1. Course Description

The notion of a “social imaginary”—the way people come to understand their social surroundings by way of images, stories, and legends—plays a key role in Charles Taylor’s thought, including his *magnum opus, A Secular Age*. In this intellectual *tour de force*, Taylor attempts to trace the historical development of Western secularism as we experience it today. In doing so, he challenges the “subtraction story” which he sees animating the social imaginary of today’s typical secularist. According to this story, the emergence of secularism in the West follows a linear trajectory, along which humanity slowly sheds the irrational accretions of myth, religion, and the sacred, in order to uncover a rational core of free thought and autonomous science, which may now flourish without the constraints of heteronomous religious authority. In challenging this story, Taylor offers an intriguing new understanding of Western secularism, as well as tantalizing suggestions concerning the continued social relevance a religious imaginary might have in “a secular age.” This seminar will be devoted to an in-depth study of this major work, which in its relatively brief life has already become a landmark text in both the philosophy of religion as well as secularization theory. Through this study, seminar participants will also consider what role Taylor’s Roman Catholic religious commitment plays in his thought, as well as the role a religiously-informed “social imaginary” might play in a pluralized global society that is deeply impacted by, but also largely at odds with, the particular social imaginary of Western modernity.
# 2. Reading Schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Seminar</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Reading</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seminar 1</td>
<td>Introduction: What is a Social Imaginary Anyway?</td>
<td>“What is a ‘Social Imaginary’?” (Ch. 2 from Modern Social Imaginaries)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seminar 2</td>
<td>The Work of Reform: The Bulwarks of Belief</td>
<td>Introduction—ch. 1, section 6 (pp. 1-75)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seminar 3</td>
<td>The Work of Reform: The Rise of a Disciplinary Society</td>
<td>Ch. 1, section 7—ch. 2, section 5 (pp. 75-142)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seminar 4</td>
<td>The Work of Reform: The Great Disembedding, Modern Social Imaginaries</td>
<td>Ch. 2, section 6—ch. 4, section 5 (pp. 142-207)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seminar 5</td>
<td>The Work of Reform: The Spectre of Idealism; The Turning Point: Providential Deism</td>
<td>Ch. 4, section 6—ch. 6 (pp. 207-269)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seminar 6</td>
<td>The Turning Point: The Impersonal Order; The Nova Effect: The Malaises of Modernity, The Dark Abyss of Time</td>
<td>Ch. 7—ch. 9 (pp. 270-351)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seminar 7</td>
<td>The Nova Effect: The Expanding Universe of Unbelief, Nineteenth Century Trajectories</td>
<td>Ch. 10—ch. 11 (pp. 352-419)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seminar 8</td>
<td>Narratives of Secularization: The Age of Mobilization</td>
<td>Ch. 12 (pp. 423-472)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seminar 9</td>
<td>Narratives of Secularization: The Age of Authenticity, Religion Today</td>
<td>Ch. 13—ch. 14 (pp. 473-535)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seminar 10</td>
<td>Conditions of Belief: The Immanent Frame</td>
<td>Ch. 15—ch. 16, section 1 (pp. 539-600)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seminar 11</td>
<td>Conditions of Belief: Cross Pressures, Dilemmas 1</td>
<td>Ch. 16.2—ch. 17 (pp. 600-675)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seminar 12</td>
<td>Conditions of Belief: Dilemmas 2, Unquiet Frontiers of Modernity</td>
<td>Ch. 18—ch. 19 (pp. 676-727)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seminar 13</td>
<td>Conditions of Belief: Conversions, Appendix: The Many Stories; Wrap-Up.</td>
<td>Ch. 20—Appendix (pp. 728-776)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3. Course Learning Goals

a. To develop a critical understanding of a major figure in contemporary social philosophy and philosophy of language, in order to compose an essay on the social relevance of this thinker’s thought that can be shared with a public audience.

b. To think creatively and constructively about the role that a religious social imaginary plays/could play in shaping our understanding of contemporary moral and political issues, in order to be able to lead a public workshop on the application of such a social imaginary to concrete public problems.

c. To gain knowledge of leading debates on the role religion plays and should play in society, in order to critically assess various positions on offer and to develop an original interpretation of one’s own.

4. Description and Weighting of Elements to be Evaluated

a) Total reading: 1250 pages total, including research for paper, of which approximately 60-70 pages per week is required to prepare for class

b) In-seminar leadership: In addition to reading the assigned readings students are expected to do regular class presentations based on the readings.

c) Description of course project: Term Paper: MA 3000-6000 words; Ph.D: 5000-8000 words.

d) Description and weighting of elements to be evaluated:

i. class participation: 10% (TST-20%)

ii. in-seminar leadership: 30%

iii. class paper: paper: 60% (TST-50%)

5. Required Readings


6. Some Recommended Readings


Other Resources:

The “Immanent Frame” Blog of the Social Science Resource Centre [http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/]

Students with diverse learning styles and needs are welcome in this course. In particular, if you have a disability/health consideration that may require accommodations, please feel free to approach me and/or Student Services as soon as possible.

Copyright, Institute for Christian Studies. All Rights Reserved. www.icscanada.edu