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# Secularization as a Paradigm of ‘Cross-Thought’

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Secularization has crossed history. Like other commutable terms and ideas, it has been straightened between opposite poles and among different fields; it has been used as the constitutive radical of compound words with a meaning floating from a sense of transgression (post-secularism) to a feeling of exhaustion (de-secularism); it has been appreciated as a symptomatic expression of crisis, revolution, catastrophe.

Notoriously, secularization has been put at the center of theoretical constructions.<sup>1</sup> Even in this respect, the researching glance cannot assume a univocal point of view, but comes to be fragmented into intersectional visionary lights. As Charles Taylor has clearly demonstrated in his monumental work, the conventional theory of secularization is framed by various accumulative story lines, metaphorically presented as piled floors of the same building.<sup>2</sup>

What is intriguing for critical purposes is to interrogate the genealogical flux that has alimented this progressional movement of reflection up to the contemporary age. In this perspective, the adjectival qualification of ‘genealogical’ is used in a precise meaning devoted to disclose the gap, the distance that occurs from the origin of an idea (of an intellectual construct) and the tradition of thought that has

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1 According to William Connolly, there are several doctrines that walk under the large umbrella of secularism [...] but there is also a discernable hierarchy among them”; William E. Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 5. For a clear systematization of the possible models of explanation historically living in the ‘secularization debate’, Philip S. Gorski, “Historicizing the Secularization Debate: Church, State, and Society in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe, ca. 1300 to 1700”, *American Sociological Review* 65 (2000): 138–167.

2 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 431–432: “What I’m calling the mainstream secularization thesis might be likened to a three-storey dwelling. The ground floor represents the factual claim that religious belief and practice have declined, and that “the scope and influence of religious institutions” is now less than in the past. The basement contains some claims about how to explain these changes. [...] But this doesn’t exhaust the richest versions. These add a storey above the ground floor, about the place of religion today.”

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returned it over time. Therefore, the path is not directed to search the inviolable identity of the origin; it becomes a lurking way to sneak on fractures and schisms, dispersals and deviations, fault lines and aberrations that locate the moment of arising, in its immaculateness, in a sort of Derridean *différance*.

The claims underlain to the present Focus are to dissolve what has been produced as a re-descriptive narrative<sup>3</sup> in order to shape the world in a creative tension between desired projections and reality; to uncover the ‘re-figurative’ power of the discourses that, factually, have reorganized temporal experience under the veil of a neutral, observational account;<sup>4</sup> to displace the creation of a universal mythology.<sup>5</sup>

The time has come to adopt a hermeneutics of suspicion. Taking this road of investigation, it could be provoking to note that the conventional meaning of the word secularization and the accepted function of the corresponding concept derive from a double intellectual torsion.

First of all, the recognized father of the orthodox theory, Max Weber, actually employs another term to denote what the following reflection has retained and

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<sup>3</sup> The concept of re-descriptive narrative is moulded on Paul Ricoeur’s thought; P. Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), Vol. I. For a critical assessment of secularization narratives, J.C.D. Clark, “Secularization and Modernization: the Failure of a ‘Grand Narrative’”, *The Historical Journal* 55.1 (2012): 161–194. A powerful book about the sense of narrative and of its ‘emplotting’ force, Robert A. Yelle and Lorenz Trein (eds.), *Narratives of Disenchantment and Secularization. Critique Max Weber’s Idea of Modernity* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021). For another important work in this respect, see Peter Harrison, *Narratives of Secularization* (London: Routledge, 2018), 2, where it is clearly stated that “histories of secularization turn out to be expressions of competing theological and philosophical programmes that seek to use history as a means of advancing various factional cultural-political agenda.”

<sup>4</sup> Once again Peter Harrison meets the point: “[...] accounts of secularization often seek to combine a descriptive of particular historical processes, explanations for those putative processes, and an (often implicit) ideological project or programme. Major genres in the history of secularization, in other words, can play activist roles within particular cultural-political programmes aimed at advancing secularization, or else opposing it in favour of some kind of ‘desecularization’ or ‘resacralization’. This conflation of descriptive, explanatory, and normative elements has meant that in practice it can be difficult to discern whether disagreement about secularization is primarily about the relevant facts, or simply reflects the divergent values and ideological commitments of the relevant players”; Harrison, “Narratives of Secularization”, 2.

<sup>5</sup> For a valuable contribution aimed both at historicizing and contextualizing concepts like modernity/modernization, religion/secularity, secularism and at highlighting complexities and ambiguities which are lurking under the alleged universalism of categories developed within the West and suitable for Western contexts, see Monika Wohlrab-Sahr, “Counter-narratives to Secularization: Merits and Limits of Genealogy Critique”, in *Narratives of Disenchantment and Secularization*, eds. R.A. Yelle and L. Trein, 149–171.

properly profaned, allowing it to the common use.<sup>6</sup> The central core of Weberian reflection is, in fact, the idea of 'disenchantment' (*Entzauberung*), that translates, through the evocative power of a metaphor, the long-term trend of substantial disruption happened to the real world.<sup>7</sup> For this purposes, the most influential and innovative expression comes to mark the entrance of the world into modernity by a disarticulating movement which dissociates spheres of values and norms, creating separated fields of human jurisdiction:<sup>8</sup> the sacred is removed from the mundane and secluded into the realm of the irrational; religion gradually retreats from all aspects of public life, remaining confined into the privacy of individual faith.

Secondly, this precise sense is derivative, insofar as Weber extends to sociology and law what he has primarily seen rooted in the history of religion, namely a process of rationalization and de-magicalization that started with early Judaism and became fully fledged in ascetic Protestantism.

Therefore, the success of the term 'secularization' is due to a purposive act of semantic expropriation and categorical expansion. Its first appearances unveil the ideological projects that have supported the familiar refrain; its contemporary discontents help to awaken intellectual debate from the dogmatic slumber into which it has recursively fallen.

The 'moment of arising' of the word can be brought back to the negotiations concerning the Peace of Westphalia, when it assumed a technical value, referring as it was to the seizure by lay power of all or part of the permanent endowment of the ecclesiastical institutions.<sup>9</sup> The idea of displacement (which has been transfigured to legitimize Modernity) was not exactly an act of differentiation, but rather

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<sup>6</sup> The meaning of 'profanation' here accepted is based on its etymological roots and it has been recently investigated by Giorgio Agamben; Giorgio Agamben, *Profanation* (New York: Zone Books, 2015).

<sup>7</sup> Max Weber introduced the word during a lecture he gave in Munich in 1917; M. Weber, "Science as Vocation", in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. Hans H. Garth and C. Wright Mills (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946), 138–139.

<sup>8</sup> The adjectival form of 'jurisdictional' is deliberate. It refers to the functional nature of the distinction between the secular and the religious: the dividing line is not revealing what religiosity is (in ontological terms), but what it is allowed to do. In this sense, Iain T. Benson, "Notes Towards a (Re)Definition of the 'Secular'", *University of British Columbia Law Review* 33 (2000): 519–549, 537–538; Veit Bader, "Religion and the Myths of Secularization and Separation", *RELIGARE Working Paper No. 8* (2011), available at: [https://pure.uva.nl/ws/files/2316271/140450\\_Religion\\_and\\_the\\_myths\\_of\\_secularization\\_and\\_separation.pdf](https://pure.uva.nl/ws/files/2316271/140450_Religion_and_the_myths_of_secularization_and_separation.pdf) (last access February 20, 2022).

<sup>9</sup> Hans-Wolfgang Strätz, Hermann Zabel, "Säkularisation, Säkularisierung.", in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Historisches Lexikon Zur Politisch-Sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, ed. Otto Brunner, Werner Conze, and Reinhart Koselleck, (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1984): 789–829, 798–801. This is the recurrent usage of the term in eighteenth-century lexicons; see, Johann Hübner (ed.), *Realen Staats-, Zeitungs-Und Conversations-Lexicon* (Leipzig: Gleditsch, 1711), 1366.

an act of redistribution in a double sense, involving an economic reallocation of goods and a juridical transferring of properties.

Another forgotten point (or covered aspect) regards the reversal of direction to which the movement figured out by the theory of secularization has been forced. The radical of the term – *secular* – emerges in its first metaphorical use within the domain of canon law, to denote a specific type of clerical life, the ‘secular clergy’, as opposed to the ‘regular clergy’: the first living in the world; the second faithful to the professed vows in the withdrawn space of cloisters and monasteries.<sup>10</sup> In this former context, *saecularisatio* was the proper name given to the transition from the regular to the secular clergy, referring – as the most convincing analysis has pointed out – to the entry of religion in the world, rather than to the exclusion of religion from worldly politics, as instead the supporters of the classical secularization theory are used to affirming.<sup>11</sup>

According to the suggested critique, the same role played by the theory of secularization to provide the main model of understanding of the emergence of Western Modernity is under attack. Its heuristic fallacy is evidenced by the different grades of intensity recognized to the confinement of religiosity: from the idea of a mere transformation to the assertion of its very disappearance, passing through the malleable concepts of privatization and decline.<sup>12</sup>

Therefore, the main question addressed by the Contributors of this Focus is how can the deep meaning of secularization be better understood without renouncing its authentic origin?

According to our view, one of the most persuasive and original explanations, among the numerous critical attempts spread about in latest times, has been proposed by the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben. According to him, secularization enacts a paradigmatic use of the so called signatorial strategy: it is “a strategic operator that marked political concepts in order to make them refer to their theological origins. [...] the “secularized” concept shows its past in the

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<sup>10</sup> See Iain T. Benson, “Notes Towards a (Re)Definition of the ‘Secular’”, *University of British Columbia Law Review* 33 (2000): 519–549, 537–538; Veit Bader, “Religion and the Myths of Secularization and Separation”, *RELIGARE Working Paper No. 8* (2011), available at: [https://pure.uva.nl/ws/files/2316271/140450\\_Religion\\_and\\_the\\_myths\\_of\\_secularization\\_and\\_separation.pdf](https://pure.uva.nl/ws/files/2316271/140450_Religion_and_the_myths_of_secularization_and_separation.pdf) (last access February 20, 2022).

<sup>11</sup> Vincent Depaigne, *Legitimacy Gap. Secularism, Religion, and Culture in Comparative Constitutional Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 7.

<sup>12</sup> For the idea of transformation see Talcott Parsons, *The Evolution of Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); for the idea of the disappearance see August Comte, *Cours de philosophie positive* [1830–1842] (Bruxelles: Culture et Civilisation, 1969); for the idea of privatization see Thomas Luckmann, *Das problem der Religion in der modernen Gesellschaft* (Freiburg: Verlag Rombach, 1963).

theological sphere as a signature. Secularization, then, is a signature that marks or exceeds a sign or a concept in order to refer it to a specific interpretation or to a specific sphere without, however, leaving it in order to constitute a new concept or meaning".<sup>13</sup> What is decisive is not the supposed relation of identity or discontinuity between theological and political conceptuality, but the sign impressed by a transformative origin unto the modern political construction, and consequently the specific way in which the reference worked by the signatorial stamp can be perceived and solved.

Assuming this form of interpretation, secularization can also be transformed into a paradigmatic form of cross-thought to denounce the insufficiency of a monological and exterior investigation of modern concepts: they are remains, ideal precipitates of past transformations, destined to remain inert and unproductive if not reconciled with their undisclosed and unmute excess.

The essays collected can be read within this outlined framework. Pier Giuseppe Monateri critically returns to ponder over the theoretical construction of Political Theology, a powerful work of synthesis that has been considered by an important tendency of transdisciplinary studies as an embedded expression of the process of secularization. The innovative idea is to suggest a de-temporalization and a dislocation of the hard core of the conventional views, in order to support a divorce from the omnipotent Schmittian lesson. According to Monateri, the birth of Modernity would be marked not by an act of disenchantment (because the Politics is always nurtured by the fascination of its excess), nor by a sort of decadence of the Theological into the mere Political, but by an heterodox and hyperbolic act, by a normative inversion which transforms the ancient theology in a new demonology. James I could be considered as the very artificer of this transgression: the Sovereign is such insofar as he comes into contact with the Demonic, representing the real counterpower to Satan's force. Therefore, it could be say that the proper secularization of theology in modern time, that is the ways in which theology entered the real world and the political sphere, was a process of 'demonologization'.

Mauro Balestrieri proposes a compelling use of the idea of secularization in the legal domain, in order to transfix a process of desacralisation of Law. In particular, what is under scrutiny is the interpretative tension created by Shakespearean theatre about the same ontology of the Law in English Renaissance time. The Author moves both from the qualification of the relationship between literary performative representation and human passions and from a proper qualification of that specific passion that finds in the Law its main object. This is the needed premise to deeply analyze the ways in which Shakespearean plays work on the

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<sup>13</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Signature of All Things. On Method*, trans. Luca D'Isanto with Kevin Attell (New York: Zone Books, 2009), 77.

idea of Law and promote a constructive reaction of the public. According to Balestrieri, in Shakespeare's works Law is contested: it is at the same time a possible matter of sacralization and de-sacralization. On the one side, it is sacralized because it allows a community to live together in a peaceful manner, with order and without conflicts; on the other side, it is on the verge of being desacralized, that is, of being deprived of its harmonizing function and presented for what it definitively is, a form of violence perpetrated by other means. *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* and *Romeo and Juliet* are, in this sense, three striking examples of the desacralization of law and its necessary connection with issues of sovereignty. Exactly like their main characters, Law lives on the edge of its eclipse. The threshold that separates the legal and the illegal, the legitimate and the illegitimate, is the result of a narrative process of which Shakespeare's theater provided perhaps the highest example in Western literary culture.

Richard Mullender composes an original essay, multiplying the levels of cross-fertilization among different disciplines. In fact, he adopts two excellent works of literature as cultural devices useful to explain philosophical theses about secularization. Hilary Mantel's *Greater Safety* and Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* are combined together in a form of unprecedented intertextual dependence to inspect a genealogical course of the relationship between religion and politics in Western social history. The two literary references are considered illuminating starting points to probe the contributions to contemporary liberal political philosophy by Richard Rorty, John Rawls and Ronald Dworkin. The main thesis is that contemporary liberal-democratic States may be destabilized by practical impulses that, in their intensity, have affinities with religion. The analysis is also enriched by a provoking reflection on the possible declensions of political anthropology when this discipline is dealing with the pursuit of progress. In this respect, an optimistic attitude (represented by the same Rorty, Rawls and Dworkin), according to which people have the capacity to fashion institutions and engage in practices that make it possible to accommodate a wide range of views concerning matters of faith, is juxtaposed to a pessimistic perspective (embodied by Stanley Fish and Carl Schmitt), which transforms the world into a space of incessant clashes fought between ideologies to individuate who will set the basic terms of social life.

Patrick Hanafin comes to offer a specific application of secularization theory to a precise field of Italian positive law. He discloses the counter-movements of secularization and desecularization that have marked the normative trends of reproductive legal discipline. Two different pieces of legislation are comparatively at stake: the Abortion Act of 1978 and the Assisted Reproduction Act of 2004. The Author's intention is to disclose the hermeneutical strategies and the operational devices adopted to mitigate, or even to reverse the ideological doctrines that have

inspired the two Acts. On the one side, the original inspiration of the Abortion Act has been de-secularized by the high usage of the conscientious objection clause (provided by the same text) made by doctors. On the other side, the spirit embedded into the Assisted Reproduction Act has been integrally challenged by the intervention of the Courts, that have integrally re-secularized this area of law. This clearly uncovers the historical existence of an internal dissociation between the declamations placed into the normative provisions and the operational rules that govern the practice of social life.

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