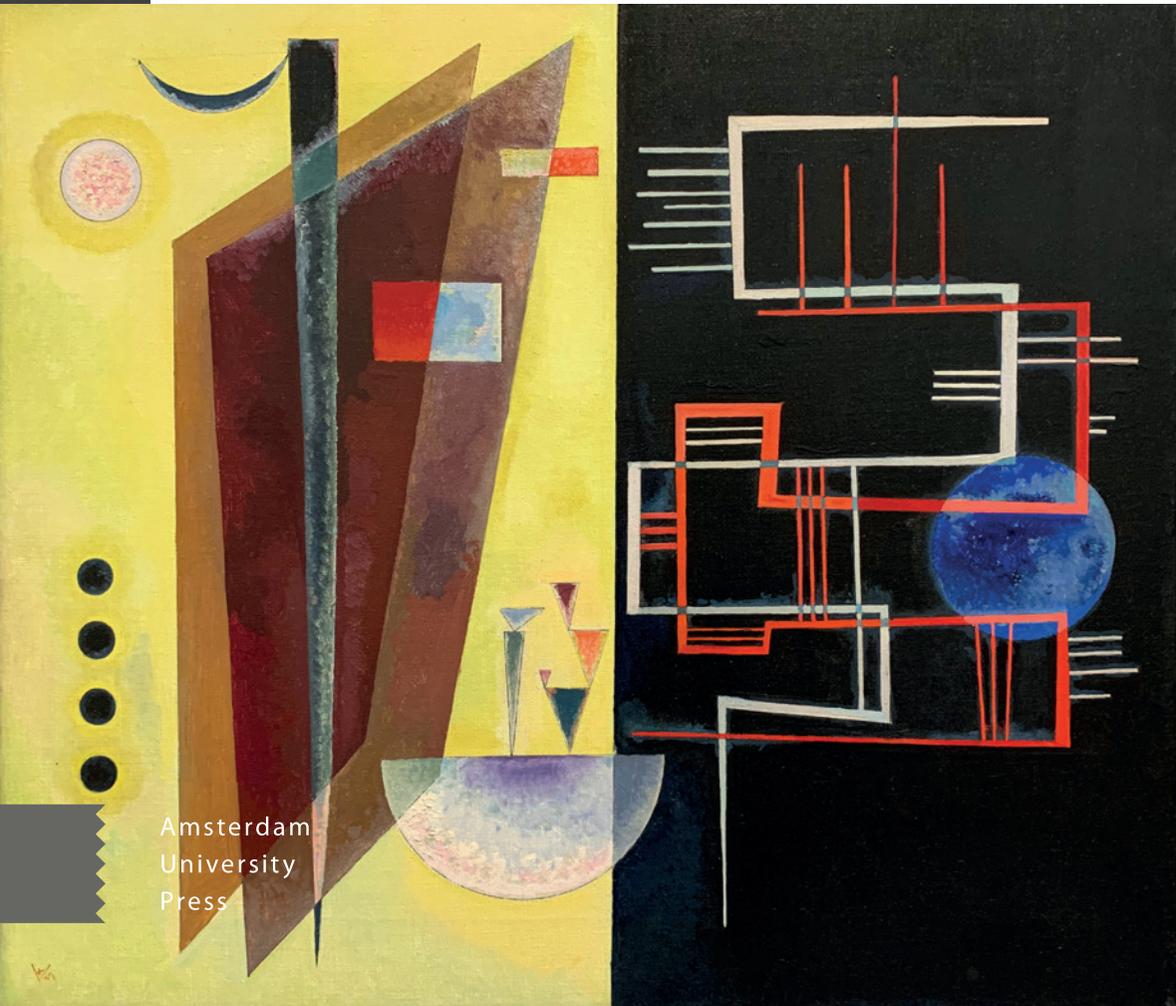


Modernity and Transcendence

A Dialogue with
Charles Taylor

Edited by Anthony J. Carroll and Staf Hellemans



Amsterdam
University
Press

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In memory of the great sociologist of religion David Martin (1929-2019)

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Introduction: Modernity and Transcendence¹

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Abstract

The idea of a Catholic modernity, first introduced by Charles Taylor in 1996, offers a third “grand strategy” of relating modernity and religion (transcendence) in our time. In this introduction, the project is presented: six leading authors from different religious traditions (David and Bernice Martin, Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, Robert Cummings Neville, Souleymane Bachir Diagne and Jonathan Boyarin) examine the idea of a Catholic modernity and Taylor responds to their reflections and looks back 25 years on.

Keywords: Catholic modernity, Charles Taylor, religious modernities, transcendence.

The purpose of this collection of essays is to critically review Charles Taylor’s idea of a Catholic modernity which revolves around the crucial issue of the shape and role of (Catholic) religion in modernity, of “how to live the life of a Catholic in contemporary society.”² Taylor launched the idea in his seminal 1996 essay *A Catholic Modernity?*³ We think the idea should be

1 We would like to thank Enrieke Damen (Protestant Theological University, the Netherlands) for her help in preparing the publication of this volume.

2 Charles Taylor, “A Catholic Modernity 25 Years on,” in *Modernity and Transcendence. A Dialogue with Charles Taylor*, eds. Anthony J. Carroll and Staf Hellemans (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021), 201.

3 Charles Taylor, “A Catholic Modernity?,” in *A Catholic Modernity? Charles Taylor’s Marianist Award Lecture*, ed. James L. Heft (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999),

considered in more depth, and not only in Catholicism. It has the potential to become a central and encompassing perspective in thinking about relations between modernity and religion/transcendence in each religious tradition. Therefore, we aim to explore the extension of Taylor's idea to other religious traditions as well. We have, hence, invited some leading authors from different backgrounds to assess Taylor's Catholic modernity idea and to probe whether and how the extension to other religious modernities (Anglican, Pentecostal, Confucian, Islamic, Jewish) makes sense—or not. We have also asked Taylor to react to their considerations and to reflect on his own idea 25 years on.

Why is Catholic modernity such an interesting idea?

The idea of a Catholic modernity—and of other religious modernities—deserves to be further examined because it offers, potentially, a contemporary and encompassing access to an old and fundamental question, of how religion(s) and society are and should be connected.

First, it signals the opening of a new strategy for religious involvement in modernity. Indeed, the starting point for Taylor in his essay *A Catholic Modernity?* of 1996 was his experience of a deep crisis in the relation between Christianity and modernity. The two “grand strategies” that religious traditions have followed since the end of the *Ancien Régime* and the French Revolution in their reaction to the advent and ascent of modernity seemed after 1980 both to have become obsolete, not only the attempt to restore Christendom—be it in the grand way of taking over modernity as a whole or in the more modest way of building a subculture in a seemingly hostile world—but also the attempt to leap forward as an allied partner towards an augmented liberal/socialist modernity. Christendom projects were fraught with authoritarianism, intolerance and dogmatism (see the restauration pursuits in Catholicism and Orthodoxy), with various strategies of retreat into sect-like formations (as in fundamentalist Protestantism) or even with an upswing of violence (as in jihadist Islamist circles). Liberal, socialist and Marxist forms of religious modernization on the other hand kept too close to modern society, with the danger of identifying the gospel with one type of society and politics and of relegating earlier forms of religion and

13-37. For an open source access to the lecture at the website of the University of Dayton, see https://ecommons.udayton.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1009&context=uscc_marianist_award, accessed February 22, 2021.

religious practice as less worthy. Moreover, after 1980 these approaches were in disarray intellectually and loosing traction. What then? Taylor's Catholic modernity idea is, in fact, a proposal for devising a new, contemporary, third "grand strategy" that enables moving beyond total rejection and a total embrace of modernity, a strategy that does not remove the positive achievements of modernity and, at the same time, restores Christianity's critical potential to confront modernity with its darker sides.

Second, the Catholic modernity idea affords considerable analytical benefits for analyzing the contemporary dynamics of religions in modernity. The single expression "Catholic modernity" articulates clearly that Christianity and society, "Church and World" are not to be seen as two alien worlds that exclude one another—as in the modern retrieval strategy of the Christendom project, in fundamentalist positions and in many secularist stances. The two are regarded here as two constituents that are inseparably related, despite being also, partly, in opposition. In crafting the singular expression "Catholic modernity", Taylor focusses our attention on this asymmetrical, but also potentially fruitful relationship between the two constituents, and on their interactions and tensions. Catholicism and modernity cannot escape one another, nor can they fuse together anymore into an undifferentiated unity. They are held together by both mutual bonds and tensions that require analysis. In modernity, the inner logics of these bonds and tensions have become further differentiated through the transcendent framing of issues in the case of religious traditions versus a number of immanent logics in modernity, of various subsystems—e.g., political, economic, artistic, scientific—and of various secular movements. These logics are not necessarily inimical or antithetical. Most of the time, they are just different, or partially different and partially complementary, hence the manifold interrelations. With its dual reference, to religion and to modernity, molded into one expression "Catholic (Protestant, Confucian, etc.) modernity", Taylor captures neatly this differentiated instantiation of the "Church and World" relationship, of the nexus between transcendence and modernity.

The third asset of the Catholic modernity idea consists in its transferability. In this book, authors appropriately present analyses of Anglican, Pentecostal, Confucian and Islamic modernity. All religious traditions are involved in a network of entanglements with modernity, in an interplay of distinctiveness-cum-connectedness—in different ways, of course. As a general way of referring to these symbiotic, yet differentiated bonds of religion with modernity, we propose the term "religious modernity." Catholic modernity then becomes an example of a religious modernity first suggested

by Taylor. With Shmuel Eisenstadt, one could say that, in modernity, there are multiple religious modernities at work—as well as diverse secular modernities. We consider it profitable to study these diverse modernities and their interactions.

For these reasons, we believe that a further exploration of Catholic modernity and of other religious modernities is warranted. Taylor has a gift for inventing new or drawing upon existing imaginative expressions that open up fresh perspectives. Examples of the first are “ethics of authenticity” and “subtraction theory”, of the second “social imaginary” (Castoriadis) and “subtler languages” (Wasserman). We consider that the expression “Catholic modernity” also holds this promise of opening up new interpretative horizons.

Initiating the project

As previously mentioned, in order to explore the idea of a Catholic modernity and its possible extension to other religious modernities, we, as editors, thought it would be good to ask other thinkers how they looked at the idea and whether and how they would elaborate it further from their own intellectual and religious perspectives—or why they would abstain from this enterprise. We thought it also opportune to ask Taylor to comment on the views put forward in the hope that it might stimulate him to expound his own ideas further.

Once Taylor had accepted to write concluding reflections, we approached authors who have developed broader perspectives on the nexus “modernity and transcendence” in their own right, authors from diverse disciplines—philosophy, theology, anthropology, sociology—and from different religious traditions, Christian and non-Christian. We conceived three broad questions for authors to address in their contributions:

- What are your views on modernity as you see it now?
- How is your position related or not to religion/transcendence?
- How do you view Charles Taylor’s proposal of “a Catholic modernity”?

Since several authors refer to these questions in the proposal which we sent to them, we reproduce them here in the form that we set them out.

We interpreted modernity as pertaining to modern society, i.e., the type of society that emerged with the industrial, political and cultural revolutions around the decades of 1800. It is a truism to state that feelings of being locked in a crisis of modernity are nowadays widespread. Hence, it is all the more

important to provide considered views on what is happening in modernity, where it might take us, and what we can do about it. Of course, there are many different interpretations possible. Seeing modernity confronted with signs of an “exhaustion of utopian energies” in the 1980s,⁴ Jürgen Habermas presented his view on modernity as “an unfinished project”, evolving since its beginning in the 18th century.⁵ In *A Catholic Modernity?* and *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor has looked at diverse culturally inspired traditions of thought in modernity in which the secular and religious sides “both face the same issues [of threats of meaninglessness, violence, inequality, etc.— eds.] and each with some difficulty.”⁶ Others doubt that modernity projects are the way to conceive of social and civilizational change. Moreover, not only do global interpretations of modernity differ substantially, but when it comes to specific analyses of what the major problems are and of how they should be met, further differences appear.

In formulating the second question on the author’s perspective on religion/transcendence in modernity, we took Taylor’s definition of religion as transcendence as our starting point. Indeed, Taylor’s 1996 *A Catholic Modernity?* is, in essence, an argument about “the insufficiency of human flourishing as the unique focus of our lives.”⁷ It is a forceful proposal for going “beyond exclusive humanism” through arguing for the relevance of transcendence in modernity: “I needed a term to talk about all those different ways in which religious discourse and practice went beyond the exclusively human, and in exhaustion I fell back on ‘transcendent’ (But I haven’t given up hope of finding a better term).”⁸ So, we asked the authors to consider questions such as: Would you like to qualify this sense of transcendence in another way than Taylor? How can/has religion to translate its sense of transcendence into societal change and what, if any, are the limits of this? What are the major parallels and differences in your approach with respect to the involvement of Christianity/your religious tradition in the wider society? How should we imagine the critical and mutual collaboration between religious and secular traditions?

4 Jürgen Habermas, “Die Krise des Wohlfahrtsstaates und die Erschöpfung utopischer Energien,” in *Die neue Unübersichtlichkeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1985), 141-163.

5 Jürgen Habermas, “Die Moderne – ein unvollendetes Projekt,” in *Kleine Politische Schriften* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1981), 444-464.

6 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 727.

7 Charles Taylor, “Concluding Reflections and Comments,” in *A Catholic Modernity?*, ed. James L. Heft (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 109.

8 Taylor, “Concluding Reflections,” 106.

Our third guiding question to the authors, soliciting reactions to the project of a Catholic modernity as formulated by Charles Taylor, was presented as following. According to Taylor, Christianity and modernity can mutually enrich one another. Modernity is capable of criticizing and challenging Christianity—where the latter deviates from the gospel—and Christianity is capable of criticizing and helping to remedy recurrent ills and failings in modernity. Taylor calls this “a Catholic modernity”, yet he understands Catholic in an inclusive way, consisting “of all the forms of devotion acceptable to God”, “across all time.”⁹ He likens the undertaking to that of the Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci in 16th-17th century China who attempted to spread the gospel in Chinese garb: “Similarly, we are challenged to a difficult discernment, trying to see what in modern culture reflects the promotion of the gospel, and what its refusal of the transcendent.”¹⁰ Taylor cautiously puts a question mark in the title of his lecture, signaling both an academic reserve vis-à-vis a tentative, first idea, and the awareness that “Catholic modernity” is a project that is far from realized and may never be realized. Here, we are asking authors to relate their views about, or projects of, modernity with that offered by Taylor, in particular as presented in his *A Catholic Modernity?*.

As the reader can ascertain for themselves, we attempted to formulate the guiding questions neutrally. We did not want to push the contributing authors to confirm Taylor’s proposal and analysis. On the contrary, we were interested in their views on the matter and in a critical analysis of Taylor’s thought. How they would respond was clearly unpredictable.

Contents of this issue

We start with the contributions of the six authors whom we have asked to critically assess and expand on Taylor’s proposal in his lecture. Honoring the sociologist of religion David Martin who passed away on 8 March 2019, a few months after finalizing his contribution, the book opens with his account of Anglican modernity. It is followed by two other contributions from authors from within Christianity, sociologist of religion Bernice Martin on Pentecostal modernity and Catholic theologian Francis Schüssler Fiorenza on modernity and transcendence. The chapter by the Christian-Confucian philosopher and theologian Robert Cummings Neville on Confucian

⁹ Taylor, “Concluding Reflections,” 108.

¹⁰ Taylor, “A Catholic Modernity?,” 36.

modernity is a fitting crossover with views from the non-Christian world, with those of the philosopher Souleymane Bachir Diagne writing on a possible rapprochement of Catholic and Islamic modernity and of the Jewish anthropologist Jonathan Boyarin who rejects the Catholic modernity project as such.

In a second part, Charles Taylor presents his concluding reflections, on the one hand commenting on the contributions of the preceding six authors and, on the other hand, framing his Catholic modernity idea in his overall writings on religion and modernity. Our attempt in the afterword to overview the vast field that is being opened by Taylor's Catholic modernity idea and its extension to other religious traditions closes the book.

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