

This project addresses the changes taking place in contemporary historical thinking as a result of the globally observed return of religion and/or its new visibility in the public sphere. It defines, critically analyzes, and responds to research challenges and opportunities posed by what the contemporary humanities have deemed the so-called postsecular turn, that is, an intellectual reaction to the phenomenon of the return of religion. Postsecular reflection is a dynamic and developing interdisciplinary research field that explores issues associated with the crisis of secularization and various forms of the return of religion. The scholars who represent this perspective (including Giorgio Agamben, Agata Bielik-Robson, Karina Jarzyńska, Magdalena Lubańska, John Milbank, Charles Taylor, and Slavoj Žižek), on the one hand, look for answers to questions about the causes of these phenomena, while on the other, use them as a pretext for utilizing religious, spiritual, and theological images as inspiration for their own ideas.

The symbolic date that marks the emergence of the postsecular turn is September 11, 2001. Reacting to the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City, German philosopher Jürgen Habermas proposed the concept of a “postsecular society.” By this he meant the present state of modern societies with a largely secular identity, in which citizens representing different religious worldviews play a large part. Postsecular discourse has developed specifically in philosophy, sociology, literary studies, anthropology, and archaeology, but it is currently hardly developed in history. This project will introduce postsecular thought to historical theoretical thinking and help answer the following questions: what is the significance of the theory of secularization for historians today? What affect does the present return of religion have on making of history? What theories, approaches, and research tools are necessary to investigate this phenomenon?

An analysis of diverse theoretical and historical material will allow for the development of postsecular history as an independent perspective within the framework of historical reflection and for the construction of such new categories as the “postsecular event” and “the postsecular regime of historicity.” These concepts will be used to conduct comparative research on various aspects of the return of religion in the contemporary world and related transitions in historical thought. The former refers to the events that inaugurate the postsecular condition in a given time-space context while the latter speaks to the transformations of historical consciousness in these conditions. I argue that in contemporary historical discourse, there are cryptotheological mechanisms that shape historical thought and writing, i.e. they derive from originally theological ideas. Although history, in the course of its development, has undergone secularization, this process remains incomplete and unfinished. The project aims to assess the state of the field, to determine the state of historical thought in relation to the postsecular condition, and to demonstrate the opportunities this approach creates for history as an academic discipline.

This research is, above all, comparative in nature. It relies on a broad analysis of archival documents, interviews, and historical writing, specifically the work of Hayden White, Krzysztof Pomian, Dominick LaCapra, and Dipesh Chakrabarty. In doing so, I am looking for examples of the effects of prophetic thinking on historical narratives, the relationships between secular and sacred history, mythological connotations of chosen theoretical concepts or the agency of supernatural beings.

My research also focuses on discourses related to such phenomena associated with the return of religion such as the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, the repercussions of the collapse of the Soviet Union (specifically the Buryat body cult of Lama Itgilov), and the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran. Recognizing these events’ effects on the conditions of the contemporary world, and humanities and social sciences, I formulate research categories that will allow historical theory to better conduct comparative research.

I am motivated to conduct this research mainly to fill the existing gap in studies that, since 2001, have concerned themselves with the effects of religious images on historical thinking. Another reason is the growing influence of religious ideas on contemporary society on a global scale (including Poland). Facing the crisis of the process and idea of secularization itself, historical thinking has the opportunity to test its social utility. Similarly, history can use this occasion to prove its autonomy in relation to other humanities and social sciences, especially when it comes to developing a theory that serves to capture a dynamic and everchanging reality.

The result of this project is the identification, analysis, and presentation of changes taking place in contemporary historical thinking as a result of the development of postsecular discourse. The concept of postsecular history, supported by new categories of research, can help include historical thinking in discussions taking place in the humanities about the influence of religion in academic matters, and the changing place of religion in the world. Additionally, the project proposes a reinterpretation of contemporary historical thinking in a novel postsecular perspective, offering innovation interpretations and new research categories for historical theory.