

“Apologetics” for the Secular Age: Charles Taylor’s Theological History

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The argument of *A Secular Age* is often read in relation to the religious position of its author, Charles Taylor. Taylor wrote this massive historical narrative of secularity, which is normatively characterized by his theological insights, both as a philosopher and a Roman Catholic Christian. Some preceding studies seem to regard Taylor’s work as “apologetics.” However, such a characterization is not appropriate, since the word is sometimes understood to denote as “anti-secular” criticism. Articulating the contemporary secular situation with the unique concept of “conditions of belief,” Taylor defines secularity or “the immanent frame” as “the sensed context in which we develop our beliefs.” Given this definition, it is logical to suppose that his Christian belief itself also operates within the conditions of this secular age, and therefore it cannot offer its own critical standpoint outside of this immanent frame.

In order to clarify Taylor’s theological normativity, this paper examines two issues that underpin the above understanding of Taylor’s argument under the rubric “apologetics.” The first issue concerns Taylor’s criticism of exclusive humanism and the second his detailed reference to the thought of Ivan Illich. Earlier studies tend to misidentify the former with his general criticism of secularity. However, if one carefully examines the substance of Taylor’s criticism, it is clear that his target is not secularity itself but rather the exclusivity or narrowness of some secular humanistic viewpoints. The latter, the positive reference to Illich in the last part of *A Secular Age*, is often considered as a plausible evidence that Taylor interprets the historical root of secular modernity as the “corruption” of Christianity and that his theological end is to revivify an authentic form of this system of belief from the predicament in which it has fallen since the Reformation. Taylor’s theology, however, does not possess an eschatological or apocalyptic character comparable to that of Illich’s; therefore, his narrative of historical “change” in social imaginaries is not identical to the history of “corruption” that Illich pessimistically describes. Based on these arguments, this paper concludes that Taylor’s theological end can be appropriately understood as “the Communion of Saints” or “unity-across-differences,” which is characterized by conversations, friendships, and mutual understandings among “a host of different positions.”