

# LONGING FOR A POSTSECULAR CONDITION. ITALY AND THE POSTSECULAR

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First of all let me thank Kristina Stoeckl and the other organizers of this conference. It is a great occasion to discuss with authoritative scholars and colleagues from Russia and from Italy an important issue for our societies, actually an issue relevant for contemporary societies at large. Let me also say that I am glad and proud that the CSPA, the Centre for the Study on Politics and Religions in Postsecular Societies that is based at the University of Rome Tor Vergata, could offer its contribution to the organization of this conference.

Following the organizers' instructions, I will try to address three main points: first, what is characteristic about the postsecular condition? Secondly, is it Italy a postsecular country? Thirdly, which is the condition of postsecular studies in Italy?

Let me start with some general consideration on the very notion of postsecular society. 'Postsecular' society is becoming a more and more widespread key-word in contemporary debates, within the philosophical, political, theological as well as the sociological domains. Even if the word is not so new, it has gained a new conceptual relevance and specificity as a consequence of a deep scrutiny of classical theories of secularization. In this presentation, I will take for granted this story, as I will take for granted reasons to make a shift from a secular to a postsecular paradigm. I know it is a controversial premise. However, my aim is to try to reflect on the notion of the postsecular in order to try to contribute to the clarification of this still vague notion.

Looking at the existing literature, one might have the feeling that the notion expresses a general intuition – the insufficiency of secularization theories, in one version or another, to grasp the present state of the relationship between religions and contemporary societies and/or political arrangements –, and a normative stance – the need from a normative point of view to find more just ways of accommodating religious claims in our liberal institutions. In my opinion, Jürgen Habermas' definition of the postsecular society can conveniently be taken as our starting point. This is one of the definitions offered by Habermas:

This term 'postsecular society' refers not only to the fact that religion continues to assert itself in an increasingly secular environment and that society, for the time being, reckons with the continued existence of religious communities. The expression *postsecular* does not merely acknowledge publicly the functional contribution that the religious communities make to the reproduction of desired motives and attitudes. Rather, the public consciousness of postsecular society reflects a normative insight that has consequences for how believing and unbelieving citizens interact with one another politically. In postsecular society, the realization that 'the modernization of public consciousness' takes hold and reflexively alters religious as well as secular mentalities in staggered phases is gaining acceptance. If together they understand the secularization of society to be a complementary learning process, both sides can, for cognitive reasons, then take seriously each other's contributions to controversial themes in the public sphere.<sup>1</sup>

The key expression in the above, long definition is, in my view, *complementary learning process*. Proper to the postsecular condition is the epistemic attitude of both carriers of secular conceptions and of bearers of religious visions to "take seriously each other's contributions to

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<sup>1</sup> J. Habermas, *The Secular Liberal State and Religion*, p.258

controversial themes in the public sphere". Habermas' definition is an important one, however, I believe that implicit in it there are several elements that deserve to be made explicit. Trying to unpack this definition, I would say that it implies:

- a) The three essential features of every Axial civilization, namely reflexivity, historicity and agentiality. These features are implicit in Habermas' definition.
- b) The co-presence or co-existence within the same public space of religious and secular world-views and ideas of the good life and of the good society. This is a crucial point: a postsecular society is not a de-secularized society, but a society where religious and secular views are called to live together, and to live together differently.
- c) De-privatized religious movements. A postsecular society is a society where religion cannot be considered only as a private, strictly individualized, spiritualized, de-ritualized experience. Western modernity is not at odds with religion per se, and it can easily consider religious individualization as one of the expressions of modern individualism. Believing without belonging, religious patchworks, invisible religions, even invented religions – just to mention some of the formulas used by sociologists of religions to name contemporary forms of religiosity – are perfectly within the modern horizon and, at the end of the day, compatible with the Western modern sensitivity. However, traditional or new de-privatized religions – Catholicism, Christian Orthodoxy, Islam, Judaism, Pentecostalism – challenge the philosophical and anthropological presuppositions of Western modernity. They challenge the Western idea of the autonomous Self, the idea of a secular, neutral public space, and at least the idea of a neat discontinuity between the right and the good, religious world-views and the Law. A postsecular society is a society that considers it a part of the democratic vitality of its public sphere that religious voices are within the public space, that they may challenge the self-referentiality of modern differentiated subsystems and try to make pressure on them from a normative point of view.
- d) A postsecular society requires not only the end of the modernist dream of the total eclipse of the sacred or of the privatization of religions, but also the end of conditions of strict religious monopoly. A truly postsecular society is a multi-religious society, where 'indigenous' traditions are nowadays together with diasporic religious communities. Religious pluralism, in other words, is part and parcel of the sociological conditions of a postsecular society.
- e) Social actors, individual and collective, religious and secular, must practice the virtue of epistemic humility, secular groups in name of public reason, religiously oriented groups in the name of a principled tolerance, capable of finding religious reasons, consistent with particular vocabularies, to be tolerant towards world-views and practices considered false and wrong.
- f) Finally, a postsecular society is a society where the sacred can take different forms, immanent and civic as well as transcendent.

If these are the conditions of a postsecular society implicit in Habermas' definition, I want to specify that when I talk about a postsecular society, I am not referring to a given and perfectly fulfilled specific society. As Fuet Kemsan writes, "postsecular society refers not to an ontological totality, but to an 'emerging reality' in the process of being made". (*Assertive Secularism in Crisis: Modernity, Democracy, and Islam in Turkey*, in *Comparative Secularisms in a Global Age*, p. 155). Here and there, there are contexts where one observes the making of a postsecular society, where the above conditions are better satisfied, but a postsecular society is just one possibility among many.

In my view, modernities in different contexts (Western modernity included) have coped with religions typologically speaking in 4 different ways: there were cases of mutual misrecognition between religions and modernity (post revolutionary France, or nowadays debates between religious integralists and the New Atheists); contexts where religions played a democratizing role vis-à-vis authoritarian forms of modernity (i.e. Solidarnosc); contexts where modernity exploited the functional virtues of religions, not considering them qua religions (i.e. Italy after the collapse of the First Republic); and then there is the postsecular society, characterized by a complementary learning process between secular and religious worldviews, that I tried to outline before.

The second point I want to address has to do with my own country. Here the question is if Italy is a postsecular country or not. In the light of the above conditions, I would say that Italy does not meet all the necessary conditions to be called a postsecular society. Conditions a-b-c-f are satisfied. As part of the European civilization and modernity, Italian culture obviously shows the essential features of reflexivity, historicity and agentiality that are proper to each Axial civilization; secondly, it is a country where religious and secular worldviews are co-present, inhabit every social sphere; thirdly, it is a country where Catholicism has never been a simply private faith; Catholicism, above all in Italy, has always been a public religion in Casanova's sense, in a stronger or weaker way depending on the decades, but basically always present in the public sphere. However, conditions d) and e) are not, in my opinion, sufficiently met. For a long time, Italy has been a classical example of religious monopoly. Today, the Italian religious landscape is changing, for a number of reasons related not least to immigration. Beyond Catholics, there are approximately 1,3 millions of Orthodox, 700.000 protestants – 400.000 Pentacostals – plus the historical community of Valdenses: more or less 36.000 Jews; 22.000 Mormons, 243.000 Jehovah's Witnesses, 1,2 millions of Muslims, 103.000 Buddhists, 108.000 Hindus, 25.000 Sikhs, 45.000 Animists, 13.000 members of neopagan groups. Pentacostalism above all is an emerging reality, doomed to challenge and change Christianity from within so to speak. Now, beyond numbers, the point is that this pluralization of the religious panorama has tremendous implications at several levels. Most of these religious groups ask for public and juridical recognition, ask for places of cult, respect of religious markers such as dietary law, religious clothing, recognition within public spaces such as schools and prisons, just to mention two different examples. From this point of view, I would say that Italy is far from respecting and implementing religious pluralism and its implications. It is still impossible to have a law on religious freedom, and just a few confessions, Islam not included, have legal arrangements with the Italian State. There are a number of reasons to explain this situation. One could say that changes like this need time; culture is potentially porous but it is also resilient. Another reason has to do, in my view, with the difficulty of the Italian Catholic Church to leave a condition of monopoly; and still another reason has to do with the sometime instrumental use of religion (Catholicism in this case) as a tool of social integration, with the identification of Christianity and Catholicism with the central core of national and cultural identity. Here we are in deep waters, and we deal with thorny issues. However, my view is that a postsecular society is a society capable of addressing and potentially coping positively with these issues.

What I mean is that the concept of the postsecular, as defined above, is useful to grasp not only features that the Italian religious panorama shares with other contemporary panoramas, but also its limits and contradictions. This is apparent also if we consider the intellectual panorama. The notion of the postsecular raised a widespread interest in Italy. However, my feeling is that it has been used above all by Catholic intellectuals as an ideological tool to defend the rights of Catholic hierarchies to intervene in the political life of the country and to criticize secularist self-understandings of Italy and Europe. In other words, Catholic intellectuals grasped more the idea of de-privatization of religion (namely Catholicism), than the idea of a pluralized religious context, where Catholicism is just one of the possible religious actors; they grasped more the criticism of theories of secularization than the idea of a genuine learning process. At the same time, we know that it is impossible and incorrect to talk about Catholicism as an undifferentiated entity, so one should distinguish and specify. Alternatively, the idea of the postsecular has been endorsed by sensitive thinkers critical of the last ideology of the past century (secularization), as a philosophical normative concept, but without particular care for its sociological meaning and implications. However, the scope of postsecular studies is, in principle, tremendous.

Let me dedicate the last minutes of my speech to try to explain what we try to make at the CSPA. The CSPA is a non-confessional study and research centre. One of its features is its highly interdisciplinary nature; members of the CSPA are sociologists, political philosophers, moral philosophers, historians of religions, anthropologists. At the moment, we carry on three types of activities: we organize or co-organize lectures, workshops and seminars; we organize empirical research projects; we try to foster the publication in Italian of important scientific contributions originally published in other languages. These three kind of activities are aimed

at working at three different levels: first, we want to contribute to the conceptual definition and clarification of the concept of the postsecular, in dialogue with authoritative and/or young scholars who participate in discussions on this topic; secondly, we want to reflect on the postsecular in its contexts, linking the concept of the postsecular to ongoing reflections on different forms that modernities take in different contexts; our interest for realities such as the Orthodox world, Middle East, Turkey, Israel and so on, stems from here. Finally, we are interested in the postsecular in the social space, as a social and not only a political phenomenon. Our empirical projects on religious assistance in Italian prisons, planned research projects on the postsecular urban space and postsecular architecture, just to mention a few examples, try to focus on the postsecular in its multiple dimensions. For sure, we at the CSPA are perfectly aware that intellectual work is not an individualistic but a cooperative effort, and that is why initiatives like this conference are highly welcome and laudable.