

Article

# Nonviolence and Religion: Creating a Post-Secular Narrative with Aldo Capitini

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Received: 11 February 2018; Accepted: 14 March 2018; Published: 20 March 2018

**Abstract:** This article argues that nonviolence is a valid framework for religions to build up a post-secular narrative. Drawing from the approach of Aldo Capitini, I claim that religions can choose nonviolence as a religious path to integrate the different narratives of secularism via the concepts and practices of liberation and openness. In particular, nonviolence adds self-rule to an immanent framework; it offers resilience to the society; and it adds “the heroism of peace” to the political sphere. The result is the construction via *facti* of an innovative post-secular narrative.

**Keywords:** nonviolence; post-secular; religion; secularism; praxis; Catholicism

## 1. Introduction

Religion has returned from exile (Hatzopoulos and Petit 2003). This return is not only made of “the missionary expansion; a fundamentalist radicalization; and the political instrumentalization of the potential for violence innate in many of the world religions” (Habermas 2008). Indeed, there is a slow but visible process of encounter, exchange, and dialogue between them and the rest of society. At stake there is the construction of a pacific post-secular society, in which religions coexist and play a role.

There is, however, a heated debate on what the actual issues of secularism are and how to solve them (Rorty and Vattimo 2005; Žižek 2003; Habermas 2008; Taylor 2007; Dillon 2012; Hurd 2012; Mavelli and Petit 2012). For some the problem involves isolating violent religious groups and promoting peaceful institutions; for others the problem is deeper and concerns the epistemic divisions between religious and secular reason, which must be overcome via a process of translation into secular terms. Nevertheless, the term post-secularism has great potential when it is neither simply the end of a period of irreligion, “a loathed and despised aspect of modernity”, nor the necessity to tolerate religious people “provided their conduct and utterances submit to the dominant language game” (Dallmayr 2013, p. 138). Post-secularity is a term designating a chance for all people, whether they are religious or not. This chance does not exist at the institutional or communication levels. At the practical level there is a chance to make a move via *facti* beyond the violence and limits of secularism toward “justice and social reform” (Dallmayr 2013, p. 149).

To represent the engine of a post-secular society, religions must overcome the dominant narratives of secularism, which still define the role of religion in society. The definition of secularism is “highly contested” (Taylor 2009); it refers to a “whole range of modern worldviews and ideologies concerning ‘religion’” (Casanova 2011, p. 67), consciously held or not, which shape and limit the role of religion in society. Religions have to face the narratives of secularism on at least three different levels: political, social and personal (Ferrara 2009). On the political level, secularism means the independence of the state from religion. Firstly, this means that “the exercise of legitimate state power—what we might call the coercive dimension of law—takes place in secular terms”. Secondly, it means that “all citizens can freely exercise their religious freedom and worship one God, another God, or no God at all”. Finally, political secularism entails a neat separation between state and churches (Ferrara 2009, p. 78). At this level, many scholars claim that a post-secular society requires

both equal access to public space—and thus a common secular language, especially in institutions—and the right standard of what is tolerable or not, as religions cannot go against the law or use the law to engage in coercion.

On a social level, the “filter” that is required in the institutional realm is removed: religious groups can participate without using a common secular language. Despite this, secularism claims that religious communities became specialized sub-groups affecting fewer social actions, law, politics, and education. In addition, religious rituals became less important, while more prestige is given to secular events; religious boundaries are becoming marginalized in the process of building up one’s social network; religious categories shape “people’s thoughts, commitments and loyalties less and less; religiously motivated actions retreat into special areas that are less and less important to social life (Ferrara 2009, pp. 78–79). A post-secular society would acknowledge the importance and legitimacy of any contribution in religious terms much more than now (without translating such a contribution into secular language). Yet, the key problem for post-secularism is to find the methods and limits of religions in pursuing their agenda.

Finally, on a personal level, religions must deal with a change in the experience of believing. Indeed, secularism is “a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed unproblematic to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace” (Ferrara 2009, p. 80). In other words, the experience of believing has been transformed from being something unquestioned and natural, to becoming one of the many choices of a pluralist society. Moreover, the faith of the believer is now experienced from within an “immanent frame”, which is “a whole cultural horizon that identifies the good life with human flourishing, accepts no final goals beyond human flourishing and not allegiance or obligation to anything beyond this flourishing” (Ferrara 2009, p. 81). In short, the issue here is how religions can link the immanent framework with transcendence in a post-secular society.

This article claims that nonviolence offers a new path, a narrative able to overcome the narratives of secularism, creating *via facti* a post-secular society. How? I will start from a precise conception of nonviolence, that of the Italian philosopher Aldo Capitini. He conceived of nonviolence as much more than the simple idea of renouncing the will to kill or damage. For the Italian philosopher, nonviolence is a praxis of openness and liberation, which shapes and changes personal, social, and political reality.

Finally, I will show how Capitini’s approach works as a framework to help religion walk on a different path. This approach represents the ideal conceptual framework adding self-rule at the personal level; adding resilience (through prophets, a horizontal organization and a liberating education) to society; and adding “the heroism of peace” to political secularism. This creates an innovative narrative, which religions can choose when building up a post-secular society.

## 2. Aldo Capitini: Nonviolence as Praxis of Liberation and Openness

To deal with the narratives of secularism we should go beyond the beliefs that nonviolence is simply a set of techniques where action falls short of violence, or a principle proscribing any kind of violence. Here I propose to look at the conception of one of the key, but still understudied, European philosophers of nonviolence, Aldo Capitini<sup>1</sup>. To be clear, this article is not an intellectual history of Capitini. I want to use some of his ideas to contribute to the debate on religion (in particular Catholicism) and nonviolence. Capitini considered St. Francis and Jesus models of nonviolence. However, he also strongly criticized Catholicism from the perspective of nonviolence, offering a detailed analysis of what a nonviolent religion, called open religion, would look like.

What does nonviolence mean for Capitini? The philosopher did not reduce nonviolence to a mere set of techniques or a principle. Capitini interpreted nonviolence as a tension, a praxis, a process of both liberation from the chains of reality, i.e., necessity and cruelty; and “openness to the existent” (Capitini 1962a, p. 21). In this sense, Capitini followed the Gandhian tradition, but his philosophy

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<sup>1</sup> Aldo Capitini (1899–1968) was a philosopher, educator, and activist. Up to now, there are only few publications in English on the Italian scholar: (Drago 2014; Altieri 2008; Capitini 2000).

goes much beyond the definition of praxis as “direct political action against forms of oppression and discrimination” (Steger 2006, p. 345).

The liberation described by Capitini starts with the acknowledgment of human limits and the interconnectedness of life. Human beings share a condition of fragility as they are all connected by the fact that they face tremendous limits, such as the possibility of pain, mistakes, and death.

This precarious situation between human finitude and human interconnectedness creates space for a ground-breaking choice. The opportunity lies at the level of action, in the continuous choice between practical actions of closure or openness, liberation or passivity, of deepening the link with others or not<sup>2</sup>. Capitini argued that when the personal reaction against human limits is passivity and closure, a person renounces the opportunity provided by her link with others, and falls into solitude, into a state of war against others that is subject to historical and biological necessity.

Yet, human beings are neither forced to act according to mere power relations, nor obliged to be led by human limits (Capitini 2011, p. 7). When a person recognizes the link with others, she can decide to deepen this link through actions of liberation and openness. She can choose to disclose a different reality, which transcends the material. In this way, a person can become an “open center”. The idea of a person as “center” can be described as a state where people arise from a condition of passive acceptance of the status quo; they act authentically, out of persuasion, always deepening the link with others in the production of values (Capitini 1950, p. 56). Anyone has the capacity of working every day toward a liberation from human limits and an openness to others, making a profound transformation of reality.

### 3. Open Religion: Nonviolence, Faith, Compresence

This interpretation of nonviolence is in line with Dallmayr’s approach, in which he claims that the way to build up a post-secular society is *via facti*, i.e. through action, and not through institutions (Hurd 2012) or communication (Habermas 2008). Nonviolence is a “choice of a way of thinking and acting which is not oppression or destruction of any living being, especially human beings” (Capitini 1962b, p. 29). This choice is at the basis of a new narrative described at length by Capitini, which represents a key opportunity and a serious challenge to religions. Indeed, religion is not the same as religions for Capitini. Religion cannot be reduced to “materially existing institutions organized for the pursuit of ‘religion’” (Hatzopoulos and Petit 2003, p. 86): it is not a “menu of ideas and principles” (Hatzopoulos and Petit 2003, p. 27). In other words, religion cannot be considered a “set of privately held doctrines or beliefs” (Hatzopoulos and Petit 2003, p. 25), or a choice of allegiance and obligation. The pre-modern definition of religion as a community of believers is insufficient as well. Religion is, from a nonviolence point of view, “a set of thought and action, of principles and acts (which can increase and change) to prepare and form a religious openness in us” (Capitini 2011, p. 7).

Action requires faith. However, with this term Capitini did not mean blind and passive obedience. Faith is not a set of belief structures that are attached to some objects. It also differs from virtues as defined in past societies (Asad 2003). Faith is interpreted as persuasion. However, what kind of persuasion? For Capitini, the term does not mean simple obedience or the act of behaving as if things exist in a certain way. Persuasion means being persuaded, instead of passively living in society as it appears; persuasion refers to a sort of “internal participation” (Capitini 2011, p. 57). The realization of values in society entail a persuaded action of love, of care toward the other. Thus, faith is persuasion of the fact that an insufficient reality of divisions, pain, mistakes, and death can and should be overcome *via facti*. This means that religion is the exploitation of the opportunity provided by human limits and the interrelatedness of life to change reality. The opportunity is to overcome divisions and closures, to create an altogether new reality.

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<sup>2</sup> This is a point in which Capitini’s approach differs slightly from King’s. Indeed, the individual does not live a “struggle of the Spirit” between “contingencies of their subjective character and given situation” and a “great idea” (see Vernon 2016). For Capitini, human finitude is overcome in the action of liberation and openness to others, in acts of cooperation that face human limits.

From this perspective, religion emerges as a unity of thought and action that is centered on faith. It is true that everyone shares the same human limitations; some are even hit harder by life, physically or psychologically. Nevertheless, a nonviolent or open religion shows that everyone can share a key opportunity that is present in any action: transcending human limits by participating in the construction of values. The cruelty of material life can be overcome by an act of love and openness, creating here and now a new reality that transcends nature and materialism.

This approach embeds a different “method” of action. The Italian philosopher was very clear in stressing the fact that nonviolence cannot work in a traditional way. The praxis of liberation and openness cannot fall into dialectics. In an article published in 1959, Capitini rejects Hegelian dialectics, due to its presumption of including everything. For instance, in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel claims that dialectics tend to absorb the negative to overcome it, in an endless progression that leads to a point where reason is reconciled with itself. The fact that progression is the result of a struggle (that everything is licit for human progress) triggered Capitini’s many doubts, because this may be valid in nature, where human beings are events, and where the struggle is led by arrogance and vitality. Unfortunately, Hegel’s work does not provide a way of superseding conflict other than through the annihilation of others; instead, conflict becomes the way of progress (Capitini 1959). Capitini also claimed that the way out of this does not involve the “method of the empire” (Capitini 1966), which expresses itself in burning books, or forcing others to do something<sup>3</sup>. Instead, the action of liberation proposed by nonviolence is an “adjunction” (Drago 2014) to the rest of human actions. These actions are pure, authentic, and without condition; they do not hinder the receiving being and they do not seek anything from others. This action is called “adjunction” because a nonviolent action does not aim at demolishing existent institutions or groups. On the contrary, it integrates them with a force from below, resulting in open actions that aim at offering something more to the state of affairs<sup>4</sup>.

This new reality is a “circle” of living beings producing—or to put it differently, adding—values, which touches on a religious level when it achieves the maximum of openness and liberation. This means the inclusion of every newborn, as they actively introduce new opportunities to act with values, even if they cannot speak or move. At the same time, the “circle” is not restricted by the death of someone; the other’s material presence is not necessary for him to be here in an act of love or in the production of values. Someone’s moral example, or the spiritual strength someone exhibited in the past, makes her present here and now, even if the body is dead. In performing an act of value, past and future generations are “alive” and participating. In this way, a different reality is produced, which cannot be described simply in material terms. It is a reality that makes sense only in practice, in everyday human relations. In any action, the person can intimately participate with everyone in the production of values, even with those who are normally excluded due to being weak or dead.

Capitini called this new reality compresence. The concept of compresence is described as “the connection constructed between all men, both living and dead, at the moment when they present themselves as moral subjects, in contrast to the given reality, and acting as members of an ideal community” (Capitini 2000, p. 105). It is sometimes equated to the idea of God and is extremely

<sup>3</sup> The influence of Hegel in European philosophy has been extremely important. Capitini is one example of Italian reactions to the German philosopher, as well as to Gentile’s neo-Hegelian idealism and Croce’s historicism. For this reason, the striking similarity with some of the key critics of Hegel, such as Kierkegaard, should be acknowledged. Capitini and the Danish philosopher heavily criticized the abstract world vision offered by Hegel. They put the importance of human existence at the center of their writings, against abstract reason, with the aim of finding a way to free human beings from a condition of suffering. However, Capitini only learned about Kierkegaard later in life, through the writings of the Christian Existentialist Nikolaj Berdjaev (and his interest in Boine and Ibsen). Thus, it may certainly be claimed that they share very similar views (Capitini even defined himself as a “Kantian-Kierkegaardian”), but we should stress that there is no direct influence of Kierkegaard on Capitini (see: Foppa Pedretti 2005).

<sup>4</sup> The method of adjunction represents a step forward when compared to Hegel’s dialectics. As Vernun correctly pointed out with regards to King’s admiration for Hegel, dialectics leads to thinking that to “actualize a universal principle” overrides “the established boundaries of national customs and morals”. King was aware of the problem: aspects of Hegel’s thought tended to swallow up the many in the one (see Vernon 2016).

similar to the Gandhian idea of Unity–Love. God is interpreted in Capitini’s terms as “one-all”. It is not an object or some perfect entity outside the world that moves the *primum mobile*; it is the totality of subjects that produce values (Bobbio 2011). Anyone can participate through any act of love; values become a community’s production. In short, compresence is both a recognition of, and the work toward, the unity of everyone perceived as carriers and producers of values.

How does this religious approach help religions deal with the three meanings of secularism? This will be the focus of the following sections.

#### 4. Adding Self-Rule to Human Flourishing

The new framework provided by nonviolence is a valid way of building up a post-secular path on a personal level. An open religion will not aim to put an end to “human flourishing”, imposing some transcendental tale about the other world that tells people to sacrifice their lives. On the contrary, it is the choice to qualitatively improve their lives, to bring transcendence within an immanent framework—overcoming the distinction found by Taylor—by integrating this myth with further opportunities for liberation and openness. In other words, nonviolence is the opportunity to choose God via facti, through embracing persuaded actions of freedom from the chains of reality and openness that link people to others. This path leads to the integration of self-rule to the secular framework.

The new opportunity provided by nonviolence is apparent when “human flourishing” clashes against human fragility (pain, mistakes, and even death). The religious sphere can intervene at this point, showing that life cannot only be reduced to despair and power-relations; that there is a practical opportunity, based on the perception of a profound connection with others.

Nonviolence adds self-restraint and personal responsibility, what Mantena calls “self-limiting” or “selfless” actions (Mantena 2012), which limit aggressive tendencies and which go beyond the necessity of acting like a “bag of sensation”, to use Capitini’s expression. These moments do not exemplify occasions for imposing a “consistent ethics” of nonviolence on others. They are an occasion for each person to fully realize the possibility of reconnecting with his or her interiority, as well as with others. This is an occasion to continue and strengthen human relations, creating another reality in which each human being learns to rule himself within the infinite interdependence that exists between everyone. This new reality is practical, and everyone (whether dead, alive, or yet to be born) can take part in it (Capitini 1999, p. 175).

The dilemma is therefore not about whether to convert and choose who is entitled to join the group made up of those who are good. The issue, instead, lies in enhancing and spreading self-restraint and personal responsibility (meaning both acting under personal persuasion and being morally accountable to the rest of the society and beyond), by focusing on new opportunities for everyone to act in a value-based way. In acting to produce values, people feel that they are not alone; they achieve self-rule doing something with the rest of humanity. They participate in something bigger, enhancing a new reality, with an enormous difference in quality compared to the past.

The choice of enhancing self-rule through persuaded actions constitutes an important change of focus for religious institutions. It entails discarding the past emphasis on dogmas, along with the obsession in predicting how things will turn out. This is not what religion can offer to human flourishing. Instead, religion provides people with the opportunity to enhance self-restraint and personal responsibility to fully develop their self-rule. This does not depend on the beliefs and convictions of the receiver. This adjunction manifests itself in free actions that depend on the situation. Any action, however, shows that humanity cannot give way to passivity and brutality.

An objection may emerge at this point. How can human flourishing coexist with religious commands? How can an open religion make sense of the many commands, and rules embedded in it, in such a way that it does not clash with human flourishing? To answer this question, it is worth examining the way in which Capitini looks at one of the key religious principles of Christianity, namely the command “thou shalt not kill” (Capitini 1962b, pp. 7–14). Traditionally, this command is part of an authoritarian approach to religion; it has been imposed on the population by an authority, either a delegate or a book. These authorities have a power over concessions and limits, the right and wrong implementation; they could even provide certain individuals or events with privileges or

exceptions. For instance, the authority could decide that abortion should be forbidden but that war was allowed.

The idea of nonviolence proposed by Capitini turns this approach upside down. The philosopher suggests looking at the words “thou shalt not kill” from a personal point of view and through the concept of compresence. The command ceases to be an authoritative directive that rules an entire life; it becomes a non-binding and interesting occasion for reflection on past and future experiences, an opportunity for practices of liberation and openness. This means that it neither supports aggression and violence, nor that it backs cowardice. It means that a person does not kill because she is persuaded that the choice of not killing is the best in a given moment. It also entails remembering that anyone owes his historical life to people fighting and killing for a country’s independence and freedom, and that in extreme cases, killing may be sadly necessary. The point is to add caution to the decision of killing and to understand that there may be other solutions (Capitini 1998, p. 102), including self-sacrifice. Thus, the persuasion of the words “thou shalt not kill” is the starting point for new personal thoughts and actions in the future (Capitini 1998, p. 8), allowing for a different inclusive reality made of different ideas and models. This is full human flourishing and self-rule.

This approach does not lead to any limitation of individual freedom and reason. The contrary is true. The absence of any authoritarian institution describing the correct way to interpret any command is a precious occasion for the person, allowing him to boost both reason and freedom. Indeed, reason is paramount for the continuous reinterpretation of sacred words and principles. At the same time, the command has become an opportunity to experiment new and creative ways of actualizing a principle while considering the circumstances. It is no longer a problem of dogmas, authorities, institutions, allegiance, or obligation. The issue is not even the fact that we are talking about God’s words. The issue is practical: an open religion offers inclusive and creative bottom-up actualizations of values and principles as a way of integrating human flourishing.

This alternative path offers self-rule to human flourishing. Nonviolence is the religion’s choice for the full realization of humanity; it is a persuasion of freedom from the chains of reality and openness that link everybody.

## 5. Adding Resilience to Society

Turning to the social level, it should be clear by now that an open and nonviolent religion can neither survive nor make sense at the margins, where it would retreat into unimportant areas of social life and dogmas. The exact opposite is true: a nonviolent religion adds resilience to every sector and group of society through actions of liberation and openness. Indeed, Capitini makes it clear that only through practical commitments is it possible to understand what God is (Capitini 1998, p. 121). In other words, religion without social work is not religion. Instead, it becomes another form of superstition (Degli Oddi 2012, p. 133), a form of closure to society.

This means that the problem resides not in finding the limits of religious action, but in building up first a new kind of religious citizenship. A nonviolent religious person will not look at obeying an authority, at blindly executing an order or a ritual, or at hurting or even killing “infidels”. She will look at new ways of living the unity-love, of developing human relations both qualitatively and quantitatively. Thus, having faith is equal to becoming a “prophet”, in Capitini’s terms. A prophet is not a new authority teaching people a doctrine; he reveals a different perspective on those who suffer; criticizing a violent reality, a prophet exemplifies an alternative path. This interpretation of the prophet can be considered in line with the post-Vatican II importance of the prophetic mission “that calls for individuals to speak out against worldly injustice no matter what the consequences” (Stepan 2000, p. 53). However, the prophet is not sectarian; the prophet provides everyone with new opportunities for liberation, and she does not predict the future (Capitini 2010, p. 55). This is very different from the priest who belongs to an institution and a tradition, who works with the authorities, objectively administering doctrines, formulas, and rituals (Capitini 1966, p. 16). Prophets dedicate themselves entirely to the education of consciences. They criticize reality, proposing a different path that can be pursued with rationality and faith. When possible, they will seek a new synthesis, but the aim is not to win the fight. Therefore, the prophet will never crave to become a

legislator; his aim is to extend liberation and openness to everyone, empowering each person to express his or her own convictions in a way that is better and freer.

Consequently, it is not bizarre for Capitini to consider the prophets of a nonviolent religion the most well-known “pure religious spirits”, including Christ, Buddha, St Francis, and Gandhi. They represented the authentic religious spirit against the traditional institutionalism, along with a clear request for religious reform (Capitini 2003, p. 33).

The consequences of the centrality of the prophet (and not the priest) are far-reaching. Indeed, at the social level, this approach does not lead to any cultural war against others: the prophet will not teach and impose epistemic claims that are different to those of others. He will work to foster everyone’s liberation and enhance personal openness toward others. For a start, openness means the recognition of fallibility and humility. The nonviolent individual tries to realize nonviolence every day in the best possible way. In particular, religion would represent an important cultural power, which does not aim at imposing radicalizing cultural wars. On the contrary, religion is able, in Capitini’s view, to add occasions of liberation and inclusion to society. Thus, the prophet of an open religion acting in society will be conscious of her fallibility, but will be determined to represent a change (Capitini 2003, p. 39).

The work of the prophet will have consequences for the boundaries that religions impose. The choice of nonviolence implies considering any social relationship not in terms of authority, power, and repression, but in a more federative, horizontal, and open way (Capitini 2003, p. 37). This implies that sometimes change requires protests against our own organizations. For instance, Capitini left Catholicism in 1929, when the institution decided to make an agreement with fascism instead of fighting it. This was also one of the reasons for his interest in Gandhi, who was trying to free his country from the yoke of colonialism.

Later in life, the clash with religious institutions took many different forms. For instance, the harsh critique of religion led him to defend an Italian couple, Bellando of Prato, who sued the Bishop of their city for having accused them of being concubines: they were baptized but decided to hold only a civil wedding, not a religious one. This led Capitini to write a letter to the Bishop of Perugia, along with dozens of other people, asking to be removed from the baptism register, which was the symbol of being subject to a non-recognized authority. Later, he published *Battezzati non Credenti*, in which he provided an account of what happened, including the letter to the Bishop of Perugia, analyzing baptism and the concept of the mystical body.

Nowadays, the struggle is to spread nonviolent techniques of action to empower each person and community to say NO. This has been the role of Catholic communities in the Philippines, leading to the People Power Revolution, and in many countries of South America. Moreover, the religious struggle is to empower every person to decide autonomously and to respect different walks of life, against some religious groups’ continuous attempts to impose correct behaviors on society as a whole—for instance with issues such as abortion, euthanasia, freedom of scientific research and individual freedoms.

Nevertheless, protest is not always enough, and sometimes it is not the best way forward. For instance, Capitini argued that St. Francis is an example that proves that nonviolence does not always seek confrontation. Yet, what is crucial is to propose an alternative path, a constructive program. The Franciscan reform was the attempt to empower those at the bottom of society: the humble, the excluded, the despised, and the sub-human. This work would result in a drastic change to the hierarchical system.

What was this alternative path for Capitini? He for instance organized many different conferences in Italy to discuss the idea of a different kind of religion. Out of these, the Movimento di Religione (Movement of Religion) was founded with the excommunicated ex-priest Ferdinando Tartaglia<sup>5</sup>. The aim was to gather people with different religious backgrounds to talk about the

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<sup>5</sup> Ferdinando Tartaglia (1916–1987), was an Italian priest, theologian, and writer. Due to his very progressive ideas about religion, he was prohibited from celebrating mass. Later he was excommunicated for having commemorated the excommunicated Ernesto Bonaiuti.

opportunity to overcome religious practices, specifically, those that are overly attached to revelation, dogmas, and institutions, in favor of a religion able to foster freedom and openness. The religious reform included helping ex-priests who the Italian constitution forbade from having public jobs putting them in contact with citizens, conscientious objectors, such as Pietro Pinna (who met Capitini in one of the meeting of the Movimento di Religione, which led to his decision to become a conscientious objector), pacifists, and opponents of war. In 1950, Capitini took part in the World Congress of Religions for Peace Foundation in London, where he proposed to build a Religious and Nonviolent International. In 1951, to keep the dialogue around religious reforms alive, Capitini started to write *Letters of Religion*, which were periodical letters addressing many different religious topics.

Beside this work, Capitini focused on creating a different kind of education to create prophets and develop the power of all. Capitini fostered the encounter between nonviolence, religion, and education (Capitini 1967). Religion became an “education to openness”, going beyond the actual insufficient reality, and the prophet (who promotes personal responsibility, values, and liberation) becomes the teacher par excellence. For Capitini, this meant an endless amount of work aiming to introduce nonviolence into schools and universities. He developed the concept of “open education”, meaning a proactive and anti-authoritarian approach in which liberation from exclusion, marginality and violence are central. This approach led Capitini to look at other nonviolent pedagogues, such as Maria Montessori and her research on the liberation of children. Moreover, it meant looking at examples, such as the activity of Don Lorenzo Milani<sup>6</sup> in Barbiana, who impressed Capitini with his attentiveness to the weak. The school that the Catholic priest ran, along with the writings he published, were an important example of an open and inclusive idea of education.

Capitini even tried to establish a new bottom-up public space to spread different values and practices. It led to the establishment of the Centre for Religious Orientation (COR) in 1952. This project was founded with Emma Thomas, an 80-year-old Quaker. They organized weekly meetings open to everyone, independently from religion or faith, with the aim of fostering knowledge of the many religions in the world, as well as of stimulating discussions and criticisms of Catholicism. They met each Sunday to discuss spiritual, social, and artistic topics related to religion, with the participation and introduction of guests of different religions and faiths.

The result of the link between religion and nonviolence included the promotion of different models of conduct and an open concept of sanctity. For what concerns models of conduct, an open religion focuses on action. Thus, it will promote who already belongs to the religious group and who did outstanding work in society. In the case of Catholicism, it is important to consider the many worker-priests acting in the 1940s and the many priests killed by criminal organizations and authoritarian regimes.

Nevertheless, belonging to a religion cannot be the reason for the adoption of someone as a model. Thus, religion should encourage people to look beyond itself. One famous example of nonviolence is Danilo Dolci. He is certainly a model for his important social commitment in Sicily, as well as for the nonviolent ways he used to implement his ideas. His hunger and reverse strikes and his famine marches became famous in Italy and in the rest of the world.

Finally, a nonviolent religion also promotes a different idea of sanctity in the social realm. The meaning of sanctity is enlarged to include any “pure spirit”, independently from affiliation with any church. In this way, the sanctity of Francis of Assisi and Gandhi should be put on the same level, representing two polar stars for the entire world (Capitini 1962a, p. 16).

## 6. Adding the “Heroism of Peace” to Politics

The narrative of nonviolence offers an alternative path on the personal and social levels. Nevertheless, fear remains a concern in relation to the role of religions in the international realm. Is

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<sup>6</sup> Don Lorenzo Milani (1923–1967) was a Roman Catholic priest. He is famous for his work as an educator of poor children in Barbiana, a remote village in the Mugello Region. Amongst his various important activities, he was a strong supporter of conscientious objection. He has even been put on trial for advocating it in *Lettere ai Cappellani Militari*.



the renewed role of religions in society a threat to democracy? The post-secular debate claims the exact opposite is true, but it remains unclear *how* to link politics and religions. Religions can build up a post-secular society which moves beyond “a corrupt kind of secular or ‘worldly’ politics oriented solely toward such aims as power, wealth, and selfish interest” (Dallmayr 2013, p. 148). A nonviolent religion offers to politics what it needs the most, what Capitini called *compresence*: the connection of everybody in an act of value, the most extreme examples of maximum liberation and openness.

As Dallmayr claimed, the main issue is not the translation of religious arguments into secular terms. It is not even the search for an “overlapping consensus” on core values or principles in society. The problem involves translating the religious “existential appeal” into practice. Nonviolence can contribute to frame this effort towards liberation and openness to others. Thus, a nonviolent and open religion is not interested in entering and having privileges in democratic institutions; this is not the right path for the construction of a post-secular society. As Stepan claimed, “democratic institutions must be free, within the bounds of the constitution and human rights, to generate policies. Religious institutions should not have constitutionally privileged prerogatives that allow them to mandate public policy to democratic elected governments” (Stepan 2000, p. 39). However, a nonviolent religion goes further than what Stepan called “twin tolerations”, both of freedom for democratically elected governments and of freedom for religious organizations in civil and political society (Stepan 2000, p. 40).

Additionally, the political relationship of religion with the rest of society is not one of competition in the political arena. An open religion is not interested in competing with secular forces to influence government policies, as in the “secular-religious competition perspective” (Fox 2016). The aim is not to hold power to coerce those who do not agree with their precepts. The nonviolent framework allows religion to focus on a positive adjunction to politics. Religion integrates politics with actions that engender the maximum liberation and openness possible, with the deepest practical connection with everyone (including past and future generations), via actions of value. From this perspective, religion at the political level represents the “impatience” of waiting for the end, claimed Capitini. Religion represents an occasion for excellent action in which means and ends are unified, and in this way it supports politics, showing examples of “heroism of peace” (Capitini 1962b, p. 21). Religion implements extreme and pure actions of liberation and openness, being an example of peace, love (as *agape*), and liberty in a society that still uses war for peace, violence for love, and dictatorship for liberty (Capitini 1948, p. 35).

In other words, religion is no longer a problem for politics, and, in particular, for democracy; it is an opportunity and a stimulus to translate religious existential appeal into practice. This does not mean imposing on others rules and visions of life or death. The aim is the “spiritualization of politics” (Jahanbegloo 2014, p. 180): to propose a new attitude toward openness and participation. This does not mean imposing laws in line with some specific religious belief. On the contrary, it means expressing the tension toward values and openness at any moment. It means both forgiving enemies and avoiding acts that humiliate them. It also means fighting the political elite when it is driven by a particular set of interests, or when politics become mere dry administration, or even confessional.

This approach can take infinite forms: offering one’s life in exchange for freeing other prisoners, as the Franciscan Maximilian Kolbe did; sticking one’s neck out in defense of a minority, like Martin Luther King Jr.; leaving the just war theory in favor of nonviolence, something Catholicism is debating at the moment; creating third-party intervention organizations such as Witness for Peace, Peace Brigades International and many others.

However, this is only the beginning of a wider and much-needed reflection on theories and practices involving all areas of politics. In other words, religion can build up a post-secular society without learning secular jargon, but by restraining closure and violence within the political arena. For instance, this means not surrendering to nationalisms, even when life is at stake. An open religion strongly fights the desire to form religious states (Juergensmeyer 1995). It even avoids the flaws of dry and juridical cosmopolitanisms. Indeed, there is no need to wait for some world government or police; the new practices and the new commitment actualize, in the here and now, a different cosmopolitan reality, in which everybody takes part, including those usually excluded (Degli Oddi 2012, pp. 125–26).

In sum, religion can build a post-secular society filling the political arena with people working endlessly to avoid violence and sacrificing themselves for peace.

## 7. Conclusions

This explorative article suggested nonviolence as a fascinating opportunity for religions to build up via facti a post-secular society that overcomes the dominant narratives of secularism. To describe the consequences of the link between religion and nonviolence, I used the first Italian philosopher of nonviolence, Aldo Capitini. He interpreted nonviolence as a new perspective, starting from the person as an open center able to make actions of adjunction in society. The adoption of nonviolence by religions creates what Capitini called an “open religion”, which is a unity of thought and action that prepares openness in individuals. This entails the interpretation of religion as persuaded action that is based on faith (a rejection of necessity and cruelty), as well as compresence (a connection with everybody via acts of value).

The consequences are far-reaching: open religion can create via facti, here and now, a post-secular society. An open religion adds self-rule to human flourishing, through self-restraint and personal responsibility (via both the limitation of aggressive tendencies and the rejection of actions resulting from necessity and cruelty). Further, it offers resilience (via the figure of the prophet, horizontal institutions, and an education toward openness) to a secular society. Finally, it offers the “heroism of peace”, which shows the maximum of liberation and openness (compresence) in politics.

This path is very demanding. It is much easier to think of nonviolence as a set of methods of action to wage cultural wars and influence policies. However, the path outlined here is much more ambitious: it turns religions into the engine of a very different post-secular society.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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