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Postsecular Thought and Literary Studies: Towards the Problem of “the Religious” within a Local Cultural Context

Abstract: The paper raises the question of investigating the religious in the perspective of the grand narrative of Western modernity, which is seen as secular(ist) and hegemonic. It is argued that the discourse of literary studies is of primary importance for the study of the relationship between religion and modernity; as such, it may contribute to epistemological and methodological self-interrogation of the Western model. Firstly, a particular notion of postsecular thought that may serve as a perspective for investigating the local experience of modernisation is suggested. Secondly, the very significant research problem of the religious within modern Bulgarian culture is presented as an example of addressing the issue of adapting the Western (European) understanding of the religious to a non-Western (European) cultural context. The study’s reference points are Slavic cultural and literary studies.

Keywords: postsecular; literary studies; modernity; Slavic studies; Bulgarian culture

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Postsecular Thought and Literary Studies: Towards the Problem of “the Religious” within a Local Cultural Context¹

Ewelina Drzewiecka

Introduction

This paper aims at presenting a particular understanding of postsecular thought with regard to literary studies (discourse) in order to suggest its great potential in research of the problems of ‘the religious’ in cultures that are product of ‘Eastern European’ experience of modernity.² This hermeneutic approach will be shown through an ongoing research project that is held in Institute of Slavic Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences and devoted to the problems of the religious within the modern Bulgarian culture, so the main reference points will be Polish and Slavic cultural and literary studies. In this regard, there should be pointed out the focus on ‘the religious’ with reference to the national discourse can be seen as a hallmark of Polish (Slavic) research approach³ but also a result of a specific context of formulating scientific framework of Slavic and Eastern European studies in terms of both institutional and ideological constraints. Therefore, all the notions and the final approach that is proposed here should be perceived as an attempt in adapting postsecular thought in a vulnerable research area in order to go beyond conventions and prejudices within the field, which has been deeply biased both politically and disciplinary. For this purpose, first, a particular postsecular point of view that may serve as a reference point for a new reflection on Eastern European modernities will be suggested. In the second part of the paper, a significant research problem within the Bulgarian studies will be presented as an example of addressing the local understanding of the religious in the context of modern grand narrative(s).

¹ This work was supported by a grant from National Science Centre in Poland (2019/35/D/HS2/00544).

² In this sense, it presents further reflexion on the subject which was initially commented in: Drzewiecka 2014.

³ There is a rich tradition of studying religious motifs in literature and culture in Polish humanities especially in terms of “sacrum” and “theology” (Sawicki 1979; Gutowski 1994; Jasińska-Wojtkowska 2003). In the last few years, post-secular thought has started affecting local practices within this field. Likewise, in reference to Slavic cultures the issues of religious traditions and contemporary spirituality constitute the current and significant subject of interpretation (Gil 2005; Drzewiecka 2016; Szwał-Gyłybowa 2017; Sosnowska and Drzewiecka 2018).

Postsecular spectrum

Although the term ‘postsecular thought’ has become very popular in recent times, it remains ambiguous and multi-faceted. As the term ‘postsecular’ is used in various contexts in different meanings, it requires constantly clarification and definition, especially since it can often become ideologically entangled and thus may not be purely descriptive. In fact, postsecular thought can be seen as a postmodern reaction against the dispersion of meaning, and as such, it can also be viewed as an appeal for new terminology that would be more adequate to the changing reality (Mączyńska 2009). As a new epistemological fact and a new methodological approach, the postsecular thought is a phenomenon both problematizing and problematic. The problems with the research application of postsecular thought relate to its framework, its main exponents, and even its origins and history so the use spatial rather than temporal metaphors, referring to such concepts as *spectrum* (McLennan 2010a) is more accurate. Postsecular spectrum appears heterogeneous not only due to various disciplines, but also various methodological and political stances. At best, it can be defined as a hermeneutic perspective, which can be described as a certain set of features and not as a model. It seems that all postsecular approaches are founded upon two core constataions: 1) secularization (at least with regard to the Western European civilization) has already happened, and that any widespread “return to religion” as a basic principle of social organization is impossible; 2) religion, reinterpreted and reinvented in a freer, less orthodox way can become a cure for the ills of secular modernity, and an important factor by which the said secular modernity can self-correct (Warchała 2013: 178–179).

The assumption that one of the hallmarks of the twentieth century was growing secularism (or the process of disenchanting the world), which was concomitant with modernisation, and that both the processes were connected and mutually conducive, is now widely accepted. But the postsecular thought both questions and problematizes this assumption, calling for a re-evaluation of the heritage of the Enlightenment, which the dominant scientific paradigm has presented as emancipation from the bondage of superstitions and religious traditions. According to Jürgen Habermas (2001), there exist two conflicting modes for interpreting and evaluating the role of religion in the post-Enlightenment universe: repression and dispossession. The first one harks back to the ideal of the triumph of the autonomous reason, and the second one – to its direct critique. Both show traces of the polarization fallacy, and (being based on *resentment*), both prove

invalid within the postmodern discourse. The postsecular thought strives to go beyond the worldview dichotomy, while crucially it still stays within the confines of secularized (albeit differently defined) world. As Gregor McLennan points out, despite its critical attitude towards secularism/secularisation, the postsecular turn encompasses modes of thinking and action that are in essence secular, more intra-secularist than anti-secularist (McLennan 2010b, 19), or conducted in the secular age (Taylor 2007). The postsecularism is all about “a critical opening of secularism” (Mitek-Dziemba 2012).

On the level of meta-narrative, the postsecular thought contains two fundamental debates, concerning the secularization thesis and political theology. Both debates are intrinsically connected as they both involve the connections between the social and the religious. In that sense, they relate to the foundational texts of the intellectual fathers of modernity: Max Weber, Karl Löwith, Carl Schmitt, Eric Voegelin, Erik Peterson and Hans Blumenberg. Bogalecki and Mitek-Dziemba cogently argue that many voices in the debate on the connection between religion and modernity can be imagined as situated in a triangle (Bogalecki and Mitek-Dziemba 2012: 31) whose vertices are the ideas of Schmitt (all important concepts pertaining to the study of the state are secularized versions of theological terms), Löwith (modern history is Christian in origin and anti-Christian in its results) and Blumenberg (the secularization thesis is invalid and the justification of modernity does not draw inspiration from the theological heritage). In this context it is important to point out that “setting apart the postsecular thought as a distinct and separate mode of reflection might prove useful only if its exponents will strive to go beyond the limitations imposed by the above-described triangle, either by escaping the foundational framework of principles and oppositions on which it is based, or by questioning the basic premise of its creation” (Bogalecki and Mitek-Dziemba 2012: 31). The postsecular thought stands for ‘that which is opposed to the reductive and wholly secular perceptions current in modern societies and in social thought’ (Bogalecki and Mitek-Dziemba 2012: 38). Its goal is problematization of the existing order, destabilizing and de-naturalizing the ‘secular-normative’ system which is seen as a positive effect of secularization. At the same, the postsecular thought can analyse the results of secularization in the negative sense (i.e. abolishing the old ‘religious-normative’ system) (Parmaksız 2016).

Within different worldviews, academic disciplines and methodological paradigms, the postsecular thought exists in many varieties with varying levels of subversiveness, and it is applied and interpreted in different ways. It is enough to mention

that with respect to its attitude to religion in general, the postsecular thought can be divided into three distinct and fundamentally different lines of thought: 'the return to religion' (Habermas, J. Milbank), the complete depletion of the sources of religion (G. Agamben, Blumenberg), and the new relationship between the religious and the secular (J.-L. Nancy, A. Badiou) (Mościski 2007).

Postsecular approaches

As far as literary studies are concerned, one can introduce another kind of typology which is based on assumption there are currently three distinct approaches within the postsecular thought: thematizing, deconstructing, and projecting (cf. Drzewiecka 2014).

The first approach can be called 'thematization' because it focuses on manifestations of religion in (post)modernity, which are usually analysed in terms of 'return to religion.' For this reason, this variety of the postsecular approach is primarily interested in alternative religiosity, including modern fundamentalisms. Whereas within the context of psychology and philosophy this approach involves an examination of the reasons and conditions of these phenomena, in the context of literary studies it is concerned with interpretation of such phenomena in literary texts (or, more broadly, cultural texts, including e.g. games.) The thematization-oriented postsecular approach within literary studies therefore looks to analyse religious paraphrases in a diverse range of texts. The research subject is mostly contemporary fiction, where researchers can analyse the theme of search for religious meaning in a modern, secularized Western world (Cf. McClure 2007; Hungerford 2010). As Tracy Fessenden points out, scholars who analyse new forms of religiosity, and who endeavour to question the Enlightenment-inspired value framework, often fall prey to the fallacy of progressivism (Fessenden 2014; cf. Fessenden 2006). They view the new forms of religiosity as a later, and thus – by definition – a better stage in the development of religious thought. In truth, this approach is based only on a change of definition, without changing the time-honoured temporal framework. In essence, scholars working within this paradigm are bound by the grand narrative of modernity, which perceives religion and secularity as a stark opposition. The postsecular approach in literary studies should be differentiated from the 'Religion and Literature' approach, because the latter disregards popular culture, and analyses literary texts from a Christian perspective (Fessenden 2006). Lastly, thematization within postsecular studies is predicated on a belief that there are forms of religiosity that can 'save' the secular modern men and women by introducing spirituality into their lives. In

this way, this approach obliquely suggests that modernity is inherently evil, and that the omnipresent secularism has faults that should be rectified.

In this context, Agata Bielik-Robson's remark that 'all serious philosophical debates on religion within the postsecular paradigm necessarily circle around one essentially modern trope: *the death of God*' is particularly cogent (Bielik-Robson 2013a: 8). The postsecular thought positions itself in the 'dialectic in-between,' between the revealed religion in the strict sense of the term, and a complete obliteration of any traces of transcendence (Bielik-Robson 2013a: 11). As a consequence, postsecularism turns out to be a *sui generis* minimal theology, an immanence open to 'the religious,' which can and indeed should participate in the transformative experience. Of course, religion is conceived here in a particular way: it is always a *modern* religion or at least a religion that 'complies with the Enlightenment' (Habermas 2001; Bielik-Robson 2013a: 7).

The latter position is in fact connected to the main tenets of the second variety of postsecular thought, which argues that religion/theology (the religious/the theological) lies at the foundations of every secular thought, or – to use Walter Benjamin's famous metaphor of the dwarf hiding under the table – that every secular project either explicitly or implicitly references religion. In Benjamin's metaphor, which can be found in his essay *Über den Begriff der Geschichte* (1940), religion is compared to a dwarf who controls the movements of a chess-playing puppet. In practice, this variety of postsecular thought involves searching for oblique religious paradigms, and thus is akin to crypto-theology (Bielik-Robson 2008). This approach is visible especially in philosophy, but also in social sciences, where recently there is an observable turn towards analysing the discipline's own ties to various non-secular (and thus non-scholarly) discourses. The literary studies seem to be at the forefront of this trend, as this discipline offers an opportunity of studying not only the spiritual beliefs of writers as a context for their work, but also those of the literary critics and scholars themselves. For this reason, this variety of the postsecular thought, which I shall henceforth call 'deconstructionist,' seems especially promising and valuable from the point of view of history of ideas.

Once more it seems necessary to highlight that this approach is predicated upon a very broad understanding of religion, defined as a worldview or alternatively as a kind of conceptualization, which is historically fluid and can only be gleaned in opposition to the concept of secularity. This approach is thus in open conflict with the secularization thesis, questioning its very tenets and pointing out that the relation between the secular and the religious is context-dependent and discursive.

This variety of the postsecular thought sees the religious element in the Enlightenment itself. It does not challenge modernity but – to paraphrase Agata Bielik-Robson – rescues the Enlightenment from itself, as it is founded on oblique (and lethal) conflict between two types of ‘sacred sensitivity,’ the Greco-mythological and the Judeo-Messianic. The former involves a tragic existence bound by the mythical circle of return, and the latter – the experience of exile (Bielik-Robson 2013b: 337–339). Thus, the goal of the postsecular analysis is studying the juxtaposition of religious horizons and unearthing evidence of their clashes since the Enlightenment. It is supposed to uncover that which is repressed and unconscious in the cultural horizon of modernity (Bielik-Robson 2013b: 337).

In the postsecular world, modernity is supposed to be a period where ‘the dominating imperative is not rampant secularization, but a subtle negotiation between transcendence and immanence, where the stake is salvaging human freedom’ (Bielik-Robson 2013a: 12). This vision of postsecular analysis is shared by Peter Conviello and Jared Hickman, who furthermore propose that a study of the past should be *free from the bondage* of secularization thesis, and that it should consist of epistemological and methodological *self-interrogation*, and therefore it should involve a changed vision of modernity, one that would eschew the irrelevant category of secularity (Conviello and Hickman 2014).

The search for ‘the alternative route’ is also visible in the third variety of postsecular thought, which is concerned with studying the use of religious language in secular discourse (and *vice versa*), and which harks back to Hegel’s ‘sublation of religion in philosophy.’ In academic reflection, it is manifested by using theological and metaphysical terms and concepts (always, however, with a semantic shift, i.e. not in a traditional but decontextualized sense.) As a result, such terms take on the character of projections. In social sciences, such attempts are made by scholars who try to merge (in varying degrees) the perspectives of sociology and theology, urging for social and religious engagement. Such an approach is expounded e.g. by Kieran Flanagan, James K. A. Smith, or – albeit in different contexts – by Zygmunt Bauman and Philip Fountain. Likewise, in literary studies, the presence of religious concepts in the language becomes not only a subject of scrutiny, but also the very mode of description (McClure 2007; Ludwig 2009; Ratti 2012). On the one hand, it enables scholars to capture previously marginalized phenomena, and on the other hand – threatens with blurring the boundary

between the researcher and the object of research. The merging of discourses constitutes a serious risk.

The tendency to undermine existing distinctions is however a given in the postsecular approach. Furthermore, being a result of revolt against various types of reductionism, it is a positive force, urging a new approach to and problematization of the existing concepts. As a consequence, the postsecular thought allows its practitioners to go beyond the (seemingly) barren confines of the dichotomy 'the religious vs. the secular'. It offers a fresh perspective on the experience of 'the Enlightenment dialectics', not only in its sociological dimension, but also from the point of view of the history of ideas. It focuses the attention on the most fundamental questions: how are (these) categories created and what roles in the process are played by (various) institutions. Lastly, it points to the necessary discursivity of the modern experience.

Postsecular modernities

Entangled in the discourse of modernity, the postsecular thought asks questions about the effects of modernisation. In this way, it links to the recent theories concerning translation, adaptation and the cultural transfer. It is especially inspiring if viewed in the context of reflection on Westernization and, more specifically, also on (seeming or alternative) secularization of Far Eastern cultures. The most important question is the viability of Western models in culturally disparate contexts, especially in that of Islam. This problem has been cogently and comprehensively analysed by Arjun Appadurai (1996) and Talal Asad (1993, 2003). In a way, their theories constitute a fourth variety of the postsecular thought, which can be understood as a merging of the three previously described ones, where the major preoccupations of the three varieties are viewed through the prism of postcolonial discourse. In this variety, the focus is on revising concepts (genealogies) and problematizing the role of institutions, as in the postsecular perspective analysing the (local) modernity is inextricably connected with analysing the religious context. In this context, the secularization thesis appears at its most problematic, and the modernisation process is viewed as idiosyncratic. For this reason, recent anthropological reflection on modernity problematizes the concept of distinction.

The postsecular thought is thus involved in the most pressing problems of today's anthropology (where the term 'anthropology' is treated broadly). It asks questions about the nature of the so-called 'civilizational core' and about the reasons behind cultural change. At the same time, it seems that the Western civilization does not receive a due

amount of scholarly attention. In fact, 'the West' is often only analysed in passing, as a kind of background for the study of the non-Western 'the Other'. The closer-to-home Other who is a part of the Western civilization also does not receive due attention. There is a dearth of self-interrogation in relation to the Western model. Again, the postsecular thought becomes a stimulus for in-depth re-evaluation and realignment, especially with regard to the study of cultures of the so-called Eastern Europe, and primarily the Balkans (because of their idiosyncratic development model, including a unique social and cultural experience related to the Byzantine and Ottoman influences). If we can define modernity in a broad and universalistic way, then surely in the study of the minor cultures, we can also step away from the model in which the dominant Western culture is the model, and the minor cultures are its (failed) copies, or in which the West is the core, and the minor cultures – the peripheries. It is possible to analyse the discontinuities and *lacunae* in the cultural model (either in the version promoted by the 'core' or assimilated by the 'peripheries,' and thus analyse the inherent artificiality of the Westernizing narrative in relation to the internal 'Other.'

It is precisely in this context that the Western-centric character of the scholarly discourse becomes evident. As a result, there is a need to create new adequate research tools, which would take into account the local conditions, including the relevant religious context. In the case of Southern European and Eastern European cultures, this would involve not only reading the works of Western scholars working within the paradigm of hermeneutics of suspicion, but also engaging in reflection on Orthodoxy, which is the dominant religion in the region. Orthodoxy would need to be analysed from the anthropological perspective, which in effect would lead to the creation of a new scholarly toolbox. On the other hand, it should be stressed that any study of modernization processes in the Balkans would also need to include an inquiry into the Islamic substrate.

If we view the process of enculturation as a clash of two social imaginaria (imagined ways of life in a community), then we should follow Charles Taylor's precept that a new imaginarium does not supersede the old one. Instead, it re-examines and re-interprets the most important tenets of the older tradition while remaining attached to it (Taylor 2004). Within the transdisciplinary paradigm, such new perspectives on the so-called Eastern European⁴ cultures (inspired by the postsecular thought) can take one of

⁴ My usage of the term is loose. I use it here only with the intention of suggesting a contrast between Western and Eastern Europe, disregarding the existing geo-cultural terms such as e.g. Central Europe.

the following forms: 1) analysis and interpretation of the presence of alternative forms of religion (the first variety of postsecular thought); 2) deciphering the crypto-theological entanglements of culture users and (their) ideological projects (the second variety); 3) introducing concepts current in Orthodoxy/Islam into the Western-centric anthropology (the third variety); 4) the study of religion and its role in the processes of adaptation and cultural translation (the fourth variety.) On a broader plane, such a research perspective would make researchers more sensitized to the illusory nature of the ideal of objectivity and to the illusory transparency of research tools.

On the other hand, one should also be mindful of the history and contexts of the postsecular thought, and as a result – guard oneself against the dangers of the confusion of tongues. Burdened with the risk of ambiguity, which allows for tacit transitions and fluid boundaries between diverse epistemological perspectives (Hałas 2014), the postsecular discourse is undoubtedly intended for the initiated (those conversant with the languages of both theology and philosophy and/or social sciences.) When it is learned in a reflexive way, it becomes ‘a saving threat’ (Sławek 2012) that allows one to resolve the impasse of the project/self-image/grand narrative of modernity. It gives one a chance to grasp the heterogeneity of cultural phenomena.

However, at this point the question about the conceptual boundaries of the term ‘postsecular’ reappears with redoubled force. It is especially pertinent in the context of diverse reference points, and thus – in the context of the risk of dissolving in the polyphonic (and often nebulous) discourse of modernity. The postsecular perspective open to the often-voiced charge of anachronism, which argues that postsecularism is a historically-conditioned interpretative perspective, stemming from the philosophical and social problems that became exacerbated in the second half of the twentieth-century, and that as such it is only applicable to new phenomena. It seems that this problem exists in the case of the thematization-oriented approach, when postsecularity denotes the *object* of research (e.g. postsecular society, postsecular novel.) Because it is inextricably connected with the historical context of its emergence, it becomes comprehensive, but also limited to the phenomena of the so-called late modernity. However, if the term ‘postsecularity’ is applied to the research approach (and not to the subject), it seems that the charge of anachronism is no longer valid. By implying a particular set of sociological and philosophical assumptions, it becomes a research perspective with which one can study the (manifestations) of modernity as such. While admittedly it does not cease to be

somewhat problematic (especially with regard to social sciences), nevertheless it seems more promising.

Postsecular literary studies

The benefits of the postsecular approach seem the most obvious in literary studies. An advantage of the ‘anachronistic’ practice of reinterpretation of earlier texts through the prism of postsecularism lies not only in exposing the connections between texts that problematizing the relation between the religious and the secular, but also in sensitizing the scholars to the essential discursivity and fictionality of narration. It is manifested in two types of reflection in literary studies.

First of all, it should be stated that most scholars focus their attention on literary texts that illustrate the postmodern phenomenon of the so-called new spirituality, and thus they call for re-evaluation and reinterpretation of marginalised or wrongly interpreted texts dating from earlier periods. It seems more productive however to see these texts as material for studying the connections between religion and modernity, i.e. by engaging not in thematization, but in crypto-theology. In this paradigm, postsecularism becomes not only a research approach, but also the object of research, as it is defined as ‘the experience of secularization’ (Habermas 2001). The literary discourse itself becomes valuable material for studying the relation between the religious and the secular. The reception of “religious” themes and their subsequent interpretation in later periods is a useful index of conceptual tensions. Significant disparities between specific terms are created by the changing discursive contexts. If the context helps to define the concepts, then the differences between them help to delineate the boundaries of a given discursive context (Kauffmann 2007).

Both literature and the discourse of literary studies reference the relationship between the religious and the secular not only through their ‘attitude to religion’ but also through creating new distinctions and meanings. As Kauffmann argues, the terms ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ are used in order to delineate the boundaries of different discourses and establish the identities of those who use them (Kauffmann 2007). In this context, the importance of literary studies becomes apparent. Formed by the narrative of secularization, the literary studies play an important role in further developing that narrative (Pecora 2006). It leads to crucial questions: how is the discursive context of this (new, modern and secular) discipline defined by the changing relationship between the religious and the secular? How does the discipline itself define that relationship? What

assumptions lie at the roots of its research object and establish the boundaries of the literary studies discourse? (Kauffmann 2007) The goal of the postsecular analysis is not only to deconstruct the binary oppositions, but also to track the genealogies of key categories.

Thus, within literary studies one can treat the postsecular thought as an incentive to open up new research fields which would result in 1) re-examination of stereotypes regarding national literatures (and cultures), e.g. regarding the presence and significance of religious themes and the use of religious codes); 2) reinterpretation of the work of artists who had been hitherto marginalized, or whose work was deemed to be irrevocably classified; 3) drawing attention to the existence of crypto-theological entanglements of both the authors (writers, critics etc.) and the scholars, and as a consequence, to the local experience (or even creation) of modernity. In this context, Benjamin's metaphor of the dwarf of theology hiding under the table seems particularly apt. The study of worldviews proves to be very fruitful, even though it is not focused on ideological systems that would be consciously accepted and professed, but on their implicit 'theological' foundations. In accordance with a shift of meaning which is crucial for the postcolonial thought, the religious is not only defined as divine in the traditional sense, but also as non-human (Sławek 2012: 16), i.e. defined in a close connection to the human condition, albeit by opposition.

Furthermore, the postsecular thought allows one not only to track the (crypto-theological) entanglements, but also promises breaking free from the grand narrative of secularism, i.e. resisting the grand narrative of modernity. It asks *why*, and for what reason are certain beliefs and practices classed as secular or religious (Kauffmann 2009). Literary studies can certainly have a valuable contribution to this field of research, especially as modern culture should be viewed as a *par excellence* literary (i.e. artificial, non-authentic.) As the artistic experience of Romanticism and Modernism has demonstrated, artificiality is the destiny of the modern man. (Modern) literature is neither transparent nor authentic. It testifies to a lack of connection between experience and thought, and becomes the dominant characteristic of the modern experience (Lovejoy 1924: 240-249; Warchała 2006: 102-105).

For this reason, it is important to view literature (understood as an object of research) as a source of knowledge. It should not be perceived as an attempt to debunk secular ideas and present them as essentially religious. Neither should it focus primarily on studying the replacement of religion with secular forms of the same idea (including

the model in which it is literature itself that replaces religion) (Kauffmann 2007). It should not be sacralised or put on a pedestal as an expression of transcendence (as it is done e.g. by the proponents of the 'Religion and Literature' approach.) If literature is in any way more *valuable* for scholars, it is precisely because of the methods of literary studies.

According to Jordan Stein (2014), literary studies can play a crucial role in unearthing the provisional nature of the grand narrative of secularism. The analysis of literary works, founded as it is upon the assumption of functional fiction (and in this respect, similar to secularism), never aspires to complete coherence, because it is rooted in the idea of persuasiveness and elusiveness of the artistic process. It turns out that literary studies can in fact be intrinsically connected with the study of secularism, understood as the result of the process of creating a linear story of progression from religiosity to secularity. The literary studies are also particularly sensitive to the provisionality of studied objects. They can unearth 'inequalities' and 'inconsequences' of the secular discourse. By this token, they can disturb the coherent and linear vision, based on a simple cause-and-effect chain. Viewed in this perspective, *literary studies* turn out to offer a certain form of *epistemological sensitivity*.

For this reason, the reflection on literature and oneself (*self-interrogation*), should be done subverting the stereotypical juxtaposition of 'good religion vs. bad religion' which manifests itself in the modern perspective and its fundamental opposition 'the religious vs. the secular.' The juxtaposition is rooted in the conceptual framework inspired by Protestantism, and is based on the concept of 'good religion' (which, in contrast with 'bad religion,' is invisible, fully internalized and as such, poses no threat to the progress of humanity, Fessenden 2014). A glance at the history of reflection on the religious element in literature clearly demonstrates that the operative word is always 'spirituality' (seen in a positive light), which is a front for the invisible, non-institutional 'religiosity' which is 'tamed' within the narrative of progress (Orsi 2005; Fessenden 2006, 2014).

Postsecular literary studies thus engage with the postsecular experience, which by necessity goes beyond *various* stereotypes. It needs to answer the appeal: "the religious/the crypto-theological" calls for new reflection on modernity. And this is only the first step on the way towards broadly-conceived *self-interrogation*; the second step is the revision of *one's own* narrative of modernity. And thus, from the perspective of such a reflection on Western culture, the study of 'Eastern European' literatures and literary studies approaches proves to be more and more promising and potentially fruitful. This

is where the original (e.g. Orthodox) context merges with the new, imported approaches (which at some level often have a Protestant provenance). This is where diverse discursive contexts merge, where old/new meanings and juxtapositions become reinforced, and where their 'artificiality' is exposed. This is where the discursivity or creativity of the *self* becomes apparent. In this sense, the literary discourse, and – because of its illusion of objectivity – especially the discourse of literary studies stemming from the 'Eastern European' cultures, becomes a *valuable* field for researching the relationship between the religious and the secular, and for experiencing the grand narrative of modernity. In this paradigm, the preferred orientation seems to be a mixture of crypto-theological sensitivity and a literary studies approach.

Postsecular (in) Slavic (Culture) Studies: An example

Slavic studies are indeed very interesting scientific field because of its (geo)political genealogy and immanent disciplinary and language diversity (cf. Szwat-Gyłybowa 2014). It can be seen as a peculiar mediating sphere in terms of its object of concern and location within the Academia. Deeply involved with problems of culture (not only in regard to Slavic languages and literatures), it has a potential to put in question matters that have a direct relation with 'Western European – Eastern European' dichotomy on both levels the source material that is typically analysed and the institutional practices and prejudices that are shared by various researchers.

It seems the case of Bulgarian modern culture and its discourses could be especially interesting in this regard and may serve as a context for re-evaluating common knowledge that is shared also by researchers. First, it is perceived as peripheral in two dimensions: due to its different (than Western European) historic development, which based on the influence of many different culture and religion patterns, including the Ottoman one, and because of its strong relation with Eastern Orthodox Church, which in Western-centric social sciences is still considered as non-modern (cf. Lubańska and Ładykowska 2013). Secondly, although it is based on the Christian worldview, one of its most relevant elements is the auto-stereotype of non-religious Bulgarians as religiously indifferent (or possibly pagan, heretic or atheist) that was established thanks to a historian of Bulgarian literature, Boyan Penev, in the 1920s.

The fact this auto-stereotype is still vivid in contemporary Bulgarian elite's discourse deserves a special attention due to two paradoxical phenomena (from the viewpoint of the Western (European) cultural model): the close attachment to the

Orthodox tradition that is commonly declared by Bulgarians and the low percentage of actual believers⁵ and public/political engagement with a religious institution (which is read by many researchers as a reference to the traditional Orthodox concept of the symphony of powers (cf. Ghodsee 2009). In fact, the very concept of religion (that is ‘traditional’, ‘Orthodox’, ‘Christian’, ‘Bulgarian’, ‘autogenous’) is the foundation of national and nationalist discourse (the Orthodox identity appears here as a *sine qua non* of Bulgarian identity) (cf. Elenkov 1998; Dimitrova 2006). In this sense, it is one of the basic themes in various deliberations of the Bulgarian elite. Moreover, research on biblical motifs in the Bulgarian literature of the 20th and 21st centuries showed that literary paraphrases of religious themes that are not associated with the local vernacular Orthodox tradition function on the periphery of the literary canon or are branded as ‘foreign’ in local literary studies (Drzewiecka 2016), and yet the question of the (non-)religious worldview of the classic writers of the Bulgarian canon of literature, which is determined on the basis of their work, is one of the ‘great’ yet underestimated and uncharted subjects of literary studies and is recurrent regardless of changes in the socio-political conditions in Bulgaria (Dzhevietska 2018). The fact that, in Bulgarian studies, the auto-stereotype in question is addressed mostly by *literary* experts and the key category is authenticity is more than meaningful. The history of the reception of the classics of Bulgarian literature not only reveals the peculiar status of the religious in Bulgarian culture.

Therefore, researching Bulgarian literary criticism with regard to the relationship between the religious and the secular seems to be particularly promising also as far as the imperative of historicizing and contextualizing a certain Eastern-European experience beyond the grand narrative of modernity is concerned (Drzewiecka 2018). The analysis of the notion of religion and the related notions of secularization, clericalization, reformation and confession, which was carried within the framework of the Polish collective project “The Migrating Ideas in the Slavic Balkans (18th–20th centuries)” (Szwat-Gyłybowa 2018-2020), revealed the multiplicity and even randomness of influences, although it pointed to the key role was played by the Western interpretation of social phenomena. In this context, the function of Protestant thought as a model for

⁵ According to the census of 2001, almost 83% of Bulgarian citizens are referred to as Orthodox Christians (Prebroyavane 2012), according to the Eurobarometer Poll of 2005, only 40% of the population believes in God (Special Eurobarometer 225 2005). It remains to be seen what is the percentage according to the last year’s census.

building a narrative about the progress of a nation in opposition to supposedly outdated or oppressive traditions (called ‘Byzantine’, ‘Orthodox’, ‘Oriental’) emerged (Dzheviecka 2017).

What is important, the influence of Protestantism on Bulgarian culture is usually examined in relation to the activities of neo-Protestant missions in the Ottoman Empire in the 19th and early 20th centuries, but this usually occurs in a more historical and social manner (e.g. Ilchev and Mitev 2003) than in an ideological one (cf. Danova 2009) that is often entangled in the polemical (and compensatory) tradition of research on this phenomenon, which is manifested by the use of the pejorative term ‘Protestant propaganda’ (Dzheviecka 2017). This approach fits into the established interpretation of phenomena based on the ‘own vs. other’” opposition, seeking arguments for the so-called self-sufficiency of native culture. There is also a tradition of studying the influence of literatures from Protestant countries, which can be perceived in terms of westernization or modernization. However, there is no *autonomous* view on literature (except for specific research on Bulgarian modernism) that follows the sociological and historical perspective in regard to the notion of local modernity. Similarly, there is no application of post-secular thought within the field. As a research perspective, postsecularism is still a novelty that occurs mainly in the context of the problems of modern society and the state–religion relationship (cf. Krasteva 2014). Although Bulgarian literary experts do show interests in investigating religious experience in modern literature (e.g. Ogoyska 2017), the focus is on revisiting the canon in traditional modus. The status of religious and biblical topics in Bulgarian literature was discussed and partly revised after the fall of communism (e.g. Radev 1999), but even recent critical approaches are entangled in the image of the non-religious Bulgarian (e.g. Rikev 2020). It seems crucial to deconstruct the Bulgarian literary critics discourse precisely from the post-secular perspective in order to reveal the genealogy of the Bulgarian auto-stereotype. Moreover, focus on the crypto-theological entanglements will address the problem of functioning of the Protestant and Orthodox categories in Bulgarian culture.

In this regard, it should be pointed out that the rise of the Bulgarian humanities was strongly marked by a very complicated socio-political situation in the country in the period of the end of the 19th century and the first decades of the 20th century. The modern Bulgarian state was organized under the political influence of Western European countries and Russia in the context of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, so the local experience of modernization was particularly ambiguous. When Bulgaria was defeated

in the Second Balkan War (1913) and World War I (1914–1918), i.e. after the ‘fall of the national ideal’, a deep social and ideological crisis became even more vivid. As more and more ‘foreign’ influences emerged, the discussion about national identity grew under the sign of strong axiological alternative ‘European vs. Bulgarian’. Bulgarian elites faced problems of two kinds. On the one hand, various non-Orthodox paradigms of thought, both religious and anti-religious, entered their discourse, so that the points of reference were disturbed fundamentally, regardless the common perspective of ‘national psychology’. On the other hand, achievements of the Western, post-enlightenment science that were suddenly introduced and adapted carried with them all the ambiguities and secularistic prejudices of the modern way of producing and articulating knowledge. In this context, the question of the religious denomination manifested itself very clearly. Therefore, I argue that problematizing the concept of religion (‘the religious’) in this period will reveal the discursive and historical context of the religious–secular opposition, as well as the worldview distinctions associated with these senses.

Thus, the ongoing research project ‘Secularization and literature. Intellectual elites in Bulgaria and the question of religion (1892–1944)’ is aimed at analysing Bulgarian literary criticism by engaging the deconstructive and crypto-theological sensitivity of post-secular thought. Focused on the genealogy of different meanings of concepts that were used in regard to ‘the religious’, it takes into account not only the first professionalised studies of literature,⁶ but also various texts published in such prominent yet ideologically different journals as *Misal* (1892–1907), *Zlatorog* (1920–1943), *Hyperion* (1922–1931) and *Nakovanya* (1925–1933). Thus, the subject of analysis are not only works by great critics and literary experts⁷, but also authors who nowadays are considered less important but who had an influence in the studied period.⁸ The crucial fact is most of them were educated in the Western European academic centres but only after being raised in the native Orthodox culture which is derived from the folk and Church tradition, so they can be seen as actors of cultural transfer. In this context, various ideological and esthetical differences between them appear to be even more meaningful.

⁶ E.g. a study by Vladimir Vasilev, “Circle of Individualism in Our Literature” (1932); a three-volume work by Boyan Penev, “History of New Bulgarian Literature” (1930–1933); a work by Ivan Radoslavov, “Bulgarian Literature 1880–1930” (1936).

⁷ E.g. Yordan Ivanov (1872–1947), Krastyo Krastev (1866–1919), Boyan Penev (1882–1927), Simeon Radev (1879–1967), Ivan Shishmanov (1862–1928), Aleksandar Teodorov-Balan (1859–1959).

⁸ E.g. Georgi Konstantinov (1902–1970), Ivan Meshekov (1881–1970), Vladimir Vasilev (1883–1963).

By engaging of the postsecular perspective within the question that traditionally is addressed by approaches of literary history and cultural transfer, the study has a potential to trace and deconstruct the process of adapting the categories that determine the 'Western' discourse on religion in Orthodox conditions and by this – to be a fruitful adaptation of postsecular sensitivity in regard to literary studies within the field of Slavic studies. Involved particularly in Bulgarian studies, it is expected to contribute in to *self-interrogation* of both the Bulgarian modern culture and the Western notion of secularist modernity.

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