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Introduction: Religious Education and the Notion of the Post-secular

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In the preface, we write that the non-confessional religious education that was introduced in Swedish schools during the 1960s was shaped in a distinctly modern intellectual space. The concept of the post-secular is a useful tool for describing how this intellectual space has undergone major changes and for drawing attention to some of the challenges facing religious education today. In this introductory chapter, we try to answer the question: What is the post-secular context of religious education?

Although there is no consensus as to how the term "post-secular" should be understood, it is still possible to distinguish some of the recurring themes. We outline the major themes in this chapter. The concept of post-secular is also somewhat ambiguous. This is partly because the "secular" content is unclear, and partly because the meaning of the

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concept of the secular has changed with time. However, it is possible to grasp the main points in the discussion about the post-secular without first discussing the different interpretations of "the secular". Indirectly, issues relating to "the secular" will be touched on in this introduction.

Post-secularity as a Slow Cultural Change

The first meaning of post-secular refers to the disintegration at a cultural level of the ideology that was inherited from the Enlightenment, which assumed that religion would more or less disappear as society became more enlightened. From a global perspective, this assumption was false. In fact, opposite tendencies are visible across much of the world (Berger 1999), although what will happen in the West is difficult to judge.

Well-known nineteenth-century proponents of this ideology are Marx and Comte. Their visions of a "religion-less" society can, despite mutual differences, be interpreted as particular instances of this wider belief in the disappearance of religion. Also, the so-called secularization thesis that dominated sociology for more than half of the twentieth century was heavily influenced by this general outlook (Warner 2010).

According to José Casanova, the belief in an inevitable disappearance of religion has not been restricted to an intellectual elite, and he contends that Western society as a whole is still permeated by a "stadial consciousness" (Casanova 2015, 31–32). This influence on society can probably be explained in part by the success of some of the ideologies from the nineteenth century. However, despite the various explanations, what is important is that post-secularity in this broad cultural sense not only affects academic thinking, but also concerns the whole of society. It is about a changed consciousness, a loosening of the grip of stadial consciousness that in turn leads to that the secular lifestyle no longer appears as a natural consequence of modernization (Casanova 2015).

A common criticism of the traditional secularization thesis by sociologists is that it is based on a simplified picture of the relationship between religion and modernity: "In places where … stadial consciousness is absent or less dominant, as in the United States or in most non-Western

postcolonial societies, processes of modernization are unlikely to be accompanied by processes of religious decline" (Casanova 2015, 32). In other words, there is no correlation between modernization and secularization (religious decline). Instead, we have "multiple modernities". Another criticism of the traditional secularization thesis is that it is too sweeping and needs to be broken down into various components. The differentiation thesis is still relevant but none of the other components (Casanova 1994).

From a philosophical point of view, the general belief that religion is an outmoded way of living and thinking that will soon disappear is similar to a so-called grand narrative and is equipped with all the intellectual difficulties characterizing such metanarratives (a penchant for binary opposites, lack of discernment/nuances, absolutizing, an ahistorical mode of thinking, etc.). This philosophical critique reveals that the first meaning of post-secular is closely related to the concepts of postmodernity or late modernity. According to this philosophical outlook, what has lost power in our society is not only the belief that religion will disappear, but also a whole package of beliefs, such as the belief in science as a superior authority and a belief in development as a steady, ongoing process (the latter became impossible already after World War 1). Some thinkers would even argue that "secular reason" has been undermined in the historical process (Milbank 2006).

Taking this first notion of post-secularity seriously means that there is no longer any point in discussing the future of religion itself (whatever that would mean today). At least in the area of Religious Studies, the academic discussion has already gravitated towards a very different yet related question: the validity of the concept of religion influenced by Western thinking and, in particular, the ideas of the Enlightenment (Thurfjell 2016). To be more precise, what is questioned today is not religion itself, but a cultural construction of it that has profoundly affected popular culture, academic studies and the self-understanding of religious traditions. The eventual disappearance of this construction could lead to a "religion-less" society, although in a very different sense than that imagined by the early proponents of such a society in the nineteenth century.

Post-secularity as a New Form of Cultural Relativism

One aspect of late modernity—and one of the biggest challenges for religious education—is a new form of cultural relativism. In the modern period, a secular view characterized by a strong belief in reason/science and technological progress, often mixed with an atheist conviction, functioned as an unquestioned framework for the interpretation of reality. As a result of a growing awareness of the limitations of the Enlightenment heritage, this secular view has become a target for critical analysis in the same way that religion was previously targeted. A well-known example of this new intellectual orientation is the work of Charles Taylor. In his book *A Secular Age* (2007), he describes secularity as a "new context of understanding":

> … the change I want to define and trace is one which takes us from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one of human possibility among others. (Taylor 2007, 3)

Taking this argument about one "possibility among others" one step further, it follows that *all* today's life stances, including atheism and its correlations, are relative. Absolute claims no longer appear credible. This relativistic turn is visible at many levels of society. Apart from postmodern intellectual trends and a deepened historical awareness, it is related to and reinforced by social factors such as globalization and the increased presence of multicultural life forms in the West. At the same time, and taking the complexity of the situation into account, unbelief is still dominant in modern civilization and has achieved hegemony in, for example, academic spheres (Taylor 2007).

A prominent feature of this relativistic attitude is that individuals now have much more room to formulate their interpretations of life, even if it is not clear whether or how young people perceive such activity as meaningful or if it is comprehensible to everyone. What was an external authority in the modern period—science as an institution and a

normative ideal for gaining knowledge—has now lost a lot of its power in society as a whole, which is visible in, for example, climate scepticism and medical self-treatment. Trying to decide for others what should be regarded as true or reasonable is perceived as patronizing. Such considerations are now regarded as private matters and expressions of individuals' freedom of choice.

The second meaning of post-secularity denotes a particular, relativistic aspect of the slow cultural change already dealt with above. What is happening now is not only a disintegration of "stadial consciousness". In the wake of this disintegration, and also taking the weakened cultural position of science into consideration, what is left of secular reason can no longer function as a protective wall against "the religious"—what was deemed by many as "irrationality"—at a societal level. The distinction between high and low has now more or less been eroded. The influx of magic and occultism in popular culture, what Christopher Partridge (2005) calls "occulture", is a clear sign of this.

A recurring aspect in the discussion about post-secularity is whether this phenomenon is to be understood as a change in our way of reflecting on social and historical reality, or whether the change reflects a transformation of society, dawn of a new era. This section shows that both things are involved. The reorientation of critical thinking, exemplified by Taylor, where reason has begun to question its own secular foundation, marks a change in our thinking. The rampant relativism and the erosion of intellectual standards point to an actual change. However, how deep the latter change goes is still an open question. Some layers of society seem to be affected, whereas others are not. In the basic activities of everyday life, truth still matters.

Post-secularity as a Rediscovery of a Continuity With the Past

A dominant feature of modernity has been the will to completely detach from the past, to break radically with tradition and to build a new society based on science and reason. The great role model here is Descartes and

his attempt to rebuild all knowledge from scratch. At the same time, this feature has been a utopian endeavour. The power of tradition and the way it always reappears, not least through language, were underestimated. The ties to the past were never cut but were suppressed and made invisible. A dominant feature of post-secularity is the willingness to make these ties visible, trace the genealogy of modernity and recapture the continuity with the past.

Many researchers have highlighted how political ideologies, such as communism and liberalism, convey a religious heritage, albeit in a transformed and sometimes distorted form. In a similar way, secular life views and teachings are often viewed as translations of religious doctrines and messages. One remarkable example from 1959 is the German philosopher Eric Voegelin's argument that Marxism had taken over central themes from antique Gnosticism, which could consequently be apprehended as a new, or modern, Gnostic movement (Voegelin 2005). Another example is the writings of the Jewish thinker Hans Jonas. In the epilogue of the paperback edition of his classic *The Gnostic Religion* (1963), Jonas exposed structural similarities between existentialism (modern nihilism) and antique Gnosticism. As early as 1922, Carl Schmitt, in his controversial book *Political Theology* (2005 [1985]), tried to demonstrate how concepts in political science were secularized theological concepts (cf. Sigurdson 2009).

However, the appreciation of the significance of the past is not merely an academic matter. The political arenas of our time show a range of cases in which politicians and debaters make reference to traditional religious teaching in order to emphasize a dependence, or at least an inspiration, which, with its long history, could make their arguments look sound. The past is no longer a problem that we have to overcome, but a resource.

A recent example in a Swedish political context is the Christian Democrat leader Ebba Busch Thor, who on various occasions has formulated her vision for meeting the challenges of a multicultural society by referring to a Christian platform. In an article entitled *The suburbs would also benefit from Christianity*, published in April 2019, Busch Thor claimed that "Becoming a Christian Democrat is perhaps a way of saying that one has seen what makes a society successful and understood what gives the inhabitants the greatest possible freedom. Upholding Jewish

Christian ethics and Western humanism is not a method of sneaking in morning prayer and Sunday school to create a religious Sweden, but a guarantee of the opportunity to have a liberal lifestyle"[1] (*Expressen* April 20, 2019).

What happens here is that Jewish Christian teaching is used to make a political statement in a new and different historical context from that in which this teaching is rooted and that seems to promote some kind of universal claim. The teaching in question is presented by Busch Thor as providing a solid and significant foundation for what is taken to be a successful liberal method for dealing with the challenges facing Sweden's multicultural suburbs in the twentieth century. This example also shows a blurring of the borders between what is apprehended as "secular" and "religious" (see the next section).

Close to the political arena is the school context, which is our final example in this section. In 2009, the Swedish National Agency for Education was commissioned by the government to develop a new religious education syllabus. Christianity had been given a special position in the Agency's proposal, which mainly reflected its historical significance for Swedish society. The government chose to reinforce this special position in a number of points by adding "values and culture" to underline the historical significance, and it was emphasized more clearly that Christianity has a special role in relation to the other world religions. This revision reflected an increased emphasis on Christianity as a cultural heritage, which could in fact be regarded as a post-secular turn in Swedish society (Thalén 2019).

Post-secularity as the Resolution of the Sharp Boundary Between "the Religious" and "the Secular" or "Non-religious"

The previous section leads into the theme that could be very significant in terms of how religious education is designed in the future. The sharp distinction between what is and what is not religious is currently being dissolved in society, and categories and conceptual boundaries are

becoming blurred. The book *Post-Secular Society* (Nynäs, Lassander and Utriainen 2015), edited by members of a Finnish research team, contains plenty of empirical examples from different areas of society of how contemporary religiosity is in a state of change that is marked by "individualization, democratization, fluidity, hybridity, relocation, and the transgression of boundaries" (Utriainen et al. 2015, 189).

The social mechanisms behind this blurring are manifold. In contemporary society the ideological dimension of religion is increasingly losing its importance. The differences between religions become less important for individuals, which also tend to dissolve the boundaries between the religious and the secular. A change from dogma to subjective experience and a shift from the collective to the personal occur when the authority of religious institutions is dissolved (Frisk and Nynäs 2015; Warner 2010). The empowerment of the individual has given rise to eclecticism, where secular and religious views are blended together, facilitated by globalization. Moberg and Granholm stress the role of the media and popular culture in this transformation:

> … if the increasingly sustained focus on the visibility of religion in the public sphere … were to be coupled with an equally sustained focus on the impact of the media (in the forms of both technologies and institutions), popular culture, and consumer culture, then scholars might well arrive at drastically different interpretations of the actual composition and general character of the religious landscape of the West …. (Moberg and Granholm 2015, 114–115)

Further, according to Moberg and Granholm, the impact of the media, popular culture and consumer culture re-shapes "what 'counts' as religion, what the function of religion is, what the various arenas and locations of religion are," (Moberg and Granholm 2015, 115).

The fact that popular spirituality expresses itself in both a religious context (e.g. sacred dance and meditation) and secular culture (diverse practices of well-being such as yoga and mindfulness) means that there are no longer any "sharp borders between the religious and the secular, between holy and profane" (Frisk and Nynäs 2015, 56). Several examples of this phenomenon—Utriainen, Hovi and Broo use the expression

in-between-spaces—are found in hospitals, health care and palliative care (2015, 93). Religion can today be seen as something that is multi-located and people do not need to see themselves as either religious or non-religious. The same conclusion, based on other premises, is reached by the Finnish theologian Tage Kurtén: "At the beginning of the 2010s, we must understand human life beyond the secular—religious distinction"[2] (Kurtén 2014, 259).

There are also cultural mechanisms or large-scale historical processes behind the blurring of categories. The category religious–secular/non-religious has been developed within the framework of the Enlightenment's way of thinking, which is characterized by general (ahistorical and timeless) divisions that disregard linguistic and historical differences. The breakdown of the category religious–secular/non-religious at a societal level reflects and interacts with the breaking up of the Enlightenment paradigm at a historical level.

The cultural aspect of blurring the categories appears most clearly in those academic contexts in which the concept of religion is critically discussed (cf. Thurfjell 2016). The "secular" is usually seen as the opposite of "the religious". But if the Western concept of religion is deconstructed, or is shown to be a mixed product of Western Christianity and Enlightenment patterns of thought, "the secular" category will be undermined and exposed as a cultural construction. In the future there may not be any non-religious people in the West. Not because of a religious revival that achieves total hegemony—that is pure fantasy—but because the modern division between "the religious" and "the secular" may no longer be meaningful or understandable. We need to go no further than the Reformation era to find such a cultural reality.

Post-secularity as the Return of Religion in Society

The fifth meaning of the concept of post-secular is the most common and, at the same time, the most controversial, namely the idea of the return of religion in society. A lot can be said about the use of the term

"return" in this context, but a common denominator is that it often refers to at least partly measurable phenomena (even though it is difficult to estimate or measure non-organized religion) that are not only of interest to sociologists of religion. This empirical trait makes this interpretation of post-secularity different from the cultural and philosophical approaches mentioned earlier. A fully possible position is to affirm post-secularity in the cultural/philosophical senses and at the same time deny that there is any visible sign of increased religious/spiritual activity in the West, indicating some kind of significant trend shift or even reversal of the so-called process of secularization.

The question of the "return of religion" has been widely discussed amongst sociologists of religion. A well-known study in Great Britain from 2001 to 2003, conducted in the small market town of Kendal by Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead (2005), concluded that there was evidence of the beginning of a spiritual revolution in terms of religion giving way to spirituality. This conclusion has been contested by Steve Bruce (2017) and other defenders of the "orthodox" secularization thesis. In their opinion, the number of people practising "alternative" or "holistic spirituality" is far too low and cannot fill the gap of the general decline of traditional, organized religion. Inspired by the Kendal study, a group of Swedish sociologists of religion investigated the spread of religion and spirituality in Enköping, a small Swedish town similar to Kendal in important aspects. However, in contrast to the Kendal study, no clear signs of a "spiritual revolution" could be detected (Ahlstrand and Gunner 2008).

In recent sociological research in a Nordic context, attempts have been made to try to bridge the conflicting views between those who defend the secularization thesis and those who regard it as more or less obsolete by introducing the concept of religious complexity (Furseth 2018). Using this concept as a theoretical framework makes it possible to discover and discuss simultaneous aspects of the growth, decline and changes in religion in different spheres and at the micro-, meso- and macro-levels of society. Advocates of post-secularity are thus regarded as too one-sided "and fail to account for multiple religious trends that appear at the same time" (Furseth 2018, 15). Characteristic of this example of current research is that the research team (wisely) refrains from making any

long-term predictions about the future of religion and instead adopts a perspective of non-linearity: "Changes are often nonlinear and unpredictable" (Furseth 2018, 18).

What complicates this sometimes polarized discussion of a "return of religion" in society is that the standard sociological question of "return of religion" in empirical surveys seems to be framed in a particular matrix of scientific thinking in which a sharp distinction between "the religious" and "the secular"/"non-religion" is assigned an axiomatic role (even if not regarded as unproblematic) when presenting the results. Challenging this presupposition implies that the question of return needs to be reframed. The future might be neither religious nor secular, but something that we cannot imagine or foresee at this moment in time. Introducing a theory of complexity does not deal with or solve this methodological difficulty.

Even if "return" is mostly about increased religious activity, or a growing interest in the various spiritual practices of a population, or at a certain level of society, it sometimes also refers to a more limited phenomenon: the new visibility of religion in the public sphere, not least in the media. Talking about "the return of religion" in this sense does not imply a basic change in the role of religion in society, or a return in a literal sense, but that it is still an open question (a growing opinion against religion is also an example of visibility). This new visibility mirrors the new ethnic diversity of former homogenous (and secular) countries, caused by immigration and a heightened awareness of the religious dimensions of the political conflicts on the global scene (Furseth 2018). However, it is also plausible that this new visibility is connected to post-secularity as a cultural change in terms of a weakening of the inherited barriers from the Enlightenment that impeded talking about religion in the public sphere. Another connection, suggested by Habermas and mentioned already in this chapter, is the emergence of a new self-reflexive stance to the Enlightenment heritage that questions a secularist understanding of modernity.

A third meaning of the "return of religion" is the deprivatization of religion. Whereas "visibility" primarily refers to a new awareness of the presence of religion in society, deprivatization implies a factual and quantitative increase of religion in the public sphere. But this increase does not refer to phenomena such as "New Age" spirituality, which is central to

the Kendal study, but to the revitalization of those traditional religions that had been ruled out by social scientists as "marginal and irrelevant in the modern world" (Casanova 1994, 5). Deprivatization in this sense poses a real challenge to the part of the traditional secularization thesis that predicts a general decline in religion. Religious traditions throughout the world are, according to Casanova, "refusing to accept the marginal and privatized role which theories of modernity as well as theories of secularization had reserved for them" (ibid., 5). In his ground-breaking book *Public Religions in the Modern World* (1994), Casanova analyses examples from three different continents (Spain, Poland, Brazil and the United States) to substantiate his thesis.

If we make a threefold distinction between "return" in a strong sense and in a moderate and weak sense, deprivatization would belong to the moderate category. The re-emergence of the Orthodox Church in Russia would be an example of return in a strong sense: a substantial change at a macro-level that affects a whole country. The new visibility and different expressions of "New Age" spirituality in secular countries such as Sweden would indicate "return" in a weak sense, which is open to interpretation and does not necessarily contradict established theories of secularization. This attempt to determine the extent to which we can talk about a return of religion in society is imperfect in several senses and should be viewed as provisional. The new visibility sometimes also contains aspects of a factual increase in religion in, for example, the media. If this visibility is viewed as a symptom of a deeper shift in culture, a new awareness related to the revaluation of the Enlightenment heritage, the visibility itself, no matter what it is, would indicate the return of religion.

Post-secularity as a New Public Role for Religion

A sixth interpretive approach to the concept of post-secularity is the social philosophical one presented by Jürgen Habermas. He raises the idea that religious voices must be heard in a democratic society, but that when speaking from constitutionally influential positions, they need to adapt to the language use of secular society (Habermas 2006).

The Swedish sociologist of religion Anders Bäckström has argued that one can ask whether Habermas really believes that religious voices have an intrinsic value (Bäckström 2012). In the work mentioned, Habermas discusses John Rawls' concept of an impartial position with reference to which disagreement should be analysed and assessed, and whether this position is a secularly defined position. Habermas emphasizes that religious people's voices have something to add to the social dialogue about values, but at the same time argues that a religiously defined basis for constitutionally anchoring democratic values is not possible, because it would reduce the diversity of voices entitled to be heard in the public conversation.

At the end of his "Notes on Post-Secular Society", Habermas claims that:

> [T]he state's neutrality does not preclude the permissibility of religious utterances within the political public sphere, as long as the institutionalized decision-making process at the parliamentary, court, governmental and administrative levels remains clearly separated from the informal flows of political communication and opinion formation among the broader public of citizens. (Habermas 2008, 28)

This means that religious voices are welcome to take part in the "informal flows" mentioned, even when using religious language. However, according to Habermas, this constitutes a challenge to secularists in the form of an "expectation that secular citizens in civil society and the political public sphere must be able to meet their religious fellow citizens as equals" (ibid., 29). He also claims that "Secular citizens are expected not to exclude *a fortiori* that they may discover, even in religious utterances, semantic contents and covert personal intuitions that can be translated and introduced into a secular discourse" (ibid., 29).

Consequently, and at least in principle, this approach opens up for a dynamic process in discussions in which secular and religious voices meet in a common context of a mutual exchange of arguments, ideas and viewpoints. There are, according to this approach, democratically anchored borders to be respected in arenas for institutional decision-making processes, while at the same time informal societal and political dialogue helps to bridge gaps and unite.

Some Further Interpretations of the Concept of Post-secularity

The exposition of interpretations and different meanings of the concept of the post-secular presented in this introductory chapter are not exhaustive. Here we have only touched on central aspects of a large subject area. Two additional meanings, which are more peripheral but could be relevant for religious education, are also worth mentioning.

The post-secular could represent a trend in academic theology, sometimes with traditionalist or conservative elements, where in the talk about the "postmodern" and in the relativization of a secular perspective on human life as something historically contingent, some theologians see an opportunity to upgrade parts of an older theological tradition. If this trend continues, it could affect the content of religious education.

Finally, in Religious Studies—and especially in the sociology of religion—the concept of the post-secular could signify the development of a new concept formation for carrying out empirical studies of religious change in contemporary society. This is the approach recommended in the book *Post-Secular Society* (Frisk and Nynäs 2015). The elaboration of this conceptual formation does not mean that an a priori decision has been made as to whether society actually demonstrates post-secular traits or not, but rather enables an empirical investigation of such eventual traits in society. In this sense, the concept formation intends to be neutral, even if its use at the same time is a critical marker against previously too general and simplifying hypotheses—the so-called secularization thesis in its various guises—of an ongoing secularization of society.[3]

Notes

1. Authors' translation.
2. Authors' translation.
3. A much shorter version of the typology of different meanings and interpretations of the concept of the post-secular presented in this chapter can be found in the introduction to the book *The post-secular classroom* (Carlsson and Thalén 2015).

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