

Faith Maps

Ten religious explorers from Newman to Joseph Ratzinger

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Charles Taylor: the pressures of modernity

In 1960, when Charles Taylor was a graduate student in Oxford, he published an article entitled 'Clericalism', critical of the marginal role given to lay people in the Catholic Church. This showed, he argued, a defensive Church, isolated from modern culture, and slow to appreciate the new humanism that had come to birth over recent centuries. Such a ghetto stance was unfaithful to the Incarnation, because Christian faith invites us to move towards God through our humanity and through the changing adventure of history.

This youthful article came two years before the opening the Second Vatican Council. In subsequent decades, as the work of this Canadian philosopher became widely known, his books often touched on religious themes without ever making them central. However his Catholicism has become a more explicit presence in his writings in the last ten years or so (beginning with *A Catholic Modernity* of 1999). In 2008, for instance, he wrote a short reflection on the barriers between the university world and religion. His critique is now directed against a different form of academic clericalism, whereby philosophers, sociologists and historians find it normal to ignore the spiritual dimension of life. Such intellectuals, he holds, have not only forgotten the answers to the great questions of life, they have forgotten the questions.

Beyond human flourishing

Although Taylor is a moral and political philosopher rather than a specifically religious thinker, he offers us a perspective not found in more theological authors. In particular, his explorations of cultural history can help us to understand the effect of changing contexts on faith. Context conditions consciousness, as a Marxist emphasis would have it, and the 'modern' consciousness of the individual has been a constant theme in Taylor's work. He has explored in depth the influence of this emerging self-image on our religious horizons

– or lack of them. Especially in recent writings, he has tried to understand our spiritual situation as living in an age dominated by secularity, and he invites us to stop moaning about statistical or sociological loss of faith and to ask deeper questions.

Comments on the nature and importance of faith occur with increasing frequency in Taylor's work, often stressing that religious belief is richer than the usual cultural perception of it. For instance, he rejects the assumption 'that the main point of religion is solving the human need for meaning' (*SA*, 718), because he suspects this approach of being influenced by a pervasive individualism that measures everything in terms of self-fulfilment. Instead, he presents religion as a source of graced conversion, where 'the perspective of a transformation of human beings' takes them beyond what 'is normally understood as human flourishing' (*SA*, 430). As Taylor has remarked, a purely social or functional account of religion would be like Hamlet without the Prince.

What he sees as specific to Christian faith is captured in this sentence: 'God's initiative is to enter, in full vulnerability, the heart of the resistance, to be among humans, offering participation in the divine life' (*SA*, 654). Against more agnostic or psychological viewpoints, he stresses that Christian revelation empowers people through their sharing in God's own love. In an eloquent passage in *A Catholic Modernity*, he wonders how such a high vision of love can become real today and he writes: 'our being in the image of God is also our standing among others in the stream of love [which ultimately is] the Trinity. Now it makes a whole lot of difference whether you think this kind of love is a possibility for us humans. I think it is, but only to the extent that we open ourselves to God' (*CM*, 35). This seems a remarkable statement of faith commitment, all the more impressive since it comes from a world-famous philosopher.

From his perspective as a specialist in cultural history Taylor underlines that faith 'has survived ... by evolving' (*VRT*, 104). Moreover, he is convinced that God is gradually 'educating mankind' by 'transforming it from within' (*SA*, 668). Even a time of cultural upheaval can purify images of God which were 'too simple, too anthropocentric, too indulgent' (*VRT*, 57). He also suggests that 'we are just at the beginning of a new age of religious search-

ing, whose outcome no one can foresee' (*SA*, 535), but when faith will be less 'collective [and] more christocentric' (*SA*, 541). It will also need 'a new poetic language' (*SA*, 757). In this he echoes the emphasis on imagination that we have seen in theological writers as different as Newman, Balthasar and Soelle. For Taylor the hope is to nourish faith today through moments of 'epiphany', akin to the experience of art as a call from beyond the self, because in this way we discover 'moral sources *outside* the subject which resonate *within*' (*SS*, 510).

The complex story of modernity

The first chapter of his enormous book, *A Secular Age*, published in 2007, begins with a question: 'why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable?' His answer involves the birth of a 'modern' sense of the self, as less embedded in traditions of belonging, more insistent on individual rights, and assuming that this 'disengaged' version of self is simply common sense. But 'human nature is something that ... cannot be conceived as existing in a single individual' (*CM*, 113). In this spirit Taylor defends the importance of community roots and 'mutual enrichment' as opposed to 'solitary self-sufficiency' (*CM*, 114, 116). He is sympathetic to the 'modern' ideal of personal authenticity and yet suspicious of its more dehumanising embodiments, in particular of its tendency to get out of touch with sources of meaning larger than the individual self. Among these larger horizons is the possibility of religious faith.

Taylor is frequently impatient with approaches to secular modernity that provide only surface descriptions of what he considers a more complex story. What he calls 'acultural' theories of modernity are merely sociological in the sense of explaining secularisation as the automatic product of urbanisation, or the inevitable outcome of scientific rationality. According to this interpretation modernity would be like an automatic steamroller, levelling out traditions, local cultures and religious faith. The mistake of this 'acultural' school is to see everything through the lens of Western history and to interpret decline of religion only in

terms of loss of beliefs, thinking that science and the new individualism make the truth claims of Christianity incredible.

Instead Taylor seeks to deepen the agenda of discussion from the world of ideas to the more hidden world of self-images. Again and again he insists that the loss of faith associated with Western modernity is less a crisis of truth or epistemology than of ethics and of imagination. He holds that secularisation has to do with our moral self-understanding, and more particularly with our 'social imaginary'. This expression refers to our ways of imaging our lives – before theory comes along to analyse or explain things. It points to 'that largely unstructured and inarticulate understanding of our whole situation' (*MSI*, 25) which serves as a background music of our lived assumptions.

In ways reminiscent of Newman (whom, surprisingly, he never mentions) Taylor defends this less intellectual or pre-logical approach to meaning: ordinary people give meaning to their lives not through explicit ideas but through narratives, images, and shared practices in community. Whereas the 'acultural' model neglects this area of moral sensibility, a 'cultural' interpretation locates the crisis of faith in changes of symbolic imagination. It is more than simply the by-product of external social factors or new theories of knowledge. Indeed, it would be a form of Western arrogance to claim that one particular pattern of secularisation must be repeated in other cultures whenever they become technologically 'modern'.

Time, ordinary life, inwardness

Taylor, in brief, interprets the drama of modernity as a revolution of cultural sensibility, and not simply as a sociologically predictable set of external changes. He goes on to insist that although certain forms of faith have gone into crisis, the core of Christian faith transcends its changing cultural embodiments. Thus he seeks to lead debates on secularisation into more tacit and subjective fields, seeing modernity as more than a product of the usual suspects – the rationalism born between Descartes and the Enlightenment, or the political or sociological upheavals, ranging from revolution to urbanisation. Among the factors that he sees as creating a radically

different culture are the market economy, the development of a public sphere of print media, and the birth of popular democracy based on the sovereignty of the people. But he is more interested (and interesting) about the impact of these situations on what he calls the social imaginary, in other words how people come to feel and interpret their lives at an intuitive level. He complains that too often we speak of 'modernity as a traditional society minus something', seeing it as either liberation from or as loss of older religious horizons (*CM*, 107). Instead he holds that 'the modern theory of moral order' could never have become dominant 'in our culture without this penetration/transformation of our imaginary' (*SA*, 175).

Underlying this transformation, he sees a different human perception of time, whereby time loses its vertical dimension of life as related to the eternal or transcendent, and becomes largely horizontal. This sense of non-religious time allows people, for the first time in history, to 'imagine society horizontally unrelated to any "high points"' (*MSI*, 157), so that they come to understand and imagine themselves 'exclusively in secular time' (*SA*, 714). A second development has to do with 'the affirmation of ordinary life' (*SA*, 370) as morally valuable in itself. This is connected with the Protestant emphasis on work and the family life, and with its generally non-sacramental theology. A third development is the centrality of the individual and of 'new forms of inwardness' (*CM*, 107). Unfortunately, this initially positive emphasis on subjectivity will later descend into the ambiguous 'ethic of self-fulfilment in relationships' (*MSI*, 103) and, in more recent times this separated self has become more marked by therapeutic self-expression, consumerism and a tendency to see sin only as sickness. Taylor does not mince his words: this shrinking of subjectivity can 'actually end up abasing' human dignity (*SA*, 618).

A new sense of God

Connected with his concerns for these dimensions – time, ordinary existence, subjectivity – is Taylor's typical focus on human identity. Modernity spells the end of an older world of stable religious identity, marked by 'social embeddedness' and a hierarchical world

view. It involves a new moment of history where individuals are seen as responsible for imagining and choosing their own sense of self. 'Secularity' enters the scene when the motivation for action feels no need to look beyond the here and now in order to find foundations for its commitment.

Taylor is never a naïve celebrant of this modernity. He admits that it 'is often read through its least impressive, most trivializing aspects' (*SS*, 511). Many of its achievements, in his view, have a shadow side, where they slide into shrunken versions of an original ideal. There has been a struggle between higher and lower forms of freedom. The new rationality can become merely functional or utilitarian. A closed individualism can forget larger questions of meaning, or reduce freedom to egoist horizons, where 'more self-centred modes of self-fulfilment betray the ideal of authenticity' (*EA*, 105). In more recent decades this betrayal has shown itself in the 'soft relativism' of each person doing 'their own thing' (*SA*, 484). Such reductive versions of the hopes of modernity happen whenever we forget both our responsibility for others and our innate desire for some connection with God.

With this background he evaluates the impact of cultural change on religious faith. Over the years he has constantly repeated that secular modernity does not necessarily mean 'the absence of religion' but rather that 'religion occupies a different place' in people's experience and imagination (*MSI*, 194). More specifically, modernity 'removed one mode in which God was formerly present', perceived as reigning in a vertical and transcendent eternity, but an 'alternative form of God's presence' becomes possible, more personal or spiritual, less institutional, less exclusively transcendent or eschatological (*MSI*, 186-7). In Taylor's words, 'in personal life the dissolution of the enchanted world can be compensated by ... a strong sense of the involvement of God in my life' (*MSI*, 193). Thus a different language of faith comes to birth which involves all of our humanity and is much more than an intellectual belief.

Accompanying this attempt to identify new cultural expressions of faith, he questions whether we should give priority to the individual or to the community. He worries about the excessive isolation of the separated individual produced by modernity. He sees a need to retrieve relationships and responsibilities as central

to an authentically human self-image. But the widespread assumption is that society is made up of individuals: 'are we not by nature and essence individuals?' If this idea dominates, it can lead us to abandon 'modes of complementarity' and mutual belonging that have characterised most of human history (*MSI*, 18). Taylor comes out in favour of a relational or communal anthropology as a necessary foundation for human selfhood. Isolated forms of identity remain fragile or even self-deceptive: 'to be an individual is not to be a Robinson Crusoe, but to be placed in a certain way among other humans' (*MSI*, 65).

Spirituality today

Taylor's most extended reflection on his own Catholicism and on Christian themes in general can be found in his 1999 lecture at the University of Dayton, 'A Catholic Modernity'. Here he sets himself the task of imitating Matteo Ricci, the Jesuit missionary who entered sympathetically into the culture of China in the late sixteenth century. In similar fashion Taylor prefers to stress common ground rather than adopting a strongly counter-cultural stance. He distances himself from the closed or 'exclusive humanism' inherited from modernity, which in his view tends to forget the human need for a deeper or higher wholeness of life. But he is equally uneasy with 'the project of Christendom', or any model where faith seeks to rule the culture or to achieve some fusion between religion and society.

Christians should thank Voltaire and his like for the humbling but liberating experience of dismantling Christendom, thus 'allowing us to live the Gospel in a purer way' (*CM*, 18). They should also acknowledge that certain Gospel-based values, for instance, human rights, have flourished more effectively in a secular setting. However, Taylor qualifies this by insisting that 'the denial of transcendence can put the most valuable gains of modernity in danger' (*CM*, 30). Without a sense of God, can the human values born from the Judeo-Christian tradition survive for long? Can the primacy of ordinary life avoid becoming a shrunken zone of self-concern? As against isolated or disengaged individualism, he suggests a more relational perspective: 'to see the fullness of life as

something that happens between people rather than within each one' (*CM*, 113). Identity at its best comes from recognition in relationship, not simply from a solo run through life. Indeed, without a framework or tradition of belonging there is a danger of falling 'into a life that is spiritually senseless' (*SS*, 18).

Taylor has no doubt that modernity helped believers to emerge from more puritan, more fearful and excessively other-worldly versions of faith, and to recognise 'the potential of human beings for goodness' (*CM*, 32). Indeed a transition from a more ascetical spirituality to one that reads the Gospel as promising fullness in this life has become one of the hallmarks of today's religious culture. Here too, however, a danger lurks: can this sensibility face the darker sides of life? Taylor sees secular humanism as too innocent on this point, and he implies that some versions of spirituality fall into a 'feel-good' naivety. Genuine fullness of life 'means eternal life and death is taken in stride' (*CM* 110). In this lecture, as so often in his work, Taylor's original contribution lies in his changing the agenda of the debate about modernity, religion and culture. As already indicated, what he calls the 'main story' is best understood as a shift of sensibility rather than of ideas: 'the obstacles to belief in Western modernity are primarily moral and spiritual', not simply a question of truth or intellectual credibility (*CM*, 25). It is on this level of non-explicit, but lived, assumptions that he is concerned about long-term damage to humanity, when it tries to live without any religious dimension to life.

A different love

That 1999 lecture ends with a reflection on cultural discernment in the light of a 'stream of love' descending from God as Trinity, where Taylor urges us to be healthily 'bewildered' by the complexity of living the Christian faith today. We should not fall into the extremes of embracing everything or condemning everything – what he calls the 'boosters' or 'knockers' of our culture. 'As with Ricci, the Gospel message to this time and society has to respond both to what in it already reflects the life of God and to the doors which have been closed against this life' (*CM*, 37). Responding to a debate on his lecture, Taylor goes further in expressing his religious

positions. He speaks of the pain of students who are religious believers but who find themselves in universities that silence their spiritual dimension or impose a kind of atheist conformity. 'Unbelief has informed more than the answers; it has also shaped the questions' (*CM*, 119). In his own field of moral philosophy, he fears that there is room only for neutral theory about what we should do, but no place for reflecting on how to motivate goodness in practice. Neither is there any recognition of a perennial conflict between our 'loving and self-absorbed desires' (*CM*, 121). When 'there is a lot of hostility out there', Christian academics should try 'to change the agenda, open it up', unlocking 'the closed and neglected corridors in the ethical mansion' (*CM*, 123). He sees the present level of anger in cultural debates as blocking 'spiritual growth' and even 'resisting God', and he ends with a challenging insight on communicating faith today: 'changing the tone might be the essential prelude to changing the content' (*CM*, 124-5).

Towards transformative faith

In the several years before publishing *A Secular Age* in 2007, Taylor began to tackle religious themes more often and more openly, not necessarily through reading theology but through reflecting on writers such as Hopkins, Flannery O'Connor or Bede Griffiths. The final chapter of that volume voices a critique of a trivial level of cultural unbelief and also of ecclesial paralysis in meeting the spiritual needs of people today. It offers a prophetic summary of his hopes for the survival of faith. Inspired by his reading of Ivan Illich, Taylor writes passionately about the need for more incarnational expressions of faith. Under the subtle erosion of the dominant culture, faith can lose its transformative edge. Models of thought, even in theology, can be cramped by the assumption that objectivity requires us to see truth 'as something quite independent of us'. He views this as a dangerous 'excarnation' of reason, a forgetting of commitment and affectivity as valid roads to knowledge (*SA*, 746).

Unless Christians have the courage to 'recover a sense what the Incarnation can mean' (*SA*, 753), even the power of the Eucharist can be strangled by convention. Taylor maintains that authentic faith has to do with our gradual conversion by God's love and

towards a new way of loving with God. Clearly this perspective goes beyond any tendency to examine religion sociologically. Here the surprise of the Gospel has to do with God's transformative action in our lives: if we over-identify faith with the values of the culture, we will miss this 'greater transformation which Christian faith holds out' (*SA*, 737) – that we participate in God and that this is the source of our difference. Such a specifically faith-based image rescues us from the loneliness of modernity where 'all meaning comes from us' and where 'we encounter no echo beyond' the world of immanence (*SA*, 376).

That a major contemporary philosopher could arrive at such affirmations about faith is remarkable. It shows that we cannot do justice to the fullness of faith either by fidelity to the dominant rationality or by innocently embracing the ideals of the culture. According to Taylor, our sources of goodness and of loving need to be larger than the self. Even though he admires and defends the emergence of the modern sense of self, he has become troubled about the unanchored and 'buffered' personality – isolated from others, from traditions of meaning, ultimately from the possibility of religious faith as the most credible fountain of our transformation towards love. When that horizon becomes real, life becomes an adventure of 'choosing ourselves in the light of the infinite' (*SS*, 449).

In the voice of Taylor (an imaginary monologue)

We need to take on board the hugeness of the cultural revolution we have experienced, and continue to experience. It involves more than some easily explainable social changes, and more than a different set of ideas. In place of a previously stable identity, people now find themselves in an ocean of cross currents, of multiple identities on the move. This new context also means a painful and sudden uprooting of religious self-images. It has displaced Church-based religion from its previous centrality: forms of religious belonging and expression that once seemed so secure have come to appear unreal, out of touch or even oppressive.

A deeper secularisation

Religious belief used to be the default option for most people, but unbelief or at least a large-scale unchurched has taken its place. The cultural situation has swung from a smooth pre-modern inheritance of meaning to a fast 'disembedding' along 'modern' lines, as an ambiguous individualism became dominant. In today's so-called post-modern world, everyone tells us that we suffer, as never before, from fragmentation, dispersal, or drifting. And so the agenda of faith, and the whole context of our receiving and deciding, has changed radically.

For years I have insisted that the real process of secularisation is not found in sociological statistics of religious diminishment, and that a deeper erosion occurs in our unformulated but shared images of spiritual identity. Is our visible and horizontal life everything, or are there higher and vertical calls, inviting us beyond what we glimpse with our empirical eyes? Certainly the dominant culture around pressurises us to forget our higher hungers and to lost ourselves in the glamorous surfaces of life.

Faced with such enormous change, it is vital to remember that our freedom to respond creatively is never extinguished. Don't expect me to give directives about faith formation. I'm just a philosopher with a passion for exploring the deeper shifts of history, of our self-interpretations and how we live them. But I am also a Catholic, increasingly inclined to ponder the emerging languages of faith today and indeed the whole issue of the future of Christianity – all in the light of some converging insights I have accumulated over the years.

Beyond neutrality

Modernity has taught us to value neutrality, or a certain kind of objectivity, and this can leave us handicapped concerning paths of existential commitment. We all live from various options, but we fear that they cannot be justified rationally. Here we are suffering from an idolatry of clarity, or of clarity of a certain Cartesian kind. But our human knowing is so much richer than what we can articulate with intellectual precision.

Religious faith is a genuine kind of knowledge, but not one that fits into the straitjacket of our inherited empiricism or rationalism.

As part of the history of the self, I have been a constant defender of the positive achievements of modernity, such as its ideal of personal authenticity. But we should not deny the later tendency to reduce the personal to the merely individual, or to shrink authenticity into self-fulfilment without conscience. We need to critique these cultural forms of a drifting existence as more likely to undermine the possibility of Christian faith than any of the intellectual attacks of angry atheists.

My hunch is that religious formation today needs to be doubly discerning. It needs to be critical of the dehumanising factors in the culture that rob people of spiritual awareness. This is not a matter of scapegoating the dominant life-styles but of asking questions about the deadening impact they can have on our self-horizons. And then there is a call for Christians to be honestly self-critical of their own structures and their own reductions of the grit of the Gospel. Christian history is marked by terrible scandals that can make one despair of our Church and of ourselves. My own hesitant hope is that after facing the shadows of history in a spirit of mourning, we can become more creative in shaping our always inadequate embodiments of faith.

A key dimension of humanity

I sometimes speak of my religious 'hunches', and perhaps that word is deliberately tentative, because a philosopher is not meant to wear his faith on his sleeve in university circles. In old age I have been rebelling more frequently against that silent academic censorship. What are some of these hunches that have strengthened for me into strong convictions? That religion is a crucial and universal dimension of our humanity, and that to ignore this possibility is to risk not just spiritual but anthropological impoverishment.

I have come to see that a neutral approach to religion is reductive. If Christianity is true, it offers more than an answer

to my hunger for anchors in a confusing world: it is rooted in an extraordinary event of God in history and one that continues to happen in us. It involves an almost incredible sharing in God's love rather than just institutional belonging or believing. Christ is our source of transformation now, rather than merely a founder of a tradition in the past. The historical and functional interpretations of religion are valid approaches, but they should not monopolise our vision. To echo the Gospel, there is something more than Solomon here.

For years, experts in theology and religious education have been saying that faith has to be a decision, not just a passive transmission (a terrible word more suited to car engines). That stress on choice is valid but it is not enough. The decision is not just about a religious truth but about a whole way of life, a different vision of everything, ultimately about receiving and responding to a divine love called *agape*. Don't ask me for help about how to communicate this to a new generation. My hunch, to repeat that word, is that it is always easier to 'teach religion' functionally and historically, and no doubt that is needed. But more importantly, any spiritual conversion needs to be prepared and pointed towards, if people are to arrive at a liveable faith for today and tomorrow. I have come to think of poets as our best spiritual guides, because they can tap into our imagination and put us in contact with possibilities that get suppressed in routine thinking or living.

Fullness as gift

For years I have been fascinated by our longing for fullness and for human flourishing in its many forms. Although I recognise, with deep respect, the genuineness of non-religious versions of fullness and flourishing, I am convinced that the religious road is more true and more in tune with our hopes. In the Christian vision fullness and flourishing come as gifts in a relationship, not simply as self-achievements. I hold that the origin of all our growing in love has to be larger than us. I worry that unanchored individuals – isolated or uprooted from

any tradition – are being deprived of religious faith as the most credible source of transformation towards that larger love.

If I were ever to write more explicitly about Christian spirituality, perhaps the epigraph of the book could come from the prologue of John's Gospel: 'from Christ's fullness we have all received'. In this light I would want to evoke not only the joys but also the fragilities of faith, its darkneses and dangers, and the long adventure of trying to make the Gospel incarnate again within all the changes of history.

References to works of Charles Taylor

- CM *A Catholic Modernity*, ed. J. Heft, Oxford, 1999.
EA *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Cambridge MA, 1991.
MSI *Modern Social Imaginaries*, Durham NC, 2004.
SA *A Secular Age*, Cambridge MA, 2007.
SS *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity*, Cambridge MA, 1989.
VRT *Varieties of Religion Today*, Cambridge MA, 2002.