

The 'Buffered Self', Muslim-Christian Relations and the Church's Response to a Secular Age

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"Faith in a Secular Age: a Conversation with Charles Taylor"

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A Secular Age fell into my lap at a fortuitous moment in the preparation of my doctoral research. I had been hunting for a theoretical framework within which to articulate an opposition between two groups of modern Muslim writers. On the one hand I had been looking at a group of reformists, influenced by Henri Bergson and incorporating various mystical and evolutionary ideas; they were distant relatives, you might say, of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. On the other hand, there was a group of Sufis as radically opposed to the modern world as one could hope to be. Theirs is a neo-Platonic articulation of Islam (although they wouldn't put it like that) which underpins a theory of the "transcendent unity of religions", the view that all religions are one in their esoteric core. It was not hard, I thought, to see that these two versions of Islam were poles apart. Yet, surprisingly, the radical difference between them was not so apparent to secular scholars in the field. How, I wondered, might I be able to construct some simple theoretical framework which might make this opposition clear?

As I read Charles Taylor's great tome, it dawned on me that his methodological apparatus provided the categories I needed. In particular, I homed in on two notions; the social imaginary and the "immanent frame". Taylor's analytical focus on the social imaginary is what sets him apart from other philosophical or sociological accounts of the advent of the secular. Rather than focus on avowed religious belief or on the institutional presence of religion in society, he concentrates on something that is a condition for belief or unbelief: that shared background representation of reality whose shifting contours can be delineated by examining the trajectory of our civilisation's intellectual, institutional and cultural development. The long and complex historical narrative which Taylor weaves tells the story of a how we westerners moved from an imaginary in which the self's participation in a

transcendent reality is patently obvious to one in which the self is experienced as encompassed in an immanent frame, all her ends and aspirations potentially satisfied in this world and in this life.

I work in the area of relations between Christians and Muslims. At the theological level that relationship is complex enough. But to understand many of the issues which crop up in current dialogue between the two religions entails a detour through their somewhat different appropriation of modernity. I have found Taylor's work yields powerful insights into that difference. More than that, I find that it sheds light on my own quest to be faithful to the Catholic tradition in the modern age. In the rest of this short paper, I want to explain why.

I want to concentrate on what Taylor calls the "buffered self". His assertion is that one of the fundamental conditions of the kind of spontaneous religious belief which was almost universal say five hundred years ago, is a certain sense of selfhood. What makes religious belief so problematic today is that this sense of selfhood is no longer easily accessible to us. We have passed from an apprehension of the self which Taylor calls porous (though I have come to the conclusion that it would be better to speak of the permeable self) to the "buffered self", a sense we all have that "things cannot get to us", where "things" might be evil spirits but also the unwelcome expectations of community and family. Where the permeable self feels vulnerable because it is easily invaded, the buffered self is defended by a separating membrane and hence is its own master, the centre of its own world. The price it pays for its security, however, is that it feels like an observer in the world, detached and isolated.

It is this idea of the modern self as boundaried which offers precious insights into contemporary relations between Muslims and Christians. If a great deal of what passes for difference between the two religions is, in reality, the consequence of a differential appropriation of modernity then it can be analysed in terms of differential selfhood. Some examples will come to mind instantly: for the most part, first generation immigrant Muslims in Europe betray none of the coyness of their European Christian counterparts in recognising the existence (and fearing the very real activities) of bad spirits, *jinn*. Indeed, a naïve realism about the existence of such entities is very much the norm in British Muslim communities.

But other less obvious themes can also be illuminated by reference to differential selfhood, an example being the neuralgic topic of veiling. For modern westerners, the wearing of the *hijab* grates against the passionate conviction embedded in buffered culture that selves, including male selves, should be in command of their passions, no matter the intensity of the stimulus which might provoke them. Furthermore, no other self should feel obliged to modify their behaviour to help their co-citizens resist their darker impulses. For permeable selves, the situation would look very different. It is common sense that selves, especially male selves, are not fully in control of ourselves. They can be visited with devastating impact by powerful and destructive forces, not least sexual temptation. It is only prudent that one take certain precautions to avoid calamity. Now, in our public debate, the issue is usually moral charged on both sides: for one side, it's a simple standoff between modesty and licence; for the other it is about the right of an individual to self-expression and the duty of the other to self-control. Taylor's analysis enables us to see that it is not just a matter of two incommensurable moral claims. Something deeper is at work: profoundly different senses of selfhood. On each side are people who sense their very selfhood to be under threat. It's not a moral disagreement so much as an ontological one. This explains why such a simple, practical matter has taken on an almost totemic significance.

British society is not simply divided between "buffered" Christians and "permeable" Muslims. Alongside a growing number of "permeable" Christians from Africa and elsewhere, Britain is also home to growing numbers of "buffered" Muslims, youngsters born and brought up in the West and finding themselves living out their faith in a way very different to their parents. Taylor's categories offer a much-needed framework to explore these crucial inter-generational transitions. For example, one important phenomenon, hardly confined to Muslims, is that of the buffered self who talks like a permeable self. Many Catholics, I find, speak about their faith with a lack of sophistication quite at odds with the level of their general education and the sophistication of their professional lives. They are fully buffered selves who, when it comes to matters religious, reproduce the discourse of permeable selves, their discourse suggesting a naïve realism about the supernatural but co-opted into the service of the isolated individual, her wants and sensed needs. If I may be bold, one finds this replicated in the religious discourse of neo-conservatives, fundamentalists and, of course, jihadi militants. Perhaps the phenomenon can even account

for our media's systematically incoherent and distorted treatment of religion; all that buffered journalists can do, faced with the madness of religion, is to mouth what they have heard, a language handed down from a traditional milieu, saturated as it is with the experience of permeable selves.

The Iranian intellectual Dariush Shayegan speaks of "cultural schizophrenia". I think Taylor's model gives us greater clarity than Shayegan's evocation of a split self, about what is really at stake: in any individual there is just one actually functioning imaginary which acts as the substrate on which everything else is built. If a person's discourse is at odds with the contents of their imaginary then everything is distorted. What they say will simply not ring true. If I may venture a bold hypothesis, it seems to me that much of what is usually discussed today under the heading of "fundamentalism" is in fact best analysed as the consequence of a disjunction between a religious language which comes from a world of permeable selves and the instrumentalist mentality of the buffered identity which has made it his own. It is noticeable, for example, that the milieu of Islamism is dominated by those with a background not in religious law but the natural sciences. Treating sacred texts as if they were scientific manuals is exactly the kind of clash I am talking about.

Although one might be inclined to think that buffering is the preserve of Protestantism within the Christian world, Taylor argues that in fact it has its origins in the Catholic pastoral programme engendered at the time of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215). He identifies the seminal impulse of modernity in those reiterated pushes for "reform" which are to be found among both Catholics and Protestants, in fact in any proposal that the lives of all the faithful should reflect the highest demands of the Gospel, whether it come from the Reformers or the Counter-Reformers.

This is importantly counter-intuitive. Catholics like to think of themselves as quaintly medieval. We adopt rather too easily the role of patrician resistance to the modern world. The typically pessimistic pronouncements of the Magisterium make clear that we see ourselves as bastions of communion and defenders of the dignity of the person against a modern, globalised culture that is ever more individualistic and fragmented. There is, of course, truth in this. But what is left out of this picture is the extent to which a modern Catholic identity is also highly buffered in its own way, not least by virtue of the tight rein by which the Church enforces doctrinal uniformity. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the

Faith and its predecessors have been, thanks to the disciplinary role they have exercised over centuries, among the most effective buffering agents of our civilisation. This sheds light on what can be a fundamental incoherence in some Catholic diagnoses of what is wrong with the contemporary world. One cannot both attack the consequences of buffering (e.g. fragmentation, individualism, *etc.*) and prescribe yet more buffering as the cure (e.g. stricter adherence to moral or liturgical rules). And it is not just a problem of incoherence. It is the predicament of the buffered self which makes access to a genuinely religious experience so problematic' you cannot "let God in" if you do not experience anything very much as "getting in". If the Church's current practices and disciplines do not always help in this matter, how might they?

Taylor believes that there *is* a way of overcoming the limitations of the buffered self and of exiting the immanent frame. The intuition is fleshed out in the final (and, I suspect the least read and the least understood) chapter of *A Secular Age*, "Conversions". In those pages, Taylor sketches the itineraries of three modern "converts" (all to Catholicism) who, by his reckoning, each found a route to something beyond the default social imaginary which defines the age.

- For **Charles Péguy**, it was through the realisation that the great founding moments of his past could not be treated as mere objects: the legacy of the French Revolution could not be lived out as if it were starkly opposed to that of France's medieval, Christian past. The two historical moments should infuse each other; they were both matters in which he was profoundly and formatively involved. (Donald Allchin has spoken evocatively of "an ecumenism of the past" to express a similar idea.)
- For **Ivan Illich**, maverick critic of even the positive aspects of modernity, it was an awareness of how the dawn of Christianity had been accompanied, almost from the outset, by a pull towards rules and regulations, which enabled him to access an essentially pre-modern sense. The Gospel, which according to Illich is intrinsically characterised by an ethos of interpersonal encounter and culturally transgressive friendship, has always been in danger of giving way to the mere moral imperative to provide forms of social care to the needy on a universal and, therefore, routinely institutionalised basis.

- Finally, for **Gerard Manley Hopkins**, it was the discovery of language's capacity to make new meanings, to give form to a meaning which is in the very process of being born into consciousness, which led him beyond our modern sense that the lot of words is simply to correspond to an objective truth about the state of the world.

These three itineraries of conversion are not exhaustive, nor are they meant to be. What they all have in common is a deep-seated disenchantment with modernity which, as we know so well, could have catapulted them into a rigidly reactionary anti-modern, even restorationist stance. What saved them from this was that what they experienced was disenchantment with the mood and ways of the buffered identity *itself*. They seem to have stumbled upon a way to dissolve the hermetic seal which so isolates the buffered self, ushering in new modes of connectedness. It is no coincidence that Taylor ends his book with a paean to communion. According to his analysis, it is only by re-discovering various forms of mutual ontological participation that we can hope to find a way out of the more stifling and sterile effects of immanence-confined life.

Coming at all this with an interest in the mission of the Church in Europe, I detect here the seed of a pastoral programme. Helping people to find a way out of the immanent frame and into an experience of God and of themselves which challenges the boundaries of the immanentist imaginary strikes me as being exactly what, at our best, we Jesuits find ourselves doing when we give the *Spiritual Exercises* of St Ignatius Loyola (a text Taylor mentions several times in *A Secular Age*). Ignatius, it seems to me, sits on the cusp between permeable and buffered selfhood. He comes to the spiritual quest with all the appurtenances of the ascetic hero, determined to discipline himself to the point where he can better the examples of Saints Dominic and Francis. An early prayer of his ("Teach us, good Lord, to serve you as you deserve; to give and not to count the cost; to fight and not to heed the wounds; to toil and not to seek for rest; to labour and not to ask for any reward, save that of knowing that we do your will.") has a somewhat buffered feel to it. But come his crucial conversion experience, Ignatius finds a way out via, and this is crucial, the personal discovery of a new way of *knowing*: the discernment of spirits. In the *Exercises*, Ignatius spells out that the aim of spiritual discernment is to recognise "the different movements which are caused in the soul, the good to receive them, the bad to reject them". These simple words summarise a dramatic step forward emblematic of his conversion

experience. Notice the profound change which has taken place in the sense of selfhood expressed. The buffered self, we know, does not sense itself vulnerable to the movement of spirits. It is strictly impermeable. The permeable self, on the other hand, is vulnerable to the point of not being able to do anything about the action of the spirits; this is, after all, what gives the witch doctor his power. So the idea that one can recognise the movements of the spirits *and* then act to accept or reject them is a challenge to both imaginaries. It is the birth of a new kind of self. This, I take it, is what marks out the quality of that prayer of the mature Ignatius, the *Suscipe* (“Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, and my entire will, all I have and call my own. You have given all to me. To you, Lord, I return it. Everything is yours; do with it what you will. Give me only your love and your grace, that is enough for me.”) It is, to put it simply, not all about the one praying but about a transfigured identity in which the one praying is conscious of living in deep communion with God. Perhaps the word “person” best captures the essence of it.

The significance of these observations, inspired by Taylor’s ideas, should not be ignored when it comes to thinking through the Church’s pastoral response to the modern world. Two strident voices within (and without) the Church have until recently dominated the discussion. Contemporary Church discourse has taken on an unpleasantly polemical and discordant tone, echoing the “culture wars” of the North American political scene with its polarisation between liberals and conservatives. Both “sides” have found it hard to place a Jesuit Pope who seems not quite to fit into either camp. Is it possible that Pope Francis is rather like Taylor’s converts? Has he found a path beyond the disciplined buffered identity in whose tight grip both sides in the polemic are still held? If so, I predict that this pontificate will become more and not less mystifying to people as it proceeds. Papa Bergoglio beckons to us with his characteristic thumbs-up from a world most of us simply cannot locate, beholden as we are to the prison-bars of the immanent frame. It is a world invariably accessed through crisis and disenchantment but one which opens up the self to communion by allowing God to get to us. I am indebted to Charles Taylor for helping me to understand this (even if he doesn’t agree with it!) and I commend him to you as a uniquely wise and perceptive guide to complex times.