

Editorial

Special Issue: Exploring the Religious Phenomenon from the Secularism Perspective

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When considering and accounting for social reality, the relationship between an observer (explorer) and the observed object (explored) is a complex circle, especially in the humanities. There is no neutral observer who perceives with absolute objectivity and transparency. Every observer places some conditions on the observation, which necessarily predetermines the description of what can be observed; there is always something underlined and hidden, and perhaps there is also something distorted. In describing what is observed, the observer is portrayed somehow and to some extent.

When the observer is also a social subject (a group, an ideology, a current, a social class, etc.), the complexity of the observation is even more challenging. On the other hand, if what is observed is a social fact, we face a changing reality open to multiple realisations that can sometimes puzzle the observer.

This initial reflection directly affects the central theme of this monographic issue. Secularism and the religious phenomenon can both be the observer and the observed, and both are ways (options) of situating oneself in the social world. Both are social facts subject to analysis and are difficult to define clearly and distinctly. Both are significant in the constitution and evolution of what we call modernity. Both observe each other. Curiously, on many occasions, the observations' results are far from coinciding; on more than one occasion, they appear contradictory and even incompatible.

In any case, it is different to be observed than to observe.

The theological thinking linked to different religious traditions, the leaders and staff members who are parts of their organizational structures, and the various participants linked to these traditions of belief are attentive observers of the secularising processes that bring about socio-cultural changes of enormous proportions, which transform the conditions of religious permanence and experience. From this point of view, the "religious feeling" towards secularisation can range from visceral rejection to attraction or from unconditional acceptance to fear and mistrust. From this perspective, people linked to religious facts become the subject of observation in one way or another.

From the other perspective, secularising processes have produced a particular vision of the world and of the human being which has taken shape in consolidated social structures that constitute what we can call Western modernity; for this part of humanity, secularism has become a (quasi-natural) worldview that orders reality. Western societies are in a framework, a cultural–hermeneutical horizon in which, on occasions, it is difficult to find a place for transcendence (nevertheless, people are still open to it). The Western tradition, in which secularism is deeply rooted, tends to understand reality in a very ethnocentric way (maybe more than other traditions) and has an idea of good and prosperity that disregards the religious phenomenon. However, religion is still part of this reality and, to some extent, must be taken into account by secularism.

The social sciences, which represent a very significant component of the secularising process—at the same time, a consequence and a cause—have been interested in studying



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the religious phenomenon since its inception. The religious phenomenon is the object of attentive observation insofar as it remains against the predictions of secularising theory and surprises the secular observer with its multiple twists, turns, and transformations that are unforeseen in the cartography created by the social sciences. In this Special Issue, secularism is the point of observation chosen to observe the religious fact.

But in a strange play of mirrors, in the writing within the different articles that comprise this Special Issue, the observer is also observed from other points of view and social contexts. Many articles in this Special Issue have begun to underline the ambiguity of the very concept of secularism (which is nothing new) as it is widely shared in the specialised literature. However, this clarification makes us look at the observing subject (secularism) to reveal the diversity that characterises the social place from which it observes. This diversity entails different conditions for the observation which easily generate plural and sometimes contradictory results, as an attentive and critical eye can appreciate the various themes dealt with in this Special Issue.

Continuing with the mirror image, secularism's observation of the religious phenomenon reflects at least two crucial characteristics: non-neutrality and plurality. At the same time, both factors are mutually related. Non-neutrality refers to the preconditions (choices prior to observation) that observing secularism puts in place. Secularism, in a fallacious way, believes its view is neutral, but this is false: it is just another cultural point of view. Plurality is related to the various conceptions of secularism, each starting from a different premise. However, there is perhaps a common point among all versions of secularism: the construction of a social world that no longer seeks legitimation in a religious transcendent widely shared by society is taken for granted.

On the other hand, if we look at the content of secularism, a broad spectrum opens up, ranging from the perception of secularism as a space (empty, although this space always has limits) where different approaches and life projects come together to the conception of secularism as a specific life project, an ideal of personal and social life. At the first pole of the spectrum, secularism is a method with some basic rules that must be accepted for the social construction of the common good, but it in itself is not a social project that is opposed to others; it is instead a space that allows for the concurrence of different approaches as long as some basic rules are respected. At the second pole, secularism becomes a proposal, a particular project of society that has rational arguments but which indeed produces new problems; in this approach, secularism quickly becomes a project of social construction alternative to others (which also have their rationality).

This point about the observer (secularism) has consequences for the results of observing the religious phenomenon. It can perceive the phenomenon as an ally, an anomaly (to the mainstream tradition) seeking accommodation, a curiosity to be explained, a threat, or even a venerable relic emptied of meaning. All this is reflected in the articles in this Special Issue. As Uriarte and Rodríguez's article shows, European secularism expresses an appreciation of the religious fact when various European organizations recommend where the religious phenomenon should be located in public spaces of schools. Espinosa defends that the moderate secularity that characterises much of Europe could positively value religion's contribution to developing a person's purpose and consequent spiritual growth, with undoubted social benefits. On a different thematic level, Vicente and Urrutia suggest that the secular framework can perceive the religious phenomenon as a new challenge to be integrated into the growing migratory flow that brings a more significant presence of a pluralism of beliefs and worldviews. The different uses, customs, and duties related to the anthropological event of death and burial that many religious traditions have, and their practical consequences are examples of this religious pluralisation and its demands that seek to be incorporated and harmonised within the secular framework, as we can see in De León and Basterretxea's article. The shift of young people's religious beliefs towards atheistic or agnostic visions within a markedly religious culture is the subject of the study of secular science that seeks to interpret social changes by applying the logic of statistical objectivity and the methods of social research (Beltrán and Peña). A secular

political constitution may perceive the threat of a return of the religious phenomenon that seeks to condition social life significantly (Vukasinovic and Damjanović) but, at the same time, a secular framework could be a great opportunity for a particular religious tradition (Musiewicz). Finally, Quintana and Casanova point out that religion may be perceived as irrelevant when secularism develops a spiritual sensibility capable of absorbing and diluting religious experience.

This diversity shows that secularism does not have a single, neutral viewpoint to compose a harmonious image of the religious phenomenon. We can see this in how the image of the religious phenomenon appears fragmented in significant public spaces for social construction, such as the public school (Uriarte and Rodríguez). It shows different degrees of flexibility and openness in the face of the challenge posed by the Muslim religious approach to its burial tradition (De León and Basterretxea). The various models of understanding secularity imply different consequences at both the personal and institutional levels; at the personal level, the model of secularity may welcome or reject religion as a factor in the development of a person's purpose (Espinosa), and at the institutional level, Musiewicz defends the idea that a given model of secularity may facilitate the adaptation to the modernity of an institution as significant as the Catholic Church in the remarkable change brought about by the Second Vatican Council. The academic world is one of the best exponents of the secular observation of the world. For this reason, it is highly significant that the intersection between religion and immigration is arousing interest as a research topic in doctoral theses in Spain (Vicente and Urrutia). This Special Issue offers new approaches and frameworks for understanding the value of the religious experience and managing its growing pluralism.

It is interesting to note that most of the articles in this Special Issue focus, in one way or another, on the public management of religion and have an impact on the institutional dimension: in the case of Montenegro (Vukasinovic and Damjanović), academic interest lies in the study of religion about immigration (Vicente and Urrutia), the management of cemeteries (De León and Basterretxea), public schools (Uriarte and Rodríguez), the relationship between Catholic tradition and adaptation to modernity (Musiewicz) and, finally, the contribution that religious institutions can make to the development of a person's purpose (Espinosa).

However, two articles are more on the level of personal or collective experience. The reflection on the consequences of Hartmut Rosa's approach refers to the realm of personal experience and the undermining of the "plausibility structure" of personal religious experience, which would imply a third stage of secularisation and an attempt to dilute the transcendence of religious experience in the immanence of a secular approach (Quintana and Casanova). Within this same plane of experience but abandoning speculative reflection, the article—which focuses on an empirical study of a group of young Colombians—delves into the reasons that can lead to the identification of members of this population as atheists or agnostics who live within a largely religious culture. It is, therefore, a secular analysis (from the social sciences) of the displacements that occur within a religious culture that has difficulties in the socialisation of new generations (Beltrán and Peña).

Finally, it seems essential to briefly point out the consequences of the different conceptions of secularism when it comes to answering the question of religion's status in society and the role it should play. In the conception of secularism as an empty space, the religious fact can be understood as one (not the only one) of the social places in which meaningful approaches are publicly offered in the search for the common good (Uriarte and Rodríguez). Within this perspective, there is the question of whether or not religious fact should have a privileged status within this social dialogue in the pursuit of a common good. Habermas' normative approach to post-secularity seems to point in the direction of recognising the special contribution that religious traditions can make (Mendieta and Van Antwerpen 2011), while the perspectives of Taylor (2011) on one hand and Rawls (1978, 1998) on the other suggest that the proposals of religious traditions in the pursuit of a common good should be treated on an equal footing with other comprehensive doctrines of the good. In any

case, the pole of the conception of secularism as an open space has at least two significant consequences concerning the observation of the religious phenomenon. Firstly, it will not identify the religious fact as an antagonist or as a threat to a certain worldview established in society. Secondly, it can be an open and receptive approach to other cultures and worldviews that are present in the world which, reciprocally, do not necessarily have to identify secularism as an enemy or as the imperative of Westernisation; it opens the possibility for them to perceive it as an opportunity to publicly share the treasure of a given religious tradition (as long as it is willing to confront the presence of other traditions). In any case, this is a dynamic balance and not an easy one to maintain since this kind of understanding of secularism as an open reality is exposed to several threats, two of which are reflected in this Special Issue. The first threat occurs when a particular religious tradition aspires to become (once again) hegemonic in a state by taking advantage of certain conjunctures and social deficits, as exemplified in the case of Montenegro (Vukasinovic and Damjanović). A second situation that threatens to break the balance occurs when a secular formulation empties the meaning of the religious proposal (Quintana and Casanova). This attempt has already appeared in some of the past stages of Habermas' thought (Habermas 1989) and is also identified in Harmunt Rosa's proposal in the article included in this Special Issue.

At the other extreme, when secularism is understood as a social project that entails a certain worldview, the logical approach will be to subordinate the presence of other worldviews (as is the case of religious traditions) to the realisation of the hegemonic worldview, which is understood as a universal vision of social reality. In this case, the religious fact, by virtue of respect for freedom, is recognised as a free exercise of personal decision. Still, it will have restricted access to the public space and will be monitored so that it does not contradict the hegemonic worldview of secularism. In Berger's terms, this conception of secularism will respect the freedom of personal choices, but socially, it will treat the religious fact with the logic of pest control (Berger 2014, p. 90). This perspective opens the door to the opposition between secularism and religion (opening the door does not necessarily mean crossing the threshold of the door). This has at least two very important consequences. The first is that secularism is largely defined by its relationship to religion (secularism as a space where religion has no impact). Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, this understanding of secularism is linked to a particular culture, which is Western culture; it can very easily be understood from other cultural schemes and worldviews as the imposition of a creed born, conveyed, and transmitted by Western culture, which seeks to be the hegemonic culture in the contemporary world. This perspective probably leads to a confrontation of different cultural ways of understanding the good. However, despite the possible negative consequences that theoretical approaches lead to, empirical observation indicates a common and positive desire for understanding.

Seen as a whole, it seems that humanity once again finds itself at a complex crossroads; in the context of a humanity increasingly synchronised by the media and by the great waves of migration, whichever path is taken, enormous challenges appear on the horizon, but there are also new, hitherto unimaginable opportunities. The theme of this Special Issue continues to call for deep and shared reflection for the good of humanity.

The editors of this Special Issue would like to end this editorial by thanking each and every one of the authors who made a significant effort to reflect on this topic, which remains open and in need of further contributions.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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