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## The Postsecular Point of View

**KEYWORDS:** postsecular, conference overview, Slavic cultures and literatures, religious experience, modernity

**ABSTRACT:** The paper is a subjective overview of the international conference “The experience of faith in Slavic cultures and literatures in the context of postsecular thought,” held in Warsaw on 16–17 October 2017; it aims to comment on the nature of the postsecular approach, as well as the problems and potential of research into religious experience in Slavic modernities.

The international conference “The experience of faith in Slavic cultures and literatures in the context of postsecular thought,” held in Warsaw on 16–17 October 2017, was organized by the Institute of Western and Southern Slavic Studies of the University of Warsaw, the Faculty of Polish Studies of the University of Warsaw, the Institute of Slavic Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences and the Slavic Foundation. Its reference point was a claim by Peter L. Berger, a former proponent of secularization theory and one of the most important sociologists of religion, that today’s world is “as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever.”<sup>1</sup> Having in mind the famous conceptualizations of José Casanova, Thomas Luckmann and Jürgen Habermas on the specific nature of the religious in modern society,

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<sup>1</sup> Peter L. Berger, “The Desecularization of the World. A Global Overview,” in *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, ed. Peter L. Berger (Washington, D.C.: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1999), 2.

the conference organizers decided to focus on Western and Southern Slavic cultures as they are perceived as being able to reveal various subjects and experiences that cannot be captured with the traditional dichotomies, such as the sacred–profane or the religious–secular. The organizers suggested postsecular thought as a hermeneutical perspective due to the fact that it provides a new approach to relations between the religious and the secular, but in Slavic countries it has been adapted to different extents. For this reason, the conference was not devoted to ‘postsecularism’ as a particular view, but to modifications of *images of religiosity* which could provide a more nuanced sense of the issue thanks to *postsecular ideas*. The aim was to open a discussion about the modes of the religious/spiritual experience under the conditions of local modernities, to popularize both the hermeneutical perspective and the Slavic research material. This is why the conference received financial support from the Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education that is allocated for activities disseminating science (‘DUN’), according to contract no. 695/P-DUN/2017.

The conference was attended by twenty-one scholars from Bulgaria, Czechia, Holland, Poland, Serbia, Slovakia, Ukraine and the United Kingdom. The program consisted of two keynote lectures (“Religious and sexual nationalism: theo-politics of blasphemy in Central and Eastern Europe” by Srdjan Sremac and “The secular, the sacred, and the three stages of postsecular/post-postsecular in Russian literature: past and present” by Ivo Pospíšil), two panel discussions (“A specific nature of contemporary religious experience” with Nonka Bogomilova, Roman Kečka, Kamila Klingorová, Stanisław Obirek, Srdjan Sremac and Yuri Stoyanov; “Secularization, desecularization, postsecularism” with Karina Jarzyńska, Roman Kečka, Stanisław Obirek, Ivo Pospíšil and Michał Warchala), and four modules of individual presentations (“Religion beyond orthodoxy” with Paula Kiczek, Magdalena Maszkiewicz and Nemanja Radulović; “Religious experience in gender perspective” with Nonka Bogomilova, Dominika Gapska and Kamila Klingorová; “Belief or mockery – A real alternative?” with Elżbieta Benkowska and Ola Hnatiuk; “Literature, religion and the search for methodology” (held in Polish) with Ewelina Drzewiecka, Anna Gawarecka, Grażyna Szwat-Gyłybowa and Danuta Sosnowska). The conference ended with a presentation of the film “Not to judge” by Magdalena Lubańska and Pawlina Carlucci Sforza (35 min), which received a prestigious documentary film award from the Grand OFF World Independent Short Film Awards. It was preceded by a special lecture by Lubańska: “Post-memory of the suffering of the Homo Sacer in the region of Subcarpathia, Poland: A post-secular anthropological view as an introduction.”

The keynote lecture “Religious and sexual nationalism: theo-politics of blasphemy in Central and Eastern Europe” by Srdjan Sremac from the Depart-

ment of Religion and Theology at Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam was held on the first day of the conference. It raised the question of the relation between religion and nationalism based on a particular vision of sexuality. The subject of the analysis was the discourse of Church leaders in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe on the famous Eurovision performance by Conchita Wurst. The potential of blasphemy, which in this case was moved from the religious to the political sphere and subordinated to anti-Western rhetoric, was interpreted in the postsecular framework of the prophetic.

The keynote lecture, “The secular, the sacred, and the three stages of post-secular/post-postsecular in Russian literature: past and present” by Ivo Pospíšil from the Department of Slavic Studies of Masaryk University in Brno, was held on the second day of the conference. It raised the question of the specific context of Slavic literatures which led to a specific attitude towards the problems of the sacred and the secular. The author explained that some Slavic countries barely experienced the Western stages of cultural development or did not experience them at all; he argued that the absence of the Reformation in Russia resulted in the unfinished process of secularization, which manifested itself in permanent postsecular returns to “the sacral kernel of arts and literature.”

Although the keynote speakers represent different scientific approaches to different research materials, it is particularly meaningful that both of them referred to the issue of the ambiguous relation between the ‘West’ and the ‘East’, given the Western claims of being the ‘universal’ framework, which very often turns out to be a source of misunderstanding and frustration within the framework of European culture. Sremac stated that Central and Eastern Europe are sometimes seen by Western Europe as homophobic, which is related to the notion of an antimodernist, conservative, intolerant Other. Pospíšil brought up the popular notion of the imperfect imitation of Western models by Slavic cultures, but he agreed that the history of so-called Western Europe was a complicated process and there is hardly any parallel which might correspond to the contemporary understanding of the East and West.

The conference raised three basic issues: images of modern religiosity in Slavic countries, meanings of the postsecular and related concepts such as (de)secularization, (re)sacralization, (dis)enchantment, and the postsecular framework in Slavic-focused research.

### **Images of modern religiosity**

As far as images of modern religiosity are concerned, the two main perspectives that guided reflection at the conference were literary studies and the sociology

of religion. The starting point was statistical data on contemporary denominational declarations of the populations of Slavic countries. In this context, issues of stereotypes and well-established images of national cultures arose.

Talking about the “Contemporary religious experience in Czechia,” Kamila Klingorová from the Department of Social Geography and Regional Development of Charles University in Prague reminded the audience that the well-known fact that about 80% of citizens declare themselves as non-religious is a result of the historical development of Czechia, particularly key events such as the Protestant Hussite movement (14–15th century), the Battle of White Mountain (1620), Recatholization (17–18th century), the Expulsion of Germans after WWII and the communist regime. Focusing on the situation after the revolution in 1989, she showed that initially the religiosity of the Czech population significantly decreased, but the current situation can be described as a postsecular turn as there are various ongoing processes of desecularization, spiritualization and individualization of religion. One of these phenomena, (re)sacralization of public spaces and landscapes, was discussed in detail in the second presentation by Klingorová, “Women’s everyday experience with religion and spirituality in post-secular Czechia. A geographical approach.” Showing the results of her research with Tomáš Havlíček and Zdeněk Vojtíšek, it focused on the spatial dimension of the religious experience, i.e. how ordinary women turn places that are not primarily associated with religion or spirituality into sacred or spiritual ones through their embodied, emotional, and spatially varying practices.

In his presentation “Postsecular or post-traditional? Slovakia between tradition and secularization,” Roman Kečka from the Department of Comparative Religion of Comenius University in Bratislava argued that about 75% of the population declare a religious denomination, which often leads to a simplified view that the Slovak religious landscape is monolithic and traditional. It is still obvious that the traditional institutional form of religiosity is dominant, nevertheless its nature is more complicated than is usually claimed. Kečka stated that according to sociological research, Slovakia has actually seen a very dynamic post-traditional turn characterized by belonging to a church and attending its services, and at the same time being open to new spiritual possibilities outside the institutional ecclesiastical milieu. This ‘post-traditional Christianity’ in Slovakia is experiencing a process of transformation and adaptation of traditional religious forms in the conditions of a modern pluralistic society.

A complicated image of modern religiosity emerged from the remarks of Nonka Bogomilova from the Institute for the Study of Societies and Knowledge of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences and Yuri Stoyanov from the Near and Middle East Department of SOAS University of London. Both confirmed

that the Balkans can be seen as a region that is marked by religious pluralism and syncretism, torn between a return to tradition and the search for new religious forms – between official declarations and everyday practices. Particularly interesting was Stoyanov's presentation on the subject of religious syncretism in the historical dimension and in relation to the current situation. He pointed out the crucial role of the experience of the Byzantine and Ottoman models of culture in the history of the Balkans and in this context gave a few examples of attempts to create syncretic religious systems. He also gave some case studies from Bosnia and Herzegovina, showing that peculiar clericalization and religious purism should be taken into account when investigating the contemporary situation, because religious borders are no longer porous, but increasingly sharp.

The phenomenon of the intertwining of the private–public and religious–secular spheres in the context of the experience of post-communism was also a subject of the presentation by Ola Hnatiuk from the Center of East European Studies of the University of Warsaw and Kyiv-Mohyla Academy. It was devoted to “New dimensions of religiosity in contemporary Ukraine (on overview of the changes of public space, 1989–2017)” and showed not only the religious and ethnic diversity of Ukrainian society, including the complex situation of the local Orthodox Church(es), but also some very interesting cases of the public activity of various (quasi)religious groups. The first case was the huge movement of Greek Catholic believers in the late 80s, who while fighting for legalization of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church in the USSR organized the first public service and Christmas celebration in Kiev Opera House. It was very interesting to be reminded that the famous quasi-religious movements of that time (e.g. the Kashpirovsky TV programs, the Ukrainian Sacred Republic, which was a peculiar project created by Ukrainian fantasy writer and former dissident, Oles Berdnyk, and the White Brotherhood) as an alternative to the official atheism were supposed to protect society against the Greek Catholics. The second case was a new kind of religiosity in public space which appeared during the Maidan protests in 2013–2014. According to Hnatiuk, the day-and-night prayers and speeches on the square that were established by an ecumenical temple and were given by the head of the Orthodox Church and the Greek Catholic Church, as well as Chief Rabin of Kyiv can be treated as an example of a new phenomenon in Ukraine – an ‘ecumenical religiosity’.

The second basic issue developed by the conference participants was an interpretation of quasi-religious motifs in cultural texts from the perspective of literary and cultural studies.

Magdalena Maszkiewicz from the Institute of Slavic Studies of Jagiellonian University in Cracow raised the question of “Unorthodox experience of faith

in Ivan V. Lalić's and Miodrag Pavlović's poetry: a comparative study." She presented two models of unorthodox yet Christianity-related religious experience in the poetry of the 20th century Serbian authors Ivan V. Lalić and Miodrag Pavlović, arguing that in their works these poets reflect on the existential situation of the contemporary human being by re-interpreting texts of culture from antiquity to modern times. Maszkiewicz's presentation was a comparative analysis of their poems referring to Christian texts: the Bible, and Byzantine and Orthodox literature. The rebellious and blasphemous approach of the lyrical speaker was interpreted not as a mere negation of the traditional idea of holiness, but as an attempt to overcome the classical oppositions in thinking about the world and humanity, among which there is a dichotomy between the immanent and the transcendent.

Nemanja Radulović from the Department of Serbian and South Slavic Literatures of the University of Belgrade raised the question of the development of Slavic Neopaganism since the 1980s. In his presentation "The reception of the Book of Veles and the disenchanted world," he stated that desecularization is apparent not only in the revival of traditional religions, but also in many forms of esotericism which influence various streams from high to popular culture and contemporary folklore. Referring to Christopher Partridge's term 'occulture', he analyzed how the reception of the Book of Veles – a mystification purporting to be a text of ancient Slavic religion and history – is characterized by a deep ambiguity of the sacred and the secular. He argued that the programmatic antimodernity of neopagan groups turns toward the resacralization of the disenchanted world ('reconstructed' as New Age), but while doing so they still act within the concepts of modernity and, above all, national identity.

Anna Gawarecka from the Institute of Slavic Studies of Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań gave a presentation entitled "Surprise or approval? The picture of religious experience in Františka Jirousová's 'Vyhnanci' (*The Exiles*)," in which she shows that the progress of atheization and secularization of Czech society can be seen as a result of the restlessness and disintegration of firmly established traditional models of identity. The subject of analysis (the novel *The exiles*, published by Františka Jirousová in 2010) was interpreted as an example of the existential anxiety caused by the lack of a common axiological denominator or a platform of understanding which would be respected by all members of society and constructed on the basis of uniform and generally shared axiological systems. It was argued that the fact that the novel was awarded the high-profile Jiří Orten Prize for literature in 2011 is evidence that questions concerning the role of authentic religious attitudes have resurfaced in Czech public discourse and have regained the importance they seemingly had lost.

The subject of interest of the conference participants was not only various literary texts, but also cultural phenomena in a broad sociopolitical context. In her presentation “Women’s spirituality in postsecular Serbia,” Dominika Gapska from the Institute of Slavic Philology of Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań showed how the spiritual tradition of the past, i.e. the cult of female saints and the female monastic tradition, creates codes of meaning in postsecular Serbia. She pointed out a significant growth of interest in religion among Serbian women – who are rediscovering the role of spiritual mothers as counsellors and guides in religious and social matters – and argued that the monastic life is now reclaiming its position in society. Functionalization or actualization of the religious senses can be observed in the fact that female saints are presented as major figures in Serbian history and culture.

Paula Kiczek from the Institute of Western and Southern Slavic Studies of the University of Warsaw focused on Czech philosopher and dissident Milan Machovec, who was an initiator of the so-called ‘seminars of dialogue’, which were created as a platform for dialogue between Marxism and Christianity in the early 1960s at Charles University in Prague. In her speech “Faith beyond doctrines – faith in dialogue: reflections on the philosophical anthropology of Milan Machovec,” she presented Machovec not only as an important thinker who had close relations with Erich Fromm and Ernst Bloch, but also as an emblematic example of a man who – with disillusionment with traditional faith and with experience of the totalitarian regime and the crisis of civilization – encountered the world and the ambiguous possibilities it offers. Tending to turn towards the Socratic practice of questioning persistent dogmas, his main concern was to seek a deep understanding of the spiritual needs of contemporary people.

Different material was proposed by Elżbieta Benkowska from the Faculty of Languages of the University of Gdańsk; she gave a presentation entitled “We believe only in BKS... Religious motifs in the chants of Polish and Serbian football fans.” She interpreted religious motifs in football songs from the perspective of a social function of religion and people’s desire for belonging and strong identification.

## **Research problems**

The image of modern religiosity captured by the conference was modern *par excellence*: it was ambiguous and related to the specifics of the everyday life. As shown by the sociologists and literary scholars at the conference, this

experience manifests itself in mixing orders, going beyond, overcoming opposition, and looking for alternative sense horizons. However, this diverse review of 'modern religiosity' also revealed many problems, both plainly articulated and hidden, and thus it requires comment.

In the presentations and discussions, the problems of describing religiosity were pointed out from the point of view of methodology. It was stated that the perspective of sociology of religion focuses on statistics and asking questions about declarations; however, the situation is more complicated as it is influenced by the pluralization and heterogenization of views, as was emphasized by Bogomilova during the panel discussion. In this context, both the questions and the answers become problematic. As summarized by Kečka, 21st century people are asked questions from the 19th century. Another question was whether popular concepts of 'desecularization' and 'postsecularity' are suitable in the context of Slavic countries. There were also serious doubts relating to the traditional notions and chronology of these phenomena due to the fact that the sociological approach is shaped by the Western conceptual dictionary.

The participants of the conference agreed that the understanding of modern religiosity or phenomena of spirituality requires a serious revision. They stressed that the individual or subjective context should be taken into account and for this the concept of 'lived experience' or 'lived religion' seems to have particular potential. The second context which should be considered is the context of local conditions, i.e. the history of Slavic cultures, which are different than Western ones. The struggle for national identity was a recurring motive, as were postcommunism and postmodernism. It should be stressed that Slavic modernities were also influenced by the atheism enforced during the communist regime(s), which changes the perception of the 'return to religion' after 1989.

The second research problem which arose during the conference was the diversity of notions and scopes of understanding of the postsecular. Of course, postsecular thought is heterogeneous in its very core as it covers not only many disciplines but also methodological and political positions, so it seems more legitimate to talk about it as a set of features that are subordinated to various contextualizations. Moreover, the scope of the conference was only to bring up the notion as a hermeneutical perspective. Nevertheless, the terminological issue manifested itself especially during the discussions. No solution was found, possibly due to the fact that the main reference point for the scholars was the reflection of sociologists of religion and philosophers of modernity, both of whom focus on religiosity and religiously experiential specifics in general. As a result, there was a broad understanding of the subject, which is

understood as the relation between religion and modernity (where modernity is perceived as a period marked by secularization).

As a co-organizer and participant of the conference, but also as a proponent of the postsecular turn, I would like to take the opportunity and comment more on the issues that emerged during the event. My goal is to present the postsecular point of view in the context of general questions of the religious, both in research and in Slavic studies.

First, it should be noted that in this context the ‘return of religion’ – and thus the coexistence of the religious and the secular – can be seen as the next stage of cultural development. The object of analysis is various forms of religiosity founded in unexpected contexts, i.e. syncretism, heterogeneity or purism. In this sense, most of the presentations at the conference can be seen as ‘thematization’.<sup>2</sup> As I argued before, this is the most popular and widespread approach in postsecular studies, but also to some extent it is a misleading type of postsecular approach. While in the case of sociology or philosophy reflection is focused on multidimensional determinants of these phenomena, in literary studies it is about the interpretation of their textual testimonies, including games with religious codes (and thus paraphrases). The subject of research is usually a contemporary search for the spiritual experience in the conditions of Western secularity.<sup>3</sup>

In general, we can observe some terminological chaos among scholars, both in relation to the postsecular as well as in its connections with other phenomena and concepts, not only desecularization and resacralization, but also postmodernism, especially when literary play with religious motifs is taken into account. Due to the fact that ‘postsecular’ may apply to both the subject (when describing forms of contemporary religiosity) and the approach (when developing a specific interpretation of religious subjects, etc.), these two orders of meaning are often mixed. Moreover, two facts should be distinguished: the return to the religious among contemporary researchers and the emergence of new religious-like phenomena in the modern world.

As Tracy Fessenden pointed out,<sup>4</sup> researchers who deal with new forms of religiosity (and have a pretension to undermine the Enlightenment’s

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<sup>2</sup> Ewelina Drzewiecka, “Myśl postsekularna w badaniach slawistycznych. Próba spojrzenia,” *Studia Litteraria Universitatis Jagellonicae Cracoviensis*, no. 9 (1) (2014): 29–44.

<sup>3</sup> See e.g. John A. McClure, *Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007); Amy Hungerford, *Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion Since 1960* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Tracy Fessenden, “The Problem of the Postsecular,” *American Literary History*, no. 1 (2014), 154–67. DOI: 10.1093/alh/ajt066; Tracy Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

conceptual system) are still caught up in progressive history, as they see in these new forms a new – better – stage of religious development. In essence, their approach only changes the definition, but the usual temporal pattern remains valid. In fact, they are still within the framework of the grand narrative of modernity, according to which religion and secularism are a confirmed alternative. In this sense, they represent a secular approach.

The prefix ‘post’ is not about the chronology of the occurrence of the phenomena: it is about finding a way out of well-established patterns of thinking. Nevertheless, these two orders overlap quite often – the meaning of secularization as a concept is a separate problem. Are we talking about the ‘classical’ sense or the reinterpreted one? Postsecular thought has undermined the theory of secularization, understood within the framework of a progressive narrative. Processes of modernization and the ‘disenchanted’ of the world are recognized here as mutually conditioning and therefore proceeding in parallel. However, the essence of the transformations that are typical of modern times is not the gradual disappearance of religion, but – as Charles Taylor formulated it<sup>5</sup> – they are a change in the conditions of belief which can be described by semantic shifts within the ‘religious–secular’ relationship. Moreover, since the processes of secularization are indeed heterogeneous (but also disproportionate), one cannot speak of homogeneous modernity in terms of the effect of secularization phenomena, but of its many local variants that appear according to the specificity of a given culture. Postsecular thought does not reject secularization as a social process, it only problematizes it by raising the question of the character of the Enlightenment, perceived as liberation from the captivity of traditions/religions thanks to scientific stereotypes. In this sense, secularism is the grand narrative of (Western) modernity. In this context, one can agree with the thesis that “all philosophically serious discussions about religion conducted in a postsecular perspective revolve around the interpretation of this one, exemplary modern motive: the death of God.”<sup>6</sup>

In this perspective, postsecular thought situates itself in the ‘dialectical between’; it is a kind of immanence open to the ‘religious’ and thus can participate in the transformation of experience.<sup>7</sup> This is why the postsecular approach is not only thematization, but also deconstruction – a particular search for ‘religious’ paradigms within the secular. Importantly, religion

<sup>5</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> Agata Bielik-Robson, “Przedmowa,” in *Deus otiosus. Nowoczesność w perspektywie post-sekularnej*, eds. Agata Bielik-Robson and Maciej A. Sosnowski (Warszawa: Krytyka Polityczna, 2013), 8.

<sup>7</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Glauben und Wissen* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2001); Bielik-Robson, “Przedmowa,” 7.

is defined as a worldview or a kind of sense-making horizon which is historically fluid and can only be captured in opposition to the concept of secularity. This approach is thus in open conflict with the secularization thesis as it questions its very tenets and points out that the relation between the secular and the religious is dialectic. As Talal Asad showed,<sup>8</sup> the ‘secular–religious’ relation is contextual and discursive, i.e. its elements are defined and valorized depending on the cultural context. Moreover, this binary opposition is in fact a construct. It is the (cultural) institutions that have built the difference between the secular and the religious. These are the terms which have been and are used to establish boundaries for discursive contexts and the identities of those who speak within them.<sup>9</sup>

And so, postsecular thought offers a tool to investigate this ‘religious–secular’ tension. Here, secularization becomes only a loose term for certain phenomena, defined each time for the needs of a given cultural context, i.e. in regard to its specific boundaries and reference points. In this sense, it is a function of the *pluralization of modernity*, as shown by Peter L. Berger, Charles Taylor or Anthony Giddens.<sup>10</sup>

Entangled in the discourse of modernity, postsecular thought asks questions about the effects of modernization. In this way, it links to recent theories concerning translation, adaptation and cultural transfer. It is especially inspiring if viewed in the context of reflection on Westernization or, more specifically, the (seeming or alternative) secularization of non-western cultures. The focus is on revising concepts (genealogies) and problematizing the role of institutions. The question is about the nature of the so-called ‘Center’ and about the reasons behind cultural change. It is precisely in this context that the Western-centric character of the scholarly discourse becomes evident. As a result, there is a need to create a new suitable research language which would take into account the local conditions, including the relevant religious context.

And so, postsecular thought investigates this change in the conditions of belief; it is also a term for the changes in contemporary humanities and social sciences.

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<sup>8</sup> Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

<sup>9</sup> Michael W. Kaufmann, “The Religious, the Secular, and Literary Studies: Rethinking the Secularization Narrative in Histories of the Profession,” *New Literary History*, no. 4 (2007): 607–27.

<sup>10</sup> See e.g. Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990); Taylor, *A Secular Age*; Peter L. Berger, *The Many Altars of Modernity. Towards a Paradigm for Religion in a Pluralist Age* (Boston and Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014).

## Postsecular potential

As was indicated during the panel discussions, the advantage of the postsecular approach is not only the recognition of sacred or religious language or moments in history, but also the revision of the canon and methodology. The argument that this is a Western term and perhaps should not be used in the context of Slavic cultures is valid *only* if it is defined as a thematization and is thus related to the progressive narrative. If the postsecular is seen as an attitude towards the ‘universal’ conceptual dialectics, research on Slavic ground is not only possible, but necessary. As Peter Coviello and Jared Hickman suggested,<sup>11</sup> the general idea is to provide a study of the past which is *free from the bondage* of the secularization thesis, and so it consists of epistemological and methodological *self-interrogation*, which means a changed vision of modernity that would eschew the *irrelevant* category of secularity. This would be a specific reference to the call for saving modernity. At the conference, this was strongest in the statements of Stanisław Obirek from the American Studies Center of the University of Warsaw and Michał Warchala from the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Pedagogical University of Cracow. Both these scholars in fact saw the need to interpret the world in order to create distance from traditional judgments, fixed canons of knowledge and concepts.

Referring to the famous claims of Habermas, Warchala called postsecular thought a way of saving secular humanistic discourse, or even a new paradigm of analysis of religion within the Western modernity. He stated that this approach is new, but the phenomenon which is described by it has a quite long history. The hermeneutical aim is to retranslate religious symbols into a language of the liberal public sphere so a new kind of consciousness or language can appear – a consciousness which would take into account the religious and the secular and oscillate between them successfully.

In this regard, Obirek presented some interesting attempts to overcome the existing dichotomy of ideological positions. He mentioned the debate between Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger in 2004 in Munich, a long interview for BBC television conducted by Richard Dawkins as a part of the program “The genius of Charles Darwin” with the Jesuit and astronomer George Coyne, and three inspiring books: *The many altars of modernity. Toward a paradigm for religion in a pluralist age* by Peter L. Berger, *Sacred stories, spiritual tribes. Finding religion in everyday life* by Nancy T. Ammerman and *The practice of everyday life* by Michel de Certeau. He agreed that the religious pluralism of

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<sup>11</sup> Peter Coviello and Jared Hickman, “Introduction: After the Postsecular,” *American Literature*, no. 4 (2014): 645–54. DOI: 10.1215/00029831-2811622.

the modern world is a hermeneutical key to interpreting religious changes, but in order to analyze religious phenomenon appropriately it is necessary to take another step and overcome the traditional dichotomy. Obirek's view on the Polish Catholic Church as being unable to deal with the challenges of democracy and globalization should be seen in precisely this context. It seems that Karina Jarzyńska had the same ideal in mind when arguing that a postsecular way of thinking which differs from the mainstream narration about Polish heritage could enrich modernity research in Poland.

And so, the postsecular turn in scientific research means not only recognition of religious language, but also in-depth problematization of senses and petrified oppositions. The subject of interest should be the mixing, intersecting and overlapping of religious and secular senses – going beyond the binary dichotomy, looking for new ways of understanding.

What (and how and when) is defined as secular or religious?

Who (and how) translates the meanings?

## **Postsecular propositions**

Among the conference presentations, there were also some attempts to apply tools or hypotheses of postsecular thought in hermeneutical practice. In his lecture on religious and sexual nationalism, Sremac not only used religious language in a secular context, but also referred to the conceptualizations of Gianni Vattimo and John D. Caputo. However, in the light of the meta-language problem, the propositions of Danuta Sosnowska and Magdalena Lubańska were even more interesting.

In her presentation “Postsecular versus postmodern interpretation? The religious issue in Czech literature after 1989,” Sosnowska argued that thanks to postsecular thought the question of the usage of religious motifs in contemporary Czech literature can be perceived not as an example of postmodern play with the Christian tradition or even a sign of a consumption of sacral language, but as an attempt to reveal dangerous stereotypes of thinking – inadequate yet comfortable notions on the most important questions about existence. She recalled the philosophical assumptions of Jean-Luc Nancy and Tomáš Halík in order to claim that by undertaking the transcendental theme – by showing metaphysical yearnings – Czech literature became a critic of Czech culture, with its materialism and mundane character.

Lubańska focused on the “Post-memory of the suffering of the Homo Sacer in the region of Subcarpathia, Poland.” Relying on interpretive tools developed in the form of the post-secular theory proposed by Talal Asad and Giorgio

Agamben, she talked about the post-memory of the atrocities committed in 1945–1946 in a Subcarpathian forest near the town of Przeworsk and asked about the status of phenomena which are unclear, mixed or liminal; why and how do they escape the traditional oppositions?

There were also conceptualizations regarding research on Slavic cultures in general that were based on the assumption that postsecular thought has become a prerequisite for reorganization and revalorization of research on so-called Eastern Europe, including the Balkans (due to its unique path of development that is related to different socio-cultural, i.e. Byzantine and Ottoman, experiences). If modernity is defined broadly and universally, then studies on ‘small cultures’ can go beyond the traditional interpretative ‘pattern – copy’ or ‘center – periphery’ models. It is possible to establish that there is incoherence in the Western narrative about itself in relation to its own ‘other’.

In this context, I gave a presentation entitled “Postsecular thought and literary studies: new perspectives.” I argued that the discourse of literary studies is of primary importance for the study of the relationship between religion and modernity, firstly because of its entanglement in the grand narrative of secularism, and secondly because of the character of literary studies. Taking into account remarks by Jordan Stein and Michael Kaufmann, I suggested that literary studies can play a crucial role in unearthing the provisional nature of the grand narrative of secularism because they are particularly sensitive to the provisionality of the studied objects, and so they can unearth the ‘inequalities’ and ‘inconsequences’ of the secular discourse. By this token, they can disturb the coherent and linear vision that is based on a simple cause-and-effect chain. In this sense, I claimed that scholars should turn their attention to literature and literary studies rooted in ‘Eastern European’ cultures because, as they are ‘peripheral’, they can reveal the underbelly of the modernization narrative, and thus bring about a re-evaluation of the ‘Western’ narrative of modernity. For this reason, I proposed the adoption of a research orientation that would merge the crypto-theological (or deconstructive) approaches and epistemic sensitivity, which is a feature of literary studies.

In her speech “Weak thought, deep trace: observations on the migration of ideas in the Balkans,” Grażyna Szwat-Gyłybowa presented the results of the grant project “Migrating ideas in the Slavic Balkans (18–20th centuries)” (NCN 2014/13/B/HS2/01057), arguing that a systematic analysis of the local discourses brings to light the way in which seemingly secular and rational elements turn out to be ambiguously enmeshed with theological paradigms. Taking into account Michel Foucault’s view on the history of ideas as a “discipline of fluctuating languages, of shapeless works, of unrelated themes,” she noted that this was indeed particularly apparent when applying the instruments of postsecu-

lar studies to reflection on the processes of negotiation that affect the semantics of migrating ideas that shaped modernity in the southern Slavic area. She suggested that the overall picture is far more complicated than Walter Benjamin's metaphor of the 'dwarf' of theology might suggest – that the 'automaton' actually seems to be concealing not one but many 'dwarves of theology', who as often as not cast Manichean shadows of their own. Moreover, she raised the question of the epistemological significance of the 'small cultures' by calling in Constantin Noica, a Romanian thinker who chose to treat the fragile and the weakened as the starting point in his philosophical explorations – an intellectual choice in tune with the anti-dualist aspects of his thinking regarding the problem of linguistic and ontological modality. It was claimed that when viewed from that perspective, any questions about the connection between linguistic structures and the heterogeneity of theological forms that manage the characteristic failed or failing projects (such as 'capitalism' without capitalism, 'conservatism' without conservatism, 'fascism' without fascism, 'racism' without racism, etc.) emphasize the need for further and more comprehensive analysis of migrating ideas at a higher level of meta-meta-reflection.

Both proposals defended the specificity of the Slavic material but also established a new connection with the issue of the West as an interpretive model and a source of ideas. These attempts at *being in-between* (here: the traditional modes of reading) could be seen as being particularly fruitful as they do not close themselves to Western thought; this is a dangerous look from the outside, but also they do not get involved with the local resentment and trauma of modernization.

The conference showed that investigating the religious in the Slavic area *is* problematic. It brought to mind or even revealed many important issues. As stated by Klingorová during one of the panel discussions, Slavic religious experience is "messy," but maybe it is better to say that the Slavic experience of modernity is messy. Bearing in mind that this 'Slavic experience' is only a metaphor – a mental shortcut – we should remember that it *is* torn between the specificity of the local context and Western-centric unification. Investigating this phenomenon is indeed full of potential. The postsecular approach is particularly worth attention and application just as a *weak or weakening thought*. The aim is to weaken both yourself and the other...

In this regard, it is worth thinking once again about the idea of overcoming the existing dichotomy of ideological positions or languages, thus allowing distance from one's own ideological positions or languages. Here is a passage from a Polish example of a dialogue between a scientist and atheist (Jerzy Vetulani, a neurobiologist) and a theologian and believer (Grzegorz Strzelczyk, a priest):

Humanistic reflection is important for a scientist for at least three reasons. First, a theologian or philosopher can ask interesting questions that give rise to neurological research. This may be, for example, a question about the existence of free will, which the neurological equivalent of scientists will try to discover. Science develops due to both technological development and the right issues. I do not expect a new brain scan from a theologian, but to formulate inspirational questions that will force me to find convincing answers.

Second, a theologian saves and analyzes theories that appear in the history of culture. Philosophical and religious concepts of the soul or sources of morality may carry interesting intuitions, develop our understanding of the subject, suggest a different perspective.

The third issue is to consider the ethical and societal consequences of scientific discoveries. A theologian can help to capture scientific problems in the broader context of everyday human experiences and dilemmas that bring about the progress of science.<sup>12</sup>

Is this not a perfect expression of a postsecular approach to knowledge as such?

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