Charles Taylor, A Secular Age – Summary

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The noted sociologist Robert Bellah has referred to A Secular Age as "one of the most important books to be written in my lifetime."[1]

Background and Overview
In recent years, secularism has become an important topic in the humanities and social sciences. Although there continue to be important disagreements among scholars, many begin with the premise that secularism is not simply the absence of religion, but rather an intellectual and political category that itself needs to be understood as an historical construction.

In this book, Taylor looks at the change in Western society from a state in which it is almost impossible not to believe in God, to one in which believing in God is simply one option of many. He argues against the view that secularity in society is caused by the rise of science and reason. He argues that this view is far too simplistic and does not explain why people would abandon their faith.

Taylor starts with a description of the Middle Ages and presents the changes to bring about the modern secular age. The Middle Ages were a time of enchantment. People believed in God, angels, demons, witches, the Church's sacraments, relics, and sacred places. Each of these types of things had mysterious, real effects on individuals and society. The early Middle Ages were content to have two speeds for people's spiritual development. The clergy and a few others were at the faster, more intense speed. Everyone else was only expected to plod along at a slower spiritual speed. The High Middle Ages had a strong focus on bringing everyone along to a higher realm of spirituality and life. Up until a few hundred years ago, the common viewpoint of the North Atlantic was basically Christian. Most people could not even consider a viewpoint without God. The culture has changed so that multiple viewpoints are now conceivable to most people.

This change is accomplished through three major facets of Deism:
one, an anthropocentric shift in now conceiving of Nature as primarily for people,
two, the idea that God relates to us primarily through an impersonal order that He established,
and three, the idea that religion is to be understood from Nature by reason alone.
Deism is considered the major intermediate step between the previous age of belief in God and the modern secular age.[2]

Three modes of secularity are distinguished:
1) secularized public spaces,
2) the decline of belief and practice,
3) cultural conditions where unbelief in religion is a viable option. This text focuses on secularity three.[3]

In his previous work, Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity, Taylor focuses on the developments which led to the identity of modern individuals in the West. This work focuses on the developments which led to modern social structures. The content of Sources of the Self is complementary to A Secular Age. Taylor discussed the political implications of A Secular Age in an interview with The Utopian.
Outline

Preface/Introduction

Taylor is "telling a story... of 'secularization' in the modern West" (p.ix), and what the process amounts to. That is to say, religion (1) as that which is retreating in public space, or (2) as a type of belief and practice which is or is not in regression, and (3) as a certain kind of belief or commitment whose conditions in this age are being examined (3)." (p. 15)

Taylor does not believe that the decline in belief occurred because "'Darwin refuted the Bible," as allegedly said by a Harrow schoolboy in the 1890’s." So he wants to discuss belief and unbelief, "not as rival theories... but as different kinds of lived experience involved in understanding your life in one way or the other" (p. 5).

Where is the place of richness or fullness, and its opposite, the place of absence or exile? There is also the "middle condition," the daily activities between the extremes, and their meaning.

For believers, the place of fullness is God. For unbelievers, it is within the power of reason (Enlightenment) or Nature, or our inner depths (Romanticism). Also, postmodernism wants to stand outside reason and sentiment, on the idea that fullness is a projection that cannot be found.

In the old world, people could have a naive belief, but today belief or unbelief is "reflective," and includes a knowledge that other people do or do not believe. We look over our shoulder at other beliefs, but we still each live a "background," with our beliefs "held within a context or framework of the taken-for-granted... tacit... because never formulated." (p. 13)

Part I: The Work of Reform

"Why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable?" (p. 25)

God's presence retreated in three dimensions.

(1) People no longer see natural events as acts of God.
(2) Society "could only be conceived as grounded in something higher than human action in secular time." (p. 25)
(3) People lived then in an enchanted world, now in disenchantment.

Reformers paved the way

Rejecting the "subtraction" theory of secularization, Taylor believes that a movement of Reform in Christianity, aiming to raise everyone up to the highest levels of religious devotion and practice, caused the move to secularization. The disciplined Reformed self replaced the "porous" self, vulnerable to external forces, spirits and demons, with a new "buffered" self, a disciplined and free agent living in a progressively disenchanted world.

The success of Reform and the propagation of successful disciplined selves leads to a disciplinary society that starts to take action against rowdiness and indiscipline: controlling the poor, taming the warrior aristocracy, suppressing "feasts of misrule" like Carnival. Calvinists and Puritans were "industrious, disciplined... mutually predictable... With such men a safe, well-ordered society can be built." (p. 106) The success of the project encouraged an anthropocentrism that opened the gates for a godless humanism. (p. 130) "So disengaged discipline frames a new experience of the self as having a telos of autarky." (p. 138)

Early humans were embedded into the world in three ways: into their small-scale social group in which religious ritual was identical with social ritual; into the cosmos, the enchanted world of spirits and forces; and the cosmos into the divine, so that the gods are intimately involved with the project of human flourishing. Thus: "Human agents are embedded in society, society in the cosmos, and the cosmos incorporates the divine." (p. 152)
This embedding is broken, for an elite, by the "higher" religions of the Axial Age. Humans are individuals, no longer embedded in society, God is no longer embedded in the cosmos, but separate, and the notion of human flourishing becomes transformed, e.g., in "a salvation which takes us beyond what we usually understand as human flourishing." (p. 152)

In the Reformation and after, this 'disembedding' extended more and more from the elite to the whole population.

More and more, in recent times: "Humans are rational, sociable agents who are meant to collaborate in peace to their mutual benefit." (p. 159)

This modern social imaginary is the Modern Moral Order, and it is a radical break with the two pre-modern moral orders, the idea of "the Law of a people" (p. 163) or the organization of society "around a notion of hierarchy in society which expresses and corresponds to a hierarchy in the cosmos." (p. 163)

Taylor sees "three important forms of social self-understanding." (p. 176) "They are, respectively (1) the "economy," (2) the public sphere, and (3) the practices and outlooks of democratic self-rule." (p.176)

Both the economy and the public sphere are conceived as existing independent of the political power. In the notion of economy is the "invisible hand" and the exchange of advantages in a relationship of interlocking causes. The state becomes "the orchestrating power that can make an economy flourish." (p. 178)

This new moral order is no longer a society of "mediated access" where the subjects are held together by an apex, a King, "We have moved from a hierarchical order of personalized links to an impersonal egalitarian one, from a vertical world of mediated access to horizontal, direct-access societies." (p. 209)

Taylor anticipates that his approach might be attacked as "idealism" against the Marxian requirement of "materialism." But ideas and material conditions are inseparable. "Ideas' always come in history wrapped up in certain practices" (p. 213).

Part II: The Turning Point

The program of Reform, by creating a disciplined, ordered society, in which the vulnerable "porous self" became the disengaged "buffered self," created a distance between humans and God. Thus, exclusive humanism became an option through the "notion of the world designed by God... God relates to us primarily by establishing a certain order of things... We obey God by following the demands of this order." (p. 221) A true, original, natural religion, once obscured, is now to be laid clear again.

Christianity always provided for ordinary human flourishing, but included inscrutable divine grace. With deism, grace became eclipsed, for people endowed with reason and benevolence need only these faculties to carry out God's plan. God's providence, once a mystery, is just God's plan. Eventually, we come to Feuerbach: "that the potentialities we have attributed to God are really human potentialities." (p. 251)

Taylor makes a threefold claim.
First, "exclusive humanism arose in connection with, indeed, as an alternative set of moral sources for, the ethic of freedom and mutual benefit."

Second, "it couldn't have arisen in any other way at the time." (p. 259)

Third, today's wide range of unbelief still originates "in the ethic of beneficent order."
The usual interpretation of the changing understanding of God in recent centuries is a move from a "supreme being with powers... [of] agency and personality" to God as creator of a "law-governed structure" to "an indifferent universe, with God either indifferent or non-existent." (p. 270) This is the subtraction story, but Taylor believes that it is more complicated than that.

The official Enlightenment story is that "people started using Reason and Science, instead of Religion and Superstition" (p. 273) to explain the world. The social order can be organized by rational codes, and human relationships which matter are prescribed in the codes. But the motive force behind this development was reformed Christianity and its move to a designer God in the early modern period.

In the new epistemic predicament, humans "acquire knowledge by exploring impersonal orders with the aid of disengaged reason." (p. 294) They form "societies under the normative provisions of the Modern Moral Order." In the secularist understanding, "human beings discover that they just are humans united in societies which can have no other normative principles but those of the MMO." (p. 294) "It is a massive shift in horizon."

Part III: The Nova Effect

Three stages of explosion of secularity

Taylor sees three stages of a nova effect, an explosion of secularity. Beginning with "an exclusive alternative to Christian faith" (p. 299) in the 18th century. It was followed by diversification in the 19th century, even to the Nietzschean break with the humanism of freedom and mutual benefit. Finally, in the last fifty years, the nova has exploded to reach beneath elites to whole societies and includes "a generalised culture of 'authenticity', or expressive individualism," of doing your own thing.

But there are cross pressures.

Against the freedom from "unreasoning fears" there is a feeling of malaise, of something lost. Heroism is lost in the leveling down of aspiration; utilitarianism is thought too flat and shallow. There is no room for death. Unbelief in the middle-to-late 19th century began to take up the profound new sense of the universe, its vastness in space and time, and in the lack of a plan. Taylor calls this the modern "cosmic imaginary" (the natural version of the modern "social imaginary"). "Our present sense of things fails to touch bottom anywhere." (p. 325) Through the idea of the sublime and recovery of the "well-springs of sympathy" (p. 344) in Herder and Rousseau lost to disengaged reason, we reach eventually the Will of Schopenhauer. We experience a universe maybe without a "rational, benign plan," bottomless, and the "locus of our dark genesis." This leads to the theories of Freud, that the "highest functions, thinking, willing, are... the product of neuro-physiological functions in us." (p. 348) The new imaginary sustains a range of views, from "the hardest materialism through to Christian orthodoxy." (p. 351) This has confounded the war between belief and unbelief.

Shift in art

The opening up of different ways in experiencing the world includes a shift in the place of art. Instead of mimesis, the retelling of the Christian world-view through its standard symbols and reference points, we have a creative art that must develop its own reference points.
Artists "make us aware of something in nature for which there are as yet no established words... In this 'subtler language'... something is defined and created as well as manifested." (p. 353) This applies to poetry, painting, and music taking an "absolute" turn, decoupled from story and representation. Yet they still move. But why? The mystery provides a place of the spiritual and the deep for the unbeliever.

Taylor invokes Schiller and his notion of "beauty as an aid to being moral," a "stage of unity as a higher stage, beyond moralism" obtained through play, the way we "create and respond to beauty." (p. 358) It creates an unspecified space "between religious commitment and materialism." (p. 360)

Two additional factors
In the 19th century, two additional factors influenced people in renouncing their faith in God: advances in science and Biblical scholarship, and the new cosmic imaginary. People came to feel that the "impersonal order of regularities" was a more mature standpoint than the faith in a personal God. The new cosmic imaginary of a universe vast in time and space also argued against "a personal God or benign purpose." A materialist view is adult; faith in a personal God is childish.

Another view is associated with Nietzsche, the "post-Schopenhauerian" vision that notices the "irrational, amoral, even violent forces within us." (p. 369) These "cannot simply be condemned and uprooted, because our existence, and/or vitality, creativity, strength, ability to create beauty depend on them." This rebels against the Enlightenment in a way that echoes the old aristocratic and warrior ethos, a "revolt from within unbelief... against the primacy of life" (p. 372) i.e., that "our highest goal is to preserve and increase life, to prevent suffering... Life properly understood also affirms death and destruction." (p. 373)

Thus, it is possible for people to live in a world encountering "no echo outside." This view experiences "its world entirely as immanent." (p. 376)

Cultural and moral ascent
After a resurgence of belief driven by the evangelical movement, by the 1830s elites began to experience again the cross-pressure between "the inescapable idea of an impersonal order" (p. 378) and the need to avoid a flattened world shorn of the values of Christianity. Carlyle attempted his own faith in "the human potential for spiritual/moral ascent" (p. 380) in the face of "utilitarian-commercial-industrial society." In Matthew Arnold, this becomes a faith in culture, "the best that has been thought and said in the world." (p. 384) Darwin and evolution changed everything, but the "need to articulate something fuller, deeper" (p. 391) continues. The high cultural trajectory was accompanied by the slow replacement of the vertical understanding of society into the modern horizontal idea of rights-bearing individuals related in mutual benefit, a combination of constitutional monarchy, rights and freedoms, Protestant religions, and British "decency", i.e., character and self-control. This strenuous ethic of belief set up "an unbelieving philosophy of self-control" (p. 395) in Leslie Stephen and John Stuart Mill, a "humanism of altruism and duty." (p. 398)

But this moralism provoked a rebellion by the young at the end of the century. It was too materialistic and too stifling. The new rebels were opposed not only to the "ethic of self-control in its altruistic, public-spirited facet, but also in its individualistic, self-improving, "self-help" aspect." (p.401) In one version, with G. M. Trevelyan, it teeters on the edge of the material/transcendent divide, in another, with Walter Pater, it replaces the transcendent with aestheticism.
Bloomsbury was another approach, an ethic of "personal relations and beautiful states of mind." (p. 405) It carried immanence another step, identifying the intrinsically valuable with the internal experience and sensibility. Then along came the World War I. Here was a war fought for "civilization... the protection of life from violence through order and law." (p. 407) Yet the war was a "greater negation of civilized life than any foe threatened." Thus Pound's notion of "a botched civilization" and Eliot's "Waste Land." For intellectuals, it was impossible to inhabit the mental world of Rupert Brooke. Educated people could not deploy images of dedication and patriotism without distance and irony. "The will was suspect" (p. 411), a "formula for destruction rather than virtue." We get to the post-war consensus of an interventionist state. There is an option to believe that is wisely refused, and a confident, buffered identity.

The trajectory took different forms in the Catholic cultures.

In particular, in France the modern order of mutual benefit, in its Rousseau version, becomes republican and anti-Christian, if not always clearly atheist.

The notion of humans as innocent and good requires a political order opposed to the Christian original sin. The social imaginary "is grounded in exclusive humanism" (p. 412) and becomes radicalized in Marxist socialism.

Opposed to this imaginary was "Reaction," a vertical hierarchy "where differences of rank were respected" (p. 413) and each had his place under monarchy, albeit justified by its beneficial consequences rather than an ontic logos.

An ideal order "stressing rights, liberties and democracy, squares off against a counter-ideal which stresses obedience, hierarchy, belonging to, even sacrifice." (p. 414) But there can be crossovers, with Comte and a scientific "religion to provide social cohesion" and an unbelieving Nietzsche with heroes, suffering as an ineradicable dimension that "heroes learn to face and surmount." (p. 415) By 1912, Henri Massis and Alfred de Tarde write of a generation of youth needing a new discipline to create order and hierarchy and commitment against the dilettante generation of 1885. This movement was shattered in World War I. Many went into the war celebrating the opportunity for "heroism and dedication" only to be "sent wholesale to death in a long, mechanized slaughter." (p. 417)

Crisis of civilisation – religion delinked from society

The crisis of civilization dealt a body blow to established Christianity, and provoked "new, unbelieving variants of the vertical ideal of order" (p. 418) in fascism and Nazism. Thus, the struggle between belief and unbelief "has been connected with ideals and counter-ideals of the moral order of society. But this conflict has disappeared, as religion has delinked from society into "a new kind of niche in society." (p. 419)

Part IV: Narratives of Secularization

To combat the standard narrative of secularization, e.g., Steve Bruce's proposal that the endpoint of secularization is a widespread indifference to religion, and "no socially significant shared religion" (p. 435)

Age of mobilization

Taylor proposes an age of mobilization, from about 1800 to 1960 where religious forms of the ancien régime-type suffered decay, but new forms that fit the age "recruited and mobilized
people on an impressive scale." (p. 471) Churches organized their members' lives and inspired intense loyalty, so that "people would be schooled, play football, take their recreation, etc., exclusively among co-religionists." (p. 472)

In France, this process played out as a direct combat between the ancien régime church and the secular Republicans in which the Church began organizing lay people in new bodies for fundraising, pilgrimages, and "Catholic Action."

In the Anglophone world this mobilization occurred through "denominations" (e.g. Methodists) that "are like affinity groups" (p. 449), an organizing force to help people struggling to find their feet in the market economy.

Age of authenticity

But with the cultural revolution of the 1960s, the age of mobilization came to an end, at least in the modern West. The last half-century has seen a cultural revolution in the North Atlantic civilization. "As well as moral/spiritual and instrumental individualisms, we now have a widespread "expressive" individualism." (p.473) Taylor calls this a culture of "authenticity," from the Romantic expressivism that erupted in the late 18th century elite, "that each one of us has his/her own way of realizing our humanity, and that it is important to find and live out one's own." (p. 475)

This affects the social imaginary. To the "horizontal" notion of "the economy, the public sphere, and the sovereign people" (p. 481) is added a space of fashion, a culture of mutual display. The modern moral order of mutual benefit has been strengthened, mutual respect requires that "we shouldn't criticize each other's 'values'" (p. 484), in particular on sexual matters. Since "my" religious life or practice is my personal choice, my "link to the sacred" may not be embedded in "nation" or "church." This is a continuation of the Romantic move away from reason towards a "subtler language" (Shelley) to understand individual "spiritual insight/feeling." "Only accept what rings true to your own inner Self." (p. 489) This has "undermined the link between Christian faith and civilizational order." (p. 492)

The revolution in sexual behavior has broken the culture of "morality" that dominated most of the last half millennium. Developing individualism was bound to come into conflict with moralism, but in the mid-20th century, the dam broke. Thinkers started to think of sexual gratification as good, or at least unstoppable, especially as "in cities, young people could pair off without supervision." (p. 501) Now people are not bound by moralism: "they form, break, then reform relationships;" (p. 496) they experiment.

It is a tragedy, however, that "the codes which churches want to urge on people" still suffer from "the denigration of sexuality, horror at the Dionysian, fixed gender roles, or a refusal to discuss identity issues." (p. 503)

Today, the "neo-Durkheimian embedding of religion in a state" (p. 505) and a "close interweaving of religion, life-style and patriotism" (p. 506) has been called into question. People are asking, like Peggy Lee, "Is that all there is?" They are heirs of the expressive revolution, "seeking a kind of unity and wholeness of the self... of the body and its pleasures... The stress is on unity, integrity, holism, individuality." (p. 507) This is often termed "spirituality" as opposed to "organized religion."

This has caused a breaking down of barriers between religious groups but also a decline in active practice and a loosening of commitment to orthodox dogmas. A move from an Age of Mobilization to an Age of Authenticity, it is a "retreat of Christendom." Fewer people will be "kept within a faith by some strong political or group identity," (p. 514) although a core (vast in the United States) will remain in neo-Durkheimian identities, with its potential for manipulation by such as "Milosevic, and the BJP." (p. 515)
Religious life continues, more at a distance

Assuming that "the human aspiration to religion will [not] flag" (p. 515), spiritual practice will extend beyond ordinary church practice to involve meditation, charitable work, study group, pilgrimage, special prayer, etc. It will be "unhooked" from the paleo-Durkheimian sacralized society, the neo-Durkheimian national identity, or center of "civilizational order," but still collective. "One develops a religious life." (p. 518)

While religious life continues, many people retain a nominal tie with the church, particularly in Western Europe. This "penumbra" seems to have diminished since 1960. More people stand outside belief, and no longer participate in rites of passage like church baptism and marriage. Yet people respond to, e.g. in France the 1500th anniversary of the baptism of Clovis, or in Sweden the loss of a trans-Baltic ferry. Religion "remains powerful in memory; but also as a kind of reserve fund of spiritual force or consolation." (p. 522)

Difference between Europe and US

This distancing is not experienced in the United States. This may be (1) because immigrants used church membership as a way to establish themselves: "Go to the church of your choice, but go." (p. 524) Or (2) it may be the difficulty that the secular elite has in imposing its "social imaginary" on the rest of society vis-a-vis hierarchical Europe. Also (3) the U.S. never had an ancien régime, so there has never been a reaction against the state church. Next (4) the groups in the U.S. have reacted strongly against the post-1960s culture, unlike Europe. A majority of Americans remain happy in "one Nation under God." There are less skeletons in the family closet, and "it is easier to be unreservedly confident in your own rightness when you are the hegemonic power." (p. 528) Finally (5) the U.S. has provided experimental models of post-Durkheimian religion at least for a century.

Beginning of a new age of religious searching

After summarizing his argument, Taylor looks to the future, which might follow the slow reemergence of religion in Russia in people raised in the "wasteland" of militant atheism, but suddenly grabbed by God, or it might follow the "spiritual but not religious" phenomenon in the West. "In any case, we are just at the beginning of a new age of religious searching, whose outcome no one can foresee."

Part V: Conditions of Belief

We live in an immanent frame. That is the consequence of the story Taylor has told, in disenchantment and the creation of the buffered self and the inner self, the invention of privacy and intimacy, the disciplined self, individualism. Then Reform, the breakup of the cosmic order and higher time in secular, making the best of clock time as a limited resource. The immanent frame can be open, allowing for the possibility of the transcendent, or closed. Taylor argues that both arguments are "spin" and "involve a step beyond available reasons into the realm of anticipatory confidence" (p. 551) or faith.

Closed frames

There are several Closed World Structures that assume the immanent frame. One is the idea of the rational agent of modern epistemology. Another is the idea that religion is childish, so "An unbeliever has the courage to take up an adult stance and face reality." (p. 562)
Taylor argues that the Closed World Structures do not really argue their worldviews, they "function as unchallenged axioms" (p. 590) and it just becomes very hard to understand why anyone would believe in God. Living in the immanent frame, "The whole culture experiences cross pressures, between the draw of the narratives of closed immanence on one side, and the sense of their inadequacy on the other." (p. 595) Materialists respond to the aesthetic experience of poetry. Theists agree with the Modern Moral Order and its agenda of universal human rights and welfare. Romantics "react against the disciplined, buffered self" (p. 609) that seems to sacrifice something essential with regard to feelings and bodily existence.

To resolve the modern cross pressures and dilemmas, Taylor proposes a "maximal demand" that we define our moral aspirations in terms that do not "crush, mutilate or deny what is essential to our humanity". (p. 640) It aspires to wholeness and transcendence yet also tries to "fully respect ordinary human flourishing." (p. 641)

Taylor imagines a two-dimensional moral space. The horizontal gives you a "point of resolution, the fair award." (p. 706) The vertical hopes to rise higher, to reestablish trust, "to overcome fear by offering oneself to it; responding with love and forgiveness, thereby tapping a source of goodness, and healing" (p. 708) and forgoing the satisfaction of moral victory over evil in sacred violence, religious or secular.

Unquiet Frontiers of Modernity

Taylor examines the Unquiet Frontiers of Modernity, how we follow the Romantic search for fullness, yet seem to respond still to our religious heritage. We replace the old "higher time" with autobiography, history, and commemoration. Many moderns are uncomfortable with death, "the giving up of everything." (p. 725)

"Our age is very far from settling into a comfortable unbelief." (p. 727)

"The secular age is schizophrenic, or better, deeply cross-pressured." (p. 727)

Against unbelief, Taylor presents a selection of recent spiritual conversions or "epiphanic" experiences in Catholic artists and writers, including Václav Havel, Ivan Illich, Charles Peguy, and Gerard Manley Hopkins.

The path to the future is a rich variety of paths to God in a unity of the church and a new approach to the question of the sexual/sensual. The disciplined, disengaged secular world is challenged by a return to the body in Pentecostalism. There is a "profound interpenetration of eros and the spiritual life." (p. 767) "[I]n our religious lives we are responding to a transcendent reality." (p. 768) Our seeking for "fullness" is our response to it.

Secular belief is a shutting out. "The door is barred against further discovery." (p. 769) But in the secular "'waste land'... young people will begin again to explore beyond the boundaries." (p. 770) It will, Taylor believes, involve a move away from "exarnation," the disembodying of spiritual life, and from homogenization in a single principle, to celebrate the "integrity of different ways of life." (p. 772)

Epilogue: The Many Stories

In a brief afterword, Taylor links his narrative to similar efforts by e.g., John Milbank and the Radical Orthodoxy movement.

Reviews

A Secular Age has been reviewed in newspapers such as The New York Times[4] and The Guardian,[5] magazines such as The New Republic[6] and The American Prospect,[7] and
professional journals such as Intellectual History Review,[8] Political Theory,[9] Implicit Religion,[10] the European Journal of Sociology,[11] and in many other publications.[12]

References

1) The Immanent Frame » Blog Archive » Secularism of a new kind
2) p 221
3) p 20
5) Stuart Jeffries (7 December 2007). "Is that all there is?"
12) For listings of many additional reviews, see a Google Scholar search.