

How Christianity Created Secularism

I'm someone who holds an ongoing interest in the origins of secularism.

It's a fascinating question to me: How did Christianity grow from a small, persecuted movement in Palestine to become the European cultural phenomenon known as "Christendom", only to be relegated to an ostensibly marginalized position in modern Western society?

According to one answer: Christianity did it to itself. In other words, Christianity—or, at least, a mutation of Western Christianity—is the originator of secularism.

Perhaps the most well-known proponent of this thesis is [Charles Taylor](#), professor emeritus at McGill University in Montreal who for his work was awarded the 2007 Templeton Prize (which gives its recipient \$1.5 million dollars [!] for "an exceptional contribution to affirming life's spiritual dimension").

Taylor is today most known for his 900-page tome [A Secular Age](#), in which he examines the decline of Christianity from the Middle Ages—where unbelief was (supposedly) almost unthinkable—to today, where unbelief is regarded as one viable option among many.

As it turns out, Taylor owes a debt of gratitude to [Ivan Illich](#) for helping to shape his thesis in *A Secular Age*. Illich was a 20th-century philosopher and social critic. Some of you may know him as the author of [Deschooling Society](#), in which Illich argues for the overthrow of the public education system.

In the foreword to [The Rivers North of the Future](#)—which contains a series of interviews with Illich—Taylor writes:

"Illich argues that Western modernity finds its original impetus in a mutation of Latin Christendom, a mutation in which the Church began to take with ultimate seriousness its

power to shape and form people to the demands of the Gospel... What I call a 'mutation' in Latin Christendom could be described as an attempt to make over the lives of Christians and their social order, so as to make them conform thoroughly to the demands of their faith. I am talking not of a particular, revolutionary moment, but of a long, ascending series of attempts to establish a Christian order, of which the Reformation is a key phase. As I see it, these attempts show a progressive impatience with older modes of religious life in which certain traditional collective, ritualistic forms coexisted uneasily with the demands of individual devotion and ethical reform which came from the 'higher' revelations. In Latin Christendom, the attempt was made to impose on everyone a more individually committed and Christocentric religion of devotion and action, and to suppress or even abolish older, supposedly 'magical' or 'superstitious' forms of collective ritual practice.

Allied with a neo-Stoic outlook, this became the charter for a series of attempts to establish new forms of social order. These helped to reduce violence and disorder and to create populations of relatively pacific and productive artisans and peasants who were more and more induced/forced into the new forms of devotional practice and moral behaviour, be this in Protestant England, Holland, or later the American colonies, or in Counter-Reformation France, or in the Germany of the *Polizeistaat*.

This creation of a new, civilized, 'polite' order succeeded beyond what its first originators could have hoped for, and this in turn led to a new reading of what a Christian order might be, one which was seen more and more in 'immanent' terms. (The polite, civilized order is the Christian order.) This version of Christianity was shorn of much of its 'transcendent' content, and was thus open to a new departure, in which the understanding of the good order—what we would call the modern moral order—could be embraced outside the original theological, Providential framework, and in certain cases even against it (as by Voltaire, Edward Gibbon, and in

another way David Hume).”

According to Taylor (and Illich), then, the attempt to create an ordered, Christian culture has paradoxically produced a secular culture—one in which Christian faith is one choice among many, and where the practice of the Christian faith is merely one aspect or compartment of what we call “life”.

Or, more accurately, the attempt to construct a Christian order has altered the definition of a Christian. In the New Testament and in the early Church, being a Christian was a radical calling. The Christian was one who was baptized into Christ’s death, and spent the rest of his earthly life dying to self and the world (paradoxically, for the sake of the salvation of the world) through worship, unceasing prayer, frequent fasting, the cultivation of watchfulness, and care for the poor, the widowed, and the orphaned.

Today we think of a Christian as one who attends church regularly, who engages in prayer semi-regularly, who has certain Christian symbols and books featured prominently in their homes, and who may oppose the legalization or government approbation of certain activities in the voting booths and through periodic participation in marches. Today’s lukewarm, secular Christian is what most people identify as a Christian. But in reality, the secular Christian is a Christian made according to the image of those Renaissance- and Enlightenment-era creators of the “new, civilized, polite order”. He conforms to their structural determiners of Christian life, but nothing more.

In Taylor’s reasoning, the devolution of Christianity into the modern secular order was thus accomplished by the attempt to mitigate the need for will in people’s lives, “to create systems so perfect that men no longer needed to be good”. In its essence, however, Christianity involves taking up a willed struggle, which is known in Greek as *askesis* and in Russian as [*podvig*](#). It involves a lifelong attempt, aided by God’s grace, to engage in spiritual warfare against the passions of pride, lust, greed, gluttony, anger, envy, and sloth, so that one can

grow in the virtues of chastity, humility, patience, and love. The attempt to remove struggle, and to manufacture order, is often associated with fear—of the loss of control, of the center not holding. The same process that has afflicted Christianity is also now afflicting the very secular order that it created. America, for instance—which has been called the “last, great act of the Renaissance”—was born from a spontaneous movement of the will, of numerous wills. But very soon after the Revolution anxiety set in about how to preserve “the Republic”. As *Declaration* signer Benjamin Rush noted, “We have changed our forms of government, but it remains yet to effect a revolution in our principles, opinions, and manners, so as to accommodate them to the forms of government we have adopted.”

And now, today, a number of Americans are noticing the increasingly oppressive character of the order and its institutions (education, the legal system, health care, entertainment, etc.) that were designed to “effect a revolution in our principles, opinions, and manners”. According to the biblical account, the Original Sin consisted of the first man and woman attempting to attain a goal (“to be like God”) by avoiding the path of struggle (i.e., by simply eating the fruit). If Taylor and Illich are right, the modern secular order is but a reiteration of this primordial story.

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