DEFINING THE POSTSECULAR[*]

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Abstract

This paper proposes a definition of the term "postsecular". It discards two possible modes of understanding the "postsecular": the understanding that the postsecular means *de-secularization*, and that it means *post-secularity*, a regime-change that brings society back to religion. Instead it suggests to conceptualize the postsecular as a condition of contemporarality / of co-existence of the secular and religion, which can be conceptualized in three dimensions: normative, sociological-political-historical, and phenomenological. Each of these three dimensions is characterized by a tension: *Kantian vs. Hegelian tradition in the normative postsecular*; *model vs. practice in the sociological-political-historical postsecular*; and *individual vs. collective in the phenomenological postsecular*.

Introduction

The term "postsecular" or "postsecularism" has become a catch-word in recent sociological and philosophical debates. In my own field – political theory – and in sociology, the term "postsecular" is widely used; mostly, I should say, by scholars of a lay mindset who want to signal that they are somewhat open to the topic of religion. That is a very vague definition of the term; it is certainly too vague.

The research-centre I work at carries "postsecular" in the title: "Centre for the Study of Political Institutions and Religions in Postsecular Societies"; and the conference we are currently organizing together with Professor Horuzhy also refers to the "postsecular": "Politics, culture and religion in the postsecular world". Surely the "postsecular" in the title of these academic endeavors must convey more than just a vague sense of the importance of religion in our modern world.

Therefore, as a kind of introduction to the work we want to undertake with the conference and for the sake of a general clarification, what I want to do this evening is to try to define the term "postsecular".

De-secularization

Over the last twenty years, it has become common in the social and political sciences to speak about a "return of religion". What is meant is that religion is claiming a role and a voice in a public sphere which the mainstream of modern social and political theory used to conceptualize as empty from religion, neutral, independent. Religion, most sociologists and political scientists agreed, was somewhere else, in the private sphere, in individuals' consciousness. This understanding of religion and of the public was embedded in a larger narrative, a narrative which told the story of modernization as a story of democratization, individualization, functional differentiation and secularization. Modernity was thought to rest on these four pillars. Vice-versa, if one of these factors went missing, the suspicion was that we are no longer really talking about modernity. The "return of religion" was, therefore initially interpreted as an attack on modernity, as a falling back into pre-modernity.

This is precisely the meaning of the term "desecularization". The term was used for the first time in the early nineties by Peter Berger, who not only had been a strong advocate of the secularization thesis before; he was also one of the first to admit that he had been wrong: "The world is as furiously religious as it has always been".[1] Berger's religion is, if we look at the religious movements he is studying, first and foremost a fundamentalist religion. He is worried about the attack of fundamentalist religion on the modern order, the return of pre-modernity into our contemporary world. In this sense, Berger speaks about "desecularization".

In geometrical terms, the "de-" suggests an up and down movement on the vertical axis, without any movement on the horizontal axis. Something rises up, and then falls back. The modern secular order has risen, and it has fallen, the world has secularized and is now de-secularizing, on its way back to the status-quo-ante, exposed to pre-modern forms of religion. Now, I admit that this may be a slightly exaggerated version of Berger's thesis, but I want to make the idea as clear as possible: desecularization means that religion and modernity are incompatible. You either have one or the other.

De- / Post-

Within the social and political sciences, this understanding of the return of religion was soon perceived as too narrow. Was religion really incompatible with modernity? Most sociological studies did not suggest that at all.[2] How to understand the "return of religion" then?

This is the point where the term "post-secular" enters the debate. The prefix post- suggests a completely different geometry than the de-. Post- indicates a movement on the vertical as well as on the horizontal axis. It describes a parable: religion in post-secular society is not the same as the one in pre-secular society. The return of religion is not a falling-back into something that was there before. When we think about the post- as parable, we see that the religion that is presumably "returning" has meanwhile changed as well.

This new image has an impact on the modernization narrative: it no longer suggests that the fourth pillar of modernity – secularization – (besides functional differentiation, individualization and democratization) is breaking away, but it acknowledges that it is changing form. Religion and modernity might, after all, be compatible.

Therefore, to conclude on the distinction between de- and post-: the first perceives religion and modernity as incompatible, the second as compatible. The success of the term "postsecular" in the public discourse and also in academia seems to be related to this very simple distinction.

Post-secular

Our definition, however, cannot stop here. Therefore, the next question I want to ask is whether we should actually write "post-secular" or "postsecular"? Is the prefix detached from the word by a hyphen or is it not? And does that make a difference?

Let me explain why I think this question is important and not just a matter of style. Actually, I should add that I did not myself think about this very much until my colleague Massimo Rosati, a sociologist who is also involved in our conference-project, made me notice the difference. Speaking about the name of our research-centre, he said: "Kristina, we have to decide whether we write postsecular with a hyphen or not." So what is the difference?

I want to suggest that the hyphen makes a semantic difference. The hyphenated post-secular suggests that the post- really means "after", after the secular, it indicates a sort of

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[1] Peter L. Berger, ed. *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Washington, D.C., Grand Rapids, Mich.: Ethics and Public Policy Center; W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1999).
[2] José Casanova, *Public religions in the modern world* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

timely succession. As if one wanted to say: once society was secular – now it is no longer secular.

The examples that come to mind are Turkey – once Kemalist laicist, Turkey is now led by religious party and religion is back on the scene – and also Russia – Soviet Russia did everything to eradicate religion (you might have heard of a recent book "The plot to kill God. Findings from the Soviet Experiment in Secularization" by Paul Froese), and now, after the fall of communism, religion is back on the scene also here. These examples suggest neat successions from the secular to the post-secular, before-after: post-secularity as regime-change.

I feel uneasy with such an understanding of the post-secular. I feel especially uneasy because I get the impression that very often religious actors are happy to define the post-secular in precisely this sense. Post-secularity becomes, from their point of view, a kind of state of redemption or salvation, a return not *of*, but *to* religion. Let me explain what I mean by that:

As an outside observer of the Russian Orthodox Church, I often get the impression that leading figures in the church, Patriarch Kirill himself or Metropolitan Ilarion, define post-secular society in this sense. They assume that Western secular modernity has run its course, has exhausted itself, has, in fact, become "post-modern" and "post-secular", and is now ready to return to religion.

Such a kind of interpretation of history has a long tradition in Russian thought. Already Fedor Dostoevskij and Vladimir Solov'ev, in their analyses of the Western modern experience, anticipated a return to religion, a return in which Orthodox Christianity would play the role of a "catalyst". The "mission" of Russian Orthodoxy was, for these two thinkers, precisely to help the West in its return to Christian roots *after* a period of secularization, a *free* return. It was precisely this moment of freedom, of *free choice*, which made Western modernity attractive in the imaginary of the Russian religious philosophers, because it highlighted the predicament and potential of man's fallen nature.

When Metropolitan Ilarion says that the Russian Orthodox Church has resisted "militant atheism" (communism) and is now ready to resist "militant secularism", then he is alluding precisely to these themes: Russian Orthodoxy has a mission to resist ideologies that come from the West and now, as the West is turning post-secular, it also has the mission to carry religious values back into the West. Recent political activities of the Russian Orthodox Church that aim at introducing a debate on traditional values into international human rights institutions are a good example for this.

Postsecular

Now, I said that I feel uneasy with such an understanding of the post-secular, with the idea that post-secularity means a regime-change. I actually think that is a wrong understanding of what is happening, and I also think it is not helpful in order to make us ask the right questions. I want to propose that if we take the hyphen out of the word and make the post-secular – *postsecular*, then we arrive at a different definition and a different set of meanings.

The definition of the postsecular which I want to propose here breaks with images of succession (*before-after, regime-change*). Instead, it defines the postsecular as a condition of conscious contemporarily/co-existence of religious and secular worldviews. The co-existence of religious and secular worldviews, of religious and secular outlooks on society and politics, of religious and secular modes of understanding one's individual life creates tensions. Postsecularity is a condition of permanent tension.

My definition of the term postsecular understood in this way comprises three

complementary topics:
- the normative postsecular,
- the sociological, historical and political postsecular,
- the phenomenological postsecular.

Every single one of these topics is characterized by an internal tension. The point I want to make is that the meaning of the postsecular lies in the very contestedness of the term along these three dimensions. Let me explain this further:

- *The normative postsecular: Kantian vs. Hegelian tradition*

The normative postsecular should actually be called "postsecularist", because it describes a philosophical, normative standpoint which recognizes that secularism can itself be considered an ideology. Key-authors that come to mind for this ideological shift from secularism to postsecularism are Jürgen Habermas, William Connolly, John Rawls.[3]

What is important to bear in mind with regard to this normative strand of postsecular thinking is that it is, firstly, *political* and secondly, of a *liberal* origin. It belongs, if you want, to a *Kantian tradition* in political philosophy. Habermas and Rawls do not argue for the legitimate place of religion in the public sphere because they are convinced of the superiority of the religious viewpoint, or because they are religious themselves. They are simply making a logical, a democratic argument: a public sphere which privileges the secular over the religious discourse risks excluding religious citizens and that would be undemocratic.

This is an entirely different take on the subject of religion than we find in conservative or communitarian political philosophies which tend to argue for the importance of religion on *moral* grounds. For the sake of simplicity, we could call this approach the *Hegelian tradition*. In contemporary political philosophy, representatives of this way of understanding politics and religion are the communitarian political philosophers Michael Walzer, Michael Sandel and Charles Taylor.[4]

Just like their liberal colleagues, these authors argue that religion has a legitimate voice in the public sphere. However, their reason for arguing that is not because religion must not be excluded from democratic debate, but because they consider religion an indispensable ingredient to the public discourse. It adds something which might otherwise get lost: morality.

Between these two strands of normative political philosophy exists a tension which is not well-defined in the contemporary debate. If we consider the postsecular only in its liberal, Kantian dimension, then the entire philosophical project of postsecular political philosophy somehow turns very thin, procedural. Even Habermas himself does not stop there, when, at one point, he hypothesizes that religious voices carry important contents for public debates. The real challenge of postsecular political philosophy seems to lie in considering the postsecular also in its Hegelian dimension, to give it a more thick description, to take the risk to engage in moral philosophy.

To summarize, the definition of the normative postsecular has two dimensions, a Kantian and a Hegelian, which are in tension with each other. The normative postsecular cannot be reduced to any one of the two, it lies in this very tension.

- *The sociological, historical and political postsecular: model vs. practice, pluralism*

The sociological, historical and political postsecular is concerned with actors and

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[3] William E. Connolly, *Why I am not a secularist* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Jürgen Habermas, "Religion in the Public Sphere," *European Journal of Philosophy* 14, no. 1 (2006); John Rawls, "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited," *The University of Chicago Law Review* 64, no. 3 (1997).

[4] Michael J. Sandel, *Public Philosophy. Essays on Morality in Politics* (Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press, 2005); Charles Taylor, "Justice after virtue," in *After MacIntyre. Critical perspectives on the work of Alasdair MacIntyre*, ed. John Horton and Susan Mendus(Cambridge, Oxford: Polity Press, 1994); Michael Walzer, "Drawing the line. Religion and Politics," in *Thinking Politically: Essays in Political Theory*(New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

institutions. Scholars in these fields study the return of religion into secular society by looking at religious actors and relations between secular and religious institutions, often in a comparative fashion.[5]

I see the main tension in this field between models of secularity and practice. The modernization-narrative – which considered functional differentiation, individualization, democratization and secularization the four pillars of modernity – is itself a model. If we scrutinize this model against the real world, we soon find out that things have always been more complicated.

Let me only give two examples.

First example: One sociologist who enjoys unsettling sociological models through empirical data is José Casanova: for example, he pointed out that the Peace of Westphalia, which ended the Thirty Years' religious wars in Europe, was not a peace between religions, nor a settlement between religious and secular forces, but rather a territorial separation of religions and secular powers from each other – *cuius region, eius religio* – which left tension between religious denominations intact. The whole narrative to secularization as a response to religious violence is, according to him, a myth.

Second example: Countless politologists have, over the last years, scrutinized the secular political landscape of Europe.[6] One favorite paradoxical case, which we find cited very often, is France. France, allegedly the most secular country of all, gives subsidies to Catholic private schools and maintains Catholic cathedrals. So is French political system really secular?

What do we learn from these two examples? First, that the separation of church and state is a muddled separation in almost all cases. Second, that the real problem of postsecular societies might not lie in separation, but in pluralism.

When talking about postsecular society from a sociological, historical and political perspective, we have to bear in mind that in many cases that what we call "secular" has never been "really secular", that most of the arrangements we call "secular" are in fact accommodations of Christian religion. What sense does it therefore make to speak about the "postsecular"? – I think it makes sense to speak about the postsecular inasmuch as we take into account the fact of pluralism, the presence of other religions – Islam, Orthodoxy, Judaism, etc. In this sense, Europe today really is changing, because through migration there is a larger presence of Islam, and since the fall of communism in Eastern Europe, also Orthodox Christianity plays a greater role. European countries are turning religiously pluralist.

In a postsecular society, the relations between the secular state and religions pluralize. The postsecular in sociological and political terms makes sense when we understand it as a key to unravel hidden religious biases and conceptualize pluralism.

○ *The phenomenological postsecular: individual vs. collective experience*

With the term "phenomenological postsecular", I want to indicate the topic of "religious experience". Charles Taylor is one author who has recently drawn the attention of political philosophy to religious experience. In his book *A Secular Age*, Taylor shows how, with the onset of modernity in the West, the human search for fulfillment has increasingly abandoned religious frames of reference and has become an *immanent* search. Living in a secular age, he writes, means living in a society in which belief in God "is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace."[7] Living in an immanent frame, however, does not mean that human beings have stopped being in search of fulfillment or, as Taylor calls

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[5] Larry Jay Diamond, Marc F. Plattner, and Philip J. Costopoulos, eds., *World religions and democracy* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005); Alfred Stepan, "The World's Religious Systems and Democracy: Crafting the 'Twin Tolerations'," in *Arguing Comparative Politics*(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).
[6] John T. S. Madeley and Zsolt Enyedi, eds., *Church and State in Contemporary Europe* (London: Frank Cass, 2003).
[7] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 3.

it, wholeness.

Religions in the world today, including the Orthodox Churches, largely operate in societies for which the immanent frame has become the dominant frame of reference. What should therefore be appreciated about Taylor's argument in *A Secular Age* is that he puts the whole debate about secularization and postsecular society upside down. Instead of speaking about a "return of religion", he makes clear that religion – and the human predisposition to religious kinds of experiences – has never left us, just as Churches have continued to occupy a certain space in society. What has changed is that many people today no longer seek experiences of fulfillment outside of their immanent frame or, which would be another way of putting it, with the organized religions.

The first tension of the phenomenological postsecular therefore lies in this: the immanent frame is not reversible. We are living in a secular age, and religion is one among other possible options of individual experience of fullness. From a religious viewpoint, one might find that wrong or deplorable, but I think we have to recognize that it is a fact.

However, there is a second tension within the phenomenological postsecular, and this second tension concerns the definition of religious experience: The religious experiences described by Taylor are highly individualistic, spontaneous, and personal; they are an isolated, unsocial event. With his one-sided focus on the individual condition, Taylor expresses only half of the truth about religious experience. What is missing in Taylor is a reflection on the practical and communal dimension of transcendental experience.

My objection can be explained more easily if we compare Taylor's example of religious experience with the elaboration of religious experience and practice in Orthodox theology found in the works of Sergej Horuzhy. From the perspective of studies of *Hesychasm*, religious experience and practice are not arbitrary phenomena. They are embedded in a tradition and in a collective body, the Church. They are individual experiences, but individual experiences that become possible in a specific context and through a codified type of preparation.[8] The knowledge and rich repertoires of experiences of self-transcendence are not individual knowledge, they are the work of a tradition and collectivity. The tension in the phenomenological postsecular therefore lies between individual and collective religious experience.

There is a certain risk, I think, that the liberal tradition of postsecular thinking considers religious experience too narrowly in terms of individual choice, leaving aside the importance of community and tradition.

Conclusions

What I have tried to do in this paper is to give a definition of the postsecular. I have first indicated what, in my opinion, the post-secular is *not*, namely de-secularization/the falling back into pre-modernity; nor post-secularity/a regime-change that brings society back to religion. I have suggested to conceptualize the postsecular as a condition of contemporarlity / of co-existence of the secular and religion, which can be conceptualized in three dimensions: normative, sociological-political-historical, and phenomenological. I have pointed out that each of these three dimensions is characterized by a tension: *Kantian vs. Hegelian tradition in the normative postsecular*; *model vs. practice in the sociological-political-historical postsecular*; and *individual vs. collective in the phenomenological postsecular*.

I see the task of us scholars, who are concerned with the postsecular, in the exploration of these tensions. I hope that research initiatives like the centre I work at and the conference we are trying to organize will give more substance to the term "postsecular". I think we are at a

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[8] Сергей С. Хоружий, *Синергия: Проблемы аскетики и мистики православия* (Москва: Ди-Дик, 1995); Сергей С. Хоружий, *К феноменологии аскезы* (Москва: Издательство Гуманитарной Литературы, 1998); Сергей С. Хоружий, *Опыты из русской духовной традиции* (Москва: Изд. Парад, 2005).

point where we don't need more narratives about the "return of religion" or "de-secularization" of "society after secularism". We need piece-meal studies of the tensions that determine the postsecular age we are living in.