

Religion, the Critique of Secularism, and State Neutrality in Post-Secular Society*

Introduction

One of the most significant current discussions in contemporary social and political theory concerns the topic of post-secular society. The concept of the post-secular is, as James Beckford argues, a transdisciplinary one and is conceptually related to a variety of subjects and a wide-ranging debates and issues of discussions in humanities and the social sciences (J.A. Beckford, *Public Religions and the Postsecular*). In this paper I explore state neutrality in post-secular society in the fields of contemporary social and political theory through a critique of secularism. My main purpose is not to define state neutrality as an institutional arrangement, but to construe a philosophical model based on the accommodation of pluralism in post-secular society. In order to do so, I proceed in three steps: a) First, I will offer a brief account of the concept of post-secular society, b) then, I will proceed by discussing what I call the critique of secularism, and c) finally, I conclude by reconstructing the debate between Jürgen Habermas and Charles Taylor concerning the legitimation of state neutrality.

Understanding the Post-Secular

From a methodological point of view, we should distinguish the concept of the post-secular as an epistemic category describing various phenomena as ‘secular’ from the concepts of: a) secularization as a historical and social process, b) secularity as the experience of “being secular”, as the moral and cultural experience of secular modernity, as the generic and unavoidable experience of living in a secular world (what Charles Taylor has famously called “the immanent frame”), c) secularism as a statecraft doctrine and/or ideology. This is obviously an analytical distinction made for methodological reasons. Secularization theory – at least in its

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mainstream version – is most commonly associated with the loss of the social functions and the political influence of religion as the necessary and inevitable outcome of modernization leading to the decline of religious belief and the confinement of religion to the private sphere. From this point of view, it is commonly claimed that religion has no longer any serious role to play in western societies marked by the irrevocable condition of social differentiation and a moral and cultural pluralism – what Rawls names the ‘fact of pluralism’ – which makes impossible any consensus on ultimate values and worldviews. Nevertheless, last years we speak of “the new visibility of religion in Europe”, of “the new visibility of religion in the public sphere”, of the return of religion, of the condition of post-secularity.

In his magnum opus *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor of “post-secular Europe”, a term which makes reference to the critique of mainstream secularization theory. The sociologist of religion José Casanova speaks of ‘deprivatization of religion’. This expression is not meant to ascertain the reversal of differentiation processes or a return to the irrevocably lost social functions of religion. Rather, it describes in sociological terms the thoroughly modern phenomenon of the active intervention of religions and churches (and by this we do not mean “established churches”) in the public sphere.

Habermas describes post-secular society as a “change of consciousness” and speaks of a “more skeptical assessment of modernity” (Postmetaphysical Thinking II 143) leading to the need to reflect on the role of religion in our modern, secular, pluralist societies. This “change of consciousness” acquires a normative significance, since it points to the opening of the public sphere to new forms of experience and sources of meaning lacking in our societies dominated by the destructive forces of secularization and a modernization out of control. In my view Habermas’s complex reconstruction of the post-secular society and the post-secular public sphere intends to show that the concept of the post-secular does not describe a new sociological phenomenon or a radical transformation of our secular pluralistic societies. Habermas nonetheless adopts a critical stance as regards the secularist relegation of religion to the private sphere and the view that religion is of no importance in the social and political life of the citizenry (Notes on Post-Secular Society 19).

Religion, Modernity, and the Critique of Secularism

The reconstruction of the concept of the post-secular requires a critique of secularism. In this respect, we should distinguish two different critiques of secularism. Both positions are in agreement that our perception of secularism is fundamentally distorted by the secularistic outlook, which takes religion as a fundamentally private matter or even as a threat to the universal presuppositions of the public sphere. A) The first one is secularism conceived as a historical/teleological account of the emergence of the secular as an exclusive and self-sufficient conceptual entity through its distinction with religion. This criticism centers on the teleological connotations of secularism describing social and cultural modernization as a process of progressive emancipation from the irrationality of religion. This conception of secularism is related to what Casanova calls a “secularist historical stadial consciousness” (The secular, secularization, secularisms 59, 66-7) and Taylor defines as a “subtraction story”, targeting by this the mainstream and largely dominant narrative of secularization which understands modernization as the progressive emancipation of rational and autonomous human, “natural” reason from the social powers, the political domination and the irrational authority of religion.

As Klaus Eder states, “The term “postsecular” means that secularism is not an exclusive feature of modern societies and that there is no natural tendency toward secularism as the exclusive telos of the development of modern societies”¹. According to this type of criticism states, secularism as a disguised philosophy of history conflates the experience of being secular, of living in a secular age with a teleological conception of history leading necessarily to the privatization of religion and the decline of religious beliefs and even the disappearance of religion.

b) The second type of criticism concerns secularism as a statecraft doctrine, which presupposes the institutional separation between political and religious authority and/or between church and the state. Political secularism as such is not necessarily tied to an explicit “theory” of religion, either positive or negative. Secularism turns into an ideology (Casanova) or a “distinctive political perspective and social movement” (I borrow this expression from the political theorist William Connolly, Why I Am not a Secularist 21) the moment it entails a theory

¹ (<https://www.resetdoc.org/story/neither-state-nor-church-but-democratic-self-government/>).

of what “religion” is or does, when the state holds explicitly a particular conception of “religion” (The secular, secularization, secularisms, 66). Political secularism emerges as ideology when it claims that “religion is nonrational, particularistic, and intolerant (or illiberal) and as such dangerous and a threat to democratic politics once it enters the public sphere” (J. Casanova, (2009). The Secular and Secularisms. *Social Research*, 76 (4), 1051, 1058).

State Neutrality in Post-Secular Society: Habermas and the multiculturalist paradigm

Thus said, how are we to understand state neutrality in post-secular society? When coming to pluralism, especially religious pluralism, in the public sphere of the post-secular society, one of the most challenging issues is the issue of state neutrality. In his article *The Idea of Public Reason Revisited* (The University of Chicago Law Review, 1997), Rawls revises his earlier account of public reason (The Idea of Public Reason in *Political Liberalism*, 1993/1996) in order to allow for religious and other moral comprehensive doctrines as being part of the ideal of public reason. Nevertheless, Rawls’s formulation has been met with criticism, since it presupposes the uncontested priority of public arguments as a type of arguments accessible to all. The Rawlsian proviso seems to impose, as numerous authors have argued including Habermas, an unbearable psychological and mental burden to religious citizens (Wolterstorff, Habermas). While secular citizens enjoy the freedom to formulate their arguments in the public sphere, religious citizens are inevitably faced with the unbearable obligation to split their identity in a private and a public part in order to accommodate their existence as citizens enjoying the same status of freedom and equality as secular citizens do.

As Habermas states, the neutrality of the state vis-à-vis different worldviews, which guarantees equal individual liberties for all citizens, is incompatible with the political generalization of a secularized worldview. Secular citizens should not deny that religious worldviews are in principle capable of truth nor question the right of their religious fellow-citizens to formulate their contributions to public deliberations in religious language. Religious insights are part and parcel, as Craig Calhoun argues, of the genealogy of public reason (C. Calhoun, “Secularism, Citizenship, and the Public Sphere”, in C. Calhoun, ed., *Rethinking Secularism* 84). Against the dismissal of religious contributions in the public sphere, Habermas

seeks to understand the post-secular public sphere as the common matrix of both secular and religious arguments. This task implies not only the recognition of religious arguments as an important source of moral and cultural meaning, but also and moreover the recognition of the fact that the critique of secularism has – or at least should have – as a normative consequence the “self-reflexive overcoming of a rigid and exclusive secularist self-understanding of modernity” (Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion* 138).

The post-secular public sphere receives its normative significance from the synthesis of the multiplicity of its resources, which involves the mediating function of intersubjective consensus without suppressing the ineradicable differences between them (*Between Naturalism and Religion* 21-2). The crucial point is that Habermas’s reflections are situated in the broader context of the post-metaphysical legitimation of the normative foundations of the democratic constitutional state (rule of law, human rights). Following closely Rawls on this point, Habermas argues that a *modus vivendi* is not enough if our main task is to rethink the complex and multifarious relationships between religion, the political, and the principle of state neutrality in post-secular society. Thus Habermas proposes an “institutional translation proviso” functioning as a filter between the informal public sphere composed by the free flow of citizens deliberations and the official public sphere, which Habermas relates to the parliamentary and court deliberations, the government level and the administrative decisions, leading necessarily to collectively binding decisions.

Adopting a different point of view, Charles Taylor is highly critical of any attempt to conceive religion as the conceptual axe around which revolves our perception of secularism and tries to dismantle this view in order to make up the case for a different conception of secularism whose superiority is reflected on its inclusive character. For Taylor, the undeniable condition of pluralism in post-secular society represents the fragile nature of the post-secular public sphere, where no single moral source has the final and uncontested authority. In contrast to Habermas, Taylor evokes the Rawlsian concept of “overlapping consensus” in order to highlight the element of contingency as the fundamental trait of the post-secular public sphere finding itself, in our post-secular age, in a state of permanent permutation and recomposition of its spiritual background and its metaphysical resources (Habermas → the pre-political foundations of the liberal constitutional state) (Taylor → *A Secular Age* → The fragmentation of the spiritual). For

the multiculturalist paradigm no particular comprehensive doctrine – either religious or philosophical – maintains a privilege relation to truth. As a consequence, it is really impossible to reconstruct a mediating consensual synthesis of all points of view as Habermas’s discourse ethics try to do.

This criticism raises some serious questions concerning Habermas’s project to rethink the conditions of political secularism. It is true that, Habermas gives at times the impression of conflating the term post-metaphysical with the term post-secular, of treating secularism and state neutrality as the conceptual equivalents of the post- or the non-religious (this is not the case for Rawls, when Rawls speaks of the ideal of public reason/public reasons, he does not mean by this the secular reason, the fundamental distinction is that between public reason(s)/and nonpublic reasons, secular reasons as such belong to the domain of “background culture”, to the domain of comprehensive doctrines).

For Taylor, the problem is that we conceptually construe from the beginning the secular state or state secularity as a definitive institutional arrangement tied to the accommodation of religion. Secularism transforms a particular historical experience based on the need to accommodate religious pluralism into the self-evidence of a universal conception of the public sphere conceived as a neutral space based on the polemical exclusion of religion, which is turn is related to the authoritative line of division between private religious belief and public political discourse (Connolly *Why I Am Not a Secularist* 20-4).

From this point of view I agree with Taylor that we should detach both secularization as a process and the secular as a conceptual entity from their particular historical origins based on the “fixation on religion” and the attempt – based to a great extent to the emergence of the modern liberal state – to establish a rigid dichotomy between the alleged neutrality of the public space and the private sphere of religious conscience, or belief. Thus understood, secularism describes a fundamental democratic condition, the correct response of the democratic state to diversity. The correct interpretation of secularism and the institutional meaning of state neutrality are better conceived as an ongoing project based on the constant rearrangement of the conflictual principles of freedom and equality. I also agree that the dividing line between public discourse and religious arguments should be drawn inside the activities of parliaments and other institutions defined by processes of decision making. The post-secular is congruent with the post-

metaphysical only if it detaches itself from its particular historical meaning based on the exclusion of religion.

Nevertheless, Taylor's view is unable to account for the understanding of secularism as a practical project based on the deliberations of the citizens themselves. As Habermas states, "[T]he secular character of the state, Habermas notes, is a necessary though not a sufficient condition for guaranteeing equal religious freedom for everybody... The parties themselves must reach agreement on the always contested delimitations between a positive liberty to practice a religion of one's own and the negative liberty to remain spared from the religious practices of the others (Religion in the Public Sphere 4)". The post-secular calls for a political stance going beyond the indifferent tolerance of beliefs, pointing to what Habermas calls "the post-secular balance" between freedom and equality (Notes in Post-Secular Society), between the ineradicable sociological and symbolical condition of cultural difference as a fundamental feature of modernity and the normative presuppositions of 'shared citizenship' which defines the very essence of the modern secular state. The neutrality of the secular democratic state is "embedded" and acquires its legitimation from the different social and historical conditions of various comprehensive doctrines, religious or not (Rawls, Habermas, Between Naturalism and Religion 308).

In this respect, secularism/and state neutrality in post-secular society are not so much reduced to the status of an institutional arrangement but they rather designate a particular normative condition, insofar as secularization transforms itself into a moral and cultural resource of modern democratic societies. The post-secular is an attempt to reconstruct a critical account of modernity and its relation to religion and its metaphysical heritage without putting into question the central achievements of secularization or the generic experience of secularity. Secularization is not an iron law of universal history but a political task based on the democratic condition of practical discourse, a response to the challenges of modernity, and an attempt to come to terms with the multiple spiritual resources of the post-secular public sphere.