

## The Post-Secular Debate: Introductory Remarks

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Some scholars have recently expressed their doubts about the popular use of the term “post-secularism” and suggested that it is merely a short-lived fashion in social theory and philosophy, all too often used to gain access to research grants.<sup>1</sup> Veit Bader may be perfectly right about the term itself, for in time it may indeed fall into disregard and disappear from use. Skepticism about its inflationary use is, we think, warranted. However, we also submit that, if severed from the temptation of proposing a new grand narrative, “post-secularism” can be useful for designating a socio-cultural phenomenon that will not wither away any time soon.

Let us first consider the inflationary reading according to which the “return” of religion is interpreted as the shift to a new age or to a new type of society coming after the secular one. According to this influential reading, advanced by philosophers as different as Jürgen Habermas, John D. Caputo, and Gianni Vattimo, in this new age a transformed religion may play a fundamental role in the socio-political sphere and enable individuals to overcome unhelpful divisions between faith and reason.

Habermas, for one, speaks of a new “post-secular society” in which religious and non-

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religious citizens engage, predominantly in the social-public sphere, in a process of mutual learning and reconciliation through dialogue and the exchange of reasons.<sup>2</sup> For Habermas, religious and non-religious citizens can attain agreements and enrich public discourse by means of a rational dialogue, understood, in large part, as leading to the translation of sacred language into secular language. In turn, by developing Jacques Derrida's deconstructive reading of religion, Caputo interprets the end of the secular age as the abandonment of the belief in the death of God and of the death of religion as proclaimed by, among others, Feuerbach and Marx. For Caputo, we have entered a new post-secular age characterized by "the death of the death of God," namely by a shift in focus away from God as Reality and Truth to God as Love.<sup>3</sup> He argues that the deconstruction of the question of the existence of God, that is, the onto-theological critique of religion, has a liberating political-religious impact. Bracketing the question of the reality of God opens up the possibility of experiencing God as passionate, impossible love beyond the absolute certainties and rigid institutional hierarchies of the Church. Finally, Vattimo welcomes the "Age of Interpretation" in which democratic citizens abandon absolutist claims about religious or non-religious nature, accept the hermeneutic injunction that "all is interpretation," and value solidarity, friendship and love over Truth.<sup>4</sup> In an all-too-familiar Hegelian gesture, this privileges the Christian paradigm as having a "world-historical" relevance. The coming of the Age of Interpretation is but the gradual unfolding of the consequences of Christ's self-sacrifice, the self-emptying of an Almighty God and the overcoming of the violent logic of sacrifice itself.

These divergent views of a "new age" that usually privilege the world-historical relevance of the Judeo-Christian paradigm are unpersuasive.<sup>5</sup> Speaking of a post-secular age or society is often premised on the false assumption that Western societies have

become secular. But even in Europe, now the most secularized continent, religion has played an important role in society and politics, even when the gigantomachia between capitalism and communism eclipsed it between WWII and the fall of the Berlin Wall. The idea of a neutral and secular European state is largely a myth. Moreover, Habermas's rational agents or translators are at worst fictional and at best a minority. In any case, people who are inspired by, and learn from, religious traditions do not represent a novelty that justifies speaking of a new society. Likewise, religious people who are willing and able to bracket the question of the existence of God so as to cultivate a post-Kierkegaardian impossible love or Vattimo's preference for love over truth are far from being representative of the common religious believer. Rather than the *differentia specifica* of a new epoch, they constitute a limited group of philosopher-believers, be they post-Heideggarian deconstructivists, influenced by Derrida and Caputo, or hermeneuts, influenced by Vattimo.

Thus the current age is not post-secular but one of accelerated pluralization in all societal fields: in the field of legal norms, for example, as argued by Mariano Croce in "Is Post-Secularism Bad for Homosexuals?," his exploration of legal pluralism and family law in this Special Issue. Western democracies in particular are neither conventionally religious, post-secular, or secularist: they are pluralistic. Together with forms of militant atheism, secularism and religious conservatism, post-secularism refers to one socio-cultural trend in the on-going dynamic of pluralization. However, if severed from the temptation to project a grand narrative, the term "post-secular" may be useful in describing a socio-cultural trend in contemporary democracies: a broad constellation of discourses and practices—philosophical, socio-theoretical, artistic, social and political, and so on—that are premised on the search for a complex, open and interactive relationship between modern reason and religion.

This search can aim at retrieving in non-dogmatic, non-authoritarian, and heterodox ways the salience of faith, sacrifice, transcendence, mystical insight, transfiguration, conversion and sacrifice, beyond the self-complacencies of conventional religion and militant atheism. Think of the new wave of philosophers, social theorists, writers and artists who have, in the past two decades, questioned the secularist opposition between religion and modernity, faith and reason, and looked for a common ground shared by atheists and the faithful alike. Although not always identified with, or self-identifying with the label “post-secularism,” Charles Taylor, Jacques Derrida, Jürgen Habermas, Ronald Dworkin, Rohit Bhargava, Bruno Dumont, Michael Haneke, to name but a few, form a complex constellation of emblematic figures who search for alternatives beyond religious conservatism and a secularism that is hostile to religion per se. Dworkin’s religious atheism, based on the claim that “Religion is deeper than God,” Thomas Nagel’s interest in the question of the “religious temperament” beyond religion, Dumont’s explorations of a “religion without religion” are all, their differences notwithstanding, part of this search beyond old-style dichotomies.

This cultural phenomenon is socially rooted in late modern democracies. The relative decline of church-going in Europe notwithstanding, the secularist worldview that is hostile to religion and predicts its disappearance has become increasingly implausible. Globally, religion is on the rise,<sup>6</sup> and even in Europe, the most secularized continent, religious and quasi-religious experiences remain important for many of its inhabitants, often in heterodox, transformed and disguised forms. There has been a growing socio-cultural pluralization, a process involving multiple factors that are difficult to reconcile. Religious minority communities, mainly the result of immigration, have become ever more assertive in the public sphere; majority churches have been

reaffirming their influence on politics and law-making in new ways, as, for example, by the use of communication technologies and transnational lobbying. In several Western and non-Western societies, the interest in (individualized) spiritual-religious experiences has grown beyond established institutions. The film director Bruno Dumont conveys this mood: “one must recover words like ‘grace,’ ‘holiness,’ for the profane world, we should not simply grant organized religion a monopoly over this language. I desire a sacred humanism, indeed a spiritual life, transcendence, but without God or the Church.”<sup>7</sup>

We can distinguish between two versions of post-secularism: rationalist and non-rationalist.<sup>8</sup> Habermas’s perspective, which has largely been responsible for the current vogue of the term “post-secular,” is an example of the rationalist version. In the 1970s and 1980s, Habermas advanced a post-Marxist version of secularism that ruled out the presence and relevance of religion in an emancipated society. However, some fifteen years ago, Habermas initiated a post-secular “turn,” motivated by empirical and conceptual-normative concerns, as well as by his interest in the historicity of modern reason. In Habermas’s version of post-secularism, religious values can legitimately influence commonly binding decisions once citizens translate them into secular norms and reasons in the public sphere. In his quasi-teleological view, translation can retrieve the seeds of moral truth contained in the plurality of religious voices; in so doing, it contributes to the gradual constitution of the unity of secular procedural reason.

While Habermas’s post-secular turn has the virtue of mitigating the exclusivist consequences of his earlier secularism, it is unable to adequately consider pluralism. As Ulrike Spohn argues in “A Difference in Kind? Jürgen Habermas and Charles Taylor on Post-secularism,” Habermas fails to show that dialogue and translation necessarily guarantee the linear progress towards a pure, unitary reason. As he himself

acknowledges, communicative practices are embedded within, and interpreted on the basis of, ultimately non-reconcilable religious traditions, which is why there are no convincing criteria for ordering them hierarchically on a value scale. If this is so, it is hard to see how translations can aim at the “same perspective” espoused by religious and non-religious citizens at the level of ideal consensus. A minority or an immigrant group, for example, can gradually produce a new interpretation of the principles of political justice by drawing on their religious tradition. In time, they can form a majority that triggers a shift in existing democratic practice. Nonetheless, as religious traditions can neither be reconciled nor placed on a hierarchical scale, such shifts cannot be accounted for by the notion of linear progress whereby reason gradually converts the plurality of religious and non-religious voices into a homogenous unity. In other words, translations are incapable of taking the edge of singularity off religious traditions so as to transmute the plurality of religious voices into the unity of reason.

The second version of post-secularism goes beyond the mainstream public reason approach of Habermas and others. Notwithstanding his post-secular turn, Habermas sees the philosopher as the “guardian” of the domain of reason, the one who can keep at bay the “intruding forces” of faith, transcendence, political theology and metaphysics. However, various continental and even analytic philosophers have advanced a more substantive challenge to secularism. They reflect on the relevance of political theological traditions for the varieties of secular state-religion regimes, and/or retrieve the experience of faith, transcendence, the holy, messianism, and the mystical for ethics and political philosophy in general. Several articles in this Special Issue pursue this line of reasoning. Alessandro Ferrara focuses on the issue of transcendence, while Colby Dickinson and Silas Morgan reconstruct Judith Butler’s view of religion and post-secularism through the diasporic experience.

This version of post-secularism is extremely diverse in terms of its claims and methodology. Let us propose a tentative division. At one pole, thinkers such as Dworkin, Taylor, or Cooke seek to integrate the concepts of faith, metaphysics and transcendence with the aim of broadening and refining the public reason approach.<sup>9</sup> In his last book, *Religion without God*, for example, Dworkin advances a project of reconciliation by arguing that religion is essentially faith in the objectivity of value (moral, aesthetic, etc.). According to his “liberalism of reconciliation,” “what divides godly and godless religion—the science of godly religion—is not as important as the faith in value that unites them.”<sup>10</sup> Joan Vergés Gifra takes issue with this claim in his critical review of *Religion without God*. Differences notwithstanding, Alessandro Ferrara’s “Varieties of Transcendence and Their Consequences for Political Philosophy,” on exemplarity, democratic ethos and religion, can also be understood as an attempt to rethink liberalism beyond the rigid proceduralist view of rationality.<sup>11</sup> While not outright dismissive of more rationalist versions of post-secularism, these approaches nonetheless assume a critical distance from them.

At the very opposite side of the spectrum, there is Slavoj Žižek’s explosive mixture of messianism and communist-revolutionary politics in his philosophy of a violent Radical Act that draws inspiration from Saint Paul, Lenin, and Mao. At this end of the continuum, we also find the work of Giorgio Agamben, which is discussed in Mar Rosas Tosàs’s “Life under and beyond the Law: Biopolitics, Franciscanism, Liturgy.” Žižek dismisses different versions of post-secularism—the Habermasian and the Derridean, among others—as nothing more than the symptoms and accomplices of a capitalist order that needs to be overcome. Žižek’s Radical Act, emerging *ex nihilo*—a revolutionary break with the current order—is a sort of Messianic leap into the “impossible.” This form of Messianism, verging on irrationalism, is resonant of a

heterodox political theology rather than of Marx's rigorous socio-economic analysis. As such, it offers an unappealing apology for the "divine violence" of a minority of revolutionaries that are not unlike Dostoyevsky's nihilist revolutionaries.

Between these two poles there are attempts to rethink democracy from the perspective of the other. These can take the form of comparative political theorizing, giving weight to the "otherness" of different theological-religious heritages and political contexts.<sup>12</sup> Or they can take the form of Derrida's radical-democratic project advanced with the tools of a universalizing philosophy of the otherness of the Other. Derrida's deconstruction conceives an open dialectic between faith and reason, messianic justice and law. By re-appropriating tenets of Carl Schmitt's political theology for rethinking sovereignty and decision, his dialectic goes beyond both Habermasian proceduralism and the Schmittian exaltation of the decision *ex nihilo*.<sup>13</sup>

The complex questions raised by these different versions of post-secularism, which take us beyond the conventional debate on religion vs rationality, cannot be settled within the limited scope of these introductory remarks. But we believe that the interrogations posed by the authors of these essays will enrich the current debate about post-secularism by moving it beyond the rigidness of Habermas's rationalism and Žižek's revolutionary nihilism.



## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Veit Bader, “Post-secularism or Liberal-Democratic constitutionalism?” *Erasmus Law Review* 5.1 (2012): 5–26.

<sup>2</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> John D. Caputo, *On Religion* (London: Routledge, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Gianni Vattimo and John D. Caputo, *After the Death of God*, ed. Jeffrey W. Robbins (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007). One may object to considering Vattimo under the heading of post-secularism for two reasons: first, he does not use the term himself, and, second, and more importantly, for him secularization is the result of the development of a Christian “logic.” From this perspective, the Age of Interpretation is part of the process of secularization. While this is true, the advent of the Age of Interpretation marks a crucial shift within the dynamic of secularization as it breaks away from the different versions of secular “absolutes” (e.g., in politics, Stalinist communism and French laicism; in epistemology, naturalism and realism) as well as breaking with a rigid opposition between faith and reason.

<sup>5</sup> In recent times, Slavoj Žižek provides the most polemic “grand narrative” centred on the Judeo-Christian paradigm and its “world-historic” relevance. Žižek privileges Christianity as anticipating the communist revolution and combines it with the often crude dismissal of other spiritual-religious orientations, in particular Eastern ones. See, for instance, Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), esp. chap. “When East Meets West,” 12–33.

<sup>6</sup> Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> Damon Smith, “Bruno Dumont, ‘Hadewijch’,” *Filmmaker*, at:

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<http://www.filmmakermagazine.com/news/2010/12/bruno-dumont-hadewijch/>

(accessed 31 October 2014).

<sup>8</sup> Ferran Requejo and Camil Ungureanu, eds., *Democracy, Law and Religious Pluralism in Europe* (London: Routledge, 2014).

<sup>9</sup> Ronald Dworkin, *Religion without God* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013); Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); Maeve Cooke, “A Secular State for a Postsecular Society? Postmetaphysical Political Theory and the Place of Religion,” *Constellations* 14.2 (2007): 224–38.

<sup>10</sup> Dworkin, *Religion without God*, 29.

<sup>11</sup> Alessandro Ferrara, *The Democratic Horizon: Hyperpluralism and the Renewal of Political Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014). See also Ferrara’s reflections on transcendence and political philosophy in this Special Issue.

<sup>12</sup> Rohit Bhargava, “Political Secularism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Theory*, ed. John S. Dryzek, Bonnie Honig, and Anne Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 637–55.

<sup>13</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Andjar (London: Routledge, 2002).