Welcome to the SMR society

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During the last decades, we are witnessing the persistence and even the resurgence of religious beliefs and practices in societies that have undergone a long process of secularisation. This seems to falsify the classic secularisation theory according to which the secularisation of society and the decline of the Church in Europe were the unavoidable corollary of modernisation and hence an irreversible process, not only in Europe but also in other parts of the world.
Several authors speak of a 'post-secular' society. But this is not to say that secularisation is coming to an end, or that is being surpassed (the idea of 'post'). Surely, the overall decline of Church membership, the influence of secularism in science and politics, the spread of secular lifestyles, the move away from traditional Christian morals, anticlerical sentiments and opposition to the influence of religion in society, all of that continues. But at the same time there are other developments: practicing and committed Christians remain an important and influential minority, their percentage is even growing in some countries. New forms of Christianity are developing, largely but not only due to immigration. Muslim and other religious communities are developing. Demographic trends are clearly in favour of the religious population, as Jim Memory brings out in his article.
Then there is the so-called 'return of religion' in the public sphere, i.e. in civil society, in the arts, in popular music, in philosophical debates, and not to forget the social media and the Internet. Muslims, but also Jews, and Christians are marking their difference, for everybody else to see.
At the same time, the number of 'nones' (non religious or unaffiliated persons) is increasing, but among them there is a widespread interest in spirituality, and an attachment to social values rooted in Christianity.

No return but 'SMR'

So, religion continues to be important in the secularised societies of Europe. We should not think of (or dream of) a return to a former situation in which Christianity was the dominant religion, and the only one in many places. The near future is one in which religious and non-religious will live side by side. Both are there to stay, so they have to work together in society. The present situation is characterized by a plurality of worldviews, and by the re-negotiation of the place of religion in the public sphere. Moreover, Christians have to accept that they are a minority among other religious minorities. Welcome to the *SMR society*: secularised (or secularising) and multireligious at the same time.
Granted, the label 'SMR' is my suggestion, for want of a better one. In fact, there is not yet a widely agreed concept to denote the situation summarised above. A range of theories have been developed to analyse it. Different terms are proposed, depending on what aspect or what implication one is concentrating on. Let us mention some of them.

Post-secular intellectual dialogue

Several authors use the term 'post-secular'. German philosopher Jürgen Habermas is widely credited for having popularized it.[1] What did he mean by that? He says that he has always written as a 'methodological atheist', which means that when doing philosophy or social science, he presumed nothing in advance about particular religious beliefs. Yet in the light of the continuing role of religion in society, he evolved to a 'post-secular' stance, meaning that fundamental questions in society cannot be reduced to secular rational ideas and theories. Religious people have important things to say about scientific, ethical and political issues – let alone questions that transcend the visible and the tangible. They also are rational, the basic difference with secularism being that they take into account the influence of a transcendent reality. Habermas takes issue with all forms of militant secularism that consider secular science and humanism the only relevant discourse in the public realm. Religious convictions, values and norms should not be ruled out from the public debate, simply because they are not based solely on human reason and science. So there should be an intellectual dialogue between believers and non-believers.

Former pope Benedict XVI accepted the challenge and undertook a series of in depth conversations with Habermas on the foundational values of modern society. The publication of this dialogue (*The Dialectics of Secularization,* 2007) has exerted considerable influence. Any dialogue can only be fruitful when no party imposes his own language to the discussion. This is particularly difficult for secularist people to admit, since they are used to putting everything that refers to the transcendent within the brackets of 'private persuasion', so as to conveniently ignore what the other is saying. In his own dialogue with Joseph Ratzinger, Habermas makes some important points:

'Persons who are neither willing nor able to divide their moral convictions and their vocabulary into profane and religious strands must be permitted to take part in political will formation even if they use religious language (…) The democratic state must not pre-emptively reduce the polyphonic complexity of the diverse public voices, because it cannot know whether it is not otherwise cutting society off from scarce resources for the generation of meanings and the shaping of identities. Particularly with regard to vulnerable social relations, religious traditions possess the power to convincingly articulate moral sensitivities and solidaristic intuitions.'

This is what Pieter Boersema calls a 'pluralistic dialogue', in which people try to get beyond stereotype images of the other into a deeper understanding of their motivations and the meaning of their viewpoints.

Resource and reassurance

A second aspect of the SMR society is the recognition of the importance of religion, and Christianity in particular, for the cohesion of society. French sociologist Yves Lambert argues that we should replace the old secularisation model of a one way process in which religious communities are more and more marginalised, by a pluralist secularisation model in which religion remains important. 'In this model, religion should not hold sway over social life, but it can play its full role as a spiritual, ethical, cultural or even political resource in the broadest

[1] Michel Reder and Josef Schmidt. 'Habermas and Religion'. In: Jürgen Habermas, et al. *An Awareness of What Is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Post-Secular Age*. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2010. p. 1-14.

sense of the term, while respecting individual autonomy and democratic pluralism' (Willaime, p. 13).
Habermas corroborates, when he writes: 'For the normative self-understanding of modernity, Christianity has functioned as more than just a precursor or catalyst. Universalistic egalitarianism, from which sprang the ideals of freedom and a collective life in solidarity, the autonomous conduct of life and emancipation, the individual morality of conscience, human rights and democracy, all of that is the direct legacy of the Judaic ethic of justice and the Christian ethic of love. This legacy, substantially unchanged, has been the object of a continual critical reappropriation and reinterpretation. Up to this very day there is no alternative to it. And in light of the current challenges of a post-national constellation, we must draw sustenance now, as in the past, from this substance. Everything else is idle postmodern talk' (p. 150–151).
Italian author Roberto Cipriani speaks of the ambiguity of Western Europe. While there is a strong push towards breaking with the past, and develop a secular society and secular lifestyles, people are the same time drawn in the opposite direction as they feel the need to remain connected to the past. 'The (anthropological) truth is that the options of fundamental values, and of experiencing the sacred that transform life, are limited, even in modern times. They are all weakened by reciprocal pressures. Because of this, the push towards the new does not always have the upper hand. There is also pressure to remain in continuity with the past. Hence the endurance of traditional religious values and institutions, which often serve as a refuge in difficult times' (p. xx).
A refuge for some, a reassuring sign for others. Observers all over Europe notice examples of what Grace Davie has called 'vicarious religion', that is, the notion of religion performed by an active minority but on behalf of a much larger number, who (implicitly at least) not only understand but approve of what the minority is doing. It is like the reassuring presence of someone to whom you can always go in time of distress, or mourning, or celebration.
Even though Davie herself suspected that this phenomenon would gradually disappear, we still see many examples of this, such as non affiliated Germans continuing to pay a Church taxes, while this is no longer obligatory, or the Belgian state spending tax money to pay the salaries of pastors and priests because it recognises the usefulness of churches for society at large.

Religious communities and politics

Closely related to this is a third aspect of the SMR society: the changing relation between religion in general and the Church in particular on the one hand, and the political realm on the other. French sociologist of religion Jean-Paul Willaime writes: 'We are at a turning point where religions, far from being seen as more or less obsolete traditions that are resisting to a conquering modernity, can increasingly appear as symbolic resources preventing politics from turning into a mere bureaucratic management of individual aspirations and avoid that modernity dissolves itself in a generalized relativism' (p. 13).
His compatriot Bérengère Massignon calls this the 'second phase of secularisation'. In the first phase, The secularised state took over the role of the churches in society (education, health, transmission of values, social care, defining ethical norms, etc.). The 'neutral' state had the tendency to secularise the public sphere, in which it took the central place, as if Caesar was God, who lays down all the ethical rules and tells people how to behave. In the

second phase, the state recognizes its limits in moral issues and the importance of religious institutions and civil society when it comes to transmitting fundamental values. This leads to a desacralisation of politics: the state is neither God nor Caesar.
For a long time, the main thrust of politics with respect to religion was separation of Church and state, non-interference. In the SMR society, this changes into a constructive approach: how can churches and religion in general contribute to the common good in society?
During a seminar, I heard a Dutch politician saying: 'precisely because Christians have become a minority, politicians can appreciate what they do for people in need, and listen to their ethical appeals, even because they don't have to fear the dominance of the Church as in the old days.'

Some literature

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Jean-Paul Willaime, *Europe et religions,* Fayard, 2004.