

Radical Secularism and the Risks of Undemocratic Trends. Constitutional States, “Far Right” Parties and Anti-immigration Platforms

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Abstract

Every political category, even the most democratic ones, may become discriminatory. Relativism and secularism, similar in their aversion to axiomatic categories, may produce, if radicalized, undemocratic trends by the state towards minorities. Moreover, radical secularism risks being exploited by “far right” parties. Within this framework, we should aim for moderate secularism against dogmatism and fundamentalism, as well as against the total indifference toward the spiritual dimension of human beings. The radicalization of relativism and secularism lies, primarily, in a theoretical-philosophical level. As postmodernist approach suggests, this level is fundamental for contemporary democracies: we should rediscover that relativism and truth, and democracy and “unquestionable” spiritual values (e.g. faith) are not always in contraposition. Only in this way we can guarantee minorities a real integration in a sympathetic public sphere.

Keywords: Radical secularism, truth and democracy, discrimination

Riassunto. *Secolarismo radicale e rischi per la democrazia. Stato costituzionale, partiti e programmi contro l’immigrazione*

Ogni categoria politica, anche la più democratica, può assumere connotati discriminatori. Relativismo e secolarismo radicale, simili nella loro avversione a categorie assiomatiche, possono produrre, se estremizzati, un atteggiamento poco democratico da parte dello stato nei confronti delle minoranze. Il rischio è anche quello che una laicità portata agli estremi venga strumentalizzata da partiti fortemente ostili all’immigrazione. In questo contesto, è necessario ricorrere a una laicità “moderata”, avversa sia ai dogmatismi e ai fondamentalismi che a una discriminatoria totale indifferenza nei confronti della dimensione spirituale dell’essere umano. L’estremizzazione di laicità e relativismo appoggia, ancora prima che su un piano politico, su un piano teorico-filosofico, la cui importanza è fondamentale per le democrazie contemporanee: è necessario riscoprire che relativismo e verità, democrazia e spiritualità religiosa non sono sempre in contraddizione. Solo così è possibile garantire alle minoranze una sfera pubblica accogliente.

Parole chiave: Secolarismo radicale (laicismo), verità e democrazia, discriminazione

1. Introduction

Every political category, even the most democratic ones, may have undemocratic drifts. Secularism, in its radical form, can be an example of these. Secularism has been named in many ways, and many words have been used to differentiate between secularism, *Laïcité*, and secularization. In this paper, I refer to that form of secularism that, in the name of a pure, absolute, and untouchable neutrality of the state and the public sphere, tends to restrain minorities’ freedom, attacks those states that protect them, and tends to undervalue every form of religion.

To be sure: “secularism” is meant here as a situation and/or an attitude, according to which religion and spiritual life are just *one* of the aspects of society and no longer the core of the social life; “secularization” is the historical process that led to the circumscription of the role of religion and spiritual life in society; “radical secularism” indicates an attitude that *marginalizes* and *undervalues* religion and spiritual life. Therefore, I refer to secularism (and radical secularism) as a philosophical, political and social interpretation of the relationship between spiritual and public sphere: I *do not* deal with secularism meant as institutional separation between church and public institutions, even if some mentions can occur¹.

Many scholars have already underlined the degree to which radical secularism may be a religion itself with all the characteristics of a dogmatic and ideological category. I will try to analyse to what degree this category can become dangerous for democracy.

Dealing with scholars’ interpretations of secularism, I will argue that a classical approach may lead to conclusions that do not fit with contemporary pluralism. Other approaches, even with their differences, seem to be more appropriate, such as Charles Taylor’s, Brad S. Gregory’s, and in general post-modernist ones. I will try to underline that all of these scholars support interpretations that promote democratic and open-minded attitudes by not neglecting the religious and spiritual needs of human beings.

From a philosophical point of view, I would argue that radical secularism (meant as a theoretical category) is grounded in radical relativism. The latter, in which every non-purely-relative category² is denied, is a contradictory drift of normal relativism. This denial may be considered the philosophical terrain for a socio-politically hostile attitude against 1) minorities that retain their own identity and beliefs; 2) religion and religiousness in general, felt as “ways of living” that cannot be relativized.

Through a political lens, I will try, without the demand of being complete or

1 Some other terminological clarifications: the term “state” refers in general to institutional and political power and the term “constitutional state” refers to the idea of *Rechtsstaat*. For the goal of this paper the generic label “far-right party” fits better than other ones (such as “populist” or “neo-nationalist”) that would give the analysis a misdirecting undertone. The label “far-right” is not meant to indicate necessarily extreme, radical or fascist positions, but just to describe those parties that are further on the right of the left-right spectrum. I refer in this essay to parties such as Alternative für Deutschland (Germany) and Front National (France).

2 “Non-purely-relative” categories or attitudes are those that do not accept to be made relative in their core, e.g. faith, religious beliefs.

comprehensive, and only intended to offer some starting points of inquiry, to analyze the political consequences of both radical relativism and radical secularism. I would argue that these two radical categories may 1) paradoxically lead to the undervaluation of “the others” and to the justification of an imperialist exportation of democracy; 2) induce people to get together in like-minded groups and increase the polarization between and inside communities; 3) contribute to provoking both the release of the sacred from the sphere where it previously resided (churches) and a sacralisation of politics; 4) be connected to national security matters and exploited by “far right” parties that aim to have a legal foundation for their anti-immigration plans.

The goal of this paper is to show the existence of a link between radical secularism and undemocratic tendencies. Throughout the paper I will maintain the idea that the undemocratic effects of radical secularism can often be compared to the undemocratic ones of established religion. Radical secularism and established religion seem to have similar trends. Far right parties that promote measures of radical secularism in order to defend cultural, national and *religious* identity, are great examples in this regard. In conclusion, extreme relativism, extreme secularism, dogmatism and established religion, whatever their form (philosophical, political, institutional), lead to serious risks for democracy in similar ways.

2. Secularism and post-secularism: scholars’ converging points

2.1. The standard linear interpretation of secularization

Laïcité, secularism, secularization. These terms, which are usually used to refer to Western culture, are too substantial to be described in definitive ways. Generically, these words, even if not perfectly coincident, refer to the formation of a public-political dimension separated from a private religious one. Moreover, they (sometimes) support an *operative* attitude towards an unmitigated banishment of the sacred/religious sphere. The separation of

these two dimensions is usually linked to the internalization of religion that seems to already have existed, for example, in Ancient Rome. The Roman traditional public religion was gradually substituted by an internalized sense of religiousness: the involvement and interest of Roman intellectuals in existential matters and in the relationship with the divine began to create a different non-public “sector”, making it possible to think of religion as separated from cultural tradition. Apart from this Roman anticipation, the term *laicus* indicated a real contraposition only in the Middle Ages. The Church divided *laici* from *clerici*, meaning with *laici* those without the competence required to deal with liturgy. Gradually, the word *laicus* became broadened to indicate the absence of competence in general. The people “without competence” would have formed a new “class” with its own educational and professional system (the professions of notary and judge were some of the most commonly found professions) (Frasca, 2011, pp. 65-66).

In spite of the complexity that this contraposition later assumed, many scholars interpreted the modern history of laicization and secularization in a rather simplistic way, claiming the existence of a sort of path of rationalization that would have led to our modern secularized societies, also allowing the liberation from pre-modern illusions (Taylor, 2007, p. 22). It would be too simplistic, although not wrong, to criticize this approach by arguing that our society is actually not secularized. Sure enough, this approach seems unable to justify its linear interpretation that tends to divide a good secular part that had to be reached from a bad religious part that had to be abandoned. In addition, it is not so obvious that the defeat of one of the two spheres (secular or religious) would unarguably have been progress: as the historian Paolo Prodi wrote, the core of this historical process of secularization should be considered the *dialectic* between public and private, religious and non-religious, and not the subjugation of one of them (Prodi, 2008, p. 381).

Of course, not all of the standard approach should be discarded: the liberal idea of privatizing religion made imaginable and possible the formation of an open public sphere. That being said, what should be refused nowadays is the belief that religion *should only* be private, otherwise it is dangerous (Cladis, 2010, p. 23). This fear of religion was reinforced after the catastrophic events of the 20th century, associated with political, civil or

“secularized” religions. Nevertheless, totalitarianism was not caused by religion itself, but by the absolutization of an aggressive religiousness *in* aggressive politics. Moreover, there isn't any acceptable reason to argue that faith, religiousness and their simple existence in public life are dangerous as such. Nowadays, fear of religion is increased by fundamentalist terrorism. Should the classical interpretation of secularism be followed and at the same time this fear incited, we may tend to dread religion as a whole, without excluding possible restriction against religious groups and minorities. I will return to this.

2.2. Other interpretations of secularization. The coexistence of spiritual needs and secular public space through “communicability”

One of the most important and famous works about secularism is Taylor's *A Secular Age*. Taylor analyses three aspects of secularism: 1) secularism as the absence of God from public spaces; 2) secularism as the regression of belief and practices; 3) secularism as a gradual transition leading to the possibility of not believing in God. Taylor focuses on the third aspect: «Belief in God is no longer axiomatic» (Taylor, 2007, p. 1-3). According to Taylor, the question about secularism is to explain how it was possible that people existentially accepted the possibility of not believing in God. Taylor tries to answer this question by comparing the «different kinds of lived experience» of believers and non-believers. Human beings have a need for reaching spiritual fullness and living their moral/spiritual life: while believers postpone this goal to another life, conscious of their existential limitation and considering fullness outside themselves and outside life, non-believers feel it is possible to develop or find fullness immanently (either inside themselves or in nature). This second attitude arises thanks to a shift from a “naive” background to a “reflective” one that questions the dependence of the immanent on the transcendent. This shift creates a pure humanism that accepts the absence of final goals beyond human flourishing (Taylor, 2007, p. 18) and leads to a new experience of life and sensibility, which “allows” people not to believe in God: «the condition of secularity 3 has thus to be

described in terms of the possibility or impossibility of certain kinds of experience in our age» (Taylor, p. 14). Therefore, this exclusive humanism is crucial for secularism, even if Taylor argues that no linear connection exists. Thus, «a secular age is one in which the eclipse of all goals beyond human flourishing becomes conceivable» (Taylor, p. 20). This means that a new kind of Self can autonomously decide whether to believe and in what to believe. This autonomy was initially created through religious reforms and movements during the Modern Age, which substituted the Middle Age individual with the modern one (Faggioli, 2013, p. 66). Through history, the individual has been more and more encouraged to «find his own way», so that nowadays we live in «a spiritual super-nova, a kind of galloping pluralism on the spiritual plane» (Taylor, p. 300). In this context, the issue is not the marginalization of religion itself, but a general instability of our culture: this is what Taylor calls a «fragilization of the outlooks both of belief and unbelief. The whole culture experiences cross pressures, between the draw of the narratives of closed immanence on one side, and the sense of their inadequacy on the other, strengthened by encounter with existing milieu of religious practice, or just by some intimations of the transcendent» (Taylor, p. 595).

Another approach is that of Brad S. Gregory. According to him, it was the Reformation that caused secularization. When the reformers tried to free themselves from an imperative theological system grounded in Aristotle's and Thomas's philosophies, they opened the doors to religious pluralism and to the questionability of truth. Therefore, Gregory, far from being nostalgic (Faggioli, 2013, p. 72), affirms that this process, other than being the basis for religious freedom, has also led to relativize every value, unintentionally questioning the most basilar foundations of our society (Gregory, 2012, pp. 18-20). This process of relativizing doctrines that began in the Late Middle Ages and exploded with the Protestant Reformation and modern philosophy, led in the long-term to an unintended hyperpluralism, so extended and lacking of landmarks that it fell under the domain of capitalism: «In combination with the exercise of power by hegemonic, liberal states, a symbiosis of capitalism and consumerism is today more than anything else the cultural glue that holds together the heterogeneity of Western hyperpluralism» (Gregory, p. 23).

Other important approaches, such as those from Mark Lilla with his *The Stillborn God: religion, politics, and the modern West* (2007), or Steven D. Smith's *The Disenchantment of the Secular Discourse* (2010), underline the inadequacy and limitations of the standard ideas of secularism and secularization. In contrast with the standard approach, many scholars see in secularization a complicated and non-linear process that led (concretely or/and ideologically) to a marginalization and an underestimation of religion and religiousness. The success that this marginalization achieved to some important extents, such as the development of modern reason, or religious freedom from dogmatic doctrines and institutions, shifted the focus away from observing and understanding the shapes that religiousness were assuming. Religiousness, and everything connected to it, has always survived. For these reasons, many scholars tried to find a less "anti-religious" explanation of secularization, trying at the same time not to assume an opposite ideological religious-conservative position (Ungruneau, 2014, p. 1).

Maintaining this line, post-secularism considered different factors (such as the collapse of trust in science and reason in the 20th century on the one hand and the impressive increase of religious groups on the other hand) as signals of a post-secular society. It is not clear what this society looks like and what post-secularism precisely means. In general, a post-secular approach identifies an individual that refers to religion (or in general to a spiritual dimension) as a means of constituting himself (Zagrelbesky, 2009). In this context, post-secularism aims to readmit religious discourse into public life. Since spiritual sensibility is part of human beings, since a modern religious discourse may provide enrichments to society, and since a constitutional state needs to protect people against any form of religious discrimination, this reintegration seems indispensable. The conditions, the modality, and the degree to which this reinsertion should be carried out are diverse and complex and there is no unique solution. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify some basic claims.

At the core of these quoted approaches seems to be the necessity of conserving both those values that people do not want to eliminate (e.g. their status as believers or non-believers) and their simultaneous need to confront the infinite possibilities of an existence which requires acceptance of "the others" (e.g. believers to non-believers and vice-versa). This is

evidenced by Taylor, who refers to the *fragilitization* of an individual who fluctuates ontologically (once he has recognized the different possibilities of existence) between a believer or a non-believer status. In this context, *the matter of interest is no longer, as a traditional approach would want, to understand which is the right side of the “struggle”, but to create communicability between different ways of experiencing life that lie in the same level.* I wish to stress this point, which is the core of this paper. As Taylor claimed, modernity produced a fracture between two ontological and existential interpretations of life. Both are the roots of our conscience, our way of thinking, our sensibility. None of them should be considered as structurally unsuccessful. The question is how they can communicate.

To confirm the importance of this “problem of communication” I wish to stress that many authors take it into account. In his *Political Liberalism* John Rawls deals with the “reasonable citizen”, who is supposed to be unwilling to impose his own creeds and “doctrines” on the other citizens. The reasonable citizen fundamentally accepts the diversity of worldviews: «Different conceptions of the world can reasonably be elaborated from different standpoints and diversity arises in part from our distinct perspectives» (Rawls, 2005, p. 58). Habermas’s approach stresses the importance of a meeting point between non-believers and religious citizens through a open communication grounded on rationality and reasonableness. For Habermas, the matter of interest is not the “foundation” of a modern constitutional state, which is autonomous from any transcendent basis (Habermas, 2006 p. 8), but the usual incommunicability of secular and religious discourses. Dworkin’s postmodernism stresses that there is no God behind moral orders founded on religion. A sort of “strength of values” and human capacity to find objective good come before any faith in God; the idea of God is only an accident (Ungureanu, 2014, p. 10). Dworkin’s approach is different from Habermas’s, but from the perspective of the attempt to find a “fundamental” communicability, their spirit seems identical. By arguing that faith in God is an accident, Dworkin removes those dogmatic and monolithic aspects of religious faith that usually cause struggles between a group of believers and “the others”.

Moreover, Caputo, borrowing Derrida’s deconstructionism, writes that religions are the

human expression and interpretation of the Love of God. Talking about a «religion without religion», Caputo insists on the fact that God cannot be identified either with faith or with religion: «God is more important than religion as love is more important than faith. Religions are rafts, human artefacts, historical constructions that are organized in their particulars by human communities in order to articulate the love of God» (Caputo, 2001, p. 117). As such, they can be completely deconstructed. Yet, Caputo says, human beings prefer not to think about a human origin of their religions, which are supposed to be, in Caputo's words, dropped from the sky. And the only thing “dropped from the sky” is the Love of God, which comes upon us through the question «What do I do when I love my God?». Therefore, «God is a question, not an answer». Once again, the dimension of communicability is central: Caputo's reasoning implies that there is something common between us, deeply comprehensible, and communicable, once we remove the structures we build around us.

These approaches are much larger than I can quote here. In this paper I refer to them only from the point of view of their common intent (express or not) to research points of meeting beyond dogmatic elements, trying at the same time not to disrupt the ontological ways in which the individual tries to build up his existence.

Since the pluralism we live in forces us not only to face different people or groups but also to face countless different (and potentially conflicting) ontological ways of understanding existence, every group's and individual's most spiritual part should be recognized and protected. Therefore, it is necessary to work towards a public sphere that aims to achieve this goal. No “hostile” category will help in this sense. Radical secularism is one of these categories.

3. Radical secularism and the risks of incoherence: the philosophical problem of relativism

3.1. The connection between radical secularism and radical relativism

We have also changed from a condition in which belief was the default option, not just for the naïve but also for those who [...] talked about atheism; to a condition in which for more and more people unbelieving construals seem at first blush the only plausible ones. [...] and it is difficult to understand people adopting another. So much so that they easily reach for rather gross error theories to explain religious belief: people are afraid of uncertainty, the unknown; they're weak in the head.

This quote by Taylor (2007, p. 12) underlines the degree to which secularism made the comprehension of “the others” difficult. It shows that secularist mentality, which was born through (and in order to grant) modern relativism, became almost blind. I would argue that this happened because of a shift from moderate relativism to a radical axiomatic relativism. The link between secularism and relativism lies in their opposition to religion and metaphysics, which, in their strongest form, impeded the free expression of beliefs, reason, and opinions. Secularism and relativism both fought against the dogmatic side of these categories and, in doing so, contributed to the development of modern freedom. Nevertheless, they both generated their extreme versions, which are dangerous to democracy.

3.2. The contraposition Absolute-Relative and the demonization of the truth: contradictory drifts of radical relativism (and radical secularism)

The struggle between the Absolute and Relative has always existed throughout history. During Ancient Greece it was characterized by the contraposition between metaphysics and relativism. Later, it was characterized by the contrast between monotheistic religions and their opponents, as well as by countless other forms of similar division in every field of Western culture. During the Modern Age, Western culture identified truth, and in general the dimension of the Absolute, as something oppressive for the individual. From a political and institutional point of view, this identification has been one of the most important accomplishments of our modernity. Truth, Absolute and political power form the worst

combination.

It is from a philosophical point of view that it may be dangerous. And since philosophy has always represented the ways in which we think and shape our interpretation of reality, this danger has spread for a long time in our mentality, also contributing to the development of radical secularism.

The safeguard of the individual as a whole is more complex than simply defending him from the Absolute meant as a political category. *The Absolute is not only a political category.* It can also be meant as an *axiomatic (unquestionable) starting point* from which we build ontologically our reality. This starting point should not be *identified as such* with God, dogmatic faith, religion, dogmatic power, etc.

Much of our rights, recognized and granted from modern constitutions, our dignity and the modern individual himself, are founded on values that we stress as fundamental. Values that *we want and need* to be unquestionable, because they are the deepest roots of our society. That is to say that we cannot touch them. They are *untouchable*. They can't be made relative. If we change them, we destroy everything. The fundamental rights expressed in constitutions are in this sense a proof of the importance of values that cannot accept relativism. Human dignity cannot be made relative.

Therefore, the fear of Absolute and Truth is justified: they may be strong tools in the hands of power; but denying them as such means to deny every possibility of providing a foundation to society. Even the form of democracy claimed by Habermas, which develops over time through daily public experiences and that is founded on the rationality and reasonableness of participants, requires that these participants are open to being rational and reasonable and to deciding together (thus, somehow creating an axiom) that their cohabitation is founded on rationality and reasonableness.

More critically, Brad Gregory (2012, pp. 18-20) criticizes the denial of the category of truth:

I am concerned about the blithe and incoherent denial of the category of truth in the domains of human morality, values, and meaning among academics. It is frequently alleged that all human meaning, morality, and values can be nothing more than whatever human beings of different times and cultures subjectively and

contingently construct for themselves [...]. if this is so, then for example it is ultimately inappropriate to say: "it is true that genocide and rape are wrong for everyone". [...] We simply happen to live in a culture in which most people happen not to like such things.

Moreover, about the incoherence of radical relativism:

From the undeniable fact of pluralism, it is frequently inferred that moral and cultural relativism is true, that there are no norms and values rightly applicable to people of all times and places. (Hence the incoherence of attempts to abandon truth as a category: its denial always involves at least this one truth claim. Consistently to abandon truth requires that one stop making assertions or arguments.).

This kind of position may look extreme, but the questions it raises are not so easily answered. I would argue, in order not to fall into the contradiction expressed by Gregory, that relativism should simply be moderate. On the one hand it should "check" and "balance" the existence of every form of axiomatic (unquestionable) values, in order to guarantee their democratic characterization and avoid authoritarian drifts. On the other hand it should not ignore their importance. Relativism can succeed only through the meeting of different sides that manage to communicate, but it does not mean that no fundamental belief can exist. Relativism is communication between different opinions, mentalities, cultures. Since these accept democracy, their beliefs should not be considered as dangerous. Relativism does not mean that *everything* should be relative.

Dealing with secularism, the same reasoning should be applied. Secularism can only succeed in its moderate version. If it is extreme, it contradicts itself. Secularism means that individuals and groups (believers of different credos and non-believers) can at the same time express themselves and communicate their values in order to participate and be listened to in the public sphere, thus forming a dimension of free expression and debate.

4. The political and social consequences of radical relativism and radical secularism

This topic is so large that it is not possible to cover all its aspects. Far from being systematic, I try to raise some questions and underline some scholars' opinions that may be useful for reflection on radical secularism and radical relativism. These two categories may 1) paradoxically lead to the undervaluation of "the others" and to the justification of an imperialist exportation of democracy; 2) induce people to get together in like-minded groups and increase polarization between and inside communities; 3) contribute to provoking both the release of the sacred from the sphere where it previously resided and a sacralisation of politics; 4) be connected to national security matters and be exploited by far right parties that aim to have a legal foundation for their anti-immigration policies.

4.1. The undervaluation of "the others" and the exportation of democracy

As we have already seen, the elimination of truth as a whole is a process that risks denying the values and the moral system that its "believers" have built. The denial of truth and in general of existential construals (religion among them) is also a denial of identity (it is not a coincidence that in modern constitutions faith and religion are protected together with fundamental categories, such as gender, language, political opinions, ethnic provenience). In this context, I would argue that Western culture tends to refuse the category of truth as a whole and to undervalue the identity of "the others". That is to say, it tends to consider cultures that did not eliminate the category of truth (that is to say religious cultures) as undemocratic and retrograde, thus creating the eligibility of "democratization" in the name of a relativist-democratic logic that is, in reality, dogmatic. Would it be possible to claim that Western culture, by considering truth *only* as a dogmatic category, has an excuse both to "save" the others from impositions and to spread its "fair" relativism? The same question may arise about secularism. Even the idea of religious tolerance can be questioned: tolerance starts from the assumption that who tolerates owns a "right" idea of truth and *merely* tolerates the others. (Taranto, 2013, p. 271).

4.2. The polarization inside communities

From a sociologically pragmatic point of view, the emphasis on relativism seems to have been a practical mistake: people have actually never eliminated their need for truth, regardless if it is personal, communitarian, metaphysical, immanent, etc. This is an evident fact represented by the countless existing groups with a deep spiritual background. So, as Brad Gregory wrote (2012, p. 11), we can make the «banal observation that human life in the Western world today [...] is characterized by an enormously wide range of incompatible truth claims pertaining to human values, aspirations, norms, morality, and meaning». In this context, any claim to radical relativism and/or radical secularism tends to force people to an open-mindedness which may be felt as disruptive. Therefore, radical relativism may lead people to withdraw into their truth. Again, in Gregory's words (p. 16):

People are likely to pursue serious political engagement only with those who are like-minded; conversely, disagreements diminish the likelihood of participation in the very venues available for their negotiation and prospective settlement. And Americans have literally built their divides into the country: more and more people choose to live in neighbourhoods or communities with others of like views and values, a demographic trend that has increased sharply since the late 1970s.

4.3. The release of the Sacred and the sacralisation of politics

According to the Italian historian Paolo Prodi, secularism as a “result”, so to say, is not as important as secularization meant as the constant *dialectic process* between the sphere of the sacred and that of politics. This dialectic process contributed to enclose sacred in spheres that are not those of politics. In time, the distinction between the sacred and political power has slowly created two worlds of norms: the moral (pity) and the positive (disobedience) (Prodi, 2008, p. 381). Some kinds of “containers” were created in this process in order to limit sacred and political power to their respective spheres. Nowadays, both of them have

exploded without limits (Prodi, pp. 387-389).

The sacred shifted from its original transcendent dimension to forms of political religion, to totalitarianism and to ideas such as Nation or *Heimat*. Moreover, as Miccoli writes, a sort of secularist religion was born. A religion of freedom (and later it would have been the religion of state, race, class), that had its own monks, rituals and martyrs. Behind the modern totalitarianism lies, in its extreme version, the logic of the new political religions of state, race, nation, party, class (Miccoli, 2010, p. 262).

Radical secularism tends to avoid any form of the sacred. Should constitutional states continue to accept, even partially, forms of radical secularism, they would probably underestimate the role of the sacred and be unable to deal with it.

Therefore, we should be worried about «reactionary traditional religions around the globe that are fostering dangerous forms of the sacralisation of politics» or «forms of civil religion [...] that appear to be nationalistic and militaristic» (Cladis, 2010, p. 28). But we should not cede to the temptation to consider any kind of relationship between politics and religion as dangerous, because we would not be able to deal with the processes of sacralisation of politics.

4.4. The dangerous mix of secularism, national security and nationalism. An example of radical secularist attitudes in far right parties: the Alternative für Deutschland and the Front National

As I wrote above, radical secularism and radical relativism tend to deny, underestimate or fear the identity of “the others” and to increase ingroup-outgroup dynamics. In particular, radical secularism, other than having been useful for different countries (e.g. Turkey) in nation-building processes, may be exploited in order to support some kinds of identity claims, anti-immigration plans, or security policies. It is common to read about secularism and nationalism in nation-building processes, but it is more difficult to find a complete analysis about the connection in a European State or in the USA, between secularism,

ingroup-outgroup dynamics, security, or about the use of secularism by far right parties. Do these links exist? It is not so easy to answer this question, and it is not so directly obvious that, for example, a radical secularist policy would lead to an anti-immigration trend or vice-versa. Demonstrating any recurring connection in this regard would be work that is not meant to be done here. Nevertheless, I report some examples that, at first sight, seem to confirm the existence of some links. I just wish to underline that I don't mean radical secularism as a cause or a consequence of far right platforms or as a natural element of far right parties. Rather, I would argue that radical secularism, thanks to its strong ingroup-outgroup characterization, may be very easily mixed, intentionally or unintentionally, with security matters and far right trends.

An interesting mix of *laïcité* and security is reported by Yolande Jansen (2014, pp. 76-85), who analyzes the December 2003 report by the French Stasi Commission. The Commission proposed the prohibition of conspicuous religious signs in public schools and expressly stated that the matter was no longer the freedom of conscience but public order. The prohibition was thus supposed to be a strong sign to Islamic groups: «the idea that legislation against the scarf could function as a semiotic weapon [...] contributed to the surprising consensus among members of the commission» (Jansen, p. 78). Therefore, radical secularism is not always an autonomous category: choices that should be made with a focus on religious matters (such as the prohibition of head coverings) may instead be influenced by political trends that are usually either strongly defensive or aggressive against “the others” and do not concern the religious sphere. In 2011 Jean Baubèrot wrote that France fluctuates between a tendency (sometimes mixed with national or security matters) to distrust religion and to accept it (Baubèrot, 2011, p. 69). Yet nowadays, due to the fear caused by the attacks of international terrorism and the rise of far right parties, France risks moving more and more toward a strict model of secularism.

Continuing our examination of France, the trends of radical secularism are followed by the Front National. Deputy Gilbert Collard affirms: «L'idée de neutralité, chère aux pères fondateurs, n'existe plus. La laïcité n'est plus neutre. Elle n'est même plus historique. Elle veut déraciner les racines judéo-chrétiennes de la France» (Collard, 2014). Thus, secularism

is supposed to be neutral and to preserve the cultural roots of France. Neutrality is meant as the total indifference of the state toward religion. In addition, another member of the party, Bertrand Dutheil de La Rochère, writes: «Avec Marine Le Pen, le Rassemblement Bleu Marine veut assurer par le respect de la laïcité la liberté de chacun et de chacune. L'interdiction du port de signes religieux ostentatoires, et notamment du voile islamique, dans l'espace public, et donc dans la rue, est une des mesures nécessaires» (Dutheil de La Rochère, 2012). The party's platform is insistent in this regard; one of its paragraphs is entitled "The Return of Equality Against Positive Discrimination" ("Le retour de l'égalité contre la discrimination positive"). Positive discrimination should be prohibited: «La discrimination positive à l'embauche ou à l'accueil de stagiaires, d'étudiants ou d'apprentis sera interdite dans la fonction publique, les entreprises privées et dans les écoles et institutions d'enseignement financées au moins pour partie par l'argent public» (Front National, 2012).

In Germany, the AfD defends the Christian origins of Germany, considering them one of the first values to be protected: «Die Alternative für Deutschland bekennt sich zur deutschen Leitkultur, [...] erst [zur] religiösen Überlieferung des Christentums» (Alternative für Deutschland, 2016). Moreover, multiculturalism is seen by the AfD as ideology («die Ideologie des Multikulturalismus») and, in this perspective, the AfD can affirm that Islam is not part of Germany («der Islam gehört nicht zu Deutschland»). Dealing with security matters, anti-immigration trends and their support for radical secularism (or, vice-versa, the support that they can receive from radical secularism), the AfD is an important example: it has announced the prohibition of foreign donors to fund mosques in Germany. The fear is that these donors, whether individuals, organizations or States, fund mosques in Germany in order to try to increase their power there. Mostly important, the AfD expressly declares that the minaret is a symbol of domination: «Das Minarett lehnt die AfD als islamisches Herrschaftssymbol ebenso ab wie den Muezzinruf». Also from an institutional perspective, the AfD platform seems to promote a radical version of secularism: Islamic organizations should not be allowed to be public organisms because they do not have the "necessary characteristics". In addition, no kind of head covering should be admitted in public spaces.

Many examples could be provided from both the German AfD and the French Front National. And other far right parties in Europe seem, at first sight, to have similar characteristics. It is not possible now to analyze them too. Using two of the largest examples in Europe, my goal was to show how easily far right parties can embrace radical secularism, *which may become a legal and “fair” way to justify their inhospitable platforms.*

5. Conclusion: communicability and open-mindedness. The coexistence of truth(s) and relativism

In order to guarantee fundamental respect to every group sensibility, a reevaluation of truth as a useful category should be encouraged. Whether transcendent or not, whether universally valid or only constructed by people's sensibilities, truth exists as a category: many people refer to truth, to their truth, and build their existence upon that. And we should not forget that the modern privatization of faith does not mean that the desire to share and the hope of sharing this faith in a communitarian sense has disappeared. New forms of identity arise from this combination of individual beliefs and communitarian need for sharing (Marchisio, 2005, p. 619). In this context, a reevaluation of religion, spiritual sensibility, faith, and truth should be encouraged and groups with a spiritual background should be increasingly admitted into the public sphere. Cladis (2010, p.27) named this dynamic of spiritual and cultural exchange Spiritual Democracy, which is «a reflective integration of the critical thought, skills, practices, dispositions, and emotions of diverse citizens as they pursue the distinctively democratic relation between their distinct identities and the dynamic, plural character of their country». Obviously, the state should be a-ideological and non-denominational, but at the same time not indifferent to religions, as the Italian Constitutional Court affirmed in judgment 203/1989. It is obvious that restrictions on uncooperative and fundamentalist creeds or dangerous groups and organizations are necessary. But this would be a very delicate operation in which religious beliefs risk being observed from wrong points of view, with an overlap of values and interpretations or a mix

of fear and xenophobic attitudes. Who decides what is dangerous? With which framework? How does one decide where the line is between violating the creed of others and protecting our values? How does one “decide” when to welcome a guest and when to be afraid?

The coexistence of the countless groups of pluralism is possible only through a constant focus on *communicability and humbleness*: every contact between different beliefs should be considered as extremely delicate. When French authorities banned the *burkini* (a full-body swimsuit that some Muslim women wear on French beaches) and fined the women who wear it, claiming that *burkini* represents a violation of women’s dignity, we go exactly in the opposite direction. French authorities *imposed* their category of freedom on Islamic women. Since a practice or an attitude of a different culture does not directly damage us (and the *burkini* does not!), we cannot just prohibit it. In addition, even if we try to see through the lens of the French authorities, something does not work in their reasoning: that is to say, if we consider the *burkini* as humiliating for Islamic women, we should *protect* them and not *fine* them when they wear it on French beaches. In conclusion, pluralism is something more than just letting “the others” enter our countries or guaranteeing neutral secularized spaces, as the French model would suggest.

If we are not even able to resist the temptation to condemn a swimsuit, we lose the challenge of relativism, because we are *not open* to recognize “the others”. In the case of the “*burkini*”, French Court suspended the ban. But what shall we expect in the future?

The history of Europe is the history of a pacification of religious violence and of the affirmation of democratic societies that are able to grant the pluralism of religious choices (Willaime, 2009, p. 765). Therefore, secularism should be a tool, not a goal.

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