

# **Reason, Reality and the Re-personalisation of Being: A Response to Taylor's Characterisation of the 'Impersonal Order'**

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## **Introduction**

Charles Taylor, in his book, *A Secular Age*, characterises modernity as an 'impersonal order' (Taylor 2007, 326). By this he means not only that science and reason have evicted religion and superstition from the public mindset, what he calls the 'classic subtraction theory', but also that form of deism which deigns to explicitly keep God out of the world.

This modern rationalistic conception of the world, religion and being itself, has, in its refusal to acknowledge any contingent relationship of human being to divine being, led to an impersonal world (Taylor 2007, 282). It is characterised by a situation where human beings now see themselves as self-sufficient, the very creators of reality, and yet often in a way that leads to the destruction of humanity itself. For Taylor, this destruction can be avoided only when human creatures acknowledge the importance of re-discovering the personal dimensions of existence. To do this requires overthrowing a deistic form of religion and its renewal. As Taylor hints, and on which this article will seek to elaborate, this can only come about through a rediscovery of the true possibilities of a mutual personal relationship with God, and hence to the fulfilment and the possibilities of life-giving relations with others.

## **Modernity, the Manipulation of Reality, and Death**

As Taylor characterises it, the impersonal order is aided by a particular scientific approach characterised by a narrow view of reason. It aids the preservation of this myth of the self-sufficient person, perpetuating the belief that all nature can be manipulated. Influenced by the 'universal reason' of

the Enlightenment, it holds that human nature can be defined as a 'given fact'. However Mary Midgely notes that behind this scientific confidence in its own efforts to control things by the mind is a fear of death and mortality. She writes that this fear has somehow been kept at bay by evolutionary theory, 'with its transference of future hopes away from personal immortality to continued earthly development' (Midgely 1992, 53). Nicolas Lash sees this effort to control and classify as symptomatic of the modern 'terror of contingency' and the 'fear of solitude and infinite spaces' (Lash 2008, 65). Recognising true contingency on the other hand involves facing the areas of human nature which are mysterious and even terrifying in their openness to a 'beyond'. This embracing of the in-between recognises that the truth of one's being is never definable once and for all, but only finds definition in its continual openness to Being itself (Lash 2008, 67). It is this openness to the reality of contingency which is the call to move to a new type of order.

Taylor acknowledges that it is specifically the bias of science against 'the whole', or against 'relationality' which leads to the embodiment of the impersonal order in a disenchanted world, 'a causal universe unresponsive to human meanings' (Taylor 2007, 280). Cardinal Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI, 2005) describes a similar phenomenon arising from what he sees as a consequence of the de-hellenisation of the world (Ratzinger 1995, 19). Like Taylor, the latter laments the consequences of Deism, which has led to a situation where the meaning of being cannot be accessed from within this world, but he goes further in describing this in terms of historical waves. He describes the first wave of de-hellenisation as due to Kant's separation of the noumenal and phenomenal spheres and Luther's call for the purification of Christianity from Greek philosophical influences. In his Regensburg Address, (2006) Pope Benedict XVI notes how this process was also influenced by the philosophy of Voluntarism. Hence, Benedict's characterisation of an impersonal order is in terms of a critique of modernity which denies that phenomenal reality has any connection to the 'logos', and thus that reality itself is never perceived as grounded in what is true and good. As a substitute, a voluntarist philosophy has made popular the view that what is

true in the world is deemed so not according to nature but according to God's will alone (Hooykaas 2000, 42). This divine will can make what is good to be bad and vice versa but the intelligibility of being cannot be discerned by reason's reflection on creation.

### **The Impersonal Order and Christianity**

This impersonal order has not only impacted philosophy, but influenced religion itself, producing in the nineteenth century what Taylor calls 'a tamed version of Christianity' (Taylor 2007, 292). This finds expression in Kant's own religious writings and is seen explicitly in Auguste Comte's attempts to construct a social, deistic religion (De Lubac, 1995). In both these thinkers religious truth is cut off from participation in divine Being. This effect, identified by Ratzinger in what he terms the second wave of de-hellenisation or the 'scientific approach to Jesus', has influenced the study of Christology and the Scriptures. While Ratzinger does not deny the importance of the historical method, he notes that at times this methodology can one-sidedly alienate 'unscientific elements' such as Christ's divinity, and may even result in their elimination (Ratzinger 2004, 133).

Taylor associates this new 'tamed' form of religion with relativism and the new form of religious believer characteristic of modernity: the modern invulnerable 'buffered-self' to whom a multiplicity of faiths has little effect once 'being like them is not an option for me' (Taylor 2007, 304). Ratzinger characterises the effects of the third wave of de-hellenisation in a similar way: the rejection of reason results in a cultural and religious pluralism which favours relativism in favour of the truth of being. He also notes that deism and voluntarism have resulted in a popular secular view of faith that is no longer something that has the ability to explain and penetrate everyday human life and its meaning, but is 'pure paradox' (Ratzinger 1995, 21). The influence of the 'impersonal order' on religion has led to a consequent impersonalisation of human nature itself. If God is inaccessible to humanity in this world, then the theological virtues, which are the gift of creaturely

participation in God's personal nature become reduced to characteristics of a morality rooted in a human's own will-power.

### **A Re-Personalisation of Being through a Recognition of Embodiment**

Taylor's response is interesting. He offers a multi-faceted solution to the impersonal order. Firstly, in order to correct a one-sided disembodied rationality, he begins by a call to reintegrate the body and the sensual. His approach is not to champion what he sees as another response still rooted in the Enlightenment, namely 'giving ordinary sensual desire its outlet where it can be fulfilled on its own terms' (Taylor 2007, 609). Neither is it an approach that, while recognising the body and emotions, becomes an over-sentimentalism enslaved to them. While modernity acknowledges the limitations of disembodied reason and by contrast acknowledges the heart, the emotions and the body, this often takes the form of an over-correction. Yet this in itself is not a corrective but often tends to deny reason altogether in favour of an opposing 'irrationality' which it identifies with matter equating this falsely with a feminine principle (Schindler 2001, 291). Another proposition put forward as a corrective is a certain Romanticism which opens to the 'whole' but sacrifices reason for feeling (Taylor 2007, 609). However, neither Romanticism nor a one-sided feminist identification with matter throws light on the power of reason to access reality and being itself.

Taylor's remedy to this one-sided rationalism is to acknowledge human embodiment in a different way. He begins in terms of the traditional Christian acknowledgment of God's personal intervention in history and a corresponding capacity of human reason to open to ultimate Being. He then proceeds to suggest that when ultimate being is acknowledged as personal this makes further sense of the existence of human bodiliness, heart, emotions and history (Taylor 2007, 278).

### **A Re-Personalisation of Being through Relationality**

Taylor's understanding of reality is at its heart a Trinitarian one which emphasizes that 'the highest mode of being arising is a relation' (Taylor 2007,

282-283). This could also be recognised as an explicitly feminine perspective, or an understanding of being, in relation to the whole. Theodore Roszak's theory is that a modern scientific, purely rational approach to discovering reality has become less than fully scientific by excluding the soft, relational and traditionally feminine aspects of reality in favour of a characteristically masculine continuous need to destroy matter (Roszak 1999, 148-149). This latter atomistic view of creation holds that there is at its very core ultimate and primitive particles of matter which, if they could only be 'split', would yield the secrets of reality. Yet in an example of scientific truth mirroring revealed truth, scientific experimentation at the CERN plant in Switzerland has discovered that individualistic, atomistic particles of reality (called quarks) if split at this most fundamental level will simply disappear and disintegrate. They can in fact only be understood as existing within the context of a relationship to the greater whole. Roszak writes that

Physicists tell us that quarks reside in families that are so tightly knit that they may never let their members roam free as lone individuals. ... It is almost as if nature were trying to tell us that relatedness is what came first and can never be meaningfully reduced to something more fundamental (Roszak 1999, 125).

Taylor's understanding of relationality in order to access the truth of being is not to 'advocate a return to the earlier socializations of sex and violence', but rather to seek 'new forms of collective ritual, rites of passages, individual and small group disciplines of prayer, fasting and devotion' (Taylor 2007, 613). Taylor hints then that it is by means of the Church, or through the practice of religious life in community into which 'facets of prayer, faith and hope' have been interwoven, that an impersonal Order can be overcome (Taylor 2007, 294). This point offers ample opportunities for ecclesiological thought in the context of understanding the task and mission of the Church in the secular world.

Taylor continues his vision for the re-personalisation of being by relating the corrective need for a community of faith to the human need for celebration. The modern rationalistic understanding of order has pushed out the notion of 'Carnival' or what Josef Pieper would call 'Festivity.' To

acknowledge the role of festivity is to admit as Taylor does, that 'all forms of structure need an anti-structure' (Taylor 2007, 47). For a purely rationalistic culture, work alone can be comprehended as having usefulness, and furthermore, enjoying leisure time is difficult. As Pieper explains, truly festive time is only possible when there is a deeper recognition that any time off from the drudgery of earning one's living, exists in order to 'waste time' in the deeper contemplation of the nature of all reality (Pieper 1999, 24). This contemplative seeing is the actual precedent of the beatific vision, humanity's ultimate end. Taking time to be festive is to recognise the in-breaking of eternal divine reality and time into chronos time. Otherwise, as we have seen in the modern world, the exaltation of chronos time itself threatens humanity to believe in its self-sufficiency and its ability to control all things in creation for its own purposes. As Taylor acknowledges, a Christian view of reality and history recognises human contingency and how this is shaped by the Eschaton to which humanity is oriented (Taylor 2007, 276).

### **Human Dispositions Needed in Order to Live Contingency**

Certain dispositions, however, are needed of human beings in order to live this contingency, and to go beyond the acceptance of a deistic religion in order to receive as a personal gift this capacity to open to Eternal Being. Whereas Taylor does not elaborate, Ratzinger notes that in contrast to a narrow rationality, which claims it 'knows' everything (Ratzinger 1991, 19), the way of Christian faith can never claim a knowledge that 'exhausts the boundaries of human knowledge' (Ratzinger 1991, 14). Unlike a narrow scientific rationality, faith and belief are on a different plane from a modern obsession with 'making', but inspire a disposition of 'adoring humility and reverence' (Ratzinger 1991, 17). Elsewhere he states that 'if one thinks only practicably of what can be made, one forgets to reflect on oneself and the meaning of one's existence' (Ratzinger 1993, 41). Faith by contrast is about answering the Word/Logos at the core of reality and affirming the meaning that we can only receive because it is already given (Ratzinger 1993, 40). It is a meaning to be contemplated rather than grasped. This type of receptive

contemplation is in the context of a personal and loving relationship between God and the creature and the working out of this context in everyday life through the other Christian virtues of love and hope. As Josef Pieper and Ratzinger (1991, 64) point out, the Christian virtue of Hope is based on the reality of the hope of eternity which has broken into temporal time. The Christian virtue of Love helps to interpret reality through the dimensions of Christ's self-gift (Ratzinger, 1987). These are both given as theological gifts based on the premise of the human being's creaturely relationship with God.

### **Community, Tradition and the Embodiment of the Word**

A narrow, reductive understanding of reason is one that excludes community, its history, and contextuality, thus further cutting it off from accessing divine being and reality. It involves, as Nicolas Lash puts it, a dissociation of memory from argument and narrative from truth. It thus obscures the 'conversational character of the human quest for truth', which is expressed in the social and ecclesial dimensions of the Christian faith (Lash 2008, 63).

The recognition of Christian community and Tradition is hence part of the rehabilitation of reason and of the re-personalisation of being itself since it relates the truth of being to life as it is lived and experienced. A full understanding of reason involves recognising a vital Tradition where 'we do not just have to know what people said in the past, but we have to be in continuity with their wrestling with their problems' (McCabe 2002, 206). The very truths of faith which are handed on and not just received passively have already been part of a process which, as McIntyre puts it, 'embodies continuities of conflict' and is thus living and vital (cited in McCabe 2002, 206). Christianity is therefore not defined narrowly once and for all but as Hans Von Balthasar puts it: 'Christian existence that is lived by virtue of a faith can never locate itself definitively in relation to that faith. It (rather) aspires to be an expression of that faith and therefore contained in and formed by it' (Von Balthasar 1972, 12). It is this living expression of the faith in community through the Holy Spirit which preserves being as personal (Von Balthasar 1972, 13).

This same idea can be seen from another angle characterised by a Marian approach to reality which allows an insight into the importance of embodiment, testifying that the Word is not communicated separately from its visible enfleshment. The latter reflection is a revelatory truth of faith but does not contradict a philosophical understanding gained through reason, such as that of Wittgenstein. In his philosophy of language, Wittgenstein highlights that language is not private; words are not individualistic, atomistic, self-sufficient realities (Wittgenstein, 1973). Rather, words contain a meaning that can only be understood when they are embodied and expressed, thus fulfilling their meaning and purpose in the context of life and community. So it is for being itself. When Christian being in the community of the Church is viewed from a Marian perspective as distinct from a deistic or purely sociological view, it illuminates the reality of a living faith, from which emerges the realisation that a true understanding of ecclesial being cannot be dissociated from a loving personal relation to divine Being itself and to others through the Holy Spirit.

### **Conclusion: Rehabilitating Reason and Re-Personalising Being**

This paper has developed from the starting point of Charles Taylor's characterisation of the Impersonal Order. In this context it has examined the nature of reason in the modern world from the point of view of Deism which denies the access of human reason to being and reality. As Taylor sees it, the task of engaging with the destructive effects of modernity involves giving full strength and power to reason to access divine being as well as reality itself. This is what this paper has termed 're-personalisation.' This process will not happen in a way in which reason attempts to control being as in a false scientific positivism but rather to enable it to be open in order to 'receive' the intelligible structure of reality given to it in creation.

In going beyond Taylor's own call to refute a deistic understanding of religion through re-personalisation, this article has noted the potentialities offered in ecclesiologies which emphasise relationality not only at a horizontal level, but also at a vertical level. In fact, only in recognising the possibilities of

creaturely openness to transcendent divinity can ecclesial relationality be constituted at all. As a corrective to possible de-humanising influences of a narrow rationalism within modernity, these ideas offer possibilities for further theological development in the understanding of the faith, the Christian community and what they offer to humanity in the modern secular world.

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