

Reason vs. Faith: the Battle Continues

By RICHARD WOLIN

In 1802 Georg W.F. Hegel wrote an impassioned treatise on faith and reason, articulating the major philosophical conflict of the day. Among European intellectual circles, the Enlightenment credo, which celebrated the "sovereignty of reason," had recently triumphed. From that standpoint, human intellect was a self-sufficient measure of the true, the just, and the good. The outlook's real target, of course, was religion, which the *philosophes* viewed as the last redoubt of delusion and superstition. Theological claims, they held, could only lead mankind astray. Once the last ramparts of unreason were breached — our mental Bastilles, as it were — sovereign reason would take command and, presumably, human perfection would not be long in coming.

Soon legions of skeptics and naysayers emerged to cast doubt on the Enlightenment's presumptuous self-conceit. By making the lowly human intellect the measure of all truth, weren't the *philosophes* arbitrarily isolating humanity from the possibility of attaining a higher order of truth? Who would really want to inhabit a totally enlightened universe, denuded of mystery, plurality, and sublimity? What if ultimate reality weren't attainable by the prosaic methods of cognition or secular reason? What if, instead, the Absolute had more to do with the faculties of the imagination, intuition, or the unfathomable mysteries of the human unconscious?

A cursory glance at the major cultural divide of our day suggests that, in many respects, we haven't gotten much beyond the landmark dispute between faith and reason that separated the leading lights in Hegel's time. For with the notable exception of Western Europe, on nearly every continent, religion seems to have found its second wind. And it would be difficult to deny that this global revival of spirituality has occurred in pointed reaction to the broken promises of enlightened modernity. Nineteenth-century utopians like Charles Fourier speculated that, once industrial society was perfected, rivers and lakes would pulsate with lemonade, public fountains would overflow with salmon, men would learn to fly, and wild beasts would do our hunting. Instead, as we confront on a daily basis the dislocations of Western modernity — teeming cities, urban blight, industrially scarred landscapes, massive pollution, and climate change of eschatological proportions — it seems as though Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West* was more clairvoyant than Fourier's odes to universal harmony.

Prominent secularization theorists like Peter L. Berger who, as recently as the 1960s, openly conceded religion's demise, are having to radically alter their forecasts. They have had to invent new concepts and categories to describe the phenomenon of religion's unexpected global resurgence. The philosopher Jurgen Habermas now felicitously refers to the advent of a "postsecular society" to characterize religiosity's remarkable staying power. In recent works such as *Between Naturalism and Religion* (Polity Press, 2008), he questions whether modern societies possess the moral resources to persevere without relying on their religious roots — the Judeo-Christian basis of secular ethics, for example. And Berger himself, who was once secularization theory's most vocal proponent, has expressed his change of heart in a book title, *The Desecularization of the World* (W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999).

Today academe is rife with discussions of "political theology," a term popularized during the 1920s by the German jurist Carl Schmitt. Schmitt meant by it that all modern political concepts — sovereignty, natural rights, the social contract — are secularized versions of theological concepts. He sought to call into question the legitimacy of the modern age, which in his view fed parasitically off of a nobler theological past. Along the same lines, two weighty anthologies edited by the Johns Hopkins philosopher Hent de Vries have stressed the centrality of political theology for comprehending the impasse of the political present, defined in terms of the sordid triumph of neoliberalism and globalization: *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World* (Fordham University Press, 2006, with Lawrence E. Sullivan of Notre Dame) and *Minimal Theologies: Critiques of Secular Reason in Adorno and Levinas* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005, translated by Geoffrey Hale).

The resurgence of political theology suggests that the promises of secular modernity have played themselves out and been found to be severely wanting. Formerly, Marxism provided a framework for radical social criticism. But with Communism's demise, the discourse of critique has seemingly been deprived of an immanent, secular basis. This is one key reason behind the revival of scholarly interest in political theology, which employs a messianic or salvific idiom to expose the failings of a predominantly "secular age."

As de Vries and Sullivan observe in the preface to *Political Theologies*: "The model of limited governance in political liberalism ... and the unstoppable engine of globalization find their match in spreading expressions of discontentment and resistance, which are often articulated in *theologico-political* terms." An appeal to the promises of "negative theology" — although we can't claim to know what a redeemed humanity might look like, we can speculate about the debased social conditions that prevent its realization — was the plaintive note on which Theodor Adorno concluded his aphoristic masterwork, *Minima Moralia*. As Adorno poignantly put it: "The only philosophy that can be responsibly practiced in the face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption. ... Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the Messianic light." Adorno's dramatic shift away from the profane discourse of left-wing social criticism to the framework of negative theology is a path that numerous disillusioned former leftists have subsequently tread.

A Secular Age (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007) is the title of a hefty tome — 874 pages, to be precise — published to much acclaim by the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor. Two centuries ago, the German philosopher J.G. Fichte described the modern world as being in an age of "total moral corruption." To judge by Taylor's account, Fichte's verdict may have been excessively mild. The problem is that in modern life, religiosity has ceased to be an all-encompassing imperative. Instead, it resembles another "lifestyle choice," akin to whether one practices yoga or tai chi at the local gym. Taylor shows his hand forcefully and early on: "In our 'secular' societies, you can engage fully in politics without ever encountering God, that is, coming to a point where the crucial importance of the God of Abraham for this whole enterprise is brought home forcefully and unmistakably." Our public spaces, he writes, "have been emptied of God or of any reference to ultimate reality. ... This is in striking contrast to earlier periods, when Christian faith laid down authoritative prescriptions, often through the mouths of clergy, which could not be easily ignored. ..."

In Taylor's view, the failings of a secular age are egregious and manifold. He claims that, to our detriment, we live in an era of "exclusive humanism." To him, it is self-evident that the ideal of "fullness" — of authentic "lived experience" — is tied to ends that surmount both the self as well as the profane ends of creaturely life. For Taylor, it is clear that such ends can only be religious or transcendent.

Taylor contrives a new "faith based" lexicon of social criticism to indict the multifarious shortcomings of a secular age. In his view, modernity's "crisis of meaning" has reached grave and epidemic proportions. As denizens of a fallen world, we systematically lack commitments and allegiances that transcend the narrow confines of our own monadic egos. Our social existence has withered to the point where we have become a mass of atomized, "buffered" selves — living caricatures of Descartes's shallow, epistemological solipsism, *ego cogito sum*. As social beings we are incapable of creating cohesive and lasting bonds. For this reason, we have become incapable of community. Taylor castigates Protestantism — for him, Luther's 95 theses represent the beginning of the end of a transcendent, divinely ordained cosmos — insofar as it sacralized the everyday and thus obliterated the distance separating the sacred and profane. Deism, the religion of choice among the *philosophes*, comes in for a similar indictment, since it heretically sought to reconcile divinity with the strictures of a soulless and mechanistic Newtonian universe. According to the worldview of modern physics, what it means to be human is simply to be a body or an atom careening in space. Surely, existence doesn't get any more forlorn and godforsaken than that. "Authenticity" and "fullness" have become, at best, dim and distant memories.

The problem is that, as a thinker, Taylor is constitutionally incapable of conceiving of meaning in secular terms. His account smacks of one-sidedness — it is insufficiently dialectical. In an era of multiculturalism and value pluralism, it is both impossible and undesirable to return to the inflexible prescriptions of Belief as such. Moreover, Taylor refuses to acknowledge that, traditionally, dogmatic, all-encompassing religious doctrines have stood in the way of meaningful self-determination. Historically, the fundamentalist credo whose loss he mourns has inhibited freedom of inquiry, tolerance, human rights, and political emancipation. A life course that is not self-chosen, but that instead is lived under the constraint of authoritarian value-prescriptions, be they secular or sacred, is not a meaningful human life.

Moreover, Taylor is unconscionably silent when it comes to acknowledging the historical and political excesses of dogmatic belief: the intolerance, the persecutions, the expulsions, the forced conversions, the autos-da-fé. With Vatican II, the Catholic Church embraced the modern world — democracy, human rights, and religious pluralism — and thereby magnanimously avowed the errors of its previous ways. Taylor stubbornly refuses to walk down that road. Instead he wishes to turn back the clock — knowing all the while that that is impossible.

The irony is that Taylor's book itself might be a primary symptom that the tide has begun to turn; that the "secular age" he describes is well on its way to becoming "resacralized"; that the age of belief is in fact making a noteworthy comeback.

The crisis of meaning afflicting modernity was astutely diagnosed by the sociologist Max Weber who, in "Science as a Vocation" (1919), forecast that "the fate of our times is characterized by

rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the 'disenchantment of the world.'" For Weber, the rise of rationalization meant that in the modern age all aspects of life are increasingly subjected to the solvent of instrumental reason. Rationality's advance causes meaning — and qualitative human experience in general — to atrophy.

A vocal chorus of scientific skeptics has emerged to challenge religion's resurgence. In many respects, they have reformulated the *philosophes'* critique of belief, which they have supplemented and buttressed with neo-Darwinian claims. They argue that since religion is an illusion — an expression of "false consciousness" — and since illusions are detrimental to progress, the world would be a better place were the last vestiges of belief entirely extirpated.

The problem is that, historically speaking, belief and meaning — or, to use Taylor's preferred term, "fullness" — have been integrally intertwined. Hence, to reject belief in the name of science potentially aggravates the crisis of meaning, with its attendant upsets and dislocations: alienation, social disorientation, anomie.

The return of the sacred is in large measure a response to modernity's failings. However, religion's neo-Darwinian detractors seem unable to fathom the correlation. Moreover, they are peculiarly tone deaf, or "unmusical," when it comes to comprehending the very real attractions of belief and spirituality for a great many denizens of our hyperrationalized, disenchanted cosmos. Thus, in *The God Delusion* (Houghton Mifflin, 2006), Richard Dawkins's portrayal of belief is so dismissive and simplistic that one wonders why anyone would embrace such demented and malicious ideals. As Dawkins observes: "To the vast majority of believers around the world, religion all too closely resembles what you hear from the likes of [Pat] Robertson, [Jerry] Falwell or [Ted] Haggard, Osama bin Laden or the Ayatollah Khomeini." Dawkins goes on to praise a newspaper advertisement for a BBC documentary based on his book featuring a pre-September 11 image of lower Manhattan — with the World Trade Center towers prominently displayed — bearing the caption: "Imagine a world without religion." In other words: Religion and fanaticism go hand in hand; it is impossible to separate the two.

In *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (Viking, 2006), the philosopher Daniel C. Dennett begins with a parable that ultimately reveals more about the author's own antitheological prejudices than about his purported object of study. Dennett describes the suicidal behavior of an ant that repeatedly strives to climb to the top of a blade of grass where it can be better spied by potential predators. It turns out that the insect is the victim of a parasite that, to the ant's peril, is angling for the completion of its own reproductive cycle. Dennett treats this vignette as a cautionary tale about the perils of religion as an instance of demonic possession — albeit, ideational rather than microbial possession.

A few pages later he stoops to purvey an even more unflattering and condescending analogy: "Think of people who are addicted to drugs, or gambling, or alcohol, or child pornography. They need all the help they can get." Dennett views *Breaking the Spell* as an intellectual "intervention" for believers who similarly need to be weaned from their unwholesome addiction to divinity and transcendence.

But from a narrowly neo-Darwinian perspective, it is impossible to account for religion's indispensable role in forming the higher ideals that, as a species, help to make us genuinely civilized. Historically, religious ideals have inspired agape, compassion, selflessness, brotherly and sisterly love, community, and numerous good works. They have spurred political leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., and Desmond Tutu to oppose oppression and champion the cause of social equality. Religious conviction provided the moral suasion behind the 19th-century antislavery movement and has been a spur to numerous instances of humanitarian intervention.

A genuine and fruitful dialogue between believers and nonbelievers is impossible unless one takes the standpoint of one's interlocutor seriously.

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