

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,

N.C.

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 religious 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.

Doubts about bounty of genetically modified crops

By Danny Hakim, New York Times

LONDON — The controversy over genetically modified crops has long focused on largely unsubstantiated fears that they are unsafe to eat.

But an extensive examination by the *New York Times* indicates that the debate has missed a more basic problem — genetic modification in the United States and Canada has not

accelerated increases in crop yields or led to an overall reduction in the use of chemical pesticides.

The promise of genetic modification was twofold: By making crops immune to the effects of weedkillers and inherently resistant to many pests, they would grow so robustly that they would become indispensable to feeding the world's growing population, while also requiring fewer applications of sprayed pesticides.

Read the whole story

4th time president-elect lost the popular vote

By David G. Savage, Los Angeles Times

For only the fourth time in U.S. history, the presidential campaign has ended with an electoral college winner who won fewer votes than his opponent.

Under the system established in the Constitution, in 1787, the winner is the candidate who wins the majority of electoral votes based on the state-by-state tallies, and that candidate is Donald Trump.

Hillary Clinton will finish second, even though she will have beaten him by more than 200,000 votes in the national popular vote.

The electoral system is a legacy of the Constitution, part of an agreement between states, including Southern states that

had more slaves than free men who were eligible to vote.

It was also an era when ordinary people living far from the handful of cities could not be expected to know leading figures of the time who could serve as the chief executive.

Read the whole story

Blue Ribbon Award winners announced

The winners for the 9th annual Blue Ribbon Awards were announced Nov. 10 at Hard Rock in Stateline.

Nearly 300 people attended the Lake Tahoe South Shore Chamber of Commerce event..

The winners are:

Geotourism Award

Winner: Taylor Creek Visitors Center, U.S. Forest Service
Honorable mention: Lake Tahoe Bicycle Coalition

Tourism Award

Winner: The Loft
Honorable mention: Coachman Hotel

Experience Award

Winner: Alpine Sierra Tours
Honorable mention: Treat Street, KRLT/KOWL

Entrepreneur Award

Winner: Debbie Brown, Coldwater Brewery and Grill
Honorable mention: Cassy Burnside, FATCO

Customer Service (Business) Award

Winner: Tommy Walker, Ciera at MontBleu

Honorable mention: Kimberly Templeton, Hard Rock Cafe

Customer Service (Public Agency) Award

Winner: Jody Filgo, South Lake Tahoe Senior Center

Honorable mention: Irma Salazar, Lake Tahoe Visitors Authority

Wendell Award for Green Business or Program

Winner: Tahoe Mountain Lab

Honorable mention: League to Save Lake Tahoe.

Calif.'s drought divide – rainy north, dry south

By Associated Press

Among the changing red and yellow fall leaves of Yosemite National Park, nature artist Penny Otwell is marveling at the fullest rushing waterfalls and rivers she's ever painted there in autumn. But down in the dry Southern California suburbs, David Cantuna laments the same dead and dying grass in his backyard.

California's historic drought finally is easing in parts of the north, thanks to October rains that were three or more times the norm.

"I've been here 53 years and I've never seen it like this," said Otwell, busy in recent weeks capturing on canvas Yosemite's flooded meadows, brimming rivers and gushing waterfalls that more typically are dry this time of year.

The Merced River "is just bank to bank, which is unusual, and

the waterfalls are just – after the rains, they were fabulous,” Otwell said as she headed to her studio.

But the five-year drought only is deepening in parts of Central and Southern California, including the 21 percent of the state that remains stuck in the deepest category of drought. In the Orange County city of Santa Ana, Cantuna, a 52-year-old machinist, doesn’t even think about turning on his backyard sprinklers anymore.

“The damage is already there,” Cantuna says of his forlorn front and back lawns. “There’s no reason to use my water right now because everything is dry.”

The drought divide leaves California’s water managers and experts striving to finesse conservation messages for two wildly differing situations in the state.

In Southern California, the results have been be wildly differing as well. This fall, the water district in one city, Costa Mesa, hung a banner on its building telling residents they could now water their lawns any day they chose, even as another city, Santa Barbara, banned lawn-watering.

“There’s always a balance in managing the drought message,” said Jay Lund, director of the Center for Watershed Sciences at UC Davis. “Play up the drought too much, and then they see it rain, they think...’Why are they just crying wolf?’”

All of California remains under a state-declared drought emergency. That follows what was the driest four-year span in history in the state. At peak, 100 percent of the state was in drought, and Gov. Jerry Brown ordered 25 percent conservation for cities and towns.

Many farms saw water allotments cut, leading to a rate of groundwater pumping that caused countless rural drinking-water wells to run dry and made the land sink more than 1 foot in parts of the Central Valley. The drought has further imperiled

dozens of native fish and other species.

Last month brought a much wetter start to the state's winter rainy season than usual, after near-normal rain and snowfall in 2015. Officials lifted mandatory statewide conservation earlier this year, but stressed they could clamp down again if the rainy season fails or water use shoots up.

This month the U.S. Drought Monitor's weekly report said nearly one-fourth of the state was out of drought. That was California's best showing in three years.

California has the biggest share of its 39 million people in the south, but gets most of its water from the north.

Letter: Thanks and clarification from candidate

To the community,

With the election over, I am writing to congratulate the new LTUSD board members, to respond to some of the claims Derek Allister made public in the final days of the election, and to reaffirm my commitment to volunteer my time and talents to this school district into the future.



Annie Davidson

First, congratulations to my opponent and neighbor, Larry Reilly. Matt and I know from experience how much time and devotion he and his wife, Michelle, have given school districts on both sides of the state line. I congratulate Bonnie Turnbull and Troy Matthews as new members, honor Mike Doyle and Larry Green for their many years of committed service, and fully support the new board and district leadership going forward.

Second, to Derek Allister, I respond for the record.

• The issue of a conflict of interest is not personal, as you have suggested; it is a legal one. Since Larry's spouse, Michelle, earns a paycheck from the school district, Larry is required by law to recuse himself from any board discussions that affect salaries and benefits if their household income could be impacted. It remains to be seen how much this conflict will affect board activities. However, with approximately 80 percent of the school district budget going to salaries and benefits annually, this is a serious consideration. Having been raised in a family of teachers and being former classroom teacher and association member, this issue gets my attention with regard to representing teachers' interests.

• You suggested that because I have children in one school in the district, I would not be fair in my decision making, favoring one school over another. Does this argument hold for the many other past and current board members with children in schools, too? Because my nephew is in the middle school, does your argument hold? If you are questioning my character or fair mindedness, I hope you would check with those who know me around town and my references. I will let my record and reputation demonstrate that I am committed to all children in our community (and state and nation, for that matter).

• I am proud to bring my professional experiences to

benefit this district, including what I have learned about standardized testing. I was a classroom teacher in elementary school in 2001, deeply troubled when No Child Left Behind brought on the heavy requirement of standardized testing. I began studying the issues, went graduate school to study statistics and education policy to empower myself in the face of federal laws. I then worked for McGraw-Hill's CTB where I learned how tests are made, managed, and reported. However, because I wanted to be in public service, I left CTB (which has since shut down because this industry is in such shambles) to take a job at the Department of Education in Nevada to make a difference for schools, teachers, and students while troubling teacher accountability pressure was coming on strong with Race to the Top. Child bearing and making a living have affected my career, but in all my experiences, I have argued for fairness and equity, healthy systems, and support to teachers and students. I believe our federal education laws are flawed, that there is way too much testing, and that we need to work for change in the next rewrite of ESEA.

Finally, to the LTUSD board, district leadership and staff, parents and students:

I promise my continued support for all programs and efforts in our schools. I gladly volunteer any of my time or talent that could benefit our children going forward, whether coaching or classroom volunteering, explaining how tests work or what the data mean (or don't mean), helping to evaluate assessments or curriculum, serving on committees or boards – or tying a child's shoes.

Thank you to the hundreds of people who voted for me, for the hundreds more who supported my campaign who could not vote for me, and for the opportunity to share who I am this election season. I am grateful to be part of this engaged community and look forward to other ways to serve it.

Respectfully,

DCSO cracking down on seat belt scofflaws

The Douglas County Sheriff's Office will be enforcing seat belt laws from Nov. 14-Dec. 10.

Deputies will be watching for drivers and other occupants in vehicles who are not wearing their seat belts and children who are not properly secured in car or booster seat.

According to the National Highway Safety Administration, 12,584 lives were saved by wearing seat belts, yet 49 percent of occupants who were killed in 2013 weren't restrained.

Snippets about Lake Tahoe

- South Lake Tahoe is conducting a **survey** about vacation home rentals.
- This winter season Tahoe Adventure Company will host a series of full moon snowshoe tours. For more info, go **online**.
- Weather permitting, the Truckee ice rink will open Nov.25.
- Two Lions will play at Whiskey Dick's in South Lake

Tahoe for free on Dec. 10. Doors open at 9pm.

- Squaw Valley is projecting a Nov. 23 opening.

Changes likely for Douglas County sewer board

By Evan Maxwell, Reno Gazette-Journal

A legislative committee that oversees Lake Tahoe issues has endorsed a reorganization of the sewer district that serves Stateline casinos and more than 5,000 residential connections on the Nevada side of the lake.

In taking the action last week, the Joint Legislative Committee that oversees the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency also endorsed introduction next year of a law that could fundamentally alter the way local government is conducted in all but two of the state's counties.

The six-member committee rejected a request by the board of Douglas County Sewer Improvement District 1 to reorganize the district in a way that would permit Stateline casino and resort owners to retain control. Since its organization in 1953, the three-member DCSID board has been composed entirely of executives from the major casinos and from Edgewood Tahoe Golf Course.

Read the whole story

History talk in Camp Richardson

Carol Van Etten, a student and author of Lake Tahoe history, will be giving a talk on Nov. 15 at 7pm at the Camp Richardson Lodge.

She will talk about the summers she spent at her grandparents' cabin in Rubicon Bay.

Van Etten has published three books.

The talk is free for Lake Tahoe Historical Society members, \$3 for others.