

## Vicarious religion in a secular country

Milosz Puczydowski  
Jagiellonian University Krakow

SRA 2014, 1st Round

What is the role of religion in 21<sup>st</sup> century Europe? Since it was definitely dethroned in many areas of public life, the question above is frequently asked. Religion has lost its significant social role. A great British sociologist Bryan Williams put it in his own words: 'Religion once provided legitimacy for secular authority; endorsed, at times even sanctioned, public policy; sustained with a battery of threats and blandishments the agencies of social control; was seen as the font of all 'true learning'; socialized the young; and even sponsored a range of recreative activities'. All that has gone. Is then religion merely a relict of the European past?

To answer the question is in fact to do two separate things. First of all one has to dwell upon a historical process of loosing faith by people, dismantling religious institutions and reformulating the horizon of values by the European philosophers. Yet another thing to do is to examine the position of contemporary secular beliefs, institutions and values. It could not be of a great effort to find both the religious roots of secular phenomena and the religious mediation sustaining their current existence. If so, one can assume that religion is still playing an important role in contemporary Europe. However its presence has been veiled with a subtle curtain of opaqueness.

My research in a highly secular country of Norway was picking up the traces of a religious entanglement of the secular social *status quo*. The old church buildings and still celebrated religious festivals, masses, marriages and funerals were to me not the vestiges of once vivid but nowadays withered religious culture, but rather they suggested that a remarkably secular society even now vitalizes a subtle recourse to religion itself. A great contribution to my thesis was the notion of 'vicarious religion' coined by a superb British sociologist, Grace Davie. Davie noted that an outwardly secular society does not stand out against religion. To her it seems rather that religion is 'performed by an active minority but on the behalf of a much larger number, who implicitly at least not only understand, but quite clearly approve of what the minority is doing'. Bearing Davie's point in mind one could easily interpret all the encountered religious activities in a secular society of Norway as the evidences for the hypothesis that contemporary Europe has not done away with religion and is still deeply inspired by the religious culture. What has been changed is that the inspiration does not appear explicitly but rather implicitly under the guise of a strict secular separation. The practical involvement of Norwegian theology in politics, charity, academic debate or family customs provides an example of the thesis above.

If the conclusion above is right and religion affects a secular society in a non-direct way, one should then look also for the verso of that process. What is the secular influence on contemporary religion? First of all it is practiced in a vicarious way. This however does not shed any light on its internal stature but deals much more with some external conditions positioning it in a secular context. But how does this context transform religion in itself? To put flesh on the bones of the issue I decided to turn to another theoretical tool easily accessible in the social practice in contemporary Norway: the theology of secularization and the God's death theology.

The most important thinker of the 20<sup>th</sup> century protestantism was undoubtedly Karl Barth. His elaboration on the dialectical relation between religion, faith and God's revelation was a trigger for the next generation theologians to cope with the widening phenomenon of secularization in Europe and America. Barth's main thesis is that a cultural form of religion being practised in a

Christian Europe for ages should have been perceived not as a fulfillment of God's will but as an obstacle to having faith that is a right response to God's revelation. Hence the process of limiting social significance of religion has in fact an invigorating impact on the churches in secular Europe. The lower number of people in pews does not necessarily mean an effect of de-christianizing Europe but rather gives a chance to reformulate its faith and avoiding the idolatry of religion. This could be easily harmonize with Davie's idea of a vicarious religion. The social process of transforming popularly practiced religion to a small group of believers resembles Barthian concept of the reconstruction of the church. However, thanks to Davie's writings and in opposition to a sophisticated form of religious community in Barthian theology, one can still note the close binding between a secular society and small groups of believers acting on behalf of the majority.

The general aim of my research stay at the Faculty of Theology at the University of Oslo was then to combine to perspectives: a practical and a theoretical one. In my doctoral dissertation I will try to demonstrate a reciprocal mediation of religion and secularity in contemporary Europe. Counter to its popular critiques religion has not passed away. However its deep transformation calls for another theological key. The theology of secularization stemming from Karl Barth writings seems to dovetail the secular context.