

SECULARIZATION IN THE FACE OF PAIN, SUFFERING, AND DEATH

JOSEPH E. CAPIZZI

PONTIFICAL ACADEMY ON LIFE

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The task I set myself is to describe some of the challenges placed to the Christian understanding and meaning of suffering and death as it encounters the features of contemporary secularization. Thus, in order to proceed, I shall need to define and describe the features of contemporary secularization, and also I must make clear what I mean by “suffering” in the Christian sense. I shall take each of these in turn, beginning with a description of contemporary secularization, and then, once the definitional comments are complete, I shall turn to describing some of the challenges.

By introducing the terms “culture of life” and “culture of death” in *Evangelium Vitae*, Pope John Paul II suggested an apt way of thinking about our current situation is in cultural terms. The terms “culture” and “cult” derive from the Latin word for “tilling”, as in cultivating or caring for the land. Eventually, that notion of “caring” for the land extends in usage to a notion of worship. A cult is defined by the thing its members care for, the object of their worship. Whole practices grow up around the worship of that object; practices that make sense in the context of worship and also speak to the depths of meaning contained in the object being worshipped. A culture therefore can be defined by the “constellation of understandings of person, nature, society and the good” that emerges from the worship by a society of a particular object.¹

¹ Drawing on Charles Taylor, 1995, “Two Theories of Modernity,” *Hastings Center Report* March-April 1995, 24-33.

What we worship, what we believe in, drives what we do, what we build, how we live. Our culture, the life of our society, is thus defined by what we believe is the truth about the meaning and goal of human life. If we believe that we are made to love each other and to serve the common good, and are duty bound to do so, then our culture should and will reflect these values. If, however, we hold other deep beliefs about the purposes of life and our relationships to each other, the culture should and will reflect those values. Let's then reflect a moment on what our culture seems to hold in common as a value, and let's name that "secularization" and ask what that entails and how that shapes our lives; that is, how secularization affects the lives even of faithful people. I suggest that we engage this task because whatever effects secularization has on us as believers will pertain to our capacity to live in accordance with Christian teaching about life, suffering, and death.

II. *Towards a Definition of Secularization*

A new book by the Catholic philosopher Charles Taylor is gaining much well-deserved attention because of its insightful analysis of secularization, purported to be one of the key features of our culture. Before I describe Taylor's understanding of secularization, I must at least take stock of a challenge to the notion that we're living in a secular (or secularized age).

In *A Secular Age*,² Taylor describes three senses of secularization, all of which we can find in society. The first sense of secularization is in terms of public spaces that have allegedly been emptied of God or any reference to ultimate reality. This means, among other things, that public discourse about various activities (politics, economics, science and technology) today take place without reference to God or wider cosmological views, and further that such activities are preserved rationally just to that extent that they are emptied of God. Related to this would be, for those familiar with his work, Father R. J. Neuhaus's claims about the "naked public square." But an important consideration regarding this sense of secularization is that

² Harvard University Press, 2007.

it can accompany quite well the vast majority of people in that society still believing in God, much as we have in the United States. Despite a particular understanding of the separated relationship of the “church” and the “state” (an understanding in severe departure from the medieval one, for instance, where the church enabled social bans on usury) and a decline in the secular authority of church leaders), the vast majority of Americans still number themselves among believers in God and specifically in the Christian God.

While that first sense of secularization may be an important mark of our culture, Taylor implies that it is not the only version of secularization or even the most important. Thus, he identifies as a second sense of secularization the falling off of religious belief and practice, in people ceasing to believe in God and no longer going to church. Immediately, some of you may pull Europe to mind, as you’ve no doubt heard of and experience the vast decline of worship in formerly Christian and Catholic countries. And yet, as Taylor notes, many of these countries may be marked by this second sense of secularization without being marked by the first, as for instance in Germany where despite an apparently devastating decline in religious belief and practice, the government maintains a special formal relationship with the Catholic and Protestant (*Evangelische*) churches. Or, similarly, one may think of Ireland, where a decline in religious belief and practice accompanies a country whose constitution continues to make explicit reference to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. We see, then, two kinds of secularization, each the mirror image of the other where some sense of religious piety is retained despite some decline from a prior cultural experience with faith. So, as important as are the first and second senses of secularization, Taylor says there is yet another vital sense worthy of taking up.

The third sense of secularization focuses on the conditions of belief. This sense, according to Taylor, “consists, among other things, of a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed unproblematic to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest one to be embraced.”³ In societies characterized by this third sense, Taylor says, *what it is to*

³ Taylor, 3.

believe is strikingly different from those societies not characterized by the third sense (think Muslim or Hindu society today, or Latin Christendom in the past).

Because Taylor's point is so important, and because of the many obvious problems our culture poses to believers today, and specifically to Catholics, we'll focus a moment on a brief and insufficient comparison of two cultures following Taylor's analysis: one, our contemporary and disenchanted world, and two, the enchanted world of Christendom.

The Disenchanted World: Today we live in a world where the locus of thoughts and feelings is what philosophers call "minds," and the only minds in the cosmos are those of humans. All these thoughts and feelings then are located within human minds. This means all our thoughts, perceptions, and beliefs about the world emerge from within us, and indeed whatever is outside of us is merely the consequence of particular thoughts and beliefs we have; things, in other words, have existence entirely dependent upon us, or even upon me: I give life to things by the operation of my mind. This is the famous "brain in a vat" philosophical exercise which seeks to show that because we are minds, and because all meaning depends on minds, it's theoretically possible that whatever is is simply our thoughts about the "thing." To think convincing things about the world merely would require the stimulation of particular brain states.

The Enchanted World: In the enchanted world meanings are not located in the human mind; instead, there was abundant life independent of any human thinking, of any mind activity. Thus, ordinary folk lived in a world of good and bad spirits. There was Satan, of course, but a host of demons that threatened one from all sides. Spirit agents were numerous also on the good side. Of course there was God, residing above all and intervening as necessary, but in addition there were saints to whom one prayed for relief and protection. The world abounded with independent and external powers. There were holy places and holy things, like relics and ritual instruments. The consecrated Host, of course, was a source of protection. Certain prayers, like the prayer to the Archangel Michael, were thought to invoke the agency of other beings in one's defense against manifest evil. In the enchanted world, then, there were

manifold sources of meaning external and even superior to the human mind; sources like God and the devil that would be there even if we and when we ceased to exist.

In drawing this distinction, a distinction that some of us may argue does not quite apply in our own cases (as we may retain the beliefs characterizing the enchanted world), Taylor strives to show us the vast, chasm separating the contemporary culture from its antecedents. His points are at least two: First, in the enchanted world, disbelief is hard. In this spirit filled world, God figures as the dominant spirit and the sole guarantor of the triumph of good over evil; and, additionally, often belief in God is seen as necessary to one's securing his assistance over evil (think of any good vampire movie worth its salt: the vampire will not be intimidated by a faithless priest). The prospect of disbelief – of rejecting God – entails standing alone against an array of forces existing independently of and against you. Second, and more immediately important, in a disenchanted world, belief in God is hard and even irrational because in the context of the enchanted world “God” reduces to a mere construction of the human mind.

So, the distinction between an enchanted culture and a disenchanted culture implies a critical difference of that culture's posture towards belief. Whereas it was once extremely difficult not to believe in God, today Taylor maintains it is difficult to believe in God. This may seem abstract and highly philosophical, but the implications are real and deep. The cultural factors conducing to belief or disbelief don't just affect belief, but affect every aspect of society, including how the culture keeps track of time.

So, in the pre-modern, enchanted era, “ordinary” time was distinguished from and given meaning by what we might call higher time, playing off the obviously liturgical note sounded by the language of “ordinary” time.⁴ This ordinary time was even called “secular” time to distinguish the age from the higher age of eternity which was the “time” some religious folk (like monks and nuns) chose to occupy. Secular, or ordinary time, is simply the felt time, the time we check on the clock or

⁴ Taylor, 54.

the calendar. But higher time gathers and re-orders secular time; events which are far apart in secular time (say the sacrifice of Isaac and the Crucifixion of Christ) are linked immediately by their purpose and meaning in the context of the divine plan. Put differently, as Catholics experience every Easter, Good Friday 2007 is closer to the actual Crucifixion than it is to July 4th 2007. Thus, an entire community gathers, under the aspect of an obligation, to commemorate and relive this “high” and enchanted moment, and to fail to do so is not merely a moral failure, but a failure in judgment, a failure to see the world as it truly is according to the enchanted way of conceiving of the world.

Building upon this notion of time, and stemming from it at the same moment, is a whole assortment of cultural practices that gain their meaning from the intimate connection between the higher and the ordinary. Just as the divine can puncture time to make immediate the relationship between Good Friday 2007 and the First Friday of Christ’s agony, so too could the divine puncture lives to become immediately present. Fasting, obligatory church observance on Sundays and Holy Days, Penance, blessing candles, devotions to saints, cults of relics, prayers and devotions to the Virgin all were meaningful and socially significant reasonable practices that affected the entire society. Businesses closed on Holy Days, whole populations revered statues and relics, wars and battles avoided Holy Days and Holy places, soldiers carried relics into battle, workers devoted themselves and their work to particular saints, art in all media was imbued with religious meaning (and judged meaningful just to the extent it made the divine immediate).⁵

Entire practices and stances regarding death were informed by the enchanted outlook. Mortality was made explicable by the notion of an age beyond ours; of living eternally with God and the saints. This made of death simply a stage of life, subordinated like time to the higher age of eternity. By so subordinating death under the rubric of eternity, the entire meaning of life (and thus of death) was changed; life was important, of course, but important particularly as the ground for making oneself fit to receive eternal life with God. Life was not an end in itself, but the very

⁵ Ibid., 62ff.

special means to a further end. Death, on the other hand, became surrounded by meaning. Death became a part of life writ large; life that extended beyond mortality and into the timeliness occupied by God. Indeed, as St. Paul says, we strive in life to become like Christ in death that we may be liberated from death by His Resurrection.⁶

Of course, much of the complaint of today from believers is precisely the felt alienation from all that enchantment. In fact, one cannot at times help but hear a tinge of resentment in believers who complain that our age is hostile to religious belief and practice. We live at a time when we're told increasingly that belief itself is a problem. Many people today, many of our elite institutions, tell us we ought to resist belief; that belief is dangerous, and religious belief in particular may even be murderous. Because belief leads us to build in a certain way, to follow the advice of these people and institutions and believe in nothing, to espouse unbelief as a worldview, leads to the creation of a nihilistic, anti-Christian culture.

This third type of secularization being described by Taylor is one in which belief in God reduces merely to one option among many other equal, and in some cases superior, choices. Belief is almost unthinkable; the practices of belief (such as belief in the real presence of Christ in the Host, fasting, denial, the acceptance of suffering) seem not merely unreasonable but mad. Over time, over the course of centuries, the enchanted world view was inverted by disenchantment, and accompanying and facilitating this was the move from external sources of meaning to the ascendancy of the self, the sole source of all meaning. The human mind triumphs at the expense of the divine.

This is nothing less than what Nietzsche termed the "death of God."⁷ There is nothing fancy in Nietzsche's point; he means what Taylor is getting at with his conception of secularization: the conditions today just don't permit honest, rational, and unquestioned belief in God. The conditions that prevail today "leave us nothing

⁶ St. Paul, Phil; compare Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Letter, *Salvifici Doloris*, (1984), nos. 15 and 21.

⁷ *The Gay Science*, quoted in Taylor, 560.

we can believe in beyond the human – human happiness, or potentialities, or heroism.”⁸

The moral implications of this ought to be obvious, and thus the implications of this kind of analysis for death and the place of suffering ought to be obvious as well. Religious belief is, in this culture, on the defensive, and the morality that stems from religious commitment must defend itself as well. But the fight is rigged in important ways, just as once defense of unbelief had to be fought in the face of overwhelming odds. Popular books can call the transmission of religious belief to children by parents “child abuse”; religious belief will and has been blamed for all wars and world conflict and even, of course, for global warming, but this is all in large part because religious belief is seen as mad, childish, of the same stuff as belief in unicorns and faeries. Religious moral injunctions to self-denial in food, drink, and sexuality and to wariness regarding individual consumption are viewed as archaic and fueled by resentment.

Thus, today, the Church’s understanding of death and suffering stands challenged by this deep-seeded third type of secularization Taylor identifies. Yes, western culture is secular in the first two senses as well; but this third sense that Taylor explores provides a particular challenge to a moral and social set of teachings that derive from a pre-secular culture. When the foundations of belief have been so challenged that it is apt to speak of the death of God, how can moral doctrines that depend upon God themselves have and give life? At this point one understands Viktor Frankl’s comment that “Man is not destroyed by suffering but by suffering without meaning”: A secularized age fears death and marshals many of its resources against it because death has become meaningless.

⁸ Ibid.