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Focus: Religiosity and Public Spaces

Expressions, Mediations, and Exclusions in Post-secular Societies: Introduction

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Modernist theories of development and democratization predicted that secularization would lead to the disappearance of religion. This has not happened. But contemporary democratic states are secular and define religion as a private matter. At the same time, a politics of recognizing religiosity is deeply rooted in the modern state, and it is obvious that intangible values play an important role and have a valid claim to public spaces. On the metaphorical agora, the square that constitutes the middle ground between the cathedral and the parliament, commitment born in the cathedral is transformed into rational arguments that can be presented in parliament. But who governs the square? Do spiritual values need a public defence? Can or should all religious commitments and expressions be transformed into profane arguments? How could public spaces be designed and maintained to promote peaceful mediations between profane, sacred and other principled commitments? By assembling artistic and academic thinkers who do not confine themselves to intellectual analysis, but demand our involvement and our realization that we are part of the processes we are considering, this Focus contributes to a discussion of religiosity and public spaces in post-secular societies.

Introduction

Modernist theories of development predicted that secularization would eventually lead to the disappearance of religion. Today we are witnessing rather the opposite. Existential reflection and the craving for inclusion in something beyond the self appear to be fundamental to the human condition. It follows that places and common arenas for introspection and contemplation are needed. Contemporary democratic states are secular and define religion as a private matter. However, this does not suggest that they are a-religious. Quite the contrary, a politics of recognizing religiosity is deeply rooted in the historical tradition of the modern world. Religious freedoms are constitutionally guaranteed. For instance, airports everywhere have rooms for silence and contemplation.

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What new institutional processes could support a politics that recognizes the human need for spiritual identification and practice? How are religiosity and spirituality articulated, represented, and expressed in secular states? Would such expression benefit from public support that is not channelled through sectarian organizations?

To explore these themes, we arranged a workshop on 16 November 2009, entitled *Responsibility for Intangible Values in Public Space: Why, Where and by Whom*? We invited speakers on the basis of not only academic excellence and intellectual zeal, but their ability to bring a personal dimension to the questions under consideration. Such people do not confine themselves to academic analysis, but demand our involvement and our realization that we are part of the processes under consideration.

Explorations by the speakers of religiosity in post-secular public spaces were accompanied by choreographer Eva Ingemarsson's staging of dialogue and spirituality. The purpose was to identify a possible need for ways of expressing and investigating religiosity other than rational dialogue and bureaucratic institutionalization.

Our desire was to create a programme that would encourage our commitment and spur the evolution of different approaches to the questions under discussion. We have reformulated workshop presentations into articles for this Focus and included the recorded dance performance as an integral part. We hope that the workshop and the Focus will make a difference for contributors, participants and readers alike.

Post-secularism

As with other recent 'post-' concepts, post-secularism should not be regarded simply as a linear temporal phenomenon. Rather it is an acknowledgment that secularism has entered a new phase and evolved into something that is different enough to require a fresh term. 'Post-secular' might also work as an expression of openness to intangible human experiences without naming or addressing what has been excluded from the secular-modernist model. But how do we address this aspect of human life without disparaging the experiences and longings of individuals?

Spanish philosopher Eugenio Trías tries to employ a language outside the modernist-secular understanding that often creates a dichotomy of rationalism, objectivity and secularism versus mysticism, subjectivity and religiosity. Trías describes what is normally called the Modern Era as the Age of Modern prophecy. There was a time when the term Modern was used in a prophetic way, as a solution and alternative in almost every field. The term wore an aura of the coming of a new age – a very prophetic quality. Rather than calling the present time post-modern or post-secular, Trías refers to it as the post-prophetic era. He says that modern philosophy could never escape the fact that Reason and Logos cannot find their own foundation. Logos can deal only with the manifested aspects of Being, not those that experience alone conveys. Religious experience and meaning cannot be judged by reason or science. Modern prophecy attached a messianic hope to reason and science that remains unfulfilled. In the post-prophetic era, there is less certainty, and therefore a need to acknowledge aesthetic, symbolic and religious experiences as non-reducible aspects of the human condition.[1]

Complexity theorist Stuart Kauffman is also concerned with modernist reductionism. He criticizes scientific reductionism from within. 'In physics, there are only happenings,

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only facts, only statements of fact about what "is". But we have seen that biology is not reducible to physics, nor is agency, an aspect of life, reducible to physics. With agency […] values enter. Once this is true, meaning and "ought" enter the universe. […] Values, meaning, doing, action, and "ought" are real parts of the furniture of the universe. "Ought" is central to much of human action and all our moral reasoning.'[2] Thus, values can be both real and intangible.

Abdullahi Ahmed an-Naim is one of the intellectuals who are involved in discussions that may be described as post-secular. Although he does not use that concept and talks about secularism instead, his discussion of the relationship between Islam and the secular state allows for a new kind of understanding that could be regarded as post-secular. An-Naim, with his social science approach, sees secularism as 'negotiation between the religious neutrality of the state and the public role of religion'.[3]

This enhances the legitimacy of both the secular state and religion. Thus, An-Naim makes a crucial departure from classical modernist theories of secularization, formulated most notably by sociologist José Casanova, that saw three different perspectives of secularization theory as interdependent: the first perspective consisted of the historical differentiation between social spheres, whereby religion separated from politics, economy and science; the second perspective understood secularization as the decline of religiosity; and the third perspective predicted the privatization of religion.[4]

This theory was constructed from an Enlightenment-centred analysis of European history. As with many sociological models, it was taken to be a universal social law. This was a mistake. But even within Europe, the theory has been proven wrong. Religions are more visible in public spaces, and post-positivistic theories have given rise to strong arguments for the impossibility of totally compartmentalizing social life. Although different logics govern politics, science and religion, the people involved in these activities are determined by their experience and practice in every sphere. It is impossible to be religious in private only. The secularist claim that religion and politics should be divorced is not scientific or analytical, but ideological. Berger and Zijderveld have argued that the predicted privatization of religion is correct in the sense that religion and worldviews in modern pluralistic societies may be chosen. But 'where secularization theory went wrong was in the assumption that these choices were likely to be *secular*' (emphasis in original).[5] This is also to say that reflection about one's religiosity is unavoidable.

One vital question is how and to what extent public spaces are open to these choices, and how human beings can learn to respect the decisions of others and find ways to mediate between different religious aims – to be mutually supportive and come together in a larger whole. Maybe, as Seligman *et al*. argue, we need new kinds of post-secular rituals that allow us to experience a sense of social belonging and live as if society were a harmonious whole. Everyone who wants to take part in the mediating practices of public spaces can be included in society. Perhaps there is no need to identify those who are authentic social creatures and those who are sincere in their commitment to parliamentary life. It is not so much a question of the building blocks of your discourse. As long as you act as if you are a part of society, that's all that matters.

Seligman *et al*. talk about 'the failure of our existing cultural resources [in the West] to deal with ambiguity, ambivalences, and the gentle play of boundaries that require

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both their existence and transcendence. All too often the modern world has absolute boundaries … Rather than trying to eliminate boundaries or to make them into unbreachable walls – the two approaches that so typified the twentieth century – ritual continually renegotiates boundaries, living with their instability and labile nature'.[6]

Jürgen Habermas is one of the social theorists who have lent credence to the term 'post-secular'. In his view, the term describes a society in which religion is not necessarily a vanishing phenomenon; on the contrary, religion has to be acknowledged as a valid, integral part of society. Religion must be given the right to have a public voice. Others, such as Richard Rorty, have argued forcefully that religion must be a strictly private matter and should not attempt to influence public policy. Still others, such as Hans Joas, have speculated that a change has taken place in Western social theory rather than in society itself. Another interesting critique is that the privatization of religion, now freed from its institutions, does not necessarily mean that human beings are free from authorities; rather, it means that spirituality is now controlled by capital and the market instead of sectarian institutions. Spirituality has become just another commodity. In societies where this takes place, the potentially emancipating and free power that religious institutions have always had is lost. A secular society might be more monolithic, even more totalitarian, as Slavoj Zizek argues.[7]

Returning to An-Naim, his discourse is situated outside the paralysing dichotomies of secularism versus religion and modernity versus tradition. If we can let go of these ideological concepts, we can develop new understandings, as in An-Naim's analysis of Turkey: 'It seems clear to me that the struggle in Turkey is between two views of secularism, one totalitarian and the other probably more democratic, and not between advocates of theocracy and secularism' (see Ref. 4, p. 218).

Tariq Ramadan's latest book *Radical Reform* also approaches a stance that can be called post-secular when asking rhetorically, 'Are our respective ethics no more than a body of principles that we protect away from the world (in a very intimate, if not marginal, sphere of our existence), or are they references through which we try to live coherently in our private and public lives?'[8] Ramadan's answer is that religious people, regardless of denomination, should act on their ethics in public spaces in order to help create a better world. It is not a choice between remaining traditional and becoming modern. It is a matter of shaping a future that uses tradition to take advantage of the good aspects of modernity and to place the struggle for a good life at the centre of public debate.

The above review is but a brief sketch of a few aspects of the current post-secular debate. But it points to an area of discussion that intrigued us and inspired us to arrange a workshop and a follow-up publication to discuss the role of intangible values in public spaces. As Swedish theologian Ola Sigurdson puts it: 'The choice is, so to say, not any longer between politics or religion, but rather the question is *what* politics and *what* religion should influence our future' (emphasis in original).[9] Our own conversations often addressed more tangible aspects of the question than what we had seen in the rapidly growing literature on post-secularism.

Religiosity and public spaces

One way of interpreting the post-secular predicament is to compare it with the parliamentary resistance to the political and democratic claims of working class movements at

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the turn of the twentieth century. Class struggle and consciousness were at best seen as legitimate grounds for political action. But in order to be part of proper and constitutional political governance, they had to be reformulated in terms of established political discourse. From the perspective of the hegemonic ruling class, working class interests were seen as unreasonable and irrational, as a force that sought to destroy the public space. We find interesting similarities in contemporary attacks on political claims grounded in religious sentiments and interests.

How can spaces be designed and maintained such that they are open to different discourses and do not expel that which is seen as threatening or foreign? How demanding can claims for inclusion be, how much power can be asked for? Is religious commitment the only way for the working class, the subaltern, to articulate its claim to participation and for a more just world order? Has class struggle been replaced by a religious struggle against the rich secular elite? Shantikumar Hettiarachchi's article 'Sufficiency and Material Development: a Post Secular Reflection in the Light of Buddhist Thought' looks at the potential of a Buddhist understanding of sufficiency to alleviate capitalist exploitation of the poor, as an alternative to confrontational class struggle. Hettiarachchi relates to a growing discussion of happiness as a political concept. For more and more people around the world, the link between wealth and happiness is not causal. New areas of political debate are emerging, and the secular, materialist demarcations of political life are increasingly insufficient. Even if secularism is an important, positive aspect of the modern nation state – an assertion that is open to disagreement – the demand for public articulation of values is in constant flux and has reached a point where intangible values must have stronger representation. Materialistic rituals are rampant in public life: the daily reporting of the fluctuations of the stock market, of GDP statistics and public opinion polls. But what about happiness?

In his presentation at the workshop, Father Thomas Michel, Secretary of the Jesuit Secretariat for Interreligious Dialogue in Rome, insisted that all political stances taken by a religious person must be grounded in religious commitment. The secular dictate that religion and politics must be kept separate is nothing but an ideological attempt to exclude religion. Even though Michel stresses in his daily life that all argumentation must be built on nonreligious foundations, he feels that his intentions have often been regarded as suspect, not because of the work he has done, but because he is a Jesuit priest. In his work for human rights, this should not make any difference. But despite not having advanced religious arguments or advocated religious practices, he feels that his sincerity is questioned simply because he has a religious commitment in other spheres.

Secularism may claim that only positive, rational arguments are allowed in parliament. Habermas's post-secular turn acknowledges that religious sentiments can play a role in inspiring people to take part in rational communication and parliamentary efforts. But all their arguments must be transformed into positive terms. If you try to use religious expressions in parliament, you will be expelled (see Singh's article). On the metaphorical agora, the square that constitutes the public middle ground between the Cathedral and the Parliament, commitment born in the Cathedral must be transformed into rational arguments that can be presented in parliament. But who governs the square? Can or should all religious commitment be transformed into profane arguments? Is the square mainly an

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arena for argumentation, or is it rather a place for public festivities and rituals? Could mediations between profane, sacred and other principled commitments not be carried out inside parliament?

If the parliamentary position acts as if it has the full responsibility and authorisation to decide what symbols can be presented in the square, the democratic right of all citizens to take part in communal decision making is compromised. Along these lines, Aakash Singh interprets Habermas's defence of parliament as being emotional and religiously biased. Parliament seems to be under threat from people and perspectives that do not belong there. This is why Habermas's use of language becomes conservative and revivalist: he is defending an identification with *his* Europe that is imperilled by foreign religious perspectives. In his article 'Habermas's Wrapped Reichtag: Limits and Exclusions in the Discourse of Post-secularism', Singh offers a polemic but thought-provoking interpretation. What must be stressed, however, is the vast importance of Habermas's having started this debate. Merely by conceptualizing the need for recognition of the intangible, spiritual aspects of human life, he has set the stage for this critique and the evolution of a whole field of discourse. That a well-established Enlightenment thinker made this move is of no small importance.

When post-secular discussions of religiosity become heated and tense, it is important to stress that the anxiety is very European, related to a specific conception of the secular nation-state. In the United States, intangible values still have strong political representation, and religion affiliation is almost compulsory. More Americans would vote for a religious non-Christian presidential candidate than an atheist.[10] That brings us to Thomas Barrie's contribution to the Focus, which is written both from and about the American context.

In his article 'Sacred Space and the Mediating Roles of Architecture', Barrie reminds us that human beings are always bodies in a spatial environment. Different ways of structuring space create latitude for different ideas and values. Architecture is both a form of knowledge and mediation between individuals and the sacred, as well as among social spheres. In what Barrie calls archaic societies, religion was the only public space, and sacred architecture symbolized and guided people's interaction with the holy.

In secular, differentiated societies, religion is but one sphere, alongside politics, culture and economics. The Temple is flanked by the Stock Market, the Parliament, the Shopping Mall, the Theatre, the Library and the Internet. In multicultural societies, it is also surrounded by other temples, cathedrals, mosques, synagogues and churches. How does this affect the mediating role of sacred architecture? How does it affect the ideal secular square as a middle ground between church and state? How can the square be a place that resonates with the intangible claims of the different actors and institutions around it?

Can the multifaceted square be articulated as a communicative space, capable of bringing about a Habermasian ideal speech situation, or does it run the risk of covertly excluding those not versed in the hegemonic language? If a message or a communicative statement is by virtue of its form and content directed only towards one discursive community, as Singh maintains, how can it be argued that its aim is inclusive and that it invites new participants into the discourse?

In his discussion of architecture, Barrie stresses the importance of the ritualistic and symbolic aspects of human life. A debate about the post-secular predicament cannot be

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merely philosophical. Public spaces are always physical, and interactions among different commitments are inevitably embodied in concrete, living individuals. Living individuals are always moved by much more than by rational arguments. To fully grasp the post-secular predicament, we need tools beyond academic discourse. This is why a dance performance, exploring embodiment and space, was a vital part of the workshop.

Eva Ingemarsson's work explores the interconnections between dance, still photography and video. In *Defensa – Tesoro 2*, the performance presented at the workshop, interviews with the dancers are central to the narrative. *Defensa* is a direct sequel to *Tesoro* (2007) and has a general theme of defence, both mental and physical: defence of ourselves, our loved ones, our lives, ideas, inclinations and identities. When does this help us and when does it become an obstacle? Three dancers, three dolls, three filmed alter egos and three cubes appear on stage. The cubes form three life spaces that both limit and lend freedom. In them the dancer encounters herself, her memories, her resistance, her innate darkness and a blinding light.

In her contribution 'Expressing Religiosity in a Secular Society: the Relativisation of Faith in Muslim Communities in Sweden', Anne-Sofie Roald also deals with embodied and spatial participation. How do Muslims embody the Swedish public domain, with architecture and ornamentation? One reading of Roald's article suggests that the Muslim embodiment of Swedish public life is largely the responsibility of Muslim women: the dress code to which they are subject highlights their faith much more than is the case with their male co-religionists. Thus, their participation in public spaces is always framed by otherness and religion. Roald argues that the secular differentiation of public spheres and the privatization and individualization of religion are healthy. A space is created in which citizens with different religious commitments, or none at all, can meet as equals. From such a perspective, Muslim aspirations for distinct symbols, architecture, dress and behaviour represent a step back from the public nature of communal spaces.

A Muslim commitment also includes qualities other than distinguishing people from their fellow citizens. The square should have common symbols – probably those of the majority community. But how does this tally with contemporary shopping malls and town squares and their punk rockers, skaters, surfers, yuppies, hippies, tattoos, etc? How can a veil be regarded as a problem among all these diverse dress codes and symbols?

Drawing on Seligman *et al*.'s *as if*, we might argue for a Bachtian *carnevalesque* exchange of symbols and dress as an integrative practice – dancing a quadrille on the square as if we are all equals. Even if it conserved social inequalities, it could constitute a politics of otherness and recognition that did not lead to disintegration but maintained a bond between groups with no insistence on cultural integration or subordination.

How do we retain peace and create solidarity among the people who share public spaces? What symbols carry identification with a common interest and a sense of responsibility? Our interest is in the importance of public spaces. We are *zoon politikon*. We need public spaces as common land. We must defend the virtues of openness and social inquisitiveness. Life on the square must be a common responsibility. It is obvious today that intangible values play an important role and have staked a valid claim to embody public spaces. But how can this be done in an inclusive and communal way?

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