

Charles Taylor – On Secular Time and Higher Time

IV. It is obvious that time in this world of reversal and anti-structure can't be the "homogeneous, empty time" which Benjamin makes central to modernity. The time of carnival, for instance, is *kairotic*; that is, the time line encounters *kairotic* knots, moments whose nature and placing calls for reversal, followed by others demanding rededication, and others still which approach *Parousia*: Shrove Tuesday, Lent, and Easter.

Now there are *kairotic* knots in the stories we tell about ourselves in our time. Revolutions themselves are understood by their heirs and supporters as such *kairotic* moments. And nationalist historiography is full of such moments. But what has changed is that around which these moments gather. In the pre-modern era, the organizing field for ordinary time came from what I want to call higher times.

The most obvious term to introduce here would be 'eternity'. And that isn't wrong, because it is the philosophically and theologically consecrated term for higher time. But I need the more general term, because (a) there was more than one kind of eternity, and (b) these didn't exhaust the higher times.

What did higher times do? One might say, they gathered, assembled, reordered, punctuated, profane, ordinary time. Let me grasp a nettle and call this latter 'secular time'. There is a risk here, because I'm already using the word 'secular' (and in three senses, already!) for features of our age. If I feel impelled to introduce it in a fourth sense, it's because this is the original one, that from which my three meanings of chapter one are derived.

"Secular", as we all know, comes from '*saeculum*', a century or age. When it begins to be used as one term in an opposition, like secular/regular clergy; or being in the *saeculum*, as against in religion (that is, some monastic order), the original meaning is being drawn on in a very specific way. People who are in the *saeculum*, are embedded in ordinary time, they are living the life of ordinary time; as against those who have turned away from this in order to live closer to eternity. The word is thus used for ordinary as against higher time. A parallel distinction is temporal/spiritual. One is concerned with things in ordinary time, the other with the affairs of eternity.

So it is hard to side-line the term when discussing pre-modern time-consciousness. Best to have things straight out, and use it. "Secular" time is what to us is ordinary time, indeed, to us it's just time, period. One thing happens after another, and when something is past, its past. Time placings are consistently transitive. If A is before B and B before C, then A is before C. The same goes if we quantify these relations: if A is long before B, and B long before C, then A is very' long before C.

Now higher times gather and re-order secular time. They introduce "warps" and seeming inconsistencies in profane time-ordering. Events which were far apart in profane time could nevertheless be closely linked. Benedict Anderson in a penetrating discussion of the some of the same issues I am trying to describe here, 'quotes Auerbach on the relation prefiguring-fulfilling in which events of the old Testament were held to stand to those in the New, for instance the sacrifice of Isaac and the Crucifixion of Christ. These two events were linked through their immediate contiguous places in the divine plan. They are drawn close to identity in eternity, even though they are centuries (that is, "*aeons*" or "*saceula*") apart. In God's time there is a sort of simultaneity of sacrifice and Crucifixion.

Similarly, Good Friday 1998 is closer in a way to the original day of the Crucifixion than mid-summers day 1997. Once events are situated in relation to more than one kind of time, the issue of time-placing becomes quite transformed. Why are higher times higher? The answer is easy for the

eternity which Europe inherits from Plato and Greek philosophy. The really real, full being is outside of time, unchanging. Time is a moving image of eternity. It is imperfect, or tends to imperfection.

For Aristotle, this is very true of the sub-lunar. Nothing here can be counted on to be quite totally conformed to its nature. But there were some processes which reflected eternity without flaw: for instance, the stars in their circular courses, without beginning nor end. The general tendency of this thought was to go for a sempiternal universe, that is, one which underwent change, but in which there was neither beginning nor end. True eternity was beyond this; it was fixed and unvarying. This was the realm of Ideas. Below these lay their embodiments in the world, which begin to exhibit imperfections. These become really serious in ordinary, sublunar time, where everything deviates to a certain degree from its Form.

Thus what happens in time is less real than the timeless. A limit is set to this deviancy because the course of time is held in place by higher movements which are closer to eternity (like the rotation of the stars). On some versions, it is also held in place by circular "great years", huge cycles of time after which everything returns to its original state. This was a common idea borrowed from mythology. Thus for the Stoics, after each such cycle everything returns to its original undifferentiated state in a great conflagration. Without fully abandoning this idea of eternity, Christianity developed a somewhat different one. The Bible sees the universe as made by God. It also tells a story of God's dealings with humans. This divine-human history is incompatible with the idea that there are ever-repeating cycles. It also means that what happens in time matters. God enters into drama in time. The Incarnation, the Crucifixion happened in time, and so what occurs here can no longer be seen as less than fully real. Out of this emerges another idea of eternity. As long as it is conceived after the fashion of Plato, and after him Plotinus, our way to God lies in our rising out of time. And also God, as impassible, beyond time, can't really be a player in history. The Christian conception has to be different from this. It evolves slowly, but its best known formulation in Latin Christendom comes from Augustine. With him eternity is reconceived as gathered time.

Unlike his Greek sources, who looked at objective time, the time of processes and movement, Augustine in his famous discussion in Confessions XI examines lived time. His instant is not the "*nun*" of Aristotle, which is a limit, like a point, an extensionless boundary of time periods. Rather it is the gathering together of past into present to project a future. The past, which "objectively" exists no more, is here in my present; it shapes this moment in which I turn to a future, which "objectively" is not yet, but which is here qua project. In a sense, Augustine may be thought to have foreshadowed the three *ekstaseis* of Heidegger. This creates a kind of simultaneity between the components of an action; my action knits together my situation as it emerges from my past with the future T project as a response to it. They make sense of each other. They cannot be dissociated, and in this way there is a certain minimum consistency in the now of action, a minimal thickness, below which time cannot be further dissected without disaggregating the coherence of action. This is the kind of coherence we find in a melody or a poem, favourite examples of Augustine. There is a kind of simultaneity of the first note with the last, because all have to sound in the presence of the others in order for the melody to be heard. In this micro-environment, time is crucial because it gives us the order of notes which is constitutive of the melody. But it is not here playing the role of time the destroyer, which has carried my youth off to an inaccessible distance, and closed the door on bygone ages.

There is thus a kind of extended simultaneity of the moment of action or enjoyment, which we see also, for instance, in a conversation which really engages us. Your question, my reply, your rejoinder occur in this sense together, even though like the melody, their ordering in time is of the essence. Now Augustine holds that God can and does make all time such an instant of action. So all times are

present to him, and he holds them in his extended simultaneity. His now contains all time. It is a "*nunc stans*". So rising to eternity is rising to participate in God's instant. Augustine sees ordinary time as dispersal, *distensio*, losing the unity, being cut off from our past and out of touch with our future. We get lost in our little parcel of time. But we have an irrepressible craving for eternity, and so we strive to go beyond this. Unfortunately, this all too often takes the form of our trying to invest our little parcel with eternal significance, and therefore divinising things, and therefore falling deeper into sin.'

The Middle Ages had therefore two models of eternity: what we might call Plato eternity that of perfect immobility, impassivity, which we aspire to by rising out of time; and God's eternity, which doesn't abolish time, but gathers it into an instant. This we can only have access to by participating in God's life. To this we have to add a third kind of higher time, which we can call, following Eliade, a "time of origins". Unlike the two eternities, this was not developed by philosophers and theologians, but belongs to the folk tradition of peoples, and indeed, not only in Europe, but almost everywhere.

The idea is of a Great Time, an "*illud tempus*", when the order of things was established, whether that of the creation of the present world, or the founding of our people with its Law. The agents in this time were on a larger scale than people today, perhaps gods, but at least heroes. In terms of secular time, this origin is in a remote past, it is "time out of mind". But it is not simply in the past, because it is also something that we can re-approach, can get closer to again. This may be by ritual only, but this ritual may also have an effect of renewing and rededicating, hence coming closer to the origin. The Great Time is thus behind us, but it is also in a sense above us. It is what happened at the beginning, but it is also the great Exemplar, which we can be closer to or farther away from as we move through history.

Now some aspects of each of these three kinds of higher time helped form the time-consciousness of our mediaeval predecessors. In each case, as well as the "horizontal" dimension of merely secular time, there is a "vertical" dimension, which can allow for the "warps" and foreshortening of time which I mentioned above. The flow of secular time occurs in a multiplex vertical context, so that everything relates to more than one kind of time.

Thus a late mediaeval kingdom, in which the king has two "bodies", has to be conceived as existing also in Plato eternity. The body which can never die is not subject to time and change. At the same time, many of these kingdoms saw their Law as laid down since time out of mind, a notion which comes from the framework of a Time of Origins. While also, as part of Christendom, they were related through the Church to God's eternity. Meanwhile the Church, in its liturgical year, remembers and re-enacts what happened in *illo tempore* when Christ was on earth. Which is why this year's Good Friday can be closer to the Crucifixion than last year's mid-summer day. And the

Crucifixion itself, since Christ's action/passion here participates in God's eternity, is closer to all times than they in secular terms are to each other. Put in other terms, on this view tracts of secular time were not homogeneous, mutually interchangeable. They were coloured by their placing in relation to higher times. I am evoking the contrast case here, Benjamin's "homogeneous, empty time", as the mark of modern consciousness. On this view, time like space has become a container, indifferent to what fills it.

I'm not sure that this take on our contemporary outlook is quite right as it stands. It's true that the shift from ancient and mediaeval "place" to modern "space" involved a dissociation of segments of space from what happens to be filling them. While a "place" is identified by what's there, Newtonian space and time were mere containers, within which objects could be moved around (and even non-

objects, i.e., *vacua*, could fit there). But many contemporary understandings of time take it as indissociable from cosmic processes, like entropy. However, this identification of time in cosmic terms makes it an indifferent container of the human and historical events which our species lives out on this planet. In that sense, cosmic time is (for us) homogeneous and empty. But that is far from being true of the earlier, complex time-consciousness. If a tract of time is identified not just by its placing in secular time order, but also by its proximity to higher times, then what happens within it is no longer indifferent to its placing. A time which has fallen away from the eternal paradigms of order will exhibit more disorder. A time-place which is closer to God's eternity will be more gathered. At the pilgrimage centre on the saints feast day, it is the time itself which is hallowed. When Hamlet says that "the times are out of joint", we could take this remark literally, and not just as a metonym for "the condition of Danish society which happens to be filling this time-slice is lamentable". "Out of joint" means that things don't fit together in the proper fashion, as they do in times which are closer to the ordering paradigms of eternity. Just as we should take Marcellus' earlier remark literally, that ghosts and goblins don't dare walk the earth on Christmas Eve, "so hallow'd and so gracious is the time".

Now homogeneity and emptiness don't tell the full story of modern time-consciousness. I want to argue later that we have forms of narrativity, gathered around notions of potential and maturation, which make different time-placings significant in a sense. But certainly, in relation to the earlier complex consciousness of higher times, our outlook enshrines homogeneity and indifference to content. We now find it very hard even to understand what Hamlet may have been getting at. That is because, unlike our ancestors, we tend to see our lives exclusively within the horizontal flow of secular time. I don't mean, once again, that people don't believe in, say, God's eternity. Many do. But the imbrication of secular in higher times is no longer for many people today a matter of common, "naïve" experience, something not yet a candidate for belief or disbelief because it is just obviously there; as it was for pilgrims at Compostela or Canterbury in the fourteenth century. (And as it may be today for many at Czestochowa and Guadalupe; our secular age has geographical and social as well as temporal boundaries.)

This is another of the great shifts, along with disenchantment, and the eclipse of anti-structure, which have helped to set the conditions for modern secular society. Obviously modern natural science has had something to do with the change. Seventeenth-century mechanistic science offered a completely different notion of the stable reality behind change. This was no longer eternity; the stable is not something beyond time, nor is it gathered time, but just the law of changes in time. This is like ancient objective time, except now there is no deviancy. The sub-lunar obeys these laws exactly, just as the stars do. The eternity of mathematics is not beyond change, but constantly rules change. It is equidistant from all times. It is not in this sense a "higher" time.

But important as science is to our present outlook, we mustn't exaggerate its causal role here, and make it the main motor of the transformation. Our encasing in secular time is also something we have brought about in the way we live and order our lives. It has been brought about by the same social and ideological changes which have wrought disenchantment. In particular, the disciplines of our modern civilized order have led us to measure and organize time as never before in human history. Time has become a precious resource, not to be "wasted". The result has been the creation of a tight, ordered time environment. This has enveloped us, until it comes to seem like nature. We have constructed an environment in which we live a uniform, univocal secular time, which we try to measure and control in order to get things done. This "time frame" deserves, perhaps more than any other facet of modernity, Weber's famous description of a "*stahlhartes Gehäuse*" (iron cage). It occludes all higher times, makes them even hard to conceive. This will be part of my story below.

V. Interwoven with this change in time-consciousness is a transformation in our understanding of the universe in which we live. We might say that we moved from living in a cosmos to being included in a universe. I use 'cosmos' for our forebears' idea of the totality of existence because it contains the sense of ordered whole. It is not that our universe isn't in its own way ordered, but in the cosmos the order of things was a humanly meaningful one. That is, the principle of order in the cosmos was closely related to, often identical with that which gave shape to our lives. Thus Aristotle's cosmos has at its apex and centre God, whose ceaseless and unvarying action exemplifies something close to Plato's eternity. But this action, a kind of thinking, is also at the centre of our lives. Theoretical thought is in us that which is "most divine". And for Plato, and this whole mode of thought in general, the cosmos exhibits the order which we should exemplify in our own lives, both individually and as societies.

It belongs to this understanding of order that the cosmos was limited and bounded. At least it did for the Greeks, for whom order and limit were inextricably linked; and our civilization was in this sense heir to the Greeks. This kind of cosmos is a hierarchy; it has higher and lower levels of being. And it reaches its apex in eternity; it is indeed, held together by what exists on the level of eternity, the Ideas, or God, or both together—Ideas as the thoughts of the creator. Partly as a result of the scientific revolution, the cosmos idea faded, and we find ourselves in a universe. This has its own kind of order that exhibited in exceptionless natural laws. But it is no longer a hierarchy of being, and it doesn't obviously point to eternity as the locus of its principle of cohesion. The universe flows on in secular time. Above all, its principles of order are not related to human meaning, at any rate not immediately or evidently. Biblical religion, in entering the Graeco-Roman, later Arab, worlds, develops within the cosmos idea. So we come to see ourselves as situated in a defined history, which unfolds within a bounded setting. So the whole sweep of cosmic-divine history can be rendered in the stained glass of a large cathedral. But the universe approaches the limitless, or at any rate its limits are not easily encompassable in time or space. Our planet, our solar system is set in a galaxy, which is one of an as yet uncounted number of galaxies. Our origins go back into the mists of evolutionary time, so that we become unclear as to what could count as the beginning of our human story, many of the features of which are irretrievably lost.

Many of the spectacular battles between belief and unbelief in the last two centuries have turned on the challenge to Biblical religion from the universe idea. But in spite of the headline-grabbing nature of these fights, I doubt whether the relevance of the universe conception for unbelief lies here. The battles only arose because and where Biblical religion was held prisoner to the cosmos idea. Placing the creation of the world on a certain day in 4004 B.C. is a prime example of this kind of thinking. Paradoxically using the modes of exact calculation developed in modernity to entrench oneself in the cosmos bastion. As is the refusal of the very idea of an evolution of species (as against the more implausible aspects of neo-Darwinianism).

There is no bar as such to rethinking Biblical religion within the universe. And some earlier thinkers—Origen, Nicholas of Cusa—already had done something of this kind. Not to speak of Pascal, whose invocation of the eternal silence of infinite spaces places him firmly beyond the range of the cosmos and the music of its spheres. The real relevance of the universe understanding is more subtle and indirect. It lies in the way it has altered the terms of the debate, and reshaped the possibilities both of belief and unbelief, opened up new loci of mystery, as well as offering new ways of denying transcendence. We will see specifically later on how the universe, seen as a great clockwork-like order, whose parts are made to mesh perfectly, can be the basis for a certain kind of doctrine of Providence. But the new understanding of our spatio-temporal setting worked alongside the other

changes I have been describing here to generate this new context. Let me move on to the story' of how this arose.

Source: Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 2006), 54–61.