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Meaning under the Nova-Effect: The Role of Substantive and Functional Definitions in Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*

Introduction

In *A Secular Age,* Charles Taylor presents a narrative interpretation of modernity that dispels common myths about the decline or regression of religion in the modern age. He critiques the popularity of "negative narratives" within the social sciences, which explain modernity as a product of epistemic losses or the shedding of illusory ideas. Such narratives ignore the prevalence of new ideas, social constructions, and religious behaviour in the modern age, and are thus inappropriate as explanations of modernity. Taylor thus offers a "positive" narrative of modernity focused on the epistemic gains that have contributed to the modern understanding of the self.

Taylor relies on a specific terminology in *A Secular Age* to convince the reader of his narrative of modernity. He challenges the implicit understandings of 'secularisation' and 'secularity' often used by anti-religious negative narratives to present the decline of 'religion' as inevitable and normal, and presents two distinct models of religion to emphasize the plurality of belief in modernity. Taylor argues that negative narratives focus on describing *how* secularisation, secularity, or religions function in modernity without explaining what these terms *mean*. The lack of substantive explanations or definitions produces "spins" the narrative explanation of modernity in favour of anti-religious claims. Taylor asserts that both substantive and functional definitions of these words are required to accurately describe what the role of religion in modernity is. This paper examines the substantive and functional definitions of 'secularisation,' 'secularity' and 'religion' Taylor presents in *A Secular Age*, and demonstrates how Taylor attacks anti-religious negative narratives of modernity through his analysis of the meaning of these terms.

Theories of secularisation

In *Sources of the Self*, Taylor expresses discomfort with the definition and usage of the term "secularisation" in the human sciences. He insists that secularisation theories must account for how the condition of belief has changed through history,

explaining how we have "moved from a horizon in which belief in God in some form was virtually unchallengeable to our present predicament in which theism is one option among others" (Taylor 1989, p. 401). A common mistake within the social sciences is to presume that modernity is itself a product of secularisation. In reality, secularisation is merely a feature of modernity – it represents a process of change in the condition of belief. Secularisation theories, Taylor insists, are not and should not be mistaken for explanations of modernity, for "to invoke secularisation here is just to re-describe the problem, not to offer an answer" (Taylor 1989, p. 309–310). Taylor contests the validity of the theories of secularisation that attribute a decline in religious faith to the industrial revolution, the rise of scientific rationalism, and technological advancements of the late 17th century. These theories overlook the shift in the horizon of belief and presume a definitive decline in religious belief that cannot be substantiated.

Taylor argues that mainstream secularisation theories, which posit the decline or disappearance of religion as the end result of the process of modernization, are themselves a form of negative narrative. They lack a substantive understanding of the process of secularisation – they do not explain what secularisation actually *is* – and instead focus on identifying the presumed historical causes for religion's apparent decline (Taylor 2007). Taylor suggests that proponents of mainstream secularisation theory presuppose modernity to be incompatible with religious faith. He writes: "The accusation thrown at orthodox theorists is that they must somehow believe that these modern developments of themselves undermine belief, or make it harder; rather than seeing that the new structures indeed, undermine old forms, but leave open the possibility of new forms which can flourish" (Taylor 2007, p. 432). Many examples of religious, industrialized, and scientifically advanced countries can be found in existence today. Moreover, the factors credited with generating secularisation were historically motivated by religion: the expansion of capitalism and the industrialization of European society were encouraged by Protestant ethics, and the development of the natural sciences was inspired by the religious desire to know and understand God's creation. Disregarding the many ways religions prosper in modernity requires the adoption of a narrow and limited understanding of religion, which is incongruent with history and the present context.

Taylor maintains that the first step in developing a comprehensive theory of the process of secularisation is to identify how modern forms of belief differ from past forms of belief. Once the substantive understanding of secularisation is determined, it is then possible to suggest the sources of these changes. Taylor attempts to identify these changes by tracing the historical development of two significant components of traditional Christian belief: (1) the belief in a supra-human power; (2) the "transformation perspective" – a belief that individuals, or society as a whole, are called to fulfil transcendent goals (Taylor 2007, p. 430). Both of these components were strongly emphasized in pre-Reformation Christian culture: everyone was required to maintain belief in God for the good of society and

the clergy were additionally responsible for answering God's call to transformation. The Reformation initiated a decline in the transformation perspective by affirming ordinary life as the sole locus of Christian worship and fulfilment. This new affirmation meant that those occupied solely with the call to transform were no longer needed. In sanctifying ordinary life, reformed Christianity posited human flourishing as the highest good, negating the pursuit of transcendent goods. The spread of atheism and agnosticism during the 18th and 19th centuries further separated the call to transformation from the notion of human flourishing, initiating a rift in society between a minority who continued to adhere to the transformation perspective, and the majority who adopted an exclusively humanist moral framework. However, atheism and agnosticism has yet to become so popular as to suggest that belief in God is irrelevant for the majority of modern persons or that religion is undergoing a regression.

Taylor thus proposes that what remains at "the heart of «secularisation»" can be summarized in the observation that "modernity has led to a decline in the transformation perspective" (Taylor 2007, p. 431). This redefinition of "secularisation" calls us to consider the ways in which religions evolve in response to new conceptions of the good and reveals the misinterpretations that are produced when functional definitions are applied without substantive understanding.

This discussion of 'secularisation' demonstrates that without a commonly shared substantive understanding of secularisation, explanations of modernity through secularisation risk incomprehension. As Taylor's own substantive definition reveals, secularisation is too specific a phenomenon to properly account for all aspects of modernity or even the role of religion in society. Instead of correcting secularisation theory, Taylor constructs a new narrative – the Reform Master Narrative – which explains how changes in our conception of human morality and agency have resulted in the possibility of an exclusively humanistic moral framework. He also avoids using the term 'secularisation' to describe modernity because the mainstream, functional understanding of secularisation as religious decline is too ubiquitous. Instead, he employs the less commonly used term 'secularity.'

Three forms of secularity

This decision comes with its own set of challenges as the meaning of 'secularity' is somewhat ambiguous in the human sciences. Taylor identifies two forms of secularity that are often cited by mainstream secularisation theorists as products of modernity. The first form of secularity (secularity 1) refers to the absence of references to God or the transcendent in the public sphere. As a feature of the modern age, 'secularity 1' is observable in the specific contexts such as France or Turkey; however, religion is more often part of the public sphere, even when it lacks political authority. The second form (secularity 2), which is the most common usage of the term, "consist[s] in the falling off of religious belief and practice" (Taylor 2007, p. 2). The applicability of secularity 2 is much less than that of secularity 1. Outside

of Western Europe – where references to God still occur in the public realm though fewer people attend Church or observe religious practice – there has not been a widespread decline in religious behaviours. Taylor thus proposes the adoption of a third definition of secularity (secularity 3), which in his estimation is a more accurate description of the state of religion in modernity. This form of secularity describes "a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace" (Taylor 2007, p. 3). In other words, secularity represents the condition of the possibility of belief in the modern era. It is the framework that encompasses all forms of belief and non-belief.

Mainstream secularisation theories, and other negative narratives, explain secularity (forms 1 and 2) as the product of a linear path of human progression towards a heavily scientific, technological and rational future. What remains of religion in this version of modernity is narrow and limited. Taylor argues this account inaccurate and that secularity is the product of multiple, and often unrelated, moral and philosophical developments. The most important of which is the exponential increase in moral frameworks and their accessibility to all persons. Taylor calls this increase "the nova-effect" and writes: "we are now living in a spiritual super-nova, a kind of galloping pluralism on the spiritual plane" (Taylor 2007, p. 299–300). Rather than narrowing and disappearing, the possibilities for religious belief and expression have widened, abolishing naïve belief altogether. Moreover, the nova--effect is self-sustaining. Secularity (secularity 3) preserves the frameworks and moral orders that effectively prevent the nova from collapsing; the notion that belief and unbelief are equally valid positions prevents a single framework from gaining hegemony.

Secularity thus represents a meta-framework of meaning: a framework that makes sense of the human agent's relationship to other frameworks. Seen from this angle, Taylor's definition of secularity is both substantive and functional. It describes what secularity is – the condition of belief in society – and how it functions in society – determines the parameters for all modern moral frameworks. In identifying secularity as the condition of belief in modernity and positing it as a meta-framework, Taylor establishes the epistemic circumstances necessary for articulating a positive narrative of modernity. Frameworks are affirmations of what human beings hold as valuable, meaningful, or good, and as such they do not articulate epistemic absences or losses. In defining secularity as meta-framework, Taylor avoids employing the negative dialogue of the anti-religious negative narratives. Secularity may never be absent of meaning, nor of significance. The shift to a secular age must therefore be explained through epistemic gains. Without substantive and functional explanations of secularity, Taylor demonstrates that the anti-religious negative narratives are incapable of explaining secularity and the religious condition of modernity. Accepting his definition of secularity thus engages the reader in Taylor's project of constructing a positive narrative.

Varieties of religion

Centrally important to Taylor's drive for a positive narrative of modernity, is a comprehensive understanding of religion. Without religion, the secular has no meaning. Taylor struggles to provide a singular definition of religion. He notes that the phenomenon of religion is too vast, plural, and diverse to be summarised in a simple statement. Instead, he offers two distinct models of religion – "Durkheimian" model and the "Axial" model, in addition to a third definition of religion that satisfies his purpose of constructing a positive narrative of modernity.

The "Durkheimian" model of religion

In *Varieties of Religious Experience*, Taylor introduces a "Durkheimian" model of religion that categorises religion based on four distinct "social forms" or "dispensations": paleo-Durkheimian, Durkheimian, neo-Durkheimian and post--Durkheimian (Taylor 2002, p. 75). Taylor uses the Durkheimian model to explain how societal structure and social imaginary relate to religion and shape how it functions. The paleo-Durkheimian social form, most prevalent in Catholic states during the medieval period, is characterized by "a sense of ontic dependence of the state on God and higher times" (Taylor 2007, p. 76). Collective action and religious engagement of society affects the flow of divine power, upon which life is dependent. Under the paleo-Durkheimian social form, religion operates through society and society is centred on religion. The Durkheimian social form, on the other hand, demands that all members of society belong to a single Church with authority over the state, society and religion. The Church thereby mediates divine power, restricting the flow such that "the Church alone retains the role of guide in a society otherwise based on complementary equality" (Taylor 2007, p. 442). As with the paleo-Durkheimian social form, the Durkheimian social form is most prevalent in Catholic or Orthodox states, which only recognize the authority of a single Church.

The introduction of denominationalism produces the neo-Durkheimian social form in which "God is present because it is his Design around which society is organized" (Taylor 2007, p. 455). In this social form, religious sentiment is integral to political identity – religiosity is a valued societal good. Religious authority in the political sphere, however, is undermined by denominationalism, which stresses that individuals have free exercise over their faith. Moreover, the strong evaluation of individualism erodes the notion of a social sacred. Under the neo-Durkheimian social form, society works to bring about God's design without the assistance of divine power mediated by society or the Church. While the legal and ethical systems are often inspired or based on religious mores, they are given secular justifications.

The post-Durkheimian social exaggerates the individualism encouraged by the principle of denominationalism. In this social form, religion is viewed as a personal choice that has little to do with the social cohesion of the state, which is expected to be neutral in religious matters. Taylor hypothesizes that the post-Durkheimian social

form represents a dramatic departure in terms of the relationship between religion and society. Religion is no longer seen as something significant to the maintenance, structure, or identity of society. He argues that in certain cases the post-Durkheimian social form can have a destabilizing effect on the other Durkheimian dispensations as it challenges the concept of a social sacred, the power of religious authority, and the necessity of religious sentiment in promoting social cohesion.

Taylor uses the Durkheimian model to stress the plurality of religion and social reality in modernity. In positing four such social forms, he once again attacks the foundations of unilinear, secularist narratives of modernity which only seem to recognize the post-Durkheimian social form as compatible with modernity. These narratives suggest that given enough time, everyone would abandon religious attachments, identities, and morals to form a secular humanist nation, and thus, humanity will be forever liberated from "claustrophobic relations, involving excessive control and invidious distinctions" (Taylor 2007, p. 575). According to Taylor, these narratives interpret the post-Durkheimian destabilizing effect as a natural progression. He writes:

> So the story of the rise of modern social spaces doesn't need to be given an anti-religious spin. But there are motivations to go this way; and like any spin, we can easily see how the wide acceptance of one such, and the relegation of religion which this involves, could harden into a 'picture, 'which appears obvious and unchallengeable. The point of tracing this fact of the narrative of modernity is that [...] [it] shows how once a secularist spin has been taken, this anti-religious story has all the force and moral power which attach to the inauguration of these spaces of citizen sociability. (Taylor 2007, p. 579)

In spinning the rise of the post-Durkheimian social form, the authors of this narrative portray religion as corrupting to society. Any connection between the religion and society is considered potentially damaging. Taylor argues, however, that the connection between religion and society will not spontaneously disappear. Until the 1960s, the Durkheimian social form was prevalent in Quebec and continues to arouse sentiment. Furthermore, the United States may be considered a neo-Durkheimian social form, as the idea of electing an atheist president remains inconceivable for many. For many people religion is still a fundamental part of modern society. The spun, secularist narratives fail to consider the experiences of communities that exhibit Durkheimian or neo-Durkheimian social forms, denying these communities a legitimate place within modernity.

The "Axial" model of religion

In *Modern Social Imaginaries*, and again in *A Secular Age*, Taylor introduces a second method of classifying religion loosely based on Karl Jaspers' notion of the "Axial Age" – c. 800–200 BCE (Taylor 2004; Taylor 2007). During this period, multiple religions emerged that placed the conception of a good higher than human flourishing, namely salvation, as the ultimate goal of humankind. Taylor refers to the Axial period as a revolution: it marks the beginning of the "Great Disembedding" of

pre-Axial religions and argues that this disembedding reaches a conclusion with the development of post-Axial religions.

These three periods of religion – Pre-Axial, Axial, and Post-Axial – represent major shifts in the conception of human agency as related to "society," the "cosmos," and "existing reality." Taylor uses the concept of "embeddedness" to explain how these conceptions have evolved through history. He explains: "embeddedness is [...] partly an identity thing. From the standpoint of the individual's sense of self, it means the inability to imagine oneself outside a certain matrix" (Taylor 2004, p. 55). Taylor identifies three dimensions in which human agency is routinely imagined as embedded: society, the cosmos, and existing reality. These three dimensions can be equated with social, physical, and moral space. A socially embedded agent understands their every action as having an effect on the whole of society, and the actions of society to have a direct effect on them. The meaning of human agency is thus dependent on the imagined reality of society. In contrast, a disembedded agent is one whose agency is not ontically dependent on society; they understand themselves to be an individual, distinct from the society to which they belong and their sense of self is not dependent on their imagined social reality. For a person whose agency is embedded in physical space, or the cosmos, their agency is ontically dependent on their imagined physical reality. Their imagined physical reality is what Taylor describes as a *cosmos*: a physical reality imbued with meaning. To be disembedded from this dimension would be to understand the human agent as occupying a meaningless universe. Taylor calls the final dimension of embeddedness: "embedding in existing reality," by which he means that these individuals find the fullness of life in the pursuit of human flourishing, or ordinary life (Taylor 2007, p. 150). To a person embedded in existing reality, their moral agency is immanent. This form of embedding does not preclude the idea of a God, with goals for humanity; rather, agents embedded in existing reality have no ability to attain or pursue these other goals through their own means. In contrast, a person disembedded from existing reality is able to consider a transcendent good as the highest achievable good, as their moral agency is not restricted by immanent, existing reality.

Taylor uses these three dimensions of embeddedness to explain the social imaginary presented by pre-Axial, Axial, and post-Axial religions. Pre-Axial religions are characterized by their embedding of the human agent in each of the three dimensions of society, the cosmos, and existing reality; he writes: pre-Axial agents "are embedded in society, society in the cosmos, and the cosmos incorporates the divine" (Taylor 2007, p. 152) . The pre-Axial person is incapable of seeing himself as a self that is separate from the society to which they belong. God relates to humankind through society, making collective ritual an important part of religious life. Another aspect of pre-Axial religious life is the significance of physical space. In pre-Axial religions the entire cosmos is seen as imbued with meaning, capable of affecting people physically and emotionally. The pre-Axial agent sees themselves as embedded in the cosmos, constantly connected to the seen and unseen world

that surrounds them. As part of the meaningful cosmos, ordinary human existence has a sense of purpose and value. Moreover, the concept of divine, or transcendent, goals beyond that of human flourishing are not present in pre-Axial religion – people pray for successful harvests, health, fertility and prosperity. The pre-Axial agent has no other goal than the betterment of their condition in life; their agency is fully embedded in existing reality.

The Axial period represents a profound shift in the way religions conceptualize human agency. While still conceiving of human agency in relation to social, physical, and moral space, Axial religions break the chain of embeddedness – human in society, society in cosmos, cosmos incorporating the divine – at several points. In terms of Western religion, this break hinges on the conception of the divine as part of the cosmos. For example, with the Jewish idea of a creation *ex nihilo* God is projected outside the cosmos; the relationship to God is independent of the cosmos. Consequently, "God can become the source of demands that we break with «the way of the world»" and it is therefore possible to entertain goals other than that of human flourishing (Taylor 2007, p. 152). For the pre-Axial agent, who was embedded in existing reality and concerned with their ordinary life, the Axial revolution initiates a disembedding from this dimension.

In contrast to Axial and pre-Axial religions, post-Axial religions disembed the agent from the social dimension and the cosmos, while partially re-embedding human agency in existing reality. Social and physical disembedding was initiated by the Reform movement of 16th and 17th century Europe, which brought a new sense of individuality to religion and encouraged the conception of a meaningless universe, devoid of sacred locations. The Reform movement also re-affirmed ordinary life as the locus of spiritual fulfilment, re-imbuing this dimension with meaning and significance, and thus initiating a move away from the strong evaluation of transcendent goods. In addition to the declining popularity of the transformation perspective, later theological movements – which posited God as the Designer and human beings as interpreters of this design, allowing for the positing of human flourishing as an ultimate good – further reinforced the embedding of human agency in existing immanent reality. Taylor insists, however, that this re-embedding is only partial as there are multiple interpretations of God's plan for humankind. According to Taylor, the ability to consider both transcendent and immanent goods as the ultimate purpose of human moral agency and to vacillate between them is a defining feature of post-Axial religions (Taylor 2004).

The language Taylor uses to describe the Axial model of religion seems to support a negative explanation of modernity. Human beings are disembedded – (freed) from imaginary (illusory) social constructions that constrain or restrict their agency. Taylor thus seemingly contradicts himself; however, the categories of embedding and disembedding represent epistemic shifts, rather than losses or gains. The social imaginary is involved in both states of being. Disembedding does

not imply the discovery of ultimate reality, only a change in the way persons imagine themselves to inhabit social, physical, and moral space.

Together, Taylor's two models produce seven different categories classifying religion primarily based on their relationship to society. These categories overlap quite significantly. For instance, the social sacred is highly valued in both pre-Axial and paleo-Durkheimian religions, and individualism strongly dominates in both the post-Axial and post-Durkheimian conception of human agency. While both models classify religion based on its representation or interactions with society, they each fulfil a different explanatory role in Taylor's narrative of modernity and provide two methods of defining religion: one that is functional (the Durkheimian model) and the other that is substantive (the Axial model). The Durkheimian model is functional in that it explains what religion *does.* Taylor uses the Durkheimian model to describe the role of religion, or lack thereof, in maintaining, structuring, or defining society. The Axial model is substantive because it describes what religion *is* – i.e., a three dimensional hermeneutical reflection of human identity.

In describing seven distinct classifications of religion, Taylor equates religion with plurality and proposes that both the functional and substantive understandings of religion are malleable. Taylor's models demonstrate that a single substantive or functional definition of religion cannot account for the sheer variety of religious phenomenon, both past and present. Instead, he suggests that as the understandings of human society, agency, and selfhood evolve, the function, and meaning of religion changes. In other words, the perennial features of religion are virtually non-existent. Taylor thus employs multiple definitions of religion in *A Secular Age*, and utilizes both models of religion in his historical narrative, as no single definition could explain religion in its entirety.

Religion as a distinction

In addition to these two models, Taylor offers a third definition of religion in the introduction of *A Secular Age.* While only briefly discussed, Taylor employs this definition throughout the text when speaking about modern religions in general. He writes:

> [If] we are prudent (or perhaps cowardly), and reflect that we are trying to understand a set of forms and changes which have arisen in one particular civilization, that of the modern West ... we see to our relief that we don't need to forge a definition which covers everything 'religious' in all human societies in all ages. [...] [A] reading of 'religion' in terms of the distinction transcendent/immanent is going to serve our purposes here [...]. It is far from being the case that religion in general can be defined in terms of this distinction. (Taylor 2007, p. 15)

I propose that Taylor's definition of religion as the "distinction transcendence/immanence" is another formulation of the post-Axial religious form, which relies on a particular understanding of the term 'transcendence.'

According to Taylor, transcendence has three dimensions: (1) the "notion of a higher good;" (2) "belief in a higher power;" (3) the recognition of life "as going beyond the bounds of its 'natural' scope between birth and death," such as the idea of the afterlife or reincarnation (Taylor 2007, p. 20). The idea of transcendence, in any of these forms, is the only shared feature of all forms of religion. In other words, all religions recognize both an immanent and transcendent dimension, in some form or another, as part of human reality.

Taylor uses "transcendence" interchangeably with "God" in both *A Secular Age* and *A Catholic Modernity?*; however, he recognizes that not all religions are centred on a deity. God and transcendence are interchangeable terms in at least one direction because the belief in God necessarily implies belief in at least one dimension of transcendence. In his conclusion to *A Catholic Modernity*?, Taylor explains that his decision to use the term transcendence stems from a desire to reach a greater audience. He writes:

> [How] could I ever have used such an abstract and evasive term, one so redolent of the flat and content-free modes of spirituality we can get manoeuvred into in the attempt to accommodate both modern reason and the promptings of the heart? I remember erasing it with particular gusto. Why ever did I reinstate it? What pressures led in the end to its grudging rehabilitation? Well, one was that I wanted to say something general, something not just about Christians. [...] I needed a term to talk about all those different ways in which religious discourse and practice went beyond the exclusively human, and in exhaustion I fell back on 'transcendent' (but I haven't given up hope of finding a better term). (Taylor 1999, pp. 105–106)

As a blanket term, transcendence may refer to anything, and everything, non--immanent or eternal, including God. However, a belief in the transcendent is not equal to a belief in God. For instance, you may believe in an afterlife or in some continuation of consciousness after death without believing in God. Alternately, you may believe in a higher power that runs through all beings and connects us to the fabric of the universe without labelling this power God. You may even feel that there is a far greater good than the fullness of ordinary life and yet not identify God as the source of an internal call to pursue this goal. To believe in God is to believe in at least one of the three dimensions of transcendence of which God is the absolute source.

Post-Axial religion and the transcendence/immanence distinction

The implications of Taylor's definition of transcendence and his definition of religion as a distinction between transcendent and immanent are relevant for the understanding of morality in modernity. A person needs not to adhere to a transcendent framework, in which the constitutive good is transcendent, to be 'open' to transcendence. This person may approach transcendent goals, or the belief in a transcendent power, or a higher life, from an immanent framework. This idea is reflected in post-Axial religion, in which the agent is partially re-embedded in existing reality due to the declining popularity of the transformation perspective.

Post-Axial agents approach the world from an immanent frame, though they may recognize transcendent goods. As a reflection of this condition, post-Axial religions teeter on the edge of open and closed attitudes towards transcendence; while these religions may discredit the transformation perspective, they nevertheless articulate an open stance towards the transcendent in other areas, such as the belief in God or in an afterlife.

The definition of religion as the distinction between transcendent and immanent represents an articulation of the post-Axial religious form in which human agency is *only* partially re-embedded in existing reality. In identifying modern religion as a distinction, Taylor is highlighting the duality between open and closed perspectives as *the* defining feature of religion in the modern age. This definition allows consideration of any movement or perspective that recognizes any form of transcendence as a type of religion in modernity. Such a definition once more reinforces his argument that religion has not declined in modernity, though its function and meaning have considerably changed.

Concluding observations

In *A Secular Age*, Taylor continuously defines and redefines his vocabulary of modernity, and provides not only the functional definitions of his terms, but their substantive meaning as well. This results in the creation of multiple definitions for the same term. While at times confusing, Taylor's exercise in definition and redefinition highlights the inherent plurality of modernity. Through his terminology, Taylor reveals that modernity is the site of multiple forms of secularisation, secularity, and religion, which cannot be explained through unilinear negative narratives that focus on epistemic losses. In some ways, however, Taylor's definitions are more self-serving than informative and reveal a certain inconsistency in his methodology. For instance, he restricts the substantive meaning of secularisation such that the term becomes inapplicable in most circumstances, while widening the definition of religion to include any activity or belief that references the transcendent in order to disprove the claims of mainstream secularisation theories. Despite this apparent inconsistency, Taylor's emphasis on the substantive meaning of words is an important contribution to the ongoing discussion of secularity and modernity.

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Abstract

In *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor presents a narrative interpretation of modernity that dispels common myths about the decline or regression of religion in the modern age propagated by anti-religious negative narratives popular within the social sciences. An important part of Taylor's critique centres on the terminology employed by these narratives and their lack of substantive definitions. This paper examines the substantive and functional definitions of 'secularisation,' 'secularity' and 'religion' which Taylor presents in *A Secular Age,* and demonstrates how Taylor attacks the anti-religious negative narratives of modernity through his analysis of the meaning of these terms.

Key words: Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, secularization, secularity, definitions of religion