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International Institute for Global Analyses

Vision & Global Trends. International Institute for Global Analyses
Piazza dei Navigatori 22, 00147 – Rome (Italy)
Analytical Dossier – N. 13/2021 – March 2021

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First Edition: March 2021

Analytical Dossier 13/2021 - ISSN 2704-6419

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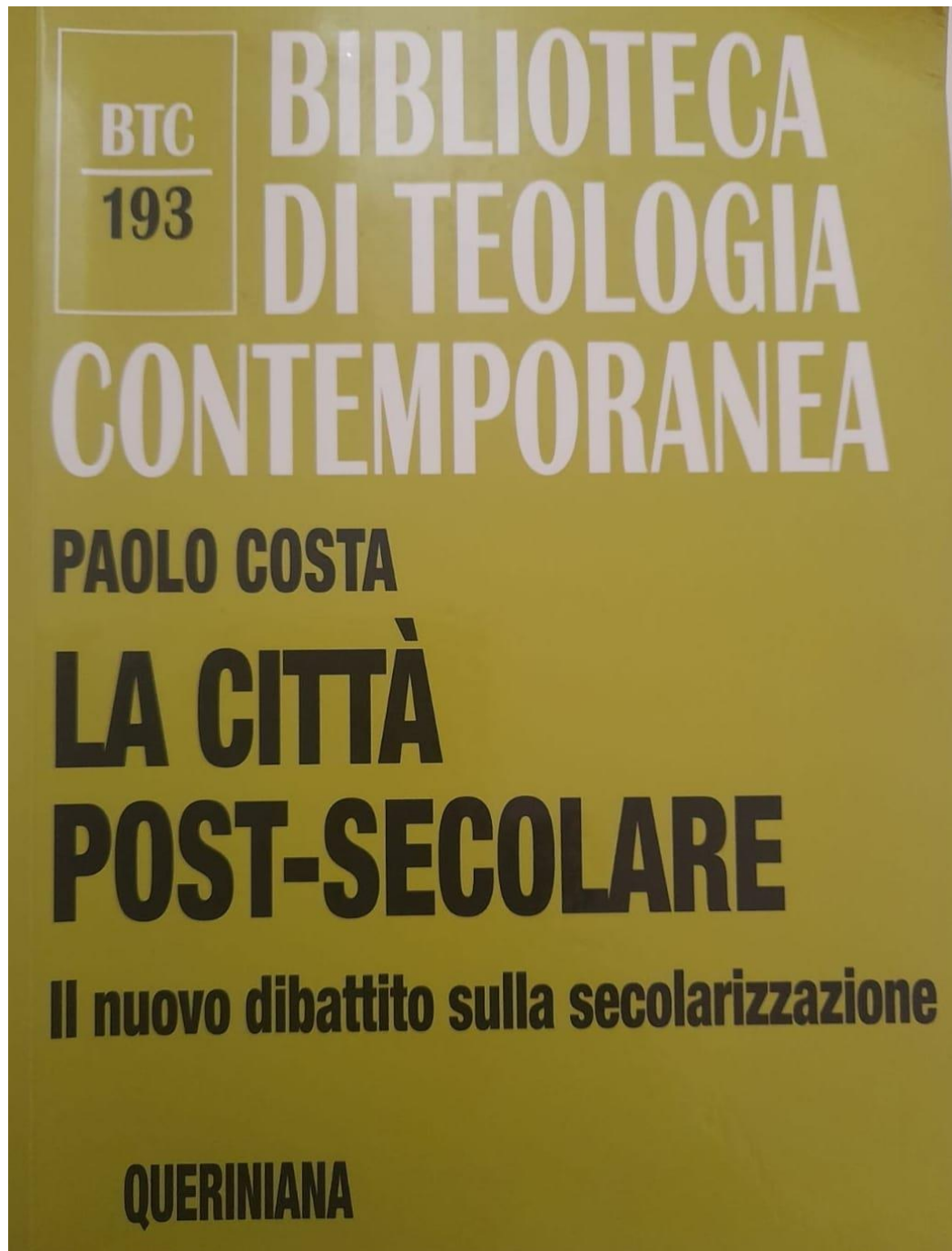
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*Celestino Victor Mussomar, Paolo Costa e la sospensione del concetto di secolarizzazione SFI
Sezione di Sulmona Giuseppe Capograssi [online] ISSN 2281-6569 – gennaio 2021-translated
from Italian by Caleb Echonyi Omamo.*



PAOLO COSTA AND THE SUSPENSION OF THE CONCEPT OF SECULARIZATION

CELESTINO VICTOR MUSSOMAR

Reading the book by Paolo Costa entitled *The Post-secular city: the new debate on secularization* (2019), you can breathe the air of a complete radiography on secularization, an often complex and elusive theme due to the exegetical diversification of the authors. Costa juxtaposes the different visions creating a symphonic atmosphere and offers us a reading key without which it would not be easy for the same authors to approach them. The reader finds a systematic and argumentative capacity as well as the sharp and clear balance between secularization, Christianity, theology and philosophy. Secularization in the philosophical tradition is a topic that has been viewed both with pessimism (J. G. Hamann, J. W. Goethe, J. G. Herder, L. Strauss, C. Schmitt, K. Löwith, D. Martin) and with optimism (G. Vattimo). Costa's thesis suspends, if necessary temporarily, the concept of secularization which in modernity is contested for the pretense of showing the paradigm shift (Costa, 209-211). For Costa: «In the absence of a better lexical alternative, which is not yet on the horizon, a moratorium of a few years in the scientific use of the term would probably be the most logical choice» (Costa, 211). This thesis is presented in the wake of Owen Chadwick. The book consists of eight chapters corresponding to two parts: one for the deconstruction of the theorem of secularization, the other for maintenance, and at the end he presents his thesis on the suspension of secularization.

In the first chapter: two diametrically opposed and minimalist positions appear, those of K. Löwith and H. Blumenberg. The first position consists in thinking that even within the dechristianized world there are elements of religious continuity and rejecting the positions that see secularization as a rupture. His intent is to criticize historicism. This thesis will have continuity in K. Popper (Popper, 1957) and J. A. Ratzinger (Ratzinger, 1968). The second (Blumenberg) supports the legitimacy of modernity and thinks that there is no continuity of the religious in the modern world, but only a rupture (Blumenberg, 1966). For Costa, the question lies in

understanding the specific difference of the modern in how to grasp its authentic meaning in the secular age that is being defined.

In the second chapter, which Costa dedicates to David Martin, the thesis of the demolition and elimination of the secularization theorem is proposed as a reason for the «decline of the institutions defined as “religious”» and an obstacle to the progress of the sociology of religion; this spirit of decontextualization has as a consequence: rationalism, marxism and existentialism (Costa, 45). He criticizes the “radical reductionism” of secular reason in which the decline of religions does not *ipso facto* mean the death of religion and this fact is not a *conditio sine qua non* to reduce it to the all-encompassing category of secularization (Costa, 47). We can then ask ourselves, is he a forerunner of post-secularization when he asks himself, what is the role of religion in modernity?

The third chapter is dedicated to Charles Taylor who aims to “make the tacit background of the classical thesis more complex than it appears at first sight” and only later tries to overcome it (Costa, 58-60). Taylor does positive “genealogical reconstruction” and not just deconstructive-unmasking. He is concerned with defining how one can still live in the immanent frame, so that there are discomforts in modernity such as: individualism, eclipse of ends and loss of political freedom (Taylor, 1991). Therefore, in a society like this, where an immanentist *Weltanschauung* has developed through cartesian rationalism, historicism that has its ontogenesis in Giambattista Vico where the category of the true classical (*verum est ens*), has been transformed into the modern one: *verum quia factum*. The concepts of “transcendence, immortality, beatitudes, salvation, love etc.” have become incomprehensible today because they are incompatible with secular reason. The question would be: how to get out of cultural myopia? Secularization, concluding with Taylor, is «the complex, disordered, karstic, but ultimately unitary historical process that culminates in the birth of “the immanent frame” where an “exclusive humanism” is manifested (Costa, 63). It is a process of “demagification” of bourgeois subjectivity and polarization in immanence with the consequence of “the depersonalization of God” from the modern religious imagination (Costa, 65-66). To compare the discomforts of modernity such as “individualism, eclipse of ends and loss of political freedom” (Taylor, 1991), a dialogical reason open to other dimensions of reality is needed for what is called the expansion of reason (J. Ratzinger). Taylor’s intent, as Costa shows us with insight in his book, is to “weaken the

secularists' claim to absoluteness by contextualizing and relativizing it"(Costa, 73), as polarizing reductionism today shows its failure. For this reason Taylor argues that political disagreement will never cease to exist and insists on the need to make a compromise between the different worldviews in the life of the individual and of the communities (Costa, 76). At this point, the openness with which Taylor speaks of would be in the perspective of recognizing that others exist in facts and interpretations.

In the fourth chapter, Costa dedicates to Hans Joas a deconstructionist theoretical framework of the classical thesis of secularization, criticizing his provincial approach. Costa, in this chapter, wonders if secularization is only a Western process, given the hegemonic dimension of Western culture in the global world. Costa's intent is to analyze the provincialization of secularization and it is in this deconstructionist perspective that Costa frames the figure of the German philosopher. For Costa, Joas's goal is to "make what remains of the concept of secularization epistemologically plausible and explicitly operational" (Costa 89), because, as Joas says, one must perceive secularization in multiformity; overcoming the thesis of secularization does not mean ignoring secularization (Costa, 90). Joas sees secularization as a historical and critical innovation of the concepts of "modernization" or "modernity", stating that they are finalists and distancing himself from Taylor's models of "vector" or "new effect". For Joas, secularization is not a universal phenomenon and cannot be universalized. We must seek the spiritual environment of the period we live in, without absolute polarization between secular and religious. From this perspective, we cannot fail to consider Joas as a deconstructionist of secularization, eurocentrism and ethnocentrism, with which Costa agrees (Costa, 97-98).

In the fifth chapter, in the wake of the post-colonialists, Costa asks himself: how is secularization viewed by the eurocentric or north atlantic world? Using Talal Asad's thought and his anthropological concept of "idea of the secular" as his piece de resistance, Asad denies the vision of the separation or continuity between secular and religious with its essentialist relapse (Costa, 114-115), like that of Löwitt and Blumenberg, and also criticizes José Casanova and the theory of multiple freedoms (Costa, 119). For this reason Costa then proposes an "epistemological heraclitism" (Costa, 122).

In the sixth chapter, he begins by reflecting on the so-called "Weberian meta-tale" (Taylor) or the "demagification" as a disenchantment of the enchanted world, showing the case of skeptics

such as Nietzsche and Weber (Costa, 131); while the first proposes the will to power as a solution, the second thinks of “re-enchanting the thesis of disenchantment” (Ibid). Inversely, Marcel Gauchete advocates the maintenance of the secularization theorem, emphasizing a “metabolization” of the same in the form of “secularization of the thesis of secularization” (Costa, 147-149).

In the seventh chapter, Costa describes J. Habermas’ thought and the concept of post-secularity, summarizing the chapter through the metaphor of the “fragile supremacy of reason”. There is therefore a change that a Hegelian should understand as “the unfinished dialectic” which for Habermas translates into scrutinizing the post-secular horizon so that religious life remains “substantially unchanged”. It can be said that one cannot think in the logic of either-or between secularity and post-secularity, but post-metaphysical thought must recognize its limits and open itself to other sources (Costa, 165). It is in this vision that for Habermas the dialogue between faith and reason is asymmetrical and despite this, it is essential to enter into this dialogue. In conclusion, Costa compares Habermas’s position, which seems “to save reason through a critical recovery of the religious heritage”, with that of Ratzinger who affirms the willingness and openness to learn with mutual limitation.

In the eighth chapter, starting from Nietzsche’s saying “God is dead”, Costa says that both Nietzsche and Heidegger perceive their time as an epoch of sunset, where all reality would seem to orient towards immanence (Costa, 187-190). What remains is to ask whether the immanent frame is a novelty or is it the very *conditio humana*? (Costa, 193). Classical metaphysics ends with the death of God (Costa, 198) and Vattimo proposes a non-violent thought, and therefore weak, with a deconstructionist vision between Western thought and the Christian vision (Costa, 204). Weakening Western thought (Vattimo) with a vision of epistemological Heraclitism (Costa, 122) is a *sine qua non* for a new culture that is not the will to power (Nietzsche).

What, then, after following the path made in all the chapters of the book? Costa’s book is a compass, it guides us into an exegetical complexity on secularization, advises us to be prudent in hermeneutics and to suspend the dispute at least for a short time and not to get rid of the concept of secularization too hastily, before understanding deeply the time we live in. Therefore, a critique of secular reason calls for a shared axiological vision, avoiding eurocentrism and opening up to new visions of the world. Costa tells us that western culture needs a radical and urgent change of

its foundations and invites us to ask ourselves the following question: is eurocentric and euroatlantic culture open to a new opening? The author invites us to a serene dialogue between philosophy and theology and tells us that thought should always be open and accept complexity. Therefore, it can be said that creative audacity is needed in developing a symbolic, dialogic and oxymoronic thought, in which the principle of identity is questioned together with the principle of *tertium non datur*. In conclusion, this means that in order not to fall into the trap of building empty speculative monsters, we must say goodbye to the thought of the *Aut-aut* of the Eurocentric West.

The Author

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He has a Ph.D in History and Social Philosophical Sciences from the University of Rome Tor Vergata and obtained his second Ph.D in philosophy at the Pontifical Athenaeum Sant'Anselmo of Rome. He taught contemporary political thought at the Saint Bonaventure theological faculty of Rome. He is member of the Italian Society of Critical Theory-SITC and founding member of CeSAI- Centre of African Studies in Italy.



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