



A MEMORABLE YEAR  
CHARLES TAYLOR

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Born in 1931 in Montreal, Charles Taylor studied at McGill and Oxford. For four decades he taught at McGill, where he is now Emeritus Professor of Philosophy, and he has also visited and taught at a number of other universities. His publications include: *Sources of the Self* (1989), *The Malaise of Modernity* (1991), and *Modern Social Imaginaries* (2004). – Address: Philosophy Department, McGill University, 855 Sherbrooke Street West, Montreal, Canada H3A 2T7. E-mail: [cmt111111@aol.com](mailto:cmt111111@aol.com)

I am very grateful to the Wissenschaftskolleg for the priceless opportunity to finish my book *A Secular Age*, which I had been working on for almost 10 years. I started it in the summer of 1996, interrupting another book project, because I received an invitation at that time to give the Gifford Lectures in Edinburgh.

I had been planning for many decades to write a book of this kind, and when the Gifford invitation arrived, I realized that this was the really suitable topic for that series. Although lots of people ignore or only refer in perfunctory fashion to Lord Gifford's will establishing the lectures, in fact it is plain that their founder foresaw a series which would deal with the place of religion in the modern world. He framed this interest in terms of "natural theology", which of course was not my theme, but I feel that I was following the spirit of this series in taking on the issue of modern secularism in the West and the place of religion in this age.

So I set aside a previous book project, on the philosophy of language, and started reading for the one I have just completed. I made considerable progress before giving the lectures in Spring 1999, but I still hadn't completed it. What was worse, I didn't quite know how

I was going to complete the project. Part of my self-given brief was to explain the development of secular civilization in the West (really in what might be called ex-Latin Christendom); my thesis is that this has its roots in the wave of reforms which marked the late mediaeval and early modern periods in this civilization. But this was also meant to issue in some conclusions about the conditions of belief today, and there I was still only feeling my way.

In the autumn of 1999, I returned to teaching, and the result was that I made progress only at a snail's pace thereafter. Moreover, I could advance only in fits and starts, and never found the protracted period of uninterrupted time when I could attempt to draw together all the threads. This year at the Wissenschaftskolleg provided me with this; and in addition it offered ideal conditions of work, an almost miraculous library service (books appearing as if by magic, often just hours after one had ordered them), excellent computer support, quiet, and hours of concentration. I could never have done the work without this.

In addition, there were a number of colleagues here at the same time who were working on similar issues. We formed a discussion group on "Religion and Contingency". Hans Joas took the initiative in bringing us to Wiko together. The group included José Casanova, Ingolf Dalferth, Horst Dreier, Astrid Reuter, and Abdolkarim Soroush. We had a number of very fruitful discussions, and some of my chapters were worked over in our exchanges and were immensely improved as a result.

I must also admit that I needed Wiko to help me fend off temptation. When we North Americans visit Europe, we start thinking of all the places we would like to visit and which normally are out of reach. And what's more, we receive invitations to travel to all these exciting places. I am happy that Wiko played the role of a stern tutor, exercising discipline over a flighty pupil. I shamelessly took refuge behind Wiko's rules, in order to give myself several months of uninterrupted work. Without this, I would never have made it.

I have one further acknowledgement to make. The winter helped. We were informed that this was the coldest and most overcast winter in Berlin for years. I'm not sure about that, because I have noticed that almost anywhere, people tend to pass off the rigours of the climate as temporary aberrations. But permanent or occasional, a winter like this keeps you at your desk. The only danger is drooping morale, as the sun fails to appear day after day. The climate was almost ideally designed for my purposes. As soon as I was finished, spring arrived (unusually late, I am told). The first real temptations to slack off came along with the possibility of doing so. I have greatly enjoyed the last month or so, and begin to see something of Berlin.

And of course, spring coincides with visitors. As soon as friends and relations know you're in Berlin, they let you know how much they would like to see you. From a standing start, I became an instant expert on Prussian history and the life of Frederick the Great. All this forms part of the pleasant aftermath of fevered months of redaction. Wiko made these months possible and fruitful, and for this I express my undying gratitude.

I would like to add that I participated in two Wiko workshops. The first was on "Secularisms and Secularization", which was taken on by our "Religion and Contingency" group. All the members took part, but the energetic leadership of José Casanova ensured that the event was a great success, with a very diverse group engaged in intense and fruitful discussions.

The second workshop was the result of fusing what were originally two projects, one on democracy and participation, and the other an attempt at a comparative study of different cultures of democracy. Early on, we saw the potentialities of a combination between the two. This required bridging rather different theoretical languages which belonged respectively to the milieux associated with the two original projects. But this effort really added to the interest and the intellectual profit of the seminar, as it ultimately occurred.

Needless to say, I personally profited from both these events, which took place in my last days at the Kolleg and represented the culmination of a very fruitful year.