



Charles Taylor and Jeffrey C. Alexander on secularity and the sacred

Samuel Nelson¹

Published online: 20 February 2020
© Springer Nature Limited 2020

The following is a conversation between Charles Taylor and Jeffrey Alexander which developed from a panel convened for the tenth anniversary of Taylor's *A Secular Age*, held at the Annual Meeting of the Social Science History Association in Montreal in November 2017. Taylor was present to hear and address the reflections of four scholars, including Alexander, who were invited to discuss the book's legacy a decade on.

Alexander's remarks centered on the possibilities of transcendental or sacred experience in modernity in view of Taylor's account, in *A Secular Age*, of the unique conditions and limits imposed on such experience—conditions which, in his reading, reflect the uniquely modern authority claimed by self-referentially immanent, and thus secular, frames of experience. For Taylor, the rationalizing, disenchanting processes associated with the transition to modernity displace the once integral authority of religion—the historic domain of transcendental engagement—and thus displace the transcendent, as such, from the institutional logics and discourses governing everyday modern life.

Alexander is in agreement with Taylor regarding the secularizing implications of the differentiating and disembedding processes associated with modernization; yet he parts company with Taylor in substantial, and perhaps axiomatic ways, in asserting that the transcendent and the sacred not only remain vitally possible in modernity but also that they are as vital and anthropologically indispensable as ever, their fortunes not bound exclusively to the fortunes of religion—that is, of religion defined in narrow terms, as he suggests Taylor does, as entailing an explicitly divine or theological orientation. However, Taylor's immanent secularity would drive those left existentially and aesthetically unfulfilled in search for transcendent touchstones at a remove from the disenchanted contours of everyday life (in nature, the cosmos, art, etc.), for Alexander, even the most ostensibly rational and immanently oriented domains of modern experience (politics, science, etc.) involve integrally sacred and transcendent moments. This extends even to forms of immanent and material

✉ Samuel Nelson
samuel.nelson@mcgill.ca

¹ McGill University, 3520 University Street, Room 019, Montreal, QC H3A 2A7, Canada



sacrality normally ascribed to times and places left behind by modernity, and thus seeming to bely the stronger narratives of progressive historical disenchantment from the axial age through the Reformation and arriving, complete, at Weber's metaphorical iron cage.

Alexander's conference remarks catalyzed an extended conversation with Taylor which began at the conference and continued in writing over subsequent months. Animating this exchange (also include here in full) are concerns of special relevance to cultural sociology and to this journal. Their back and forth evokes an enduring Weberian/Durkheimian divide in scholarly thinking generally about the relationship between modernity, culture and religion. This divide is made uniquely explicit here, however, and productively so, with Alexander and Taylor, despite much mutual resonance between their scholarship otherwise, directly confronting a rather consequential divergence in the very conceptual foundations of their accounts of modernity. In Taylor, the buffering of modern self-hood vis-à-vis the durably disenchanting environments of modernity generates countervailing movements of re-enchantment and re-sacralization in ways that either leave the secular modern alone, and in meaningful tension with fuller, deeper, or more authentic sources of experience outside it; or that seek culturally or politically to reverse this modernity to revive a lost authenticity. In Alexander, in contrast, and following Durkheim, sacralization remains the basis of human classification itself, and the nexus of meaning and collective solidarity, operative always and everywhere even if the complexity, differentiation and contingency of modernity imposes unique conditions on its expression.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Samuel Nelson is Assistant Professor of Religion and Culture in the School of Religious Studies at McGill University. An historical sociologist and sociologist of religion, his research focuses on religion in early modernity, secularization and the religious dimensions of imperialism.

