# Opinion: What atheists and monks have in common

**By Jeffrey Guhin**

It's hard for me to think of a philosopher more important for my work than Charles Taylor. I'm a sociologist, and while most people don't think of sociology as an especially philosophical discipline, if you dig a little beneath the surface, philosophy is actually all you'll find. That's not just true for sociologists either: It's true for anyone who makes arguments about people, which is to say, everyone who's ever been able to talk.

For example: Let's say someone thinks her boss is a suck-up to her supervisor and not especially helpful to those she supervises. The employee describes the boss as a "kiss up, kick down" kind of manager. This statement is full of implicit philosophy: Assumptions about how we ought to relate to those above and below us in status, expectations about workplace behavior, as well as models of what a good person is and how this particular manager doesn't live up to it. Social life contains philosophical assumptions about what it means to be a good person and what the good life entails, and we are always tapping into those deep connections even when we don't realize it. Charles Taylor calls these underlying assumptions our "social imaginaries." This concept is key to my work.

I study religion and schools. My first book, which is forthcoming, is an analysis of the year and a half I spent observing four high schools in the New York City area: Two Sunni Muslim and two Evangelical Christian. My second book project looks at how school reform and old-fashioned American individualism shape how public schools think about "success." I spent time observing six public high schools across the country, two each in San Diego, New York City, and Charlotte,

Taylor's work helps me make the case that my two books are not as different as they appear. Both public schools and religious schools talk about what it means to be a good person, what it means to be a success, and what it means to be responsible to someone other than yourself. While secular and religious visions of the good person might vary, Taylor's way of analyzing them based on their underlying philosophical assumptions (social imaginaries) helps me to explore how they're ultimately united by the kinds of questions they ask. Everyone wants to know what it means to be a good person, and most people have a pretty good sense of who such a person might be, rooting their answer in a narrative about a community of people. That community could be the global network of Muslims, or North American conservative Christians, or liberal secularists committed to the necessity of reason. The content changes, but the form's the same.

Part of the reason I study schools and religion is because comparing religious and secular organizations can help us get a better sense of how moral life works. Why are certain issues extremely important to communities while others are ignored? How do morals work at both an individual and community level? I'm also interested in the similarities between religious and secular communities, which are greater than you might expect.

As part of a longer definition of the "social imaginary" in his book "A Secular Age", Taylor explains: "The social imaginary is that common understanding which makes possible common practices, and widely shared sense of legitimacy."

"Understanding" in this sense doesn't have to be conscious. If I say that someone is a "man" to you, you'll probably imagine him in shoes, a shirt, and pants. At another time in history you'd have imagined a hat or a beard. These are "understandings" that are rarely articulated and usually aren't even conscious, and they relate to "practices" (wearing

a hat, wearing shoes) that are not actually necessary in any sort of biological or physical sense.

Yet these social imaginaries can relate to much more than just what we wear. In "A Secular Age", Taylor relates how it became possible to imagine (or conceive of) a world without God, and for such an imagining to coexist alongside those who continue to imagine a God-filled world.

Taylor is a devout Catholic, so when he talks about religions imaginaries, he is certainly not claiming that God is "imaginary" in the sense of not real. He is shifting the focus of the question from "Does God exist?" to "How do people think about (that is, imagine) God?" That shift allows him to show how certain ways of imagining allow for certain ways of acting and relating to each other. What makes Taylor's work exciting is that he has shown how changing the way we imagine can change the way we live.

I use the idea of a social imaginary to challenge the commonly perceived chasm between religious and secular thought. In fact, they have a lot in common. Taylor has written about the historical relationships between things we now think of as utterly separate: Science and religion, church and state, the religious and the secular. Believing in the scientific method is obviously not the same thing as believing in God, but insisting on the primacy of a social thing called "science" is as much a product of a social imaginary as insisting on the primacy of a social thing called "church." Of course, a rock will still fall whether or not there is a human to describe it. However, in that world without humans, the force pulling a rock to earth will not be called gravity; neither will it interact with social imaginaries called physics, measurement, and the scientific method. All that stuff exists because humans imagined it. More important, humans imagined a moral impetus behind science and from that we got certainties: Truth is better than falsehood, scientific curiosity is good for everyone, and innovation trumps tradition.

And this is where Taylor's argument helps me unpack modern secularism. Secularist scientists like Richard Dawkins present the new atheist as courageous, committed to truth, and eager to liberate others from error. Taylor shows that the secular social world is just as "imagined" as any religious person's: There is a vision of a good person and a good life that is by no means self-evidently true, and both are maintained by their communities. A new atheist's dogged pursuit of truth is just as much a "social imaginary" as a celibate monk's quiet pursuit of holiness. Taylor describes the new atheist attack on religion as a "subtraction story"—the assumption that if you just take away all the religious superstition, you'll somehow get down to the really real human existence. But, Taylor shows, all human existence is imagined. If you subtract imagination, all we are is bones.

But Taylor doesn't just challenge secularists, he also challenges the faithful, who, he says, are almost certainly secular in the West. By secular, he doesn't mean not-believing: He just means that they recognize how it's possible another might not believe. That possibility comes from centuries of changes in how Europeans thought about themselves and their relation to the universe, gradually making it easier to believe it's the individual in this world, rather than the God in another, who's at the center of it all.

When I'm talking about my work with my secular friends, they sometimes ask me why many Evangelicals deny macro-evolution, or why certain Muslims separate genders and wear the hijab. Taylor's analysis has helped to give me a philosophical language to articulate how Evangelical and Muslim moral imaginaries are not all that different from those of secular people.

Imagine an atheist with an impressive commitment to physical fitness who comes from a community of fitness freaks (perhaps in Southern California). This person feels that physical fitness matters in a profound way. But that's not more

obviously true than the idea that a woman has to cover her hair because it matters in showing her religious devotion. The same logic is in play when some Evangelicals deny evolution. Rather than thinking of scientific denial as a specifically religious problem, it's a much more human story of what scholars call motivated reasoning, which can affect secular people as easily as religious ones. That realization makes bigger problems with scientific denial—things like climate change and vaccines—much easier to deal with. Despite new atheist claims, science is not an all-or-nothing deal. If it's a human problem and not a religious one, then if you can show creationists why it doesn't go against their religion to accept climate change, it's entirely possible to convince them to accept one part of science without convincing them to accept all of it.

And that's really what speaks to me in Taylor's work: He helps me to show that my work on religious people is much more about people than it is about religion. And that's something both the religious and the not-religious ought to hear.