

THE SECULAR AGE
Charles Taylor's "Secularity" and Missional Pedagogy
The Challenge of Teaching Mission and Evangelism Amid "Secularity"
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One of the many jobs I had working my way through college was a 3 – 11 shift at Capitol Steel in Oklahoma City. As I pre-med major I had been working at the Free Methodist Deaconess Hospital as a surgical orderly, but I did not feel they were paying me enough, so I traded that in for a \$.35 per hour raise at Capitol Steel. It turned out to be an expensive move, as in the third week I got my left hand caught between two 90 ft. I-beams, so I had to have my left hand surgically reconstructed.

Sophomore that I was, and not just chronologically, I requested the neurosurgeon to give me an anesthetic block to my left arm, allowing me to stay awake and watch the surgery on the TV monitor. We did have TVs back in the 60s. His gentle response was, **"The hell you do, unless you want to come out of surgery lame in your left hand."** He followed us in his gentle manner, "I thought you were a pre-med student. Have you had biochemistry?" When I told him I had not had the course, he said: "If you had said yes, then I would tell you that you did not learn much." He went on to explain that even with a total arm block, if I was watching the surgery, then my brain would be sending signals to the nerve endings. They would jiggle, and it would be impossible to reconnect the nerve endings. The result over time would be a dysfunctional hand.

I propose that my discussion paper today is something akin to this lesson in biochemistry. The nerve endings of a shared Gospel narrative are frayed, indeed broken, in Western Christianity. In most quarters the Church continues as if the traditional soteriological narrative is still shared and that it makes sense to the majority of people that walk through our doors. This is naively false. As one our British colleagues is fond of saying, "If 1952 comes back around, the Methodist Church in Britain is ready." Indeed, 1952 is not coming back around, and the Western Church as a whole is not ready for its non-arrival.

The monumental ***A Secular Age*** (Cambridge Press) was published the year I (Stephen Gunter) arrived at Duke Divinity School (2007), and it was a must-read

to stay in the community's conversation. To say that it is a 'thick read' is an understatement. It is a tome in depth, density, and length. I struggled my way through and realized that the way I taught evangelism and missional theology required revolutionary change. I could not just tinker around, I had to rethink the entire enterprise.^[1]

As I tried to introduce the new conceptual frame, I realized that my students and I were existentially caught in what Taylor calls the **immanent frame**. It is a 'haunted' state of mind." On the one hand, even as faith endures in our secular age, believing does not come easy. Faith is fraught; confession is haunted by an inescapable sense of contestability. We don't believe instead of doubting; we believe *while doubting*. We are all doubting Thomas in this contested immanent frame:

It is "a constructed social space that frames our lives entirely within a natural (rather than a supernatural) order. It is the circumscribed space of the modern social imaginary" that precludes transcendence as the ordering principle. The evolution of this dialectal frame has evolved since the beginning of the Enlightenment when **Secularity** emerged as what we called modernity, with "secular" meaning an intellectual point of reference that was perceived to be neutral, unbiased, and objective. This conforms to Taylor's first definition of secular.

We are now all aware that a proposed perspective of strict objectivity is a pure fiction, as we all have our vested interests and controlling values. The best we can hope for is a scholarly objectivity in which we realize what our interest and values are and move to neutralize them, or at least keep them from determining our conclusions.

We have lived more than 200 years with this reigning assumption of objectivity, but we have to now face an even more complicated landscape of secularity: **Secular₃** Taylor's notion of the secular as an age of contested belief, where religious belief is no longer axiomatic. It is now possible to imagine **not** believing in God. Indeed, this is increasingly seen as normative. What we entertain now is a realm of

^[1] Fortunately for all of us, in 2014, James K.A. Smith published **How (Not) to be Secular** (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans). When Charles Taylor lectured at Duke, he said, "Jamie Smith understands me better than I understand myself." I recommend that you read Smith before you try to read Taylor.

Exclusive humanism: A worldview or social imaginary that is able to account for meaning and significance without any appeal to the divine or transcendence.

What I came face to face with in my classroom full of students committed to Christ, Christ's Church, and Gospel vocation, was a world view in which immanence and transcendence were at war with one another. They are anxious about their inability to simply believe like their grandparents and the fathers and mothers of the church they read about, but they do not understand why.

An homogenous frame dominated by God and transcendence has been lost from sight. The Boston theologian-sociologist (Peter Berger) decades ago called it "cracks in the sacred canopy." What was in the 20th century an emerging humanism is now, except in Fundamentalist circles where people act like nothing has changed, is a full-blown exclusive humanism.

And there are multiple dimensions to this exclusive humanism, as well as practical social and psychological results that flow from it:

1. **Fragilization** In the face of different options, where people who lead "normal" lives do not share my faith (and perhaps believe something very different), my own faith commitment becomes fragile — put into question, dubitable. In search of certainty, doubt, or at least any sense of certainty, is ever-present.
2. **Expressive individualism** Emerging from the Romantic expressivism of the late eighteenth century, it is an understanding "that each one of us has his/her own way of realizing our humanity," and that we are called to live that out ("express" it) rather than conform to models imposed by others (especially institutions). This is tough on the church with either a large or lower case **C**. Since the 1960's, spirituality has become increasingly deinstitutionalized and is understood primarily as an expression of 'what speaks to me.' Authenticity and expressive individualism are intimate partners in a committed relationship.

Buffered self. In the modern social imaginary, the self is sort of insulated in an interior "mind," no longer vulnerable to the transcendent order (God), on the one hand, or cosmic forces of evil (The Devil), on the other hand. These notions are completely absent from the social narrative. Even in church, it rather quaint to entertain such language. The older generation remembers the language, but few

live under that sacred canopy on a daily basis. At the personal level, this may be the most pervasive change with which the Church has to deal.

Contrast the buffered self with the *porous self*.

Porous self . In the ancient/medieval social imaginary, the self is open and vulnerable to the enchanted "outside" world — susceptible to grace and divine connectins. Peter Berger said that we are now citizens of a “disenchanted world.” The sacred canopy is not just cracked, it is broken open.

Taken together, we end up with a world view quite in contrast and even antithetical to what has here-to-fore been the traditional world view.

Namely, the ***Modern moral order*** (MMO) A new ***understanding of morality*** that focuses on the organization of society for mutual benefit rather than an obligation to "higher" or eternal norms. Thus the "moral" is bound up with (and perhaps reduced to) the "economic." Everything is measured in economic terms. [Check out the latest bulletin boards of progress at our local, district, conference, and central church levels!]

In the newly minted “modern moral order” all the definitions of secular are at play. Taken as a whole, this is much more than just the subtraction of the religious.

It is a totally new ***Social imaginary***. Different from an intellectual system or framework, "broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they *think* about social reality in a disengaged mode." A social imaginary is "the way ordinary people 'imagine' their social surroundings, and this is often not expressed in theoretical terms. It is carried in images, stories, legends, etc." (Taylor, pp. 171-72).

It is a whole new “take” on reality:

Take A construal of life within the *immanent frame* that is open to appreciating the viability of other “takes.” This can be either "closed" (immanentist) or "open" (to transcendence).

In modern political parlance, we all know the word spin. It simply means, what is the constructed reality under which we want our audience to interpret our words?

We now find ourselves in a world of absolutely defined spin.

Spin A construal of life within the *immanent frame* that does not recognize itself as a construal and thus has no room to grant plausibility to the alternative. Can be either "closed" (immanentist) or "open" (to transcendence).

In our increasingly dominant "take" or "spin", only the IMMANENT is construed as real. This takes us back to a previous definition.

Immanent frame. A constructed social space that frames our lives entirely within a natural (rather than supernatural) order. It is the circumscribed space of the modern social imaginary that precludes transcendence.

Immanentization. The process whereby meaning, significance, and "fullness" are sought within an enclosed, self-sufficient, naturalistic universe without any reference to transcendence. A kind of "enclosure."

Only here in this flattened out enclosed space is the fullness of life to be found:

Fullness A term meant to capture the human impulsion to find significance, meaning, value — even if entirely within the immanent frame.

The typical Christian response to this de-Christianizing of a world view, especially among evangelicals, Charles Taylor calls : **Excarnation** The process by which religion (and Christianity in particular) is dis-embodied and de-ritualized, turned into a "belief system." Contra incarnational, sacramental spirituality.

Fundamentalism in the past has typically excelled in this thorough rationalizing of religion into a belief system as a way to safeguard historic truth – not realizing that this is in itself an extension of the Enlightenment project. It is an epistemologically enclosed system.

In so doing there is something akin to a simple exchange: **Closed world structures** (CWSs) Aspects of our contemporary experience that "tip" the immanent frame toward a **closed** construal. One closed construal (fundamentalism) is exchanged for the most recent closed construal. Both end up with the buffered self.

It is the porous self to which the Gospel calls us:

Porous self. In the ancient/medieval social imaginary, the self is open and vulnerable to the enchanted "outside" world — susceptible to grace, connection to/with the divine.

Taylor would teach us that the goal is what he calls:

Maximal demand. "How to define our highest spiritual or moral aspirations for human beings, while showing a path to the transformation involved which doesn't crush, mutilate or deny what is essential to our humanity"

Historic Christianity has defined this as **imago dei**.

Once upon a time, God (and not just for Christians) was the cornerstone of the path to transformation; and for Christians it was faith in Jesus Christ as Savior that defined this transformative process. While this truth has not actually changed in itself, the assumptions about its viability have. This is no longer self-apparent. For the first time in the history of Western civilization, to NOT believe is just as viable as believing . . . and for the younger generation, below the age of 40, to choose not to be is a most acceptable stance. One seeks meaning, but one does not seek salvation.

The above-described set of intellectual and social circumstances have forced me to conclude that "**telling** the truth" is not the best instructional mode. One must work more obliquely. I call it heuristic pedagogy – a teaching mode in which the learner is allowed to discover the truth. The philosopher Michael Polanyi described this as "tacit knowledge," or "personal knowledge." In the discovery process, one gathers a host of knowledge and information about related fields and subjects. With a level of expertise in related fields, the student discerns what the best explanations are for what yet remains to be discovered. Polanyi was the first to assert that Einstein's theory of relativity was 'discovered' in this manner. Einstein did not deduce his theory from an extension of mathematical formulae. Based on his expertise in attendant fields of inquiry, he gained the tacit and personal knowledge that relativity was the best available explanation for what he did know from his scientific pursuits.

One of my favorite poems is from Emily Dickinson: "Tell the Truth, but tell it Slant."
Tell all the truth but tell it slant —

Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth's superb surprise
As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind —

This brings me to the “so what” of this intellectual excursion.

I would love for someone to tell me that this construal (my appropriation of Charles Taylor) is all wrong. So far, over the last decade, that nay-sayer has not appeared, so I press on.

In order to suggest a way forward, I have to first describe briefly how I believe that Methodism as a whole has betrayed itself. This is not something that we have done intentionally. It is, I believe, a betrayal that is the by-product of what we have described above. The dissolution of the sacred canopy produced a reality in which it was increasingly foreign to acceptable discourse (to say nothing of sophisticated discourse) to speak a direct divine action. We Methodists do not want to sound like a Fundamentalist Southern Baptist, much less an enthusiastic Pentecostal. So, we basically ‘silenced’ ourselves.

I believe that Emily Dickinson instructs us to what I call ‘Gospel exercises in obliquity.’ “Tell the truth, but tell it slant.”
And I further believe that we have in our DNA the perfect way to do this, but we are going to have to get over the betrayal of our Wesleyan heritage.

I would assert that we have betrayed our heritage by our Gospel silence. We have failed to a very large extent to verbally connect our Acts of Piety and Deeds of Mercy. There was a time (in Wesley’s day, and even through the 19th century) when a largely shared social narrative made it apparent about the connections between piety and mercy. In the 20th century that obvious

connection began to dissolve, and now in the second decade of the 21st century, the connection is LONG GONE.

The develop language and practices that connect these two in order to engage people in the discovery process of the viability of the Gospel of Jesus Christ will require our best and brightest minds.

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Ever since she assumed the role of CEO at the FFE, Jane Wood has been leading us in our own discovery processes, and we have discerned that to have a viable future we can't keep on 'doing evangelism' as we have done in the past. We have put our MAP (Ministry Action Plan) on fast forward, and I want Jane to tell you more about what we are discovering and doing.