

Tomasz Wiśniewski

Adam Mickiewicz University of Poznań

Towards the Post-secular Historical Consciousness

Abstract: This paper is an attempt to present an idea of post-secular historical consciousness. I start from brief observations about the contemporary post-secular condition and emphasize the presence of some non-secular factors in historical consciousness (such as the meaning of the theological tradition). I reveal some elements present in contemporary historiography (especially in the writings of Hayden White), which — I believe — are based on ideas derived from religious (spiritual, theological) imagination, but which also appear useful for eventual conceptualizing of the post-secular historical consciousness. I discuss also political dimensions of the problem, its symptoms and stakes (from 9/11 terrorist attacks to Michel Houellebecq's novel *Submission*).

Keywords: post-secular historical consciousness, event, figure-fulfillment, Hayden White, Michel Houellebecq, *Submission*, Ananda Abeysekara, political theology, utopia

The post-secular is everywhere in the academia. Important contributions to the issue have been made in the areas of sociology and philosophy, but as yet there has not emerged a view of the post-secular problems in history. This is a surprising situation since the so called post-secular turn diagnosis a phenomenon which is primarily historical in nature.¹ This essay intends to be a modest contribution to the post-secular conceptualization of history. By 'history,' I understand both the discipline as well as changes in time. I will examine how the post-secular condition can find expression within historical consciousness. My goal is to outline an initial concept by which we could communicate a historical shift from the secular to the post-secular.

I will begin with general remarks on the ties between theology and history, then move through historical concepts of figure and event,² and comment on some

¹ One of the view direct references to the post-secular might be found in Allan Megill, 'History, Theoreticism, and the Limits of "the Postsecular"', *History and Theory* 52, 2013, no. 1, pp. 110–129. Megill's text is a review of the book by Dominick LaCapra, *History and Its Limits: Human, Animal, Violence* (Ithaca, NY 2009), where this intellectual historian discusses some post-secular issues in the context of contemporary challenges to the discipline of history.

² I assume that within its own meaning 'figure' is a product of imagination, but the word 'figure' itself is also a concept, in the simplest sense, a name for a phenomenon. Thus, in the current context I speak of figures and events as concepts.

* Niniejsza wersja artykułu uwzględnia poprawki wyszczególnione w erracie dołączonej do wydania drukowanego.

aspects of the post-secular thinking and strategies which are articulated within it. I will end with a commentary on *Submission* — a recent novel by Michel Houellebecq, which, in my opinion, contains a compelling vision of historical change, a vision that we can understand as a post-secular scenario. In thinking the post-secular, we inevitably encounter the issue of utopia.

From Theology to History, from Figure to Event

Certain way of thinking about history's importance in the post-secular context is to join it with theological reflection. For instance, members of the 'Radical Orthodoxy' movement (mixed Anglican-Catholic) try to re-establish theology as a 'metadiscourse' of an integrated corpus of knowledge.³ A secular study of history would then — after radical revaluation — become a history of salvation. Deciding what constitutes important knowledge about the past would then depend on the criteria of usefulness for the sake of salvation. Similarly, philosopher Philip Goodchild states there are two modalities of theology or two ways of criticizing reality: one based on the affirmation of revealed authority, and another on questioning it.⁴ History — or historiography — is a possible field for the examination of such an inquiry. Moreover, Polish theologian Piotr Feliga revitalizes an old theme of 'history as *locus theologicus*,' drawing on the Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics.⁵

Important traces of the non-secular content in the theory of history (and a sign of a quasi-theological approach to history) might be found in figural thinking. It has been always necessary for Christian theologians to grasp Judaic heritage and transform it in the service of salvation, based on the figure of the new messiah named Jesus. Theologians have always tried to express the continuity between Jewish prophecies and the preaching of Jesus, Apostles and their heirs within the Church. We find a clear exposition of such conceptualization in Henri de Lubac, who explains, 'the Church appears in the Bible in the form of the figure of Israel, and it is thus that even in its national particularism, the Chosen People are presented as a symbolic anticipation, as the sacrament of that heavenly City in which the Church is to end.'⁶ In figural thinking, in some sense, we encounter a repetition of the primordial figure,

³ J. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, Oxford 2006.

⁴ N. Turnbull, 'Deleuze, Marx, and the Extent of the Theological: An Interview with Philip Goodchild', *Radical Orthodoxy: Theology, Philosophy, Politics* 1, 2013, no. 3, pp. 574–575.

⁵ P. Feliga, *Czas i ortodoksja. Hermeneutika teologii w świetle Prawdy i metody Hansa-Georga Gadamera (Time and Orthodoxy. Theological Hermeneutics in the Context of Hans-Georg Gadamer's Truth and Method)*, Toruń 2014.

⁶ H. de Lubac, *Theology in History*, trans. A. Englund Nash, San Francisco 1996, p. 392.

but in this repetition, the meaning of the first one is revealed as incomplete. This is because the second figure is understood as the fulfilment of the previous one; the second one needs the previous one for its own legitimization and self-revelation as the splendid effect of a long process of progression.⁷

The validity of figural thinking is not limited to theology only; in fact, for centuries it has been present in many areas of human thought. There are some definite ties between theological and historical modes of thinking, and figurativeness is one a key factor in this relationship. In two interesting texts Hayden White explores 'the historiological notion of event' and 'figure-fulfilment model of narrativity.'

In the first text, *The Historical Event*, White talks about the difference between the event and the fact. Events belong to the ontology of history, facts — to epistemology.⁸ When an event enters into historical discourse, it is a matter of construction. Only when we have obtained a historical fact are we aware that it refers to some actual event. We understand that discursive constructions are representations of something that we regard as reality itself. But it also works in reverse: our discursive constructions themselves create events in our minds. Besides genuine witnesses of given events, there is no reality beyond such mediation and representation, and yet these witnesses must resort to common means of communication in order to convey their experiences to others. Between the event and the fact, there is 'historical research,' by means of which historians try to communicate the obscure and difficult meaning of the event itself. In my

⁷ On the subject of religious or theological 'figuralism,' see also: E. Auerbach, "Figura", trans. R. Manheim, [in:] idem, *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature*, Minneapolis 1984, pp. 11–76; A. Efal, 'Panofsky's Idea and Auerbach's Figura, Two Philological Iconodulist Experiments', *The Protocols of the History and Theory Department of the Bezalel Academy at Jerusalem* 14, 2009, <http://bezalel.secured.co.il/zope/home/en/1252746792>; R.M. Davidson, *Typology in Scripture: A Study of Hermeneutical Typos Structures*, Berrien Springs 1981; J.D. Dawson, *Christian Figural Reading and the Fashioning of Identity*, Berkeley 2002; L. Goppelt, *Typos: The Typological Interpretation of the Old Testament in the New*, trans. D.H. Madvig, Grand Rapids 1982.

⁸ H. White, 'The Historical Event', *differences: a Journal for Feminist Cultural Studies* 19, 2008, no. 2. As an epigraph, White quotes Alain Badiou's important words: 'For the process of truth to begin, something must happen. What there already is — the situation of knowledge as such — generates nothing other than repetition. For a truth to affirm its newness, there must be a *supplement*. This supplement is committed to chance. It is unpredictable, incalculable. It is beyond what is. I call it an event. A truth thus appears, in its newness, because a supplement interrupts repetition.' Ibid., p. 9. I found a small disparity in this statement in Badiou, *Infinite Thought: Truth and the Return to Philosophy*, trans. and ed. O. Feltham, J. Clemens, London-New York 2004, p. 62: the word 'evental' is added before the phrase 'supplement interrupts repetition.' There is no doubt Badiou's thought is very important for contemporary post-secular philosophy. In fact, the French philosopher secularizes some aspects of Christian messianism and mobilizes them for the purposes of his own project. A. Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. R. Brassier, Stanford 2003. Badiou's other works and categories are obviously related to his Pauline attempt. See: idem, *Being and Event*, trans. O. Feltham, New York 2005.

view, White admits the paradoxical nature of historical thinking; this thinking constantly tries to deal with its own 'other,' and at the same time both preserve its otherness and make it understandable. So the eventual radicality of an event would be a factor in a successful new demarcation between 'our' and the 'other' parts of history. As historical actors and possible historical writers, we are free to choose the first or the second option. We can identify with whichever position; we can believe that we defend a continuity of history, its connection to the past or tradition, or that we break with it and try to inaugurate a new age or condition in the world. To take note of this paradox is to express our subjective freedom, which begins as an opportunity of choosing between two divergent options: either-or. Such situations are also orientation points that systematize our historical being. *Distinguo ergo sum*.

In his second work, *History as Fulfillment*, White argues that construing of narratives is a specific mode of historiographical work. Every narrative must have its own climax, in which various plans or dimensions of plot can be united. It is a kind of image, composed of different elements, which make sense when we see them as part of one structure. White calls it 'figure-fulfillment model of narrativity'.⁹ The meaning of a given narrative is revealed at the end of linear story. There must be a time to end the story, for us to give it meaning. But this is not a firm ontological reality but rather a human epistemic construction. 'Historical substance' itself belongs to the capacities of our subjectivity. 'Figure-fulfillment model' of history is in some sense primordial, and it is associated with religious, sacred-oriented mode of being. We can say that, in this understanding, every narrative is developed around an important archetype, and layers and stages of the plot only reveal its hidden meaning. Other events in the discursive grid are connected with this centre and can, gradually or abruptly, manifest its meaning. Together, they form a consistent paradigm of a worldview. The centre is that which possesses and gives meaning to other, inferior elements of the structure. Of course, this is only an interpretation of one of the possible ways of thinking. What is important, such a scheme may be applied not only to the narratives of the past but also to the current understanding and discursive construction of ongoing reality.

Thus, event and fulfillment belong to each other, and together they shape a given dimension of our historical imagination. This is an important clue, and later we will see that one of main problems with the post-secular history is this kind of tangle. What factors accumulate in the event? I do not dare to describe the confrontations that emerge in concrete contexts; I will limit my discussion to the realm of concepts.

⁹ H. White, 'History as Fulfillment', [in:] *Philosophy of History After Hayden White*, ed. R. Doran, London 2013.

The Post-secular Event: Challenging Political Imagination

For the purpose of this paper, I would define the post-secular event as a radical act in which the previous discourse of secularization becomes understood — and unmasked — as representing a ‘false consciousness.’ This unmasking, however, is not realized by theoretical means. At work is a power of factuality which challenges theory and demands an answer from it; therefore, conceptualization will only be secondary to empirical elaboration. The post-secular event is a symptom of the post-secular condition, and — potentially — a foundational event of the post-secular age. Let us also stress that the power of the event is permanently stimulated by discourse.

Surely, 9/11 is a perfect example of the way ‘in which extraordinary limit situations transform the political imagination.’¹⁰ Jean Baudrillard calls 9/11 ‘the absolute event, the “mother” of all events, the pure event uniting within itself all the events that have never taken place.’¹¹ If we situate this statement in the context of the post-secular, we could say that 9/11 has annulled the importance of hitherto secular trends of history. It is post-secular in its very core: a retroactive act of transgression, which has no effective meaning without reference to radically questioned past. 9/11 carries a powerful possibility of another knowledge: we do not identify with terrorists and their goals, but we experience the vehemence of their vision. Maybe, as a result, there could suddenly appear a kind of liberating illumination: we have never been secular. There have only ever been many types of the sacred and the violent competition of their followers.

The master narrative of secularization has been violated by the event of 9/11. This event itself is only the next figure in our discourse, and we see how this one element can transform the meaning of the entire constellation of figures. It is a climax, which allows us to change one form of emplotment of history and open a new one; the previous one becomes sublimated and included into the broader chain of figures, into a wider, future-oriented narrative. What the event has crushed is the certainty of one-patterned end of history. The event has marked the turn in the very meaning of the word ‘turn’. It has aroused new fears and concerns, and a peculiar acceleration of history. One figure intensifies our epistemic suspicion and gives an impulse for another figure to emerge, and so forth, and so on... in effect, we gain a retroactively constructed chain of figures.¹²

¹⁰ H. Wydra, *Politics and the Sacred*, Cambridge 2015, p. 20.

¹¹ J. Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism*, trans. Ch. Turner, London 2002, p. 4. See also: T. Asad, *On Suicide Bombing*, New York 2007; S. Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real! Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates*, London-New York 2002; B. Cooper, *New Political Religions, or An Analysis of Modern Terrorism*, Columbia-London 2004.

¹² 9/11 has created a situation in which works such as Gilles Kepel’s *La Revanche de Dieu*

Of course, 9/11 is not an only possibility of ‘the post-secular event’; maybe it is only an example, but nonetheless an inevitable one. Another possibility is, for instance, the Iranian Revolution of 1978. But we cannot acknowledge these two events as solitary figures; they exist in a constellation: in the present perspective, we are able to relate them and reveal their joint meaning, or their participation in contribution to what we can call a ‘return of religion.’ I dare think that if one of these events had stood ‘alone,’ its meaning for us would have been completely different; maybe, we would have not talked about the post-secular at all. Concrete fears, angers, hopes and predictions are associated with these events; they are considered as symptoms of the future, which is coming. They are partial evidence and the basics from which the post-secular has been deduced. They clearly demonstrate concern for the shape of the future. In consequence, I am convinced that the fundamental feature of the post-secular turn is to be future-oriented. In case of the eventual project of ‘post-secular history,’ there is a tendency to rethink the past, which has been conceptualized so far in relation to emerging predictions or trends. Of course, there is an ideological aspect of the post-secular turn and it is somewhat immanent — both on the side of events and their interpretation. I would like to propose the notion of the ‘post-secular event’ to mark a moment of shift between the two conditions.

The impact of 9/11 has provoked Jürgen Habermas to react and release the tension, first in his speech *Faith and Knowledge (Glauben und Wissen)*, on 14th October 2001.¹³ Later, in 2004, he took part in the discussion with Catholic cardinal Joseph Ratzinger. At the time, he called for a reconciliation between secularism and religion, which in his view are not too far apart:

In the postsecular society, there is an increasing consensus that certain phases of the “modernization of the public consciousness” involve the assimilation and the reflexive transformation of both religious and secular mentalities. If both sides agree to understand the secularization of society as a complementary learning process, then they will also have cognitive reasons to take seriously each other’s contributions to controversial subjects in the public debate.¹⁴

(1991) (*The Revenge of God: The Resurgence of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism in the Modern World*, trans. A. Braley, University Park, PA 1994) have been proclaimed as prophetic and illustrating inescapable drive of religious — mainly Islamic — fundamentalisms toward global terrorism, ‘clash of civilizations’, and so on (in his book, the French sociologist describes and analyses radicalization of some religious milieus and/or movements in Europe and Middle East, starting from the late sixties up until the end of the eighties). Fundamentalism and terrorism are presented as essential features of Islam, and the current military conflicts as flowing directly and in a teleological way from the core message of that religion. Such violent phenomena are perceived as the evidence of the collapse or exhaustion of the process of secularization. This new kind of visibility of religion in the public sphere can be taken as one of many symptoms of the emerging post-secular condition.

¹³ J. Habermas, ‘Faith and Knowledge: Acceptance Speech’, <http://www.friedenspreis-des-deutschen-buchhandels.de/sixcms/media.php/1290/2001%20Acceptance%20Speech%20Juergen%20Habermas.pdf> [acc.: 11.02.2016]. See also: idem, ‘Notes on Post-Secular Society’, *New Perspectives Quarterly* 25, 2008, issue 4.

¹⁴ J. Habermas, ‘Pre-political Foundations of the Democratic Constitutional State’, [in:] J. Habermas, J. Ratzinger, *Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion*, ed. F. Schuller, trans. B. McNeil, C.R.V., San Francisco 2006, pp. 46–47.

Habermas is the posthumous son of the Enlightenment, and he believes in non-violence and transparent discourse, a simple space of mutual communication. Commenting about ‘the post-secular society,’ he perceives a dualism between ‘religious and secular mentalities,’ but here one must note that he speaks from the hegemonic position of the — allegedly neutral — secular regime. We should understand his recognition of a post-secular condition as a strictly political gesture of issuing a call for peace, hoping for the preservation and stabilization of Western secularism, which today is being attacked by many fundamentalist ideologies and movements all over the world. Habermas’ initiative was a reaction to 9/11. It was the moment which ultimately allowed us to re-evaluate positions within the secular discourse.

This is the lesson from which we need to draw conclusions. In general, our task is to identify a post-secular event in order to outline genealogies — histories of particular subjects, entangled in the secular past. We must identify many post-secular events because we need a symmetrical genealogy and a multidimensional history, in which a narrative of the secular is only one of many. The secular realm described so far could constitute one of the series of events; the post-secular — another one. The post-secular future could be articulated under the conditions of new configurations of subjectivity; we relate to the secular past polemically because our contemporary situatedness demands an improvement of that past and its effects.

The post-secular thinking is then a kind of trial of the disappearing historical formation. The process is open; it is a continuum of lives and deaths of historical formations, in which the necessity of mourning is inescapable. If secularism is an ethnocentric ideology, a kind of ‘methodological nationalism’,¹⁵ then the post-secular projects are an attempt to relativize its discontents; as such they appear as the movement of ethical contestation, the movement which announces and contains a series of ‘theologico-political insurgences’.

Excursus: Abeysekara’s ‘Mourning Secular Futures’

In *Politics of Postsecular Religion*, Ananda Abeysekara deals with Jacques Derrida’s concept of democracy as a promise. For Abeysekara, the idea of democracy is the very essence of secular modernity. He conceives secularism as an ethnocentric ideology which achieves its highest peaks — as well as possibilities of transgression — in contemporary Western philosophy. This is because Abeysekara begins and ends his book debating with Derrida.

¹⁵ See: A. Wimmer, N. Glick Schiller, ‘Methodological Nationalism and Beyond: Nation-State Building, Migration and the Social Sciences’, *Global Networks* 2, 2002, no. 4, pp. 301–334.

By definition, a promise is something that is deferred. That which is deferred is not present or available. Nor is it simply absent. (Indeed, the deferred is irreducible to the binary of presence/absence). Understood this way, to live in a democracy, to be a citizen, to believe in democratic principles — freedom of choice, freedom of the press, human rights, justice, law, among others — is to live in a state of deferral. To believe in the deferred promise is to believe in the future. That is to say, by definition, that which is deferred belongs to the future. Put simply, if democracy is a promise, and if promise is deferred, then to live in democracy is to live in the future.¹⁶

Living in a democracy, therefore, we live in the future, which takes us beyond the present (this is the most radical and universalistic kind of messianism we could ever imagine). This state demands a decision: are we able to sacrifice our present in the name of a democratic promise? The decision depends on our particular stakes. Abeysekara is a postcolonial critic, so he is aware of the multiplicity of local contexts and configurations of power. He does not want to decide for us. He only claims that the future of democracy has already passed. ‘It is past because we are already living in its future. The end of that democratic future is already near, just around the corner.’¹⁷ Whatever we do, this state of things demands a mourning. Mourning is an activity which enables us to work through the past and initiate a new period of life.

Abeysekara seeks “a pathway of actively forgetting history that sees time as being out of joint with itself.”¹⁸ He rejects a mode of thinking to which he refers as the *liberal investment in history*: “the assumption that the more knowledge we have of history and its embedded injustices, the better we can serve (and receive) justice. [...] In this correlation between knowledge and justice, history embodies a redeeming quality, and justice can only be obtained through knowledge of history.”¹⁹ For him, we should not accumulate our knowledge of history, but try to eliminate its difficult, painful or traumatic parts. These parts often are related to political aspects of the history of modernity, such as colonial conquests and its consequences.

Abeysekara is opposed to secular ideology primarily in the context of postcolonial nation-states, which emerged as a result of imitating their former colonial powers (the scholar talks chiefly of Sri Lanka, his country of origin). New

¹⁶ A. Abeysekara, *Politics of Postsecular Religion: Mourning Secular Futures*, New York 2008, p. 1. Abeysekara refers mainly to the following works of Derrida: *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. A. Bass, Chicago 1982; *Politics of Friendship*, trans. G. Collins, New York 2007; *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, trans. P.-A. Brault, M. Naas, Stanford 2005; *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, New York 1994.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 278.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 193. Cf. Wydra’s observation: ‘Ever since Greek antiquity, forgetting has been by far the most dominant response of communities to acts of atrocity and violence [...]. From the re-establishment of democracy in Athens in 403 BC to the *perpetua oblivio* included in the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, and from the re-establishment of the monarchy in England to the return of the Bourbons to the throne of France in 1816, amnesty and oblivion have been essential to overcome atrocities and violence.’ (H. Wydra, *op. cit.*, p. 157).

¹⁹ A. Abeysekara, *op. cit.*, p. 238.

nationalist elites have imported western templates of political culture, and their initiatives have only intensified old conflicts and developed new ones. Secularism's conceptual distinctions have revealed its political (and not only political) inefficacy:

if we are armed with a strict understanding of the secular and the religious, we cannot understand the competing narratives that produced this debate. Secularism, however variously defined and redefined, offers precisely such a limited understanding of the religious and the secular. What we need, then, is not merely an updated version of secularism trumpeting the importance of cultivating more tolerance and pluralism to peaceful democratic existence. We need rather to realize that the demarcation between the religious and the secular is contingent and fleeting. Once we recognize this, we may begin to oppose (often deadly) nationalisms that insist on an unchanging relation between religion, nation, and identity and to affirm non-nationalist, non-hegemonic practices of being and freedom.²⁰

I refer to Abeysekara's reflections because I consider the concept of the post-secular event to be complementary to his idea of 'mourning secular futures.' Namely, I think the post-secular event is the effective 'condition of possibility' of such mourning. The post-secular event reveals the impossibility of secularism's continuation; its radical and spectacular power enables us to forget the secular past — 'un-inherit' it, as Abeysekara wants. He writes of mourning only generally, but we should remember that acts of mourning are rooted in our particular traditions. The death of secularism (which still is to come) will have many particular faces, which often will be incomparable. Presently, we live at the threshold of the failure of secular modernity's promises, and the very destiny of democracy depends on our political will: 'if the-West-is-secular discourse ceases to be the ideological commodity of the secularists and atheists, we will have to confront the present urgency of desecularizing secularism.'²¹

Houellebecq's Post-secular Scenario: History of the Future between Utopia and Realism

In *Provincializing Europe*, Dipesh Chakrabarty writes:

A certain kind of historicism, the metanarrative of progress, is thus deeply embedded in our institutional lives however much we may develop, as individual intellectuals, an attitude of incredulity toward such metanarratives. [...] This we need to develop critiques of institutions on their own terms, secular critiques for secular institutions of government.²²

²⁰ 'theologico-political insurgences'.

²¹ Ibid., p. 41.

²² D. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton 2008, p. 88.

I understand these words as admitting that eventual post-secular criticism implies efficient use of instruments of secular critiques, but with an additional awareness of their limits.²³ The use of prefix 'post-' expresses this awareness, as well as the fact that there exists the excess or surplus, which could destroy the established limits of the secular. The post-secular criticism inherently rests on the institutions of the previous historical formation, simultaneously looking for the means to delegitimize them. In case of failure, one could always appeal to the freedom of critique immanent to the secular regime.

I would also like to pay attention to Reinhart Koselleck's interpretation of the Enlightenment utopia, which found its legitimization in the philosophy of history (*Geschichtsphilosophie*):

Although the divine plan of salvation was secularized into a rational plan of history, it also became the philosophy of history that assured the course of the planned future. The philosophy of progress offered the certainty (neither religious nor rational but historico-philosophical) that the indirect political plan would be realized and, conversely, that rational and moral planning determines the course of history. The assurance that the intention will find realization is contained in the volutative act of planning.²⁴

Thus, in order to be fulfilled, philosophy of history needs not only 'the volutative act of planning,' but also the moment of effective political will and its execution. As Koselleck emphasizes at the end of *Critique and Crisis*, every utopia needs to be 'politically secured.'²⁵

Utopian thinking remains an important part of the Enlightenment, modernity, secularism etc., but these historical formations do not have a monopoly on utopia.²⁶ In reality, utopia has been a very useful instrument of political critique in various contexts and conditions. I believe each utopia covers a specific, own kind of rationality. The post-secular utopia is also possible, which inevitably deals with the secular narrative of history and tries to transcend its linear, monotonous continuum. We can find an excellent example of such a utopia in a recent bestseller novel entitled *Submission*, by the controversial French writer Michel Houellebecq.²⁷

²³ See: T. Asad et al., *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech*, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London 2009.

²⁴ R. Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society*, trans. Berg Publishers, Cambridge, Mass. 2000, p. 133.

²⁵ I refer to Koselleck's observation of the Enlightenment's utopia, which 'in the hands of modern man' was 'a politically unsecured loan,' payed off just by the French Revolution (ibid., p. 186).

²⁶ See also Hayden White's essay, in which he tries to 'consider history as utopia's Other than the reverse': 'The Future of Utopia in History', *Historein* 7, 2007.

²⁷ M. Houellebecq, *Submission*, trans. L. Stein, New York 2015. See also reviews of the novel: M. Lilla, *Slouching Toward Mecca*, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2015/04/02/slouching-toward-mecca/>; A. Gopnik, *The Next Thing. Michel Houellebecq's Francophobic Satire*, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/01/26/next-thing>. See also a discussion about Houellebecq's book on the Telos blog, <http://www.telospress.com/tag/submission/>.

The action of the novel takes place in the year 2022. Houellebecq describes a process of political Islamization of the French Republic, as seen from the perspective of middle-aged academic lecturer, François. As is typical for Houellebecq, the book contains the motif of a sexual relationship, here strictly associated with the main protagonist's changing political self-consciousness and choices. A presidential election takes place in France of 2022, and a confrontation occurs between the National Front (with candidate Marine Le Pen) and a fictional party Muslim Brotherhood (with its candidate Mohammed Ben Abbas). Muslim Brotherhood gains support from the Socialist Party and wins the election. During this time France is on the verge of civil war. Riots occur between young extremists from different parties in various parts of the country. François is outside of Paris at the time of the elections. Later he comes back and observes how various domains of politics — e.g. education and social policy — became subordinated to religious agenda under the new president's rule. Earlier, tormented by the hopelessness of his life and following his idol (and an object of his academic interest at the same time), the decadent French writer Joris-Karl Huysmans, François tried to embrace catholic rituals. Finally, in order to preserve and strengthen his social position, he agrees to convert to Islam, in order to become one of leading intellectuals of the reformed, already Islamic university in Paris. Conversion is also linked with his peculiar benefits of a sexual nature (the privilege of polygamy, based on arranged marriages with Islamic female students). The novel ends with an imagined scene, projected into the future, of François' conversion in the Grand Mosque of Paris.

Analogically to Koselleck's analyses of the Enlightenment's discourse, the post-secular utopia contains elements of moral criticism and a vision of political crisis, and they form a dialectical continuum. Structurally, the vision of political crisis consists in waiting for a radical event. In the case of Houellebecq, his moral argumentation is peculiar and it differs from the Enlightenment's criticism. He does not attack political structures — he is a strong apologist of institutions — but the secularized society and its habits. Houellebecq is a cynic, and his cynicism is parallel to the cynicism of modern civilization, in which he strongly believes. His post-secular utopia — from the secular point of view, we should call it a 'dystopia' — is a nihilistic act of revenge, behind which hides nothing but cultural despair. Nevertheless, his novel is worth analysing. Like previous books of the French writer, it diagnoses the symptoms of contemporary Western consciousness. Moreover, *Submission* appeared at the time fraught with tensions, when European societies were trying to deal with problems of domestic crises, associated with mass migrations, social inequalities, religious fundamentalisms, xenophobic populisms and so on (the French premiere of the novel took place exactly on the day of the infamous Charlie Hebdo terrorist attack, 7 January 2015). Houellebecq cleverly seizes these tensions, reconfigures them and transforms current ambiances into a brave and seditious vision of the future.

In order to remain within the limits of realism, the post-secular utopia needs to depict a moment of crisis of the contemporary secular regime. This is the way in which Houellebecq operates. He presents a narrative which doesn't contain a completely unreal world, but our well-known reality — only it has been transformed in a few crucial ways. We have old institutions, but they realize new values; we have democratic procedures, which currently are fulfilling the sovereign will of the people who have chosen their representatives. Everything is congruent with the letter of the law; of course, there are some extremists but in fact they are powerless and the police and other state services have them under control. Something is happening — maybe the event itself — but it is unrepresentable. There is a threat of unrest, but the order is protected by the institutions. In *Submission*, French people believe in their institutions; thereby, they do not need to be seriously afraid of the future. If there are political changes with cultural and social consequences, they ensue from the democratic legitimization. Of course, there is religion, but it turns out to be only an ideological and institutional *simulacrum*, or better — a spectre. In Houellebecq's testimony religion is active, but only as an unaware minion of broader historical processes. Even if the writer treats politics and religion seriously, they are only weak, minor aspects of the broader spectacle, which we know from our experience. We perfectly know their behaviours, their roles; what is played therein is a *de facto* pointless repetition. But the spectacle is bound to reach its end. Initially, its inner life is exhausted and it gradually reaches the external limits of the spectacle. Then, the *simulacra* disappear; but this is not now, still not yet — and surely not in 2022. We, the educated public, have got no means to grasp it. For us, everything remains the same, at least until we are able to see the resemblance, the continuity. We cannot know whether Houellebecq is a good clairvoyant, but we should understand that his *Submission* possesses a lot of agency. In current (geo)political situation, the novel could act as a can of petrol to stoke the fire. Presumably, we will observe how one book gains a political power in a complicated context.

In Houellebecq's novel one encounters the 'genius of the post-secular' — a figure of an unpredictable meeting between reality and utopia, where we cannot designate a border between them, between the truth and a lie. *Submission* is an example of intellectual insurrection, which pretends to offer at least a possibility of vital, existential truth; it illustrates a becoming of truth. The writer's freedom allows Houellebecq to propose his narrative as a tempting hypothesis. His vision of Islam and its believers is obviously 'orientalist' (in the sense of postcolonial critique), not to mention phantasmic and objectifying. The real Islam has nothing to do with this fictional vision; Islam functions there only as a confusing figure of the Other. It is also obvious that the stakes of future interpretations of the book will be inevitably political. Depending on the shape of this future, such interpretation will be univocal in some way which we cannot recognize at present; there

still lies a plethora of possible scenarios. But when in the long run one of them will have been consummated, this one will become authoritative truth, an authentic voice of the event. The future, or a way to its fulfillment, has been opened.

I think that the aforementioned intuitions of Abeysekara find a promising area of application. While the critic urges us to mourn ‘the secular futures,’ he implicitly accepts their death before it actually occurs. *Submission* also deals with a deferred name of democracy, and shows that it always has only a particular view. In a series of political actions, through which Moslem Brotherhood challenges and changes the secular regime of France, a current framework of the modern society becomes only a remnant of politics... Whoever is able to articulate his own aspirations in a language of secular democracy also has a right to gain power — of course, within the limits of legal procedures. The concept of ‘democracy as a name’ reveals to be paradoxical — under the one name there could exist different facts and meanings, which are often politically dangerous, but we cannot exclude them — exactly, in the name of loyalty to the promise of democracy. The event, in my view, is hidden among meaningless actions of multiple actors who merely play their roles; the event grows imperceptibly and at first fills in the audience of the spectacle and only then, at the end, the stage itself.

Houellebecq’s literary performance is very difficult to classify. His domain is fiction, and his books cannot be criticized and evaluated according to academic standards. In consequence, in his prophetic ability, he is more effective than historians, philosophers, social researchers, etc. He is not limited by strict competences, education, or methodology of peculiar academic fields (even interdisciplinary). I am convinced that his influence on the educated public — *Öffentlichkeit* — is greater than the influence of academics, even that of so-called engaged ‘public intellectuals.’

My views here correspond to those of Joseph Ratzinger, who has stated that ‘a renewed ethical consciousness does not come about as the product of academic debates’.²⁸ Of course, Houellebecq does not offer any kind of ethics directly, but he indicates ‘hot spots’ in contemporary culture, politics and society, where the new, post-secular ethics could emerge. I am aware that ethical issues are not a primary question of philosophy of history, but such moments of discontinuity as a passage from one ‘regime of historicity’²⁹ to another inevitably bring an ethical revolution as well. So, eventually ethical orientations of the coming post-secular age are next to be realized in the course of mapping a new cartography. We shall stay prepared and not be shocked if the role of academic debates will only appear as auxiliary and symbolic, not to say — secondary. *Hic manebimus optime*.

²⁸ J. Ratzinger, ‘That Which Holds the World Together: The Pre-Political Moral Foundations of a Free State’, [in:] *Dialectics of Secularization*, p. 56.

²⁹ See: F. Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time*, trans. S. Brown, New York 2015.

Conclusion

As I have tried to show, a phenomenon which I call ‘the post-secular event’ is present in discourses which form historical consciousness. Starting from theology and passing through a reflection on historiography, we have reached some answers to questions emerging in contemporary global politics. Human thought has always needed a conceptualizations of fissures which divide a continuous world of experiences and views. The concept I have proposed, ‘the post-secular event,’ is a preliminary approach to such a problem. We need it in order to investigate the shift between the two conditions — the secular and the post-secular — the shift which we are observing today. It is necessary to embrace this problem in the field of historical consciousness.

If I can propose some postulates for the future, I would like to accentuate that in historical thinking there already exists a potential to forge frameworks needed to cope with problems of radical historical change — and our imminent task is to lift this potential from contaminated or forgotten strata of thought. I have tried to indicate it with my brief commentary on Hayden White. But currently we need also something else — an effective linking of these instruments with thoughtful theory that can cope with contemporary challenges. There is no single pattern of correct reaction or behaviour in such conditions. On the one hand, the post-secular reflection is a very open space, but on the other hand, it is also determined by current circumstances. I would like to stress, therefore, a need for mutual proximity of actuality and theory, a matter of fact and a matter of concern. I dare say that a connection between these spheres is both inscrutable and tangible.

The next task is to investigate possible theoretical — and in this context, I mean especially religious, spiritual or theological — inspirations for the post-secular view on history, in order to ensure the careful and reliable interpretation of processes in which human actors undertake their actions because of the logic that exceeds secular reasoning. In the text I have only signalled this direction (importance of Habermas-Ratzinger debate, promising approaches of Abeysekara or Chakrabarty). What is also required is the awareness of political stakes of controversies around and within the post-secular discourse. Last but not least, these political stakes are associated with the agentive dimension of instruments which could be included in the widely understood post-secular discourse, as in the case of Houellebecq’s *Submission*.

W stronę postsekularnej wyobraźni historycznej

Abstrakt

Artykuł jest próbą prezentacji idei postsekularnej wyobraźni historycznej. Autor zaczyna od uwag na temat postsekularnej kondycji współczesnego człowieka, a także podkreśla stałą obecność nieświeckich komponentów świadomości historycznej. Artykuł odnosi się do współczesnej historiografii (szczególnie prac Haydena White'a), której wybrane kategorie mają swe źródła w wyobraźni religijnej (duchowej, teologicznej). Mogą one być, w przekonaniu autora, pomocne w tworzeniu postsekularnej wyobraźni historycznej. Autor omawia także polityczne aspekty tego problemu — przez odniesienia do ataków z 11 września 2001 r. oraz powieści Michela Houellebecq'a pt. *Uległość*.

Słowa-klucze: postsekularna wyobraźnia historyczna, wydarzenie, Hayden White, Michel Houellebecq, *Uległość*, Ananda Abeysekara, teologia polityczna, utopia

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