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## **Postsecular Conflicts and the Global Struggle for Traditional Values**

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*This is the text of a lecture that Dr. Kristina Stoeckl (University of Innsbruck, Austria) gave in RANEPa on the 2nd of March 2016. She presented the research project “Postsecular Conflicts” (2016–21). This project in the field of sociology of religion and political theory explores conflicts over questions of public morality (i.e., visibility of religious symbols, definitions of family and gender). It starts from the observation that in today’s world these conflicts no longer take place in national contexts, but have a global appeal. How can we understand this global struggle for traditional values? In order to answer this question two steps need to be taken: (1) a revised political sociology of traditionalist religious actors; (2) a revised political conception of moral conflict. The Postsecular Conflicts research project wants to achieve both of these steps, specifically through a thorough analysis of the role of Russian Orthodox traditionalist actors in the global struggle for traditional values.*

**Keywords:** postsecular, Russian Orthodox Church, Habermas, religion, norm entrepreneurship.

This is the slightly revised text of a lecture delivered at the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration, Moscow, on March 2, 2016.

## Introduction

THE aim of the Postsecular Conflicts research project is to explore the phenomenon of the conflicts over moral and religious questions in present-day societies from the perspectives of sociology of religion and political theory. Let me give you two examples of the kind of conflicts I mean:

In spring 2016, Italy was living through intense public debate over the introduction of “civil unions” for couples of the same sex. Supporters and opponents of the law organized demonstrations; every other day the newspaper headlines reported on a different facet of the debate, and the Vatican issued a statement in which the Catholic Church insisted on the semantic difference between “civil union” and “marriage.” Inside the parliament, politicians of all backgrounds were divided on the question, and even the ruling center-left majority did not vote unanimously in favor of the new law, which entered into force in summer 2016.

The second example is from Austria: Austria is a country where the vast majority of the population identifies with the Catholic faith, even though only a limited percentage actually attends church actively. Religious education in Austrian public schools is compulsory and available for all recognized faith communities. School has nonetheless become a site of contestation over questions of religion: parents complained that during a music lesson in an Austrian elementary school all of the children were being taught Christmas songs. The contentious issue was that this was the music lesson, not the religious education class, and some parents felt that the school was not being neutral vis-à-vis all religions and worldviews.

I am sure you are all aware of conflicts of this kind, we read about them in the news almost every day. What these two situations have in common is that they both tell a story of a shift in public consciousness, a shift away from a situation where certain aspects of social life are unquestioned (the heterosexual definition of marriage, the simultaneous worldly and religious meaning of Christmas) to a situation where these aspects undergo re-evaluation. It is, in the words of Russian structuralist Viktor Shklovsky, a process of alienation or defamiliarization (*priem ostraneniia*), in which something that has been taken for granted to the extent of becoming self-evident again becomes “something” — an object of contention, the center of struggles over definition.

Conflicts of this kind concern not only questions of family and education, but also questions of life and death — for instance abortion, assisted suicide, medically assisted procreation — and questions of religious freedom — for example the display of crucifixes in public places.

These conflicts are also not confined to secularized Western democracies, but also take place in Russia. The year 2012 is commonly considered the “turning point” in Russia’s engagement with morality politics: this was the year when the Russian government fully endorsed traditional values in terms of a domestic and international political agenda, introducing laws regarding the protection of religious feeling and the ban on propaganda for non-traditional relationships inside Russia (Stepanova 2015), while lobbying for traditional values in international human rights policies outside Russia (McCrudden 2015). In reality, however, traditional values had occupied an important place in Russian domestic and international politics before that year, as the Russian Orthodox Church lobbied for traditional values (Stoeckl 2014).

You are surely aware of the nature of the public debate that surrounds conflicts over morality politics: usually the opponents accuse each other of all sorts of things, including backwardness, a geopolitical quest for power, advocating murder, instrumentalizing religion, defending religion, lack of values, destroying the basis of civilization, inhumanity, violence, intolerance, discrimination, lack of restraint, oppression, and so on. Public debate and journalistic reporting on the issues at hand are stuck at the level of fierce reciprocal accusations and tend to use a friend-enemy strategy.

I don’t think this is helpful for understanding the nature of these conflicts.

The research project “Postsecular Conflicts” is about these conflicts, but it wants to move beyond the usual level of these debates. It is an academic, sociological research project, not a journalistic or political endeavor, and it takes a step back from the public debate in order to ask: how can we understand today’s postsecular conflicts and the global struggle for traditional values? The answer to this question, I argue, involves two components:

- (1) a revised political sociology of traditionalist religious actors;
- (2) a revised political conception of moral conflict.

The Postsecular Conflicts research project wants to achieve both. In the remainder of this article, I will give an overview of how we intend to answer the question of how to understand today’s postsecular conflicts and the global struggle for traditional values along these two lines of reasoning.

## Postsecular Society

Because this is an academic research project, the first indispensable step is to lay open the assumptions that guide this research. Our point of departure is the concept of “postsecular society.” The social sciences are by definition secular sciences, that is, they consider religion and religious actors as a subject of research. However, social sciences today are also “postsecular” sciences inasmuch as they do not conceive of their own stance as superior to the religious. Instead, postsecular social sciences relate in a self-reflexive way to their research subject, the religious.<sup>1</sup> The term “postsecular society” was coined by the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas (Habermas 2006). He uses the term to describe a specific quality of democratic debate, namely the capacity of public debate to include and possibly incorporate religious arguments.

Habermas’s starting point is the strict separation of religion and the state. The state as the sum total of rules, regulations and institutions that organize human coexistence must not, in Habermas’s view, be itself religious: it must not be a theocracy; there must not be a state church; legislation must not invoke religious justifications. This is the politically liberal and democratic starting point for Habermas, and it is also the normative starting point for the questions I ask in this project.

However, the religious neutrality of the state does not mean that religions may not flourish inside the state and that they may not influence the ways in which people democratically discuss and decide on the laws that should govern them. This is the idea of the “overlapping consensus,” supported both by Habermas and by John Rawls (Rawls 1993). The overlapping consensus means that citizens in a democratic state can support one political order even though they hold different and even contradictory worldviews.

## From Conditions of Consensus to Conditions of Conflict

It is important to recognize that the concepts of postsecular society and overlapping consensus speak precisely to the kind of conflict situations I gave as examples in the beginning. In Italy, a religiously neutral state, citizens and their representatives, the political parties and

1. For a corresponding definition of “postsecular religion,” see Kyrlezhev 2014. For analysis of contemporary “post-secular philosophy” and changing attitudes toward theology and religious arguments, see Uzlaner 2011.

the elected government, are engaged in a process of formulating a law, the law on civil unions, which calls citizens of different and contradictory worldviews into action to mobilize for and against the legislative proposal. Is it possible to reach an overlapping consensus in this case? What is it that makes it so difficult?

It is here, at this point in the argument, that my own approach departs from the answer given by mainstream political liberalism, in particular by Habermas. Habermas correctly describes the challenge of a pluralism of worldviews in democratic societies, but I think he is wrong in describing the conditions of consensus. Let me therefore explain Habermas's answer first, and then my criticism of it.

According to Habermas religious consciousness has to undergo a process of "modernization" in response to three specific challenges in order to be conducive to an overlapping consensus in democratic societies. These three challenges are religious pluralism, modern science, and positive law and secular morality. This modernization, according to Habermas, consists of three steps, namely the development of an "epistemic stance" by religious citizens

- (I) toward other religions and worldviews that they encounter within a universe of discourse hitherto occupied only by their own religion;
  - (II) toward the independence of secular from sacred knowledge and the institutionalized monopoly of modern scientific experts;
  - (III) toward the priority that secular reasons enjoy in the political arena.
- (Habermas 2006, 14)

Habermas believes that in order for the modernization of religious consciousness to be considered "successful," religious citizens must develop their "epistemic stances" toward these three topics as follows:

- (i) They succeed to the degree that they self-reflectively relate their religious beliefs to the statements of competing doctrines of salvation in such a way that they do not endanger their own exclusive claim to truth.
- (ii) They can only succeed if, from their religious viewpoint, they can conceive of the relationship of dogmatic and secular beliefs in such a way that autonomous progress in secular knowledge cannot come to contradict their faith.
- (iii) They can succeed only to the extent that they convincingly connect the egalitarian individualism and universalism of modern law and morality with the premises of their comprehensive doctrines. (Habermas 2006, 14)

I argue that, while Habermas correctly identifies the three crucial thresholds for religious consciousness in modern society (I, II and III), his way of conceptualizing their “successful passage” (i, ii and iii) is problematic because it sets too high a threshold for the inclusion of religious arguments in the formal public sphere.

We have to remember here why it is so important for Habermas (and political liberals in general) that religious actors can become part of an overlapping consensus. The reason is that political liberalism rejects the idea of the “modus vivendi” as a viable political order. The modus vivendi is the flip side of the overlapping consensus: in a situation of overlapping consensus, all citizens agree to the principles that guide their political community, even though they may not agree for the same reasons. In a situation of modus vivendi, the citizens do not agree with the principles that guide their political community, but because they are in the minority or for other pragmatic reasons, they consent to the rules, at least for the time being. The situation of an overlapping consensus is intrinsically stable, whereas the modus vivendi is volatile: it can be overturned at any moment, and in a democracy at every election; it can also degenerate into violent conflict.

Political liberalism has been criticized for this rejection of the modus vivendi by two groups of thinkers: firstly by those political liberals who have argued that the modus vivendi can in fact be a viable political model (see Horton 2010), and secondly by postmodern critical thinkers, who have accused liberalism of losing sight of the conflictual, agonistic dimension of politics (see Mouffe 2000). This essay is not the place to resolve the question once and for all, but I do want to add that with this project, I am hoping to contribute rather to the first than to the second school in democratic theory. Agonistic democratic theory, which celebrates conflict as the center point of politics, is, in my view, insufficient for guaranteeing those basic individual rights that even antagonistic theorists would probably choose to keep.

### **Liberal, Traditionalist and Fundamentalist Religious Actors**

From a sociological perspective, Habermas’s definition of how religious actors approach the three epistemic challenges of secular modernity outlined above splits the religious field into two camps: those religious actors who respond successfully to these challenges, and those who do not. The first group is “reasonable,” the second is “unreasonable.” As a consequence, most social scientists in their study of religious

actors have focused either on “liberal” religious actors as belonging to the first group, or on “fundamentalists,” the second group, which resists modernization and attacks modern, liberal and secular societies. In the empirical study of religious actors, however, there is a third, in-between group alongside the liberal and fundamentalist representatives of religious tradition. I call this group “traditionalists.” If we look into the empirical reality of religious actors in democratic deliberation, we see that, indeed, three “steps” identified by Habermas are the crux of postsecular inclusion of religious arguments into the informal public sphere, but his way of conceptualizing their successful adaptation is too narrow. (Below I will present more examples to substantiate this claim.) If we follow Habermas closely, must we conclude that political liberalism is only about liberal “reflexive” religious actors and that his theory does not speak to any other cases of religious claims that are, from this perspective, lumped together as “unreasonable” and “fundamentalist”? This is a conclusion that I would find intellectually unsatisfying, because it avoids what I believe are the “real” issues, and practically unsatisfying, because it leaves the wide field of non-liberal religious actors undifferentiated and underexplored. The Postsecular Conflicts project was created precisely because I believe that the traditionalists deserve the attention of social and political scientists, and because I am convinced that the study of situations of moral and religious conflict is crucial for advancing a more realistic postsecular political liberalism.

What sets religious traditionalists apart from religious liberals and religious fundamentalists is their strategy of dealing with the plurality characteristic of modern secular societies. Let us now consider the traditionalist position with regard to Habermas’s three steps of modernization of religious consciousness.

### *Religious Freedom and Visibility of Religion in the Public Sphere*

In debates on religious freedom and the visibility of religion in the public sphere, the standard liberal answer would be that religious freedom is to be protected and that religion is first and foremost a private matter that should not assume privileges in public life. The standard fundamentalist answer would be that religious freedom is a sign of apostasy. Traditionalist religious actors generally disagree with both of these positions. They defend the privileged role and visibility of their religion at the expense of rights for minority religions or non-believers. They do so, however, not by publicly arguing that their belief is

superior to others, but by claiming that their belief is that of the majority and/or enjoys a historically based privilege.

One example of this strategy was Italy's line of defense in the Lautsi case in front of the European Court of Human Rights. This was a case where a parent demanded that the crucifix should be removed from her child's classroom because the presence of a Christian symbol in a public school interfered with the neutrality of the Italian state (the Italian constitution separates religion and state) and with her right as parent to educate according to her own (in this case non-religious) worldview. In its defense, Italy argued that the crucifix was not primarily to be seen as a religious symbol, but that it is also symbolized Italian history and culture, which were profoundly influenced by Christianity. The representative of the Russian Orthodox Church in Strasbourg, Ighumen Philip (Ryabykh), commenting on this case, said:

In Europe, Christianity has historically represented the main religious belief. People's choices in favor of traditional Christianity as already rooted in Europe should also be protected by religious freedom, and not just the freedom of religions that have appeared relatively recently. . . . This explains why the Russian Orthodox Church expressed disagreement with the decision of the European Court of Human Rights in 2009 on the removal of crucifixes from classrooms in Italy and why Russia supported Italy in its appeal to the Grand Chamber of the Strasbourg Court. (Ryabykh 2013, 21–22)

This quote expresses a common position among traditionalists in matters of religious freedom. It is a position that should be considered "reasonable" according to Habermas's taxonomy, inasmuch as it acknowledges and accepts the presence of other religions and worldviews within a universe of discourse hitherto occupied only by one's own religion. These actors, indeed, "self-reflectively relate their religious beliefs to the statements of competing doctrines of salvation," but they do so in terms that Habermas never considered. He speaks about exclusive truth claims, they speak about history and culture.

### *Secular Discourse*

The second challenge Habermas identified in terms of the modernization of religious consciousness is the reconciliation of religious teaching and scientific knowledge. Habermas believes that religious actors are "successful" in overcoming this challenge "if from their religious



viewpoint they conceive the relationship of dogmatic and secular beliefs in such a way that the autonomous progress in secular knowledge cannot come to contradict their faith”; in other words, if they accept the independence of scientific knowledge from belief. The “unsuccessful” or “fundamentalist” response in this case would be the denial of scientific knowledge. One example that comes to mind is the exclusive teaching of creationism practiced by some fundamentalist evangelical groups in the United States in home-schooling models. This model means a retreat from secular society and secular scientific knowledge into a religious universe. Traditionalist religious actors generally follow neither the fundamentalist retreat strategy, nor the liberal independence strategy. Instead, they borrow from the pluralism within secular discourse, from a postmodern type of relativism, and even a postcolonial subaltern discourse that questions the independence of knowledge and describes it as the product of structures of power.

The following example is drawn not from science, but from human rights discourse. However, it demonstrates well what I want to show, namely that traditionalist actors use an almost Foucauldian type of discourse and power analysis in order to deconstruct dominant discursive positions. The example is taken from controversies over the correct interpretation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. A couple of years ago (2012–14), the United Nations Human Rights Council, over a series of sessions, engaged with the topic of traditional values and the question of what traditional values had to add to the understanding and practice of human rights (McCrudden 2014). The gist of the debate was whether human rights discourse is intrinsically universalist and individualist, or whether it can also be contextual and communitarian. The argumentative strategy advanced by proponents of the latter view was not primarily that contextual and communitarian human rights would be better as such, but that their exclusion from the discussion was the result of an unfair power hierarchy inside human rights institutions. Patriarch Kirill, at that time head of the External Relations Department of the Russian Orthodox Church, said at a meeting in Geneva:

The development of human rights institutions has been increasingly affected in a monopolistic way by a limited range of ideas concerning human nature, which are not shared by most people in the world. More often than not, international organizations involved in human rights tend to draw their conclusions from the opinions of a narrow circle of experts,

functionaries or noisy but well-organized minorities. (Russian Orthodox Church 2008)

This is a common position among traditionalists in matters of secular versus religious knowledge. It, too, represents a position that should be considered “reasonable” according to the taxonomy developed by Habermas, inasmuch as this position acknowledges and accepts the plurality of discourses, and in fact celebrates it. These traditionalist actors do not lament the fact that secular knowledge contradicts their faith, they merely claim (and this is a powerful argument) that secular knowledge cannot claim superiority over other forms of knowledge. It is a classic postmodern move, and one not anticipated by Habermas when he outlined this criterion.

### *Modern Law and Morality*

Step three in Habermas’s taxonomy of the modernization of religious consciousness is about reconciling religious doctrine “with the egalitarian individualism and universalism of modern law and morality,” which religious traditionalists often argue renders a society amoral and doomed. In this point they differ from liberal religious actors (who recognize the priority of human rights and accept that their religious viewpoint represents a minority position in a larger, pluralistic society) and they agree with fundamentalist religious actors. Traditionalists differ from fundamentalists, however, in their strategic engagement in the politics that they derive from this conviction. Traditionalists do not retreat from society, nor do they endorse violent means of reversal; they rely on the conservative religious and political establishment in their respective countries, co-opt political and civil society actors and forge transnational alliances, whereas fundamentalists generally remain at a distance from organized politics and clerical hierarchies.

As political actors, traditionalists bring their religious arguments into public debates. Often these arguments are presented in a non-religious language adapted to a secular legalistic human rights terminology, or use the language of natural law. In domestic politics, these actors use democratic means to advance their case by lobbying parliamentarians, organizing demonstrations or resorting to referenda.<sup>2</sup> They also take controversial cases to court (see Gedicks and Annic-

2. For the American case, see the classic: Hunter 1991; for Europe, see: Engeli, Green-Pedersen and Larsen 2012.

chino 2014). Finally, traditionalists take their struggle beyond the nation state (Bob 2012). They try to influence international institutions in their favor, in order to weaken the domestic impact of the international human rights regime.<sup>3</sup>

The standard solution in political liberalism is to grant legal exemptions for situations in which religious reasons cannot be brought to overlap with general norms. There are many examples of exemptions on grounds of freedom of conscience, including conscientious objection to military service or to conducting abortions (in the case of medical personnel). At first glance, exemptions appear to be a valid solution in cases of religious (or non-religious) non-compliance. The idea is that in the absence of consensus on a certain law or norm, the legislator can create “pockets” of a *modus vivendi* regime, where non-compliant individuals are exempted from the general law. However, exemptions do not always work, for two reasons.

The first reason is that traditionalists themselves often claim more than merely exemptions; they want to have a say in shaping the political system as such. To again quote Igumen Philip (Ryabykh):

Today religions try to preserve their freedom not only in an exclusive way, by claiming that some norms may not apply to religious communities, but they also insist on their right to contribute to the shaping of general norms that apply to the whole of society.” (Ryabykh 2013, 23)

The second reason is that the non-religious public is less and less willing to accept exemptions as valid solutions. One good case in point is the case of *Ladele v. Islington* from the United Kingdom. This case involved a marriage registrar who refused to register same-sex partnerships for religious reasons. The claimant lost the case, with the court sustaining the idea that granting the registrar the right to an exemption on religious grounds would violate the commitment to equality assumed by the state (and consequently by its officials) (Smet 2015).

In cases where religious reasons cannot be made to match general norms, or general norms in the making, as in the case of Italy’s new law on civil unions, there is no easy solution, and perhaps no solution at all. A conflict remains, a hiatus in the liberal democratic system and a gap in the theory of political liberalism. It is the aim of the

3. For the case of Russian Orthodox actors, see: Stoeckl forthcoming; Rimestad 2015; Anicchino 2011.

Postsecular Conflicts project to develop a theory of political liberalism that is closer to reality on this point, emphasizing the idea of conflict where political liberalism imagines that there should be consensus (see Walshe and De Wijze 2015; Ferrara 2014).

### **The Russian Orthodox Church as Moral Norm Entrepreneur**

In the last section I gave examples that demonstrate that Russian actors play a role in contemporary traditionalist politics. In fact, I believe that the goal of this project — a revised understanding of the political sociology of traditionalist religious actors — has to examine the role of transnational morality politics, irrespective of national contexts. As you will have already gathered, I do not consider Russian traditionalists a unique or special case. I think they belong to a large global political phenomenon, from which they draw inspiration and to which they contribute. However, the extent of their cooperation with traditionalist actors inside and outside Russia has not yet been studied. I propose to do just that in this project, because I believe that a revised political sociology of traditionalist religious actors cannot be complete without taking Russian actors into due account.

The project therefore aims to study the Russian Orthodox Church and Russian religious actors as moral norm entrepreneurs. “Norm entrepreneurship” or “norm protagonism” are terms used in the study of international relations to describe the normative agency of actors in transnational governance regimes (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, 286). Scholars studying norm entrepreneurs distinguish between the actual norm promoters (an individual, a group) and the organizational platforms through which norm promoters act (for example a non-governmental organization or an international political body like the European Union or the United Nations). They also point out that “norm entrepreneurs and the organizations they inhabit usually need to secure the support of state actors to endorse their norms and make norm socialization a part of their agenda” (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, 900). Norm entrepreneurship thus comprises three levels: (1) norm protagonists, (2) organizational platforms, and (3) supportive state actors.

Most studies about norm entrepreneurship focus on progressive actors that promote norms like equality, freedom, education or welfare through international organizations like the European Union or the United Nations, or through international non-governmental organi-

zations like the Red Cross (Keck and Sikkink 1998). In addition, researchers have also begun to focus on conservative, anti-liberal norm protagonists (Bob 2012; Katzenstein 2006). But the Russian Orthodox Church has only been considered very recently from the angle of international norm entrepreneurship (Curanović and Leustean 2015; Laruelle 2015). With this research project, I hope to make a contribution to this emerging research field.

I mention the theories and conceptual toolkit of norm entrepreneurship because it is a theory that helps us to distinguish levels of analysis, in particular the levels of the (1) norm protagonist, (2) organizational platform, and (3) supportive state actor. This distinction is crucial in the Russian case, where the levels are very often undifferentiated in the analysis. Assessments like “traditional values are a propaganda tool of the Putin administration” or “through traditional values the Russian state is building up soft power” may have some validity in the field of political analysis, but from a political sociological perspective they fall short of analytical rigor. The situation is, in fact, much more complex than these sorts of assessments suggest, and as a scholar I am interested in the separateness and the interplay of the three levels. I am, in particular, interested in the independent role of the Russian Orthodox Church as norm protagonist.

I have said above that I do not consider Russian traditionalists to be a unique or special case and that I look at them as part of a larger global political phenomenon, from which they draw inspiration and to which they contribute. There is one thing, however, that sets Russian actors apart from other traditionalist actors, at least in the present moment: this is the fact that the Russian government is endorsing a traditional values agenda. This has made the Russian position prominent in the global struggle for traditional values, because it has given it diplomatic and logistic weight.

### **Conclusion: A European Research Project**

The Postsecular Conflicts project is a research project in the social sciences. It will last from the present year, 2016, until 2021. It is based at the University of Innsbruck in Austria and is undertaken by a multinational team that includes researchers from Russia, Austria, Italy, the United States, and Brazil. I am the director of this project and together with my collaborators I am planning to conduct interviews with traditionalist actors in Russia and elsewhere. Our aim is to speak to as many actors in the field of morality politics as possible and to

learn more about their motivation, their engagement and their collaborations. The knowledge gathered through such interviews will become the basis for a more complete political sociology of religious actors that gives due recognition to “traditionalists” beyond the limited distinction between “liberals” and “fundamentalists.” It should also become the basis for a work in normative theory that moves toward a more realistic political liberalism that also takes into account the importance and inevitability of “conflict,” where political liberals until now have looked for “consensus.”

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