

Pluralism and the Public Sphere in Post-Secular Society*

Introduction

Last years a growing number of scholars point to the growing importance of religion in the public sphere. A fruitful way to enter in this debate is the concept of the post-secular. The post-secular emerges as an object of contestation in academic discourse in a number of fields such as social philosophy and political theory, political science, sociology and sociology of religion, cultural studies, and international relations, and many others. Through the concept of post-secular society is expressed a growing attention of the role, the function and the impact of religion in the public political arena and the political self-understanding of modern, pluralist societies. Nevertheless, my purpose in this paper is not to offer an exhaustive account of post-secular theories but to try to illuminate some aspect of the conceptual relation between post-secularism and the public sphere taking as my starting point Habermas's reconstruction of the post-secular public sphere.

Religion and Post-Secular Pluralism

A number of authors, including Habermas, Jose Casanova, and various sociologists of religion and others, argue that our understanding of post-secular society is necessarily mediated by a number of sociological phenomena that reflect the process of transformation undergoing our modern pluralist societies (globalization/multiple modernities → European secular modernity is not a universal norm, the European integration process, the perception of conflicts at the local, national and global levels and the role of religion, the presence and rising influence of religion in the public sphere, especially in its relation to controversial ethical and political matters, immigration and increasing religious pluralism). Nevertheless, my emphasis is not on the historical and sociological understanding of pluralism, but on its conceptual relation with post-

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secularism. The sociological experience of transformation parallels the political need to construe a suitable political framework for our pluralist post-secular societies. Secularization as a historical process is most commonly associated with the process of ongoing pluralization of worldviews, values, and ways of life, including religious doctrines and beliefs. The sociologist Peter L. Berger (*The Sacred Canopy*) reveals the internal relation between secularization and pluralization, the process of secularization produces pluralism and pluralism produces secularization. In the same vein the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor shows, in his monumental *A Secular Age*, how the fact of modern pluralism (Rawls) is internally related to our perception of modern society as a secular one. Our society is characterized by the unheard condition of a pluralism of beliefs, both religious and non- or even anti-religious. The modern secular conception of pluralism Taylor describes does not speak in favor of a progressive decline of belief (a “subtraction” story), but it rather purports to the restructuring of the conditions of pluralism itself. Pluralism is not to be conceived as a static condition, but as an ongoing and open-ended process which point to the steadily widening gamut of new positions.

Secularism and the Post-Secular Public Sphere

In this respect the crucial question is our understanding of the complex relationships between religion and the public sphere. As Klaus Eder argues “today religion is returning to the public sphere” (Giancarlo Bosetti, Klaus Eder, *Post-secularism: A return to the public sphere*, Eurozine, Published 17 August 20) and, as Michael Walzer states, religion “becomes a political matter” (M. Walzer, (1999). *Drawing the Line: Religion and Politics. Utah Law Review*, 3, pp. 619-638). 06). From this point of view the concept of the post-secular points to the return of religion in the public sphere not in the sense that religion had disappeared and is now returning, but as a kind of deprivatization of religion. What is at stake is not only the correct understanding of the social visibility of religion but also and moreover a novel understanding of the multifarious and complex interrelationships between religion, pluralism and the public sphere in post-secular society. As a response to this problem, Habermas distinguishes between the “secular” and the “secularist” in order to designate the difference between the indifferent attitude of the secular person towards religion and the overtly polemical stance towards religion,

religious doctrines and religious contributions and their influence in the public sphere (Habermas, J. (2008). Notes on Post-Secular Society. *New Perspectives Quarterly*, 25 (4), 27). As Habermas recognizes in his paper “The Political”: The Rational Meaning of a Questionable Inheritance of Political Theology” (Butler, Habermas, Taylor, West, edited by E. Mendieta and J. VanAntwerpen, (2011). *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, NY: Columbia University Press), “the problem of the political impact of the role of religion in civil society has not been solved by the secularization of political authority per se. The secularization of the state is not the same as the secularization of society” (The Political 23). Habermas’s main argument is that it is both impossible and undesirable to escape the influence of religious contributions in the public sphere. The thrust of Habermas’s argument is that the existence of religious persons as a whole is inevitably determined by their religious faith and their arguments and contributions in the public sphere remain influenced by their faith in a sense that goes beyond any possible and complete process of neutral justification. Habermas is highly critical of the secularist doctrine which treats religious arguments as irrational or as a potential threat to the political public sphere. In this respect this understanding of the relation between religion and the political suggests a broadening of the public sphere in order to include both secular and religious contributions.

Religion in the Public Sphere and the “Institutional Translation Proviso”

In order to bridge the gap between secular and religious arguments in the public sphere, Habermas makes a distinction between the formal public sphere (which is related to the parliamentary and court deliberations, the governmental level of political decision-making and administrative decisions) and the informal public sphere as a distinctive social space constructed by the unconstrained flow of political deliberations between fellow citizens. This corresponds generally speaking to the traditional conceptual distinction between state and society, between the public authority of the state and its institutions and civil society. For Habermas the public sphere is a distinctive social space composed by the free and reasoned exchange of arguments between equals, and this social space of reasons is in turn determined by the inherently inclusive nature of our normative commitments to the rational norms of argumentation. In order to better capture the normative dimension of the post-secular considers that it is necessary to have

recourse to an “institutional translation proviso” which functions as a filter making possible the translation of religious argument in a language accessible to all. The “institutional translation proviso” is not a legal requirement or an institutional device but it rather points to a kind of civic duty as an integral part of the ethics of citizenship in post-secular society. In this respect we have to conceive what Habermas calls the institutional translation more as a rational process of deliberation based on the exchange of arguments between religious and secular citizens. According to Habermas, the model he proposes is conceptually tied to and maintains the core secular principle of state neutrality and at the same time provides a mechanism of avoiding the charge of exclusionism. As he states, the neutrality of the state power vis-à-vis different worldviews, which guarantees the freedom of all, “is incompatible with the political generalization of a secularized worldview” (Habermas *Between Naturalism and Religion* 113).

As a political process of deliberation, it the “institutional translation proviso” requires the reflexive self-transformation of both religious and secular citizens. Habermas understands secularization as a complementary learning process which involves the transformation of both secular and religious mentalities through a reflexive accommodation of their respective limits. This is a point Habermas repeatedly emphasizes in order to rethink the boundaries of the public sphere through the reflection on its relation to religion convictions and religious contributions in public deliberations on political matters. While religious citizens have to adapt to the cognitive, social, and political conditions of an increasingly secularized environment (a/the cognitive authority of science, b/religious pluralism/the existence of other denominations, c/the universal foundations of universal morality and modern law/the constitutional state) (Habermas *Faith and Knowledge* 104), secular citizens should be willing to respect the normative requirement of reciprocity by entering into a serious discussion with their fellow citizens with respect to the possible truth contents of religious contributions in the public sphere (Habermas *Religion in the Public Sphere* 10, 15).

The cognitive adaptation of secular citizens to the ongoing relevance and public influence of religion in the public sphere is precisely what we could designate as “a post-secular political mentality”. This task implies not only the recognition of pluralism as an unavoidable condition of modern societies, but also and moreover the recognition of the fact that the critical assessment of religion has – or at least should have – as a normative consequence the “self-reflexive

overcoming of a rigid and exclusive secularist self-understanding of modernity” (Religion in the Public Sphere 15). Secular citizens should not deny that religious worldviews are in principle capable of truth nor question the right of their fellow-citizens to express their arguments to public discussions in religious language. A liberal political culture can even expect from its secular citizens to actively take part in the efforts to translate relevant contributions from religious language into a publicly accessible language (Religion in the Public Sphere 10-11).

III Problems with the Institutional Translation Proviso

III-i The process of translation and its historical limits

Nevertheless, Habermas’s reconstruction of the place and function of religion in the public sphere in post-secular society is not without problems. A first problem is the scope of translation, in the sense of its historical limits, the historical limits of the process of translation as an ongoing process of transposition of religious truth contents to a secular language. Is the translation Habermas describes an ongoing process without particular end or it has its historical, social, or institutional limits? Or it is an inexhaustible process, as the philosopher Charles Taylor thinks it is, in his critique of Habermas’s institutional translation proviso? (Taylor, *Why We Need a Radical Redefinition of Secularism? Concluding Discussion* 112). In *Postmetaphysical Thinking II* Habermas responds to this objection by saying that there are no historical limits to the translation of religious contents, the process of translation is an inexhaustible process with no historical limits.

III-ii Translation in Practice and Religious Argumentation

A second problem points to the understanding of translation as a social practice. Reframing the question meaning of secularization, Habermas does recognize the fundamental role of religious contributions in the public sphere. Secular citizens have to prove their willingness to seriously engage in a discussion with the possible truth contents of religious contributions without considering religion as irrational or without passing a judgment on the

truth of religion as such. Nevertheless, Habermas makes no mention of how the translation from religious to a secular and allegedly universal language accessible to all is to be achieved in the contexts of real, everyday practice. The crucial question is how secular citizens are meant to practically realize the process of translating the contents of religious doctrines, convictions, or arguments into a secular and “generally accessible language”, given Habermas’s assumption that religious arguments remain “abysmally alien” to discursive thought and the truth contents, practices, and expressive possibilities of religion, although are not inherently alien, are still considered “too enigmatic” for the normative presuppositions of public reason (Religion in the Public Sphere 17; Between Naturalism and Religion 240). This requirement seems to violate Habermas’s normative requirement that in political deliberations in the public sphere we must treat our fellow citizens with respect regarding their autonomy and the independence of their claims to truth.

III-iii The Scope and Limits of Neutrality

A third problem with the institutional translation proviso is its normative meaning. In this respect we could ask. Which is the reason we need an institutional translation proviso as a procedure working unilaterally from religious arguments to a secular, neutral and allegedly universal language accessible to all? Do we need a translation from religious to secular reasons as a necessary precondition of state neutrality or because religious reasons as such are, as Habermas seems to argue in some contexts, beyond the scope of rational argumentation and their claim to truth concern only religious persons?

These are two different, interrelated, but conceptually distinct problems which Habermas seems systematically to conflate in his account of the “institutional translation proviso”. The influence of religious arguments in the public sphere is restrained by the additional requirement that translation must occur in the public sphere. Why the process of translation must occur in the public sphere and not at the level of the elected officials and more generally at the level of the formal, institutional public sphere? This question remains unanswered in Habermas’s reconstruction of the place and scope of religious arguments in the public sphere. In this respect the sociologist of religion James A. Beckford speaks of a “patronizing perspective” which leads

to the “emasculatation of the public sphere” (James A. Beckford. (2010). The return of public religion? a critical assessment of a popular claim. *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society*, 23 (2): 121–136, p. 125). A possible response to this problem comes from Charles Taylor. According to Taylor, we have to go beyond the standard, historically and epistemologically speaking, model of neutrality based on a given institutional arrangement in order to understand the post-secular as a political task, as a always fragile and insecure effort to strike the balance between the principles of freedom and equality. For Taylor the importance of this description is the contrast it marks with the traditional secularist model based on the fixation on religion. Secularism is not reduced to a single principle or to the special institutional arrangements of our modern democratic societies. The main contradiction of “fixation on religion” model is the conflict between the normative presuppositions of some basic or fundamental political principles of the neutrality principle (its form) and the particular social and historical contexts to which they must ultimately be applied through a process of concrete institutionalization (its content).

In dealing with secularism as a political problem, the main target of many post-secular theorists is the assumption that there is, as a normative requirement of political legitimacy, an absolute distinction between secular public reason and religion in our modern pluralist societies (Dunn, Gourgouris, Stout, Taylor, Habermas, Connolly). The idea that there is a neutral and universal process of public justification is most often singled out as the main problem of political secularism, and I mean by that of secularism as a political doctrine, from a number of theorists who argue in favor of more a differentiated and more inclusive approach towards religion in the public sphere. As Taylor argues, the main problem of secularism is not “fixation on religion”, but pluralism”. Our effort to elevate a particular institutional arrangement to a timeless principle is a dogmatic one, insofar as it does not take into account the plurality of principles concerning the place and role of religion in the public sphere. As Habermas himself recognizes, “the imperative of neutrality can be violated as much by the secular side as by the religious side” (Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion* 266). In this respect the concept of post-secular society reflects not only a well established social fact (the ‘social visibility’ of religion) but also a normative political ideal which leads to the radical transformation of the public sphere through its openness to both secular and non-secular arguments without the problems of Habermas’s “institutional translation proviso”.