

## RELIGION &amp; PHILOSOPHY

# Why God Won't Die

By Jay Tolson

SOMETHING CURIOUS HAPPENED on the way to the 21st century. Religion—which modernization theorists had said was destined for the dustbin of history—didn't go away. It even seemed to gain new strength, popping up in the culture wars, claiming space in the public square, and (in its worst manifestations) inspiring angry young men to acts of unspeakable violence. Why, it's all enough to drive a good secular humanist crazy—or at least to the bookstores to purchase the reassuring screeds of Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, or any of the other so-called New Atheists.

Making sense of secularism, its achievements and its failings, is one of the great intellectual challenges of our time. The word itself has several interlinked meanings, from the political (the separation of church and state) to the sociological (describing the abandonment of religious belief by individuals or society in general) to the ideological (the programmatic conviction that secularity is the logical outcome of enlightenment, science, and progress). A fourth sense is more anthropological, and arguably lies at the root of the other three. This secularism names a profound shift in worldview, one that the eminent McGill University philosopher Charles Taylor defines as 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 to embrace.”

It is this fourth sense that mainly occupies Taylor in his long-awaited magnum opus, *A Secular Age*. For nearly 800 pages, Taylor, winner of the 2007 Templeton Prize (religion's own “genius award”), wrestles mightily with a fascinating subject: how Christianity became the religion that produced the first exit from religion, and how that exit, secularism, never entirely disentangled itself

## A SECULAR AGE.

By Charles Taylor.  
Belknap/Harvard.  
874 pp. \$39.95

from the religion that made its existence possible. The book is, loosely, a history of ideas, but Taylor's project is to get at something deeper and broader than the activity of intellectuals and other elites, something he calls the “social imaginary,” an ungainly term describing the various ways people “imagine their social existence.”

Taylor begins, not surprisingly, with the Reformation—into which he lumps late medieval developments and the Counter Reformation—because of its crucial role in paving the way for a host of “modern” afflictions, from the confusion of morality with materialism to the disconnection of the individual from tradition and the larger corporate body of fellow believers.

If this seems like a fairly well-trod road, well, it is. But the richness and pleasure of the journey is in seeing how a profoundly learned thinker (who is also a believing Christian) examines the landmarks along the way. For example, Taylor's treatment of the emergence of a new kind of public sphere in the 18th century allows us to see how radical a development it is. Previously, what brought people together was always

“something action-transcendent,” Taylor writes, “be it a foundation by God, or a Chain of Being which society bodied forth, or some traditional law which defined our people.” This new sphere was “grounded purely in its own common actions.” Whatever happened within it—crowds clamoring for lower taxes or members of the Third Estate calling for the end of the Old Regime—was no longer important in relation to eternal time but only in relation to the actually unfolding present and its ideal goal: the future.

Particularly rich is Taylor's dissection of deism as the crucial intermediate stage between an age of belief and one of an increasingly exclusive humanism. In his handling, deism has several closely related facets. One emphasizes the creator role of God. Another involves the primacy of an impersonal order, though still created by God. A

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third is the “idea of a true, original natural religion, which has been obscured by accretions and corruptions, and which must now be laid clear again.” This last notion became so widespread that Unitarianism effectively reached beyond those who belonged to that denomination.

A book of such large proportions finally defies encapsulation, but one of its greater accomplishments is to challenge the modern (or is it post-modern?) orthodoxy that the hunger for religion is no more than the expression of some innate human need for meaning. Introduced by thinkers such as Friedrich Nietzsche and Max Weber, the idea has more recently been elaborated (and “scientized”) by sociobiologists and evolutionary psychologists. Taylor rejects it on the grounds that it usually ends up denying transcendent reality in the name of a generalized human longing for it.

For all his wariness of the factors leading to a secular age, Taylor appreciates the good that has come with a largely secular public sphere, not least because the alternative, in our time, would be endless violent conflict among contending faiths. But he is equally dismissive of postmodern sentimentalities, including the view that the sacred is merely one human construct among many. No, Taylor tirelessly and sometimes even eloquently insists, it is more than that. Much more. Including the ground on which our secularism stands.

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## SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

### Time Beings

By Sharman Apt Russell

IMAGINE A COUPLE SLOW-dancing. One partner leads. The other seamlessly follows. Now imagine that time—the natural progression of day and night, morning followed by afternoon and evening—is

the lead partner. Imagine your body dancing with time.

In fact, this is happening right now. Your internal clock (a big clock in the brain and smaller clocks scattered in cells throughout the body) keeps track of the passing minutes and signals for certain physical responses. As you move through the day, your body temperature steadily rises, along with your heart rate and blood pressure. Your muscle flexibility increases and your reflexes quicken. The level of the stress hormone cortisol declines. Hormones and neurotransmitters ebb and flow according to the hour, as does your white blood cell count. During the night, the hormone melatonin surges; your temperature, heart rate, and blood pressure fall; and the cortisol level begins to climb so as to peak when you must wake again.

The new research on chronobiology, or the effect of time on our bodies, is so compelling that some scientists suggest we should timestamp each visit to the doctor. A morning test might not reveal the hypertension of afternoon. Asthma is often worse at night, when adrenaline levels are low and bronchial passages shrink slightly. When we take certain drugs may determine how well they work. Late in the day, higher body temperatures cause medication to break down more quickly. In a recent study of colorectal cancer, the tumors in patients who were given drugs in a conventional steady dose were reduced in size by 30 percent. In patients treated in a chronotherapy regimen—in which drugs are administered at the time of day calculated to maximize their benefit and minimize their toxicity—tumors shrunk by 51 percent, and side effects were less severe.

Science writer Jennifer Ackerman takes us through the most recent discoveries about the body's natural rhythms, explaining that organisms on earth evolved these rhythms to deal with a rotating planet and its patterns of light and dark, warm and cold. Her larger point is that understanding this dance with

#### SEX SLEEP EAT DRINK DREAM:

*A Day in the Life of  
Your Body.*

By Jennifer Ackerman.  
Houghton Mifflin.  
253 pp. \$25