SOCIAL NORMS AND RELIGIOUS VALUES ON SECULARIZATION

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Abstract

In the following paper, I try to discuss the habermasian meaning of secularization, having as background the concept of communicative action and the tension it imposes between norms and values. The starting point is the definition that Habermas gives to secularization as a ‘double and complementary process of learning’ through which the political terms are ‘translated’ into religious terms. They admit their own religious, cultural and ethical source, thus finding resources to establish the solidarity and the respect of the citizens. In this way, secularization is in fact identical, in a dialectical manner, with post-secularization and the relation between religion and politics is to be described as a dialogue. I try to give examples of how this dialogue is possible in a historical form. Another pattern for secularization can yet be imagined, as long as both religion and politics are being comprehended not within themselves, but starting from their common root, the one that R. Girard, for example, refers to as sacrificial violence. Andre Scrima could be of help at this point. Secularization, as dispossession of the Church of its assets by the state, has in fact as a premise the entering of the Church itself into the temporal logic, into the game of power with an unequal partner, namely the political institution. The regress of the Church from the logic of the worldly power could be the ‘positive’ meaning for secularization in this case: the return of the Church to the catacombs, a seemingly worldly defeat, brings back the Church to its primary source, that of the concreteness of the living Christic message. Nonetheless, my main concern is not to develop one of these models of secularization, but to show the difference between them and to bring forward the possible consequences in case one of them is adopted.

Keywords: values and norms, secularization, communicative action

1. The issue

On 19th of January 2004, at the Catholic Academy of Bavaria in München, J. Habermas and the (at that time) Cardinal J. Ratzinger had a debate where the German philosopher formulated a double question for the discussion:

1. the question if, by adopting the positive law, it would still be possible a secularized legitimation for the political sovereignty, that is a non-metaphysical and a nonreligious legitimation.

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2. and considering that such a legitimation is possible, the second question would be that if a pluralist community can hold out just through a formal consensus, without appealing to values and cultural resources that come from within the communities using them to define themselves (the religious communities, for example).

‘Habermas’ response is that the participation of citizens to the public life and their adherence to the state mechanisms “definitely nourish from ethical life programs and existing ways of cultural living” [1]. The moral awareness of the principles that provide a political identity for the state, their pre-political ‘anchorage’ secures the right kind of solidarity and the link needed for the good functioning of law mechanisms. Yet, at the same time, the specific political mechanisms of the cultural communities shouldn’t get in conflict with those specific to the state, the parallelism between the state’s and the ethical communities’ functioning should be overcome by rethinking both the secularization process and the relationship between political and pre-political. This is the starting point for the definition that Habermas gives to the secularization as a “double and complementary process of learning”[1, p. 93] through which the political terms are ‘translated’ into religious terms. They admit their own religious, cultural and ethical source, thus finding resources to establish the solidarity and the respect from the citizens. This way secularization is in fact identical to the ‘postsecularization’ [2] and, at philosophical level, to a cultural critique of reason. But the members of the religious communities also have to rely on the “normative intuition” [1, p.95] of their own values and go beyond the simple reference to the community they belong to. They conceive their own representation of the world in a nonexclusive manner and try to translate their concepts into an ‘accessible to all language’. Habermas believes that this translation should be performed particularly by the lay citizen, as a member of the religious community is mostly seen as a value provider: not a passive provider, it’s true, but one who offers himself and brings his own being into the game, one who is oriented towards the others, allowing and awaiting closeness from them.

Moreover, discussing the ethical grounds of the law, Cardinal Ratzinger redescribes the situation from the point of view of a member of the religious community. ‘The divine light of reason’ acts as a supervision instance concerning the ‘pathologies of religion’, such as fanatism. But at the same time the hybris of reason is restricted by the corrective that the religious tradition makes. The future Pope Benedict the XVIth believes that the refusal of the centralisms, from the centralism of faith to that of the reason and then the refusal of the Europecentrism is made through a listening technique and a “mutual purification” provided by the acknowledge of the other [1, p. 115].

This essay places itself into this perspective and asks the following question: how can one possibly reformulate the religious value, starting from Habermas’ concept of ‘normative intuition’ in such a way that it could be brought into the public debate sphere? The resources of the ‘norm’ concept, the way Habermas sees it, could provide an answer. But a second question is
whether the religiosity is not concurrently comprised of fields that are impervious at the intervention of the public sphere categories, fields where its specificity actually resides.

So I will begin the discussion by outlining the concept of secularization in Habermas’ writings and trying to describe it in three steps. The terms of norm, communicative action and value are significant for the discussion – they describe, in fact, the secularization as translation process of the religious norm into social norm.

Another acceptation of the secularization is however possible, as long as authors like W. Benjamin or G. Agamben consider the political not through its formal-procedural nature, but rather as a power’s area and as way of ritualizing the primary violence [3, 4]. At this point secularization is being judged from a radical exteriority point of view in relation to both the political and the religious: the exteriority of violence, for the two above mentioned authors or, as in the suggested alternative at A. Scrima, the exteriority of love [5]. Secularization becomes a method through which both the political and the religious positivisms are deconstructed; this way the access to the exteriority I mentioned is gained and implicitly to the possibility of discussing again the social norm, but starting from its origin.

My purpose here is to describe the two patterns of the secularization. The main thesis of this essay, which is rather implicit but confirms the approach that follows, is that both the meaning of the political and that of the religious correlatively define themselves and their tension field could be represented by the concept of secularization. Its two above mentioned patterns are in two different ways exemplifying this tension and the correlative defining. Out of this fundamental interest come other objectives of the essay, such as outlining ‘the moments’ of the secularization at Habermas (sections 2 and 3) or emphasizing the relation between W. Benjamin’s discussion and that of G. Agamben’s concerning the primary violence (section 4). This essay should describe possibilities rather than providing solutions or arguing the validity of a pattern in relation to the other. What is essential is not the argumentation of a position, but the emphasizing of the difference between these positions. Beyond this difference in perceiving both the political and the religious lies their essential correlation emphasized by the concept of secularization. The antinomic structure of this essay, with its two moments, leads to, as I was saying, an implicit unity.

2. Communicative action and norm

Habermas defines the communicative norms as “the mutual expectations of a behaviour at an intersubjective level that we satisfy along with our verbalizations” [6]. The consensus of the communicative action is on the one hand referring to the propositional content of the utterance and on the other to the validity of the norms that ‘unify’ the participants’ behaviour at the communicative sequence. The universal pragmatique acts as the first philosophy of the communicative rationality. Habermas’ concept of norm can be further
explained if referring to the first pages of *The Theory of Communicative Action* [7]. Habermas makes the distinction between the teleological action, the normatively regulated action, the dramaturgical action and the communicative action. The normatively regulated action implies a social context for which a set of norms are established and regarded as valid. The consistency of the social world, that occurs in relation to this type of action, coincides with the consensual recognition of the defining norms set. In the passage referring to the communicative action, Habermas considers thoroughly this idea, showing how the normatively regulated action involves a limited perception of language, namely as “consensual activity of those who only make real an already existent normatif agreement” [7, p. 111]. This employment of language - as the other employments as well - that are specific to the teleological or dramaturgical action stand in fact for an ‘ultimate case’ of communicative action, through which „both locators negociate situational definitions of something from the objective, subjective and social world, by taking into account the horizon of Lebenswelt” [7, p. 111].

Therefore, the ‘normalized’ action is for Habermas the manner of universalizing the communicative action, allowing the actors’ reciprocity and consensus regarding the world. This way normativity represents the very method of eliminating the communication’s external constraint and enables an unrestricted communicative practice. Therefore, the normative aspect is the cornerstone for the ideal communicating situation. Moreover, given that the communicative action connects the concept of norm with the lifeworld and with its interpretation, the norm becomes the non-metaphysical way for conceiving the truth and for a non-objectivizing foundation of a world view. Along the same line, the validity of norms [8], which is based on the participation in the discourse and on the participants’ agreement concerning the regularities that enable the interaction, determines the understanding of the social world as a non-ideological entity and the political participation as way of exercising freedom.

In the quoted pages from *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas also suggests the possibility of applying the concept of norm to the here discussed issues: the possibility of ‘translating’ the religious value within the public debate sphere: “We do not asociate cultural values with normative validity. But values postulate a kind of normative form: when it comes to a matter which necessitates a general regulation, they can acquire the status of general laws” [7, p. 104]. The communicative action conveys the cultural value as „a substratum of the consensus” [7, p. 110] and consequently is assumed within the social world. How can the religious value – a particular case of cultural value – be translated into a social norm?

3. Religious value and norm

Habermas’ discussion on religion has various coordinates. Ranging from Philosophy of art to Sociology, then to the theories of modernity or to Kant’s work analysis, the context in which Habermas relates to religion is hence
multiple. Yet one of the recurring topics, modulated according to the purpose of the discussion, is the understanding of religion as the ‘starting point’ for the philosophical or social mechanisms’ conceptualization. “I wouldn’t defend myself if someone said to me that my view itself about language and communicative action seeking to reach an understanding nourishes from the Christian heritage.”[9]

Habermas thinks that the capitalization of the religious tradition – especially the Christian tradition – as a source for his concept, in this case for the concept of norm, is not possible unless mediated. We can try to reconstruct these mediations’ stages. Firstly, the translatability of the religious value I mentioned acts as a presupposition of the approach. Habermas implicitly recognizes this idea’s sources as being Durkheim, Mead or Weber. Secondly, the religious values are taken away from the metaphysical or soteriological [1, p. 94] legitimation that ‘confines’ them to the exclusive universe of reason focused on the subject. In the third stage these values are redescribed as structures of the ‘lifeworld’ which are communicatively assumed under the form of norms. The consequence: “Translating the idea of a man who was created in God’s image and after His likeness into the idea of equality of all men’s dignity which must be unconditionally respected is an example of saving translations” [10].

These three moments can be summarized in a few words. Habermas considers that the translatability of the religious value consists in recognizing the fact that the origins of the modernity are decisively marked by the mutations of the religious conscience. M. Weber’s approach to this matter in his The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism serves as a model in this direction. The world’s disenchantment maintains a fundamental relationship with its enchanted past. The pre-rational roots of rationality are widely discussed in the second volume of The Theory of Action, starting from E. Durkheim’s views. Habermas observes that for the French sociologist the communicative action has a prelinguistic root in the symbolic nature of communication, in the same way in which the moral authority has its origin in the ritual adjustment of the community existence. Rites, the primordial element of religion, “are ways of action that rise only within the reunited groups and are meant to provoke, maintain or bring back certain mental states of the group” [11]. Subsequently the rite’s normative consensus becomes a model for conceiving the objective character of group values, through transcending the mundanity and the relativity of time. But the challenge is to actually transfer the ritual consensus from the specific sacred regime into the social one. This phenomenon is defined as putting the sacred into words (Mise-en-langage, Versrachlichung). Therefore, „mediation through language of this normative action can give an impulse for the rationalization of the Lebenswelt” [7, Tome II, p. 98]. Habermas explains that the community’s identity is being essentialized as savoir culturel and as tradition through transforming into propositional content, while the normative universalizable character of the communicative normativity transforms it into a social norm. Therefore, connecting the sacral knowledge (savoir sacral) and the profane knowledge (savoir profane) through language makes religion an image
of the world communicatively universalizable. This is a win-win situation: the religious image regarding the world loses the possibility to justify through itself the social norm and to create an identity, but its function is being changed within the institutional systems: „By taking part in situational interpretations, made by the locators, cultural savoir becomes action-coordinator. (…) mythical, then religious-metaphysical images make institutional systems more comprehensible” [7, Tome II, p. 101].

The second moment, that is taking the religion away from the metaphysical legitimation area, is in fact placed into the wider Habermas’ project, that of the rethinking the modernity outside the philosophical boundaries of the metaphysical subject. The rethinking of the unfinished ‘project’ of modernity, the theme of the 1980s or the work The philosophical discourse of modernity in 1985 are leading to this issue. The source of the metaphysical legitimation resides in the specific modern need to ensure oneself and to confer legitimacy without appealing to the exemplary models from the past: „modernity is no longer able or willing to borrow its orienting standards from another time’s examples, it has to create out of itself its own normativity” [12]. For those at odds with the ancients, their self assurance has different paths, and Hegel remains the exemplary approach. He resorts to the theory of absolute subject that validates itself and at the same time brings along the ‘reconciliation’ with what modernity, in refusing the external reference, ends up forgetting: the world, the history, the positivity in general. But the course chosen by Hegel after his professorship at Jena leads to a deadlock: the absolute subject undervalues the actuality on behalf of the nontemporality and ignores being critic and therefore modern: „the rationality transformed into absolute spirit neutralizes the circumstances under which modernity has come to a self awareness” [12, p. 58].

In the type of legitimation that uses strong instances [13, 14] like the absolute subject, the modernity contradicts itself. Hence the need of switching to another form of ensuring oneself, one that is under the sign of the paradigm of understanding. Surprisingly this paradigm’s resources are also found in Hegel, in his early works about the normatively-ethical potentiality of the Greek polis or early Christianity, but which he later abandoned, after the step taken towards science (Schritt zur Wissenshaft) he made during the time he spent in Jena. The path of the communicative reason, under the paradigm of understanding, is different from the first mentioned path, that of the reason focused on the subject. The understanding of the reason as a mood of the subjects „able to speak and act, to acquire and utilize a fallible knowledge” [12, p. 297] is the modernity unexploited source through which the natural insertion into the everyday is assured, maintaining at the same time the request for a universal normativity. The replacement of a paradigm with another has consequences as far as the status of the religious truth is concerned. This loses its status of epistemic infallibility and the power to exclude the alterability – which are, in fact, characteristics of the metaphysical subject. The religious truth can no longer be founded out of the ‘exterior’ of the everyday praxis, but only to allow this praxis to transform it. The ‘formal and supratemporal’ nature of the transcendent
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conscience – whether metaphysical or religious – is being diminished through the linguistic, historical character of the communicative reason. The religious truth becomes unintelligible as far as the perspective of the fallible everyday knowledge concerns; out of this perception, the religious truth is seen as being strange and as a form of violence.

The third moment, that of the actual redescribing of the religious categories, is also specified with the help of The Philosophical Discourse of the Modernity. In the last chapter the German philosopher writes about the lifeworld and its connection with the everyday communicative praxis. Going beyond Marx’s differentiation between the formal rationality and the substantial rationality, Habermas describes the way in which, on the one hand, the lifeworld represents an additional source of meaning for the communicative action and on the other hand the communicative action rationalizes and reproduces the lifeworld. What meaning could be given to this interdependence? Habermas observes: „Taken as resource, the lifeworld is being operationalized according to the elements provided by the verbal actions – that is their propositional, illocutionary and intentional elements – in the cultural area, in society and person” [12, p. 321]. Culture as additional source of meaning for interpretation, the society as legitimate order of solidarity and personality as identity for the role played while acting – these are examples of ‘translation’ and ways of reproducing lifeworld in the communicative action’s context. The differentiation between the lifeworld’s individual content and its general structures is the hallmark for coupling before the predication, the holistic, intuitive segment of knowledge with the structured everyday knowledge. Therefore in what the religious values are concerned, their translation into cultural content implies a delimitation of their local applicability from the universal validity and also their functioning as additional sources for the interpretation of the world. Habermas’ example in his text from 2004, that of the translation of the formula: „in God’s image and after His likeness” into the idea of all men’s equality overlaps his previous theoretical considerations [1, p. 94].

From the Habermas’ texts perspective, the capitalization of religion in the public sphere seems evident, even necessary from the perspective of avoidance of the religious ‘totalitarianisms’ or fanaticism. But here the question is whether the translation I mentioned is, from the perspective of a phenomenology of religion, entirely legitimate. Is there a completely overlap between the norm and the religious values? Could the religious field be definitively confiscated by the logic of the communicative rationality? At this point an answer could be at least indicated.

4. Beyond the norm

In his Critique of violence [4], W. Benjamin writes about a double regime of violence: as mean for propagating the law and secondly as a means for instituting the law. Both maintain in different ways but essentially in the same manner a close connection with the power phenomenon. This provides violence
with a historical function and makes it intelligible through searching its historical ‘origin’. But beyond them the divine violence eludes the logic of power and stands for a radical exteriority. “If mythical violence is lawmaking, the divine violence is law-destroying; if the former sets boundaries, the latter boundlessly destroys them; if mythical brings at once guilt and retribution, the divine power expiates; if the former threatens, the latter strikes; one is bloody, the other is lethal without spilling blood.” [4, p. 21] W. Benjamin gives as an example God’s judgement against Korah and his followers, an undiscriminating judgement that hurts the righteous, saving at the same time with – and through – the act of annihilation. The divine violence is a violence for the sake of the living, at the price of mere life’s sacrifice. The sovereignty of pure volition, of divine violence, brings forward the discussion on the sacrality of the mere life that W. Benjamin considers to be just an attempt specific to the decadence of Western tradition to find the sacred in the ambiguity of Cosmology. More than that, it justifies the possibility of revolutionary violence as a nonreligious, historical form of the divine.

This exteriority of the sacred element – which in this case appears as pure violence – brings forward the discussion on Habermas’ thesis. Is it not the sacred, when put into language, a simulacrum? Doesn’t the religious actually define itself as a refusal to accept the categories of the public space and those of the consensus?

This latter mentioned perspective comes in fact from a supposition contrary to that of Habermas’: that is understanding the politic as exertion area and as power existence. Foucault, through the concept of biopolitics, decisively influences this interpretation of the political phenomenon [15]. In his Homo Sacer, G. Agamben takes over the discussion from the point where Foucault had left it: “zoe’s involvement in the polis area, the politization of the bare life itself is the crucial moment of modernity, which indicates a radical transformation of the political-philosophical categories of the classical thinking” [3, p. 9]. Seeing the modernity as a politization of life carries another perspective on the relationship between religion and the public space and implicitly, as I will attempt to suggest in the last section of my essay, another definition for secularization.

Agamben relies on the Latin term sacer to refer to the establishing exteriority of law: the sacred man is the one who is not convicted according to a lawful sentence, he can neither be sacrificed nor those who would kill him could be accused of homicide. This way sacrality is defined as “a limit concept of the Roman social order which can be therefore scarcely satisfactorily explained as long as we remain within ius divinum and ius humanum, but which allows us to enlighten its reciprocal limits” [3, p. 64]. Sacrality acts as a curse, through which he who finds himself in this situation is being excluded from the human area but without being this way included in the divine one. This double exclusion is, for Agamben, the exceptional sign of the sovereignty. This way the gesture defines the initial political establishment as a tensioned complicity with the religious phenomenon. The sacred life is the point from which the rethinking of the
rapports between religion and politics could start. The impeachment from the American constitution or the Jacobin’s discussion from 1792 about the possibility of killing the king without a previous trial are examples of residues of the sovereign’s sacrality idea, in his exceptional power. An interesting observation about homo sacer aims at Thomas Hobbes. Mentioning homo homini lupus leads to an indistinct condition between man and bestiality where „each is for the other bare life and homo sacer” [3, p. 89]. Thus violence becomes event which establishes the political order, the outer border (ban-lieu) placed where the religious symbolizes the borderline of the polis rather than its function. Agamben’s conclusion is: „If, in modernity, life places itself more and more obviously in the center of the state’s politics (in Foucault’s terms biopolitics) (...) this is possible only because the exile relationship was, from the very beginning, the specific structure of the sovereign power” [3, p. 93].

The founding nature of violence, its resistance against the political or religious reduction or, in terms used by R. Girard, its „extra-ritual and extratextual” [16] nature questions the agreement, to use Habermas’ term, between religion and public space. Religion and political ‘community’ find their source of significance in continuously assuming the primary violence. It also enables the switching from a language to the other. But the form can no longer be that of a ‘best translation’. Rather the untranslatability of the religion, the tension that marks its relationship with the political is the element that, from a political point of view, is most important. The irreducibility – and the untranslatability – of the religion marks the exteriority that the political itself needs in order to establish its sovereignty. The enabling or, on the contrary, the expulsion of the religious from the public sphere has its basis in the non-recognition of the primary nature of a violence medium from which both religion and politics nourish. In the dichotomic rapport between religion and politics, regarded only as perspectives on the world, the options for assuming the relationships are those already mentioned. But if the religious and the political themselves nourish from a common root – in this case, from the violence – then each acts, in its irreducibility, as an access way to this common root. In this interpretation ‘the translatability’ to which Habermas refers does not take into account the common root of the two life forms. The translation of the religious value into social norm, for example, makes it impossible the understanding of the norm in the configuration and with the orientation given by the primary, divine violence. As a new example, the criticism R. Girard makes to Frazer in the conclusion of his work takes things from a related point of view: the non-recognition of the nonreligious nature of the primary violence, of its localization at the line between human and nonhuman leads, for the modern time, to a interpretation of the religious that does not make the religion accountable for the sacrificial violence, when it is in fact just an ‘interpretation’ of the founding event when the scapegoat is being killed. Hence the lack of the reciprocal understanding or of the self is the result of the direct ‘translation’ attempt of the religious categories into public sphere categories.
5. Secularization – towards a new definition

The concept of ‘secularization’ needs to be re-evaluated, considering this new interpretation of the political – religious relationship. It can no longer define, as it does in Habermas, the ‘reciprocal learning’ process of the citizen and of the religious community member. For Habermas, secularization refers to the loss of the religious when the authority related issue passes on to the public consensus field, to loss concerning both the legitimation of an image about the world and providing the resources for the identity of the community. The translation of the religious values into public space norms compensates this loss and paves the dialectical way for postsecularization. A similar situation is to be encountered in M. Eliade’s work, in the case of “camouflage of myths” [17] For example the survival of the civilizing hero in the hollywoodian scenarios or in the literature of the 20th century. The myth is beeing taken away the force it gets through ritualization, it loses the ‘ontological’ effect acknowledged by the traditional societies and gets the compensating role of the ideal model and the responsibility to feed the modern man’s nostalgia.

Another pattern for secularization can yet be imagined, as long as both religion and politics are being comprehended not within themselves, but starting from their common root, the one that R. Girard refers to as sacrificial violence, for example. Andre Scrima could be of help at this point [18, 19]. Secularization, as dispossession of the Church of its assets by the state, has in fact as a premise the entering of the Church itself into the temporal logic, into the game of power with an unequal partner, namely the political institution. The egress of the Church from the logic of the worldly power could be the ‘positive’ meaning for secularization in this case: the return of the Church to the catacombs, a seemingly worldly defeat, brings back the Church to its primary source, that of the concreteness of the living Christic message. In the light of the considerations from the previous paragraph, the withdrawal of the religious from the logic of power enables it to gain access to its own root and to the political itself common root. No matter what it finds at its root – the message of Christic love for A. Scrima, or the pure violence – the withdrawal of the religion from the logic of power, where it is from the very beginning doomed to defeat, defines a ‘positive’ meaning for secularization as an opportunity rather than as a defeat. From this perspective, the translatability of the religious value into public sphere categories becomes equivalent to a temptation. And the task to which M. Eliade refers in his conversations with C.-H. Rocquet, namely to unravel „the camouflage hiding the sacred in a desacralized world” [20] is more than a criticism of the profane representations from the perspective of their religious origin. This way the withdrawal of the religious from the public sphere, through claiming its radical difference, could be accompanied by the recovery of its tensioned origin.
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