

or the medieval world of Aquinas'. At a time when a good number of his contemporaries were leaving the priesthood, Liddy's existential struggle with *Insight*, together with his deepening prayer life, kept him both a priest and a Catholic. Rather than philosophy having nothing to say, the drama of his encounter with Lonergan's thought and with rival philosophical conceptions now brought home to him the personal nature of the opportunities and challenges of philosophy.

In the late 1960s a work by Langer appeared in which she frankly professed a metaphysical materialism and reductionism which entailed that the religious world-view was so much myth. Liddy could no longer view such challenges to religion as items to be learnt for a theology exam soon to be forgotten. One had to be authentic in facing the alternatives: was this materialist world-view right or was the Christian one cogent and true? His Archimedean 'eureka' moment occurred not in a bath but, in true American style, in a shower and was a resolution of this intellectual and personal conflict. Liddy saw the way the central features of Lonergan's *Insight* fitted together in such a fashion as to show that a materialist metaphysics, arising as it does from an empiricist view of cognition, is erroneous. Not only that, he saw also that the alternative, critical realist position on epistemology, metaphysics, ethics and natural theology, adumbrated in *Insight*, is something to be personally verified (in its fundamental aspects) in one's own conscious experience.

The 'startling strangeness' of the book's title refers to Lonergan's way of describing the breakthrough to a critical realism which is experienced to be at once a home coming to what, as Wittgenstein would put it, we have always in some obscure way 'known' about ourselves as persons who know, choose and love, and at the same time a challenging and awkward experience. Why the latter? Because the inveterate empiricism to which we are prone as part animal makes it difficult for us to appropriate the intelligent and reasonable operations of which we have been conscious since we were small children and in accord with which we operate. Even small children assess the evidence of what they see and what they are told in order to come to a reasoned judgment and through such judgments make claims about reality. But the history of philosophy shows that spelling out such operations and following through on their implications is a very tricky matter.

I believe that both the engaging drama and humour of Liddy's autobiographical introduction to the study of Lonergan's thought, and his clear and judicious presentation of key arguments in Lonergan's philosophy, make this book a most valuable contribution to the secondary literature on this seminal thinker in the Catholic tradition.

ANDREW BEARDS

**A SECULAR AGE, by Charles Taylor (*Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 2007*) Pp. x + 874 pp., \$39.95 pbk**

One scarcely knows how to endeavor to write a brief review of Charles Taylor's recent *magnum opus*, *A Secular Age*, which comes in at just under 900 pages.

If I were a sociologist, I could try to evaluate Taylor's engagement and critique of various theories of secularism and secularization in the post-medieval west and his proposing of a new genealogy of the rise of secularity, a genealogy centered in the new focus on the world that appeared in Franciscan theology and piety, and not just in the metaphysics of Duns Scotus (p. 94), and in new forms of focus on the laity in the high middle ages (p. 94 again), a discussion that Taylor recognizes is in some, but not radical, tension with the more idealist genealogy proposed by John Milbank (pp. 773–776). Or I could focus on Taylor's discussion of the

modern “disciplinary” society, in a discussion obviously indebted to Foucault (see chapter 2).

If I were a historian of religion, I would delve into Taylor’s analysis – founded somewhat on the work of Karl Jaspers – of the development of how we conceive the religious dimension as it has changed from the axial age to the post-axial age, and in particular religion’s relationship to violence (cf. chapters 17 and 18).

If I were a political theorist, I might analyze Taylor’s very interesting reflections on the ways that communities need carnival, in a discussion indebted to Bakhtin (pp. 45–54), and the ways that communities, religious and non-religious, are always tempted to build their own ‘righteous’ identity over against an unrighteous scapegoat, in a discussion indebted to Girard (pp. 685–689).

Perhaps more importantly, if I were a theologian, I might analyze Taylor’s vision of a church as a community of diverse itineraries (p. 772). Or I might consider his way of reading even the low moments in the history of Christian thought, where, for example, Taylor shows how even the worst kind of medieval atonement theory (which is certainly not all medieval atonement theory), in which God looks like a narcissistic tyrant out to uphold his honor through the unleashing of his wrath on Jesus (who stands in for the world), still at its best points to the kind of truth about God’s wrath Christians still need to affirm, i.e. that God refuses radically to accept or condone the violence and wickedness of the world, which separates us from God (p. 652). I would also want to note Taylor’s vision of the history of theology as something of a tensely held together mosaic of various impulses to capture some part of Christianity’s always partial understanding of God and God’s work in the economy of divine action with the world, a mosaic in which not every part can be taken to its full conclusion, lest it destroy other parts of the mosaic. Can Christianity ever, Taylor might ask, hold together adequately the impulse to speak of divine wrath and the equal impulse to speak of divine mercy, or synthesize finally the truth of God’s grace with the demand for human freedom? Taylor reminds his readers of the importance of epistemic modesty and overlapping metaphors whenever humans begin to speak of God (p. 652 again). To refuse such modesty, to believe that the whole truth of how to live the Christian life has been attained by a certain community, is nothing short of heretical – Taylor’s own term (p. 755). Readers of *New Blackfriars* familiar with the work of Sebastian Moore, or St. Augustine for that matter, would also find Taylor’s move to reconnect the erotic drive with the soul’s journey to God very interesting. Perhaps the most striking insight Taylor reaches toward, one in sympathy with the work of David Tracy and theological liberalism, is that Christianity has to re-imagine in the present age what it means to be and live as a Christian, and that the ways that this re-imagining needs to take place, Taylor hints, may not always be in line with the present wishes of the *magisterium* of the Catholic church (pp. 503–504).

In fact, there is something in this book to interest not just sociologists, historians of religion, political theorists, and theologians, but also intellectual historians, anthropologists, psychologists, and others. Furthermore, the book is an excellent piece of intellectual history. Anyone who wants to deepen profoundly her or his knowledge of modern European culture will find extended discussions of Mallarmé, Hopkins, Péguy, Nietzsche, and others, and shorter but very interesting summaries of and comments on the thought of figures like Ruskin and Schiller. In fact I once heard someone say that anyone who wants to learn the history of philosophy should forget about reading primary sources and simply read Taylor. While I do not want to endorse this view literally, I will say that anyone who had read *Sources of the Self* and *A Secular Age* will have significantly broadened and deepened her cultural and philosophical education.

Since I teach philosophy, though, I want to engage Taylor’s philosophy specifically, and focus in particular on his main argument for why and how we late

western moderns should, at the end of the day, embrace Christianity. Here I am taking an enormous liberty of selection – to cover every philosophical moment or argument in this book would require another book of just about the same length as Taylor's.

So, first, why should we accept Christianity, and embrace it as the itinerary on which we will live our lives and see the world? Taylor's answer is that religion alone, and Christianity in particular, gives to the embodied self what Taylor calls 'fullness' (see the Introduction). The other two options for itineraries of human life, modern secularism and postmodern heroism, have fundamental problems. Modern secularism can too easily become what Taylor would call a 'flat' mode of life: I embrace my ordinary work, my ordinary marriage, my ordinary hobbies, and I fail to aspire to some kind of greatness, some kind of excess driven by my deepest passions and instincts (see Chapter 11). My sexuality and aggression are policed by bourgeois religion, society, and state, and I focus on making money and living decently in society. My life is content but mediocre, I have become Nietzsche's 'last man'. How do I escape from the mediocrity of the 'last man'? Nietzsche's response to the problem of the 'last man' (and here Taylor's reading of Nietzsche is certainly open to debate) is to celebrate the aristocratic warrior ethic of the Homeric poems, the life of instinct and aggression that aims at some kind of greatness, aesthetic, perhaps, or military. While this option does give rise to a certain kind of fullness, a certain kind of transcendence of the ordinary into the extraordinary that modern bourgeois secularism fails to enable, it is also very tied to sometimes spectacular embraces of violence and death. But, Taylor would say, we want life, not death, love, not violence and the alienation that comes from self-assertion. So we want spiritual fullness, adventure and intensity, not complacent flatness, but we also want life and love, not death. So we turn to the religious option: a life of aspiration and transcendence, but not one that culminates in spectacular and destructive celebrations of licentiousness and death and violence, but one that ends in love.

And this brings me to a second question, how does the logic of embracing Christianity work? What does it mean to embrace the Christian path? Here Taylor offers a picture that is at one level deeply Catholic. For it operates according to a logic of nature and grace: Christianity somehow has to make contact with our humanity, has to take the 'natural' desires of body and soul and transfigure them, not destroy them. (Yes, the whole nature/grace question is loaded and complex, but Taylor addresses it in a rather traditional way.) There is no purely dialectical vision of Christian faith, no divine transformation that does violence to human identity or human nature as it stands and is experienced before or outside the Christian faith and life. Taylor is interesting in how he deviates from traditional understandings of 'nature' (again, I am simplifying). He is, perhaps to his own surprise, a Freudian of sorts, in addition to being a Nietzschean of sorts. Who we are as humans is deeply identified with our sexual desire and our aggression, our impulse to violence. Now here Taylor is to be congratulated, not least because most contemporary Christian theologians refuse to accept just how deep the lust for violence and power runs in our souls. (Although, in a return of the repressed, it is interesting to note that some of the recent theologies that are most focused on persuading readers of the ontological and ecclesial peace and harmony that are ostensibly available only in Christianity are in fact intellectually and rhetorically violent pieces of writing.) It is not, for Taylor, as if our sexuality and aggression have to be whitewashed, morally purified before they can enter into the economy of grace. Rather, it is precisely the energy of our sexuality and aggression that makes possible our living the Christian life fully, should we choose to embrace it. Sexual desire can become sexual desire for God, desire that does not leave the body behind. (Here Taylor is an apt student of Augustine, who also does not leave the body behind, as the work of Beth Felker Jones has recently reiterated.) And

as for aggression, we have to continue to respect its 'numinous power' (p. 649). But, Taylor seems to say (and here I put his points into my own words), there is the possibility of transfiguring the energy or aggression into an energy, equally intense and electric, of 'limitless self-giving' (p. 654). The attraction of violence is in major part the excess or abandon that can be experienced by going berserk in battle. Something of that abandon, in a more joyful way, can be experienced in letting go of oneself in a radical gift of love to God and neighbor (p. 668).

I don't know if Taylor's account of the transfiguration of sexuality and aggression fully works – certainly Nietzsche would not think his focus on the aristocratic warrior ethic could be subsumed and redeemed in this way. Can sexual desire and aggression be quite so completely transfigured for humane ends? Even so, I applaud Taylor for taking human sexuality and aggression so seriously. Indeed I would go so far as to say that one of the main challenges for contemporary theologians is to incorporate sexual desire and violence and aggression into their theologies. John Milbank, David Bentley Hart, and Sebastian Moore have been at the forefront of recovering an erotic desire for God, but the confrontation with violence and aggression needs more attention. Rowan Williams is the paradigm example of someone whose theology is not afraid of letting the violence and aggression in our souls breathe, although it would take more time to explain exactly how. It is a basic insight of psychoanalysis, respected by Taylor, that our sexuality and aggression cannot be denied, lest they return in even more destructive ways. Humanity in its flesh and bones has to be reckoned with, and not simply by calling our powerful sexuality and aggression sinful. Taylor is at his strongest when he hints, tantalizingly, that our sexuality and aggression are what they are so that they can participate in the divine pedagogy of humanity, in a framework proposed by Irenaeus (p. 668), and be transformed into energy for communion and love. But it is incredibly gratifying to see a Christian philosopher value Nietzsche and Freud so highly.

JEFFREY MCCURRY

**A THEOLOGY OF CRITICISM: BALTHASAR, POSTMODERNISM, AND THE CATHOLIC IMAGINATION, by Michael P. Murphy (Oxford University Press, Oxford 2008). Pp. xiv + 210, £45.00 hbk**

More than any other major Catholic theologian of the twentieth century, Hans Urs von Balthasar re-set theology into the ambit of the humanities in ways unlikely to be emulated. He managed to achieve the almost impossible, of writing an aesthetic theology based on an awesome stock of learning whose range encompassed a faculty of arts. Balthasar provided a theological umbrella under which those with affiliations in the humanities might shelter, comforts which had been hitherto unavailable. An outcome of this generosity of vision is that the shifting basis of the human condition, and what kills its spirit in contemporary culture, can be more imaginatively calibrated. In this scholarly and carefully crafted work, Murphy grasps these opportunities and explores how a Catholic imagination offers prospects of reverse from the cul-de-sacs of postmodernism.

Primarily concerned with narrative and language (Derrida looms much), Murphy seeks to find a basis for coherence, a harmony that would resolve the unprofitable dualism that increasingly governs contemporary critical thought. Thus, construction as a response to nihilism forms his ambition for the study in which 'the analogical imagination can staunch the wounds of deconstructionism' (p. 72) and this entails conversion (pp. 73–74). As he observed rightly earlier in the study, 'all roads, whether begrudgingly or not, lead back to questions of theology' (p. 20). His primary concern is with the reconciliation of opposites and their