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Sources of the self: the making of the modern identity

Robert A. Kelly

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concept of a historical boundary or limit on human activity and a divine boundary or limit on all moments of history pressed him toward a theology deeply influenced by his historical experience and profoundly in search of the moment in which his commitment to the history of his religion and his nation would result in a new and renewed understanding of the national order or law (*nomos*). Hirsch, moreover, did not deify or absolutize National Socialism—but the contrast with Tillich does indicate that Hirsch failed to develop the capacity either to criticize the movement or to find a ground for opposition in the midst of the ambiguities of political life.

Reimer's essay offers both a significant and detailed analysis of the historical path of the Tillich-Hirsch relationship from early friendship, to debate, and rupture, and an expertly crafted discussion of the political theology of both thinkers as it developed in the time between the two World Wars. It is a welcome contribution both to the literature on Tillich and to the much needed contemporary analysis of the theologies of the first half of the twentieth century, their roots, their historical context, and their somewhat ambiguous (rather than clearly good or clearly evil) contribution to the politics of the age.

Richard A. Muller
Calvin Theological Seminary

Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity

Charles Taylor

Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989

521 pp. plus notes and index

Philosophers, to paraphrase Dickens, are the best of historians and philosophers are the worst of historians. They are the "worst" because the search for the grand generalization and the theoretical basis often ignores hard data that undoes the generalization or disproves the theory. They are the "best" because sometimes their conclusions, even when based on flawed analysis of detail, tell us more about ourselves than hundreds of journal articles which are "correct" in every particular.

Charles Taylor, a native Montrealer formerly at Oxford and now professor of philosophy at McGill University, is aware of the problems and possibilities of a philosopher doing history. He knows the dangers of a simplistic idealism, and he also knows the dangers of an equally simplistic materialism. The goal he has chosen for *Sources of the Self* is not to offer the complete story of why and how the modern identity developed, but to discover what the appeal of the developing modern identity was to those

who began to embrace it in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Taylor wants to ask: "What drew people to [early modernity]? Indeed, what draws them [to modernity] today? What gave it its spiritual power?" (203) Because Taylor understands both his own limitations and the limitations of his questions and his methods, he has written a book that is both good history and good philosophy.

Taylor is one of those rare critics of modernity who is not trying to undo the whole project, but is trying to point out the fundamental assumptions so that we can keep the benefits of modernity while solving some of the most serious problems. Not satisfied with the optimistic praise of modernism offered by some or the near despair of others, he sets out to capture "the unique combination of greatness and danger, of *grandeur et misère*, which characterizes the modern age" (x). In the process Taylor hopes to help us understand ourselves better by showing how shallow we all are in both our acceptance and critique of modern Western culture.

In the first section Taylor sets out his reasons for undertaking this difficult project and his own opinion about contemporary philosophical ethics. He finds most modern ethicists not only unable to speak clearly about the problems of current morality, but unable to speak at all. This inarticulacy comes about because so many of us—philosophers included—are not really aware of many of the assumptions we make about thinking and speaking nor about how we came to have these assumptions. Thus, Taylor sees his task as bringing those assumptions out into the light so that we can examine them and begin to have a meaningful conversation about what the good life might be.

If we are to understand the modern identity three facets are crucial, according to Taylor, so he next devotes a part of the book to each. First is "modern inwardness", the notion that we are selves who come to know ourselves and know ultimate reality by probing our inner depths. This part begins with a discussion of Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics and then moves through St. Augustine to Descartes, Locke, and Montaigne. At the conclusion of Part II we have a sense of the development and the essential shape of modern individualism which stresses autonomy, self-exploration, and personal commitment.

Part III discusses the second facet: the affirmation of ordinary life which began with the Reformation. Luther plays a part here, for it was he who undid the ancient and medieval notion of the higher life of the intellect or spirit by his assertion of the goodness of all vocations. From Luther Taylor moves through Puritanism to Locke and the Deists, where the modern form of this affirmation begins. In its English guise the affirmation of ordinary life not only means the goodness of all vocations, but the necessity of practical usefulness. With the discussion of the radical Enlightenment we arrive at the point of a full-blooded insistence on the value of commerce and production, but also of universal benevolence as the primary social virtue.

Third, Part IV takes up the notion of nature as a source of morality. This follows directly from the previous part and carries the discussion from

the radical Enlightenment through the critique of rationalism among the Romantics and into the twentieth century. In this section Taylor examines why it came to be that people could make sense not only of science, but even of morality and the spiritual dimension without the necessity of the existence of God. This happened because new sources for morality and spirituality, especially disengaged reason and the goodness of nature, came to be seen as available and preferable to Christian faith. Part IV traces how and why these sources became available to us.

I first read *Sources of the Self* because a magazine columnist mentioned the book as summer reading that would cause thought rather than merely entertain, and stated that the book might well earn a place alongside Lash's *Culture of Narcissism* and Bellah's *Habits of the Heart* as a significant analysis of the current state of North American culture. The book has definitely kept this promise and, I believe, is a deft guide to the pitfalls and problems of modern ethical thinking. In fact, I have found Taylor ultimately to be more helpful than either Lash or Bellah, both of whose work I value highly, because he does not just point to who we think we are at the present, but how we came to think this way of ourselves. It would seem to me to be essential reading for modern preachers and theologians—especially in the cultures derived from the British Isles—who want to understand better their own and their hearers' deeply held but seldom articulated assumptions about themselves and their place in the universe. For those who find the original tough going, a published version of Taylor's 1991 Massey Lectures given this Fall on CBC radio is available as *The Malaise of Modernity* (Concord, Ontario: Anansi, 1991). Read one or the other.

Robert A. Kelly
Waterloo Lutheran Seminary

Turning Points in Pastoral Care—The Legacy of Anton Boisen and Seward Hiltner

Leroy Aden and J. Harold Ellens, editors
Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990

Turning Points in Pastoral Care is the fourth in the Psychology and Christianity Series, a collection of books committed to the exploration of the, for many, problematic relationship between psychology and Christian faith. If this relationship is conceptualized in the metaphor of a marriage, some would demand a divorce (seeing psychology as the abuser), others counsel for a separation, while still others would propose ongoing therapy to promote better mutual cooperation, if not intimacy, between the two.

The first book in the series was aptly titled *Christian Counselling and Psychotherapy* as it depicts the common dilemma in the evangelical community in feeling the need to both reject and accept secular psychology