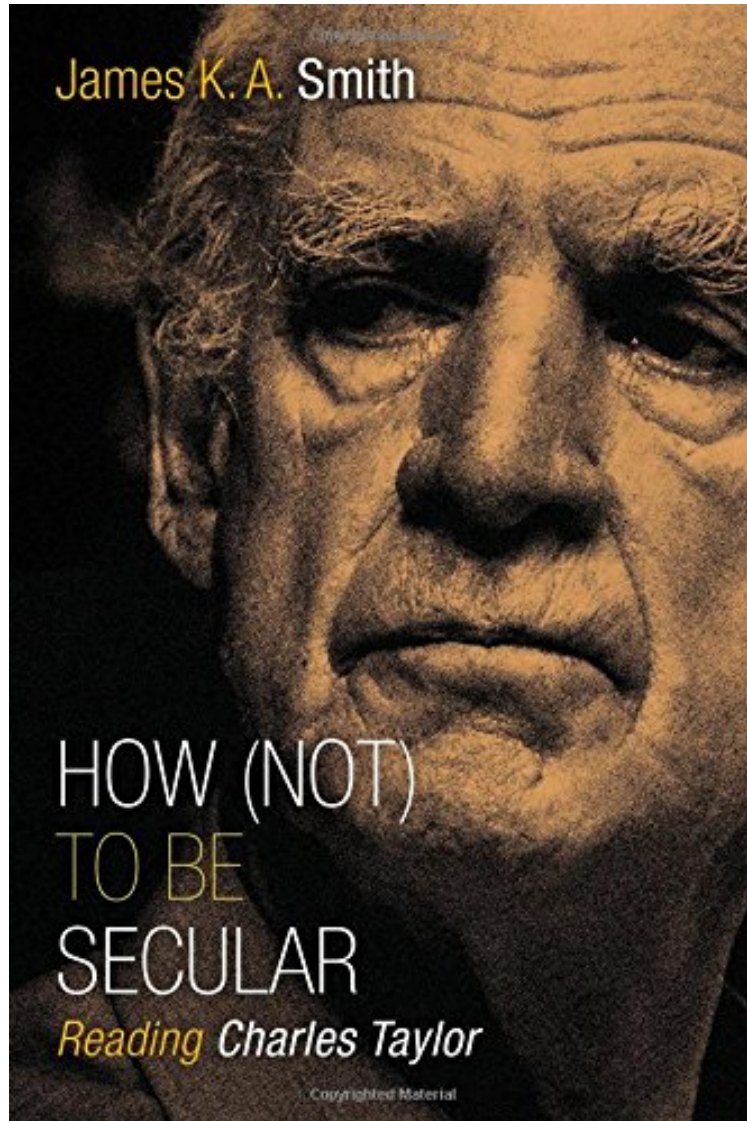


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## How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor

*James K. A. Smith*

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#11768 in Books Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Co. 2014-05-01 Original language: English PDF # 1 9.00 x .21 x 6.00l, .50 #File Name: 0802867618160 pages How Not to Be Secular Reading Charles Taylor | File size: 28.Mb

**James K. A. Smith : How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor:

7 of 7 people found the following review helpful. Great for thinking through society's unspoken assumptions By Adam Oliver It feels a bit strange to be so high on a book that appears to be adapted notes from undergraduate/graduate level class book discussion. Yes, I'd say that feels about right; reading this book is like sitting in on a few classroom sessions

with James KA Smith, listening to him give you a pretty full walk-through of Taylor's *A Secular Age*. As someone who loves that kind of learning environment, this book was right up my alley, but if that's not really your style this book could be more of a challenge for you. Just a few highlights for me. Smith works through Taylor's subversive intellectual history of Western Civilization as it attempts to undermine modern subtraction theories (that the modern world is just the old world after a God-ectomy). He maps the developments toward mature exclusive humanism as not inevitable, but resulting in many cases from developments within Christianity that are not faithful to the narrative of science displacing religion. The idea is that we can't just subtract God from society without constructing an entirely new way of imagining life and significance and meaning. Exclusive humanism then, is not just society without all the God stuff, not just the neutral frame absent ancient or medieval mythology and superstition, it's a whole new take on human life. Taylor's somewhat apologetic tactic here is to paint exclusive humanism as a take in the same way that contemporary society considers Christianity a take to be criticized, evaluated, and accepted/rejected. He moves on to argue that this modern disenchanted world where exclusive humanism is the water we swim in can be at times less than satisfying, as many feel a kind of loss or doubt about meaning and significance absent transcendence. This creates a fundamental point for Taylor, the idea of cross-pressure. While everything around us focuses on the imminent, the here and now, there are still hints, hauntings, of transcendence that create this pressure on us. Somehow, many of our major strivings, goals, or achievements seem to lack something, to be more flat than they could be. Taylor is very big on this kind of gutsy, feeling type argument. Smith portrays him as dependent upon his readers sharing the vague feelings he describes as so essential to the modern world. Smith reinforces this by showing how this cross-pressure may be evidenced in literature and music that resonates with us. Living in a cross-pressured world is true for everyone, we feel pulled by the pressure to grow up and face the reality that transcendence is a myth and we must make meaning for ourselves, while still sometimes dealing with the internal call that there might be more fullness or weight to be had than just what can be humanly created and attained. Smith's look at Taylor's book can feel a bit apologetic to be sure, there are several points where it is clear that the aim is to level the playing field between exclusive humanism and Christianity by showing some of the primary criticisms lobbed at Christianity can also impinge upon exclusive humanism. One of the more significant sections deals with the question of whether Christianity/Exclusive Humanism better handles the maximal demand: how to achieve our highest aspirations while not crushing the essentials of ordinary humanity. The ascetic and moral demands of religion easily fall upon this critique, but Smith/Taylor argue that humanism also may either underestimate capabilities of reform ("just victims" of environment) or may set the transformation bar too high allowing for a kind of ends-justifying-means mode of achieving all that humanity could/should be. Smith/Taylor state that the playing field is level more than a few times, and I, even as a Christian, did not find myself fully convinced that it was actually level, though certainly more level than fundamentalist humanists would care to concede. In the end, this book provides a helpful window into the assumptions behind modern belief systems. If you can handle the sometimes apologetic tone, it provides some great questions of fundamentalisms (both Christian and humanist, though mostly of humanist). How do we as a society and as individuals deal with the big issues of shared morality, significance, and meaning in a world where religion is no longer anything like a default option? We need to examine our assumptions and this book is a good start for that. Highly recommend.

36 of 39 people found the following review helpful. a book about a book as good as the book  
By Clint Schnekloth  
Not every book about a book is a good book. This book about a book is not only a good book... it is a great book! Smith handily summarizes Charles Taylor's complex argument on secularity in his magnum opus, *A Secular Age*. You can read Smith's book as a chapter by chapter commentary on Taylor's book (it is that). But the book also stands alone as a summary presentation of Taylor's overall argument. It also stands alone as an introduction to secularity and contemporary philosophical reflection on it. In other words, you don't have to read Taylor while reading Smith. You can read Smith, and with great benefit. This book originated in a class Smith hosted with students, a focused reading of *A Secular Age*. Readers could do a lot worse than assemble a group of sympathetic souls, and read Smith and Taylor together over a summer or semester. On the other hand, if you've been curious about Taylor but intimidated by the heft of *A Secular Age*, Smith offers here a handy and wonderful primer. One of the most helpful parts of the book is Smith's glossary. He offers simple definitions of some of Taylor's technical terminology. I believe these will solidify some of the terminological discussions around Taylor's work. See the definition of things like Age of Authenticity, Buffered Self, Cross-Pressure, Social Imaginary, the Unthought, and Excarnation. This is a handy, helpful, and wonderful short read. You will not be disappointed.

84 of 88 people found the following review helpful. Making a Genius More Accessible  
By David George Moore  
I say "more accessible" because this is hardly *A Secular Age* for Dummies. Charles Taylor's massive and dense book is tough sledding. I have not read much of it, but am certainly familiar with the work of Taylor. In *How (Not) to Be Secular*, Jamie Smith brings the intellectual cookies to a lower shelf, but don't be fooled, serious thinking is still required. Smith respects his readers by providing an accessible, yet thoughtful distillation of one of the most consequential books of our day. Instead of doing a typical book review, let me briefly mention six things I appreciated about this book:

- \*The writing style is elegant and engaging. Let me give one example from page 11: "Ardor and devotion cannot undo the shift in plausibility structures that characterizes our age." This is wonderfully conceived, but it is also pregnant with implications.\*
- \*There is a judicious use of illustrations from literature, music, and movies.\*
- \*Since

I am not a dispassionate reader on the subject of doubt (I know the struggle to believe firsthand), I am grateful for the insights on living in this unusual climate of secularism.\*The author is careful to understand his subject matter. A good example is the compassionate assessment of the troubled genius, David Foster Wallace. Smith does not offer a glib critique of Wallace's writings. Wallace is looked at seriously, even one could say, sympathetically. To be sure, Smith does not agree with Wallace's overall philosophy, but Smith does a good job of showing how others have missed salient features of Wallace's approach.\*Smith clearly appreciates Charles Taylor's overall project in *A Secular Age*. However, that does not impede Smith from offering important pushbacks and critiques.\*Both Smith and Taylor understand that a silly, sentimental, and Sunday School-ish type of faith is hardly enough to stave off the onslaughts of secularism. Smith does a good job of showing how foolish it is to abandon the Christian faith for the "mature" position of materialism. Rather, we ought to abandon the trivial or superficial beliefs of American Christianity.

*How (Not) to Be Secular* is what Jamie Smith calls "your hitchhiker's guide to the present" -- it is both a reading guide to Charles Taylor's monumental work *A Secular Age* and philosophical guidance on how we might learn to live in our times. Taylor's landmark book *A Secular Age* (2007) provides a monumental, incisive analysis of what it means to live in the post-Christian present -- a pluralist world of competing beliefs and growing unbelief. Jamie Smith's book is a compact field guide to Taylor's insightful study of the secular, making that very significant but daunting work accessible to a wide array of readers. Even more, though, Smith's *How (Not) to Be Secular* is a practical philosophical guidebook, a kind of how-to manual on how to live in our secular age. It ultimately offers us an adventure in self-understanding and maps out a way to get our bearings in today's secular culture, no matter who "we" are -- whether believers or skeptics, devout or doubting, self-assured or puzzled and confused. This is a book for any thinking person to chew on.

Conrad Grebel "Readers in any church tradition, or none at all, can benefit from Smith's accessible and lively book." Tim Keller Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York City "Charles Taylor's crucial book on our secular age is inaccessible for most people, including the church leaders who desperately need to learn from its insight. Jamie Smith's book is the solution to this problem. As a gateway into Taylor's thought, this volume (if read widely) could have a major impact on the level of theological leadership that our contemporary church is getting. It could also have a great effect on the quality of our communication and preaching. I highly recommend this book." T. M. Luhrmann Stanford University "This is a brilliant, beautifully written book on the dilemma of faith in a modern secular age. It introduces the reader to the material in Taylor's dense book, of course, but it does more. It invites the reader on a journey through the experience of the spirit in different centuries, and how our conceptions of mind and person shape belief in ways far more intimate than we usually imagine. *How (Not) to Be Secular* is a gem." Hans Boersma Regent College "Charles Taylor's daunting tome, *A Secular Age*, has just turned a great deal less intimidating. Combining his usual lucid style, his love for literature, and his passion for the church's future, Jamie Smith offers a faithful guide through the pages of Taylor's monumental work. Along the way, he wisely cautions his co-religionists against facile responses to the 'disenchantment' of modernity, but he also insists that the Christian faith may have much more going for it than many recognize." of *Metaphysics* "I highly recommend Smith's book, a short and clear introduction to Taylor's *A Secular Age*. Having slogged through Taylor's book, I think that Smith's book communicates well, contra MacIntyre, Taylor's analysis and extraordinary skill. ... Illuminating and insightful." *Christian Century* "The importance of *A Secular Age* is matched by its inaccessibility. It is a great woolly mammoth of a book. . . . Smith's book does great work in opening Taylor's tome to a wider readership. His commentary is clear, accurate, and insightful. It is also concise, leading readers deep into Taylor's ideas in well under 200 pages. Smith's sure grasp of Taylor's big picture makes the details of the argument pop with fresh intelligibility." *Religious Studies* "For those who have been intimidated by Charles Taylor's massive tome *A Secular Age* (2007), Smith has provided an accessible entry point to Taylor's work in *How (Not) To Be Secular*. . . . The work endeavors to distill Taylor's work for a wider audience and is more digestible than Taylor's daunting volume thanks to Smith's lucid and engaging prose. Those desiring an accurate summary of Taylor's work or those looking for a more sophisticated understanding of the secular age would find this book well worth the time." *Books Culture* "An altogether readable, charming and short introduction to Taylor's behemoth." *First Things* "Those looking for an introduction to this supremely important work (Taylor's *A Secular Age*) but reluctant to wade through its 896 pages can turn to this economical commentary." *Choice* "Smith offers a reader's guide to Taylor's lengthy work. This book succeeds as both a summation of Taylor's argument . . . and as a light critique. . . . A sympathetic, astute summation of Taylor's most ambitious work. Recommended." *Englewood of Books* "This is philosophy with feet, a thick theology that will get your heart beating because it meets you in the complicated world we all share." *University Bookman* "Already in previous books Smith has proven himself adept at translating difficult philosophical and theological ideas for the broader church and culture. *How (Not) to Be Secular* continues in this trajectory. It is part cultural analysis, part philosophical ethnography, always accessible, and always with an eye toward the implications of Taylor's insights for the practice of Christian faith." *Cresset* "Splendid, yet accessible and brief overview and discussion of what is arguably the most widely discussed work of philosophy of

the last twenty years."The Presbyterian Outlook "If one wants to understand the roots of our current cultural condition, Charles Taylor's book is essential. There is no better guide to it than James K. A. Smith."Los Angeles of Books "Well written, clear, and accessible. Most important, it supplies a very reliable reconstruction of the essentials of Taylor's position. Smith is particularly adept at emphasizing the existential quality of Taylor's analysis of secularity: what does it feel like to be a believer or non-believer in the modern Western world? . . . Anyone seeking a quick but dependable overview of Taylor's argument in *A Secular Age* would benefit immensely from Smith's book. . . . [It] is a fine achievement and accomplishes just what it sets out to: providing its readers with a reliable road map to Charles Taylor's account of our secular age."