AOSIS

The revenge of the words: On language's historical and autonomous being and its effects on 'secularisation'

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What if language was an autonomous historical being? What if language's use was not solely dependent on the intentions of the one who speaks? In this text I will test these provocative statements. Specifically, I will investigate whether language's proclaimed historical independence can be traced in the usage of the concept of 'secularisation', and I will try to unveil the consequences of this operation.

Contribution: Has Christianity abandoned the public stage in the 'secularised' and industrialised world? In this article I intend to demonstrate that this is not the case. The continuous operative presence of Christianity in our socio-political language is used as the model to prove this argument.

Keywords: Secularisation; Political theology; Secularism; Linguistics; Conceptual history; Philosophy.

Introduction

'What's in a name?', wrote Shakespeare (2003; 2.2.43–44):

> [*W*]hat's in a name? That which we call a rose
> By any other name would smell as sweet. (p. 107)

This well-known phrase, exclaimed by Juliet (of the house of Capulet), was an attempt to analogise her love for Romeo. She loved Romeo, but she could not love his Montague family name. 'Tis but thy name that is my enemy' (Shakespeare 2003:107; 2.2.38), Juliet had just proclaimed, after which she had added the desirous 'O be some other name!' (Shakespeare 2003:107; 2.2.42).

We all know how the story ends. Unfortunately for Juliet (and obviously for Romeo as well), there *is* something in a name. Not every other name, even if given to the same sweet-smelling flower known as a rose, will carry the same luscious scent as the rose. Sadly for these two young and innocent lovers, the Montague name did have an 'odour' that stuck to it. Regrettably, it was not the fragrant one of the rose, but the nasty stink of the blend of the poisoned corpse of Juliet and the metallic one of the vermillion colour of the blood coming out of Romeo's self-stabbed corpse.

What holds for names also holds for words. True, not all words[1] have 'something *in* them', but certainly all socially relevant words seem to be burdened with a similarly loaded heritage that can easily turn from its sweet rosy scent into the poisoned blend our Shakespearian couple had to experience in and upon their lives. Similar to this literary tragedy, also in the case of our socially relevant words, this heritage or legacy is all too often, like Juliet desired, hopefully ignored, if not forgotten or actively combatted. For as much as this heritage might be purposefully disregarded or fought, it is, however, ever so prone to surface and become vindictively fully active.

Theoretical ground zero

Leaving Shakespeare and our doomed couple momentarily behind, let me try to be a bit less hermetic and reveal what it is I am proposing by means of this rather suggestive love affair. Let me begin with the theoretical backbone of what it is that I intend to say. To be clear from the very beginning, what I will expound is the combination of a speculative further elaboration of an

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1.Simple articles, for example, are excluded from this 'category'.

aspect of the linguistic theory of the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, with a provocative stretching of a claim by the French philosopher and theorist Roland Barthes.

Regarding the speculative further elaboration of an aspect of the linguistic theory of Agamben (2018:11), his theoretical affirmation that is at stake here is that 'language is … a historical being'. As for the expansion, maybe even 'radicalisation', that I intend to make operative in this text, it regards the provocation that language is perhaps not only a historical being, but that the history of this being (i.e. that language's history) does not always coincide with the history of its usage (by us human beings).[2] The historical being named language thus has, as I intend to demonstrate, a proper history. And this history does *not always* correspond with that other history, namely, that of its usage (of language's usage). At times, to use a linguistic construction that has often been misunderstood, and has also been ascribed to so-called postmodernism (a meaningless, because all-too-plastic, word) or contemporary Continental philosophy, language itself speaks through us.

As for the claim made by Roland Barthes – and I am here merely doing what Michel Foucault (2001:1621) claimed should be done with all thoughts that are considered interesting and worth following-up, namely, trying to bring them to their limits, to stretch them (like an elastic band to see when it breaks), to make these thoughts groan and protest[3] – that I intend to stretch, making it groan and protest, it regards his consideration that words and their usages not only teach and tell us something of the culture in which they are used, but, and this is the important aspect, that these words themselves have some sort of memory (cf. Barthes 1990). Words thus not only reveal things about the culture in which they are used, but they themselves englobe and maintain meanings of their historical usages as well. However, they also remember previous usages that, at times, have been forgotten by the user of these words. And even when the meaning of a word changes (which it does, at times), these same words tend to remember their old meanings, and they (these older and forgotten meanings) are at times reproposed by the word itself, indifferently to the intentions of the user of those words.[4]

The individual memory of individual words or concepts, as claimed by Barthes, brought into connection with my extrapolation of Agamben's theory of language, namely, that not only is language a proper historical being but also that it has a distinctive history, which not *always* nor necessarily coincides or corresponds with the history of its usage, is the theoretical framework through which I will operate in what follows.

The revendication of this combination, of language's non-coincidental autonomy, implies that under certain exceptional circumstances,[5] language (its individual and non-coincidental autonomous historical being) will impose itself and cause unexpected, and at times even undesired, effects on the intended usage of it – that is, on the usage of language by any particular speaker in time. What we say, its meaning and implications will at times be out of our control, even if we attempt to carefully calibrate and weigh our words, or our usage of it.

History to our aid

A historical example can render more clearly the just delineated, rather technical theoretical framework. And one of the more pertinent examples is the word 'revolution'.[6]

Now for us, today, the word 'revolution' means 'an instance of great change'. During a revolution, something old is being overthrown and something completely new installs itself. Basically, revolutions are thus moments, or better periods – as they almost all last a number of months, at times even years – of fundamental change, be that political, social or cultural change.

That revolutions are understood to be about the inauguration of something completely and radically new can easily be demonstrated by means of the understanding of revolutionary 'time'. The revolutionaries of the French Revolution,[7] to give just one example, simply interrupted the current counting of years and erased all existing names of the months of the year. The year 1789 was thus no longer considered as 1789, but became Year 1, and in 1792 a whole new calendar, the French Revolutionary Calendar (*calendrier révolutionnaire français*), was even inaugurated, which would last for 12 years. As just mentioned, also the names of the months were changed for names that were pure neologisms,[8] the purpose of which

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2. That this provocative expansion can be justified is related to the fact that, as I argued elsewhere in discussion with Agamben (cf. Vanhoutte 2018:1), not only should the human being be considered as the 'animal' that has language – man is not just *Homo sapiens*, according to Agamben (2018:13), but, above all, *Homo sapiens loquendi*, the living being that can talk – but language itself should be considered as a living 'being' (language has a history that does not coincide with human history).

3. In a different interview from the same year, Foucault (2001:1593) had expressed the same thought in different words – this time applied to his own works and how he liked it to be honoured – saying that 'I would like my books to be [used] like surgeons' knives, Molotov cocktails, or galleries in a mine, and, like fireworks, to be carbonized after use'.

4. Independently of Barthes, Paul Kahn and, up to a certain sense, also Jacques Derrida, proposed similar thoughts. Kahn (2011:104), from his side, affirms that notwithstanding the fact that ideas constantly shed some of their older meanings and add new ones, they always keep and 'bring with them remnants of their former meanings'. Derrida can be of interest here for the linguistic interpretation of his use of the concept of 'iterability', which, as Bonnie Honig (2009:128) so accurately summarised, is a 'quality of language and practice that pushes terms and concepts always to exceed and undo the intentions and aims of any particular speaker in time'.

5. These circumstances are exceptional because of the simple fact that, generally speaking, our interaction with language is rather banal, direct and without many possible loopholes or hiccups.

6. Many other words, socially relevant words, could have been taken as example. The word 'crisis', for example, or the word 'heresy', to name just two, could have fulfilled the same explicatory function equally well as 'revolution'.

7. My reference here to the French Revolution, and later to the Russian one, does by no means attempt to circumscribe the power of the example(s) to a European context. (South) American examples of revolutions could equally well have fulfilled the required necessities, and the same obviously holds for revolutions in (South) Africa – for example the end of apartheid. If anything, the occidental centering of the discourse is a recognition of the circumscription of the knowledge of the author of this text. A similar limit is also responsible for the politico-centrality of this example. I am convinced that similar examples could be offered from non-political fields, like, for example, the art world.

8. *Thermidor* (*thermon* – 'heat') was, for example, the period covering 19–20 July to 18–19 August, and the following 'month', which covered the next 30 days, was *Fructidor* (the suffix -*dor* came from Greek and means 'gift'), the period where one had the ripest fruit and which thus explains the name of the month.

obviously was to establish a complete break with all that had come before.[9]

For as much as the term 'revolution' is thus, today, understood as something that inaugurates something completely new, the point zero of a new scale, this, however, is not the original understanding of the word. In fact, the word meant something that can be considered almost its opposite, and its main context of usage was also rather different. The human-related sociopolitical or cultural fields were not the original operative context of the word 'revolution'. It was rather that of the celestial bodies, that is, ancient astrology. A revolution in antiquity was thus the repeated returning of the celestial bodies to their place 'of origin' (from where the visualisation had started). The stars revolved; they went their due course in the night skies, and they returned to their place of origin after a fixed period of time.

The meaning, understanding and use of the word 'revolution' in antiquity was thus not, and was not understood as consisting in, a break with the past; neither did it comport a fundamental change. It consisted of and was accordingly understood as the normal circling, unwinding, repetitive movements of the celestial bodies. A revolution in antiquity consisted of an astrological Nietzschean 'eternal returning'.

As is evident from these paragraphs above, the meaning of the word 'revolution' has clearly changed. A revolution now means almost the exact opposite as what it used to mean in the past.

That the meaning or the understanding of words changes over a period of time is to be considered interesting. However, it was not the scope of these paragraphs, let alone of this text as a whole, to demonstrate the existence of this change. The goal of the invocation here of historical examples was to facilitate the understanding of the theoretical provocation phrased before, that words, even when they change meaning, would themselves tend to remember their old meaning, and would even repropose this meaning indifferently to the intentions of any particular speaker of those words. Although this might seem an arduous theoretical task, in the context of our applied research here into the word 'revolution', it suffices to discover the circling movement that was the original cipher of the revolution as still present in the new application, *not the understanding*, of the word 'revolution'.

I believe this necessary revolving movement of the 'original' revolution, this remnant of the old meaning, is easy to discover in the new application of the word. In fact, what are not the continuous purges of the hierarchs, the exchange of the revolutionary leaders, at the top of modern-day

revolutionary movements, than this resisting and autonomously operating remnant?

Taking once again the French Revolution as example, we can see how amongst its leaders there was an extremely high and very rapid, what one could call 'exchange rate' at the top of the revolutionary hierarchy. Most of the leaders were thus killed by their adversaries *within* the revolutionary movement.[10] The Girondin leaders Brissot, Danton and Hébert, all perished at the hands of the other two leaders, the Jacobins Robespierre and de Saint-Just. These latter, too, however, after having killed almost all their opponents in the 'year of terror', were themselves 'dethroned' and murdered, thus continuing the circulation of the revolutionary hierarchs. So, within only a couple of years, we can observe a constant flux, a repeated, circular renovation at the highest level of the revolution. And the very same story can be told about, for example, the Russian Revolution and its leaders as well.[11]

As can be seen, considering this continuous purge at the highest level of the various revolutionary movements as the very cynical remnant of that circulation-movement that originally characterised the concept of revolution is not a particularly difficult intellectual exercise. It is as if revolution itself – that word that had been intentionally changed to stop meaning something circular, cyclical, something repetitive – was revenging itself autonomously by continuing its revolving movement, no longer in time and space, but returning quite literally on the heads of those that attempted to create this non-revolving revolution. And still today, with every new revolutionary movement[12] comes this stubbornness of language, this refusal to let go of its ancient meaning. And this stubbornness has more often than not had a direct, and ironic or even cynical, returning effect on the non-linguistic real world and its proceedings.

Traditional secularisation, a recap[13]

Turning now to the central topic of this text, secularisation, as some might already have understood, I think something very similar to the story just related about the word 'revolution' can and should be told about the concept of 'secular' and its

9. Referring to the July 1830 revolution (once again in France), Benjamin (1969:262) tells the following tale in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History* that confirms what is at stake here: 'On the first evening of fighting it turned out that the clocks in towers were being fired on simultaneously and independently from several places in Paris'. The 'old time' had to be killed by the revolutionaries for their revolution to be able to succeed. 'The awareness that they are about to make the continuum of history explode', as Benjamin (1969:261) introduced the tale of the shooting of clocks, 'is characteristic of the revolutionary classes at the moment of their action'.

10. Many of these leaders were also ironically, even cynically, decapitated by means of the guillotine.

11. Besides what can be described as almost a continuous purge in the second half of the 1930s of whole sections and large numbers of government functionaries after the Kirov murder (1934) – and something similar happened again in the late 1940s with the so-called Leningrad affair, with Stalin ordering hundreds of party and government functionaries (from, or simply close to apparatchiks from, Leningrad) to be thrown into prison or shot, this time even without any form of (show) trail – there was also a more regular, always-present flow into and fall from power (something that obviously augmented the sense of terror). Basically all the great opposers of Stalin (Trotsky, Zinoviev, Kamenev, Bukharin, Rykov, Tomsky and many, many more) were to meet a premature death by the hands of the communist Tzar, and many more would 'inexplicably' disappear from the Soviet Union's power stage and the public eye.

12. Even those who are only revolutionary in language – think of the history of post-apartheid politics and the leaders it has seen already.

13. Some of the arguments that I develop in what follows – with the exclusion of the references to Martin Hägglund's book *This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom* (Hägglund 2019) – go back to my book *Limbo Reapplied*, specifically the section of the third chapter entitled *Prolegomena to Any Translation of Limbo* (Vanhoutte 2018:99–109).

derivates.[14,15] So what's in the words of the (post-)secular, of secularism, secularisation?

The first thing that has to be clarified is that, as Connolly (1999:5) correctly claimed in his book *Why I Am Not a Secularist*, there are 'several doctrines [that] walk under the large umbrella of secularism'. However, and for as much as there are several different doctrines walking under the same secular umbrella, one can describe a more dominant form of secularism along the following lines (Connolly 1999):

> [O]nce the universal Catholic Church was challenged and dispersed by various Protestant sects a unified public authority grounded in a common faith was drawn into a series of sectarian conflicts and wars. Because the sovereign's support of the right way to eternal life was said to hang in the balance, these conflicts were often horribly destructive and intractable. The best hope for a peaceful and just world under these new circumstances was the institution of a public life in which the final meaning of life, the proper route to life after death, and the divine source of morality were pulled out of the public realm and deposited into private life. The secularization of public life is thus crucial to private freedom, pluralistic democracy, individual rights, public reason, and the primacy of the state. The key to its success is the separation of church and state and general acceptance of a conception of public reason (or some surrogate) through which to reach public agreement on nonreligious issues. (p. 20)

Recapping the just-related plot, the mainstream theory of 'secularisation' thus claims that the (Western) world/culture has transited from being a profoundly religious world and culture to being a culture (named the 'secular' culture) where religion is no longer of the same profound and predominant importance. In fact, this secular world and culture are to be understood as meaning and implying the emptying of the public sphere of its former religiousness.

The Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor (2007), in his already classic *The Secular Age*, has enriched our understanding of this dominant form of secularism. He has demonstrated that there is, in fact, not just one story present in this more mainstream theory of secularism, but that there are three different accumulative storylines in this predominant theory. The first and easiest storyline to discover regards the retraction of religion from the public space. As I already stated in the summary of Connolly, the understanding of the world as having become secular implies an emptying of the public sphere of its former religiousness. This, however, is, according to Taylor only the most basic form of secularisation.

Besides this first storyline, there is a second understanding of secularisation at work in this theory as well. Secularity in

the West does, in fact, not comport only some sort of retracting from the public sphere of forms of religion and religiosity. 'Secularisation' is also about the 'falling off of religious belief and practice, in people turning away from God, and no longer going to Church' (Taylor 2007:2). Secularisation is thus not just a dwindling of the importance of the religious in the public sphere, but it also consists of an ebbing of religious participation and practice on a more personal level as well.

Now according to Taylor, there is also one more meaning at work in this dominant theory of secularisation. This regards what could be called the 'optionalisation' of belief. In the 'presecularised' world, so Taylor claims, it 'was virtually impossible not to believe in God'. Now, to the contrary, traditional 'faith, even for the staunchest believer, is [only] one human possibility among others' (Taylor 2007:3). Basically, secularism, and the third storyline identified by Taylor within the main 'secularisation' narrative, has thus opened up a wide variety of possible new forms of belief that were not previously available for those who are looking for meaning.[16]

Secularisation revisited (again)

For as much as the just-explained mainstream understanding of secularism is still the predominant form, a new, or better, and altered version of an older form of secularism is making somewhat of a return. This older version of an alternative theory of secularism was first proposed in the late 19th century by the British scholar George Jacob Holyoake, founder of the National Secular Society (1866) in the United Kingdom, and it has recently been reproposed by the Swedish professor of comparative literature and humanities at Yale University, Martin Hägglund (2019), in his already-mentioned book *This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom*. This version of secularism claims that physical, social and moral improvement of the individual and of society as a whole can only be achieved by basing oneself exclusively on considerations of practical morality, in combination thus with the exclusion of all religious and metaphysical considerations whatsoever (cf. Benson 2004:85–86).

As can be seen, this is a much more radical form of secularism than the more dominant one. And although this form of secularisation theory often hides its harshness against religion behind descriptive, 'neutral' and pseudo-observational language, it cannot hide its rudimentary (and often rude) anti-religion orientation. For the secularists who subscribe to this understanding of 'secularisation', religion was and is mere ignorance and a hindrance to progress, and it (i.e. religion) devaluates life and the human individual

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14.With the derivates of the concept of 'secular', I intend the various concepts (which often differ significantly also in meaning) such as secularism, secularisation and even post-secularism.

15.As just mentioned, although I am aware of the significant semantic and philosophical difference between these various concepts (and for as much as I am also aware of the claim made by some that the period of high secularism is already in the past and we have thus entered an epoch of 'post-secularism'), I will use them as if they were interchangeable (with the exception of the term 'post-secularisation', obviously) as the effects of my provocative thesis of the revenge of some concepts does not have any implications for these semantic differences and oppositions.

16.Taylor particularly traces this third storyline in his impressive volume. This third sense of secularisation is indeed, as Taylor correctly claims, the most interesting one, also because it allows one to breach at least a little bit the protective wall of the false evolutionary tale that results from the first two understandings of the theory of secularisation. It in fact allows one to undermine the cliché that the decline in religiosity (public and private) is linear and that there are no new forms of religiosity that are continuously being formed in a world that is ever more secular according to the other two plotlines (cf. Taylor 2007:436–437).

because it considers life and the individual only as a means, and never as an end (cf. Hägglund 2019:6).

As a side thought, considering the great similarity between Hägglund and Holyoake, it is bizarre that the former never mentions the latter in his book. True, it might always be the case that they simply thought in ways that are very similar, without Hägglund taking inspiration directly from Holyoake. It is, however, noteworthy that not only do they propose almost identical theories, but they also conclude their books in exactly the same way, by proposing 'secularised' religious functions – and strangely enough the same four categories return: civil or public service, marriage, baptism, and funerary rites (cf. Benson 2004:89; Hägglund 2019:387–388).

Let it be clear, I am not accusing Hägglund of copying or of plagiarism or of anything akin to that, by any means. It might, however, have been that the closeness between Holyoake and his utilitarianism (a philosophical current that has always had a serious smell of liberalism) was not the best – let alone loyal or partisan – source to explicitly mention for Hägglund, who turns to Marx to make his point in favour of the construction of a democratic socialism that is based on this theory of secularisation.

Four blind spots of secularisation

For as much as the more dominant theory of secularism and this renewed older and more radical version of a homonymous theory of secularism differ on a number of points, they however also share some fundamental characteristics. And it will be these characteristics, which can be characterised as fundamental blind spots of these theories of secularisation, that will allow me to bring back into play the earlier considerations of vengeful, even vindictive, words and concepts:

1. A first aspect that is noteworthy regards the fact that notwithstanding the descriptive and observational style of both these accounts (theories) of secularisation, they are only *narratives*, as it was understood by Paul Ricoeur. This implies that these 'theories' of secularisation are not simply descriptive, but are actually 're-descriptive' (Ricoeur 1984:xi). That a narrative is redescriptive means for Ricoeur that it is not reproducing in a referential and descriptive way the world 'as it is', but that it organises and reconstructs the world 'as it is' according to the desired experiences. Said somewhat simplistically, a redescriptive narrative is not a description of how the world is, but of how one wants the world to be.

2. A second aspect, and one that builds further on the first point, regards the fact that what is at stake in these theories of secularisation is, as the legal philosopher Iain Benson (2000:537–538) correctly indicates, not a 'neutral' redescription of how one wants the world to be, but actually consists of an ideological redescription that often also shelters (intentionally hides?) a crypto-juridification of this same world. What is at stake in the dominant, but also in the more radical reinterpretation of the theory of the secular is not only a redescriptive desired 'as it is', but

also a hoped-for 'as it ought to be'. The description of religiosity's demise, contained in both versions of the theory of secularisation, is thus not the only objective of these kinds of secularists, they aim also at either containing (in the softer version of Charles Taylor and the more mainstream secularism) or even excluding (in the harsher version as proposed by Holyoake and Hägglund) religion and its practice.

3. The third blind spot of the more mainstream and more radical theories of secularisation can be considered as a basic outcome of the two previous points. In fact, because of the continuous and active attempts at either containing or excluding religion from the public sphere, and because of their shared conviction of operating within a theoretical representation of the real world as it is – but which in actuality is merely a representation of the world as it (ought) desired (to be), the proponents of these various forms of secularisation are unaware of, and even blind to, the extremely emotional and powerful continuous operativity of religion in the public sphere.[17] This obtuseness, which borders on philistinism, has however not only rendered these theories incapable to discover the remaining presence of religiosity, but more importantly has rendered them above all impotent to deal with these religious remains when these aspects of religion do resurface. When religion emerges or religiously inspired events propose themselves in a positive way, this is then generally received accompanied by a haughty presumptuous sneer. However, when the always-present religious undercurrent crops up in a destructive way, like with the recent radicalisation of some parts of the younger population, then such a haughty presumptuousness is revealed to be what it is, namely a simple incapacity to understand and act.[18]

4. The fourth and last aspect is that if proponents of this version of secularisation do not ignore the existence of the concept of secularisation in history – as was, for example, the case with Holyoake, who claimed to have coined the term 'secular' – then they actively misinterpret or misrepresent the history of the meaning of the word. Similarly to the word 'revolution' we looked at above, the word 'secular' also has a particularly different ancient understanding, one that, as I will now demonstrate, also more often than not returns with a vengeance.

What secularisation?

Let me take the recent book by Martin Hägglund (2019), *This Life*, to which I already referred, as example for this misunderstanding within the circles of the secularists. This misunderstanding will allow me once again to illustrate this stubbornness of language, this refusal of certain words to let go of their ancient meaning. This stubbornness will also

in this case prove to have, through the ironic or even cynically returning ancient meaning, a direct effect on the non-linguistic real world and its proceedings. However, let me not run ahead of the facts, and let me start with Hägglund's mistaken understanding of the more ancient usage of the word 'secular'.

For this, Hägglund (2019:69 ff.) correctly turns to St Augustine and his digressions on time. And, for as much as Hägglund is correct in arguing that for the bishop of Hippo the Latin word *saecularis* implied our boundedness by time, earthly and historical, he goes much out of bounds when he connects this understanding of the 'secular' with religious faith. When Augustine connects this, rather Heideggerian *ante litteram*, condition of thrownness in the historical world of every human being with the required condition of faith, this cannot mean 'religious faith in eternity' but necessarily means 'secular faith in what is temporal' (Hägglund 2019:72). The Augustinian understanding of one's 'secular' condition of being thrown into the world thus means for Hägglund that this same saint was the first theoretician of secularisation understood as a retraction of religion from (public) life.

For as much as we all have moments of clarity, we also all have our moments of unintelligibility. For as much as we can never precisely know what went on in the mind of somebody who lived more than a millennium and a half ago, what is, however, most probably at stake in Augustine's understanding of the secular order was not some modern secular religionless world, but the historical and time-ridden world in which the faithful found themselves then and within which they had to operate. The secular is, in that ancient context, not understood as a world separate from religiousness, but a world that is fundamentally signed (or should be signed) by the operativity of the faithful.

That this is the case, and that this is also the correct interpretation of Augustine's intention in his usage of the term *saeculum*, finds, first of all, confirmation in the meaning and understanding of this concept as it was used over and again in the history of Christianity following Saint Augustine. We can thus see, for example, this usage in the field of canon law. The secular, in fact, referred to a specific type of clerical life, the 'secular' clergy (the *ordo saecularis*) – the normal parish priests (also known as *canon*) – who lived 'in the world', as opposed to the 'regular' clergy (the *ordo regularis*), who lived 'withdrawn' from the world in their monasteries.[19] And secularisation (*saecularisatio*) was the phenomenon of transition from a regular clergy position to a secular clergy position – that is, a monk who became a 'normal' priest, a *canon*.

A further confirmation of the correctness of the here-proposed interpretation (and not the one by Hägglund) of the idea of secularisation in the wake of Augustine can be found in the

19. The clerics who belonged to the *ordo regularis* are probably better known in our time as the monks or friars who live in monasteries or convents. They are known as the 'regular' clergy because they follow a religious rule (a *regula*).

phenomenon of the creation of the third or 'secular' orders in the Catholic Church, which have become a fundamental part since their 'birth' of the mendicant orders (e.g. the order of Franciscans or, one more example, the order of the Preachers, who are also known as the Dominicans). These third or 'secular' orders consist of married or unmarried people who, again, live 'in the world', where they have 'normal' jobs and functions (as opposed to the somewhat 'irregular' job of being an ordered person, be they female [nuns] or male [priests or monks]). Once again these 'secular' people thus live in the world, a world in which they live 'notwithstanding' their religious promises; in fact, a world in which they live precisely because of their religious promises.

As can be seen from these examples of the usage of the concept of the 'secular' (and secularisation), it is the clergy that is secular, and it is the third orders that are secular. From this we thus have to conclude, first and foremost, that the secular is not historically to be understood as lacking religiousness. The exact opposite is, in fact, the case. The secular is the religious signing of the world. Or, as Vincent Depaigne (2017:7) accurately summarises this state of affairs: '[t]he secular means the entry of religion "in-the-world" rather than an exclusion of religion from world'. The Augustinian understanding of the secular is, if our reading of the Church's history (which was highly based on the interpretation of the same bishop of Hippo) is not mistaken, thus not that of a retraction of religion from (public) life, but the exact opposite, namely the signing (entry) of the world by means of religion. Basically, the secular world, as it was understood in the past, is through and through religious.

Secularisation revendicated

As can be seen, we have arrived at a very similar phase in our study of the word 'secular' and its derivates, as previously on the concept of revolution. Moreover, regarding the secular we have discovered a large hiatus between its older and its more recent understanding. However, what does all of this mean for the concepts of 'secular' and 'secularisation' and the other derivates? Can something similar also be found as the 'revenge' of this older meaning of the word 'secular', as we discovered with the word 'revolution'?

I, obviously, think this is the case. However, I believe that the revenge of the word 'secular' is more ironic than cynical (as it was with the case of the concept of 'revolution'). And this revenge consists in that the only means through which modernity's secularisations (be they the more moderate mainstream one or the more radical one as proposed by Holyoake and Hägglund) can only repropose themselves as a 'religion' – a faith (a belief system). Moreover, Hägglund's book, *This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom* is a splendid and extremely ironic example of this. Furthermore, in this regard Hägglund offers nothing other than a copy of Holyoake. As Benson (2004:88) already remarked, secularism is for Holyoake a mere substitute for religion, and this notwithstanding the strong (though superficial)

antireligiousness of this form of secularisation. The nature of this 'anti' is, however, of the same calibre as the one found in the battles of the Protestants against the Catholics, or, to say it in the language that the neo-Marxist Hägglund would understand best, it is of the same nature as a Maoist being an anti-Stalinist or anti-Leninist.

If the tale I have told up until now about the 'secular' and its derivates is correct, then we have found one more example of the stubbornness of language, of the refusal of words and concepts to let go of (parts of) their ancient meanings. And as we have seen, this 'revenge' of the words has a direct and immediate effect on the non-linguistic real world and how we find (and understand) ourselves in it.

Recuperating *saecularism*

If all of what we have said until now is the case, then there seems very little that is left to say. Or is there perhaps still something that should (or even simply can) be said? Have we come to some sort of a stalemate regarding the meaning(s) and usage of the words related to the 'secular'? Is the concept of the 'secular' and its derivates doomed to remain stuck in this somewhat absurd game of linguistic vendetta? Is there still a future for these concepts outside of this highly loaded partisan standoff, where no real discussion seems possible?

The future of our understanding of the remaining place of secular in our world can provocatively start with a more correct understanding of the concept of the secular, one that does not attempt to fight its ancient meaning but makes a sincere effort to bring that meaning into our times. For this alternative understanding of secularism, which is more in line with the historical understanding of the term, but which, more importantly, also attempts to elevate the term beyond its historical limits, we can turn to at least one contemporary thinker who has done significant work in what is called 'political theology'.[20] The scholar I am referring to is the already mentioned Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben.[21]

First of all, Agamben does not agree with the 'secularisation' narrative as it has been proposed during the past decades. For Agamben, the traditional tale of secularisation, namely that there is, in the relation between religion and politics, some sort of change, a form of progress, where religion, with

the entry of our world into modernity, becomes some sort of unwanted or undesired remnant, is highly unconvincing. Religion and theology have in the understanding of secularisation by Agamben thus not been relegated to the purely optional private, but are still very much active and operative in the public sphere. The whole idea of secularisation is, according to Agamben (2007:77), still very much the same idea as before (as it was historically), namely it regards 'a type of removal which leaves forces intact, and which limits itself to moving them from one place to another'. Basically, secularisation regards a displacement of concepts from a celestial to a terrestrial sphere – the theological or religious goes, as it were, 'underground', returning in a new immanent or secular form where the basic operativity is, however, still the same and functioning identically. Secularisation, with Agamben, is thus once again understood as the entry of religion into this world, but now under a different, that is immanent, guise.

However, whilst remembering the ancient understanding of the meaning of 'secularisation' (cf. Agamben 2009:77), Agamben also immediately, in an operation that has to be stressed (and hopefully also more often performed by scholars), elevates it above its purely historiological significance. The whole idea that the discussion about the meaning of secularisation is historical and conceptual is, according to Agamben, completely beside the point. That secularisation is, for Agamben, not about it being a process of a continuous and, in crescendo, relegation of religion (theology) from the public sphere and a reduction of it to a personal choice of relevance merely in a private circle. However, neither is it just about being a signing of this world by means of religiosity. All of this is, according to Agamben, beside the point (that scholars of secularisation still have not understood this probably explains the enormous and remaining animosity in the academic world about this discussion). 'Secularisation', according to Agamben (2011:4), is not just a (historical) concept, but more importantly is a strategic operator. Or, as he said using terms familiar to scholars of Michel Foucault and Enzo Melandri, it is a *signature*. By this Agamben (2011) means that there is something in a sign or concept that:

> [M]arks and exceeds such a sign or concept referring it back to a determinate interpretation or field, without for this reason leaving the semiotic to constitute a new meaning or a new concept. Signatures move and displace concepts and signs from one field to another […] without redefining them semantically. (p. 4)[22]

As Carlo Salzani (2013:130) correctly summarises, the signature is something inseparable from the sign or concept, but that does not let itself be reduced to that sign or concept. Basically, to return to the context of this text, the function of the signature is rather like the autonomous (a-)historical remembering of words and concepts, which I described in the theoretical framework at the beginning of this text.

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20. Martin Hägglund also talks about political theology (e.g. Hägglund 2019:14). There are, however, two rather bizarre aspects to his references to this field of research. A first oddity is that he only seems to consider Max Weber amongst the 'older' political theologians, and then sees the resurgence of political theology in figures like Charles Taylor, Jürgen Habermas or José Casanova. For as much as Weber did indeed play around in the field of political theology, he can hardly be considered its biggest representative, and this goes even more for those figures he identifies as proponents of the resurgence of political theology today. The second peculiarity is that Taylor, Habermas, Casanova and Weber have all mainly been in the field of, or correlated to, studies of secularisation. It might just be that Hägglund is convinced that studies in secularisation automatically point in the direction of political theology. This, however, is, I believe, not necessarily the case. In fact, I believe it is only so in one particular case, but it is not the case proposed by Hägglund, nor by any of the scholars he mentions. It, in fact, only regards this particular case explored by Agamben and that I too am trying to follow.

21. There are, obviously, other thinkers who have embarked upon a similar road. None, however, have reached the required profundity and provocativeness that Agamben has.

22. For a more extended explanation of the concept of 'signature', see his *The Signature of All Things* (Agamben 2009).

That Agamben can propose a similar reading of 'secularisation' cannot be understood without making at least a rapid reference to the, for some infamous, German Catholic and legal scholar Carl Schmitt. That Schmitt should be seen as an important source for this distinctive reading of 'secularisation' can easily be discovered by looking at one of his more important theses (Schmitt 2005):

> '[A]ll significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts' (Schmitt 2005:36). However, and more importantly than this almost-sloganised claim (which has all too often been considered in meaningless isolation), Schmitt adds, and it is this addition that renders this form of 'secularisation' so important, that the most significant concepts of the modern state are secularised theological concepts not 'only because of their historical development … but because of their *systematic structure*, the recognition of which is necessary for a sociological consideration of these concepts' (p. 36; [*author's added emphasis*]).

What is at stake is not just some historical meaning. No. It is a systematic structure that is at stake for Schmitt. And the same holds for Agamben in his understanding of the concept of secularisation as a signature. In the end, this is also what is at stake in our understanding of the vindictive powers of certain socially relevant words.

Conclusion

'What's in a name?' asked Juliet. What's in the name of a rose that makes it smell so sweet? After our voyage, we now realise that in the reduction of the problem by Juliet to the letters of the name – 'Tis but thy name that is my enemy' (Shakespeare 2003:107; 2.2.38), she had said earlier, asking even why Romeo did not have another one: 'O be some other name!' (Shakespeare 2003:107; 2.2.42) – she was already doomed. There was never something in the 'name'. Or said differently, the problem was exactly what was 'in' it. It was never just the name. What is at stake is that which comes attached to the name (its structuredness, its signature, its vindictively automatically returning past meanings) and to which the name cannot be reduced – be that the Montague name, or that of the rose, just like the concepts of revolution and secularisation. If anything, it was the smell – not the rose – the smell that is sweet for the rose but poisonous for Montague.

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