical reflection. And what I hear you saying is that contemporary Christianity doesn't have a strong enough sense of how far it has fallen and regressed from what it was called to be.

**CT:** If we were really aware of the gap, then you wouldn't have this appalling sense coming from some people that "we've got it all right" and "we're the answer to all this decay and breakdown that is happening"; you know, "just listen to us and we'll reestablish morality and order" and so on. No wonder people who are outside and who are seeking are repelled by this, just repelled!

**TOJ:** And rightly so! That makes some of the reception of your book interesting, because certain secular readers were hearing you say just that, right?

**CT:** Yeah, because they're so incredibly locked into their view of what Christianity involves that they can't really get over it.

**TOJ:** So whereas some read you as saying that secularism has led to all this decay and that Christianity possesses the means to escape from it, you're in fact criticizing Christians who say that sort of thing. Yet you still want to recommend what you see as a normative Christian take on our contemporary situation, but it's in fact one that Christians themselves have fallen from.

**CT:** Yeah, but you see you have to read the whole book, and I'm sure most people didn't. You see I have an unfortunate way of writing that I don't know how to change [*laughter*], because the nature of that book and other books of mine is that I take people through a lot of very different positions and try to explain each position. It gets to be very wearisome to say, "according to x, according to x, according to x," and so I tend to swing into a position, and I assume my reader understands that I am now working out a certain position, and I then begin to use the rhetoric of

those people in that position in order to get a sense of the logical sense of it. Now, if you don't read the whole book—I mean it's obvious to me that the guy who wrote the *New York Times* book review<sup>5</sup> simply turned to page 25 and page 375 and then closed the book. And he happened to hit a sentence that was describing some position that wasn't mine, but he attributed it to me. Now, if you just take a sentence out of the middle of the page, that's an easy mistake to make. I think that's one of the things that has always happened to me.

**TOJ:** A colleague of mine described your swinging into various positions as digressive, but I really have the sense that if you have the patience and discipline to follow, then it's really worth the ride.

**CT:** Well, thank you. I certainly hope that's what my readers will experience [*laughter*]. But I don't really know how to do what I am trying to do. I mean, I couldn't really communicate a sense of why people are really into the various positions that they are, which is what I am trying to do in the book, without getting into it in the way that I have.

**TOJ:** Part of it is also the scope of the book. You've taken on the massive project of providing a thick historical picture of spiritual development in the West from 1500 to 2000, in order to tell a better story than the secularization story; that's a monumental task to set for yourself, and I don't know how one would go about that task in a linear manner. How do you feel about the general reception the book has received so far?

**CT:** I've been astonished that it's made such a splash. I guess I just expected that it would be read by maybe twelve and a half people and then it would be over [*laughter*]. It obviously has something to do with the zeitgeist and what's currently happening. Perhaps if I'd have published it two years earlier it would have fallen like a stone into a pond.

**TOJ:** I don't know about that, but I do hear you saying that there was a certain moment—

**CT:** And the moment may not even be finished yet.

**TOJ:** Right, it's still with us. Speaking for myself, I think your book is going to do a lot of work helping to shape the conversation that's going to happen in this moment and increase the understanding of a lot of the different sides of this issue. I think you already see that happening in something like the Immanent Frame blog.<sup>6</sup> Would you agree with that?

**CT:** Yes, I think that is just a terrific blog. It's run by people who you really want to be participating in this kind of conversation.

**TOJ:** I had wanted to ask you a question about reform, partly because I come from a Reformed background, but I know you are talking about reform in a larger sense as something sweeping through both the Protestant and Catholic churches, and you're not the first to point out that this drive leads into administered societies and things like that. Maybe this has little to do with your analysis of the work of reform, per se, but I'm interested in how you see ecumenical relationships between various Christian denominations in our time doing the kind of work you do. What kind of testimonial register, or message, would you see that global Christianity could

bring to the world in terms of solidarity?

**CT:** I think there is a very important new field opening here, and it's quite remarkable how ecumenicism just became incredibly important as the twentieth century moved on. I'm not sure I have all the explanations for this, but it did indeed happen, and became a much bigger part of the agenda of every church, particularly the Catholic Church. Again, that was part of the turnaround brought about by Vatican II.

I think there is something very new happening where there is a sense that we don't believe in any particular position, whether as Catholic or Reformed peoples, whoever the *we* happens to be. We don't have all the answers; we can't entirely explain why things are going the way they are going; and we can't explain why people of good will don't always agree with one another.

Without deserting our particular position—because it's something that is very deep in us, and it's a part of our spiritual life; I mean if you are Catholic, you go to Mass and so on—we have the ability to open ourselves and to try to understand and feel in a sympathetic way why people hold to a different position, whether it be Protestant or something outside of Christianity like Buddhist, Hindu, or Muslim. And there is a certain kind of dialogue where both sides are trying to do that, which goes beyond a sort of backslapping where we're all friends, beyond a “let's-tackle-together-the-problems-of-the-world style of ecumenicism” kind of thing—which is fine on one level, but it really doesn't go to the level I am talking about where you really have this desire to know what it's like to be the other person and live their kind of spiritual life.

**TOJ:** And that is relatively new, wouldn't you say?

**CT:** Very new!

**TOJ:** I'm only thirty-nine, but I've seen quite a thaw in the academy over the past ten or fifteen years. It seems that there is a broad desire among people of various religious traditions to engage in immanent critique without skirting their own position, and to try to find out from the point of view of another what makes their position attractive to them. You know, having conversations without predicting where they will go, in which people just genuinely want to understand each other better.

**CT:** I think this is a really important spiritual development. It represents a different way of inhabiting one's faith. And it gets beyond the terrible fear reactions that we mustn't let too much in from the outside, or that if we do gain a sympathetic understanding of the other, we are somehow betraying our own spiritual tradition.

It also resists the attempt to strengthen one's faith by accepting and perpetuating totally unreal stories of other religions. You know, people have said for years that Hinduism and Buddhism are simply other-worldly, and so Western Christians haven't felt the need to consider that these religions really might have something to teach us because we've assumed from the outset that they don't. So this operation I am involved in is partly a throwing away of crutches to move towards a more open, honest, and authentic faith.

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## Notes

1. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).
2. <http://www.taize.fr/en>
3. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kpAtM1qcu0k>
4. Ronald A. Kuipers, *Critical Faith: Toward a New Understanding of Religious Faith and Its Public Accountability* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002).
5. <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/16/books/review/Diggins-t.html?ref=books>
6. [http://www.ssrc.org/blogs/immanent\\_frame/](http://www.ssrc.org/blogs/immanent_frame/)

## *Accommodation, Islamophobia, and the Politics of Mobilization: An Interview with Charles Taylor (Part Three of Three)*

by  
Ron Kuipers

### **Introduction**

The eminent Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor recently agreed to have an extended conversation with Ronald Kuipers, a representative of *The Other Journal*, about the many issues he raises in his latest book, *A Secular Age*. The two philosophers discussed such topics as the relationship between religion and politics, the relationship between faith and philosophy, and the matter of carrying forward a religious tradition in what Taylor has described as an “age of authenticity.” In what follows, the third of a three-part interview, Taylor discusses how his findings as part of the Quebec Commission square with the analysis of contemporary society set forth in *A Secular Age*. In surveying the landscape of North American religious and political culture, Taylor addresses such topics as secularism, accommodation, Islamophobia, and the politics of mobilization.

***The Other Journal (TOJ)***: I’d like to start by asking you a bit about your experience as part of the Province of Quebec’s Consultation Commission on Accommodation Practices Related to Cultural Differences (popularly known as the Quebec Commission). For our unfamiliar readers, this involved co-chairing (with Gérard Bouchard) months of public hearings across the province of Quebec that explored the impact of religious accommodation on Quebec’s identity and values. You’ve just recently finished the work, which included listening to the views of nearly three thousand citizens, by submitting a 300-page report.<sup>1</sup> I was wondering if you heard anything in the public hearings that surprised you or that you weren’t expecting?

**Charles Taylor (CT)**: Not so much in general outline, but I learned a lot in the fine detail. This experience made a lot of difference from that point of view. I knew there was a big reaction against a very dominant Catholic Church, and I knew there was a lot of ambivalence around that; a lot of people took some distance from that and others felt that they still had a very strong sense of their identity being linked with that. This is something everyone knew beforehand. But as to how the emotions were worked out, that was something very new to me.

***TOJ***: So you heard a certain level of emotion that you weren’t quite expecting?

**CT**: Oh, yes. These were very emotional meetings, the open forums more so than the formal presentation briefs. People spoke from the heart and really said what they were feeling, and sometimes it was very raw. There was a great deal of anxiety, the typical kind of anxiety that you see in some European countries, in a context where they find themselves in a much more religiously diversified situation than in the past, and they are worried about whether and to what extent their national identity will continue.

What a lot of the Quebecois are dealing with centers around religion, but in two contradictory ways, which is why it’s so difficult to understand. On the one hand, part of the sense of where



they are at in their national identity is the “Quiet Revolution,” which reacted against an extremely authoritarian religious moment. They consider this revolution to be one of their great achievements, so you get this expression of fear toward unfamiliar religions, Sikhism, but mostly Islam. You get the fear that it’s going to bring them backward, which is not a very nice idea to them.

On the other hand, there is also a sense that where they come from is a very deeply Catholic past. And of course, the same kind of people have these two kinds of emotions; horror toward religion in general because of the dominance of the Catholic Church, but also a certain attachment to the Catholic past. And sometimes this is played out in a way that is very bewildering. So the same kind of people can have these two very different reactions, and from that point of view these unfamiliar religions are kind of threatening. They threaten to dethrone and relativize the deeply culturally Catholic identity of Quebec.

So you get the two reactions from the same people, which results in two very different responses. The first would be in favor of the very general hard line laicism [or secularism] of the kind people think is French but really isn’t. The people’s image of French *laïcité* is so far from the reality. So we’re dealing with myths of a certain sort. Sometimes people react as very hard line *laïcité* [or secularists], but sometimes they are more concerned to defend the local tradition; so they get very angry at what they think are the demands of people from other religions, for example, those who want to remove the Christmas tree from the town hall. These demands are invariably made but by those who have become very atheistic, not by the minority religions who really don’t want to get into that. But there is this idea that the minority religions are somehow behind these demands.

So you get these two kinds of fear and indignation going in very different directions. I guess I didn’t know until we went through the whole process how important each one was. I think that in the end, the strong secularist position is a very minority position. However, their spokespeople are very articulate and educated, and therefore, they can produce a lot of op-ed pieces and exert a disproportionate amount of influence. But they really don’t represent the majority of the people.

**TOJ:** So what you heard in these hearings was sort of an enrichment of the peoples’ opinion on these questions, not just the educated and outspoken leaders.

**CT:** Many people are confused. I mean there are so many tracks, and they don’t all fit together. We used to make a joke that the majority-winning strategy simply in popularity terms would be to combine an extremely lax secularism in relation to traditional Catholic customs and an extremely severe secularism in relation to everything else.

**TOJ:** That’s really interesting, because I had read actual editorials to that effect, where one notices such an inconsistency, where the laical or secularistic kind of attitude is taken with respect to minority religions, but the attachment to the Catholic past is an unquestioned baseline that Quebecers are kind of comfortable with, even though they are worried about going back to the Duplessis era.

**CT:** That’s exactly it! “*Laïcité pour les autres*,” [Secularism for the others] as somebody put it

[laughter].

**TOJ:** Well, that kind of segues into a follow-up question: The readership of *The Other Journal* is mostly American, and though Quebec is unique in regard to its cultural and political history, I'm wondering if you have any insights or thoughts into how Quebecers' opinion on these kinds of questions might actually represent a larger North American anxiety. Take the example of John Tory's punishment at the Ontario polls for supporting public funding for private religious schools. If other provinces, states, or jurisdictions held a commission like this, which I think might be useful, what do you think they would find that would be similar or different?

**CT:** I wish we could do that; I would love to know what was behind that vote in Ontario over public funding for private religious schools. In a certain sense, this decision privileges the Catholic schools, which receive public funding as a constitutionally entrenched right. So this was a move that prevented that set of privileges from being generalized and extended to other religions. So my guess is that there is a certain amount of anxiety about these new and unfamiliar religions; there is obviously a certain amount of Islamophobia. And let's face it; a lot of this generalized fear of the new religions in the West, including the widely circulating Islamophobia, was prompted by 9/11. So I would probably guess that that was part of the make-up of the Ontario vote. Maybe all the Catholics happily voted against Tory's proposal for public funding for all religious schools, and in that sense they were happily entrenching a privilege they have in virtue of Canadian history.

**TOJ:** Although I didn't follow all the media reports on the Quebec commission, I know the media reported on it a lot when it was happening, and they would usually report on some of the more sensational comments that were made. Sometimes these comments would reflect, I don't know if bile is the right word, but as you said, a deep emotional anxiety would surface. Right then and there, I thought that if they did this in Ontario or Alberta, I'm not so sure one wouldn't hear the same sort of things. Is that a fair statement?

**CT:** Possibly a fair statement. I mean we get a lot of stick in Quebec from the media in the rest of the country that we're much more xenophobic [or afraid of otherness] than they are, and I tend to think that's not really true. As a Quebecer, it gets my back up a bit. But to be fair, if the anxiety is more intense in Quebec, perhaps it's because we have a standing anxiety about a defense of this minority culture that goes back 250 years. So there's a much stronger anxiety about that in Quebec. Whereas even very WASPish people, although they too can feel they have been drowned in multiculturalism, aren't worried that their culture or language will disappear. I think the anxiety level is certain to be higher here, but I think similar feelings of being swamped are felt elsewhere as well. So there are similar aspects, and yet I have to say something else that is very anti-Ontario.

**TOJ:** I'm from Alberta originally, so go ahead [laughter].

**CT:** The debate a couple of years ago surrounding Marion Boyd's proposal to continue to allow faith-based arbitration to settle family disputes such as divorce, custody, and inheritances outside the court system—especially the controversy that arose when the Islamic Institute of Civil Justice said it wanted to set up its own faith-based arbitration panels under the province's

Arbitration Act, based on Shariah law—that debate, in my frank opinion, made me ashamed to be a Canadian. I’m not saying that the actual conclusion was wrong, because that is a very complicated question, but the tenor of the debate was shocking, appalling, it was hysterical Islamophobia at its worst.

**TOJ:** And this wasn’t just about extending these kinds of rights for legal recognition to Islamic religious councils, it would have also recognized Jewish and Protestant Christian communities as well.

**CT:** These rights had already had been extended to Jewish and Protestant Christian communities. What Dalton McGinty [Premier of Ontario] had to do by canceling this amendment was also to rescind their privilege. And this dramatic change in the direction of Ontario’s society was dictated by a public debate of the most shameful babble. Hearing it made me shudder to think that I’m a Canadian citizen—

And look at what happened to the Archbishop of Canterbury when he mentioned the s-word [Sharia]. When he said that there might have to be some recognition of Sharia provision, the same kind of mindless outcry ensued. We are living in Western civilization, which has this massive Islamophobic potential, and it’s being whipped up by certain people that can turn this into a hysterical mob of shrieking idiots.

**TOJ:** If I remember correctly, in the debate around certain kinds of Sharia family law, a certain kind of feminist concern was voiced. Would you lump that in with this hysteria?

**CT:** Absolutely. I mean when you ask some of these people now if they are really proud of what they did, they say, “I don’t know; I don’t know.” The feminist concern was really meant to be in defense of the most defenseless person, which is the practicing Muslim woman integrated into her community. In fact, what they did really does nothing for her, because if she wants to divorce, she needs a religious divorce; otherwise she can’t remarry. And the whole point of the Marion Boyd proposal was to create assistance for Muslim religious divorces, which would be carefully scrutinized by trained state personnel; people with right-of-oversight trained in the Canadian Charter of Rights who could intervene if certain rights were violated.

Now you could argue that those wouldn’t work, and I really couldn’t give an opinion until I knew much more about the sociology of the Ontario Islamic community. But all we heard was, “No Sharia in Ontario!” The feminist organizations, to their utter shame, played along with the worst kind of generalized Islamophobia, hinting that this would increase the possibility of terrorism and so on.

**TOJ:** This is a bit of an aside, but when this was being debated, I was holding a postdoctoral fellowship at the University of Toronto in the Political Science department. I was sharing an office with an Ismaili Muslim, Mebs Kanji, and we had some really interesting discussions where we discovered that we had the same sorts of feelings on the issue. Even as a Christian, I was more for recognizing this because I wasn’t as threatened, and I didn’t think the world would come to an end if we allowed a safe-guarded space for Muslims to practice their religion.

**CT:** I'm curious to know your Muslim colleague's take on the matter, and what the general Ismaili Muslim take was?

**TOJ:** From talking with him, it seemed that the Ismaili Muslims are really pretty moderate.

**CT:** But they are seen by really hardline Sunni as not really being Muslim, right?

**TOJ:** True. We really saw eye-to-eye on the issue; I mean he thought the amount of hysteria was quite ridiculous as well. I don't think he mentioned the word Islamophobia, but of course he was pretty sensitive to that kind of thing.

**CT:** There are big chunks of many Western publics that are capable of succumbing to Islamophobic hysteria. It's interesting to note that a large part of the French debate on the Stasi Report, which ended up banning the hijab in French schools, has the same sort of hysterical quality. And I think the same hysterical flair can be seen all throughout the West. Not just in Quebec, and not just in Toronto. The same type of Islamophobia is very much alive all throughout Canada and the United States.

**TOJ:** I suppose you see the potential for violence in this context; so as far as the recommendations made by you and your colleague Gérard Bouchard, were there any policy recommendations to specifically address the threat of violence?

**CT:** Absolutely. There are two main axes of recommendations. First, we really think we have to make sure that the people who immigrate have a real opportunity to integrate. And they don't really have this opportunity at the moment because their educational and occupational qualifications from their country of origin aren't being recognized. And second, there are various measures that can be taken to make the ethnic media more aware of and cognizant of each other. And we did see some of this occur in the course of the commission itself. We got Muslims together with others, and everyone learned to some surprise that many of the negative viewpoints people had of each other were in fact wrong and not well-informed.

**TOJ:** This follow-up question will kind of segue into a discussion about your recent book *A Secular Age*: As you said, you learned a lot from participating in the Quebec Commission, and I think this must have been quite a unique opportunity for a scholar like you to have your ear to the ground and really hear what people are thinking. And now that you've also just finished this massive book on secularism in the West, I'm wondering if you found your description of the spiritual landscape in the West highly confirmed by what you heard or whether there were some surprises?

**CT:** Highly confirmed, but I think the things I said about the landscape in the book, at least the contemporary landscape, are based on things that are very widely known. For example, let's take the issue of spiritual fragmentation; there is a much wider gamut of possible positions today—people are moving between positions, combining positions, and inventing new ones—than in the early part of the twentieth century. Now everybody knows that, but in the book, I tried to give an explanation for why this is the case by naming the historical factors. And as I said, my experience in the Quebec Commission confirmed it. There is immense variation in what

Quebecers now believe, and conversions are on the rise, including conversions to Islam. I mean the first case to hit the media back in 1994 about a girl not being allowed to wear a hijab in school, well, she was actually a Quebecoise convert to Islam. This is simply one of the phenomena that occurs in a society augmented by immigration and fraught by religious diversity.

**TOJ:** So in that sense, Quebec is a lot like the rest of the modern contemporary West.

**CT:** Yeah, exactly.

**TOJ:** This might be a good time to turn our attention to the American political landscape for a moment. Earlier [see Part I] we spoke about a deep division between secular and religious perspectives in the United States, in which each side sees the other as betraying something fundamentally American. How do you think increasing religious diversity in the United States has impacted this divisive political landscape?

**CT:** One of the phenomena I discuss in *A Secular Age* is the development of democratic politics based on mass-mobilization and justifying itself by the will of the people—even if it eventuates in some kind of gruesome regime of a dictatorial nature. I'm talking about the kind of politics where this kind of mobilization is the marker, and the marker is very often religious. So certain kinds of Islamism are exactly that. Islamism, in the strict sense that someone like Olivier Roy uses,<sup>2</sup> is a position that sees Islam as a kind of formula for governing societies, which then ought to be applied. I think there are terribly powerful, passionate, and adversarial emotions that develop around that kind religiously-defined national identity. And I think the misfortune of the United States is that they're engaged in a kind of quasi civil war that is marked by this kind of politics of mobilization. I mean it's possible that they might get pulled out of it; it's possible that someone like Obama could pull them out of it.

**TOJ:** But there is still a deep potential for conflict there?

**CT:** Yes, a deep potential. I mean there are very powerful, well-organized minorities on both sides that would love to have a knock-down drag-out fight about these things.

**TOJ:** Are you talking about a culture war fight or actual physical violence?

**CT:** No, no, no, God preserve us, I certainly hope not. I probably shouldn't just throw around the term quasi civil war, but I mean a culture war fight of an extremely nasty kind.

**TOJ:** Nastier than we've seen before?

**CT:** Well, I hope that the experience of the last years, and particularly the way in which one of these gangs has wrecked the bus in a spectacular way with Iraq and everything else—I'm hoping that they're going to draw back from the brink. And it's significant that neither of the two candidates is going to want to take this kind of politics up. John McCain is the only Republican candidate who didn't heavily invest in this politics of mobilization. I mean he's going to start doing it now for drearily political reasons; he's going to start throwing hunks of red meat.

**TOJ:** But it's important also to remember that these culture war battles that were very nasty also did entrench a political agenda that did wreak a lot of actual physical violence in the world

**CT:** Yeah, that's right. It's a very violent outlet, one that thankfully isn't on the American scene itself.

**TOJ:** So pulling back from this would obviously have global ramifications. I'm really interested in what potential Obama might have in this regard.

**CT:** Yeah, I'm really impressed with him. I must say that his first speech on his unfortunate mentor Rev. Wright—and I think it's such a shame that he had to go on and on and on about this—was really one of the great political speeches, in that he managed to tell some truth about the tension in American race relations while still being able to disengage himself from certain positions he couldn't be identified with. It's rare that that happens.

**TOJ:** I know, and what I find impressive about him, too, is that when there starts to be hints of political trouble like that, he doesn't recoil and go to the lowest common denominator. He's actually talking up to people and saying, "Listen, this was my preacher, and I'm not simply going to write him off"—he's assuming people can understand the nature of a very complex relationship with someone.

**CT:** Here's another thing. I mean, every American candidate has to profess belief in God, and I really believe *his* profession!

**TOJ:** Oh, I see what you mean, so you don't doubt the authenticity of his faith even though—

**CT:** What I mean is that the authenticity of his faith comes through to me. I'm not saying the negative in the other cases [*laughter*], but it doesn't come through as clearly, and the candidates are always under a certain suspicion from my point of view because they have to make such a profession.

**TOJ:** I can't remember which speech it was—I think it was his "Call to Renewal Keynote Address," where he described his path to faith; he was very careful to say how he will carry his faith into a pluralistic society, which I thought was also a very sensitive reading of the way faith relates to a public world.

**CT:** The United States really needs that!

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## Notes

1. Available for download at <http://www.accommodements.qc.ca/index-en.html>.
2. See <http://www.ssrc.org/sept11/essays/roy.htm>.

