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JOSEPH A. CAMILLERI

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Postsecularist discourse in an ‘age of transition’

JOSEPH A. CAMILLERI

Abstract. The last twenty years have seen the emergence of an intriguing postsecular discourse which seeks to remedy the limitations of the secular interpretation of politics. The resurgence of religion in the public sphere, the vociferous articulation of fundamentalist worldviews, and the intensification of conflict within and between religious traditions as well as between religious and secularist dispositions are evidence enough of the need to rethink standard secularist formulations. However, this article argues that postsecularity as a concept raises as many questions as it answers. While it rightly draws our attention to the profound discontinuities of our age, post-secularist thought is too preoccupied with certain specificities of contemporary Western discourse and practice to be able to make sense of the wider challenge-response dynamic that is integral to the current period of transition. This article examines the lacunae of post-secularity and avenues for further development of its insights by reference to four closely interlinked features of a rapidly transforming world order: (a) the transnational character of much religious discourse and practice; (b) the decline of the West and the corresponding shift in the economic and geopolitical centre of gravity; (c) the complex relationship between the resurgence of religion and the wider phenomenon of identity politics; and (d) the emerging dialectic between conflictual and dialogical approaches to cultural and geopolitical pluralism.

Joseph A. Camilleri is Professor of International Relations and founding Director of the Centre for Dialogue, La Trobe University, Melbourne. He is the author of some twenty books and more than one hundred book chapters and journal articles. Recent publications include: co-edited *Religion and Ethics in a Globalizing World: Conflict, Dialogue and Transformation* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2011); co-edited *Conflict, Religion and Culture: Domestic and Regional Implications for Southeast Asia and Australia* (Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2009); *Worlds in Transition: Evolving Governance Across a Stressed Planet* (Edward Elgar, 2009). He is a Fellow of the Australian Academy of Social Sciences, and chairs the Editorial Committee of the scholarly journal *Global Change, Peace and Security*.

The concepts ‘secularity’, ‘secularism’, and ‘secularisation’ have become the subject of contestation either because the phenomenon they seek to elucidate, ostensibly the separation of religion and politics, appears to be in decline or because traditional conceptualisations of the phenomenon seem increasingly ill-equipped to offer a persuasive account of present-day political reality.¹ We use the term ‘postsecular’ to denote the diverse group of contemporary anthropologists, social theorists, philosophers, and religious scholars who have come to see the limitations of the hitherto widely accepted notions of the ‘secular’, even though not all of them have adopted the label or feel comfortable with it. The designation is nevertheless analytically useful in that it highlights a common thread in their writings, namely a sense that we need to move beyond the confines of the secularisation thesis if we are to establish

¹ The multiple, at times competing ideas of secularity in the ‘postmodern’ context, are usefully reviewed in Hank-Jan Prozman, *The Postmodern Condition and the Meaning of Secularity* (Utrecht: Ars Disputandi, 2011), pp. 14–18, available at: {<http://adss.library.uu.nl/index.html>}.

an analytical framework that can more cogently connect past discourse and emerging practice.

While postsecular insights greatly facilitate the complex and necessary task of reassessment, our central contention is that they do not as yet provide a sufficiently rigorous or comprehensive reading of the current period of transition in the evolution of human governance. The difficulty is compounded by the failure of most International Relations scholars to consider the implications of postsecular insights for their field of study.² Until recently the treatment of religion generally retained the old secular fixation with religiously based conflict or religiously inspired violence, and even today, as Hurd rightly observes, ‘the restorative turn to religion in international relations’ remains largely confined to the diagnosis of religiously motivated violence and intolerance in its various manifestations. Just as troublesome, however, is the inability of most proponents of postsecularism to discern, amidst the undeniable continuities of the age, the full extent of the normative and institutional rupture already under way, which promises to intensify in the coming decades, for it is not simply secularism that is in question but the larger intellectual framework of ‘modernity’ itself, of which secularism is but a part. It is this implicit but as yet inadequately explored insight which has far-reaching implications for the study of International Relations, in particular for our understanding of the nature of agency and its relationship to structure in a period of systemic transition.

Before proceeding to an evaluation of the strengths and shortcomings of postsecular discourse, we must revisit, albeit briefly, some of the principal concerns and propositions which leading postsecularists have advanced over the last ten to fifteen years. The task here is not to attempt a comprehensive review, but to focus on aspects of the postsecular reinterpretation of secularism, which bear directly on two closely related questions. Are postsecular readings of the changing relationship between the secular and religious domains suggestive of the new pluralisms that characterise social and political space both within and across national borders? If so, what light do they shed on the reorganisation of political space and on changing patterns of normative discourse and legal and institutional architecture?

It hardly needs to be said that there is no unified postsecular analysis of contemporary trends. Indeed, the very notion of postsecularism has proven to be no less ambiguous or elusive than secularism itself. Its proponents are far from agreed on its meaning, its explanatory potential, or its normative implications.³ They are nevertheless generally in agreement that secularism is a distinctly European or Western project, which originates with the Westphalian response to the wars of religion in Europe and eventually adopts the Enlightenment’s predilection for reason as the defining principle governing the public sphere. The question postsecularism poses is whether this principle, especially in the absence of any qualification, offers an adequate description of present day reality or an appropriate prescription for the future.

² Even those who seek to integrate religion more effectively into the study of International Relations, are more comfortable doing so within confines of IR theorising than the larger horizons offered in postsecular writings. See, for example, Mona Kanwal Sheikh, ‘How Does Religion Matter? Pathways to religion in International relations’, *Review of International Studies*, 38:2 (April 2012), pp. 365–92.

³ The diverse meanings attributed to the term ‘postsecular’ are emphatically described though not always as clearly delineated in James A. Beckford, ‘SSSR Presidential Address – Public Religions and the Postsecular: Critical Reflections’, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 51:1 (March 2012), pp. 1–19.

Postsecular perspectives

Several distinct but not unconnected factors have enabled religion to return to centre stage, at a time when the widespread expectation was that it would be relegated to the backstage. Postsecular interpretations of this shift are far from uniform. Some have emphasised the persistence of religion as an institution, the survival of clerical establishments and the accompanying array of churches, mosques and temples, schools, universities, seminaries, hospitals, and other training and social service facilities.⁴ Others have characterised the widespread religious upsurge as a populist reaction to the globalised and globalising cultural elite that is essentially secular in outlook and mode of operation.⁵ Others still have highlighted, as we shall see, an enduring yearning for some form of transcendence whether expressed in traditional religious beliefs and practices or a more amorphous but no less potent sense of something larger.

These and related trends rightly remain the subject of considerable debate, yet the widely shared postsecularist reading is that religion, the spiritual and the sacred have, contrary to the expectations of the secularisation thesis, survived and in some contexts even flourished. For many the critical consideration here is not so much the demographic resurgence of religion, which almost certainly has not occurred, at least in the West, but a noticeable shift in consciousness, which Jürgen Habermas has described as 'an altered self-understanding of the largely secularized societies of Western Europe, Canada, or Australia'.⁶ What factors might account for this shift in public consciousness? Three would seem especially noteworthy. First is the undeniable resonance and even influence which religion generally and religionists in particular have recently acquired at key moments in a number of national settings, most strikingly in Iran but also in other parts of the Middle East, in Southeast Asia, South Asia, China (resurgence of Christianity and emergence of Falun Gong), Eastern Europe, post-Cold War Russia, and not least in the United States.⁷ A second and closely related factor is the theologically conservative tide that has swept across many countries and faith traditions – a theological conservatism that more often

⁴ Highly instructive in this context is the return of religion to academic discourse in American higher education. The re-emergence of religion in diverse disciplines – from art and music to English, history, philosophy, politics, sociology, social work and medicine, to name a few – has been accompanied by the remarkable growth of religious professional associations, centres, institutes, and philanthropic foundations. See John Schmalzbauer and Kathleen Mahoney, 'Religion and Knowledge in the Postsecular Academy', Social Science Research Council Working Papers (February 2008).

⁵ See Peter Berger's analysis of this dichotomy in 'The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview', in Peter L. Berger (ed.), *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1999), pp. 10–11.

⁶ Eduardo Mendieta, 'A Postsecular World Society? On the Philosophical Significance of Postsecular Consciousness and the Multicultural World Society', An Interview with Jürgen Habermas, SSRC Blog, The Immanent Frame, available at: {<http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2010/02/03/a-postsecular-world-society/>} accessed 28 August 2011).

⁷ The trend has been noted by numerous scholars over a span of more than twenty years. One of the earlier expositions was offered by Gilles Kepel, *La Revanche de Dieu: Chrétiens, Juifs et Musulmans à la Reconquête du Monde* (2nd edn, Paris: Seuil, 2003 [orig. pub. 1993]). See also Scott M. Thomas, *The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Transformation of International Relations: The Struggle for the Soul of the Twenty-First Century* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); David Westerlund (ed.), *Questioning the Secular State: the Worldwide Resurgence of Religion in Politics* (London: S. Hurst & Co., 2002).

than not has had a significant political spill-over effect.⁸ This leads us to a third and again closely related factor, namely the explosion of religiously motivated or at least religiously informed political violence, of which religiously based terrorism is but the most dramatic manifestation.⁹

It need hardly be said that this multidimensional phenomenon has not been purely local or national in scope but has exploded with increasing force on to the world stage – an observation which International Relations scholars and policy-makers have often been slow to acknowledge, let alone fully grasp.¹⁰ Even short of the periodic episodes of violence and counter-violence which inevitably impel states and multilateral institutions into action, religion's impact on international relations has been accentuated by cross border mobility of people, ideas, information, images, and arms. The rapid acceleration of population flows that has brought multiple waves of migrants, guest workers, students, refugees, and asylum seekers to Western Europe, North America, and Australia has served as a powerful transmission belt for the internationalisation of religiously coloured conflict.¹¹

Postsecularist reflections have tended to place less weight on these overtly political manifestations of religion's resurgence than on the deeper cultural currents which underpin them. This intellectual disposition reflects a more nuanced understanding of the secular construct. There is after all more to secularity than the diminished role of religion or its formal separation from the state. Underpinning both ideas is not just the perceived or anticipated decline of faith and God but the corresponding role ascribed to human reason, science, and technological progress as structuring modes of thought and principles of legitimacy.¹² Pointing to a rapidly changing cultural

⁸ This reactionary shift is primarily associated with but by no means confined to fundamentalist religious movements. See Bruce B. Lawrence, *Defenders of God: The Fundamentalist Revolt against the Modern Age* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989); Karen Armstrong, *The Battle for God: A History of Fundamentalism*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 2001); Brenda E. Brasher, *The Encyclopedia of Fundamentalism* (New York: Routledge, 2001); Gabriel A. Almond, R. Scott Appleby, and Emmanuel Sivan, *Strong Religion: The Rise of Fundamentalisms around the World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Malise Ruthven, *Fundamentalism: The Search for Meaning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁹ See John Pahl, 'Violence from Religious Groups', *International Handbook of Violence Research*, vol. 1 (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2003), pp. 32–8.

¹⁰ This is not a novel observation. Hurd's *The Politics of Secularism* is a telling demonstration of this defect and one of the few effective attempts in the international relations literature to remedy it. See also Robert Keohane, 'The Globalization of Informal Violence, Theories of World Politics, and the "Liberalism of Fear"', available at: {<http://essays.ssrc.org/sept11/essays/keohane2.htm>} accessed 15 August 2011. The strategic and diplomatic communities have not been immune to this apparent failure to grasp the nature and implications of religion's renewed presence on the international stage; see David Brooks, 'Kicking the Secularist Habit', *Atlantic Monthly*, 291:2 (2003), pp. 26–8.

¹¹ See P. Werbner, 'The Place which is Diaspora: Citizenship, Religion and Gender in the Making of Chaordic Transnationalism', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 28:1 (2002), pp. 119–33; Vertovec, 'Religion and Diaspora', in Armin Antas, W. Geertz, and Randi R. Warne (eds), *New Approaches to the Study of Religion: Textual, Comparative, Sociological, and Cognitive Approaches* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008).

¹² The most easily recognisable interpretation of the secular, from a religious vantage point, is the one which centres on the distinction between two spheres: the religious and the temporal, the sacred and the profane. Here secularism is perceived as a cultural-political project committed to marginalising the religious or sacred by relegating its expression to a purely private sphere. Aleksandr Kyrlezhev offers a sharper variation on this theme, arguing that secularisation rejects the very duality of the religious and profane, and seeks instead to establish the secular as a fully autonomous, self-sufficient and all encompassing sphere, in which religion is rendered 'superfluous' or 'non-essential'. Religious theory and practice are thereby deprived of the capacity to relate to, let alone influence, the non-religious. Secularisation, understood as the 'desacralisation of politics', sees the reversal of roles we associate with the pre-modern Christian world. Secularisation thus becomes a cultural project which determines the character and function of religion in society, while it itself acquires sacral characteristics. See Aleksandr Kyrlezhev, 'The Postsecular Age: Religion and Culture Today', *Religion, State and Society*, 36:1 (2008), pp. 21–31.

landscape, postsecularism calls into question simplistic notions of the triumph of reason over faith, of the immanent over the transcendent, and of state-centric nationalism over other forms of collective identity.

For his part Charles Taylor discerns several important strands in what is an elusive and highly variegated trend. First among these is the search for a more direct experience of the sacred, often designated as 'spirituality' rather than 'religion', which he interprets as a reaction to modern definitions of individual and social success. Expressing 'a profound dissatisfaction with a life encased entirely in the immanent order',¹³ it aspires to a transformation which goes beyond 'ordinary human flourishing' with the emphasis not so much on 'holiness' as on 'unity', 'integrity', 'balance', 'flow', or 'harmony'.¹⁴ Taylor goes on to contrast this new kind of spiritual quest with a quite different religious sensibility which we associate with the growth of Pentecostal/Charismatic Christianity.¹⁵ From its humble beginnings in the United States in the early part of the twentieth century it has since grown remarkably not only in North America, but in Africa, Latin America, parts of Asia, and Oceania.¹⁶ To these two new developments Taylor adds a third, namely the continuing importance of celebration, as evidenced in pilgrimages, youth assemblies, and one-off events (as in the case of Princess Diana's death), each in its own way 'oriented to something putatively transcendent'.¹⁷ Finally, he notes the very large number of those who still declare themselves to be Christian, and who, though they have come to reject the institutional church, its doctrines, rites of passage, and even its conception of God, nevertheless retain a cultural and moral affinity with Christian values and history. This may well be dismissed as Christian nominalism, yet it cannot be equated with committed secularism.

Postsecularism as coexistence of the sacred and the profane

Postsecular readings of the perceived persistence or even resurgence of religion (or the transcendent) are no doubt suggestive of wider social currents and emergent cultural practice. But what are we to make of this trend given the staying power of the secular (or immanent) frame of reference? For some, what sets the postsecular age apart from what preceded it is precisely the new opening for some kind of mutually advantageous accommodation. Though they represent different philosophical traditions, Taylor and Habermas, among others, have sought in their recent writing to make the case for an emerging coexistence of the secular and the religious.

Taylor's Catholic faith has no doubt profoundly influenced his thought. Yet while acknowledging that secularism has made life more difficult for religion, he is nevertheless at pains to identify both the strengths and weaknesses of the secular project, and at the same time to highlight the important intellectual strands that connect

¹³ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 506.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 507.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 512.

¹⁶ Believers in this form of Christianity, who are said to receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit and have ecstatic experiences (for example, speaking in tongues, healing, prophesying), are now estimated to number well in excess of 500 million. Pentecostalism has been described as 'one of the great success stories of the current era of cultural globalisation'. See Joel Robbins, 'The Globalization of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 33 (2004), pp. 17–143.

¹⁷ Taylor, *The Secular Age*, p. 517.

secularism and religion. For Taylor secularity cannot be confined to its two conventional meanings,¹⁸ namely the decline of religious faith and the severance of any connection between the political organisation of society and ‘faith in, or adherence to, God or some ultimate reality’.¹⁹ To these two meanings, Taylor adds a third: the secular society is one in which religious faith ‘even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others’.²⁰ Differently expressed, in the secular moral order faith and the alternative to faith, namely *exclusive humanism*, give rise to a multiplicity of believing and unbelieving positions, the net effect of which – and this applies to both laicism and Judeo-Christian secularism – is to deprive ‘faith in God’ of a central role in the social order. Taylor describes this as ‘a pluralist world in which many forms of belief and unbelief jostle, and hence *fragilize* each other’.²¹ The jostling and the fragilization in turn create a neutral space in which law and regulation can keep an equal distance from different or contending positions (a not unimportant achievement of the secular order). However, this is also a space in which ‘disenchantment’ reigns, for here the purpose of law and politics is no longer to reflect some agreed higher reality or even to conduct a civil conversation about conflicting perceptions of that reality but simply to provide a modicum of order in the midst of the plurality of faith and non-faith positions.²²

Taylor is nevertheless at pains to argue that exclusive humanism is not ‘definable simply by the negation of what preceded it’.²³ It grew from a deistic conception of the workings of nature, which was only subsequently stripped of its religious dimension. In any case, even in its present advanced stage of development the secular order does not entirely preclude what Taylor calls the experience of ‘fullness’, an appreciation of the world which is ‘imbued with meaning, beauty and connection’.²⁴ This sense of fullness is experienced only episodically, and in the current secular dispensation with greater difficulty and perhaps less frequently, yet the potential is still there and it can be realised informed by art, philosophy, human relationships, as well as by religion.

This said, the secular order does not offer a fully satisfying path to the transcendent, for the immanent frame on which it rests is anthropocentric and deterministic. By contrast, religion offers a vision of the transcendent and ‘the connected aspiration to a transformation which goes beyond ordinary human flourishing’.²⁵ The question is whether the religious and non-religious visions of the good life can coexist in post-modern societies. For Taylor such coexistence is possible so long as secularism is understood first and foremost as ‘the (correct) response of the democratic state to diversity’.²⁶ The principle of state neutrality is thus reinterpreted by Taylor so as to make it inconsistent with any attempt to privilege (or discriminate against) not just

¹⁸ Alessandro Ferrara attaches the label *political* secularism to the first meaning and *social* secularism to the second, arguing that the key to the secularisation thesis is the expectation that *political* secularism would in due course give way to *social* secularism. Alessandro Ferrara, ‘The Separation of Religion and Politics in a Post-Secular Society’, *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 35:1–2 (2009), pp. 77–91.

¹⁹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 1.

²⁰ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 3.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 531, emphasis added.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 532, 714.

²³ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 571.

²⁴ Calhoun, ‘Rethinking Secularism’, p. 457.

²⁵ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 510.

²⁶ Charles Taylor, ‘The Meaning of Secularism’, *The Hedgehog Review*, 12:3 (2010), p. 25.

religious positions, but any basic position, religious or non-religious. In Taylor's analysis the political ethic of secularism acquires a distinctly postsecular tone for it is an ethic that 'can be and is shared by people of very different basic outlooks'.²⁷

Just as Taylor acknowledges the contribution that secularity can make to human flourishing, so Habermas in his most recent writings acknowledges the unique dimension of religious experience 'that has been lost elsewhere and that cannot be restored by the professional knowledge of experts alone'.²⁸ This leads him to affirm that 'philosophy must be ready to learn from theology' for both functional and substantial reasons, and that 'the mutual compenetration of Christianity and Greek metaphysics' has enabled philosophy to assimilate genuinely Christian ideas, which have been translated into secular discourse through such notions as 'responsibility', 'emancipation', 'fulfilment', and 'individuality'.²⁹ Harrington is right to detect in Habermas's current work 'a significantly more sympathetic engagement with the arguments of theologians and a dramatic self-distancing from his earlier secularist advocacy'.³⁰ Put simply, Habermas is proposing a middle path between triumphalist secularism and religious fundamentalism. To this end, he assigns to both religious and non-religious citizens a mutual epistemic responsibility, which may be simply described as a willingness to listen to and learn from one another.³¹

Some have argued that Habermas is nevertheless careful not to give Christianity or other religions a blank cheque when it comes to exercising influence in the functioning of the democratic spaces afforded by the liberal state. While those of religious persuasion may contribute to public debate (in the 'informal public sphere') as freely as anyone else, the more difficult question is how religious beliefs, practices, and rules are to be treated by society's constitutional arrangements and by the legislative, executive, and judicial arms of the state (by the 'formal public sphere'). It is here that Habermas's dialogical methodology is of particular interest. Dialogue, he argues, is to proceed by way of translation of 'religious idiom' into 'universally acceptable language', which requires 'the epistemic ability to consider one's own faith reflexively from the outside and to relate it to secular views'.³² Such translation, however, is a subtle process which must avoid placing the religious citizen under undue pressure, while at the same time ensuring that the secular public sphere is not thereby undermined. Simply put, 'religious citizens' may express themselves within their religion's linguistic framework so long as what they have to say is translatable into the secular language that is the *lingua franca* of the legislative process.³³

The ambiguities inherent in Habermas's notion of translation are canvassed at greater length in Dallmayr's contribution. Suffice it here to say that Habermas is striving for a new bargain, that is, a redefined secular domain within which religion expresses itself publicly with the confidence that due account will be taken of religious convictions and priorities. However, religion is required in return to

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Jürgen Habermas, 'Prepolitical Foundations of the Democratic Constitutional State?', in J. Habermas and J. Ratzinger, *The Dialectics of Secularization* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006), p. 43.

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 44–5.

³⁰ Austin Harrington, 'Habermas and the "Post-Secular Society"', *European Journal of Social Theory*, 10:4 (2007), p. 544.

³¹ Jürgen Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), pp. 114–48.

³² Jürgen Habermas, 'Religion in the Public Sphere', *European Journal of Philosophy*, 14:1 (2006), p. 9.

³³ Ibid., p. 10.

acknowledge that the state will ultimately reach its decisions on the basis of secular reasoning, and that religious citizens have an obligation, as full participants in the political process, to respect the ensuing laws and policies.³⁴ The ambiguity, not to say ambivalence that surrounds Habermas's acceptance of religion as a comprehensive and enduring partner in dialogue,³⁵ and the modalities which are to apply,³⁶ derive from two competing concerns: to preserve the primacy of secular as distinct from religious discourse on the one hand, and to prevent the sceptre of religious fundamentalism from obscuring religion's rightful place in the public sphere on the other.

We may reasonably conclude: both Taylor and Habermas, notwithstanding their quite different philosophical premises, have attempted to fashion a new secularism, one that preserves the primacy of secular reasoning while at the same time adopting the ethic of genuine equidistance and inclusiveness, with a view to accommodating the diversity that has become an inescapable feature of most contemporary societies. They are by no means alone in this undertaking.³⁷ Here, a brief reference to John D. Caputo's explicitly Christian conception of the postsecular may help to clarify the scope and limitations of this putative synthesis. Caputo suggests that European civilisation may have traversed three ages: the 'sacral age', the period of Christian ascendancy when all understanding rested on faith, when theology was a spiritual discipline beginning with God and ending with God; the 'secular age' which dethroned God and gave reason the pivotal role in the understanding of human history; and the 'postsecular age' which expresses the 'death of the death of God' which dethrones all human constructs. For Caputo, in the postsecular age, modernity is not 'over and done with', nor does postsecularity presage a return to an unthinking or nostalgic pre-modernism. Rather the postsecular represents 'a continuation of the enlightenment by another means, the production of a New Enlightenment, one that is enlightened about the limits of the old one'.³⁸

³⁴ Habermas, Rusconi suggests, sets three conditions for religion to be able to participate in the democratic process: it must renounce 'the monopoly of truth', accept 'the authority of science', and respect 'the public primacy of lay/secular law'. See Gian Enrico Rusconi, 'Three-Way (German) Dialogue on Post-Secularism', *Reset Dialogues on Civilizations* (18 September 2007), available at: {<http://www.resetdoc.org/story/00000000529>} accessed 26 August 2011.

³⁵ Barbato and Kratochwil refer to two interpretations of Habermas – one strong and the other weak – to highlight the tensions in the recent Habermasian attempt to grapple with 'the semantic potential of religious language for public discourses'. Mariano Barbato and Friedrich Kratochwil, 'Towards a Post-secular Order?', *European Political Science Review*, 1:3 (2009), p. 336.

³⁶ For a discussion of the complexities of what might be or might not be permissible by way of religious intervention in the formal public sphere (in the context of the positions advocated by Habermas as distinct from those of John Rawls), see Ferrara, 'The Separation of Religion and Politics', pp. 81–6.

³⁷ Another important contributor has been William Connolly who has advocated a conception of pluralism premised on the inseparability of politics and metaphysics. As part of his 'politics of becoming' he envisages a plural network of constituencies in which each strives for 'generosity' towards others and a form of public engagement which respects a variety of religious and secular beliefs: see W. E. Connolly, *Why I am not a Secularist* (Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 39. It is also worth noting in this context that a number of French philosophers and cultural theorists, including Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Emmanuel Levinas, Alain Badiou, Jean-Luc Nancy, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva, have played a key role in evaluating 'the return of religion' to recent Western thought. One of the most important outcomes of their collective contribution has been to reopen the debate on the role and nature of religion in the political domain, and its relationship to the secular. For a useful review of this contribution see Victoria Barker, "'After the Death of God": Postsecularity?', *Journal of Religious History*, 33:1 (2009), pp. 82–95.

³⁸ John D. Caputo, *On Religion* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 60–1.

Postsecularism as rupture

Not all postsecularists see secularism as the relatively benign or unproblematic phenomenon Taylor and Habermas take it to be. Here Asad's reading of the predicament presented by secularism is particularly instructive. The secular, he tells us, encompasses perspectives and sensibilities which have evolved over time, and represent both rupture and continuity with the religious past.³⁹ For Asad and others, the secularism of the liberal state has come hand in hand with the development of strong state power, which is no stranger to the use of violence and the infliction of pain and punishment.⁴⁰ The colonial project was one in which European states intervened repeatedly to change local regimes, broke up political entities and constructed new ones, 'thus disrupting – whether for good or for ill – indigenous life-ways'.⁴¹ For Asad, the secular liberal state is the paradoxical blending of freedom and coercion.⁴² Reduced to its core Asad's argument is that 'there is a space of violence shared by "war" and "peace", by "ruthless terrorism" and "just war", and that that space is embraced by the liberal tradition'.⁴³

Asad is suggesting, implicitly if not explicitly that the secular mindset as it has developed in the West has been no less troubled than its religious counterpart when it comes to relating to, let alone accepting, the stranger, the foreigner, or the outsider – in short the other. Here Asad distinguishes between liberal notions of tolerance 'by which spaces can be created for individuals to do what they wish, so long as they don't obstruct the ability of others to do likewise' and the pluralism which accepts and nurtures 'the different ways of life which are (a) the preconditions and not the objects of individual interests, and which are, (b) in the final analysis, incommensurable'.⁴⁴ This helps to explain Asad's less optimistic account of Western secularity, and his misgivings as to the capacities of the Eurocentric world to develop an intercultural pluralism able to accommodate the growing Islamic presence in its midst.

Here, then we have two sharply contrasting views of the postsecular. Whereas for Taylor, secularity is primarily a politico-legal framework that sustains the freedom of belief, for Asad it is 'a way of thinking "the human", which is both formative of and consequent on Western historical narratives of collective being'.⁴⁵ In contrast to Taylor's view of secularism as an independent ethic which alone can provide the necessary common ground for the functioning of diverse modern societies, Asad sees it as a specifically Euro-American political project that saw the emergence of

³⁹ Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 25.

⁴⁰ Talal Asad, 'Trying to Understand French Secularism', in Hent de Vries and Lawrence Sullivan (eds), *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), p. 508.

⁴¹ Talal Asad, 'Thinking about Terrorism and Just War', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 23:1 (2010), p. 4.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁴⁴ See Saba Mahmood's interview with Talal Asad, 'Modern Power and the Reconfiguration of Religious Traditions' (27 February 1996), available at: {<http://www.stanford.edu/group/SHR/5-1/text/asad.html>} accessed 25 August 2011.

⁴⁵ Marilyn Booth, Review of Talal Asad's *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam and Modernity*, *Bryn Mawr Review of Comparative Literature*, 4(2) (2004), available at: {<http://www.brynmawr.edu/bmrc/L/Summer2004/Asad.html>} accessed 20 August 2011.

the 'strong state' from the sectarian wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. For Asad, modern secularism is not a 'community of sentiment' or even a sphere of 'persuasion and negotiation', as Taylor would suggest, but an indispensable instrument in a structure of law consistent with 'national unity' and centralised state control.⁴⁶ The organisation of secular space, by 'redefining religion's competence', enables the state to carry out 'the unceasing material and moral transformation of its entire national population regardless of their diverse "religious" allegiances'.⁴⁷

The postsecular balance sheet

This brief survey of postsecularist perspectives has had one clear aim in mind: to identify those insights most likely to advance our understanding of the current period of transition in human affairs. Postsecularist thought does indeed raise intriguing questions about the uncertainties, anxieties, and tensions now widely considered a defining feature of contemporary national and international life. Three closely related insights are especially noteworthy: the need to rethink the simplistic separation of religion and politics and the consequent need to redefine political space and authority; the unveiling of some of the cognitive and normative underpinnings of distrust, verging on rupture, between Islam and the West; and, perhaps most importantly, the search for a new conception of political pluralism that can more effectively address the challenges posed by rising levels of religious and cultural diversity.

Postsecular thought rightly draws attention to the artificial and ultimately unworkable separation of the religious and political realms, and proposes instead a more cooperative relationship that is cognisant of the ambivalent yet unavoidable 'intersection between modern religion and modern secularity'.⁴⁸ The proposition explicitly advanced by some and implicitly by others is that, in the light of historical and contemporary experience, Western secularity is required to rethink inherited conceptions of power and authority and the assumed relationship between faith, ethics, and politics. Regardless of its origins, the increasingly visible presence of religious actors, identities, and demands is seen as providing the necessary stimulus for a renewed understanding and renegotiation of the relationship between religion and politics, between the sacred and the profane. The implications of this religious 'resurgence' are especially far-reaching since what is at play is a new form of political contestation, in which what is contested is the very nature of political space, and how agency and authority may be exercised within that space. Wittingly or otherwise, postsecularism has come to question whether the nation and the state are quite the compact and monolithic cultural and political entities assumed by 'modern' political theory and practice.⁴⁹ In a sense, what is under challenge in much postsecular theorising is not just the Enlightenment version of secularity but also the Westphalian

⁴⁶ This characterisation of Asad's notion of secularism is carefully developed in Sindre Bangstad, 'Contesting Secularism/s: Secularism and Islam in the Work of Talal Asad', *Anthropological Theory*, 9:2 (2009), pp. 189–92.

⁴⁷ Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 191.

⁴⁸ Armando Salvatore, 'Power and Authority within European secularity: From the Enlightenment of Religion to the Contemporary Presence of Islam', *The Muslim World*, 96:4 (2006), p. 553.

⁴⁹ Particularly instructive in this context is Salvatore's exposition of Vico's conception of political society and the multiple interests and identities which it represents (Salvatore, 'Power and Authority', pp. 549–50).

conception of the state. The idea that contemporary international society is still explicable largely as a system of sovereign state entities functioning in the image of the Treaty of Westphalia has already been subjected, it is true, to a comprehensive critique in the International Relations literature.⁵⁰ Much of that critique has been formulated in terms of rising levels of economic, technological, and now environmental interdependence and interconnectedness. What sets the postsecular critique apart is the focus on the internal dynamics of the state and the profound cleavages that call into question its purported capacity to act as a single purposive agency able somehow to subordinate other political agencies to its interests and *modus operandi*.

The other two postsecular insights are best considered in conjunction with each other. The discomfort that post-Christian secular societies have experienced in allowing Muslims to engage in the public sphere – and more generally the difficulty Western secularity has had in relating to Islam – has been a recurrent theme in much post-secular writing. Several contributors have drawn attention to the peculiar reading of history on which European secularity has constructed its image of the Muslim other. As Salvatore has incisively argued, European conceptions of secularity are a product of Europe's exceptionalism, which itself reflects its origins in the Wars of Religions and the statist solution to those conflicts prescribed by the Peace of Westphalia.⁵¹

With this historical context in mind, many postsecularists have concluded that European secular formations as currently constituted are simply not equipped to integrate Muslim communities, movements, and discourses into the secular public sphere.⁵² Some have even argued that in the post-Cold War period Islam as a category has come to occupy the place previously reserved for communism as the principal enemy of the West.

The European-Muslim divide has given added force to the postsecular interest in developing a richer conception of pluralism which goes beyond the plurality of individual interests and focuses instead on the diversity of metaphysical perspectives. For Habermas, as we have seen, the objective entails not mere coexistence of divergent perspectives but an active engagement that can yield mutually beneficial learning. William Connolly has gone further, advocating a 'politics of becoming', whereby the 'energies' and 'injuries' associated with 'culturally defined differences' can become a catalyst for cultural transformation and even the emergence of new identities. To make this possible he envisages an 'ethos of engagement' on the part of different constituencies prepared to respect the diverse 'moral and metaphysical orientations' which they represent.⁵³ Asad brings a sharper focus to the analysis, suggesting that a postsecular strategy, if it is to have any chance of success, must somehow move beyond the intellectual confines of individualistic citizenship and majoritarian democracy characteristic of post-Enlightenment European secular formations.⁵⁴ Much of postsecular epistemology questions the assumed primacy of the secular mindset, and reduces its implicit approach to political power and authority as just one among other philosophical or psychological perspectives.

⁵⁰ See Trudy Jacobsen, Charles Sampford, and Ramesh Thakur (eds), *Re-envisioning Sovereignty: The End of Westphalia?* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2008).

⁵¹ Salvatore, 'Power and Authority', p. 556.

⁵² The tensions that have surfaced in Europe are, as Mavelli argues, in part a function of the limitations of the established secular narratives. See Luca Mavelli, *Europe's Encounter with Islam: The Secular and the Postsecular* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012).

⁵³ William Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist*, pp. 38–9, 57.

⁵⁴ Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, pp. 181–204.

Limits of the postsecular imagination

Postsecularism's initial point of departure was the perceived need to rethink prevailing conceptions of the relationship of the sacred and the secular. As we have just noted, this line of inquiry has over time stimulated a deeper reflection on the way political space is framed and political authority is exercised. Yet, this reassessment remains severely constrained. Postsecular discourse, it should be acknowledged, has thus far tended to give undue weight to certain analytical categories, especially in its focus on the national arena as the dominant site of political contestation and on Western discourse and practice, two tendencies which Antonio Cerella also considers though from a different vantage point. Much postsecular writing seems oblivious of or ill at ease with the accelerating global power shift, and strangely unable to integrate into its conceptual frame two other secular trends, namely the rise of identity politics of which the resurgence of religion is but one striking manifestation, and the limits to modernity that spell the slow but probably irreversible demise of the grand narrative associated with the Modern project. The net effect of this misreading of emerging trends (overestimation in some cases, underestimation in others) and uncritical acceptance of certain assumptions is to blunt the explanatory power of postsecular theorising.

The preoccupation with the national domain, though at times unstated, is an almost omnipresent feature of the postsecular narrative, which is all the more surprising given that several of the leading contributors have in other contexts made no secret of their cosmopolitan leanings. As a consequence the tendency is for governance to be considered as a function of the legal and political order associated with the modern, sovereign, national, liberal democratic state, sometimes loosely referred to as 'liberal, constitutional democracy'.⁵⁵ This emphasis is perhaps understandable in that postsecular discourse is necessarily focused on re-examining secular formulations which were by definition conceived in the context of the relationship between religion and politics – and this at a time when the Modern State was making its triumphant entry on to the European political stage. However, more than three centuries later a radically different political landscape calls for a reassessment of the sites within which the relationship between religion and politics is to be considered.

Just as secularism was in large measure a response to the religious, intellectual, and political currents of seventeenth and eighteenth century Europe, so postsecularism needs to take greater account of the contemporary reconfiguration of authority structures and forms of governance. To begin with the religious or sacred sphere does not function within neatly delineated national boundaries, and just like the concepts 'secular' and 'religious', state and nation turn out to be contested constructs, subject to the vagaries of economic, technological, and cultural change, which has in turn given rise to unprecedented levels of normative, legal, and institutional innovation. The national state continues to perform important functions but within a multi-tiered framework in which municipal, provincial, national, regional, and global jurisdictions overlap and intersect. To these multiple tiers, which may be said to constitute the arena of public governance, must be added two additional arenas of social organisation, the market and civil society, each of which exercises pervasive influence over

⁵⁵ Mendieta, 'An Interview with Jürgen Habermas', pp. 11–12.

the institutional arrangements and decision-making processes of societies and communities, large and small.⁵⁶ The emerging relationship between religion and politics cannot therefore be adequately characterised, let alone explained, without placing it within this complex and still unfolding multi-spatial framework of governance.

While the national state is central to postsecular theorising, it is clear that it is the Western state in particular which is the focus of attention. Postsecular discourse is pre-eminently Western in the sense that it is primarily concerned with a chapter in European history, namely the origins and evolution of secularism in Europe and North America. Habermas makes no secret of the nature of his inquiry: 'A "post-secular" society must at some point have been in a "secular" state. The controversial term can thus be applied only to the affluent societies of Europe or countries such as Canada, Australia or New Zealand.'⁵⁷ Similarly, Taylor views secularism as a uniquely North Atlantic phenomenon.⁵⁸ For both Habermas and Taylor, it should be added, secularism is Western by virtue both of location and heritage. The theological genealogy of secularism or what Habermas prefers to call 'the symbiosis of Greek philosophy with Pauline Christianity',⁵⁹ is viewed as critical to the secularist self-understanding. As we have already observed, the Christian antecedents of secularism are also critical to Taylor's analysis. It is to the religious motor that he ascribes the commitment of the new humanism to 'goals of active, instrumental ordering of self and world' and 'the central place within it of universalism and benevolence'.⁶⁰ For Asad too, secularism is a creation of Europe and its extension, North America. Even when considering the non-European experience of secularism, the focus of attention remains very much the application of a doctrine conceived and universally applied by Europe.⁶¹ However, the West-centric character of postsecular theorising is not limited to the analysis of secularism. As Pasha is at pains to show, it is with at best partial exceptions equally evident in the conceptualisation of the postsecular society; more often than not Islam is viewed as a totalising abstraction devoid of its concrete heterogeneity. Even Islam's relationship with the West is generally set in a Western context, hence the emphasis on the growth of Muslim minorities in Europe. The non-West, insofar as it intrudes into the analysis, does so largely as the victim of Western political dominance and cultural arrogance.

Given the colonisation of the non-West and the West's continued ascendancy in the immediate aftermath of decolonisation, this is not an altogether unreasonable emphasis. Yet, much has changed over the last several decades. Powerful and converging currents indicate that the epoch of the West's global ascendancy may be coming to an end.⁶² We are in all probability witnessing the beginning of a secular decline in the West's economic and political primacy, which may eventually be followed by a comparable decline in industrial, technological, and even scientific

⁵⁶ The evolving multi-spatial context of governance is elaborated at length in Joseph A. Camilleri and Jim Falk, *Worlds in Transition: Evolving Governance Across a Stressed Planet* (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2009), pp. 158–69.

⁵⁷ Jürgen Habermas, 'A "Post-Secular" Society – What Does that Mean?', *ResetDOC* (16 September 2008), available at: {<http://www.resetdoc.org/story/00000000926>} accessed 22 August 2011.

⁵⁸ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 1.

⁵⁹ Mendieta, 'An Interview with Jürgen Habermas', p. 6.

⁶⁰ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, pp. 807–8.

⁶¹ See Bangstad, 'Contesting Secularism/s', pp. 192–6.

⁶² See Matthew Hulbert, Prem Mahadevan, Daniel Möckli, and Roland Popp, 'Strategic Trends 2011: Key Developments in Global Affairs', Center for Security Studies, available at: {<http://www.sta.ethz.ch/Strategic-Trends-2011>} accessed 20 September 2011.

competitiveness. The economic rise of Asia is obvious enough, but the economic and geopolitical shift also encompasses parts of Latin America and the Middle East. Emerging spheres and patterns of influence are discernible both regionally and globally. The shift is in any case compounded by the diminishing efficacy of the global projection of military power, as the high costs and dubious benefits of recent US expeditions in the Middle East and West Asia graphically illustrate.⁶³ Postsecularism's inability to integrate these trends into its analysis is especially problematic on three counts. First, if postsecular formulations are to have international traction they need to be applicable to, hence cognisant of, the unique cultural and political circumstances of highly diverse societies the majority of which are non-Western. Secondly, to the extent that the arena of contestation and decision-making, not least in relation to religion's place in the temporal order, is increasingly regional and global, there is no alternative but to make space for non-Western centres of power and influence. Thirdly, and in direct consequence of the two previous observations, if the management of religious and cultural plurality is the centrepiece of the postsecular project, then its success will in large measure depend on whether or not it is possible to intrude into the analysis the epistemological and cosmological insights of all major religious and ethical traditions.

The other three weak links in the chain of postsecular theorising are implicit in the almost exclusive centrality ascribed to the state and national society on the one hand and to the West on the other. The resurgence of religion on to the political stage derives much of its political resonance and cultural significance from the fact that it relates to and draws sustenance from the wider phenomenon commonly referred to as identity politics,⁶⁴ which it must be said is at best marginal in postsecular theorising. Postsecularism's primary concern, it is reasonable to suggest, has been to elucidate two distinct but interlinked questions: how religious identity is to be given appropriate expression in the public sphere, generally conceived as national in scope; and how this public sphere is to accommodate the plurality of religious and non-religious orientations. But to pose these two questions is to invite careful examination of the relationship between religious identity and multiple other identities.

Numerous observers of late modernity have drawn attention to the new forms of collective consciousness and expression and to the widespread sense of insecurity and anxiety which they reflect and seek to mobilise. While some have viewed this trend as a delayed reaction to the marginalisation of religion and the sacred, others have pointed to the rejection of rationalised and individualised structures of consciousness fostered by the Enlightenment, and reinforced by modernisation and Westernisation.⁶⁵ Others still have referred to the intensification of transnational security threats⁶⁶ and

⁶³ Joseph A. Camilleri, 'The "War on Terror": Reassessing Rationale and Efficacy', in Hans Köchler (ed.), *The 'Global War on Terror' and the Question of World Order*, Studies in International Relations XXX (Vienna: International Progress Organisation, 2008), pp. 58–84.

⁶⁴ See William Connolly, *Identity/Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); Avigail Eisenberg and Jeff Spinner-Halev (eds), *Minorities Within Minorities: Equality, Rights, and Diversity* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005); Linda Alcoff (ed.), *Identity Politics Reconsidered* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006).

⁶⁵ See B. Nelson, 'Civilizational Complexes and Intercivilizational Encounters', *Sociological Analysis*, 34:2 (1973), p. 80.

⁶⁶ G. Keppel, *The Revenge of God: The Resurgence of Islam, Christianity and Judaism in the Modern World*, trans. Alan Braley (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), p. 192.

the pressures of globalisation.⁶⁷ No doubt the factors at work are both complex and interconnected for we are dealing with a highly variegated and multifaceted phenomenon. Though the response itself has been anything but uniform, one common thread is nevertheless discernible, namely the attempt to escape from what is experienced as an intolerable condition, whether it be insecurity, marginalisation or simply homelessness, by establishing or re-establishing ties across time and space.

In this sense, not just religious but tribal, ethnic, linguistic, racial, and even civilisational solidarities can be seen to offer 'the promise of a new home'.⁶⁸ The identities that have clashed in Northern Ireland, Cyprus, the former Yugoslavia, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Egypt, China, to name a few, have at times been constructed around religious themes and grievances. More often than not religion is not the decisive factor in identity construction, combining instead with other discontents, or playing a subordinate or even marginal role. Here we should intrude another consideration, for these identities often operate as much across as within national boundaries. A critical contributing factor to the 'deterritorialisation' of identity has been the diasporic phenomenon, that is, the dispersal of peoples who, as a result of either voluntary or forced migration, permanently reside as minorities in one or several host countries, yet maintain a deep sense of belonging by virtue of a common ancestry, a collective history closely connected to a specific homeland, or shared social and cultural mores, values, and traditions.⁶⁹ To the extent that postsecularism seeks to elucidate the challenge posed by contemporary pluralism in its diverse national and transnational settings, it has no option but to come to terms with hybrid and interacting identities and solidarities made all the more ambiguous yet elusive by virtue of globalising currents that show no sign of abating.

The three problematic areas we have just canvassed – the centrality accorded to the state, the assumed primacy of the West and the relative neglect of non-religious sources of identity – point singly and collectively to a fourth lacuna, namely the failure to relate the resurgence of religion and the diminishing resonance of secular formulations to a wider set of current and historical trends.⁷⁰ However one reads the history of the twentieth century, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the dramatic events we associate with the two world wars, the Great Depression, the Holocaust, the advent of nuclear weapons, and the underlying currents which gave rise to those events have ushered in a period of far-reaching transition.⁷¹ The evolutionary dynamic that is under way is open to varying interpretations, but there is no

⁶⁷ See Benjamin R. Barber, *Jihad Vs. McWorld* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996); Zygmunt Bauman, *Globalization: the Human Consequences* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1998); and Christian Karner and Alan Aldridge, 'Theorizing Religion in a Globalizing World', *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*, 18:1–2 (2004), pp. 5–32.

⁶⁸ Peter Berger, Brigitte Berger, and Hansfried Kellner (eds), *The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), p. 124.

⁶⁹ See Gabriel Sheffer, *Diaspora Politics: At Home and Abroad* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 9–12.

⁷⁰ A number of writers do acknowledge that the shift to post-secularity may in some way reflect or connect with the shift to post-modernity (see Kyrlezhev, 'The Postsecular Age', p. 24), but few attempt to tease out the connection or to analyse the implications of the limits to modernity for the postsecular understanding of culture and politics.

⁷¹ Jim Falk and I have argued that a shift of epochal proportions may be underway, and that the post-1945 period is perhaps best understood as a period of transition in which the 'simultaneously unifying and polarising impact of financial, commercial, information, demographic and ecological flows' is producing a geopolitical, geoeconomic and geocultural environment that is radically different from the one we normally associate with the Modern epoch. See Camilleri and Falk, *Worlds in Transition*, pp. 146–9.

denying that the Modern project is now subject to powerful constraints or limits.⁷² Some analysts dwell on the metaphysical limits that derive from the pre-eminent role ascribed to reason as the prime organising principle of social advancement, while others speak of ecological limits that arise from the interlocking of technoscience, capital, and the state.⁷³ Here we can discern a certain affinity with post-secular arguments that emphasise the reaction against disenchantment characteristic of modernised, bureaucratised, secularised societies. A different body of literature has focused on the intensifying limits to empire (graphically reflected in the demise of all major empires in a remarkably short space of time).⁷⁴ Others have drawn attention to the simultaneously unifying and polarising tendencies that are eroding national identity and state sovereignty,⁷⁵ thereby weakening the cohesion and stability of the nation-state. Finally, a number of writers have pointed to the in-built tendency of complex social and technical systems to generate and institutionalise higher-level risks.⁷⁶

Here our concern is not with the validity of any particular conceptualisation, but with the pervasive and intensifying sense that modernity is reaching the limits of its intellectual coherence and organisational efficacy. With a few notable exceptions, postsecular readings seem insufficiently attuned to the wider implications of the 'age of uncertainty', seemingly unable to connect their analysis of the changing relationship between religion and politics to the wider challenge-response dynamic which, though it manifests itself differently in different spaces and contexts, reflects two clearly discernible trends: increased social reflexivity and expanding organisational complexity in the wake of heightened turbulence. The emerging multi-dimensional framework of governance and the intricate linkages between public and private institutions which it entails are best understood as a response, however inchoate, to the perceived limits of modernity.

Postsecularism and the dialogical turn

Postsecular attempts to redefine the emerging relationship of religion and politics are in many respects unnecessarily limiting. There is more to the resurgence of religion than its increasing prominence in national discourse and practice. Religiously inspired forays on to the political stage in both Western and non-Western societies are symptomatic of the multifaceted and intensifying critique of the modern, seemingly sovereign, secular, national state. They reflect and contribute to the often diminished authority and efficacy of state institutions, and expose the limitations of the quasi-anarchic system of sovereign states.

Religion was not an insignificant factor in the unravelling of the Soviet empire, with Catholicism playing a crucial role in Poland and to a lesser extent in other Eastern

⁷² See Teresa Brennan, *Exhausting Modernity: Grounds for a New Economy* (London: Routledge, 2000).

⁷³ See Patrick Curry, 'Post-Secular Nature: Principles and Politics', *Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture and Ecology*, 11:3 (2007), pp. 284–304.

⁷⁴ See Muriel Chamberlain, *Decolonization: The Fall of the European Empires* (2nd edn, Oxford: Blackwell, 1999).

⁷⁵ See Joseph A. Camilleri and Jim Falk, *The End of Sovereignty? Politics in a Shrinking and Fragmenting World* (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar 1992); Michael Bothe, Mary Ellen O'Connell, and Natalino Ronzitti (eds), *Redefining Sovereignty: the Use of Force After the End of the Cold War*, (New York: Transnational Publishers, 2005).

⁷⁶ See Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (New Delhi Sage, 1992); Anthony Giddens, 'Risk and Responsibility', *Modern Law Review*, 62:1 (1999), pp. 1–10.

European countries, Islamic movements delivering a devastating blow to the Soviet presence in Afghanistan, and Russian Orthodoxy, though greatly weakened by decades of Soviet rule, managing nonetheless to hold on to religious practices and institutions and the loyalty of a remarkably wide cross-section of Russian society. In a rather different context but with comparable effect, religion has visibly impacted on contemporary Western European states, either directly through the growth of Muslim communities in Europe or indirectly through the upheavals sweeping across different parts of the Muslim world. The fundamentalist rethinking espoused by Sayyid Qutb, Ayatollah Ruhollah al-Khumayni, and Abu al-'Ala al-Mawdudi among others has in turn further entrenched Western perceptions of Islam as anti-modern, anti-secularist, and anti-Christian. In comparable yet contradictory fashion the contagious democratic upsurge of the 'Arab spring', though it may not be quite the 'postsecular revolution' Barbatto makes it out to be, has nevertheless set in motion powerful cultural and political dynamic currents that cut across national and geopolitical boundaries.

With a few partial exceptions, postsecular theorising has not yet adequately integrated the implications of this dichotomous trend, one where the fragility and potential delegitimisation of the state (in both developing and developed societies) mirrors and reinforces the tensions that underpin the West-Islam divide. What is under challenge here is not only or even primarily the justice or efficacy of this or that constitutional system but the West's conception of itself as a universal culture where progress is measured in the light of its own dominant cosmology and where the full force of the postcolonial experience of fragmentation and marginalisation unleashed by colonisation remains poorly understood.⁷⁷

As we have already noted, the stated ambition of postsecular discourse is to rethink the contemporary challenge of diversity. The question arises: if the project of individualistic democratic citizenship is now understood to be in crisis, what is to take its place? We may reasonably expect the responses proposed by postsecularists to suffer from the limitations of their diagnosis. As we have stressed more than once, the questioning of the secular order and the resistance to such questioning are as much political and cultural as they are religious, and their expression is at least as much international and transnational as it is national. Yet, the analytical limitations in the postsecular frame of reference do not necessarily or completely invalidate the normative thrust of postsecular thought. In framing new ways of accommodating societal diversity (given the inadequacies of secular formulations), a number of postsecular theorists have invoked two closely related ideas, namely inclusiveness and dialogue. These ideas, we should hasten to add, are not unique to postsecular theorising, nor have they as yet been translated from philosophical or social theoretical abstraction to practical policy guidance. Habermas comes closest to the task of translation when considering the place of ethnic and religious minorities in Western Europe. He proposes the inclusion of minority cultures in civil society (for example, the Muslim Turkish community in Germany) as the necessary condition for two desired outcomes: the opening up of the political community to a higher level of acceptance of cultural

⁷⁷ A number of writers, notably Asad, have lucidly articulated the nature of the Islam-West divide as evidenced in Europe (see Talal Asad, 'Muslims and European Identity: Can Europe Represent Islam?', in Elizabeth Hallam and Brian V Street (eds), *Cultural Encounters: Representing "Otherness"* (New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 209–27). Elizabeth Hurd has pointed to the negative perceptions of Islam as constitutive of 'European secularity, Identity and Culture' (Hurd, *The Politics of Secularism*, pp. 52–3).

alterity and the reciprocal opening of these 'subcultures' to participation in political life.⁷⁸ The underlying assumption here is that, contrary to what Scott Thomas calls the 'Westphalian presumption',⁷⁹ religious and cultural diversity is not a recipe for inevitable conflict and instability requiring the State to exercise coercive oversight or administer mechanisms of segmentation.⁸⁰

If inclusion of the many is the objective, then it follows that a method of interaction is needed consistent with acceptable levels of coexistence, however defined. It is here that dialogue is seen as offering the preferred strategic option. However, if a dialogical approach holds the key to the management of diversity, as much of the postsecular literature argues or at least intimates, then it becomes crucially important to establish the principles, contexts, and modalities that are to govern the dialogical enterprise. Particular communitarian and cosmopolitan perspectives can no doubt shed useful light on this question, but there is little to be gained here from revisiting the sterile controversy which has pitted 'defenders of holistic unity' against 'champions of radical diversity and fragmentation'.⁸¹ For its proponents dialogue's virtue is precisely its capacity to reconcile unity and plurality. In the cosmopolitan conception such reconciliation is achieved by affirming the equality of all those who engage in dialogue, which is another way of saying that no position, set of beliefs or worldview can be presumed to be superior to another.

How, then, is a conversation among equals to be negotiated, especially in the context of profound disagreement. Eschewing the extremes of cosmopolitanism and communitarianism, Habermas proposes a 'third position' which seeks to reconcile 'the unity of reason' with 'the plurality of its voices'.⁸² Here unity is achieved not by imposition through adherence to some metaphysical conception of universal unity but by the sustained and reasoned interaction of those engaged in dialogue. The primacy that Habermas attaches to reason as the *lingua franca* of communication and the associated commitment to proceduralism have led many to question whether his approach is not unduly tilted in favour of the rationalist bias in the Western philosophical tradition.⁸³ As Fred Dallmayr and others have argued, the Habermasian emphasis on rational discourse risks disadvantaging those whose cultures and life-worlds have already been subjected to varying forms of marginalisation.⁸⁴

Linklater has sought to qualify Habermas's discourse ethics by positing a 'thin universality' where the accent is on sensitivity to difference and a readiness to suspend judgment on the validity of norms until 'they have or could command the

⁷⁸ Habermas, 'A "Post-Secular" Society – What Does it Mean?' (see fn. 53).

⁷⁹ Scott Thomas, 'Of Religion and the Changing Character of International Politics', in Max L. Stackhouse and Diane B. Obenchain (eds), *God and Globalization: Christ and the Dominions of Civilization* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002), p. 110.

⁸⁰ See Fabio Petito, 'In Defence of Dialogue of Civilizations: With a Brief Illustration of the Diverging Agreement between Edward Said and Louis Massignon', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 39:3 (2011), pp. 769–71.

⁸¹ Fred Dallmayr, 'Diversity Conversation Across Boundaries: Political Theory and Global Diversity', *Journal of International Studies*, 30:2 (2001), p. 331.

⁸² Jürgen Habermas, 'The Unity of Reason in the Diversity of Its Voices', *Postmetaphysical Thinking: Philosophical Essays*, trans. William M. Hogengarten (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), pp. 115–17.

⁸³ See Thomas Diez and Jill Steans, 'A Useful Dialogue? Habermas and International Relations', *Review of International Studies*, 31:1 (2005), pp. 127–40.

⁸⁴ Fred Dallmayr, *Alternative Visions: Paths in the Global Village* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998), p. 262.

consent of all those who stand to be affected by them'.⁸⁵ This qualification, however, does not entirely satisfy those who subscribe to a Gadamerian conception of dialogue where each participant 'opens himself to the other person, truly accepts his point of view as worthy of consideration and gets inside the other'.⁸⁶ Dialogue thus become a vehicle as much for narrative and the sharing of life experiences as for rational discourse,⁸⁷ an opportunity to share something of the other's hopes, anxieties and aspirations.

The dialogical insights to which we have briefly referred clearly resonate with the postsecular reading of emerging trends, yet their analytical and prescriptive application to specific cultural and political contexts has barely got under way. What kind of dialogue or dialogues can accommodate the multiple religious, ethnic, or cultural identities that vie for recognition in the public sphere? This overarching question encompasses three largely unanswered questions, each critical to a viable and enduring reconstruction of the secular project: What are to be the primary political objectives of the postsecular dialogue? Who are to be the agents and participants in the dialogue? What are the sites where such dialogue is to occur, and what are to be the key points of intersection and coordination between these multiple sites?

Here we can only allude to the importance and complexity of these questions. The dialogical possibilities implicit in postsecularism have yet to receive the scrutiny they deserve. At the same time a glaring, not to say dangerous gap has emerged between the theoretical expositions of the nature and rationale of the dialogical enterprise and the practical initiatives that the dialogical movement has spawned, especially in the post-Cold War period. The relevance of dialogue for a world in profound transition cannot be determined in isolation from the actual discourses, practices, institutions, relationships, and conflicts that are at the centre of contemporary political life. Theoretical debates as to whether the primary goal of dialogue is 'agreement' or 'understanding' become less than compelling as one moves from the abstract to the concrete. Religious, ethnic, linguistic, cultural, or even civilisational difference – in its multiple and diverse expressions – is politically significant in two respects: as risk or liability and as opportunity or asset. Expressed at the highest level of generality the dual purpose of dialogue is to minimise the risks associated with deeply felt collective anxieties and insecurities and to maximise the benefits that derive from pooling the intellectual, psychological, and organisational insights and resources of diverse communities and identities.

In this dual sense dialogue may be pursued to generate enhanced mutual understanding of diverse histories and visions of the future. Similarly, it can be an invaluable instrument for reaching agreement – not necessarily or most profitably agreement on universal principles, but rather diagnostic agreement on the major challenges confronting the post-Modern world, of which the most obvious are the rich-poor divide, actual or threatened armed conflict, gross violations of human dignity, in particular mass atrocity crimes, and environmental degradation.⁸⁸ Subsuming all of these is

⁸⁵ Andrew Linklater, *The Transformation of Political Community: Ethical Foundations of the Post-Westphalian Era* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), p. 96.

⁸⁶ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1979), p. 347.

⁸⁷ Richard Shapcott, *Justice, Community and Dialogue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 106–26.

⁸⁸ An exemplar of this line of inquiry is the focus on global poverty in Eduard Jordaan, 'Dialogic Cosmopolitanism and Global Justice', *International Studies Review*, 11:4 (2009), pp. 736–48.

the challenge which lies at the core of the postsecular project: how to accommodate the overlapping and competing religious and non-religious identities and allegiances occupying diverse political spaces in the vastly altered circumstances of the early twenty-first century. The relevance of dialogue lies precisely in its reflexive capacity to engage multiple stakeholders in the analysis of the current period of transition, and the likely impact of the scale, speed, and intensity of change. Beyond diagnosis, dialogue may also yield agreement – a possible though by no means certain outcome – on what might be appropriate responses to the challenges in question. Simply put the dialogical project is multi-dimensional. It includes not only the dialogue of beliefs but also the dialogue of emotions, the dialogue of analysis but also the dialogue of action (in this context it is worth noting Dallmayr's insistence on the primacy of lived experience in contrast to the Habermasian stress on communicative rationality).

Another even more difficult question revolves around agency and participation. In principle all human beings can participate in dialogue, and indeed any number of practical steps can be taken to enhance capacities and opportunities for dialogue and to institutionalise it in numerous settings. However, this constitutes at best a highly generalised and not so helpful principle. The question remains as to the kinds of participation needed to achieve particular outcomes. If the postsecular agenda is to redefine the Westphalian and Enlightenment conceptions of the secular state, and if the dialogical route is considered helpful in pursuing this goal, the question becomes: who is best placed to contribute to this dialogical redefinition of political theory and practice? Is it philosophers, sociologists, political scientists, religious scholars, and intellectuals of one kind or another? Or, is it poets, artists, publicists? Or again, is it politicians, bureaucrats, industrialists, financiers, professionals, unionists, religious or community leaders, and practitioners of one kind or another? Or is it to be some mix of these categories depending on time, place, and context? And when these or others engage in dialogue, do they do so in their personal capacities or as formal or informal representatives of their respective identities, communities, or worldviews? Who in any case can speak for Egyptian Copts, Kurds, Palestinians, or Tamils in Sri Lanka, let alone for Christianity, Islam, or Confucianism? The issue here is not just one of representativeness but of legitimacy. If dialogue is as much about listening as it is about speaking, then whose listening counts? Does the listening of some count for more than the listening of others? These are practical but also intensely theoretical questions, which go to the heart of the dialogical option, its rationale, methodology, and efficacy. It may well be that for the postsecular agenda to be advanced dialogue within faiths, cultures, civilisations, and secular and other groupings is as pertinent as dialogue between them. And, regardless of how the question of participation is addressed, we are left with still another excruciatingly difficult question. Whose responsibility is it to answer these questions, to initiate, facilitate, monitor, and follow up on these dialogues? Where does institutional responsibility lie? Is there a division of labour? If so, what is its theoretical underpinning?

This long list of questions leads us directly to a third area of difficulty, which postsecular discourse cannot evade. If the aim is to achieve a new reconciliation of unity and difference, then, as I have been at pains to argue, careful consideration must be given to the political setting within which such reconciliation is to occur. If the widening and fusing of horizons is a key objective during the current period of transition, then the proposed accommodation must necessarily proceed within a

complex and rapidly evolving governance framework.⁸⁹ It is the failure to grasp the multi-spatial and multi-dimensional character of the challenge to secularity, which restricts the perceptiveness of the postsecular narrative and compromises the efficacy of its normative intent.

Habermas's notion of 'constitutional patriotism' as a substitute for nationalism is troublesome precisely because of the primacy it attaches to 'national culture'.⁹⁰ Though there is no denying the cosmopolitan ethos which animates Habermas's prescriptions, the implication that the problem is locatable, understandable, and remediable first and foremost within the confines of the national state is misconceived, which is not to argue that the national domain does not offer valuable formal and informal channels for refashioning a richer pluralist vision of the future. Conscious perhaps of the limitations implicit in an exclusive reliance on national institutions, Habermas has entertained a European project which extends the sense of shared identity and develops over time new forms of 'civil solidarity'.⁹¹ The inclusion of regional political space in postsecular analysis is a welcome but insufficient step, especially if regionalism is somehow seen as uniquely relevant to the European context, and where such relevance is conditional on 'conserving the democratic achievements of the nation-state'.⁹² Even Connolly, whose notion of 'network pluralism' is clearly premised on a wider conception of citizenship, often finds it difficult to think outside the confines of the territorial state. He does entertain the possibility of 'non-state, cross-territorial citizen assemblages that apply pressures to states from inside and outside simultaneously', but only as an expression of the pivotal role of the territorial state.⁹³

There is good reason to think that the institutional canvas which defines the post-secular age is more extensive and polymorphous than either Habermas or Connolly has thus far recognised. If we take the most important postsecular insight to be the need to reassess the secularist division between religion and the state, it is because we sense that the very categories 'religion' and 'state' are undergoing profound change, as is the case with the wider geocultural and geopolitical context within which religion and the state function. It should not therefore surprise us if the pre-existing Euro-American categories on which the secularist division was founded no longer provide an adequate prism through which to interpret the rapidly evolving relationship of politics to space, time, and identity. A new normative, legal, and political architecture is emerging, which has its origins in modernity and even earlier epochs, but is no longer explicable purely in terms of the categories of those epochs. Such innovation does not, of course, wipe the slate clean; it simply overlays, interacts with and gradually modifies pre-existing habits of thought and modes of action.

⁸⁹ The key dimensions of the emerging governance framework are examined in Camilleri and Falk, *Worlds in Transition*, pp. 158–69.

⁹⁰ Jürgen Habermas, *The Inclusion of the Other: Studies in Political Theory* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), p. 118.

⁹¹ Jürgen Habermas, *The Postnational Constellation: Political Essays* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), p. 99.

⁹² See Robert Fine and Will Smith, 'Jürgen Habermas's Theory of Cosmopolitanism', *Constellations*, 10:4 (2003), p. 354.

⁹³ William E. Connolly, 'Cross-State Citizen Networks: A Response to Dallmayr', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 30:2 (2001), p. 351. Commenting on Taylor's *The Secular Age*, Connolly refers to the need for a 'deep, multidimensional pluralism within and across territorial regimes' without, however, characterising or explaining the significantly altered physical and social space in which such pluralism is increasingly embedded (See SSRIC, *The Immanent Frame*, available at: {<http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2008/04/17/belief-spirituality-and-time/>}).