

*Saggi*

## Secularised Society *Conscience and Forgiveness*

ELISA GRIMI\*

\* *Università di Genova*  
e-mail: elisa.grimi@gmail.com

### **Abstract**

This paper's goal is to investigate secularized society by retracing its structure. What is hidden behind the notion of secularization? Our intention here is to analyse the social phenomenon of secularisation through the study of its ontology. The research will be on the identity issue, in the first place the living identity to see its resonance in social, cultural, religious and political areas. We will then arrive at the end of this paper, at the thesis – starting from the consciousness of self and the world – of a return to the authentic form of living together in reciprocal welcome as reason of personal enrichment. In such dynamics the forgiveness issue – taking into account Occidental history – will have a central, and, at the same time, redeeming role.

Cette étude se propose d'étudier la société sécularisée, en retraçant sa structure. Qu'est-ce qui se cache derrière la notion de sécularisation? Ici nous entendons analyser le phénomène de la sécularisation sociale par l'intermédiaire de l'étude de son ontologie. La recherche portera sur la question de l'identité, en premier lieu sur l'identité vivante, pour voir ses résonances dans les domaines social, culturel, religieux et politique. Ainsi, nous arriverons à la thèse - à partir de la conscience du soi et du monde - pour un retour à une forme authentique du vivre ensemble dans un accueil réciproque en tant que raison d'enrichissement personnel. Dans cette dynamique la question du pardon – en tenant compte de l'histoire Occidentale – aura un rôle centrale, et, en même temps, rédempteur.

### **Keywords**

Società, secolarizzazione, perdono, coscienza, chiesa, stato.

From 1822 and until the end of his life Hegel gave lectures of philosophy of History in Jena, Berlin and Heidelberg. It was a popular subject at the time, his courses attracted many followers: these arguments were in fact of great interest to the point that some students were tempted to publish – the text was available after his death – his lectures. In Vienna Friedrich Schlegel was well known for his teachings and in the new University of Munich Joseph Gorres sketched the periods of World History. History became the main object of analysis and specific reflection. Not society, nor the world, nor science, but history. And likewise in Europe François Guizot filled his classes explaining the history of civilisation in Europe and in France, as also in 1828 and 29 Victor Cousin added historical-philosophical comments to his *Cours de Philosophie*.

For Hegel philosophy and history of Philosophy, the latter considered as self-manifestation of reason in as much as: “the spirit of the world”, the “reason” that is actually the very absolute, are the same. We read in his *Introduction to History of Philosophy*:

«...I maintain that the sequence in the systems of Philosophy in History is similar to the sequence in the logical deduction of the Notion-determinations in the Idea. I maintain that if the fundamental conceptions of the systems appearing in the history of Philosophy be entirely divested of what regards their outward form, their relation to the particular and the like, the various stages in the determination of the Idea are found in their logical Notion. Conversely in the logical progression taken for itself, there is, so far as its principal elements are

concerned, the progression of historical manifestations; but it is necessary to have these pure Notions in order to know what the historical form contains. It may be thought that Philosophy must have another order as to the stages in the Idea than that in which these Notions have gone forth in time; but in the main the order is the same<sup>1</sup>.

Although Hegel underlines how there is a difference between the sequence as the successive course of events in history and the sequence in the order of notions, in any case he states that proving this would distract him from the core of the argument instead of focusing on the main issue – id est, coincidence between philosophy and the mentioned history of philosophy, to the point of outlining the task of who teaches history of philosophy. He states:

«Whoever studies the history of sciences such as Physics and Mathematics makes himself acquainted with Physics and Mathematics themselves. But in order to obtain a knowledge of its progress as the development of the Idea in the empirical, external form in which Philosophy appears in History, a corresponding knowledge of the Idea is absolutely essential, just as in judging of human affairs one must have a conception of that which is right and fitting. Else, indeed, as in so many histories of Philosophy, there is presented to the vision devoid of idea, only a disarranged collection of opinions. To make you acquainted with this Idea, and consequently to explain the manifestations, is the business of the his-

---

<sup>1</sup> G.W.F. HEGEL, *Introduction to the History of Philosophy*: <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/hp/hpintroa.htm#A3>

tory of Philosophy, and to do this is my object in undertaking to lecture on the subject»<sup>2</sup>.

Hegel's position leaves us totally surprised for the dominance exerted on the order of space and time. Hegel taught until the last day of his life history of philosophy, the day he died he was starting the tenth course of these lectures. Far from secular society, subject of this research, Hegel proposed a society consolidated in what is secular, all one with its time, actually with its *saeculum*, so as to find in its legislation and government form, in its very State, its realisation. In his *Lectures* we find that the State is *the moral whole and the reality of freedom*. The modern world, as historical-philosophical realisation of the Christian theology of God's incarnation in history, is the result of the fact that subjective liberty has become only mundane as likewise what is mundane has become sacred. With this explanation in the shaping of the modern age, you may already trace the origin of secularisation as we define it in contemporaneity: this definition will be completed with the total annihilation of everyday reality in Nietzsche's view of "Gott ist tot". And so religion for Hegel offers to the layman's spirit freedom of action:

«Among the forms of this conscious union *Religion* occupies the highest position. In it, Spirit – rising above the limitations of temporal and secular existence – becomes conscious of the Absolute Spirit, and in this consciousness of the self-existent Being, renounces its individual interest; it lays this aside in Devotion – a state of mind

<sup>2</sup> G.W.F. HEGEL, *Introduction to the History of Philosophy*: <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/hp/hpintroa.htm#A3>

in which it refuses to occupy itself any longer with the limited and particular. By Sacrifice man expresses his renunciation of his property, his will, his individual feelings. The religious concentration of the soul appears in the form of feeling; it nevertheless passes also into reflection; a form of worship (*cultus*) is a result of reflection»<sup>3</sup>.

If Hegel's position is a good start to understand what later started to be known as “secularized society”, we must recall here the different nuances that the word secular reveals if we analyse it from an etymologic point of view.

### **1. Secularism: notes on the etymon**

The subject of this study is secularized society. Already from the beginning we may understand that if the issue is to go back to the origin of the secularization process of today's society, it is necessary to investigate cultural history. History in fact forms society. Time, with its demands, traditions, and perspectives forms a social context. Any belief of a subject, as authentic as it may be, is always – to recall Heidegger – to be situated. It is placed. It has precise coordinates. With reference to this point it is interesting that in the etymology of ‘secular’ is a ‘secolo’ (one century in Italian). Not many, but only one ‘saeculum’ (Latin for ‘century’ from which derives the Italian word mentioned). Secular concerns a (one) generation including in its horizon all that catches the social subject's attention.

<sup>3</sup> G.W.F. HEGEL, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*: <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/hi/history0.htm>

If in the English language the word ‘secular’ presents only one form which is *secular*, as also occurs in Spanish *secular*; in French this differs for certain peculiarities: if *séculière* indicates whatever lasts one hundred years, like for example, age-old (oak) trees, *séculier* means to live as a layman, not following some monastic rule and today even renouncing to any transcendence. We may start guessing another nuance linked to what is limitable like the time spread of three generations, one takes care of what comes before it or still of its ascendants, like of what follows like its descendants, children and grandchildren. Overall in fact: a century. But near this ‘time period’ you may find a second interpretation rooted in history. In German the word secular is *säkular* or *jahrhundertealt*, and here we may find the echo of the time spread just described, or also *weltlich*, id est, lay, profane. It’s also interesting to point out that in German the word secularisation is translated *Säkularisation* and *Säkularisierung*. These terms are synonyms: the former is preferred to underline the historical process ending the temporal power of the Church, through the shutting down of monasteries, religious orders and institutions, with particular reference to what occurred at the beginning of the XIX century and furthermore, in general, the phenomenon of progressive alienation and marginalisation of the religious dimension from the life of society; the second term instead indicates the institutional and cultural process of separation between the Church and the State.

It is curious that the very notion of “secular” has been object of injustice. If today it refers to a society where God ap-

pears to be the great Alien, with nothing to do with it, the term “secular” contains instead a kind of offence for a Christian. Secularisations were those areas the State took from the Church, or rather the confiscation of the Church’s properties on behalf of temporal sovereigns.

We consider valid R mi Brague’s hypothesis whereby: «the secularisation process is primarily semantic; the words that designate secularisation are themselves secularized»<sup>4</sup>.

## **2. The Church/the State: the true origin of what is secular**

During the contemporary age we tend to consider secular as the opposite of religious. If history teaches, on the wake of the Lateran Treaty that there is a clear distinction between the ecclesiastic field and the civil one in the reciprocal respect of the borders, in any case such distinction has been subject to a kind of transformation. The layman’s field has become the sphere of the unconventional, the excessive, right down to – with regards to morality – the forbidden. From a secular society, attentive to its tradition, its origin, its etymon, of its century there has been a passage to a secularized society, where the word ‘secular’ has been broadened or, rather, distorted. The intellectual movement of secularization in the sense of promotion of a culture more and more secular has moved further and further from those very

---

<sup>4</sup> R. BRAGUE, *Secolarizzazione:   moderna o nasce nel Medioevo?*, in *Vita e Pensiero*, 5 (2009), 59.

realistic facts that in the beginning went under that name, to the point of rebutting it. What Brague holds is correct, that in such case language enforces the prediction contained implicitly in the etymology. He writes:

«secularized is he who the logic immanent in his position would oblige (should he be coherent) to act as if humanity could last only a century. Secularized is also whose conduct (be it applied in a conformed and generalized way) is such that humanity may last only a century»<sup>5</sup>.

We stand – all of a sudden – before Chaos, a society gone mad, lost, incapable of rebuilding the *saeculum*, incapable of looking at the horizon of the meaning that gave it shape, character, evolution. It's interesting to recall some quotes of Janine Quiller, *Les clefs du pouvoir au Moyen Age*, and of Pierre Legendre, *Le désir politique de Dieu*, for whom it was the very Church to render laic political power. To really penetrate the meaning of what is truly “secular”, we must clarify what we mean with *identity*, without adjectives, the strict identity of man: what is identity? I will attempt to give a brief illustration.

---

<sup>5</sup> R. BRAGUE, *Non esiste una società secolare*, in S. BELARDINELLI - L. ALLODI - L. GATTAMORTA, *Verso una società post-secolare*, Rubbettino, Soveria Mannelli 2009, 83-93, then published in R. BRAGUE, *Contro il cristianesimo e l'umanesimo*, con un saggio introduttivo di E. Grimi, *Il perdono dell'Occidente*, Cantagalli, Siena 2015.



### 3. Identity and social role: a new way to be and communicate.

#### 3.1 Identity: cues for thought

To recall a famous definition by Johannes Baptist Lotz, S.J., in his popular *Metaphysica operationis humanae*, «unum est (vel) indivisum in se et divisum a quolibet alio»<sup>6</sup>. The concept of identity we deduct brings back to that of unity. This includes two aspects: intrinsic undivided whole and distinction of that which is other. It's surprising that in the second revised and amplified edition of the Enciclopedia Filosofica Bompiani the short article of Sofia Vanni Rovighi was retained for the word 'identity'. This scholar sustained the rediscovery of the philosophy of Saint Thomas Aquinas in the Milan school. She writes:

«The concept of identity therefore supposes the concept of being, absolute primary and undefinable notion, and the experience of difference, also primary and irrefutable notion»<sup>7</sup>.

This definition may seem to be taken for granted, but as any initial assumption it demands great attention. It's possible in fact to speak of identity because there is 'being'. This statement is extremely strong. It means that there is something that allows to give identity. And again Vanni Rovighi<sup>8</sup> states that the identity

<sup>6</sup> J.B. LOTZ, *Metaphysica operationis humanae. Methodo trascendentali explicata*, Libreria editrice dell'Università Gregoriana, Roma (1958, 1961<sup>2</sup>) 1972<sup>3</sup>, 154.

<sup>7</sup> S. VANNI ROVIGHI, Etim *Identità*, in *Enciclopedia filosofica*, Bompiani, Milano 2006, 5470.

<sup>8</sup> The next etim on *Principio d'identità* is always by S. Vanni Rovighi, *ivi*, 5471.

principle<sup>9</sup> – principle allowing the supreme law of being – coincides with *the assertion by which being is (exists)*.

If we speak of identity, it will be implicit to speak of unity and therefore of intrinsic unity and distinction from alterity. Vanni Rovighi states referring to these two elements: «Each notion of identity is based on these two elements: even the most radical reduction of all reality to the identity of one being, like that of Parmenides, is meaningless, if not in function of a multiplicity to be denied, to be resolved only apparently; and also the most radical denial of identity, like may be that of absolute empiricism, has no meaning, if not in function of a unity to be denied and reduced to a pure word, flatus vocis, arbitrary and classifying scheme. If man had the experience of an only being, he would have the notion of being, but not that (the notion) of one and identical; if the multiple data were not conceived as being, it would not be possible to be conscious of their multiplicity and diversity»<sup>10</sup>.

### ***3.2 Identity and social role***

We are starting to understand the importance of identity with respect to the social sphere. Given a structure defined at social level there is a precise identity: you may speak in fact of cultural, social, political and religious identity. Identity speaks of

<sup>9</sup> This is the definition offered by Vanni Rovighi: «Every being is itself, id est what it is determined to be and not at the same time anything else», *ibidem*.

<sup>10</sup> S. VANNI ROVIGHI, *Etim Identità, ivi*, 5470.

individual substance. In today's society the weight of identity doesn't appear anymore as founding. It's useless to propose phenomenological analysis with reference to the triggering of social change, there are plenty of records the reading of which only brings to drop a good proposal. Life has been subject to a *facilitation*. Technology makes *easy* operating, in the electronic as in the sanitary, and food fields, relationships are always considered easy under the prevailing contraceptive logic, the refusal of life, the 'easy' suppression of infants, the just economy makes life easy. It is the reign of the logic of licit and illicit, of universal rights, of the tendency to confused and blurred, – if you wish – individualized borders. To use a good expression from Zygmunt Bauman<sup>11</sup> taken up by Franc Rodé<sup>12</sup>, the XXI century man is a 'tourist' in search of new surroundings, new experiences. It is the empire of the wandering spirit, not the Middle Age one capable of founding an order, as the spirit of mendicant order.

We therefore witness the denial of identity and consequently of unity. Europe itself hesitates to recuperate its unity, the States aren't any more strongly mindful of their foundation, language is more and more subject to boycott, abridged in *easy* messages, relationships are *easily* summarized in a simple click. And in this society – almost paradoxically – emerges the 'I' who recalls, in

---

<sup>11</sup> Vd. Z. BAUMAN, *Dentro la globalizzazione. Le conseguenze sulle persone*, Laterza, Bari 2001, 87-112.

<sup>12</sup> F. RODÉ, *Quale formazione in una società secolarizzata?*, in *Sfide della secolarizzazione in Europa. Annuncio, dialogo e testimonianza*, a cura di R. Rouse, Urbaniniana University Press, Città del Vaticano 2008.

fact the Iphone, the Ipad, and to think that some time ago the market of “I love...” T shirts was considered a thriving business.

#### **4. Consciousness of self, consciousness of the world. Forgiveness**

Curious – though disputable – Brague’s hypothesis for which the notion of “secular society” is tautologic; he holds that: «Secularity is the result of a motion that triggers in the same manner that the human community took the name of “society”»<sup>13</sup>. Disputable because possibly the idea that finally in an occidental view society has been built on something that goes beyond its fundament, (which is) an economical formulation. Society in fact speaks lately of an interest that is not only economical, but for recognition of the defence of rights that speaks up, at times, in favour of an irrational liberalism. According to a certain social tendency, for example, infant euthanasia is legalized. Finally, this means having reached a second level: if, in the first place, the expression “secular society” seemed tautologic, now the secular has transformed society itself. Society is secularized: it has become prey of its customs: man doesn’t form society anymore, but societies form man.

Here arises spontaneously a reflection on conscience. What is the conscience man has of himself? The “social animal” seems more and more easy to manipulate. Pushed into a net, it’s difficult for him to have a view from outside of the system,

<sup>13</sup> R. BRAGUE, *Non esiste una società secolare*, cit.

questioning himself with the issues that form him as a man. The sense of the *polis* is lost, the value of the *demos* hidden. Recalling the metaphor of the players around a table of Thomas Hobbes<sup>14</sup>, taken up again by Adam Smith<sup>15</sup>, a concept also found in Pierre Manent<sup>16</sup>, Brague states:

«The evolution of our societies has made of society something more similar to a players club. Furthermore, to make the game *fair*, as per the English word, we must exclude any external interference. The plane of our democratic society is flat in the sense that there must not be anything, at the starting point, above the rest. The democratic social plane is not only flat but also *closed*. And it is closed because it's flat. It must be shut out to allow it to be flat. All that is outside must be excluded and first of all the Great External, God, but also anything with the pretension of self assertion. The democratic field must remain within itself, in Latin we would say that it must be *immanents*»<sup>17</sup>.

From this argument we deduct how the reflection on the Self will conduct to the world: the passage from consciousness of Self to consciousness of the world is possible precisely for the reason that the Self is not Self sufficient. In fact the longing for the other begins, to take up again our previous argument, being precedes identity as experience of a diversity. We may affirm the auto foundation of the Self *easily* but the only object of ver-

<sup>14</sup> T. HOBBS, *Leviathan*, II, 30, edited by M. Oakeshott, Blacwell, Oxford 1960, 227.

<sup>15</sup> A. SMITH, *A Theory of Moral Sentiments*, VI, ii, 2, 17, edited by D.D. RAPHAEL and A.L. MACFIE, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1976, 234.

<sup>16</sup> P. MANENT, *Cours familier de philosophie politique*, Fayard, Paris 2001, 199.

<sup>17</sup> R. BRAGUE, *Non esiste una società secolare*, cit.

ification will be precisely the Self: such auto foundation may be disputed equally by life itself: as James Arthur Baldwin would say, such a life knows well its origin and believes in God<sup>18</sup>. But here the circle of self foundation could – with the conviction of the most relentless agnostics – reinstall itself, it appears that the only thesis on which the drama has been written is evident, and speaks of the same question.

If the reflection on consciousness of self, implies at a second level a reflection on the world. In Western history, an ‘*imperat*’ stronger than one’s beliefs would appear to be in force, whereby the Great External finds its immediate collocation. We refer to the mystery of forgiveness. This is a mystery because it goes apparently against the *easy social logic*. With reference to the arguments set forward here above to illustrate the development of the secular and the evolution of society in the process of secularization it’s not by chance that forgiveness results as a jarring note. Forgiveness in the Old Testament is born precisely from the Covenant:

But this is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after those days – oracle of the Lord. I will place my law within them, and write it upon their hearts; I will be their God, and they shall be my people (Jer 31, 33).

Forgiveness is therefore the result of God’s free initiative, allowing man to recuperate what seems to be irrecoverable loss. Irrecoverable loss: therefore in forgiveness we find something that

---

<sup>18</sup> J.A. BALDWIN, *Blues for Mister Charlie*, Dial Play, New York 1964.

that goes beyond the logic of the closed circle, the norm, human measure, society. Let's read these verses:

I will make a covenant for them on that day, with the wild animals, With the birds of the air, and with the things that crawl on the ground. Bow and sword and warfare I will destroy from the land, and I will give them rest in safety. I will betroth you to me forever: I will betroth you to me with justice and with judgment, with loyalty and with compassion; I will betroth you to me with fidelity, and you shall know the Lord. On that day I will respond – oracle of the Lord – I will respond to the heavens, and they will respond to the earth; The earth will respond to the grain, and wine, and oil, and these will respond to Jezreel. I will sow her for myself in the land, and I will have pity on Not-Pitied. I will say to Not-My-People, 'You are my people', and he will say, 'My God!'. (Hos 2, 20-25).

In forgiveness it occurs that that non being becomes being, the not-pitied will get pity<sup>19</sup>, what was forgotten, left in the past without remedy, renewed, transformed, brought to renewed life, under a new light: "I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh" (Ezek 36,26).

<sup>19</sup> Cf. the Italian version: «... Io li seminerò di nuovo per me nel paese e amerò Non-amata; e a Non-mio-popolo dirò: Popolo mio, ed egli mi dirà: Mio Dio». In the English version the concept of love [amerò Non-amata] is expressed with "pity". Another English translation, but far from the Italian version is: «... And I will sow her unto me in the earth, and I will have mercy on her that was without mercy. And I will say to that which was not my people: Thou art my people. And they shall say: Thou art my God» (New Catholic Edition of the Holy Bible, translated from the Latin Vulgate Catholic Book Publishing Company, New York. Copyright 1956-1951, Printed and Bound in the USA).

Forgiveness is the horizon where we may trace not *easily* a century, but a complete history, the history of goodness, that remains or every man, the temporal motor, the *timer* that measures the distance between man and his Creator. Forgiveness is not only considered as something that happens between people but also in the horizon of history. The West needs to forgive and be forgiven, to recuperate the history that built it and characterizes it in fact as the West. Social man will immediately ask how could it be possible in front of humanitarian tragedies, wars, unthinkable and unheard of violence to speak of forgiveness. Here is the setback: only in forgiveness is it possible to recuperate the irremediable loss, transfigure the non-loved to beloved<sup>20</sup>, the destroyed to constructed, the wasteland to rich soil.

---

<sup>20</sup> See previous note.