

Conference-report: Politics, Culture and Religion in the Postsecular World

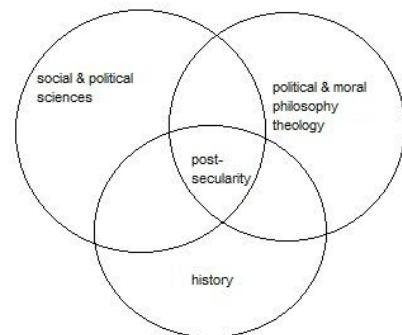
Kristina Stoeckl, University of Rome Tor Vergata

From May 12 to 13, 2011 the workshop "Politics, Culture and Religion in the Postsecular World" took place at the *Institute for Eastern and Central Europe and the Balkans* (University of Bologna) in Faenza. The meeting brought together scholars from Italy and Russia with the aim to initiate an interdisciplinary and cross-cultural dialogue on the topic of politics, culture and religion in postsecular society, drawing in particular on the Italian and Russian experience of secularization. The organizers have decided to make available the workshop-proceedings and papers as a "document series" on PECOB (Portal of Central Eastern and Balkan Europe). This introduction serves to contextualize the papers and wants to help readers to find their way through the different contributions.

The context

The term "postsecularity" has gained prominence in the social and human sciences over the last decade. It expresses the idea that the relationship between religion and politics is in need of re-conceptualization in the light of a continued presence of religion in secularized societies.

However, "postsecularity" means something very different for the various participants in this debate:



- Sociologists mostly understand "postsecularity" as the phenomenon of the return of religion into secularized societies (ex. visibility of religious practices and religious attitudes in secular public spaces); political scientists see in it the necessity to re-evaluate modes of governance of religion and adapt them to the requirements of religiously pluralist societies (ex. religious freedom and the role of religious actors in the public sphere).
- Political philosophers frequently understand "postsecularity" as the normative challenge to define the place of religious viewpoints in the democratic public sphere and to formulate a political ethic that is valid for all citizens, irrespective of their belonging to different faiths or being religious or non-religious; "postsecularism" is defined as a response to ideological "secularism". More generally, philosophers may address questions about the relevance of religious argument in debates about morality and ethics or ask questions about the various effects which a transcendent or an immanent horizon of being have on the constitution of the human self. Theologians mostly look at "postsecularity" as a particular condition for the church that needs to define its place and role vis-à-vis the state and a civil society that is no longer determined by exclusively secularist criteria.
- Historians, finally, place "postsecularity" in the broader historical context of modernization and cultural history and ask for historical processes and conditions that determine secularization. Historical studies often pursue a comparative viewpoint on secularization processes in different European societies, thus offering important correctives to general theories about secularization.

The workshop: Going beyond the predominant Western social science context...

The topic of the postsecular is not only a relatively new theme in the social and human sciences, it also appears to be tied to a particular kind of experience of secularization, which is, arguably, inherently "Western". This Western, liberal-democratic research context is challenged, firstly, by the *global* return of religion, and secondly, by the idea that we are living in a world of *multiple modernities*. This world is characterized by a variety of programs of modernization and of religious models, not all of which conform to the Western model of liberal-individualist modernization and secularization.

The intention of the workshop organized in Faenza therefore was, firstly, to open the debate on postsecularity to assessments from the perspective of Eastern Christianity and the Russian experience of secularization and, secondly, to analyze Italy and Catholic Christianity as a particular case of secularization and "postsecular" society.

The aim of this workshop was to discuss the topic "Politics, culture and religion in the postsecular world" in all its facets, to formulate questions and themes for further discussion and to set the agenda for a conference planned to take place in February 2012 in Moscow. The workshop had the character of a work-in-progress-meeting that wanted to *open up* questions rather than give answers.

Detailed description of the workshop and of the contributions

The workshop was divided into three sessions; each session consisted in three short lectures and a discussion.

Session 1 "Postsecularism in History"

was dedicated to a historical analysis of secularization in the Italian and in the Russian context. *Secularization* in a historical sense is most frequently understood as a *process*: the process of separation of church and state, the process of decline of religious authority in the public and political sphere, the process of privatization of religion. Questions dealt with during this session were: What characterizes the historical process of secularization in the Italian and in the Russian context? At what point in time can we speak about secularization in Italy/in Russia? Can we distinguish phases or "milestones"? What are the main conflicts that arise in the course of secularization? What role do the churches assume – are they active or passive, defensive or confrontational?

In his introduction to the session, the chair Marcello Garzaniti (Department for Linguistics, University of Florence, President of the Italian Association for Slavonic Studies) suggested that we should distinguish three phases in the history of secularization: phase I of confessional society, during which all spheres of human life and social coexistence were determined by a religious outlook; phase II of secularized society, during which political religions (the state, the "people", the nation, political ideologies) took over the integrative role formerly played by religion; and phase III of postsecular society, which is characterized by democracy and pluralism and by the re-negotiation of the place of religion in the public sphere. The challenge of phase III lies in a correct assessment of the role of religion in contemporary society *without* falling back into the recipes of the previous phases *and with* an awareness of the role religion can play for generating societal cohesion and solidarity necessary for the functioning of democracy.

The first speaker of the day, Alberto Melloni (Department for Education and Human Sciences, University of Modena and Reggio Emilia) presented to the audience a paper on "The Challenge of

Otherness; differences and analogies between systems of multireligious presence in Europe" in which he asked the question whether the "postsecular era" constitutes, from the point of view of the Catholic Church, really a novelty. In his view, the real challenge of the postsecular constellation lies not so much in the re-negotiation of the relationship of the church with the state – this question, he reminded the audience, has been solved by the Catholic Church in the course of the 19th and 20th century – but in the self-definition of the Church vis-à-vis "others", in particular other religions and civilizations.

Adriano Roccucci (Department for Historical, Geographical and Anthropological Studies, Roma Tre University) explored the question whether the Soviet regime can really be considered an experience of secularization. Constituting a "political religion" in itself, the Soviet system on the one hand suppressed Orthodox Christianity, but, on the other hand, established a quasi-religious ideological system itself. The Byzantine model of religious-state identity was not definitely disrupted even by communism, Roccucci argued, and continues to determine Russia's defensive position vis-à-vis modernity, secularity and the West up until today.

Victor Sergeev (Department of Political Research, Moscow State University for International Relations) confessed that he felt uneasy with the term "postsecularism" and he agreed with the preceding speaker that it was not entirely clear whether Russian society has ever been "secular". He added that today's debates about the postsecular seem motivated by the wish to overcome religious conflicts in contemporary society, while in reality we are witnessing an increase in religious-cultural conflicts worldwide.

Session 2 "Philosophy, Anthropology, Theology and Postsecularism"

was dedicated to the philosophical, anthropological and theological assessment of the term "postsecular" from the angle of Russian religious philosophy, Orthodox theology and Catholic theology. All three contributions challenged the mainstream discourse on the postsecular – if by "mainstream" we intend the debate on religion in the public sphere instigated by Jürgen Habermas and John Rawls. The speakers in this session made an initial reference to these key-authors, but only to develop their considerations into considerably different directions.

Sergej Khoruzhij's (Director of the Institute of Synergetic Anthropology, Moscow) paper entitled "Anthropological dimensions of the postsecular paradigm" reflected on the anthropological foundations of "secularism" and asked in which sense these foundations are being put into question when we speak today about "postsecularism". What is "new" in the postsecular philosophical and anthropological condition? Khoruzhij made a distinction between "religious man" and "secular man", explaining the characteristics of the former through references to the tradition of Eastern Christian spirituality. The latter, secular man, is paradigmatic for the Western Enlightenment discourse. Khoruzhij admitted that the postsecular turn in Western liberal thought has seemingly reversed the anti-religious trend of the Enlightenment and has opened up a postsecular spiral of mutual understanding, but he remained deeply skeptical about the possibilities that on the basis of two opposed anthropological models – religious versus secular man – mutual comprehension can be possible. At the same time he insisted on the fact that the postsecular paradigm should be taken beyond the meaning-horizon it has been given in Western debates and should include also perspectives from other intellectual traditions, such as Russian religious philosophy and Orthodox spirituality.

Also Oleg Genisaretskij (Russian Academy of Sciences) insisted on the need to take the postsecular paradigm beyond its Western context and offered some considerations on the relationship between pre-secular and post-secular modes of consciousness.

Stefano Caprio (Pontificio Istituto Orientale, Rome) gave a paper entitled "The Church and Religion in the Postsecular Era" in which he developed three Catholic perspectives on the phenomenon of postsecularism: firstly, the return of religion, secondly, eschatology (postsecularism as the end of the world) and, thirdly, charisma and identity-discourse. With regard to the first point, he pointed out that both the Catholic Church and the Russian Orthodox Church are faced with a double-sided return of religion, on the one hand the return of the traditional religions themselves, which have to come to terms with their own specific history of secularization, and on the other hand the growth of new-age spiritualities and fundamentalist religious currents. The eschatological perspective, he points out, has given rise to fundamentalist currents within the traditional religions, but it has also been interpreted in terms of a possible auto-cancellation of Christianity in the secular world. Given the difficulties of the traditional churches to affirm their place in the world today, Caprio detects a trend towards "charismatic" instead of institutional leadership, citing the popularity of the late Pope John Paul II as example. He is critical of this tendency, which extends also to contemporary political figures of "messianic" character such as the state-leaders Putin and Berlusconi.

In her concluding remarks to this session, the chair Kristina Stoeckl (CSPS, University of Rome Tor Vergata) emphasized the useful and profoundly challenging character of a debate on the postsecular which transcends the limits of the mainstream Western philosophical discourse. At the same time, however, she pointed out that philosophical debates on the postsecular which deliberately ignore the straightjacket of Western liberal discourse must nonetheless avoid arbitrariness. In the interdisciplinary and cross-cultural philosophical debate undertaken by the organizers of this workshop, the definition of terms such as *de-secularization*, *pre-secular* and *post-secular* must be laid open and exposed to critical discussion, with the aim to turn them into shared definitions for all participants and in order to avoid that the philosophical debate loses coherence and intelligibility.

Session 3 "Theology, Political Philosophy, Social Theory and Postsecularism"

was dedicated to the discussion of "postsecularity" or "postsecularism" from a sociological and socio-political perspective, focusing on phenomena such as the return of religion into the public sphere, the role of religious actors in secular society and religious pluralism.

Massimo Rosati (CSPS, University of Rome Tor Vergata) opened the session with a series of general remarks about the "postsecular", offering important reflections on the "disturbing" visibility of religion in contemporary society. He focused in particular on the challenge and role of religious pluralism in a religiously and culturally largely homogeneous country such as Italy.

In their paper, Alexander Kyrlezhev (Consultant to the Synodal Biblical-Theological Commission of the Moscow Patriarchate) and Andrej Shishkov (Postgraduate School of the Moscow Patriarchate) explored the question to what extent we can speak about contemporary Russian society as "postsecular", offering a historical and sociological description of the Soviet model of secularization. They made the important observation that in the secular-postsecular condition of contemporary Russian society two opposite trends can be observed: on the one hand the return of religion into the

public sphere, as the postsecular paradigm would suggest, and on the other hand the return of religion into the private sphere, from where it had been purged by Soviet ideology.

The final speaker of the workshop was Fr. Vladimir Shmalij (Pro-Rektor of the Postgraduate School of the Moscow Patriarchate). He started with the observation that public opinion in Russia tends to react with apprehension to the topic of the postsecular because of fears that the church will seize the debate in order to justify its return to politics and civil society. He made clear that such fears are entirely unjustified and that it is, instead, the church itself which seeks dialogue with social and human sciences and civil society on the topic of the postsecular. Shmalij also touched upon difficult questions such as property-restitution in Russia or religious education in schools and explained why the church approaches these issues not from the angle of "de-secularization" but from a postsecular viewpoint. The church, he emphasized, is not interested in the restoration of a status-quo-ante, but in the creation of a contemporary dialogue and fair modes of cooperation. Postsecularism, he added, seemed the right kind of framework for such a dialogue and cooperation, and for this reason the Russian Orthodox Church takes interest in this debate and is open to participate in events like the present workshop.

The chair of this session, Stefano Bianchini (IECOB, University of Bologna), closed the meeting, emphasizing once again the importance of the interdisciplinary and cross-national Italian-Russian experience, which has already produced important insights and generated new questions and puzzles with regard to the postsecular paradigm. He auspicated that the conference in Moscow could also become the place for more concrete case-study type of explorations of questions on religious pluralism, religious governance and legislation.

The organizers

The conference was organized by Kristina Stoeckl from the Centre for the Study and Documentation of Religions and Political Institutions in Postsecular Society (CSPS), University of Rome Tor Vergata (<http://www.cspc.uniroma2.it>), and Stefano Bianchini from the Institute for Eastern Central Europe and the Balkans, University of Bologna (IECOB) (<http://www.iecob.net/>) in collaboration with Marcello Garzaniti, University of Florence and president of the Italian Association of Slavists. The Russian side of the organization was in the hands of the Institute of Synergetic Anthropology (director Sergej Khoruzhij) (<http://synergia-isa.ru/>) and the Department of Philosophy of the Russian Academy of Sciences (Oleg Genisaretskij).

The sponsors

The event was sponsored by the *Fondazione Roma – Terzo Settore* and the by the *National Centre for Projects in the Social and Human Sciences of the Russian Federation*. The workshop took place under the aegis of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Institute of Italian Culture.

The event is part of the program "2011: The Year of Russian Culture in Italy" (http://www.governo.it/GovernoInforma/Dossier/2011_cultura_italiana_russa/programma_italia_in_russia.pdf)