

The Left Atrium

Secular trends

The secular mind

Robert Coles

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The ability to heal has been associated with divinity since antiquity; it is interesting that today's healing arts are founded on advances in epidemiology, bacteriology and clinical practice made in an era when Darwin, Nietzsche and Marx were, in their different ways, committing deicide.

The story of science as the murderer of God has a number of variants. In his *History of the Modern World* (1983), Paul Johnson pegs the beginning of our unholy era at May 29, 1919, when photographs of a solar eclipse confirmed Einstein's theory of relativity, which the world then mistook for relativism. In *Nostalgia for the Absolute* (1974), George Steiner lays the blame for the godlessness of our times at the feet of Marx, Freud and Lévi-Strauss, whose spurious mythologies did duty for religion. In *The Malaise of Modernity* (1991), Charles Taylor conducts his (very temperate) analysis on adjacent ground, contemplating "the fading of moral horizons" in the culture of self-fulfillment.

Now we have *The Secular Mind*, in which the prolific Robert Coles, child psychiatrist, Pulitzer Prize winning author (for *Children in Crisis*, 1990) and editor of the highly respected journal of documentary arts, *DoubleTake*, offers a parallel analysis. This is not a book about medicine or its history, but one that gives insight into the intellectual context in which medicine, particularly psychiatry, is now practised.

When Coles was a resident in child psychiatry at Harvard he was drawn to a seminar led by Paul Tillich, the theologian. Tillich's phrase, "the secular mind," would recur to Coles over the years as he conversed with writers who

pondered humanity's position in a secular universe, including social activist and Catholic convert Dorothy Day and physicians William Carlos Williams and Walker Percy. He also consulted literary texts, notably those of 19th-century realists — George Eliot, George Meredith and Thomas Hardy — who closely observed the vacuum of faith created by the scientific ascent of man.

Insofar as "secular" means, as Coles reminds us, "the things of a particular time," the tension between the temporal and the sacred is hardly modern. Moses, the great lawgiver, was "not least, an interpreter of the sacred for the secularist crowds." As for the particular secularism of our own age, Coles traces its roots to Darwin, whose evolutionary theory "radically unnerved thousands," and to Freud, who displaced the act of confession, "once the prerogative of the sacred," into what Freud himself called the "godless materialism" of psychoanalysis. In the words of Freud's daughter, Anna, whom Coles interviewed at length, "the spiritual [became] a matter of mere events in the mind, each of which carried an explanation, if you looked closely and long enough."

Perhaps most poignantly, Coles invokes his mentor William Carlos Williams, whom he visited regularly as a

student of medicine. Describing the attraction of Nazism for intellectuals such as Heidegger, Ezra Pound and Jung, Williams once remarked: "This secular mind — where it has led us." Interestingly, it is within this political and historical frame that Coles' instincts as a physician come into sharper focus: "It took me some time, in the course of working with children caught in political and social and racial crises, to realize that their mental life had to do not only with [family] relationships ... but with the larger world they inhabited."

This is a heady and idiosyncratic book, and it is difficult, at each discursive turn, to see where Coles is heading. This, together with a faintly elegiac tone, is what makes the concluding chapter so surprising. The Orwellian nightmare of totalitarianism is in Coles' view largely over, and we may take a more confident view of the future. Psychopharmacology, in particular, has already opened up new avenues for self-knowledge; sometime in the new millennium we "will come into growing command of our 'thoughts,' our 'emotions': what we call the Id and the Superego will be understood biologically and, thereafter, brought under control."

For Coles, it appears, the rewriting of the mind as matter need not constitute a loss of humanness; we will be "ever needy of an 'otherness'" to receive our prayerful impulses. Reaching the end of

this exploration, I was not sure whether I had encountered a new twist in the arrogance of science, or an unconditional faith in the wonder of creation. Wherever our "secular destiny" will take us, perhaps heaven (if there still is one) will preserve us.

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