

## **Meaning-making orientations among Danish cancer patients in rehabilitation: A taylorian perspective**

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### **Abstract**

This article proposes Charles Taylor's secularization theory as presented in *A Secular Age*<sup>1</sup> as a useful tool for understanding and explaining empirical data from a qualitative project on Danish cancer patients' self-reported secular-existential, religious and/or spiritual orientations during rehabilitation. The author will show how concepts that lie at the heart of Taylor's secularization theory, such as "fullness," "the immanent frame," "cross pressures" and "porous and buffered selves" offer rich interpretative space to the data. It shall furthermore be argued that the analytical findings of this study situated within humanistic health research can contribute importantly to the ongoing secularization debate and secularization theorization by showing the complexities in meaning making orientations for Danish cancer patients in rehabilitation embedded in a secular society.

**Key Words:** Secularization, Charles Taylor, modernity, meaning making, cancer rehabilitation.

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### **1. Introduction**

The debate that Charles Taylor's opus magnum *A Secular Age* has given rise to indicates in itself that this work marks a turning point in the last fifty years of secularization debates.<sup>2</sup> Only little, however, has been done so far to discuss Taylor's secularization theory in the light of empirical findings from current studies, as I shall attempt to do it here.

Taylor has two main starting points: Firstly he deals with the current understandings of secularization making reference to religion as 1) that which is retreating in public space (secularity) and as 2) a type of belief and practice which is in decline. Integrating these two modes of secularization he offers a third understanding which focuses on the shift from a society where belief in God is taken for granted to a society where belief in God is merely one option among others. In examining secularization in this sense, he focuses on what he calls the "conditions of belief" which include the whole background framework in which one believes or refuses to believe in God.<sup>3</sup>

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According to Taylor, what secularization has brought about is a changed context from the one that was existing before the rise of modernity – a context in which we experience and search for belief orientations of both a transcendent and immanent, religious and irreligious nature: “Secularity in this sense is a matter of the whole context of understanding in which our moral, spiritual or religious experience and search takes place.”<sup>4</sup> We have moved from a condition of immediate embodied certainty, to a condition of uncertain disembeddedness, a development, which Taylor calls “excarnation” and which he describes as: “a transfer out of embodied, “enfleshed” forms of religious life, to those which are more “in the head.”<sup>5</sup> Despite this changed condition, Taylor argues that the modern secular individual is still experiencing autonomous religious and/or spiritual aspiration.<sup>6</sup>

Secondly, Taylor develops a comprehensive analysis of the development of the history of ideas and conditions for meaning making during the last five hundred years in Western societies. This historical analysis serves the argument that the condition for meaning making by the individual has changed dramatically since the time of renaissance and reformation: “It is a crucial fact of our present spiritual predicament that it is historical; that is, our understanding of ourselves and where we stand is partly defined by our sense of having come to where we are, of having overcome a previous condition.”<sup>7</sup> Taylor does only, however, offer scarce contemporary material in order to illustrate his theories.

This paper has a twofold purpose:

- 1) To show that Taylor’s theory about the existential condition for meaning-making of the modern secular individual bears a potential for analyzing and comprehending empirical data on the secular-existential, religious and/or spiritual meaning-making of Danish cancer patients in the context of treatment and rehabilitation.
- 2) To show that the analytical findings of this study can contribute to the ongoing secularization debates by pointing out how far Taylor’s theories can help us to understand the complexities of secular-existential, religious and/or spiritual meaning-making in secular societies.

In the following we will present the research design and methods. Hereafter there will be a section where the main concepts of Taylor’s secularization theory and excerpts from the empirical data inform each other. Lastly in a third part, the discussion takes place about what the findings of this study can contribute to in a sociological enterprise: the theorizing about secularization.

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## 2. Methods

The empirical data was generated by the author of this article at a cancer rehabilitation centre (RehabiliteringsCenter Dallund (called “Dallund” in the following), located at the northern part of the island Funen. Dallund was rented in 2001 by the Danish Cancer Society and receives on an annual basis between 600-700 cancer patients for one week of residential week course. The courses are basically structured in the same way with few variations depending on the theme of the week (whether it is “Women with breast cancer” or “How to overcome discouragement and depression”). Each course holds around 20 participants that have been referred from their GP or hospital doctor. The majority of participants are women, approximately 84 % with a majority having had a breast cancer diagnosis. The weeklong rehabilitation intervention focuses primarily on information, education, physical training, psychosocial care and meeting other cancer survivors. Thus the Dallund staffs are made up of nurses, physiotherapists, a social worker and a number of externally associated experts such as a dietician, a psychologist, an art therapist and a chaplain.

Assing Hvidt carried out a fieldwork study involving participant observation and informal interviews. The fieldwork also included 11 semi-structured interviews, conducted 1-2 months after the week courses in the private homes of the participants as well as 5 focus group interviews conducted during the residential week courses with 3-8 participants in each group (2 groups with 3 participants, 2 groups with 7 participants and 1 group with 8 participants). The interviews had a duration of 1-2 hours and were transcribed verbatim. The interview-guide was designed from results from an earlier pilot study, from observations made during participant observation (field notes), and from the existing research literature. Assing-Hvidt made participant observation during altogether seven residential course weeks during activities that were found relevant to the research topic as well as during meals and breaks in between schedule. Fieldnotes were taken during participant observation and afterwards.

## 3. “Fullness”

Taylor argues that every individual has his or her version of “fullness”: “Somewhere, in some activity and condition, lies a fullness, a richness; that is, in that place (activity or condition), life is fuller, richer, deeper, more worth while, more admirable, more what it should be.”<sup>8</sup> “Fullness” is thus understood both as a condition and as an activity having as its source both immanent and transcendent, religious and irreligious orientations and having the process of meaning making as its primary goal (be it conscious or unconscious). At the heart of “fullness” lies a subjective experience, but

fullness is not merely an interior state but is understood to be objective – the way the world is or at least occasionally is. Taylor's ambition with the concept of fullness is to challenge the understanding of belief and to capture modern individuals' feelings of connectedness and intensified belonging to the world and to what is beyond the world.

When asked about their secular-existential, religious and/or spiritual orientations, the informants were oftentimes referring to a sense of something larger - identified as either God, a higher power and nature - and more deeply meaningful in life such as love, compassion, solidarity and peace. This sense sprang out of intuitive and subjective feelings and experiences reflecting on one hand their meaning making orientations (be it secular-existential, religious and/or spiritual) and on the other their epistemological criteria for knowledge about the world:

...as long as I can feel that the divine is present, then I feel comfortable, well, it...well it isn't, well, I would wish, that it was a greater part of me, or I know it's important that it is a part of me, the divine, and also the way in which I consider life, I would like that, well, that it has that aim, in one way or another, right?... (Karen)

I don't believe that there are some higher powers that kind of rule things apart from nature's own powers, which represent the divine... I believe in those powers that nature has, they are incredibly strong... (Bent)

Now I am happy, because I am in peace, and that is a state of there not being anything that hurts or jars or seems wrong, and that's real happiness, and it can last five minutes, it can last two hours, I am also happy now (smiles)... (Ann-Margit)

I pray Our Father every single night and if I forget, then I get up again, I have to do it, and I have always done it, prayed for my children and grandchildren, I can't do otherwise...if I have forgotten it, then I feel like hell... I mean, I really must, and I love to go to church, I don't do it so often, but I get so peaceful when going to church, yes, I really like that... (Marie).

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It shall be suggested that the statements that the informants made when asked about their secular-existential, religious and/or spiritual orientations could be identified as examples of what Taylor has called “fullness.” These fullness experiences were both achieved in conjunction with activities such as praying, reading the Bible and going to Church and also in moments of intuitive and subjective feelings of a divine presence, of the force of nature, of bodily peace. The experiences were closely related to a meaning making process that had arisen in the confrontation with the cancer illness. Individuals who had, prior to their illness, had difficulties imagining another background to their thinking and understanding of the world were opening up to something beyond this world – for some this meant a transcendent source.

In the following section we shall see within which frame this experience – also of unbelief – takes place. According to Taylor both the openness and closeness to a transcendent source takes place within what he calls “the immanent frame”: a background context which conditions the individual’s choice of and relation to fullness in both its religious and irreligious version.

#### **4. “Immanent frame” and “cross pressures”**

Taylor argues that the result of the secularization process is a shift in the condition in which the individual is seeking (and finding) fullness, rather than the elimination of fullness altogether. The shift to our current condition for relating to belief and unbelief is common to all of us: each individual’s understanding of fullness takes place within an “immanent frame.”<sup>9</sup> This is not so much “a set of beliefs which we entertain about our predicament... rather it is a sensed context in which we develop our beliefs.”<sup>10</sup> The immanent frame becomes part of the unquestioned background, something that conditions, largely unconsciously, the way we think about and understand our life in this world.

Taylor sees the immanent frame as a result of “disenchantment” which is to be understood as the dissolution of the “enchanted” world of spirits and causal forces, hereby giving way to the reliance on science and instrumental reason together with the development from what he calls a “porous self” to a “buffered self.”<sup>11</sup> These respective identities can best be explained by a shift in the epistemological outlook: for the buffered identity, spirits and causal powers are not matters of fact in the outer world but constructions of the mind. A new sense of the self and its place in cosmos has thus emerged: not open and porous to a magic and spirited world but bound to a modern self, capable of rational control, and drawing clear boundaries between meanings that are only in the mind and in

the physical world outside.<sup>12</sup> Along with the development of a buffered self came a rich understanding of interiorization, self-examination and authenticity.<sup>13</sup>

The informants of the study expressed personal convictions that could be said to arise from what Taylor calls “a culture of authenticity.”<sup>14</sup> In line with values such as self-expression and selectivity, the informants stated that they had to discover and choose their personal belief route, making choice a prime value. Taylor points to the fact, in line with other sociologists, that the 60s marks the climax of an expressive and individuating development that led to a loss of commitment to previous, traditional religious forms and practices.<sup>15</sup> Some of the informants exemplified this spiritual turn where first of all religion is a question of choice and secondly has become immanent:

”If I believe in God, then I believe, that God is within me, I do. I mean, I don’t see him as a person, I don’t see him as the man on the cross or the man with the beard or whether he has curls or not curls and things like that, I don’t see him as a body in that way, I don’t, I don’t...(Leila)

I believe in a God, but it probably isn’t a Christian God or Christianity I believe in, it’s probably more a mixture of... well, I don’t know what it’s called, but at least reincarnation and karma and things like that ...(Charlotte)

“I don’t go to church in order to find God there, no, I don’t...I mean God is within me...I mean, I live, I hope, that he is there, right...” (Charlotte).

A striking feature about the two women’s statements is that their belief seems undefined, vague and uncertain. Charlotte having said earlier in the interview that she was “perfectly sure, that there is a God” is expressing doubt about the existence of God later on: ”I hope that he is there, right...” Leila is initiating her statement with an *if* thus leaving room for both the possibility of belief and unbelief and showing a kind of ambivalence in the feeling about God. According to Taylor the sentiment of ambivalence towards religiosity and spirituality is a defining feature to many modern, secular individuals. Their rationality tells them to keep at a distance from any kind of religious and spiritual belief, yet their existential condition make them aspire towards resources beyond this world that can give them a sense of inner peace and

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dwelling. They are experiencing what Taylor calls "cross-pressures" entailing a feeling of permanent ambivalence:

And then suddenly one day, well, I had gotten normal again, then I had just become that stronger, right...whether it was that, or, whether it was me who hypnotized myself or what, I don't know, ... (Svend)

What is seen here can be said to be the buffered identity, which locates causal powers as constructions of the mind. Although Svend expresses an eagerness and even deep-felt wish to believe in supernatural causalities, the disciplined naturalistic reasoning has the final word. According to Taylor, the majority of modern secularized Westerners take such middle positions on the spectrum between closed and open immanence. These people want to respect as much as they can the "scientific" and "natural" side of the immanent frame, being suspicious of fanatic religious expressions; but still believing that there is more between heaven and earth than one should think.

## 5. Discussion

The empirical data of which I have only been able to give a few examples above demonstrate that the map of possibilities for meaning making orientations in a modern secular society such as the Danish is not a simple one, not even one of basic oppositions between belief and unbelief. This realization is precisely Charles Taylor's stepping stone for offering us a picture of the conditions of meaning making in a modern secular age. According to this account secularization is a result of major cultural changes in Western modernity regarding self, nature, society and God – changes which have positioned the individual within an "immanent frame" within which the individual develop his or her different "fullness" references. There are those who live the "immanent frame" as closed to something beyond, opting for scientism, materialism and exclusive humanism. On the other side of the continuum are those who are open towards something beyond – a transcendent source. In the middle position the cross-pressured people stand in tension between immanence and transcendence – opting assuredly neither for the one or the other position, but conceiving of them as viable options.

This study has focused on the different kinds of lived experience involved in the secular-existential, religious and/or spiritual meaning making of a group of Danish cancer patients in rehabilitation. Taylor's theoretical concepts "fullness", "immanent frame" and "cross-pressures" have proven to be descriptive and operational terms when examining the meaning making orientations that the patients of this study utilize in their cancer illness. Applying Taylor's body of theory on a qualitative data material there can

only be made generalizations on an analytical and not empirical level. From an analytical perspective, it can be set forth that Taylor's theory and accompanying concepts serve the purpose of opening the mind to what modern people being embedded in a secular culture believe in. Thus "the immanent frame" and "cross-pressures" are useful to capture inconsistent and incongruous belief expressions that conventionally are placed outside of the core of a traditional belief system or religion understood as a predefined concept. Furthermore "fullness" has shown to be helpful in understanding the aspiration towards something larger and more meaningful in life as expressed by the participants of this study. It can be learned, that in framing and describing the content of their fullness sensations the informants are still to a large extent relying on an inherited religious language. Whether language corresponds to content is therefore not to be taken for granted. A large number of those informants who express religious and/or spiritual orientations have taken a distance from Christendom and its churches without breaking off from it altogether. They have retained some of the beliefs of Christianity and/or retained a nominal tie with the church, identifying with it in some way. This rather enigmatic stance is what Taylor calls "diffuse Christianity," and what Grace Davie has characterized as "believing without belonging".<sup>16</sup> Therefore the data can support the understanding of secularity as a decline in traditional beliefs and practices, what one could call Christendom, but not necessarily a decline in Christianity conceived in broad and nuanced terms: an individualized non-doctrinal kind of belief.

From the data it can also be concluded that a major push to belief or intensified meaning making for the informants has been their illness experience. When struck by illness they start to question the meaning of life and their place in it, and a feeling rises that there is some richness either beyond themselves or outside themselves that deserves more attention and engagement. However, the analysis also shows that the search for meaning for these people embedded in a secular age is uneasy and cross-pressured. They are strung between different secular-existential, religious and/or spiritual belief alternatives integrating them more and less in their personal fragmented belief horizon.

From this picture, we can see, that there is more to the Danes' religious identity than the mere question of belief or unbelief, conventionally measured in quantitative surveys. Especially when examining the segment of the Danish population that is made up of people who are suffering from illness and crisis, the picture is more complex and multi-leveled. In consequence, one can argue that the patient's perspective is crucial in order to give a nuanced account of modern secularity. For the study of sociology of religion,

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it could be recommended to study religion in spaces and life situations where people struggle to find meaning, e.g. the situations of severe illnesses, in order to capture the complexities and nuances in the secular-existential, religious and/or spiritual landscape of meaning making in Western societies. With Taylor's concepts at hand, such studies will take a broader epistemological approach to religion in contemporary Western society.

### **Notes**

- <sup>1</sup> C Taylor, *A Secular Age*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2007.
- <sup>2</sup> P Admirand, 'Embodying an "age of doubt, solitude and revolt": Christianity beyond "excarntation" in a secular age', *Heythrop Journal-a Quarterly Review of Philosophy and Theology*, vol. 51, issue 6, 2010, pp. 905-20.
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- P E Gordon, 'The Place of the Sacred in the Absence of God: Charles Taylor's A Secular Age', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 69, issue 4, 2008, pp. 647-73.
- <sup>3</sup> C Taylor, *A Secular Age*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, pp. 2-3
- <sup>4</sup> C Taylor, *A Secular Age*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2007, p. 3
- <sup>5</sup> C Taylor, *A Secular Age*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2007, p. 554.
- <sup>6</sup> C Taylor, *A Secular Age*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2007, p. 515-16.
- <sup>7</sup> C Taylor, *A Secular Age*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2007, p. 28.
- <sup>8</sup> C Taylor, *A Secular Age*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2007, p. 5
- <sup>9</sup> C Taylor, *A Secular Age*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2007, p. 543.
- <sup>10</sup> C Taylor, *A Secular Age*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2007, p. 549
- <sup>11</sup> C Taylor, *A Secular Age*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2007, p. 539
- <sup>12</sup> C Taylor, *A Secular Age*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2007, p. 38-39.
- <sup>13</sup> C Taylor, *A Secular Age*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2007, p. 539-540.
- <sup>14</sup> C Taylor, *A Secular Age*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2007, p. 475.
- <sup>15</sup> C Taylor, *A Secular Age*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2007, p. 473.
- <sup>16</sup> G Davie, *The sociology of religion*, Sage Publications, London, 2007.
- <sup>17</sup> C Taylor, *A Secular Age*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, p. 573.

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