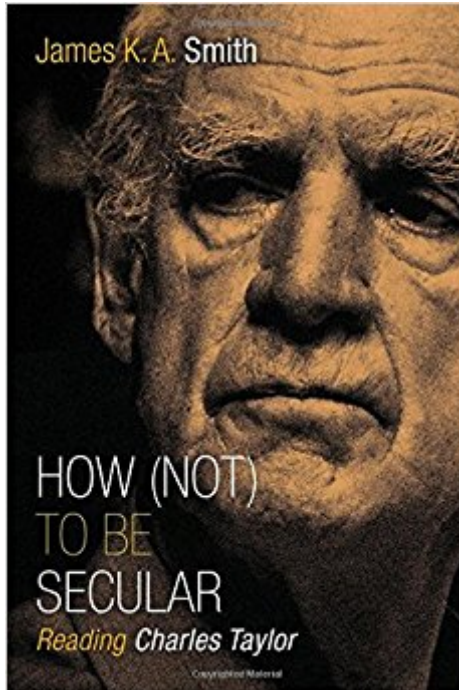


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How (Not) To Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor



Synopsis

How (Not) to Be Secular is what Jamie Smith calls "your hitchhiker's guide to the present" -- it is both a reading guide to Charles Taylor's monumental work *A Secular Age* and philosophical guidance on how we might learn to live in our times. Taylor's landmark book *A Secular Age* (2007) provides a monumental, incisive analysis of what it means to live in the post-Christian present -- a pluralist world of competing beliefs and growing unbelief. Jamie Smith's book is a compact field guide to Taylor's insightful study of the secular, making that very significant but daunting work accessible to a wide array of readers. Even more, though, Smith's *How (Not) to Be Secular* is a practical philosophical guidebook, a kind of how-to manual on how to live in our secular age. It ultimately offers us an adventure in self-understanding and maps out a way to get our bearings in today's secular culture, no matter who "we" are -- whether believers or skeptics, devout or doubting, self-assured or puzzled and confused. This is a book for any thinking person to chew on.

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Customer Reviews

I say "more accessible" because this is hardly *A Secular Age* for Dummies. Charles Taylor's massive and dense book is tough sledding. I have not read much of it, but am certainly familiar with the work of Taylor. In *How (Not) to Be Secular*, Jamie Smith brings the intellectual cookies to a lower shelf, but don't be fooled, serious thinking is still required. Smith respects his readers by providing an accessible, yet thoughtful distillation of one of the most consequential books of our day. Instead of doing a typical book review, let me briefly mention six things I appreciated about this book: *The

writing style is elegant and engaging. Let me give one example from page 11: "Ardor and devotion cannot undo the shift in plausibility structures that characterizes our age." This is wonderfully conceived, but it is also pregnant with implications.*There is a judicious use of illustrations from literature, music, and movies.*Since I am not a dispassionate reader on the subject of doubt (I know the struggle to believe firsthand), I am grateful for the insights on living in this unusual climate of secularism.*The author is careful to understand his subject matter. A good example is the compassionate assessment of the troubled genius, David Foster Wallace. Smith does not offer a glib critique of Wallace's writings. Wallace is looked at seriously, even one could say, sympathetically. To be sure, Smith does not agree with Wallace's overall philosophy, but Smith does a good job of showing how others have missed salient features of Wallace's approach.*Smith clearly appreciates Charles Taylor's overall project in *A Secular Age*. However, that does not impede Smith from offering important pushbacks and critiques.

Starting last year I have been paying a lot of attention to James KA Smith (Jamie). The first book of his that came across my radar screen was *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview and Cultural Formation*. (I still haven't actually read that one, it is on my list for this summer.) But I did read *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works*. And it really did fundamentally change my perspective on liturgy and worship. Since then I regularly read Smith's editorials (he is the editor of *Comment* magazine) and I have slowly been reading some of his other books. *How (Not) to Be Secular* is the type of book I wish were more popular. For important ideas to really take hold, we need good authors to popularize those important ideas into formats that a general public can understand. Charles Taylor's *A Secular age* is a massive and important book, but at 900 pages it is too long (and too dense) for most readers. (And more than a few people have suggested Taylor is not the most readable author.) So Jamie Smith has put together a 148 page companion that covers the basics of the argument and includes relevant contemporary examples. The basic idea of *A Secular Age* is to explain what it means to live in a secular age and how we have come to this place in culture. "We are all skeptics now, believer and unbeliever alike. There is no one true faith, evident at all times and places. Every religion is one among many. The clear lines of any orthodoxy are made crooked by our experience, are complicated by our lives. Believer and unbeliever are in the same predicament, thrown back onto themselves in complex circumstances, looking for a sign.

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