Mirjam Künkler, John Madeley and Shylashri Shanker (eds.), with an afterword by Charles Taylor

A Secular Age Beyond the West: Religion, Law and the State in Asia, the Middle East and North Africa.

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Despite the fact that this volume has chapters covering eleven different countries, it displays an all too rare cohesiveness, due to its contributors' addressing their subject matter from a common starting point – that provided by Charles Taylor in his study *A Secular Age*. The same questions are asked, using the same basic concepts, but drawing on very different material from that which Taylor drew upon. Whilst Taylor studied historical processes of secularization and the relationship between the religious and the non-religious in Western modernity, this volume explores such processes and relationships as these apply to secularity in other parts of the world.

Taylor distinguished between three types of secularity. His Secularity I emerges as the result of a process of differentiation between the various sections of society and religious norms and authority. The result of such differentiation is that the economy, education, the law, welfare operate in accord with secular rather than religious goals and values. Secularity II refers to a general decline of religious belief and practice – a phenomenon that several post-World War II European sociologists have considered to be an inevitable trend. Finally, and of particular interest for Taylor, Secularity III entails "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" (p. 2).[1] It is this last type of secularity that Taylor believes developed uniquely in the North Atlantic world, where it currently prevails. But has it, could it, the editors of this book ask, be similarly realised in other parts of the world? Can, they ask, talk of secularity be comparable in places where the concept of religion differs fundamentally from that which developed from a monotheistic Latin Christendom?

The ten countries covered by the contributors are China, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Iran, Israel, Japan, Morocco, Pakistan and Turkey. An Appendix offers "A quantitative Take on the Incidence of Taylor's Three Secularities in the Eleven Country Studies" (p. 396).

In his chapter, aptly entitled "Enigmatic Variations: Russia and the Three Secularities", John Madeley notes that Taylor's distinction between West and East is between the heritage of Latin Christendom on the one hand, and, on the other hand, that of Islam, Hinduism and other great civilizational cultures including Eastern Orthodox Christianity. He then provides a brief account of the position of the Russian Orthodox Church over the years, first arguing that, despite the claims of some scholars that it differed from Protestantism in that it did not undergo attempts at reform, it did in fact see several attempts at reform throughout its history. Next we are given a more detailed picture of the changes in the Church's fortune, with a brief promise of freedom with the February 1917 revolution being followed by increasing repression of, first, the Church and then all religious believers by the state, which promoted "exclusive humanism of a revolutionary Soviet kind" (p. 286). Then, following the collapse of Soviet communism,

[1] The quotation is from Taylor, Charles, 2007, *A Secular Age.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard Belknap Press, page 3.

when all religions where granted a new freedom, the Orthodox Church increasingly claimed its foremost position in Russian society, playing a significant, if somewhat indirect, role in the repression of religious competition, especially that introduced by foreign missionaries. In fact, Madeley argues, Russia is not all that unlike Western Europe in that both have "a hierarchy of recognition of different religious groups" (p. 288), and that, due in part to the rupture of religious memory, "the dominant option remaining in the Orthodox East as much as in the Latin West is not so much believing in nothing but believing in almost anything" (p. 289). Madeley concludes that both Taylor's Secularities I and II can be observed in ways not dissimilar from the ways they can be found in Western Europe, and that while Secularity III was vastly different during Soviet times, it has now recognisably similar aspects to that in Western Europe – to some extent.

The fact that, apart from the one chapter on Russia, this volume does not deal with Central and Eastern Europe does not mean that it is not of relevance to those that are interested in the secularities of the region. One can, after all, learn as much from recognising what is not the case as discovering what is the case. Entering on such a journey of exploration can prevent one from taking for granted as inevitable the religious (or the non-religious) aspects of a society, and, thereby, to ask questions that might not otherwise have been raised about the whys and wherefores of a particular situation.

What does emerge clearly from these different studies is that whilst Taylor argued that differentiation in the West created a condition for the emergence of radical plurality and the availability of a number of meaningful options, including humanism, to a large majority of the population, the various contributors find that elsewhere it is regulation of religion by the state that strongly influences conditions of belief, and that belief does *not* become but one acceptable option among many. In such countries, "it is unbelief, rather than belief, that is in need of public justification" (p. 11).

In their concluding chapter, Künkler and Madeley argue that "the case studies appear consistent with Taylor's argument that Western secularization was critically contingent upon particular characteristics of Latin Christendom rather than on the ineluctable consequences of some universal multi-stranded process of modernization" (p. 377). Whilst all the countries would appear to have had ideas in favour of Secularity III, in all (apart from Japan) highly contextual constellations of interests and institutions precluded its realization or, in those cases when it was achieved, were responsible for dismantling it.

In his Afterword, Taylor elaborates on the theme of Secularity III as being a 'condition of belief' where there is not merely an immense variety of religious–metaphysical beliefs held by people, but a place where shifting from one belief to another is accepted as unsurprising – it is eminently conceivable that one should do so. He then considers the difference between a situation where, while presupposing there is some kind of problem with 'the other', one tries to be tolerant and avoid discrimination, and a situation where it is believed that discrimination should be avoided because of the others' rights. Whist preferring the second situation, Taylor is aware that it can lead to a number of problems that are becoming recognisable in the contemporary West.

It would be wrong to think this is an easy read. It is not a book to be skipped through lightly. Much of the material and the theorising require careful concentration if one is to follow and grasp the full import of what we are being told. But it is, on the whole, a challenge that is well worth the effort. This reviewer has certainly had her horizons widened through the experience.

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