

A Secular Age

What's the secular culture like, and how are we winsome towards it?

The purpose of this white paper is to outline our research team's findings from reading and interacting with James K. A. Smith's "How (Not) to be Secular." HNTBS is a commentary on a longer work, Charles Taylor's "A Secular Age." While the goal of "A Secular Age" is to provide an explanation for how we have arrived in our current secular context, HNTBS and this white paper focus less on history and more on critical analysis of a secular culture and reflection questions on operating within the secular culture.

Definition of "Secular"

Our understanding of the word "secular" is key. **Secular** doesn't just mean "non-religious." "Secular" has three meanings:

1. Secular₁ - in classical or medieval accounts, the "secular" amounted to something like "the temporal" -- the earthy realm of politics or mundane vocations. This is the classic "sacred/secular" divide.
2. Secular₂ - in modernity, particularly post-Enlightenment, "secular" begins to refer to a nonsectarian, neutral, or areligious space or standpoint. "According to secularism, political spaces (and the constitutions that create them) should carve out a realm purified of the contingency, particularity, and irrationality of religious belief and instead be governed by a universal, neutral rationality" (HNTBS pg 21). This is the viewpoint that calls for a secular public square, secular school system, etc. It tends to be unreflective about the epistemic questions that attend its own beliefs.
3. Secular₃ - This is the definition of "secular" to be read in the title of "A Secular Age" and "How (Not) to be Secular." A society is secular₃ insofar as "religious belief or belief in God is understood to be one option among others, and thus contestable (and contested)" (HNTBS pgs 21-22). We can live in a secular₃ age even if religious participation is visible and fervent. The conditions of belief have changed; belief in God is no longer axiomatic. All beliefs are contestable.

This is not just a change in "worldview," but a change in the default assumptions about what is believable. Taylor/Smith call this a "social imaginary," the way in which ordinary people imagine their social surroundings; it is carried in images, stories, and song.

What's life like in a secular age?

The changing nature of which beliefs are intuitively believable and which are not leads to a new reality. We are now exclusive humanists in today's age of authenticity.

Exclusive Humanism

Smith assumes that our world is not like the Mars Hill of Paul's time (Acts 17). We think we have the answers to the questions "secular" people are asking. But in reality, our "'secular' neighbors aren't looking for 'answers,' for some bit of information that is missing from their mental maps. They have completely different mental maps. "Instead of nagging questions about God or the afterlife, [our] neighbors are oriented by all sorts of longings and 'projects' and quests for significance. There doesn't seem to be anything 'missing' from their lives -- so [we] can't just come proclaiming the good news of a Jesus who fills their 'God-shaped hole.' In many ways, they have constructed webs of meaning that provide almost all the significance they need in their lives." (HNTBS pg vii). People today "are no longer haunted by the God question' as a question because they are devotees of 'exclusive humanism' -- a way of being-in-the-world that offers significance without transcendence. They don't feel like anything is missing" (HNTBS pg viii).

The Immanent Frame

Why do we construe our existence with new mental maps, without the question of God at all? In a secular age, we live in an **immanent frame**. The immanent frame is a social space that frames our lives entirely within a natural, rather than a supernatural, order. Within the immanent frame, transcendence is precluded. "Believing doesn't come easy. Faith is fraught; confession is haunted by an inescapable sense of its contestability. We don't believe instead of doubting, we believe *while* doubting" (HNTBS pg 4).

Haunted by the Transcendent; Seeking Fullness

Though we intuitively construe reality from within an immanent frame, we nonetheless are haunted by the transcendent, even while doubting it. "In some fleeting moments of aesthetic enchantment or mundane haunting, even the secularist is pressed by something more -- some 'fullness' that wells up within (or presses down upon) the managed immanent frame we've constructed in modernity" (HNTBS pg 12). "What should interest us are these fugitive expressions of doubt *and* longing, faith *and* questioning. These lived expressions of 'cross-pressure' are at the heart of the secular" (HNTBS pg 14).

We are most haunted by transcendence in three main areas:

1. Personal Agency - we cannot bear the thought that we have no free will, even though a purely immanentist perspective seems to force us to the conclusion that we are biologically determined. We believe that we are active, building, creating, shaping agents in the world.
2. Ethics - though we can find no objective foundation for ethics within an immanentist perspective, we still feel that we must have higher motives for our actions than biological

instinct or drive. There is a way the world *ought* to be, and a way we *ought* to act, even if we can't provide a justification for it beyond this sense.

3. Aesthetics - art and nature move us because of a sense of meaning. This can't be reduced to biological responses to pleasure.

This haunting of transcendence is coupled with the human drive to find significance, meaning, value - in short, a purpose or *telos* to life - which leads to a search for fullness, even if we search for that fullness within a purely immanent frame without appeal to transcendence.

“Takes” and “Spin”

Whether or not we acknowledge the haunting of transcendence or try to explain it away determines whether or not we recognize that our view of immanence or transcendence is a “take” or a “spin.” A **spin** is a construal of life that does not recognize itself as a construal and thus has no room to grant plausibility to the alternative. A spin can be either immanentist (think of the so-called “secular” academy or the “new atheists”) or transcendent (think of fundamentalist Christianity). A **take** is a construal of life that is open to appreciating the viability of other takes. A take can likewise be either immanentist or open to transcendence. It is this final category (the open take) that Taylor and Smith argue we should inhabit as thoughtful Christians in a secular, pluralist age. Most of us do not live in the confidence camps of religious fundamentalism or the new atheism, but in the cross-pressured space in between.

Either we inhabit the frame as an open space where we recognize the contestability of our “**take**” on things (and even feel the pull of cross-pressure) or we fail to recognize our take and instead live with “**spin**,” an overconfidence in our take in which we can't imagine it otherwise. “If we settle for ‘spin,’ we'll think it's just ‘obvious’ that the frame is open or closed” (HNTBS pg 95).

Searching for Meaning

It is the existence of these categories for construing reality that creates a multitude of ways for finding meaning and significance. Whether or not we are open to transcendence, and whether or not we grant the viability of other perspectives creates for us an “explosion of options for finding (or creating) ‘significance’” (HNTBS pg 62). Open to us are myriad options for pursuing meaning, significance, and fullness, options between which we are caught, as all options seem equally plausible. This leads to **fragilization**, the worry that my own belief systems are put into question and are doubtful. Caught between transcendence and immanence, many look for a “third way” and are faced with a sense of *malaise*. How can I know what's right when I have so many options?

We have not just a binary choice between two options, but an immense array of ways of finding meaning and significance. We can choose how to live out our **expressive individualism**, our understanding that each of us has our own way of realizing our humanity, and that we're called to express it rather than conform to models imposed by others (especially institutions).

“The dissatisfaction and emptiness *can* propel a return to transcendence. But often -- and perhaps more often than not now? -- the ‘cure’ to this nagging pressure of absence is sought *within immanence*, and it is this quest that generates the nova effect, looking for love/meaning/significance/quasi ‘transcendence’ *within* the immanent order” (HNTBS pg 69).

The Age of Authenticity

How was religion thought of in different ages? Taylor introduces a web of religious forms at three different stages:

1. Ancien Règime - there is an inextricable link between religious identity and political identity. “The array of rituals that binds the polis or kingdom or nation together as a community also conscripts individual identities” (HNTBS pg 84). This type of religion is susceptible to the elites, who sway whole masses. Thus the Protestant Reformation is able to claim whole countries by converting the king.
2. Age of Mobilization - If anything is going to fill the void left by the ancien régime, we have to do it. We need new rituals, practices, institutions, etc. No ancien régime to take for granted, no enchanted cosmos in which God resides. God is present in his design, in order. “He will be similarly present in our polity, *if* we construct it aright, *if* we conform our constitution to the order God decrees in the heavens” (HNTBS pg. 85). The divine is present to the extent that we build a society which plainly follows God’s design.
3. Age of Authenticity - this is the social imaginary of expressive individualism, “the understanding that each one of us has his/her own way of realizing our humanity, and that it is important to find and live out one’s own, as against surrendering to conformity with a model imposed on us from the outside” (HNTBS pg. 85). *Authenticity* is the key word; “The primary--yea, only--value in such a world is *choice*...and tolerance is the last remaining virtue.” “The only sin which is not tolerated is intolerance” (HNTBS pg. 85).

How should we evaluate such an age? Two wrong ways: “critics can too easily dismiss it as egoism, friends can too easily celebrate it as progress without cost” (HNTBS pg. 85). Example: social media - no longer a place for common action (if it ever was) but now a place for *mutual display*. We are consciously creating identities tied to brands, which consumer corporations relentlessly exploit. The result is a soft relativism, “do your own thing; who am I to judge?” (HNTBS pg. 87). While tolerance has always been an ideal, it was contained and surrounded by other values and considerations (such as belonging to a nation, church, political party, advocacy agency, etc.). What has eroded in the last half century is the limits on individual fulfillment.

The Place of the Sacred

Under the Ancien Règime, one’s connection to the sacred entailed one belonging to a church, and the church was co-extensive with society. So if you belonged to a church, you belonged to a nation, and vice versa.

Under the Age of Mobilization, denominations arose and an emphasis on voluntary association came to be; you connected with the church of your choice, but that church was still connected to something bigger. The church as a whole still fed the projects of the nation (cf. WWI and WWII).

In the Age of Authenticity, the expressive individualist must choose his or her own religion (“spirituality”) that speaks to them and makes sense in terms of their own spiritual development. Emphasis shifts more and more toward the strength and genuineness of feeling and away from the nature of the object or person one is worshiping. The new orthodoxy is “let everyone follow his/her own path of spiritual inspiration. Don’t be led off yours by the allegation that it doesn’t fit with some orthodoxy” (HNTBS pg. 88).

The Quest: Spirituality in the Age of Authenticity

A desire for “the spiritual” endures. “This often springs from a profound dissatisfaction with a life encased entirely in the immanent order” (HNTBS pg. 89). In the age of authenticity, spirituality becomes a quest for the individual. No beliefs are axiomatic anymore, so one has to find one’s own faith.

We should be cautious in critiquing this form of spirituality; our evaluation of it is inevitably based largely on our level of buy-in to the age of authenticity. It’s not enough to lament the subjectivism and individualism of this spirituality. Those pushing for a more communal and teleological account of human flourishing see this spirituality as indulgent and self-centered. This is to miss the distinction between the *framework* of AA spirituality and the *content* of it. The framework is individualistic, to be sure (and there’s no going back on that). But the quest may lead one to choose a traditional religion, with communal and teleological content that cuts across the individualistic nature of the quest.

“The upshot is that in a secular₃ age, ‘committed secularism remains the creed of a relatively small minority.’ Because our past is irrevocably Christian, our secular₃ age continues to be ‘haunted’ by this past, for example, at moments of rites of passage or in times of disaster, etc.: ‘people may retain an attachment to a perspective of transformation which they are not presently acting on...like a city FM station in the countryside’ whose reception fades in and out” (HNTBS pg 91).

Faith in a Secular Age

Cross-pressures are not inherent in transcendence or immanence themselves, but exist because of the “draw of narratives of closed immanence on one side, and the sense of their inadequacy on the other” (HNTBS pg. 103). In other words, I’m told that this world is all there is, but it sure *feels* like there’s something more.

The functional metaphor used to describe this feeling is the term “**fullness**”. Fullness is not code for “God,” but the axiomatic belief that everyone accepts some definition of fullness and

greatness in human life. In other words, everyone agrees there's a way to do life well, and meaningfully. We just disagree on what that means.

The most fruitful apologetic for Christianity is arguing that immanence doesn't have the resources to account for fullness. It sure feels like there's a purpose, a *telos* to human life, but closed immanence says there isn't. "Don't you *feel* it? Don't you have those moments of either foreboding or on-the-cusp elation where you can't shake the sense that there must be something *more*?" (HNTBS pg. 137). "One cannot simply extract the analytic content from the story; the story has to be told, experienced, undergone, in order for its force to be *felt*" (HNTBS pg. 133). "This is an unapologetic claim. It is not demonstrable except insofar as it offers a better account of our experience. And the 'better-ness' of that account is something that has to be *felt*" (HNTBS pg. 138).

Smith references Ross Douthat's conclusion from Douthat's *Bad Religion*, "the only really effective apologia for Christianity comes down to two arguments, namely, the saints the Church has produced and the art which has grown in her womb" (HNTBS pg. 134, fn 5).

"If Taylor is right, it seems to suggest that the Christian response...is not to have an argument about the data or 'evidences' but rather to offer an alternative story that offers a more robust, complex understanding of the Christian faith" (HNTBS pg 77).

Key Questions:

1. What are the implications of this for Christian witness in a secular age?
2. How do we recognize and affirm the difficulty of belief?
3. How does this change in the conditions of belief impact the way we proclaim and teach the faith?
4. How does this impact faith formation?
5. How should this change the propagation of the faith for the next generation?