



Giancarlo Bosetti, Klaus Eder

Post-secularism: A return to the public sphere

During secularization, says Klaus Eder, religion did not disappear completely. It only became invisible to the public sphere. In Europe, this was a result of the two dominant Christian religions — Protestantism and Catholicism — which drove other religious beliefs into the private sphere. He terms the recent return of religion to the public sphere post-secularism.

Giancarlo Bosetti: Prof. Eder, what do you understand by the term "post-secularism"?

Klaus Eder: We begin with a paradox: in secular societies like those in Europe, we have a growing religious discourse. On one hand, we speak of secular society, but, on the other hand, more and more people discuss religious matters. The questions that I pose are: what happened in the course of secularization? How are religious voices changing? My response is simple: during secularization, religion did not disappear *tout court*. It simply disappeared from the public sphere. In other words, the voice of religion was no longer audible, having become a private matter. Today religion is returning to the public sphere. I define this return of religion in the public sphere as "post-secularism".

GB: Questions of visibility: is this then more ostensible rather than real?

KE: No. What I want to say is that during the secular era (still predominant in Europe), religion did not disappear, but instead took a form that was invisible at a public level. No one talks about religion, and religious groups don't dare to enter the public sphere because they do not feel legitimate. Secularization is nothing more than a phenomenon that has hushed up religion: seizure of land, interventions, censorship in schools. Therefore, religion has left the public sphere and entered the private. But this is not to say that it has disappeared. It has simply become invisible.

GB: In a certain sense, you are abandoning Weber's classical theory of secularization, or, to be more precise, the idea that as a result of rational processes, religion loses its impact.

KE: Yes, I refute Weber's thesis because it is a theory that does not take into consideration the fact that religion can change its form of social existence — in this case, change from public to private. In his official theory, Weber places a great deal of importance on rationalization even though he could guess that, at a certain point in the history of secularization, religion would have returned. Weber had this intuition, but did not formulate a precise theory. I would argue that religion is returning to the pre-secular phase, and not by chance. In fact, at a certain point in secularization, religion became confident enough to re-emerge in the public sphere, not with one voice offered by the institutions,

but with as many voices as there are individuals. We can observe this in the amount of activity and religious texts on offer.

GB: But you think one aspect of the traditional theory still holds true: the number of believers is diminishing.

KE: The religion that is diminishing is that which leans on institutions like the Church — in other words, public religion. My idea is that secularization caused religion to disappear from public spaces and that churches represent a place where people can go to show their faith as a group. In secular societies, people have developed a private religion. This does not mean that there are a small number of believers, but just that there are less who pursue religion publicly and who show their religion in the streets, instead maintaining their faith privately.

GB: What are the reasons for this return? Is the growth of visibility of religion due to the development of new means of communication?

KE: One must take a comparative point of view into consideration. In the world, there is only one continent that has gone through a process of secularization: Europe. Neither America, nor Asia, nor Africa. When you speak about secularization, you speak, therefore, only about Europe. Here, individuals were forced to privatize religion because there was only one, maximum two, religious institutions they could turn to: the Catholic Church and the Protestant Church. People did not have the possibility to develop an individual religion or their own ideas, while, at the same time, society diversified. Everyone, from lower to higher classes, followed the same religion.

GB: Not in the US.

KE: In the US, religion has remained public thanks to the vast array of options (Presbyterians, Baptists, Catholics, etc.). In Europe, a limited choice has created a crossroads: private religion or public religion. Consequently, this has reinforced the invisibility of religion, which, nevertheless, has now returned to the public sphere. Here we can see, in fact, the face of post-secularism. Private religion is returning strongly and dynamically to public view — at least individually. People dance for the pope and express themselves in many other ways. And Europe is starting to resemble America, but in a much more modern way, because it is less bound to institutional churches. The other contrasting consequence: in this way, the old continent is becoming a fertile region for radical religious opinions and fundamentalisms.

GB: Is it now necessary to place some limits in order to avoid dangers in the long run, or is post-secularism a positive phenomenon that reinforces liberal societies? In other words, do you agree with John Rawls, who noted the active role of religion in society (for example, in the civil rights movement and earlier in the fight against slavery) and inserted it into his "political liberalism"?

KE: Having public religious convictions means facilitating the integration of religion into liberal democracy, in as much as religion is worked into a continuous dialogue: one is obliged to argue, respond, and justify oneself with more force in public than in private. The permanent debate forces religion to open itself to dialogue, and forces politics to integrate religious themes and opinions into all spheres. The risk of mixing politics and religion is that some politicians could speak of religion as a burden, while some religious leaders

could say that politicians represent evil. But the danger does not really exist, since discrediting is part of the normal practice of public life.

In any case, the normative theories tell us how to live, but I am more orientated towards sociology. I look around and I note what is happening: people are becoming more and more publicly religious. People can be believers and express themselves how they want, not necessarily within institutions — even though they can choose to re-enter them. You can become a Buddhist, or a Pentecostalist, and publicly express it. This is what interests me.

Published 2006-08-17
Original in Italian
Translation by Anna Wolf
Contribution by Reset
First published in *Reset* 90 (2005)
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