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Dancing with Death in a Post-Christian Society

Satire, Social Order and the Secular Imaginary in the Takk for alt TV Series (NO 2023–present)

Abstract

From the outside, the role of religion in Norwegian society can seem paradoxical. Church attendance is low by global terms, and in surveys a majority of Norwegians claim to have no religion. Culturally, however, the Lutheran church plays a significant role in marking rites of passage, including funerals, and appeals to Christian heritage play a role in contestations of national identity, suggesting society remains marked by its Christian legacy. To interrogate this post-Christian identity, in this article we examine the Norwegian TV series Takk for alt (VGTV, NO 2023–present), in which comic actors use Lutheran funeral practices to stage their own funerals. Using Charles Taylor's concepts of the "secular social imaginary", "disciplines of disenchantment" and "North Atlantic world", we ask what cultural work this mockumentary performs and what it reveals about the varieties and self-confidence of the North Atlantic secular imaginary and the preoccupations of Norwegian celebrity culture.

Keywords

Takk for alt (VGTV, NO 2023–present), Post-Christian Identity, Secular Social Imaginary, Disciplines of Disenchantment, Norway

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Introduction

This article[1] places the Norwegian comedy series TAKK FOR ALT (Thanks for Everything, VGTV, NO 2023–present; henceforth TFA), in which three celebrities stage their own mock funerals, in conversation with the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* (2007). Taylor's *magnum opus* charts the marginalization of religion in the "North Atlantic world" between 1500 and 2000. During this period, Taylor argues, a predominantly Christian imaginary was largely replaced by a constellation of secular imaginaries[2] united by a shared conception of human life as confined to the immanent frame,[3] that is without reference to a transcendent realm beyond human life, culture, history and the natural world. Our aim is to shed light on the non-religious negotiation of death in a "post-Christian" society,[4] on the grounds that humorous cultural texts can provide insight into a society's preoccupations, practices and taboos.[5] We describe Norwegian society as "post-Christian" because few people in Norway regularly participate in Christian services and rituals (11.6 % attend once month or more[6]), but Norway remains marked by its Christian cultural heritage, a salient example being that some 82 % of Norwegian funerals in 2023 were conducted in and by the Norwegian Lutheran church.[7] Furthermore, some evidence suggests that despite low national religious participation rates, in some regions and segments of Norwegian society, Christian groups such as free church evangelicals and Pentecostals exercise significant cultural influence,[8] especially in the "Bible belt" areas of the Norwegian South. We therefore ask whether a response to a religious-cultural threat to Norwegian secular imaginaries can be found in a cultural text like TFA.

While Taylor contends that "in our 'secular' societies you can engage fully in politics without ever encountering God,"[9] Norwegians (and their mourn-

1 This article comes out of the project Banal (Non)Religion: Secular Imaginaries in Contemporary Pop-Culture which is financed by an NOS-HS Project Grant from NordForsk.
2 Taylor 2007, 296.
3 Taylor 2007, 539.
4 Brown 2000.
5 Kuczok/Stwora/Świerkot 2020.
6 World Values Survey 2022.
7 Statistics Norway 2024, https://t1p.de/x7b8r.
8 Fisher-Høyrem/Herbert 2019; Liebmann 2019, 383; Stephens 2015, 58.
9 Taylor 2007, 1.

ers) are likely to encounter at least God's representatives and their rituals when making their final exit and if they live in the south of the country, in other areas of social life too. A recent study found that non-religious young people in Kristiansand, the largest city in the region, find themselves "outsiders" in the social order, as conservative Christian groups ("the established", in Norbert Elias's typology of "established-outsider" relations[10]) are able to exercise social influence, despite being a numerical minority, through the economic and social networks that they largely control:

> The superiority of the established group stems not from numerical size or use of force but from a comparatively high degree of internal cohesion together with a certain extent of communal control. […] Historians have demonstrated how in this region, Evangelical beliefs have been intertwined with commercial interests and political engagement and influence, resulting in a "striking coincidence between religious and commercial networks", at least since the late nineteenth century.[11]

By "the non-religious" we mean people who say they have no religion, for example when asked in a survey, and by "non-religion" we mean the beliefs, values and culture they hold and produce, particularly when addressing existential challenges that people have tended historically to address using religious resources.[12] The boundaries of this group extend beyond "the secular" in Taylor's sense of being bounded by the immanent frame, because empirical work shows that many non-religious individuals draw on a variety of resources to address questions of personal meaning, navigate life events and articulate their relationship to other people, to moral and social order, and to the natural world.[13] Use of this terminology therefore leaves space for exploration of whether any openness to transcendence – and hence non-religious but not secular content – features as part of the discourse on death in TFA.

The cultural text on which we focus, an occasional TV series, is a comedy in the "mockumentary" style (see below) and by definition is therefore not intended as a "serious statement" on anything, let alone a philosophical statement of non-religion or secularity. Yet we contend that TFA is a non-religious

10 Elias 1994, 15.
11 Fisher-Høyrem/Herbert 2019, 2–3.
12 Quack 2014.
13 Herbert/Bullock 2020; Woodhead 2016.

text in the sense that it is "other than" yet substantially "defined by, or in relation to [Christian] religion",[14] because the mock funerals are performed in Lutheran churches in costumes and using language that both parody and mirror religion, and because in addressing the theme of death the performances do some of the "cultural work"[15] of meaning-making and human-connection-making more often performed by religion for previous generations of Europeans.

(Non-)Religious Identification, Religious Participation and Lutheran Culture in the Nordics

The non-religious are a fast-growing group in most European societies, especially amongst younger age groups, and now make up more than half of adults in the Netherlands (54.1 %), 42.6 % in France, 40.2 % in the UK and 36.1 % in Germany.[16] In the Nordics the proportion is smaller but substantial, and it is growing, for example 28.9 % in Sweden, 25 % in Finland and 22.5 % in Norway.[17] These figures suggest somewhat higher rates of religious identification in the Nordics than in comparable West European countries, yet in other ways Nordic societies accord *better* with Taylor's characterization of a world in which religion has been marginalized – less than a fifth of Danes (19.3 %) and only around a third of Norwegians (34.6 %), Swedes (28 %) and Finns (31.7 %) regard religion as "rather important" or "very important" in their lives[18] – fewer than in neighbouring France (37.1 %) and the UK (37 %). Figures for regular participation in religious services are even more striking, with less than 10 % of Danes and Swedes (6.4 % and 9.7 % respectively) attending once a month or more, and slightly more Finns and Norwegians (11.1 % and 11.6 % respectively), again lower than for France (12.4 %) or the UK (16.6 %). And yet, while a substantial majority of the French and British never or practically never attend religious services (62.9 % and 60.2 % respectively), infrequent attendance remains the practice of the majority in most Nordic societies.

The maintenance of regular (if infrequent) attendance at religious services, especially at rites of passage, is likely explained by the long history of

14 Lee 2012, 131.

15 Alexander 2003, 106; 316.

16 World Values Survey (WVS) Wave 7 (2022). Data gathered 2017–2021.

17 World Values Survey (WVS) Wave 7 (2022).

18 World Values Survey (WVS) Wave 7 (2022).

established Lutheran national churches (now continued only in Denmark) and relative societal religious homogeneity, meaning the Lutheran churches are able to play a significant role in national identity, marked by rites of passage such as confirmation and, important for our case, funerals. Thus, while more French and British are actively religious, Norwegians are more likely to experience a common, largely Lutheran religious culture when mourning – and hence to have a shared if shallow familiarity with the Lutheran funeral ritual, a familiarity TFA mobilizes to comic effect.

What mourners bring to and encounter in funeral services is changing. In a small but suggestive qualitative study, Sigurd Øgaard and Guro Buder observe that bereaved relatives express "an increasing degree of demand for 'personalization' but display 'a corresponding decrease' in the general proficiency and knowledge of hymns, liturgy, and church ceremonies".[19] This conclusion is supported by Carsten Schuerhoff, who comments that "studies show that there is an awareness [among clergy]of individual wishes and needs, and an effort to accommodate them. Still, the pastor is responsible for a socially sensitive reintegration into the church defined ritual."[20]

These trends go some way to contextualizing the mock funerals of the TFA series, which take place in church buildings and take the form of recognizably Lutheran funeral services, which this evidence suggests is likely to be broadly but not profoundly familiar to many. The series plays on this tension to comedic effect, with those performing roles in the mock funeral displaying ignorance of their part, often as part of slapstick.

Taylor's Secular Imaginary and TFA

For Taylor, the historical transformation from dominant Christian to secular imaginary is profound and deeply transformative of both North Atlantic cultures and the consciousness of individuals formed by them. What was once the sacred centre of social order and shared common sense became an optional peripheral activity and implausible belief system:

> We have changed not just from a condition where most people lived "naively" in a construal (part Christian, part related to "spirits" of pagan

19 Øgaard/Buder 2021, 70.
20 Schuerhoff 2023, 41.

> origin) as simple reality to one in which almost no one is capable of this, but all see their options as one among many […] to a condition in which […] unbelieving construals seem at first blush the only plausible ones.[21]

We contend that the performers of TFA largely inhabit such a world, which characterizes the Norwegian public sphere to the extent that on media forums discussing TFA, while some objected to the show on the grounds that it could offend the sensibilities of the recently bereaved, no one objected on religious grounds.[22] This response suggests a publicly confident non-religious culture and a dominant secular imaginary. However, evidence from the southern city of Kristiansand – where the outsider role of non-religious youth contrasts with the established character of the conservative Christian group manifest in social spaces from public parades to social media[23] – questions the extent of this dominance across Norway.

Taylor's description of secular imaginaries as disenchanted resembles that of sociological theories of secularization. But whereas these accounts tend to conceptualize disenchantment as the incremental and stable outcome of some structural feature of modern industrial society such as, for example, rationalization (Weber) or social differentiation (Durkheim),[24] Taylor sees the condition as precarious and requiring continuous effort (which he calls "buffering") – cultural work – to maintain itself. While Taylor does not use the expression "cultural work", we find the term as developed in cultural sociology[25] useful for describing what buffering does for the secular imaginary. For Taylor, in line with the post-structuralist emphasis on power being exercised through language,[26] this work is performed discursively, by undermining references to the transcendent in everyday speech using a variety of techniques, which he describes as "the disciplines of disenchantment". In the following passage Taylor describes the precarity of the secular imaginary's dominance and provides two examples of "disciplines" that support it:

> [W]e are widely aware of living in a "disenchanted" universe […] but also that it was a struggle […] to get to where we are; and that in some re-

21 Taylor 2007, 12.
22 Løland/Horsinek 2023.
23 Fisher-Høyrem/Herbert 2019, 6–8.
24 Herbert 2003, chapter 2.
25 Alexander 2003; 2022.
26 Foucault 1976; Bourdieu 1991.

> spects this achievement is fragile. We know this because each one of us as we grew up has had to take on the disciplines of disenchantment, and we regularly reproach each other for our failings in this regard, and accuse each other of "magical" thinking, of indulging in "myth" […] we say that X isn't living in our century, that Y has a "mediaeval" mind.[27]

In the first "discipline", which we might term "temporalization", religion is relegated to the past ("isn't living in our century […] has a 'mediaeval' mind"), drawing on an Enlightenment narrative of progress. In the second "discipline", "myth" and "magic" are denigrated as non-rational modes of thinking.

Thus, whereas in sociological accounts secularization occurs unintended, as a result of technological (Weber, rationalization) or organizational (Durkheim, social differentiation) change, Taylor's emphasis on discourse as the site and mechanism of change means secularization is not guaranteed by some large-scale unfolding structural force but instead asserted (and hence may be contested) in everyday conversation and other cultural performances. Which brings us to a cultural text like TFA.

If the secular imaginary is a contingent historical product marked by an ongoing struggle with religious modes of thinking, it requires ongoing cultural work to maintain it.[28] Seen in this light, a text like TFA can be read (at least in part) as a performance of disenchantment, a holding at bay, through parody, of a religious imaginary that must be restrained (and is visibly encoded in costumes worn and rituals performed). Or does TFA illustrate a confident non-religious culture, within which the secular elements have no need to justify or assert themselves against religion,[29] but rather feel free to play unchallenged with the cultural repertoire that religion provides? This brings us to our first research question: What kind of non-religious performance is TFA? Is it:

> *Hypothesis 1:* performed against religion, to re-enforce a threatened secular imaginary (as Taylor's emphasis on the insecurity of the secular imaginary and the role of humor in maintaining it would suggest)?

27 Taylor 2007, 29–30.

28 A view supported by recent cognitive and evolutionary approaches to religion – see McCauley 2020 for a review.

29 See e. g. Zuckerman 2008 on Danish secular culture.

Or

Hypothesis 2: performed in indifference to religion, at liberty to elaborate a non-religious imaginary which is securely, if not fully, secular (as Phil Zuckerman's reading of Danish culture would suggest)?

This in turn leads to our second research question: What kind of social imaginary is projected by Tfa? In particular, what does the show tell us about non-religious negotiation of death and the construction and contestation of social order in Norwegian popular culture?

Tfa: Between Christian Symbols and Secular Imaginaries

Tfa is a Norwegian television programme produced since 2023 by VGTV, a Norwegian ad-funded online TV channel, in which celebrities stage their own mock funerals. To date, three episodes have been released: Takk for alt, Bård Ylvisåker, featuring the comedian as the main subject; Takk for alt, Petter Northug, centred on the nationally famous cross-country skier; and Takk for alt, Linn Skåber, featuring a comedian/actress. Genre-wise, it is a mockumentary, "a fictional audiovisual text, such as a feature film or television programme, that looks and sounds like a documentary".[30] Stylistically, Tfa includes documentary features – the camerawork resembles the way real events are filmed, the commentary is a voiceover by the nationally well-known commentator Marte Stokstad, and the people present appear as themselves. The series is a parody of a live television broadcast rather than an imitation of a documentary film, less an American sitcom-style mocumentary and more a play with Norwegian public television style reportage (we suggest "mockportage").

The film style is minimalist: inside the church, several cameras capture the events from different vantage points, focusing on the coffin, the officiants, and the guests seated in the pews. The camerawork, however, remains predominantly observational. It is fluid and almost imperceptible, without aggressive close-ups or overly attractive editing transitions. There are no direct-to-camera "talking heads" or testimonial inserts from the guests; the camera is confined entirely to the church space during the ceremony. Nor are there the kinds of interstitial segments familiar from reality television,

30 Hight 2014, 515.

in which participants retrospectively comment on the events. The only commentary is in the form of brief interviews, conducted by a VGTV reporter, with attendees waiting outside before the ceremony begins. The comedic dimension is present primarily through the set design arranged in a church (an open coffin with a celebrity lying inside, a funeral wreath in the shape of a fox), props (a television set, a guitar), and effects (flames), and in the language of the speeches from the pulpit, which are somewhere between roast and absurd and are often socially awkward. The primary target of the mockery is a celebrity who is lying motionless in a coffin with their eyes closed, unable to respond to the humorous and malicious taunts directed at them from the pulpit. Another target of mockery is the social conventions of Norwegian society in general, and of a specific group of celebrities in particular. The show is grounded in a satirical exposure of celebrities' relentless pursuit of recognition and their underlying anxiety about fading into obscurity.

Each funeral takes place in a real Norwegian church: Vålerenga kirke, Vestre Frikirke and Kulturkirken Jakob, with the officiants played by each show's host – successively, the comedians Morten Ramm, Vegar Tryggeseid and Snorre Monsson. The replacement of religious professionals with comedians underscores the marginalization of religion, but the ritual is still performed within a Lutheran cultural frame: the officiants' costumes resemble those of religious professionals, and their colour, violet, is the traditional liturgical colour for funerals and mourning services.[31] However, the ritual diverges slightly from Nordic Lutheran forms to favour depictions familiar from popular culture – for example, the coffin is open, an American, not Nordic, practice.[32] While a practical means to present the live celebrity, this device also adds a sense of Hollywood-style spectacle, aligning with Line Nybro Petersen's comment, "Because the media circulate globally and to some extent are dominated by Anglo-American content and formats, the individual living in Nordic countries may become more acquainted with the religious representations of global and Anglo-American media than with the religious content of the Protestant churches in the Nordic countries."[33]

31 Thomassen/Elstad n. d.

32 Reimers 1999; Ramshaw 2010.

33 Hjarvard 2011, 132.

A Secular Reading of Hell

In the second episode, Tryggeseid gives a speech about Hell. His vision contrasts with traditional Christian representations. First, he argues that the concept of moral judgement remains relevant, as Petter Northug was a complicated person who did immoral things, referencing the Christian belief in God's judgment. Then, he presents a picture of a medieval depiction of Hell on the screen, with naked human bodies symbolizing souls being consumed by flames. But he immediately rejects this interpretation, substituting a stock photo of a family dinner as a better depiction of Hell. By translating the concept into secular terms within the walls of an actual church, he both demonstrates – and arguably performs – the marginality of traditional interpretations of Christian belief in line with secularization theory. Or, more radically, read through Taylor's concept of the disciplines of disenchantment, he performs the marginalization of religious imaginary.

The speech also fits the secular trend of individualization, meaning each person develops and prioritizes their personal interpretation. Starting with a vision from a medieval Christian imaginary, Tryggeseid departs from religious themes and moves to social commentary, attacking middle-class social conventions. While, as Pål Repstad notes, "a great majority in Norway with a varying degree of certainty reject the belief that Hell exists",[34] the voiding of all reference to the afterlife of the deceased is striking. According to Repstad's research, not only do non-believing Norwegians reject belief in Hell, but this phenomenon is also common among believing Norwegians affiliated with the Church of Norway – only one in ten of those connected to the Church of Norway believe absolutely in Hell.[35] However, while Hell is not taken literally, a substantial minority of Norwegians believe in an afterlife (39.3 %),[36] including 24.7 percent of non-religious.[37]

The concept of mediatization can shed further light on Tryggeseid's use of the idea of Hell. According to Stig Hjarvard, mediatization of religion in the Nordic countries follows on from the mediatization of society: as media consumption becomes more ubiquitous and social institutions such as family, voluntary associations, churches and trade unions weaken, media

34 Repstad 2019, 134.
35 Repstad 2019, 135.
36 World Value Study 2022
37 Gaudett/Cragun/Urstad 2025.

becomes increasingly constitutive of society's social fabric.[38] In this context, the form and meaning of religion in the media strongly shapes public perceptions of religion. Hjarvard terms the type of Christianity mediatized in the Nordics a "weak" religion and argues that its mediatization contributes to secularization.[39] The interpretation of Hell presented by Tryggeseid can be considered a concrete manifestation of this process, serving as practical evidence that mediatization can indeed foster individualized and secularized reinterpretations of religious concepts. However, Taylor's version of secularization suggests a different reading: reinterpreting religion to align with secular norms does not deal with the existential threats that "strong" religion[40] sought to contain; rather secular culture must find other ways to ward off these threats, from denial to, as in TFA, mockery. In the context of mediatization, it is worth mentioning Hjarvard's concept of "banal religion", which refers to the presence of religious elements in culture that are more cultural than confessional.[41] In the case of TFA, religiosity serves as background and as part of tradition, rather than being explicitly professed or preached. The performance can also be read, however, as a buffering of the secular imaginary against the relatively recent cultural memory of strong religion – in 1985 some 27 % of Norwegians still believed in Hell – and against its continued influence in Southern Norway and amongst some minority groups.[42]

A (Non-)religious Afterlife

In each performance at least one song is dedicated to the deceased: "What Does the Fox Say?" for Bård Ylvisåker, as a tribute to his best-known song; "Despacito" to for Petter Northug, referencing his affair with Carina Dahl; and "Uperfekt" for Linn Skåber, as a parody of her relationship with her stepdaughter. "What Does the Fox Say?" has possible afterlife references. In the version performed in the church by pop singer Maria Mena, the original lyrics are kept, but the rhythm becomes slower, and hence more solemn. While singing, Mena has a serious expression. Soon, the choir joins her, re-

38 Hjarvard 2011, 121.
39 Hjarvard 2011, 132.
40 Almond/Appleby/Sivan 2003.
41 Lundmark 2023, 44; Hjarvard 2012, 34.
42 See e. g. Bangstad 2011.

peating the line "Until we meet again!", possibly gesturing towards a post-mortem future, which contrasts with the fully secular demythologization of Tryggeseid's sermon.

On the one hand, Scandinavian society is often described as focused on the present, enjoying earthly life without much contemplation of an afterlife.[43] Even the titular expression *Takk for alt* (thanks for everything), used at funerals and written on graves in Norway, focuses on gratitude for the earthly life of the deceased rather than their present or future state. The phrase *Hvil i fred*, known in English speaking countries as "Rest in Peace", is rare as an epitaph, although the English term (including its contracted form "RIP") has entered Norwegian popular discourse, referring to something that has failed. A Norwegian funeral, which often features speeches commemorating the life of the deceased, serves more as a culmination and commemoration of the deceased's earthly life than as a reflection on what happens to their soul. On the other hand, the line "Until we meet again!" sung by the choir seems to gesture beyond the immanent frame. However, belief in the existence of an afterlife can persist in the absence of belief in God, and in Norway such beliefs may differ markedly from traditional Christian forms.[44]

The choir supports Mena in singing, but then Snorre Monsson also enters the stage, shocking the audience with rapping, wild screams and barking. Near the end of the performance, he addresses the audience in English: "Does anyone have a lighter? Get your lighters up! I know it's a funeral but put your hands up!" His use of English can be interpreted as maintaining linguistic continuity with an English-language song, or perhaps it emphasizes the artificiality of the spectacle, detachment from the ritual conducted in Norwegian, and a shift to the mode of a popular music concert. Monsson encourages the congregation to clap and raise their hands, preferably holding lighters, as they would at a secular concert. In response, they not only follow his instructions, but also begin taking videos with smartphones, smiling and laughing as if they are participating in an entertainment spectacle. This shift aligns with Henrik Christensen's account of the collapse of conventions associated with contexts and genres in hyper-linked streaming culture: "Late Modern culture is a hyper-culture: everything can become culture if it is found attractive and valorized by an audience. […] choosing to play pop music in church is just as natural (and more telling of the deceased)

43 Zuckerman 2008.

44 Gustavsson 2015, 230.

than an old hymn."[45] While the performance of "What Does the Fox Say?" at a funeral remains incongruous, and hence humorous, by personalizing the content of the event to evoke the deceased's individuality, the song fits with Nordic funerary trends, if in exaggerated form.

Christian references also appear at the end of each episode, although in less sharply satirical form than in the earlier songs and parodies, and they hold out the possibility of an afterlife. The closure of the ceremony is similar across all three episodes – the celebrity stands up from the coffin, greets some guests, and then leaves the church. The moment of departure in each episode is described by Morten Ramm using different words, yet each expression refers to Christian beliefs: Bård Ylvisåker is to "walk into the kingdom of heaven" *(spasere inn i himmelriket)*, Petter Northug to "step into eternity" *(gå ut i evigheten)*, and Linn Skåber to "go out and into the light" *(gå ut og inn i lyset)*. The final shot in each episode is the exiting of the relevant celebrity through the church door, followed by the camera panning upwards to the window and the sky beyond, which can be interpreted as a reference to heaven (*himmel* means both "sky" and "heaven" in Norwegian).

The solemn tone breaks only in the third episode, when Skåber, instead of leaving the church in silence, shouts to the camera: "Now it's beer at Cafe 33 and a celebration of life!" Chris Miller and Lori G. Beaman propose that scholars sometimes oversimplify non-religious imaginaries, as with Cicirelli's assertion that as non-religious people lack a belief in "a heavenly paradise waiting after death", they must aim to create "a paradise on earth".[46] Skåber's statement, while potentially an interesting and subversive expression of a focus on life, could also be interpreted as an oversimplification that fails to capture the full spectrum of beliefs held by nonbelievers. Following Taylor, it can also be read as an exercise in disenchantment, by turning away from the existential threat of death and warding off the religious imagination.

Parodies of Social Conventions and Status Competition

A prominent theme throughout TFA is the satirical take on social conventions and especially status competition, exemplified in Morten Ramm's opening speech in the first episode. He addresses "all other celebrities who

45 Christensen 2023, 92.

46 Miller/Beaman 2024, 4.

maybe did not know Bård well enough but are here to be able to say that they were present when Bård was buried", referencing their use of the "funeral" as a publicity event.

Dis(respect)ing the Dead and Mocking Grief

In his study of bereaved people, Cyril Schafer observes, "participants frequently emphasized the intimacy of a relationship before death as an obvious measure of entitlement to post-mortem participation. Those who had a tenuous or strained relationship with the dead individual were represented as having limited (or no) right to participate in funeral arrangement or attendance."[47] In TFA, however, open rivals of the dead give speeches, contradicting any assumption that speakers at funerals must had have (or at least can claim) a positive connection with the deceased.[48] For example, in TAKK FOR ALT, PETTER NORTHUG, Northug's Swedish rival Calle Halfvarsson states spitefully, "When a person dies at a young age, it feels very wrong. It doesn't feel that way with you."

Iva Svačinová has defined a funeral gathering as "a group of grieving bereaved who experience emotional distress, and they typically perceive the death of the deceased as a negative, unfortunate situation that arouses confusion and grief".[49] In TFA, contrary emotions are expressed, and the symptoms of grief are parodied. Thus, Ylvisåker's brother uses an onion to bring on tears, while Ylvisåker's wife misses the ceremony altogether, having already left him for a new lover and a holiday abroad; Northug's rivals express happiness at his death, and even his father shows no sign of sadness and instead jokes about his son; Skåber's stepdaughter's song repeatedly emphasizes that she neither considers Skåber her a mother nor mourns her loss.

In a speech in TAKK FOR ALT, LINN SKÅBER, Christian Skolmen distinguishes celebrities as more or less outstanding, calling Skåber an "A-list" celebrity *(en A-kjendis)*, hard to replace as a neighbour in the celebrity apartment complex in Grünerløkka. He adds that his attitude has nothing to do with cultural snobbery or vanity and is only about market value. While not attacking Skåber's reputation, he does refer to her mostly in terms of her conferring

47 Schafer 2012, 314.
48 Svačinová 2024, 296.
49 Svačinová 2024, 296.

status on him, and he swiftly moves on to list his wife's achievements while ignoring Skåber. Contradicting Skolmen but denigrating Skåber, Ramm describes her as a lower-class celebrity, saying, "it was not the cultural elite who were closest to Linn when it came to celebrities". Such posturing, point scoring and status claiming can be interpreted as a parody of the Norwegian celebrity scene.

Wreaths and Producing Social Relations

In each episode, a wreath is placed next to the celebrity's coffin, and the accompanying text is read out, reflecting contemporary social practice. As Christensen argues, "flowers are not only a *sine qua non* in funerals but are also used to make them more personal and to produce and reproduce social relations".[50] In Takk for alt, Bård Ylvisåker, a fox-shaped wreath is placed in front of Ylvisåker's coffin, referencing "What Does the Fox Say?" and serving as a clear and humorous way to personalize the church's scenography. According to Christensen, funeral flowers "tell us something about the relationships between the deceased and various participants".[51]

Normatively, wreaths favourably represent the deceased and display the esteem and affection of mourners. However, in Tfa just one modest wreath whose cost is shared by many people and organizations is used to invert these norms, showing a lack of generosity and respect for the deceased. Similarly, Ylvisåker's wreath, given by his mother, reads only a minimal "Goodbye, Bård". The texts on Northug's wreaths highlight his substance abuse and sexual promiscuity, while Skåber receives a wreath from the artist Samsaya, on which, instead of a message, is a URL linking to a song on Spotify, placing Samsaya not Skåber centre stage.

In this context, wreaths function as symbolic devices that blend elements of satire and hyperbole, subverting audience expectations through provocation. Christensen notes that "flowers oscillate between their material and symbolic features, being both objects that need to be handled and symbols that produce meaning and relations".[52] In Tfa, the texts placed on the wreaths are rooted in the Norwegian social context and make new meanings around situations and themes that are widely known. Moreover,

50 Christensen 2023, 90.
51 Christensen 2023, 92.
52 Christensen 2023, 91–92.

they also create symbolic relationships (often also as a part of parody), as for example between Bård Ylvisåker and Team Ingebrigtsen, who presents a wreath with emojis instead of text. The aim seems to be to satirize social conventions by exaggerating existing trends.

Discussion

Our reading of TFA suggests that it is not religion that is the primary target of the satire of its comedy, but rather the mores of Norwegian entertainment culture. Religion provides the set and props, which the performers feel free to use without fear of ecclesiastical backlash or public reproach. This attitude is consistent with Taylor's account of religion's marginalization in North Atlantic cultures, as religious institutions and symbols are hollowed of religious content and used to convey secular meanings, and it resonates with Hjarvard's secularization-through-mediatization perspective. This finding contradicts Hypothesis 1 and favours Hypothesis 2: the secular imaginary does not need to put religion down, at least not Lutheran Christianity, for it has already taken its place as a cultural resource and is not a cultural threat to secular autonomy. Yet, the evidence for the ongoing influence of conservative Christianity in Southern Norway and the recency of its wider cultural influence – with more than a quarter of the population having a literal belief in Hell in 1985 – suggest that the rejection of Hypothesis 1 requires nuancing. Performed in Oslo, Hypothesis 1 wins over Hypothesis 2; watched in Kristiansand, the meaning might shift.

Perhaps the deviation from Taylor reflects a difference between Nordic and North American (especially US) contexts with respect to the political salience of religion. Secular space needs to be defended against Christian incursions in the US in a way that it does not, for the most part, in Norway, and this disparity has become far more evident in the years since *A Secular Age*'s publication in 2007. Taylor's emphasis on what we have termed the cultural work of language is not therefore now wrong: the work of buffering and shoring up individual worldviews against magical thinking continues[53] and in some contexts is part of wider social contention,[54] but it is not the work of popular satire in most contexts in Norway. Entertainment culture – and the secular taboo on discussion of death – are far more important targets.

53 Herbert/Bullock 2020.

54 Fisher-Høyrem/Herbert 2019.

So, we turn to our second research question – what kind of social imaginary is performed by TFA? And especially, what can we learn about non-religious negotiation of death and the construction and contestation of social order in Norwegian popular culture from engaging with this show? First, while secular assumptions dominate, gestures beyond the immanent frame are also present, at least in episodes 1 and 2, both in the words used at the end of Ramm's and Ylvisåker's "funerals" and in the shot panning skywards. These final scenes in each episode gesture towards a more agnostic and contemplative mode, the brief seriousness undercut only in the third episode, by Skåber's call to join her at a bar. In line with other evidence on the post-Christian and liberal Lutheran[55] negotiation of death, these gestures towards transcendence persist at the fringes of dominant secular frames (remembering and celebrating the life of the departed) and tend towards the non-specific, while the darker side of Christian death beliefs is dispensed with entirely (Hell recedes or is reinterpreted immanently). In line with liberal Lutheran and secular trends, memorialization is highly personalized.

And so we arrive at the main satirical target of TFA – Norwegian celebrity culture. The series parodies a Norwegian celebrity culture portrayed as status-obsessed and characterized by shallow transactional relationships, disloyalty and narcissistic self-regard. True, the outward form of the funeral remains recognizably Christian, and specifically Lutheran, a point underscored by the social media response arguing that the satire would not work if it was transposed to a humanist ritual, because Lutheranism is what most Norwegians are familiar with.[56] The comedy, however, plays on the shallowness of this familiarity, as the mock officiants feign to stumble through their lines and roles in a comedic nod to popular ignorance, and the object of mockery is not the religious ritual but rather the performers themselves, who send themselves up as representatives of Norwegian celebrity culture – hence the content of the main funeral orations, criticizing the deceased's poor character, avarice, addictions and fractured relationships.

Does the series then tell us anything about how non-religious Norwegians navigate existential challenges? The comedic form provides the first clue: in the face of the unease caused by the existential threat of death,

55 Repstad 2019.

56 Diskutopia, 2025.

humour provides a release for anxiety and an opportunity to open an infrequently addressed topic to public scrutiny and debate. Here lies the rationale given by Ramm in interviews after the broadcast and echoed on social media[57] – death, not religion, remains something of a taboo in Norwegian society, and therefore comedy can seek to break down the barriers to open public discussion. It is this secular taboo, rather than religion, that TFA is designed to challenge.

Conclusion

Reading TFA alongside Taylor has been productive for recognizing the variety of the predominantly secular social imaginaries that the North Atlantic world has spawned. It also provides insight into the power dynamics of Norwegian popular culture (celebrities trump religion, and so are the chief target of social satire even when dressed as priests) and the Norwegian navigation of death, which remains taboo and not fully secular, and is navigated using ancient practices that have largely lost their meaning but are still vaguely familiar to most participants in death-related ceremonies.

Reading with Taylor – because of his emphasis on the construction of the social world in everyday language and performance – was used to unsettle sociological (and more broadly modern social science and indeed post-Enlightenment[58]) assumptions about the steady if incremental advance of secularity. In Taylor's account, secular imaginaries need to be constantly defended by routine, by banal practices such as jokes about religion,[59] and doing so may open new ways of reading cultural phenomena, such as TFA. In this account, disenchantment is a temporal (and perhaps temporary) phenomenon created by specific historical and cultural conditions within North Atlantic cultures. However, in Norway, despite historical rooting in a common Lutheran culture, secularity's dominance of popular culture is mostly stable and unchallenged – unlike in the US, the threat is largely confined to one part of the country. Lutheranism does not need to be kept down: its subordination is assured, though other strong religions present local and regional challenges. Taylor's disciplines of disenchantment are

57 Diskutopia, 2025; Løland/Horsinek 2023.

58 See Casanova 1994.

59 Taylor 2007, 28.

practised and his conceptual framework, when combined with a concept of cultural work, can provide rich insight into cultural dynamics on both sides of the Atlantic – even though the cultural fields in which they operate are significantly different.

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