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**LAICISM: POLYSEMY OF THE TERM
AND ITS DETERMINING FUNCTIONS**

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Abstract

The conducted analysis evokes the polysemous character of the concept of laicism, which was influenced by modern political and philosophical ideas. Two positions have determined this: a diachronic one encompasses laicism as a process extended in time, and a synchronous one allows one to perceive the simultaneity of phenomena. Thus, the concept itself reveals its practical value, especially in the context of these challenges, which affect both the state crisis and the changing relationship between the State and the Church. This value is confirmed by an important place in the secular research that is based on the principles of sovereignty, equality and separation. Thus, laicism postulated and implemented in the democratic system and its reference to fundamental values should support, above all, the importance of arguments, mutual persuasion and decision-making procedures based on consensus.

Keywords: laicism, process vs. phenomenon of laicisation, religion, relations religion – politics, relations Church – state

Introduction

The multithreading of the relationship between the «religious» world and the «laic» world is an essential inspiration for the exploration of the concept of 'laicism'. At the etymological level, the term was born in the nineteenth century and derives from the word *laïc*. In the religious space, laicism indicates non-affiliation to the clergy. Someone who is not a cleric is known as a layman. This rather theologically narrow concept was also confirmed by the latest Church documents of the Catholic Church¹. With time, however, the concept evolved into *laïque* and indicates someone who is under the banner of laicism and free from the influence of confession, privileging its role as a member of a secular (civil) society. Etymologically, 'laicism' comes from the Latin *laicus*, which transposes Late Greek *laïkos*. This Greek adjective corresponds to the noun *laos* or *populos* (Cimbalo 2007, 269–270; Warhola, Bezci 2010).

¹ An example is the Decree on the apostolate of the laity *Apostolicam actuositatem* of the Second Vatican Council and the post-natal exhortation of John Paul II, *Christifideles laici*, about the vocation and mission of the laity in the Church and the world.

However, accuracy of scientific reflection requires, above all, the socio-political repercussions accompanying the practical implementation of secularity. Therefore, the analyses undertaken for this study rightly highlight the disputes over the contemporary reception of the principles of laicism. The disputes clearly illustrate the risk of abuse that the ideologised form of laicism may take. The reasons include both the vague nature of the concept itself and the ambiguity in the implementation of the principle. A particular form of systematisation may be the proposition of assigning specific functions to contemporary laicism. Thus, the concept itself reveals its practical value, especially in the context of these challenges, which affect both the state crisis and the changing relationship between the State and the Church (Zagrebelsky 2010)².

The research area covered above also indicates the purpose of this consideration: the analysis of the concept of 'laicism' with embedded ambiguity. The analysis undertaken considers both the diachronic position, which recognises laicism as a process extended in time, and the synchronous position, allowing one to perceive the simultaneity of the phenomena occurring in it. The first position was supported by the results of analyses carried out by specialists in the fields of political, philosophical, legal and sociological sciences. The second position refers to three selected issues that indicate the importance of the functions to be fulfilled within the concept of laicism.

The adopted two research hypotheses support the implementation of the described goal:

1. The current ambiguous understanding of laicism is the result of a historical process influenced mainly by modern political and philosophical ideas;
2. Laicism has a polysemous attribute expressing itself in the functions currently assigned to it.

In the course of the analysis, two methods have been found to fit their specific applications. First is the comparative method, which relates to selected proposals systematising the phenomenon of laicism. Secondly is the historical method, which allows one to capture laicism as a process, granting its generalised description.

The ambiguity of the concept of laicism

The highly complex semantics of laicism can be recognized in reference to numerous scientific disciplines: philosophy (Miligi, Perazzoli 2010, Macioce 2007, Seidl 2010.), theology (Casula 2011), law (Bin, Brunelli, Pugiotto, Veronesi 2004, Zagrebelsky 2014), political science (Gauchet 1999; Magris 2008) or sociology (Donati 2008).

Laicism, now and then, undergoes attempts of systematization. For instance, an excerpt of paradigms regarding both the science of law and the history of law can be mentioned:

- *laicism as an autonomy of law* (autonomy of the legal system in relation to the ethical and religious sphere);
- *laicism as a political autonomy* (limitation of abuses of ecclesiastical authority vs. secular power, from theocratic forms to religious ones marked by anomalous «interference»);

² These issues, combined with the issue of religious freedom, the State-Church relation or the relationship between politics and religion, indicate a number of studies also available in Polish (Haarscher 2004; Casanova 1994; Possenti 2001; Potz 2008; Marczevska-Rytke 2010; Burgoński, Gierycz 2014). Noteworthy has also issued magazines dealing with this subject, including "Politologia religii" and "Teologia Polityczna".

- *laicism as a limitation of politics* (limiting the interference of secular authorities with religious authority, from various forms of jurisdiction to the latest forms of «hostile laicism»);
- *laicism as a religious pluralism* (recognition and guarantee of religious freedom and religious pluralism);
- *protected laicism* (indifference and alienation of the public sphere towards the religious factor, making laicism strive for self-protection, turns into a militant ideology);
- *laicism as a political pluralism* (recognition and guarantee of individual freedom, as well as pluralism of cultures and traditions and, as a consequence, the rejection of the «ethical state» and every state's ideology).

Complementing the above theoretical indications is a reference to the formation of interpersonal relationships, which may affect the functionality of a specific community: *laicism as a method* that links non-believers and believers together and shapes conditions for coexistence between opposing values or ideas. The rejection of conflicting fundamentalisms and dogmatic limitations (Barbera 2007) should be considered crucial.

The variety mentioned above, considering historical changes, makes it impossible to speak about one laicism, or its uniform understanding and application to specific, culturally different conditions (Dalla Torre 2007, D'Uggento 2009). On this value, polyhedral laicism was indicated by the signatories of the *International Declaration on Laicism*, a document signed by two hundred and fifty intellectuals from thirty countries and presented to the Senate of the French Republic: "The process of laicisation takes place when the state is no longer legitimized by religion or a specific school of thought when all citizens can intentionally deliberate, with equal rights and dignity, and when they can exercise, based on their sovereignty, political power [...]. Therefore, the elements of laicism necessarily appear in every society that wants to harmonise social relations marked by interests and multiple moral or religious concepts [...]. Laicism is not the prerogative of any culture, no nation, no continent. It may exist in situations where the term has not been traditionally used" (Baubérot 2008, 7)³.

Jean Baubérot, a French sociologist and considered to be the author of the sociology of laicism, presented a thorough analysis of the heterogeneity of laicism. In *Les laïcités dans le monde* (2007), he distinguishes between three «thresholds» in the process of laicisation, referred to as "zigzag changes". He maintains that there is no *one* laicism, but *many* laicisms in the world, which are diversified depending on the historical processes that shape them or the philosophical foundations they act in. Besides, the laity corresponds to various types of social, cultural and political realities. The purpose of their assessment should be to refer to useful indicators (Baubérot 2007, 9).

Elements announcing the future laicism have already occurred in historical periods much older than western modernity⁴. In Europe, the acceptance of Christianity by Roman

³ *La Déclaration universelle sur la laïcité au XXI^e siècle*, "Le Monde", December 10, 2005. The original text of the Declaration www.lemonde.fr/idees/article_interactif/2005/12/09/declaration-universelle-sur-la-laicite-au-xxie-siecle_718769_3232.html (02/09/2018).

⁴ Examples of such examples include Buddhist anti-clericalism; whose universalism comes from the fact that the religious formula of managing *sacrum/profanum* relations is subject to constant contestation. Another is the three forms of relationship between religion and politics in the tradition of Sunni Islam: unity in the person of the caliph, relativisation of religious authority in the sultanate and the practice of *ijtihad*, which serves the contextualization and modernisation of *shari'a* (Baubérot 2008, 14; Ramadan

emperors in the fourth century and the development of the *christianitas* idea, which has collapsed over time, were breakthrough event. The then binding concept was the model of a modern state, which presupposes a theological-political configuration with absolutism and the theory of king's sovereignty in spiritual and earthly matters. For the moment of transition from prehistory to the history of laicism, one can recognise this as the «first globalisation» (Baubérot 2008, 17–18).

The philosophical and political dimensions usually determine the period of development of the idea of laicism. In the philosophical dimension the ideas and works of John Locke (the postulate of separation), Voltaire (religious intolerance) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (the secular religion) had a major influence in this respect. The political dimension was marked by the «enlightened despotism» and its representatives creating a form of authoritarian laicisation.

Characterizing *the first threshold of laicisation*, it should be emphasised that states ceased to provide «salvation» to their citizens, focused on their temporal interests and pointed to their incompetence in religious matters. The laicisation of sovereignty and the dissociation between religious affiliation and citizenship appeared. Three factors accompanied the laicization of sovereignty and the dissociation between religious affiliation and citizenship: institutional fragmentation, social legitimisation and recognition of religious pluralism (often limited) by politics (Baubérot 2008, 46–48).

The primary motive leading to *the second threshold* of laicisation was the idea of happiness, which, according to the assumptions of Enlightenment deism, is in the hands of the people. It was supported by the «second globalisation» and the accompanying events: independence struggles in Latin America, the development of the concept of secularisation and laicisation, the separation of churches and schools, and colonial expansion, especially of the Muslim world. Three characteristics marked the second globalisation: religion, mainly due to the autonomy of education, became a socially opulent institution; religious needs lost their objective value, becoming a «private matter», a personal choice; the practice of freedom of conscience based on the essential condition of dissociation between civil and religious affiliation (ibidem, 62–63).

The nineteenth century was the time when the foundations of the philosophical foundations of atheism and the development of sciences were formed. This favoured the process of *the third threshold*, making contemporary societies more secularised, though not necessarily laic. The progressing process of laicisation took form in three ways: deinstitutionalization regarding institutions that destabilized religious structures, becoming promoters of laic symbolism; the crisis of moral socialization described by the supreme principle of “self-realization”; a new pluralistic reality that creates beliefs «without belonging» and in a syncretic manner (ibidem, 102–104)⁵.

According to Baubérot (2007, 80–81), the observed processes led to geopolitical changes of laicism and was shaped by three determinants. First, decolonization allowed many

⁵ Although laicization has endured the medieval distinction between temporal authority and spiritual power, political power has not given up all religious dimensions altogether. For example, ideological monism, present in secular religions, became dominant in a totalitarian state and is defined as a *secular religion* or *political religion*. Both terms (models) were analysed in the works of many eminent thinkers, such as Ernst Kantorowicz, Hans Blumenberg, Raymond Aron, Jules Monnerot, Karl Polanyi, Eric Voegelin, Giovanni Gentile and Hannah Arendt (Gentile 2001, 25–67). In this context, the notion of “civil religion” emerges from Robert Bellah (Bellah, 1967, Adams, Schurb 2004).

countries to emerge from Western rule. Second, state communism representing the form of totalitarian laicisation did not allow for the expression of democratic laicism and is why it has been identified with official atheism. Third, laicism connected with the development of the nation-state and its liberation from any religious influence

With Baubérot's concept of zigzag changes, Pierpaolo Donati's proposition echoes the historical conditions of the polysemous character of the concept. The Italian sociologist and philosopher points to the three basic meanings of the term 'laicism', which, although used to this day, are rarely found in their «pure» definition. First, *laicism in the pre-modern* sense refers to the people (*laikòs*), that is, it characterises whoever is not a clergyman, is not privy, does not bear specific signs and acts on the basis of the distinction between the divine and the imperial. Second, *laicism in the modern sense* is the expression of thinking and acting based on the primacy of autonomous reason, approval for secularisation and recognition for the individual as such, which leads to neutrality towards any religion. Third, *laicism in the postmodern sense* is a secular (though not secularised) mentality that expresses the relationship between faith and reason without privileging either side. This third meaning distinguishes between faith and reason's spheres of influence and combines them where it is necessary and possible (Donati 2010, 70).

The strong connection between the idea of laicism and Christian culture is indicated by Giuseppe Dalla Torre (2007). He points out that the pursuit of a secular state, which was germinating and developing in the environments of ancient Christianity, encountered difficulties as to the ways of affirmation because of the tendency of a modern state to model itself on an ecclesiastical institution. Indicating the ambiguity of laicism, it refers to four paradigms.

The first of these paradigms is the *political and legal principle of sovereignty*, which is described as the "cornerstone of modern public and constitutional law" (Dalla Torre 2007, 22). Defined in a broader sense, this principle serves to show the ruling power of the final instance in a political society and, consequently, to distinguish it from other associations whose organisation does not define authority as supreme, unlimited and independent (Matteucci 2007, 909). Sovereignty as the primacy of political power over any other authority significantly impedes the implementation of authentic laicism, due to two different orders of reference: actual and structural.

The actual order concerns the sovereignty that confers powers to the state also on the historical, social and public expression of religion. As a consequence, the state ceases to be impartial as it relates to religion and it may take the form of confessionalisation, ignorance pushing the individual's conscience into the private field or explicitly combating the religious fact. Meanwhile, the foundation of the laic state is the principle of its incompetence in religious matter. The structural order leads to the inevitable identification of legality with legitimacy, the operation of the law according to justice. In this way, the objective boundary between the political authority and the natural law is violated. Sovereignty understood in such a way turns into absolute power: the state abandons secular positions and, from the recognition of objective, universal and unchanging truth, is willing to go to the "*pantheon* of religious and ethical denominations to embrace one of them" (Dalla Torre 2007). As a result, the choice of neutrality ceases to be neutral as it means taking one cultural position among others. In summary, it should be noted that the affirmation of laicism proceeds through the acquisition of the idea of sovereignty as the attribute of the state. It should be rather a non-absolute but relative idea that finds real limitations (Dalla Torre 2007, 22–25).

The second paradigm that shapes laicism is the attitude of '*favour religionis*'. This expression is not a description of the attitude toward religion as a measure of tolerance or intolerance towards others. On the contrary, it is the attitude of the state and its political system related to the recognition of religious values as something positive and deserving of legal protection which, going beyond the limits of ordinary legality, would be considered a category of the right to freedom (religious freedom). This perspective assumes two critical assumptions. The first is the concept of «relative sovereignty», which emphasises the incompetence of the state to indicate elections in religious matters, while demanding the abandonment of secularist positions. The second is recognition of the public character of religion itself without identification between politics and religion. By evoking the concept of laicism, religion manifests itself and is expressed publicly, thus contributing to the relationship between the state and civil society (ibidem, 25–30).

The third paradigm is *the relationship between religious freedom and equality*. The right to religious freedom, constituting a *conditio sine qua non* of the existence of laicism, should be understood in two meanings. The negative meaning is expressed through the guarantee of protection against external coercion in religious matters, regardless of its origin. The positive meaning is the ability to publicly express convictions of conscience, giving this testimony both through acts of worship, but also other attitudes important for religion.

This is accompanied by the principle of equality implemented in two dimensions: formal and material. In the formal dimension, it postulates respect for existing norms and non-abuse of discretionary power in the situation of religious diversity. This often leads to a dilemma around the position of various values in society⁶. In the material dimension on the other hand, equality implies the inclusion of public institutions in respecting the obligation to remove obstacles that prevent the exercise of freedoms and rights. Thanks to them, the state is involved in creating conditions that both the religious and non-believers to fully experience religious freedom in an individual, collective and institutional manner (ibidem, 30–34).

The last paradigm regarding laicism is *the principle of separation* between the state and the church, understood as «distinction». By differentiating the state's order and the individual order of individual religious denominations, this distinction remains the supreme postulate of laicism, guaranteed both by national constitutions and concordats signed with the Catholic Church. These provisions make for a socially «visible» religion: their absence, according to Dalla Torre, would result in limiting religion to the private sphere, putting it outside the public dimension and making it legally unrecognised. The question of the discussion remains about the nature of the public manifestation of religion, while at the same time caring about not interfering in the proper order of the state. Therefore, this distinction does not mean either confusion or mutual ignorance⁷. Relations between

⁶ Recalling the so-called the «common ethical minimum», which is often the result of mediation today, Dalla Torre recalls the importance of justice: “laicism of the law is expressed as the adherence towards the legislator, and therefore in compliance with the norm of ethics that truly binds the law: justice” (Dalla Torre 2007, 33).

⁷ It is worth emphasising that the postulated «distinction» is an important part of the current teaching of the Catholic Church: “The Church and the political community in their fields are autonomous and independent from each other. Both, under different titles, are devoted to the personal and social vocation of the same men. The more that both foster sounder cooperation between themselves with due consideration for the circumstances of time and place, the more effective will their service be exercised for the good of all” (The Second Vatican Council, 76).

the state and religious denominations, implemented under various legislative regulations, should strengthen the legal order appropriate to guarantee the identity of each present religion, eliminate possible obstacles and cooperation on this distinction (ibidem, 34–37).

Laicism functions

An expression of the polysemous character of laicism is the appearing in the public discourse tensions between faith and reason or between politics and religion. As noted by Sergio Belardinelli, “the distinction between religion and politics, pluralism and the freedom of liberal-democratic institutions, awareness (especially from non-believers) that all this has developed due to the large contribution of the Christian faith, and awareness (especially from believers) that in a pluralistic society it is necessary to be able to convey the truths of faith, avoiding pretensions that they become binding for all without the consent of even the majority of those concerned. These features are significant for the laic model that developed in the West” (Belardinelli 2009, 54–55).

The attempt to systematise the phenomenon of laicism is a form of meeting the just mentioned tensions. An example of the realisation of this postulate is the reference of laicism to contemporary challenges that affect both the state crisis and the changing relations between the State and the Church. For this study, three were considered representative: relativism, the public role of religion and truth.

The belief emphasising the open character of modern society remains marked by the diversity of positions taken concerning *relativism*. In the search for the necessary agreement, it is worth recalling the concept of laicism and its universal acceptance of two underlying assumptions. First of all, society is open because it is laic (secular), and secondly, the said openness should not be interpreted as indifferentism to everything. In this way, laicism reveals its real roots and allows it to emerge from its relativistic self-understanding.

In this context, there is a significant problem of legal and political reflection on the religious neutrality of the state and the accompanying risk of a «political religion» (Kepel 2004). This is related to attempts to exclude religious content from public discourse. The model thus created leads to the “sacralisation of the political system based on the irrevocable monopoly of power, on the ideological monism, imposed and unconditional subordination of the individual and the community to its code of commandments. This order aims to pervade every aspect of life, individual and collective” (Gentile 2001, XI-II-XIV). A different proposition could be a political culture whose identity emphasises the dialogical character. It remains open to what is «other» and thus creates a secular framework that has nothing to do with the sacralisation of the political system. It allows preserving the inviolability of human rights, including religious freedom and appreciates the importance of culture and institutions guaranteeing ideological pluralism, political competition, a non-ideological activity of power, and the ability to appeal it with peaceful and constitutional means (Belardinelli 2009, 57–61).

Another function of laicism is included concerning the *public role of religion*, where the state plays a key role. By creating political and legal guarantees of peaceful coexistence of citizens with different religious and religious affiliations, the state should be the first to pursue the principle of laicism. However, the postulated peaceful pluralism between reli-

gious denominations cannot be guaranteed in cases when the state would remain either confessional or set laicist positions, pushing all religious denominations into the private sphere (ibidem, 62)⁸. However, the choice of privatisation of all religions as a way to resolve potential tensions would be contrary to the principle of religious freedom as well as the secular state itself. Another of the proposals speaks of respecting the sovereignty of the constitutional state, which is accompanied by recognition for the public role of religion and its contribution to the development of the political community and civil society (Crepaldi 2010, 27–36; Manent 1998).

The last of the selected issues, taking place in the ongoing public discourse, is the dispute over the understanding of *the truth*, its transfer to the public space and ways of protection against ideologization. In this respect too, the concept of laicism can be helpful. As Jürgen Habermas (2005, 47) wrote, “a constitutional democratic state generally represents a form of government demanding, so to speak, sensitivity to the truth”. This implies not only the cognitive value of truth but also the awareness of the abuses that may accompany its discovery. Therefore, the «dispute over truth» in the democratic public space should be based on the principle formulated by Gian Enrico Rusconi (2000, 7): “all citizens, believers and non-believers, exchange their arguments and start decision-making procedures on the basis of an agreement without asking themselves authoritatively about reasons for your truths of faith or your beliefs in general. What counts is mutual persuasion and faithful observance of procedures”.

Summary

The analysis undertaken confirms the direct impact of historical changes on the process of laicism, the scope of its impact and the sustainability of the transposition brought. Moreover, remaining as thoroughly contemporary phenomenon, laicism is realised through a series of functions essential in the context of disputes over the issue of relativism, the public place of religion or the understanding of the truth. The hypotheses put forward in the introduction, although confirmed in the course of the research, do not exhaust the complexity of the phenomenon in question, nor the scale of the on-going process.

Thus, laicism postulated and implemented in the democratic system, its reference to fundamental values, both secular and religious, should support, above all, the importance of arguments, mutual persuasion and decision-making procedures based on consensus. However, in order to be able to consider all such diverse elements of democratic order, an ethos is needed that will be the right inspiration to follow them. Besides, considering the difference between the accuracy of arguments and the procedures by which they become socially binding for everyone, the ethos protects the rights of minorities in a given community. It also contributes to the growth of virtues and respect for civil liberties. Thus, to paraphrase the well-known Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde *dictum*, one can state that the above references are necessary conditions for the existence of a laic, liberal and democratic state which the state itself cannot guarantee⁹. Thus, the German lawyer and philosopher

⁸ A breakthrough in this matter is the era of the Enlightenment, which in the matter of the distinction of the religious sphere from the political sphere has created two models: Francophone (*laïcité*) and Anglo-Saxon (*religious freedom*) (Dudała 2017, 285–312, Rémond 1999).

⁹ This formula, used for the first time in 1967 (in the essay *Die Entstehung des Staates als Vorgang der Säkularisation*, published in the volume *Säkularisation und Utopie*.) Ebracher Studien. Ernst Forsthoff

points to the axiological foundations of a democratic system whose operating principle is healthy laicism. Moreover, although this foundation is often criticised as part of the current public debate, one should bear in mind the risk of a modern democratic model moving from being «true» to being «accepted».

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