

Religion and Secularism in Post Modern Societies: A Brief Analysis

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Abstract

In this paper I will try to briefly present contemporary thoughts and critics about the state of secularism and the secularization process, in post modern societies and more specific from what contemporary sociological research, mentions about these matters. In our days, religion and its institutions may seem to lose the monopoly of legalization of values (Kotsiopoulos, 2020), within the context of a variety of social ethics. This doesn't mean that the post modern societies should violently stop the dialogue with religious institutions and religious communities, especially when ethic, political and social crises are often into rise. After all, in post modern "risk societies" (Beck, 1986), clashes and crises are crucial facts of everyday life, with a normalization tendency and with an increasing need of societies to refer to something beyond the secular theoretical despair which seems to be imposed by militant secularists.

Keywords

secularism, religion, social theory, laïcité, post modern society, post-secularism, multiple modernity, multiple secularism, sociology of religion

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I. Introduction

Secularization in general terms, is a historical process in which religion loses its social and cultural significance, the basic reason of its existence. Usually, secularization is empowered by specific social needs which are often expressed through radical movements who demand social, political and constitutional reforms. Secularism, represented within various ideological and political contexts, is the indifference, rejection or exclusion of religion or the religious considerations, with strict limitations within the individual context.

We could also assume that secularism is projected in the public space, as secularization's ideology. According to the great sociologist E. Durkheim, who tried to explain the positive function of religion in society, secularization process is seen as an invasion from the state of secular (*profane world*) to the state of sacred (Durkheim, 1915). The modernization of a society presupposes a decline of the levels of religiosity and finally the loss of a society's cultural identity. So the main question remains: are modern societies ready or from beyond ready, to get rid of anything that refers to tradition, including religion?

"Rethinking secularism"?

Secularism, as an ideology (integrated system of ideas) or as an ideal type - like the way Max Weber uses the term (*Idealtypus*) - manifests itself in the social – public space, rather militant and therefore aggressively. Ideal types are formulated by the combination of a vast number of elements which are found in reality, but they cannot substitute any ethical or religious ideal. Almost from the start of the past decade, a period when the EU and our country in particular, dealt with the consequences of a structural capitalist crisis, a dialogue opened about a comprehensive reassessment of secularization, the basic aims and the context of secularism.

Leading scholars such as Charles Taylor, Jose Casanova and others, in a common work titled *Rethinking secularism*, which is actually a compilation of articles with contributions from many social studies fields (sociology, philosophy, geopolitics, political science etc.) lay the foundations, for a structural and at the same time qualitative and creative dialogue, in the perspective of a total reflection on what secularization and secularism is.

As usual, in the context of the scientific methodology of Sociology and the social sciences in general, key questions arise based on our current situation, whether the original goals and purposes of secularization

eventually degenerated, whether as a demand it continues to meet the needs of modern people. and whether there is ultimately a need for a comprehensive reassessment, reinterpretation and redefinition of secularization.

Moreover, the overall conclusions are substantiated by elements of empirical research, which compose our contemporary reality, with the dominant feature that not only did Religions not *die*, but they are still here, possibly with different manifestations in the social space. There seems to be a greater need for religious reference in the context of the empowerment of cultural identity, in a world where individualism is imposed through globalization.

Charles Taylor, debates the terms *secular* and *secularization*, trying to present the historical context in which modern and post modern secularism is revealed. According to Taylor: “*the polemical assertion of secularity, returns in the Third Republic (France), whose laïcité is founded on the ideas of the self sufficiency of the secular and the exclusion of religion*” (Taylor, “Western Secularity”, *Rethinking secularism*, 2011). He is also mentioning the ongoing debate in contemporary France, over banning the Muslim head scarf, more like a general dead end in the secular post modern societies and especially European ones, which are dealing with growing migratory flows from Muslim countries.

Following the above, he concludes that: “*the term secular in the West is complex and ambiguous*” (Taylor, 2011). It’s also worth noting that the general idea of unlimited tolerance and also the idolizing sanctity of human rights within a strict secular context, based on atheist and non religious beliefs, is said to be strongly connected with the European Enlightenment and its spiritual fathers. Several views see in these thoughts, the very basis for modern and post modern nationalism and fascism (Tsitsigos, 2010. Calhoun, Juergensmeyer, VanAntwerpen, “Introduction”, *Rethinking secularism*, 2011. Kotsiopoulos, 2020).

Jose Casanova, also tries to define the terms “secular”, “secularism” and “secularization”, mentioning that the first is a central modern epistemic category, the second a worldview and ideology and the latter an “*analytical conceptualization of modern world historical processes*” (Casanova, “The secular, secularizations, secularisms”, *Rethinking Secularism*, 2011). As far as contemporary secularism is concerned, he will state that: “*it may be viewed as an epistemic knowledge regime (...) as a modern doxa (...)*” (Casanova, 2011). Casanova also implies interesting thoughts about the secular, which he thinks it should be “*emerged as a theological category of Western Christendom, that has no equivalent in other religious traditions or even in Eastern Christianity*” (Casanova, 2011). This conclusion, can be linked to the fact that the Roman and the Neo-Roman conception of the world (*societas naturalis*), which is indeed different from what the Eastern Orthodox theology believes, values the matter in such extent (*jus utendi*) that it allows its misuse as well (*jus abutendi*) (Kotsiopoulos, 2017).

Contemporary sociologists and in general the contemporary sociological thought, cannot ignore the catalytic influence of religion in post modern societies. Therefore the claim that we are already living within a context of multiple modernities (Eisenstadt, 2002. Davie, 2010), is totally accurate. This conclusion can easily be combined with the basic conclusion of the above study, that there is no singular secularism, but rather a range of multiple secularisms.

Finally, we can easily assume that there is definitely a talk of adapting the dynamics of the secularization phenomenon to the needs and priorities of people and societies. If the need for empowering religious identity remains alive and is constantly renewed, then the process of secularization may slow down, with militant secularism losing ground and even disappearing from the public sphere (Galassini, 2019).

Post-secular societies and the power of religion

Concluding the above, it’s more than obvious, especially during the last 15 – 20 years, that the scientific – sociological agenda has changed or is gradually changing. In another interesting work titled *The post secular in question: religion in contemporary society*, prominent scholars are trying to answer the question “*Are we living in a post secular world?*”, with a variety of methodological and scientific types.

Among several really interesting articles, sociologist Richard Madsen highlights an existing methodological problem, which concerns social research and in particular the field of Sociology of Religion. He notes that when Western scholars try to make sense out of religious cultures in non Western societies, serious disputes arise (Madsen, “What is religion? Categorical Reconfigurations in a Global Horizon”, *The post secular in question*, 2012). This indeed annoying fact, maybe connected with the distance from the fundamental principles which compose the very methodology of the Sociology of Religion or – in some cases - the lack of knowledge of all the above. Some Western sociologists take secularization process as granted for societies. It’s also a fact that some sociologists who are supposed to expertise in Sociology of Religion, due to their own personal – militant secularist or even atheist perspective, they see religion and the religious phenomenon in general, as an element of underdevelopment and an obstacle to progress.

Since the agenda is changing, as it’s already mentioned, it’s maybe time to revisit the principles of *Axiological Neutrality* (Weber, 1919), especially when Sociology of Religion is considered. The lack or more worse, the depreciation for religion and those who identify themselves through it, is far away from what the great German sociologist inherited to the global sociological society. Theology and the study of religions, have

also their special place as autonomous systematic scientific fields and they can contribute positively to the ongoing contemporary sociological and sociographic research, within the context of interdisciplinarity.

Jürgen Habermas, the most prominent agnosticist social theorist, seems to understand the value of the dialogue between the secular and religion. He is the one who introduces us to that path, acknowledging the *Power of Religion* and taking obvious distances from the militant secularism or atheism, which sometimes manifest themselves as post modern fundamentalisms in the contemporary public sphere. While trying to define the political in post modern societies, he criticizes laicism noting that it seems to try privatizing religion entirely, in an effort to keep religious citizens free of any religious “contamination”, in order to participate in the democratic process (Habermas, “The political”, *The power of religion in the public sphere*, 2011).

In general terms, Habermas suggests that secular citizens can learn from religious contributions to public discourse (Habermas, 2011. Calhoun, Juergensmeyer, VanAntwerpen, 2011). Referring to John Rawls, he mentions that: “*The liberal constitution itself must not ignore the contributions that religious groups can well make to the democratic process within civil society*” (Habermas, 2011).

II. Conclusions

1. Secularization is a historical process in which religion loses its social and cultural significance, the basic reason of its existence. Secularism is projected in the public space, as secularization’s ideology. Secularism, as an ideology (integrated system of ideas) or as an ideal type - like the way Max Weber uses the term (*Idealtypus*) - manifests itself in the social – public space, rather militant and therefore aggressively.
2. Leading scholars, trying to change or renew the contemporary sociological agenda, lay the foundations, for a structural and at the same time qualitative and creative dialogue, in the perspective of a total reflection on what secularization and secularism is.
3. Contemporary sociologists and in general the contemporary sociological thought, cannot ignore the catalytic influence of religion in post modern societies. Therefore the claim that we are already living within a context of multiple modernities, is totally accurate. This conclusion can easily be combined with the basic conclusion of the above study, that there is no singular secularism, but rather a range of multiple secularisms.
4. If the need for empowering religious identity remains alive and is constantly renewed, then the process of secularization may slow down, with militant secularism losing ground and even disappearing from the public sphere.

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