

“Being the Church in our Secular Age”

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TUMC, Toronto, ON

## Introduction

Good morning! It's not every church that lets an adherent speak from the pulpit, but Michelle and Marilyn seemed fine with it, provided I agreed to stand right over this little hatch door marked with the X....

Actually, with everything going on at TUMC right now, I thought I could share the load and take on a Sunday message, especially if it involved revisiting some ideas I spoke about at Foothills Mennonite Church in Calgary in 2010.

What I want to speak about is our secular culture, specifically how we got here (culturally) and how we can be a faithful church in the present day. To do this, I'll largely be speaking about the work of Charles Taylor and his book “A Secular Age”.

Moving back to Ontario, specifically from Calgary to Toronto, in 2015 has given me lots of opportunity to reflect on the secular. Toronto is that bit more obviously secular than Calgary, with more churches turned into condos, a lower profile Christian community and a street life that is both more vibrant and more Corinthian. So I found myself intrigued when our family visited the AGO earlier this month to see the “Mystical Landscapes” exhibit, and found Dundas Street thronged with people lined up to see the show, a show which consists of paintings that speak to the human yearning to connect with the transcendent. The paintings were created between 1880 and 1930, with all the artists rejecting, in their own way, a universe that was indifferent. They refused to accept a secular immanent frame around their works, and instead painted outside the lines, into the transcendent. Powerful stuff, and still pulling in a crowd over a century later.

Let me take you back to where my quest to understand the secular got under way....in a Dodge Caravan...

Some years ago, I signed out a Calgary Transit minivan from the fleet we had at work. Now, driving a Transit minivan (in any city)...the ones with the big logo on the door, is always an interesting experience.....the intent stares of other motorists, checking whether you're doing 3km over the speed limit,....the curious looks from people at the bus stop, hoping you might pick them up !! But one thing I always enjoyed was seeing what radio station the previous driver had chosen. As I adjusted the seat and the mirrors, I felt like I was getting to know the previous driver just a bit - 5'8" and another AM 1060 Classic Country fan !! As my little contribution to national unity, I always left the radio tuned to CBC Radio One, for that pan-Canadian perspective. I should add that I never once found the radio tuned to CBC when I got into the van !!

This particular day, as I was preparing to get on the expressway, I heard the most peculiar interview taking place on CBC. The radio host was enthusiastically describing a new book by a "Charles Taylor" and promised listeners he would be on the phone line in a minute to talk about his work. Well, the only Charles Taylor I knew was the Liberian dictator who had been arrested for war crimes, and crimes against humanity including the use of child soldiers and torture, and was being detained in the Netherlands. Even as a CBC fan, I was a little taken aback as the host warmly welcomed Mr. Taylor to the show and asked him what it was like to have an award-winning book on his hands. Was this a dramatic prison conversion straight from the Hague? As an eloquent and gracious answer began from Charles Taylor, and I tried to merge in between the wall of transport trucks on the highway, I decided I had a huge outbreak of cognitive dissonance on my hands (that uncomfortable feeling when you realize you are holding two contradictory ideas at the same time), which I tried to solve by clicking off the radio, which instead switched back to AM 1060, where I instantly received some unsolicited lyrical advice about trucks, outlaws and women.....sigh!

Well, a few more years passed until I was at Foothills Mennonite Church one Sunday morning, thumbing through the church bulletin –*not during the sermon*– and noticed a University of Calgary public lecture on Charles Taylor’s book “A Secular Age”. Now I was feeling just a touch like Jonah right then, and decided I had better not ignore this again. A little bit of digging on my part soon confirmed what everyone else probably already knew.....there’s more than one Charles Taylor in this world....and this particular one happened to have something important to say to the Church.

Who is Charles Taylor?

Canadian author Charles Taylor is an 85 year old retired philosophy professor from Montreal. As is the Canadian way, he is far better known outside the country than at home. He is a Rhodes’ scholar and has been called “the most interesting and important philosopher writing in English today”. And he is a committed follower of Christ, with a thoughtful Catholic faith, not always in-line with Rome, that he’s been unafraid to integrate into his scholarly work. His book “A Secular Age” won the 2007 Templeton Prize from the UK – a multi-million dollar award given to recognize and reward those who create works of lasting value that affirm life’s spiritual dimension. Just last fall, In October 2015, Charles Taylor won the \$1M Berggruen Prize, handed out annually to a thinker "whose ideas are of broad significance for shaping human self-understanding and the advancement of humanity."

Clearly there is an appreciation for Taylor’s ideas, in a world that is struggling to live peacefully amidst so many competing viewpoints and voices.

Taylor, a McGill University prof

There has been much critical acclaim and discussion around Taylor’s book, and from an unusually broad range of viewpoints....no small feat in today’s fragmented culture. “A Secular Age” is a wide-ranging journey through the last 500 years, in an attempt to understand how we moved from a society in which the belief in God was a nearly universal position, to one in which a religious outlook is but one possibility among many. His conclusions, and the

understandings which support them, are both challenging and source of hope to the modern believer. Far from the simple “Decline of Religion in the face of Reason”, that has become, ironically, a dogmatic cultural norm in the Western world, Taylor argues that we are living in an age very much influenced by Christianity and the on-going human need to connect with the transcendent, as those crowds on Dundas Street confirmed.

Let me offer just a bit more background on Taylor before I explain what it is I specifically will talk about this morning. Taylor was born in Quebec to a French Canadian mother and an English Canadian father, and credits this bi-cultural upbringing with helping him accept multiple viewpoints, and the need for respect around discussions of meaning and purpose. In his writing, he extends understanding and respect even when disagreeing strongly with the particular position under examination. He was also affected by his experience of the Quiet Revolution, where in a few short years in the 1960’s, Quebec went from being the most religious society in the Western world to the least. The rapid emptying of the pews was dramatic evidence of an underlying shift in thinking, one which has left Quebec as a highly secularized society. This is the cultural milieu in which Taylor cut his academic teeth, and I think with the publication of *Secular Age*, he is reaching out with a summary of his life’s work, no longer concerned about his career, but instead passing the torch from a faithful scholar who has witnessed first-hand the secularization of his society.

## The Plan

What I hope to do this morning is speak about two principal themes in Taylor’s book: how we arrived at our current secular culture, and what this means for us as the Church in the here and now. These are bigger questions than can be dealt with in a single morning sermon, but I’ll suggest that we’ve already been dealing with them for some time now. We’ve been dealing with them through the TUMC listening circles, trying to discern the route ahead. We’ve been dealing with them through the writings of Troy Watson, in his excellent “Life in the Post-Modern Shift” column in the Canadian Mennonite magazine. And we’ve been dealing with these questions every time as we step out our front door and engage with the

messy and beautiful cosmopolitan hive that is Toronto. I also want to acknowledge the myriad of secondary sources, including Douglas Shantz from the University of Calgary, and Pablo at coffee time, who have contributed to my understandings of Taylor's work.

### The Starting Point

The term "secular", defined as not having any connection with religion or the Transcendent, can be vague in its usage, so I want to comment on three common (and related) uses, but my main focus this morning will be on the third. The first usage refers to a retreat of religion from the public square and popular debate. The second refers to a decline in attendance at religious services. The third looks at the conditions that surround belief, the conditions a believer must grapple with in his or her particular cultural setting.

Taylor takes as his cultural starting point the year 1500. Not that everything was completely stable and serene at that time....the hundred years war between England and France was only recently over, the weather had been tough on food production, coffee was largely unknown, and Europe was a patchwork of fiefdoms, princes and peasants. But one thing was nearly universal...the belief in God.

Let's consider the culture that surrounds a typical 19 year old of the time. Probably already married and with children, he or she's likely well entrenched in their life's work, whether in a nobleman's field or as part of a guild, such as the weavers, the masons or the blacksmiths. Everywhere around were reminders of God and the enchanted cosmos...in the rituals of the guild meeting, the workings of the local government, the rites of the church, and the feasting rituals of the village. The Great Chain of Being, from God to King to Clergy to Lord to peasant was firmly in place. The Divine permeated all facets of life, and our nineteen year old would have little exposure to anything to the contrary. Taylor uses the term "enchanted cosmos" to describe a world where spirits of good and evil were omnipresent, and the individual thought of himself as porous, or vulnerable to the whims of the spirit world. Faith was largely a communal endeavour, where the whole village attended services together to present a strong, united front against

mischievous spirits. Annual rituals such as “beating the bounds” or walking around the village together in prayer where part of the collective effort to ensure success, largely defined in terms of bountiful harvests, worship of God, and large families.

We’ll revisit our 19-year old later on, but now I want to step briefly through what Taylor argues is a more accurate story of secularization than that served up by what he terms as the “Subtraction Story”. You know that one....people originally believed in God, but as Science and Reason began to peel back the myths of religion, it became a more marginalized stance. Those who began to throw off the childish beliefs of the Church were courageous... they faced the possibility of an empty universe on their own two feet. Eventually, as science triumphs over the last holdouts of mystery – personality, charity, love.....religion will fall away completely, like an ill-fitted overcoat that’s no longer needed to shelter us from our world.

### *Pause*

That’s what Taylor’s taking aim at. He dismisses this Subtraction Story as wholly unconvincing upon close examination. It doesn’t add up. It’s been conjured up to explain where we are, but a careful reading of history doesn’t support it. In fact, Taylor argues that it is through the process of Reform, at work within Christianity, that we have arrived at our current secular age. Let’s have a look. We’re going to move at warp speed for a few minutes here as we race from 1500 to the present.

### The Development of Secularism

Taylor argues that Reform – a move towards higher standards of conduct and personal devotion, towards a disciplined society that saw Nature as ordered and understandable, towards expectations of social civility – was underway before 1500....., but that it really began to gather momentum and show itself in the increasingly important concept of the individual in society...., in Luther’s dissent – the beginnings of the Protestant reformation....., and in the Catholic counter-reformation. The standard for religious practice was being raised, and the individual was being asked to take more responsibility for their spiritual health...a

little less village, a bit more individual. The Church and its members were being asked to run at one speed, with less differentiation between the clerical, the monastic and the laity. The classic medieval formula: the clergy pray for all, the lords defend all, the peasants labour for all, was under pressure, the differentiation of roles now suspect. Feast days and Carnivals, those rituals which temporarily turned the normal social order upside-down, came under increasing pressure to be cleaned up and purged of their vulgarity. The concept of the porous self began to yield to what Taylor refers to as the Buffered Self, where the individual has some distance from the cosmos. Gradually, as the idea of the Buffered Self takes hold, it's not a big leap to begin to see society as more a collection of buffered individuals. This all leads to what Taylor terms as the Great Disembedding, where the project of Reform aligns with the Buffered Self and the formerly enchanted cosmos comes to be seen as ordered, rational and disenchanted. No more spirit filled cosmos, this means we're now into a much colder Universe, with God also a bit more distant. By the 1700's Deism, or the clock maker God, has arrived. As Buffered individuals, we no longer quite need that same intimacy with our Creator. Worship...well maybe that's a bit optional. God's gift to us is Reason, and he's going to stand back and just see how we make out with this tool.

The concept of the good is changing too...remember when it used to be linked to the village, harvest, worship and family? Well, we've changed the rules here as well. The concept of human flourishing begins to become the end goal, not subsistence living and worship of God. Can you see the trend here?.....the rise of religious humanism, where we begin to place ourselves at the centre rather than God. Human flourishing is pretty lofty stuff from an earthy perspective...happiness, power, prosperity, but meanwhile God has been relegated to more of a spectator..... a builder of the Universe and all that is in it, but quite removed from its daily affairs.

MMO

With the religious outlook increasingly defined around human measures of success, and the ongoing project of Reform busily applying Reason to the whole

gamut of societal ills, everything is in place for the break with the Divine. From religious humanism it is a short, but very significant leap to exclusive humanism, and the 18<sup>th</sup> Century's Modern Moral Order as Taylor labels it, is born. Why, God hardly seems necessary anymore, now that our Buffered identities are in place, and our commitment to human flourishing, along with its derivative values of freedom, equality, dignity and justice. What is significant, Taylor argues, is that this break with God comes not from the Subtraction Story with its claims of casting off the baggage of the Church, but from a careful construction of Reform-driven ideas that draw heavily of the Christian notion of love. As a Western culture, we gradually built a philosophical Tower of Babel, using the building blocks of Christian inspired Reform and love – including freedom, equality, dignity and justice. It is a magnificent structure, both elegant and robust, anchored deeply in the bedrock of faith in God, and with many beautiful features. This unique blend of Christian ideas and Reason eventually brought us to such heights that we lost sight of the foundations, and started to believe that only the upper reaches of the tower were in place. I think of the shift to exclusive humanism and the Modern Moral Order as a large banner being unfurled – Greenpeace-style - down the side of the tower that declares it to be of entirely human making. It is, Taylor would say, rather foolish when one steps back and looks at the entire construction for the upper reaches to be denying the presence of all the massive structure that supports it below.

#### Book Cover Break

Let's take a mental pause and have a look at the cover of "A Secular Age". People might think it's shallow, but I really like this cover. Have a look here:

Brooklyn Bridge, gothic towers with cables supporting the bridge deck below. Symbolically this is the upper part of the tower we just talked about, the one embraced by both the Modern Moral Order and transcendent (or religious) position. The debate is really around what is necessary to support this beautiful structure with all its suspended social constructions like hospitals, law, government, education, human rights...the Exclusive Humanist would argue nothing, the believer would argue God, and just to keep things interesting,



Nietzsche argued that the entire upper portion of the tower is based on falsehoods and should be demolished as soon as possible.

### Nietzsche's critique of the MMO

Interestingly enough, the idea of the autonomous Modern Moral Order is not only criticized by the likes of Christian thinkers such as Taylor, but from the completely different viewpoint of Friedrich Nietzsche and the anti-humanists. Nietzsche famously declared that "God was Dead", which by the late 1800's was hardly a new thought, but he took it the next step. If there is no God, Nietzsche argued, then this whole construct of the Modern Moral Order, with all its trappings of equality, compassion, charity, human rights, care for the poor and the sick, was groundless. Throw it all out..., move beyond good and evil, he argued and let those with the Will to Power, the strong, the intelligent, the beautiful, the rich write their own rules about success. Frightening stuff, especially when it plays out on the world stage as it did with the Nazi party beginning in the 1930's, or in a recent election south of the border. As much as I disagree with Nietzsche's conclusions, it was he who called Exclusive Humanism's bluff, that the legacies of Christian love – charity, compassion, equality- being carried forward under the Modern Moral Order had no legitimacy if in fact there was no God who declared these things good.

### The Now

Which brings us, at long last, to the present.....we made it...., which Taylor labels as the Age of Authenticity. The on-going struggle for control among the Religious, the Humanist and the Nietzschesian (say that three times fast) positions characterize our age. People are trying to find stability in the turbulence created by the endless jostling among these three boundary positions. And one interpretation of the American election, a simplification I'll admit, is that that the Religious, in trying to defeat the secular supporters of the Modern Moral Order, accidentally voted in a Nietzschesian. There's that three sided struggle, and temporarily the Will to Power has split the traditional supporters of the upper tower into two marginalized camps. And the source of the anxiety we feel is

concern that those dependent social constructions....the hospitals, law, government, public education, human rights, maybe in for a rough ride.

There is also a deep scepticism towards the Big Stories, the meta-narratives, that try to offer a single, coherent understanding of life. Instead our age of expressive individualism is characterized by an explosion of possible positions, a Nova effect, as Taylor calls it. No longer are naive positions – positions unaware of the alternatives – available to us. Instead, we are all cross-pressured, argues Taylor, buffeted about by opposing ideas on faith, doubt, self and meaning.

Let's check in again with a typical 19 year old! He or she's now unlikely to be married, and more than just a little flustered by options, options, options. What messages is she hearing? She's being told to find her own path, one that rings true to her. The only condition.....that it be authentic, after all this is the Age of Authenticity !! Don't simply take on the beliefs of an earlier age or the faith of your ancestors. Create your path to self-fulfillment. Assemble a spirituality that works for you. Be a seeker.

No wonder young people are struggling to find their place in the world, and the Church. How will his do-it yourself spiritual constructions stand up to the disappointments of life? How is she going to find her way to the worship committee or the caring team? Buffeted by endless variations of competing ideas,..... asked to dismiss the wisdom of their elders, and implicitly told that their choices around belief, by virtue of being nearly limitless, are in fact, meaningless. In the struggle that comes from trying to find their adult identity, it is our youth that are most vulnerable in our Secular Age.

## Summary

As I was trying to pull together this sermon, I needed to go for a walk and ended up at the local juice bar, where I decided I needed to order something good for my brain. I'll have Wheatgrass juice I said - 1 oz.....Farmers must be in disbelief that city slickers are willing to pay for this kind of thing !! Well the clerk snipped off a giant green handful of wheat grass and put it in the press. Now fortunately for me, the press broke down and I only got half an ounce, at no charge! Even half

an ounce of green wheatgrass juice was hard to get down...it reminded me of cleaning the underside of a wet lawnmower (really) !!

I bring this up because I realize moving through Taylor's book, which I've been ruminating on and off about for almost 8 years, in 20 minutes might be about as concentrated as my half ounce dose of organic grass extract....so I owe you some conclusions on what this might mean for us at TUMC, and I will offer three, (though of course there are more).

- 1) Firstly, throughout "A Secular Age", Charles Taylor avoids the tendency to lament for a bygone era. He is emphatic that we cannot go back, nor should we. He doesn't regard earlier times, when the Church wielded substantial social influence, as high water marks to be emulated. He suggests, rather, that we accept the characteristics of our modern age as a baseline and move on. This is partly grounded in his stance as a somewhat heretical Catholic, not convinced that the Vatican, with its rigid theological control and immense infrastructure, has ever really served the vision that Jesus has for His Church.

Taylor also points out that there are benefits in our current age; a drop in hypocrisy as people no longer concern themselves with presenting a churched-veneer that conceals a double life, ..and a reduction in the excessive use of Church power, as was previously evidenced in the Inquisitions, ex-communications and abuses that left shattered lives in their wake. Rather than Christendom, with its dubious blend of cross and sword, state and church, our current age requires that we approach our culture without the armour of triumphalism.....sounds like a pretty good fit with Anabaptism if you ask me!

- 2) Secondly, let's keep a close eye on grace. If there's one element of the gospel that I'm concerned is slipping below the water line in our current age, it's grace. I see it in the shifting tone of political debates across the Western world. I see it in declining first-world tax contributions to help with

the development of the world's neediest countries. And, perhaps surprisingly, I see glimpses of grace's decline in aspects of the human rights movement....let me explain. When I asked our Director of Human Rights at TTC what the greatest challenge was in her work, she unhesitatingly answered that it is wronged parties being unwilling to forgive the wrongdoers, even when a sincere apology had been made. The pursuit of justice so easily veers into vengeance without grace and mercy in the mix. Let us remember the words of Psalm 40 "*Do not, O Lord, withhold your mercy from me*" and commit to also forgive those who trespass against us. Our culture needs nothing less...

Pause

- 3) And finally, change is coming to the church as we know it. The traditional Church, with its codified doctrines and structure will face increasing challenges to its viability, its membership numbers and its finances as the cultural drift away from institutions of faith continues or even accelerates. And nowhere does Taylor's hope for the Body of Christ shine brighter than when he talks of the renewal that is to come, as the forced homogeneity of the 1500's gives way to a more nimble Church that again will have many rooms; for the tax collector, for the prostitute, for the centurion and, of course, for the seeker. It seems the Church is likely to be heading back towards its roots as seen in the Book of Acts....more house-based, more communal, more alive. As Paul noted to the unruly Corinthian church almost 2000 years ago, it takes a lot of different people working together to be the Body of Christ, and all believers, all of us, have a part to play. Ask yourself...what is this place, and what is your role? As much or maybe more than ever, this world and its growing multitude of seekers, some of them lined up on Dundas Street at the AGO, need a place of authentic refuge and renewal, a place to meet God.

Yes, there are changes coming to the Church in our Secular Age, and that just may be the best thing that's happened to the Church in the last few hundred years.