

Paweł Grad

Polish Academy of Sciences
pgrad.communication@gmail.com

Post-secular philosophy. Between theory and ideology

ABSTRACT

This text is devoted to showing that from the point of view of the tasks of science dealing with the description and explanation of the different aspects of religion, the post secular turn is only apparent. Its ostensibility lies in the fact that the program articulated by post-secular philosophers suffers from a number of defects. Their accumulation leads to the conclusion that the post secular paradigm has never existed even as the seed of a theory of religious phenomena, but it has some of the characteristics of an ideology.

This article reconstructs subjects key philosophical positions associated with the post secular turn (Philip Blond, Gianni Vattimo, John D. Caputo, Jürgen Habermas) to critical analysis in an effort to extract the relevant properties of post secular philosophy to indicate major deficiencies. Next, I deal with the most important issue emerging from this analysis, namely, the question adopted by the post secular philosophers of religion. In the last part I formulate conclusions regarding the applicability of post secular philosophy as a theoretical tool explaining the situation of religion in the post-modern world.

KEYWORDS: post secularism, philosophy of religion, ideology, the concept of religion

STRESZCZENIE

Filozofia postsekularna. Między teorią a ideologią

Tekst ten poświęcony jest wykazaniu, że z punktu widzenia zadań nauki zajmującej się opisem i wyjaśnieniem różnych aspektów religii,

zwrot postsekularny jest zwrotem pozornym. Pozorność ta polega na tym, że program wyartykułowany przez filozofów postsekularnych cierpi na szereg defektów. Ich nagromadzenie prowadzi do wniosku, że paradygmat postsekularny nigdy nie istniał nawet jako załączek teorii zjawisk religijnych, natomiast posiada pewne cechy ideologii.

W tekście tym rekonstruję i poddaję krytycznej analizie kluczowe stanowiska filozoficzne związane ze zwrotem postsekularnym (Philip'a Blond'a, Gianni'ego Vattimo, John'a D. Caputo, Jürgen'a Habermas'a) starając się wyodrębnić właściwe cechy filozofii postsekularnej i wskazać jej najważniejsze braki. Następnie zajmuję się najważniejszym problemem wylaniającym się z tej analizy, jakim jest zagadnienie przyjmowanego przez filozofów postsekularnych pojęcia religii. W ostatniej części formułuję wnioski dotyczące stosowności filozofii postsekularnej jako narzędzia teoretycznego wyjaśniającego sytuację religii w świecie późnonowoczesnym.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: postsekularyzm, filozofia religii,
ideologia, pojęcie religii

For several years, it has seemed that every published work in the field of religion and philosophy of religion must take into account the declared paradigm shift in the study of the subject. This change has been called the "post secular turn". This text is devoted to showing that from the point of view of the tasks of science dealing with the description and explanation of the different aspects of religion, the said turn is only apparent. Its ostensibleness lies in the fact that the program articulated by post secular philosophers suffers from a number of defects. Their accumulation leads to the conclusion that the post secular paradigm has never existed even as the seed of a theory of religious phenomena, but it has some of the characteristics of an ideology.

This article reconstructs subjects key philosophical positions associated with the post secular turn (Philip Blond, Gianni Vattimo, John D. Caputo, Jürgen Habermas) to critical analysis in an effort to extract the relevant properties of post secular philosophy to indicate major deficiencies (1-4). Next, I deal with the most important issue emerging from this analysis, namely, the question adopted by the post secular philosophers of religion(5). In the last part I formulate conclusions regarding the applicability of post secular philosophy as a theoretical tool explaining the situation of religion in the post-modern world.(6)

1. Philip Blond: post secular philosophy and theological criticism of modernity

It is hard to say who was the first to deliberately use the term “post secularism”. It seems that the first use of this term, which had a significant impact on the consciousness of the theoretical humanists, should be attributed to Philip Blond and the authors of the 1999 book edited by him, *Post-Secular Philosophy: Between Philosophy and Theology*. The texts collected there are essentially historical in nature and are devoted to the presence of theological topics in several major modern philosophers. The basic message of these considerations is as follows: these motifs are not marginal, and even seem to be essential. The authors of these studies attempt to demonstrate that the adoption of theological assumptions or reaching theological applications is essential from the *philosophical* point of view. Philosophy is therefore not able to emancipate itself from theology (and therefore religion), thereby denying the possibility of a secular project. This thesis, this time in not the historical and philosophical mode, is clearly included in the introduction by Blonde: only the adoption of a theological starting point shall protect can philosophy from the practical and the theoretical aporias of idle skepticism and irrational nihilism. The shortcomings of these two major currents of post-Kantian philosophy indicate a theological foundation supplanted from the modern philosophical speculation. By theology Blond understands not a confessional reflection on the manifestation of a religion, but a “meditation on the origins of being.”¹ Reflection upon sources of being (not mere existence) is to protect thus understood theology from the allegation of being an “ontotheology” formulated in a paradigmatic by Martin Heidegger² and developed by Jean Luc Marion.³

The book edited by Blond has become one of the so-called “radical orthodoxy” movement founding books related to the theological department of the University of Nottingham. It is not the right place to reconstruct the philosophical foundation of this school, it is worth noting, however, that in contemporary discussions about secularization and post-secularism, this occupies a position which is, in a way, “separate”. Although its representatives have drawn extensively from the achievements of contemporary continental philosophy and critical social theory, some of the assumptions of the school’s classical program can hardly be

1 P. Blond, *Introduction: Theology before philosophy*, in: *Post-Secular Philosophy. Between philosophy and theology*, ed. P. Blond, London-New York 1997, p. 12.

2 M. Heidegger, *Identyczność i różnica*, transl. J. Mizera, Warszawa 2011.

3 J.-L. Marion, *Bóg bez bycia*, transl. M. Frankiewicz, Kraków 1996.

considered “post-secular” in the sense of the meaning this term gained in the years following Blond’s publication, and which has become the dominant meaning. Similarly to his just cited theses, analyses were carried out by the representatives of the “radical orthodoxy” movement are based on a kind of dogmatic solution (in a descriptive, not a derogatory sense). The history of the philosophical doctrines of modernity, on top of modern social and political programs, is treated there as the history of certain aporias that are resolved when theological assumptions (dogma) abandoned by modernity, are restored.

So we are dealing here not so much with an excess as with abandonment and denial of secularism. For this reason, it is difficult to recognize the radical orthodoxy movement (and its underlying sources, Blond’s book) as the implementation of a post-secular approach, if you accept the widely used understanding of the term, which insists on the abolition (which is a form of preservation) of the secular paradigm in the post-secular perspective. This way or another, Blond’s book introduced the term post-secularism into the consciousness of humanists, and cannot be regarded as a decisive formulation of the post-secular program, besides, the term appears mainly in the title, while its more precise definition is not considered by any of the texts.

Post-Secular Philosophy was a fairly general proposal to look at the part of the modern philosophical tradition whose direct object was not religion itself (understood as a social phenomenon), but at most “theology”, peculiarly understood in the sense of “first philosophy”. Of course, this “theology” can be seen as an *explicit* form of religious consciousness, yet, if the “post-secular turn” is to be seen as a change of outlook on religion in general, and the book edited by Blond has provided arguments in favor of such a change *only* in philosophy.

2. Gianni Vattimo: religion as an unlimited interpretation

Bond-edited book documents the returning religious motives also among the authors associated with the widely understood post-structuralism and deconstruction. However, a seminar organized by Gianni Vattimo on Capri in 1994, and then the publication being the aftermath of it,⁴ posed the question of reframing the attitude towards religion in the context of

4 *Religia: seminarium na Capri prowadzone przez Jacquesa Derridę i Gianniego Vattimo*, transl. M. Kowalska, Warszawa 1999.

the “end of metaphysics” directly. It is worth noting that the concept of “post-secularism” does not play any significant role in the texts collected by Vattimo.

He openly admits that “only because the metaphysical meta-narrations have disintegrated, philosophy rediscovered the credibility of religions and may consequently perceive the need for religion in the collective consciousness outside of the box of the Enlightenment criticism”.⁵ The main “metaphysical metanarratives” include, according to Vattimo, who uncritically follows the trail of the trivialized revelations of Heidegger, a story about the first principle and the very classic (“metaphysical”) concept of truth. This means that religion is released from the tribunal of reason without conviction not because it was acquitted, but because the tribunal was solved. Religion ceases to be a problem for philosophy, because in general it ceases to be considered in terms of truth or falsity. Instead, in line with the general scheme of the development of nihilism, described by Nietzsche, forcing a functional justification of religion, which is (contrary to what Vattimo would like), another variant of moral justification. If religion can no longer be itself, i.e., “righteous worship of the true God”,⁶ let it be compensated by aesthetic and existential needs. Therefore, the key, the above-cited sentence by Vattimo introduces the typically nihilistic concept of “religious need”. The subject matter is similarly handled by Richard Rorty, who, despite different intellectual roots, goes on this in the same direction as Vattimo: “Religion raised from the epistemic sphere, which considers the dispute between theism and atheism as insignificant, can provide the right solution tailored to the needs of our loneliness.”⁷ “Raising from the epistemic sphere” and “insignificance dispute between theism and atheism” means just abandoning the truth of religion a fundamental issue for all traditional religious communities.

The post-secular project in its deconstructionist variant is therefore entirely dependent on the controversial “findings” of post-heideggerian critique of metaphysics. Vattimo sees them as certain obvious data. Therefore, the overall criticism of his proposal would have to be a criticism of this whole philosophical formation. It would take far too much space and should not be the main theme of my work. Instead, I would like to tackle the element which is a link between the criticism of metaphysics and Vattimo’s post-secular project.

Vattimo identifies the “God of metaphysics”, with the God of religion of violence. The reason for identification is the association of the

5 G. Vattimo, *Ślad śladu*, in: *Religia: seminarium...*, p. 105.

6 Cf. *S. Th.* II^a-IIae, q. 81.

7 R. Rorty, *Antyklerykalizm i ateizm*, in: R. Rorty, G. Vattimo, *Przyszłość religii*, Kraków 2010, p. 50.

absoluteness of one rule and the right of order because of the absoluteness of violence. It is hard to talk here about a clear inference. Vattimo uses a paralogism of identifying two phenomena on the basis of the overall similarity of their selected characteristics. If one wanted to reconstruct some arguments behind this game of associations, it would have to include a condition under which each classically understood truth (by the every virtue of being true) would be directly a source of suffering and violence. So, the premise presupposes a radical extension of the concept of violence in relation to the standard one: violence is an action which is not only contrary to the nature of the action, but in general any situation in which the subject encounters an obstacle in the form of objective conditions, such as “the law of God”. Vattimo, as a deconstructionist, of course, does not accept the concept of “human nature”, but that is why he is not in a position to designate the boundaries that the individual has the right to face righteously. In this situation, the very existence of a “truth”, like “the first principle”, that is, God is violence.

That is why the end of metaphysics means, for Vattimo, weakening of the God of the religion of violence. At this point, Vattimo makes a further identification: death of this “metaphysics of God” is identified with the process of secularization. Since the religion of “the God of metaphysics” is a strong religion of the visible worship and the “law of God”, the end to the power of religion, the loss of its visibility and giving up “legal” thinking” is the end of such a religion. The twilight of the God of metaphysics, the God of “natural religion of violence” means the possibility of a real revelation, “which essence boils down to *charity*”.⁸ On the basis of this quasi-Marcionist concept Vattimo may propose the conclusion that secularization is not a process of disappearance of religion in general, but its primary violent form, and at the same time the process of a true revelation of the religion of love, which is manifested in the fact that man worships the God who died. In short, according to Vattimo, secularization is the work of Christianity, which ends on Good Friday.

It would be interesting to consider whether this refreshed, but already old “death of God theology” is a place for the Easter Sunday. This fact is hard to imagine without a very strong “metaphysical” commitment: “And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith” (1 Corinthians 15:14). It seems that such commitments are inevitable. Of course, Vattimo will claim that the “God of Christianity” is a “weak God”, having nothing in common with the God of metaphysics. The above-quoted words of the New Testament cast doubt on the validity of this thesis. Besides, the path of extracting of the essence of Christianity

8 G. Vattimo, *Belief*, Stanford UP 1999, p. 77.

from “metaphysical accretions” from the Scripture, is already well-trodden since long ago, and we know that it ends in a dead end. Finally, the radical program of “demythologization” (so was called the process of “cleaning” religion from metaphysical accretion) ends with a paradox: trying to distill the “true religion”, one creates an outline of some formula of spirituality that had never existed from the existing elements of religion. Vattimo, of course, can take on the burden of being a prophet of a completely new religion, and no one can forbid him or other writers like him, to hatch their para-religious reflection. At the time, however, when we treat him like this, from a partner in philosophical discussion about religion, he will change into the object of ethnographic research.

I would like to finish this critical presentation of Vattimo’s concept by paying attention to the constructive part of his design. According to Vattimo, in the articulation of religious beliefs, metaphysics should be replaced by hermeneutics. And in this respect, the Italian philosopher goes along the path marked by Heidegger and trodden by many obedient religious philosophers and theologians. Secularism is not only the most important act of “loosening” metaphysics and a revelation taking place, but a departure from literalism and disseminating “free study”.⁹ Rather than establishing and protecting religious truths, religious consciousness would be busy with religious interpretation that reveals more and more new meanings contained in revelation. On the basis of the same analogy, which connects violence with metaphysics, it is combined with literalism and the realism of the “legal” understanding of the word of God. Vattimo calls this process “freeing metaphors” and admits that the return of interest in terms from the dictionary of religion in continental philosophy is associated with this process. It would appear in such a way that the post-secular turn in philosophy is the result of the peculiarly understood Revelation and part of the history of salvation.

Vattimo’s position, however, is extreme: the abandonment of establishing a “religious truth” not only means giving up the dictionary of classical metaphysics, but in general removes any explicit rules from religious interpretation. Vattimo clearly marks his distance from Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics¹⁰ which – although far from “metaphysical” understanding of truth rehabilitated legal and philological hermeneutics. The task of interpretation (including the interpretation, which *is* secularism and *is* revelation), meanwhile, is to be uninhibited, free, not oriented to understanding the meaning of the source, but rather on *producing* sense. In short, Vattimo does not impose any rules on the correctness of the interpretation.

9 Ibidem, p. 60.

10 G. Vattimo, *After Christianity*, Columbia UP 2002, p. 62-63.

Vattimo is trying to forestall criticism of this concept, noting that these free examinations of the Scripture cannot be completely arbitrary, as the final interpretation is the rule is charity.¹¹ The intention to prevent complete freedom of interpretation should be noted, however, it seems to be completely empty. It is hard to say how the resolving of conflicting interpretations of revelation would result from the “charity”. “Charity” as the only limiting rule would not be any useful rule for interpretation, because that is how it would resolve the specific result of interpretation itself is not obvious and requires interpretation.

3. John D. Caputo: religion without declarative statements

The deconstructive variant of the post-secular idea presented in a number of publications by John D. Caputo can be subjected to similar criticism. Like Vattimo, he exploits the figure of the “weak God” who is left with only a contingent, indirectly manifested love. Caputo places great emphasis on the unconditioned reality toward which the believer turns. What we believe, if we believe, is a stable and reliable principle, definitely not more the reason for existence, but rather, “the impossible”. What shows up as impossible, thus what you can always expect (the impossible cannot be bound by arguments, which would exclude it) is the subject of a true, unconditioned love, which is *eo ipso* a religious act.

Caputo attempts to clarify that it is not “simple or absolute impossibility, such as ‘p at the same time not-p’, which boils down to inconsistency, but what the French philosopher Jacques Derrida calls ‘the impossible’, referring to what we do not anticipate and cannot predict, something the eye has not seen, and no human mind could comprehend (1 Corinthians 2,9).”¹² If so, then Derrida should rather talk about the unpredictable, not the impossible. This is not a purely verbal complaint because Caputo also uses the consequences of identifying the subject of religious faith with the impossible, which is the exclusion of objective states of affairs from the scope of religious language. This is because the impossible cannot be the subject of existential judgment. Caputo’s concept necessarily requires that that was what happened with the objects of religious belief, just because it can protect them from the Enlightenment criticism. Consequently, Caputo’s conceptual design is fundamentally inconsistent:

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 82.

¹² J.D. Caputo, *On Religion*, London 2001, p. 10.

he treats objects of religious faith as if they were impossible (and therefore “unreasonable”), although he explains the impossibility by the notion of unpredictability. However, it is obvious that this cannot be done, because not everything unpredictable at the same time impossible.

Such an ontology of the objects of religious faith justifies post-secular reorientation towards religion: “Today, at this point, which I call a post-secular or post-modern, religious meaning of life is directed towards what I call *hyper-real* and by which I mean more than the reality above what is real is the *impossible*, what defies the limited, modern idea of what is possible.¹³ The “hyper-real” cannot be subjected to normal judgment.

This idea implies going beyond literalism, fundamentalism and open superstition without repeating the Enlightenment’s critique of superstition, whose assumptions – as I have tried to show – have been widely challenged. Nevertheless, ‘religion without religion’ requires full ‘religious truth’, which, however, must be sharply distinguished from the ‘true religion’ in the sense of ‘*the* one true religion’ (which always, invariably means: mine-not-yours).¹⁴

However, this truth is not a normal judgment:

Religious truth is not the truth of a statement – a kind of truth that comes from organizing our knowledge, from the distribution of our cognitive content according to what the world is like: so that when we say ‘S is p’ it means that we give a certain *Sp* the shape our opinion. Religious truth belongs to another order, to order or sphere, which Augustine calls *facere veritatem*, ‘doing’ or ‘making’ the truth, even, and perhaps especially when we are called to transcend our abilities and to do the impossible.¹⁵

In this case, however, something must be done with the undeniable fact that the religious languages contain many sentences formed as judgments. Caputo’s solution to this situation is to reduce their epistemic content through the historical relativism.¹⁶ However, in order for the religious language not to remain *only* a historical artifact, it is necessary to propose a different function than the expression of the truth about the reality of God and his grace. Just like in Vattimo’s case, the function of this is to provide for indeterminate love:

13 Ibidem, p. 91.

14 Ibidem, p. 110.

15 Ibidem, p. 114-115.

16 Ibidem, p. 112.

One thing that – to put it this way – fell from the sky, is the love of God, which descends upon us in the form of questions: ‘What do I love when I love my God?’.¹⁷

It seems doubtful whether there may be a religious language consisting only of this kind of performatives, about which Caputo speaks. Such a language does not imply any reference to what exists (is real), but only “produce” its “truths” in a way that directs the speaker to that which does not exist, but is the Impossible, that (according to Caputo) is not possible to predict. The only function of religious language would be, therefore, the production of a certain attitude towards reality involving the anticipation of something that cannot be predicted (and thus positively identified). This idea has probably a lot to do with the Derrida’s reduction of religion to a purely formal “messianic” function” bereft of all metaphysics and reduced to pure “expectations”.¹⁸ Perhaps it is possible to think of such a religion without any *quantum* of positive knowledge about God, not treating the object of its worship as something real, but something that by definition, and always only coming. Surely this is not any known religion.

Of course all religious speculation of Derrida, as an assumption, ignore the meaning of the original texts on which it is based, but it is worth noting that the interpretation presented by him and repeated by Caputo of the fragment of “making truth” (*facere veritatem*) from the *Confessions* of St. Augustine is not sustainable.¹⁹ This passage does not provide any basis to formulate “the definition” of religious truth, which opposes “making” truth “telling” the truth in the sense of expressing true judgments. In his *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, we can find an exact explanation²⁰ from which it is clear that “making truth” lies in such behavior that is compliant with the law of God, which depends on enlightenment and *knowing* God’s

17 A dozen pages later Caputo responds in the style of a poor psychological advice book: “God is a passion for life, the passion of my life, the passion of what is unknown to me, a desire for the impossible” (ibid, p. 135).

18 Cf. J. Derrida, *Wiara i wiedza*, transl. P. Mrówczyński, in: *Religia: seminarium...*, p. 27.

19 “Thou desirest truth” and ‘he who does the truth comes to the light’ This is what I wish to do through confession in my heart before thee (*volo eam facere in corde meo*), and in my writings before many witnesses. St. Augustine *Confessions*, Book X, Ch. 1, transl. Albert C. Outler, Dallas 1955

20 How is it thou doest the truth? Thou dost not caress, nor soothe, nor flatter thyself; nor say, “I am righteous,” whilst thou art unrighteous: thus, thou beginnest to do the truth. Thou comest to the light, that thy works may be made manifest that they are wrought in God; for thy sin, the very thing that has given thee displeasure, would not have displeased thee, if God did not shine into thee, and His truth show it thee. (St. Augustine, *Homilies on the Gospel of John*; XII, Ch. III, 13).

truth. Of course Caputo's thesis regarding the nature of religious language is not ultimately dependent on the veracity of the interpretation of the phrase by St. Augustine. However, Caputo says clearly that this is just *exact* understanding of the truth of religion that St. Augustine means when he speaks about making truth. The overthrow of this claim, therefore, additionally weakens Caputo's argumentation, in particular his belief that his interpretation of the language of religion was (or should be) also shared by members of the traditional religious communities. The use of the authority of St. Augustine is to serve this purpose.

4. Jürgen Habermas: post secularism as a project to translate religious language

The author who gave the concept of post-secularism actual weight was Jürgen Habermas. In a series of lectures and articles he formulated the concept representing an outline of what can be called a model of post-secular social order. Importantly, Habermas's proposal is sociological and theoretical-political: not applicable to "theology", "post-secular philosophy" or, religion in general, but a fairly detailed question of "the presence of religion in the public sphere". Habermas, known for his commitment to the modernization Enlightenment projects and proposes a reevaluation of the principles of the public functioning of religion in modern Western liberal democracies (this is another limitation of the scope of its design, well worth remembering). This reevaluation is based on the recognition that the game of social forces of "secularism" and religion is not a zero-sum game²¹ and that the citizens with a religious worldview can and even should make a significant contribution to the public debate in the form of the symbolic capital of religious inspiration and arguments.

Habermas is primarily interested in the theory of communication and functioning of religion in the context of public debate. No wonder that even the resulting project of post-secular society (or post-secular public debate) is located on the same plane. According to Habermas, in fact, the post-secular project is realized in practice of translating religious content to widely available (and therefore "lay") content. In this way, the religious citizens gain the opportunity of political recognition and participation *as* religious citizens, while the non-religious citizens are granted the ability to empower their ethical imagination with motivations of religious origin.

21 J. Habermas, *Wierzyć i wiedzieć*, transl. M. Łukasiewicz, „Znak” nr 568, p. 10.

Habermas imposes a number of restrictions on this project of the translation, which are also the limitations used by his concept of post-secularism. It is worth listing them here, because they often become forgotten when discussing the role of Habermas in the “post-secular turn”.

First of all, Habermas is only interested in religion in the public sphere. His project is not a project for religion in general, and in particular it does not directly apply to a translation (and possibly associated with changing of meaning) within the religious community. Of course, there are good reasons to wonder whether the adoption of the principles of operation by a particular religion in the public sphere will not affect its internal self-understanding. However, this issue is not a direct concern of Habermas.

Secondly, the requirement of translation is not applicable only within the religious community (and therefore following liberal criteria in the private sphere), but also at the level of public institutions of the state. While in the first case, the translation is not necessary (because the members of the religious community “understand each other” without it), in the second case it is assumed that it has already been made in the pre-institutionalized public sphere which is intermediary between the private sphere and the public sphere of the state institutions. In the last, “only secular arguments count.”²²

Thirdly, if a religious citizen sees, in a particular situation, a requirement to translate religion rationale into secular language as a violation of their own identity, they are exempt from this requirement. In this situation, they can introduce religious content in an untranslated and un-universalized form into discussion, which involves non-religious citizens as well.

Thus clarified, Habermas’s concept seems to generate some serious difficulties.

Firstly, it is not clear whether such a narrow post-secular program represents a real change in relation to the secular one, and so at the same time, is it at all justified to call it “post-secular”. Veit Bader argues that the postulate of respecting the principle of neutrality (and therefore “universality”) for allowing religious arguments to informal public debate is in no way contrary to the perfectly secular order of constitutional liberalism.²³ Moreover, the secular “neutrality” of the state institutions seems to be the most significant achievement of modern “secularism”.

22 J. Habermas, *Religia w sferze publicznej. Poznawcze założenia „publicznego czyniania użytku z rozumu” przez obywateli wierzących i niewierzących*, in: Eadem, *Między naturalizmem a religią*, Warszawa 2012, p. 115.

23 V. Bader, *Post-secularism or liberal-democratic constitutionalism?*, “Erasmus Law Review” vol. 5, issue 5.

The second very often raised doubt²⁴ is summed up in the question whether the practice of religious content manipulation postulated by Habermas actually should be called religious language translation. Habermas does not seem to attach more weight to the appropriateness of this term and does not define it. On the other hand, he applies it consistently with the intention of it defining the idea of post-secular society. He also does not give many examples of such a translation, nevertheless, the ones that he does provide actually make us reflect on whether we are dealing with the translation of religious content. It is difficult to recognize that the truth about “the dignity of the human person”, which is not easily subjected to naturalistic reduction, is simply a translation of the religious doctrine of “creation of man in the image and likeness of God” or not.²⁵ Surely one can reasonably wonder whether from the historical and genealogical point of view, the emergence of the Christian and Jewish teaching does not constitute (in the sense of social capital convictions) a necessary condition for the formulation of the doctrine of the inherent dignity of the human being. However, it is difficult to recognize the sentence “Every human being has the inherent and inalienable dignity” for a translation of the sentence “Every man was created by God in his image and likeness”. The first sentence is probably a practical implication of the second sentence, however, it is not simply the semantic reflection in another language or idiom that is not its translation.

The third group of difficulties associated with the concept of the importance of language and translation implied by Habermas’s project. A premise of the post-secular program of translating religious language is the argument that religious arguments are “not available” to religious citizens, so that these citizens cannot give them a tangible meaning *as* arguments. In other words, they cannot – just as the religious citizens seem to be able to – neither deny nor confirm the content of the theses contained in these arguments. This simply means that they do not know the meaning of sentences from the dictionary of the religion (I assume that the ability to deny or confirm the assertions contained in the given sentence is a necessary element in understanding its meaning). In the discussion with Charles Taylor, Habermas concludes that the understanding of religious language requires being a member of the particular religious community,

24 Cf. B. Arfi, *Habermas and the aporia of translating religion in democracy*, “European Journal of Social Theory” 18:4; G. Areshidze, *Taking Religion Seriously? Habermas on Religious Translation and Cooperative Learning in Post-secular Society*, “American Political Science Review” vol. 111, issue 4.

25 This is what Habermas claims in his debate with Charles Taylor. Cf. *Dialogue*, in: *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, ed. E. Mendieta, J. VanAntwerpen, New York 2011, p. 62.

and in particular participation in its rituals and worship.²⁶ This note is an interesting and not obvious example of appreciation of the role of ritual and liturgical practice as a fundamental way of participation and understanding of religion coming from the mouth of a contemporary humanist. Nevertheless, from the point of view of the theory of meaning, the thesis that, ultimately, *understanding* of the importance of religious language required participation in a religious practice, is negating the possibility of translation in the case of radical religious language. Consequently, the “translation” can only be accomplished by someone who has mastered the full extent of both dictionaries, that is to say, by a member of the religious community. Such a person is involved in the practices of a given community, and at the same time, under the “universality of reason”, they have access to secular reason. Such an understanding of the conditions of translation, however, generates at least three difficulties for the post-secular project of Habermas.

Firstly, the idea of “mutual learning”²⁷ between religious and non-religious citizens is drastically reduced. Unbelievers, therefore, are not able to learn anything themselves, and can only be instructed by the believers, whose only is the task of translation.

Secondly, such a restriction is contrary to the aforementioned proposals of Habermas, according to which in the case of the inability to make a translation without the loss of identity, religious citizens have the right to speak in a public debate using religious reason. In this situation, non-religious citizens should try to bring out widely available content from the religious content. But if they cannot understand the latter, they do not know how they could do this.

Thirdly, Habermas takes as a given that there is a body of widely understood natural truths that is large enough to be the base of a common policy. Unfortunately, one can expect that in the political practice of secular states there are entire sets of naturalistic truths and naturalistically described values that are universal in this way. This complaint stems from the very nature of practical reason, which is always involved in the recognition of specific, contingent situations – the rules commonly known, but there is no universal agreement on how to follow them. In this situation, no actual political stance can release itself from the obligation of discussion: argumentation and presenting its case. The possibility of such a discussion is precisely the well-understood “universality of reason”, but one cannot use it to justify the universal (“natural”) obviousness of practical positions. Thus, as some would have it, “post secularism” means primarily

26 Ibidem, p. 61.

27 Cf. J. Habermas, *Wiedzieć i wierzyć...*, p. 19.

the “denaturalization” of secularism,²⁸ it is at this crucial point of the post-secular project that Habermas would not be a post-secular thinker.

5. What religion is in post secular philosophy

The most common defect of post-secular philosophy are falling into inconsistency and generating difficulty that abolishes the assumptions of the post-secular concept formulated by philosophers. The most important source of these inconsistencies is the inner ambivalence of these theories, which *at the same time* report claims to describe the essence of traditional religion (e.g. “The essence of revelation”), and project a certain non-existent post-secular religion, which only connects loosely with religions in the ordinary sense and processes some of their traditional symbols and motifs.

Some of the post-secular philosophers are aware of this difficulty and try to reject it. Agata Bielik-Robson does it in a way which is worth focusing on.

Firstly, Bielik-Robson tries to dismiss criticism coming out from self-understanding of the representatives of traditional religions (although she also mentions the secular criticism of post-secularism). The thesis that religion of post-secularists “is non-existent religion, philosophically crafted, and in addition instrumentally used by modern thought, to which religion is naturally resistant”, is rejected.²⁹

In response, Bielik-Robson puts three theses, which are to be the basis refutation of this thesis by critics.

The first argument is that “religion is something more than just a set of archaic dogmas”.

The second argument is that religion “is also a great metaphysical speculation”.

The third thesis is that “perhaps the most important one”:

the speculation may concern not only of the living, present, providential God, to whom we direct our mercenary prayers – but also, and in the times of modernity, above all, ‘the absent God’, ‘God, who withdrew’ or even the ‘God, who died’.³⁰

28 U. Parmaksiz, *Making Sense of the Postsekular*, “European Journal of Social Theory” vol. 21, issue. 1, s. 10.

29 A. Bielik-Robson, *Deus otiosus*, in: *Deus otiosus. Nowoczesność w perspektywie postsekularnej*, red. A. Bielik-Robson, Maciej A. Sosnowski, Warszawa 2013, s. 7.

30 Ibid.

Let us focus on these theses *as arguments* against the above-presented criticism of the post-secular paradigm.

The first thesis implies that the critics of the post-secular paradigm are of the opinion that religion is only supposedly “an archaic set of dogmas”. I believe it would be difficult to find a critic of the paradigm who would proclaim such a thesis. Certainly according to such critics religion cannot be reduced to ‘a set of dogmas’, although they may maintain that dogmas are an important part of a particular religious doctrine.

What is more – and here we move to the second thesis – such dogmas were often formulated by speculative metaphysical notions. Therefore, the opposition between “archaic dogmas” and “metaphysical speculation” is not justified. Certainly many religious traditions have created their metaphysical speculations. A significant issue in a dispute with criticism of post-secularism is, therefore, not a matter of *whether* religion also includes the metaphysical speculation, but rather what this speculation is. It seems that orthodox metaphysical speculation for explication dogmas within religions is less interesting for Agata Bielik-Robson, however, it is so for reasons that have nothing to do with the question *whether* religion, as such, includes metaphysical speculation.

It is important that, as a general rule, such speculation *so far has it is part of a religion*, belongs to the important self-awareness of the members of the religious community, and it cannot fall into contradiction with such a “set of dogmas” understood as a non-speculative outline of the truths of the religion. If it fell into that contradiction and became indelible, a “metaphysical speculation” would become separated from the religion. It can keep its “religious” nature, i.e. include some theological assertions, it can even become the nucleus of a new religious doctrine, but I cannot see any reason to regard the very “metaphysical speculation” as religion. Even in cases where the metaphysical speculation of philosophers separated itself from worship (as in the Arab enlightenment or in the Greek classical period and late antiquity), there was still tension between them involving not only the contradictions – metaphysicians could argue that learning the *true* nature of a deity they worship him or her more fully than the “dark” people in their rituals, but as a rule they rarely resorted to a final abandonment of “archaic” forms of religion. Even if they created their true worship based *only* on the metaphysical speculation, it would be a completely *new* religion, different from what is normally defined by this name. And sometimes, as in the case of the Pythagoreans, the new philosophical doctrine was followed a new way of worship. “Religion” in the normal sense demands “worship”, i.e. activities that are worshipping the Deity.

At this point question arises, of course, of whether Agata Bielik-Robson wants to argue that metaphysical speculation belonging to a religion,

which post-secularism is interested is a part of the traditional religions (even if in a transformed or modern form) or is it the beginning (and perhaps the right form) of some new, previously unknown religion.

I find it hard to decide, as in the case of the post-secular philosophy practiced by Agata Bielik-Robson. Her books mainly operate the “crypto theological” themes in the well-known modern authors, which means roughly that she is looking for variations on theological topics in the writings whose authors cannot be attributed intentions to create some kind of “religion”. On the basis of these explorations, Bielik-Robson is even tempted to formulate the outline of a late-modern vitalistic spirituality formula built with deconstructed elements of Judaic, or rather, post-Judaistic thought (materialistic philosophy of history and culture handling generalized patterns of theological figures of thought). It seems that even if Bielik-Robson is interested in “metaphysical speculation” belonging to the historical traditions of religion, she is also not interested in whether this speculation falls in contradiction with the principles of the religious tradition in which she was raised.

As far as the philosophers of the post-secular current analyzed above, such as Caputo and Vattimo, are concerned, it is clear that they refer to non-religious (or post-religious) speculation which is post-metaphysical in order to use it to draft a radical restructuring of traditional religion (e.g. Christianity). Moreover, as we have seen, dogmatic *identification* of the principles of this post-religious speculation with some element of a religious doctrine (e.g. “the weakness of God” with “Incarnation”) is not an explicated, but an explicating foundation of its conceptual design. In the case of these post-secular philosophers, we also cannot say that they tackle “metaphysical speculation” that would be part of the historic religions. Rather, it is an autonomous speculation outside religion, serving the formulation of a new program of spirituality or a new religion from deconstructed fragments of the language of traditional religion.

Justification of the argument that the “religion” which post-secular philosophy talks about is not a religion in the right sense, is crucial for the whole of my considerations. This thesis requires the adoption of some criteria by which we distinguish “religion in the proper sense”. I tend to accept the view that the task of the philosopher is not direct *establishment* of such criteria, but their clarification. The philosopher formulates solutions (and possibly clearer conceptualizations) but not the issues, which he rather just finds. This applies in particular to social phenomena, whose existence is completely independent of the existence of philosophy. In our case, this issue is religion in modern society, in particular the process of secularization and its “late-modern” phase in the post-secular society.

In the case reported here, post-secular authors, following the arguments cited by Agata Bielik-Robson, the issue of this criterion is concretized in the question about the legitimacy of the third of the theses put by this author: whether the religion which the post-secular philosophy projects can actually be a religion of “the God who died”? It seems that if we agree – and I think there is no other possibility – that “post-secularism” is intended as a transgression and abolition of the “secular” paradigm, the answer to these questions must be negative.

Since the post-secular paradigm is a different solution to the same issue of the place of religion in modern society as the “secular” paradigm, its outlook on the issue of religion is highly dependent on it. The scientific basis of thus understood secular paradigm is a theory of secularization, which deals with the description and explanation of the transformation and disappearance of the forms of religious life in the modernizing society. Despite the enormous diversity of the various specific theories of secularization, and even attempts to challenge this paradigm in sociology of religion in recent decades, it remains clear that “religion” means, first of all, the traditional religion, i.e. the belief systems and practices that are forms of life built around the worship of God: real, historical examples of “religion”. In particular (for historical reasons) the secularization theory concerns transformations of various Christian denominations. What I recalled above is enough to conclude that the very wording of the issue of secularization, secularism and thus post-secularism exclude the recognition that the post-secular project can be about the formulation of some proposals to create a completely new religion to limit to metaphysical speculation about the “God who died”. Had it been so, “post-secularism” would be in fact not a breaching of the secular paradigm because it would address a completely different “religion”.

The most likely explanation of the “God death” metaphor excludes the recognition, that it can be a part of the dictionary of metaphysical speculation belonging to any religion. Both Hegel³¹ (who took it from Lutheran Passion songs³²) as well as Nietzsche, who gave the ultimate meaning to this metaphor, the “death of God” means the moment in which the *proper* (i.e. declared) reasons for the truths and worship of a given religion are widely disputed. This religion may then still remain in a nihilist

31 G.W.F. Hegel, *Glauben und Wissen*, in: *Hegel Gesammelte Werke* Bd. 4, ed. H. Buchner O. Poeggeler, Hamburg 1968, s. 413.

32 As to the second of the seven stanzas of the hymn *O Traurigkeit, o Herzeleid* added by Pastor Johann von Rist to the first version taken from a Catholic song-book published in Wurzburg in 1628. The minister replaced seven Catholic stanzas with his own and published them in his own song-book in 1641.

form, as a pure morality, which it is undoubtedly a state of false consciousness. The question of the function of such a post-nihilistic religion, or post-Christianity is very interesting, but there is no doubt that it should be regarded as a religion devoid of its essential purpose. It becomes – as Nietzsche saw himself – religion adapted and adapting to the secular outside. Certainly Nietzsche saw a sociological fact that the facade of religion can continue even if its foundations are removed (i.e. the belief in a “living God”). Nevertheless, it was clear that the discovery of this truth means the end of religion, and not the new beginning.

It is difficult to identify a religion possessing indeed the death of God theology, after which there is only a “trace” of absence. After a Good Friday there always comes a Resurrection Sunday. The cabbalistic doctrine of *cimcum* formulated by Isaac Luria, which is so readily recalled in this context, is not itself a germ of any new religion, but it functions within Judaism, along with the canonical teachings on the omnipotent and providential God of Israel.³³ What is more, this doctrine of the “withdrawal” of God is also fundamentally different from the post-metaphysical theology of the “weak God”. *Cimcum* is an act in which God “retreats” to make room for creation, however, this does not deny its mastery over the latter or the possibility of intervention and in any way not “weaken” His almighty power.

In other words, the death of God, religion cannot be the “abolition” of secularism, but rather, it is an appropriate form of duration of the “remnants” of religion in secular reality. If “post-secularism” would be a discovery of such a religion, it would, in fact, not constitute any transcendence of the secular paradigm.

6. Findings

The summary of the analysis conducted here can be presented in the following conclusions concerning the recent development and prospects of the post-secular philosophy.

1. The post-secular paradigm in the proper sense is characterized by two convictions. The first consists in denying the thesis of a necessary connection between progress and modernization and complete absence of religion or negative secularism. The second belief is to maintain the thesis of the success of the positive secularization understood as emancipation from the “fundamentalist” forms of religious life. Religion understood as

33 Cf. G. Scholem, *Mistycyzm żydowski i jego główne kierunki*, transl. I. Kania, Warszawa 2007, p. 288-293.

a post-secular paradigm is part of the modernization process emancipating the society from “the religion of violence”. Therefore, such forms of criticism and abolition of the goods of modernization should not be considered as “post-secular”, if they tend to the restoration of “pre-modern” forms of religious thought and practice. For this reason, the school of radical orthodoxy cannot be considered part of the post-secular current.

2. When assessing the range of theoretical post-secular philosophers, we should keep in mind that they relate to very different ranges of the social existence of religion (e.g. in theology, political representation, hermeneutics of religious texts), and that these areas do not overlap with each other often. This promotes mutual inconsistencies of the views presented here. There is no coherent and comprehensive project of a “post-secular paradigm” inside post-secular philosophy.

3. The thinkers associated with this current formulate proposals, which suffer from the following defects: they are internally inconsistent and they use undefined *ad hoc* concepts to explain religious phenomena. Moreover, in their lectures on their concept, the post-secular philosophers make some rudimentary factual errors, which reduce the credibility of their proposals as perspectives on actual religious phenomena.

4. These defects lead to a lack of control over the analysis of religious phenomena, which turns into multiplication of in fact deeply secular beliefs about it: identification of traditional religion with violence, reduction of religion to an anti-oppressive morality, the conviction of the “irrationalism” of religious beliefs and their radical “untranslatability”, negating the criteria for institutional settlement of the orthodoxy of religious doctrine interpretations, etc.

5. The consistency with which all the post-secular philosophers analyzed here goes back to the issue of religious language and the translation thereof. I believe this is because, first of all, the treatment of religion primarily as “text”, or perhaps a reservoir of symbols, in isolation from the normative and regulating context of the ritual and religious practice. This is a symptomatic phenomenon in the philosophy of religion, which is only slowly starting to be corrected.³⁴ This adjustment is necessary, if philosophy of religion has to have an adequate concept its own your subject. This is connected with the next point.

6. The most important problem of post-secular concepts is the lack of even a provisional settlement what religion is, and, in particular, if they are interested in historical, actual religion, or rather the project they are only drawing up. In the least this applies to Habermas, who, as a social researcher, has a direct orientation on the understanding of the contemporary

34 Cf. K. Schilbrack, *Philosophy and the Study of Religions. A Manifesto*, Chichester 2014.

situation of historical religion, however, my reasons indicated above, also this attempt ends in failure and projection (instead of a description) of forms of religious life.

This is the problem which decides on the fact that post-secular philosophy did not arrive – despite nearly twenty years of work in this field – at any real theory of religious issues in late modernity. Replacing the reliable concept of a historical religion with a non-existing project, however, results in the fact that attempts already made are rather ideological than actual. The authors also project and – with limited resources that scientific work provides – push their project of radical change in thinking about religion, not providing the tools to explain its phenomena. Their concepts do not serve the purpose of getting clarity on the issues of religion, but rather provide justifications for the changes in religious life. Until post-secular philosophy chooses to fill a proper task for philosophy, which is to clarify existing problems, the deadlock will not be broken. You cannot, of course, in no way prohibit any author to write religious on religion, where they draw a vision of a completely new religion. There is no apparent reason, however, for the author to use the authority of a researcher and philosopher, and for his ideas to be recognized for their contribution to the study of religion.

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Paweł Grad (b. 1991) is preparing a doctoral thesis at the SNS IFiS, Polish Academy of Sciences, devoted to the philosophy of religious language and the theory of secularization. Member of the editorial board of the quarterly *Christianitas*. Author of *O pojęciu tradycji. Studium krytyczne kultury pamięci* [*On the concept of traditions. Critical study of the culture of memory*] (2017).