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In pursuit of the postsecular

Arie L. Molendijk*

History of Christianity & Philosophy, Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, Groningen, The Netherlands

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This article explores the various uses or – according to some authors, such as the sociologist James Beckford – misuses of the term ‘postsecular’. The variations in its use are indeed so broad that the question is justified whether the terminology as such has much analytical value. The prominence of the ‘postsecular’ in present-day debates in my view primarily indicates the inability among scholars, intellectuals and religious interest groups to come to grips with what – for some at least – is an unexpected presence and resurgence of religion in the public domains of presumably secular societies. The work of the cultural anthropologist Talal Asad shows that the secular does not preclude the religious. All kinds of religious arguments, organizations, and agents are very much present in modern ‘secular’ societies. From this perspective, the emergence of the ‘postsecular’ refers to very real phenomena, most importantly the intertwining of the secular and the religious. For instance, religious actors do not accept the barriers of secular society and claim a role for religion in public and secular arenas. This insight could be one of the most important driving forces behind the popularity of the term ‘postsecular’ in recent years.

Keywords: postsecular; Jürgen Habermas; secular & religious; public & private; Talal Asad; James Beckford

The prefix ‘post’ has gained a remarkable or even – as some would say – odd currency in the academic world. The word implies that we have now reached a new era or a new understanding of things. It started perhaps more or less innocently with terms such as post-industrial, which has the rather precise connotation that the service and information sectors of the economy produce more wealth than the manufacturing of goods, but then we got ‘poststructuralism’, ‘postcolonial’ and, of course, ‘postmodernism’. Especially in cultural studies, philosophy and theology these and similar terms carry much weight, and the danger of overburdening them with a variety of sometimes contrary meanings is certainly not illusory. More than 25 years ago Mike Featherstone already pointed to this danger:

Any reference to the term ‘postmodernism’ immediately exposes one to the risk of being accused of jumping on a bandwagon, of perpetuating a rather shallow and meaningless intellectual fad. One of the problems is that the term is at once fashionable yet irritatingly elusive to define.¹

The term ‘post’ as such may already ring a bell with many commentators who are sceptical about its analytical value. If the term ‘modernity’ stands for the transitory and

*Corresponding author. Email: a.l.molendijk@rug.nl

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the volatile,² for permanent change, what are we then to expect from ‘postmodernity’? In 1975, a newspaper announced that ‘postmodernism is dead’, and that ‘post-post-modernism is now the thing’.³ *Le roi est mort, vive le roi*. The popularity of the prefix indicates primarily the continuous process of acceleration of change in our late-modern world and the attempt of intellectuals to take this phenomenon seriously. Already in 1825 the German poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe invented the term *veloziferisch* (a contraction of *velocitas* [speed] and Lucifer), hinting at the damaging aspects of the ideal of permanent change as a goal in itself (<http://wien.gbw.at/wien/artikelansicht/beitrag/goethes-velozifer-oder-beschleunigung-als-alter-hut.html>. <http://www.fremdwort.de/suchen/bedeutung/Veloziferisch>).

At first sight, the term ‘postsecular’ seems to fit rather well into the ‘post discourse’ of overcoming an old era and moving into a new order. Although the use of the term may have a periodical aspect, the claim that the ‘secular age’ has been overcome does not figure very prominently among proponents of ‘the postsecular’. The term rather refers to the idea that there is space – and more importantly, public space – for religion in our time. An allegedly ‘secular’ state does not imply – according to the emerging consensus of many scholars of religion – that the only location for religion is in the sphere of private individuals and their communities. Even liberal social philosophers such as John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas have acknowledged this fact.

This observation calls into question at least one important aspect of the secularization thesis: the idea of secularization as privatization. José Casanova has famously pointed to the phenomenon of ‘reprivatisation’ of religion, to religious or religiously inspired movements which challenge the legitimacy of the primarily secular spheres of the state and the market economy.⁴ The establishment of a public sphere in the Enlightenment period, Casanova argues, does not forbid a *public* role of religion; instead, it opens up new opportunities. We see that modern churches adapt themselves to the new paradigm by evolving from state-oriented into society-oriented institutions.⁵ Thus, the ‘postsecular’ discourse involves criticism of specific aspects of the secularization thesis.

A remarkable fact is that the adjective ‘postsecular’ is more commonly used than the nouns ‘postsecularism’ and ‘postsecularity’. Although the use of the term may imply a critique of particular forms of secularism, especially of the strong French version often referred to as *laïcité*, the main semantic opposition is that to ‘secular’ rather than ‘secularism’. Somehow a new constellation of the religious and the secular is envisioned, overcoming a simple dichotomy between these two terms, which are constitutive of the predominant understanding of modern history in the Western world. My hypothesis is that ‘postsecular’ stands for the attempt to understand the position and role of religion in late modernity in a way that overcomes the idea that ‘religion’ is basically a premodern phenomenon which will disappear in the long run.

If this is a sound suggestion, it will also be evident what an immensely vast and complex field of research is opened by the discourse of the ‘postsecular’. Is there anything to be gained by the introduction of this term, or it is only a cover-up by researchers unwilling to acknowledge their own ignorance? One thing – I guess – is certain: our current understanding of religions and religious phenomena can and must be improved by taking the secular into account. Before going deeper into these big issues, we will first have a look at the uses of the term ‘postsecular’. I shall sketch a variety of uses, paying special attention to those developments which are particularly relevant for theologians and philosophers who want to explore what ‘postsecular’ may mean when it comes to describing, analysing and evaluating religions.

The multifarious uses of the postsecular

The discourse of ‘the postsecular’ is ripe for critical analysis, according to the sociologist James A. Beckford in his 2010 presidential address to the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion. Before reaching his conclusion that the terminology is ‘problematic in itself’, he attempts to determine the varieties in its use. This is by no means an easy task, given the many meanings attached to the term in a pluralist academic landscape. In Beckford’s view, the concern with the postsecular is ‘strongest in theology and religious studies, philosophy, literary theory, postcolonial studies, sociology, anthropology, political science, international relations, and geography’.⁶ Others mention – perhaps somewhat surprisingly – psychology, ‘consciousness studies’ and fields such as quantum mechanics and studies of relativity as well.⁷

Beckford traces the earliest use of the term to an article by the Catholic sociologist Andrew Greeley entitled ‘After Secularity: The Neo-Gemeinschaft Society. A Post-Christian Postscript’, which was published in 1966 and promotes the idea of ‘small, subparochial, or transparochial fellowships of believers’ within the Catholic Church. ‘Postsecular’ refers to this *Gemeinschaft*-like community, which Greeley presents as some sort of must somehow be an antidote to processes of rationalization and secularization in the larger church bodies. Further research will no doubt uncover more of the term’s ‘pre-history’, but it is evident that the late 1990s saw a significant rise in the use of ‘postsecular’.⁸ Especially since 2000 the term has gained currency in the academic world, more and more conferences were organized, volumes appeared and even entire series were started.⁹ In the following overview, I take Beckford’s classification of the various usages of ‘postsecular’ as a starting point. He begins with the group of the ‘secularization deniers and doubters’. This is no doubt an important aspect of the use of the term, but one that is – as I would argue – common to other groups as well. Therefore, I do not count this as a distinct use of the terminology.

More helpful is the distinction of a particular usage that concerns *art (I)*. Beckford speaks about the re-enchantment of various art forms, whereas others refer to the reevaluation or vindication of the spiritual in art.¹⁰ The capacity to disclose transcendence in ways beyond the great traditional religions is framed in terms of postsecularity.¹¹ Here Beckford points to John McClure’s claim that novels by Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and Thomas Pynchon, and the films of Quentin Tarantino treat the everyday world ‘as but one dimension of a multidimensional cosmos, or as hosting a world of spirits’.¹² In his book *Partial Faiths*, McClure gives the following reasons for labelling a body of fiction ‘postsecular’:

[B]ecause the stories it tells trace the turn of secular-minded characters back toward the religious; because its ontological signature is a religiously inflected disruption of secular constructions of the real; and because its ideological signature is the rearticulation of a dramatically ‘weakened’ religiosity with secular, progressive values and projects.¹³

Other scholars use the word ‘postsecular’ to elucidate the work of video artist Bill Viola or the alleged transcending of dichotomies between science and religion in fictional works such as Yann Martel’s *The Life of Pi* and Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth*.¹⁴ McClure warns his readers not to confuse the turn to the postsecular religious with the return to forms of a secure religion that offers all the answers, such as in the ‘fundamentalist’, bestselling *Left Behind* series or James Redfield’s New Age novel *The Celestine Prophecy*. The ‘insistence on stubborn spiritual obscurity’ sets postsecular fiction apart from both New Age spirituality and a triumphant evangelicalism or fundamentalism.¹⁵ McClure’s formulations

immediately show how difficult it is to conceptually delineate the emerging new artistic phenomena he labels 'postsecular'.

Especially important is Beckford's *public resurgence of religion* group (2), with special attention to the renewed role of faith-based organizations (FBOs) in welfare states. Cultural geographers such as Paul Cloke and Justin Beaumont have been at the forefront of research on the role of such organizations in late capitalism. Services formerly provided by the state are now outsourced, which creates opportunities for faith groups to fill the gaps efficiently and professionally. The close cooperation between neo-liberal governments and FBOs may bear the risk of leading to co-option and commodification,¹⁶ but we may also see opportunities for 'the "salvation" of politics' at grassroots level.¹⁷

According to the theologian Luke Bretherton, the contribution of religious institutions and groups is 'crucial to invigorating a robust civil society and contradicting the commodification and instrumentalization of social relationships'.¹⁸ He argues that our present-day predicament must be understood 'as a period in which, for the first time, multiple modernities, each with their respective relationship to religious belief and practice, are overlapping and interacting with the same shared, predominantly urban spaces'.¹⁹ These strong claims are underpinned by detailed research into London Citizens (an alliance of community organizations). Justin Beaumont seems to hold similar ideas, as he formulates a kind of postsecular research focus:

If we consider the postsecular as the indication of diverse religious, humanist and secularist positionalities – and not merely an assumption of complete and total secularization – it is precisely the interrelationships between these dimensions and not just the religious that are taken into account.²⁰

Undoubtedly, religious groups are players in the urban sphere, where they cater for the needs of many people – economically, socially and spiritually. Much of this type of research is focused on big cities, which are confronted with the threats and opportunities of global markets.²¹

In the process of globalization, the notions of private and public, and of 'secular' and 'religious', are renegotiated and redefined, as it becomes more and more difficult to draw neat boundaries between these 'domains'. Below I will come back to the question what the 'postsecular' means for these dichotomies, which are much criticized but still used rather frequently. We may be slightly reluctant to do so, out of scepticism about the analytical value of these dichotomies, but, on the other hand, it is hard to see how we could do without this terminology that is so deeply ingrained in our Western understanding of the world. Notwithstanding the many varieties of the 'resurgence of the religious', this type of use of 'postsecular' is held together by the focus on the role of religious groups and individuals, particularly FBOs, in public, political and urban contexts.

Another of Beckford's clusters is *Building on the secular* (3). It refers to thinkers who see the postsecular 'as a progressive development that builds on the achievement of both religion and secularism'.²² In his view, Kim Knott is a good example of this usage as she understands the postsecular in terms of 'a re-sacralization or return to the religious (often couched in the language of spirituality) which took seriously secular values such as the importance of the self, human flourishing and human destiny, diversity, choice and freedom'.²³ Beckford includes many authors in this category, ranging from the Belgian Catholic theologian Lieven Boeve to the Dutch feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti, who argues that political subjectivity 'can actually be conveyed through and supported by

religious piety, and may even involve significant amounts of spirituality'.²⁴ Thus, the assumption that personal agency can only be based on a secular, liberal individualist model is called into question.

This cluster also points to the heavily debated issue of the merits of the various models of the secular and secularism. One of the most outspoken defenders of a 'postsecular' that builds on the secular is the American philosopher John D. Caputo. He is very explicit:

[T]he 'post-secular' style should arise by way of a certain *iteration* of the Enlightenment, 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. The 'post-' in 'post-secular' should not be understood to mean 'over and done with' but rather *after having passed through* modernity, so that there is no danger of the emergence of an irrational relativistic left, on the one hand, or of a lapsing back into a conservative pre-modernism masquerading under the guise of post-modern, on the other.²⁵

Caputo's criticism of Radical Orthodoxy, to which I will turn below, is evident. In his view proponents of Radical Orthodoxy such as John Milbank and Phillip Blond do not have any grounds for their claim to be postmodern or postsecular.

The next cluster presented by Beckford is *Politics, philosophy, and theology* (4), which already suggests problems of demarcation. The German philosopher Jürgen Habermas is doubtless a key figure in this category. In discussions about the role of religion in the public sphere, the work of Habermas, one of the most well-known and authoritative public intellectuals of the moment, is extremely influential. His 2007 Nexus Lecture at the University of Tilburg, published as 'Notes on a Post-Secular Society',²⁶ is cited again and again, and to a certain extent set the agenda for the debates about the 'post-secular', at least in sociology, political theory, philosophy and theology.

It is by no means easy to summarize Habermas's position, because over recent decades his thinking has been evolving from a secular view of the political – which is in principle the area of 'rational', 'secular' debate, where religious arguments do not count – to the acknowledgement that in certain areas of public deliberation and discussion it is not wise to exclude religious voices altogether. At the moment Habermas's view is that, depending on the type of religion, these voices can be important resources for the dialogue about the 'common good', and for establishing social cohesion and civil virtues. All the same, Habermas has been consistently critical of the New Age movement and fundamentalism. 'The Californian syncretism of pseudoscientific and esoteric doctrines and religious fundamentalism are thoroughly modern phenomena which may even express social pathologies of modernity, but certainly do not offer any resistance to them'.²⁷ Thus, he practically excludes these groups from the debate 'around the table of the public sphere'.²⁸ This type of comment marks the difference between the empirical sociologist Beckford and the philosopher Habermas, who does not hesitate to take a normative stance. Apparently somewhat to Beckford's surprise, even the philosopher Charles Taylor, an outspoken Catholic, ventures the opinion that there are 'zones of a secular state [i.e., legislation, administrative decrees, and court judgments] in which the language used has to be neutral'.²⁹ In deliberations, and also in public debates, religious convictions and arguments may play a much bigger role.³⁰

Habermas is not convinced by the multifarious criticism of the secularization theory. In Europe at least, religious communities have been increasingly confined to their core business of pastoral care and had to renounce their 'wide-ranging competencies in other social domains'.³¹ Given this, to him crucial, proviso, Habermas admits

that the loss of function does not necessarily lead to a loss of influence and relevance of religion, either in the public arena or in the personal life of believers. In this specific context he introduces the notion of the postsecular: ‘Today the description “post-secular society” can be applied to public consciousness in Europe in so far as for the time being it has to “adjust itself to the continued existence of religious communities in an increasingly secularized environment”’.³² This is an extremely cautious and circumspect statement, which refers to actual change in only a secondary sense (the continued existence of religion in an environment that becomes more and more secular), and primarily points to a ‘change in consciousness’. Actually, one must add critically, it is first of all a change in consciousness within the secularist, Western intellectual elites, whose spokesman Habermas is.³³

This change, of course, is not a random change of perspective, but is related by Habermas to three major developments. The first is the ‘media-generated’ perception of global developments as inspired by strong forms of religion. Developments are ‘often presented as hinging on religious strife’. It is again about consciousness and perception, which is driven by the media. Secondly, he refers to the presence of religious voices within the national public spheres, and, thirdly, he mentions the process of the immigration of ‘guest-workers’ and refugees, ‘especially from countries with traditional cultural backgrounds’, which may result in more strident dissonances between different religions and worldviews.³⁴ The notion of the ‘postsecular’ seems to be in the first place a category of (changed) perception of the role of religion in secular society. That does not mean, of course, that this new perception is not related to real developments, but even these are described partly in terms of (media-generated) perception. Habermas’s formulations still betray a scepticism about whether or not these resurgences of religion in the public consciousness and debate can really contribute to society at large. Beckford concludes his discussion of Habermas’s use of the term ‘postsecular’ by saying that it tells us more about Habermas’s concern about the state of democratic politics ‘than about any respect he may have for religion’.³⁵ This may be true, but it is not a completely fair assessment of Habermas, who in his later work seriously (albeit in a functionalistic way) evaluates and also appreciates religious sources of at least particular forms of religion, as contributing to a stable democracy as well as to human well-being.³⁶

Beckford ends his discussion of the uses or – from his point of view, perhaps more accurately – misuses of the ‘postsecular’ with the cluster *Critical and negative views of the concept (5)*. Some authors claim that the concept of the postsecular has no roots in empirical and historical data whatsoever and see it as a construction made by academics, who use it to obtain grants. The allegedly postsecular turn is actually ‘about exploring ways of thinking and acting that are (inclusively and modestly) secular’.³⁷ Still others are not convinced about the ‘re-emergence’ of the sacred and the religious, and call for some caution in welcoming the ‘arrival of the postsecular’.³⁸ Beckford himself is deeply sceptical about the concept. He points to tensions in the use of the notion (does it mean the end or just a refinement of the secular?), and claims that it ‘fails to throw light on some of the most pressing issues concerning religion in the public life today’.³⁹

Given the variety of its uses it is hard to pass judgement. Let me first try to summarize the five clusters of uses of ‘postsecular’ we have discerned so far:

- (1) Referring to the re-enchantment of art forms (a disclosure of transcendence beyond traditional religion)

- (2) Pointing to the resurgence of religion, especially to the role of faith-based organizations in urban environments
- (3) Referring to a wide range of users, who try to build on the secular and the religious at the same time
- (4) (Related to the second connotation) Used by Jürgen Habermas to refer to a change of consciousness concerning the persistent role of religions in our present-day world

Category containing the critical views on the concept

From a systematic point of view, this division is not really convincing, but it is helpful as a first grouping.

In the context of this special issue, it is helpful to add a sixth cluster, of users who are radically critical of secular or secularist approaches, which have to be overcome by a fully and all-encompassing Christian perspective. These are the proponents of *Radical Orthodoxy* (6). To get a taste of the sweeping critique of the ‘secular epistème’ I quote from the opening lines of Phillip Blond’s *Post-secular Philosophy*:

We live in a time of failed conditions. Everywhere people who have no faith in any possibility, either for themselves, each other, or for the world, mouth locutions they do not understand. With words such as ‘politics’, they attempt to formalise the unformalisable and found secular cities upon it. They attempt to live in the in-between and celebrate ambiguity as the new social horizon, always however bringing diversity into accord with their own projections. [...] Blind to the immanence of such a world, unable to disengage themselves from whatever transcendental schema they wish to endorse, these secular minds are only now beginning to perceive that all is not as it should be, that what was promised to them – self-liberation through the limitation of the world to human faculties – might after all be a form of self-mutilation.⁴⁰

John Milbank and Phillip Blond, and their radical orthodox colleagues, challenge the academic belief in purportedly objective accounts of reality. They call into question the opposition between faith and reason, and say that theology should not accept secular rationality, stating that in doing so much modern theology has forfeited its mission. According to Blond, it is time to ‘reverse the dreadful consequences of the liberal erasure of God’.⁴¹

In his book *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, John Milbank claims that Christian theology presents a viable and even more convincing interpretation of the world than secular approaches. ‘It is theology itself that will have to provide its own account of the final causes at work in human history, on the basis of its own particular, and historically specific faith’.⁴² In this way the predominant ‘ontology of violence’ will be replaced by an ‘ontology of peace,’ which is at the core of Christianity.⁴³ Social theory and sociology, in particular, are traced back by Milbank to their allegedly religious roots and exposed as forms of heretical theology, which led to a distorted interpretation of history. The only solution is to develop a better theology, inspired by Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. Such fundamental critique is not well received among social scientists, and when incidentally someone takes the trouble to respond to Milbank’s claims, he is accused of hubris and an utter neglect of empirical checks and balances.⁴⁴

This type of theology certainly does not belong to the cluster of ‘building on the secular’, because it aims at a re-evaluation of what are commonly seen as premodern

ways of thinking. According to John Caputo, radical orthodox theologians are more orthodox than radical, as they reprimatinate dogmatic forms of religion, which have to be overcome under postsecular conditions. Caputo's idea of a 'religion without religion' 'amounts to the recommendation that we return to the medieval sense of *vera religio*, where "religion" meant a virtue, not a body with institutional headquarters in Nashville or the Vatican, so that "true religion" meant the "virtue" of being genuinely or truly religious, of genuinely or truly loving God, not The One True Religion'.⁴⁵ This new, postsecular form of faith has a distinct ethical dimension and does not preclude manifestations of religion outside the religious domain. '[T]here is no safely secular sphere where we can be so sure that no religious fires burn'.⁴⁶ This may amount to a further 'blurring of conceptual boundaries',⁴⁷ but the interplay between the 'secular' and the 'religious', or the 'sacred' and the 'profane', is in my view one of the most fascinating topics in the modern study of religion.

The secular and the religious and the public and the private

The various uses and critiques of the postsecular may point to not only the new visibility of religion and the recognition of the fact that religions will not simply disappear or become privatized in the course of modern history, but also to the problems at stake in secular societies which have to deal with (public) manifestations of religion. Which expressions of religion must be tolerated in modern so-called secular societies? Can religion in whatever form make a contribution to the common good? Such questions are debated – not only by academics, but also in the public and political sphere in general. Western intellectuals are no longer sure about the limited role they once saw for religion. The question what counts as 'religion' is also fiercely debated nowadays.⁴⁸

One of the big issues to be addressed is the question what the demarcation between the 'religious' and the 'secular' actually means, and to what extent it can be upheld (under present-day conditions). Many scholars fail to see clear boundaries here, and one historian even said that 'religion is about something else' (for instance, law, economics, sexuality or entertainment).⁴⁹ A century ago the German theologian and sociologist Ernst Troeltsch already noted that the religious as such exists only for the theoreticians, but that at the market place of life there is no interest that could not be strengthened by connecting it to religion.⁵⁰ It is not so easy to fence in religion. The terms 'religious' and 'secular' imply each other, and hence must be studied in tandem. We badly need a reflexive study of the 'secular', which admittedly is in its 'relative infancy'.⁵¹ The origin and history of the term is relatively well-researched, and the detailed results need not be reiterated here.⁵²

Of particular interest in an exploration of 'the postsecular' are the issues generated by the binaries that have developed during the course of modern Western history. Charles Taylor summarizes these as follows:

But from the foundation of this clear distinction between the immanent and the transcendent there develops another dyad; in which 'secular' refers to what pertains to a self-sufficient, immanent sphere, and is contrasted with what relates to the transcendent realm (often identified as 'religious'). This binary can then undergo a further mutation, via a denial of the transcendent level, into a dyad in which one term refers to the real ('secular'), and the other to what is merely invented ('religious'); or where 'secular' refers to the institutions we really require to live in 'this world', and 'religious' or 'ecclesial' to optional accessories, which often disturb the course of this-worldly life.⁵³

In this way state and religion (church) could become fiercely opposed to each other. Especially in the French Third Republic the state acquired a moral and instructive role of its own and so took charge against the Catholic church. Here is the root of the idea that *laïcité* is all about controlling and managing religion.⁵⁴ In other countries, of course, Christian churches upheld their privileges, notwithstanding the official separation between state and religion. Different trajectories of secularization have evolved in the course of history – also within the Western world. 370

The fact that the churches are ‘losing their hold on the spiritual life of the nations, and many of their functions are now being exercised by educationalists, writers, administrators, and by voluntary associations’,⁵⁵ could be interpreted in terms of ‘secularization’.⁵⁶ The modern state is free to pursue its own – innerworldly – legal, political, military and economic objectives. The sovereignty of God is replaced by that of the state. This means the end of the medieval *corpus christianum*, the close cooperation of state and church. Consequently, religion turns into a separate domain and the church (gradually) loses its privileged position. Principally, there is no obstacle to new competitors on the religious market, and a plurality of churches (religious groups) may develop.⁵⁷ 375

The developments sketched above do not imply that religion has now been radically privatized. The modern predicament is not properly described by the formula ‘Religion is a private affair’. This does not mean that this formula makes no sense at all. Western modernity implies a process of differentiation, by which secular spheres freed themselves from ecclesiastical control. Furthermore, the formula can be taken to point to religious freedom in the sense of freedom of conscience, which in turn is related to the right of privacy – to the modern institutionalization of a private sphere free from governmental and ecclesiastical control.⁵⁸ Yet it would be a gross misunderstanding to conclude that the only proper place for religion in the modern world is the private sphere. 385

Neither is the public manifestation of religion a radical new development, as churches, synagogues and other religious organizations have played a role in the public sphere (located between the state and the private sphere of the family) for a long time. The often-quoted saying *Religion ist Privatsache*⁵⁹ implies in the first place that religion is no state affair, and that citizens are free to profess the religion of their choice. In ordinary parlance, the private sphere is most of the time restricted to the domestic domain of family life, whereas in political theory the line is often drawn between the state domain (public) and the spheres outside the state (private).⁶⁰ In this view, the private sphere is made up of economic, societal and (partly) political initiatives. This allows, of course, for religious initiative and competition as well.⁶¹ The above historical digression underpins my thesis that the recent ‘discovery’ of the resurgence of religion in the public sphere is primarily a change of perception, which was at least in part initiated by the dramatic events of 9/11. 390 400 405

The secular, secularism and the religious revisited: Talal Asad

In my view the basic issue at stake in the discussion of the postsecular is the intricate relationships between ‘secular’ and ‘religious’. This fundamental binary emerged in the history of the Western world and has been conceptualized, redefined and transferred to other cultures in the process of capitalistic globalization. Because this dyad is not just a conceptual tool but embedded in hard-core structures of states (in constitutions and laws), it is almost impossible to come to more general conclusions. At the moment, it is *en vogue* among scholars to stress the – sometimes widely different – contexts of use, and to avoid generalizations as much as possible. Nevertheless, we need a more general understanding 410

of the dialectics between what is called ‘secular’ and what is called ‘religious’ (or ‘sacred’ or even ‘spiritual’). One of the scholars who is at the forefront of theorizing ‘the secular’ is the cultural anthropologist Talal Asad. 415

In his groundbreaking and difficult book *Formations of the Secular*,⁶² Asad wants ‘something seemingly paradoxical – to problematize “the religious” and “the secular” as clear-cut categories but also to search for the conditions in which *they were* clear-cut and sustained as such’.⁶³ His claim is that notions such as ‘secularism’ and ‘religion’ are embedded in discursive practices, which differ geographically and historically. Therefore, it does not make much sense to give definitions which try to encompass the variety of religious phenomena (or, for that matter, of ‘secularisms’) under one umbrella.⁶⁴ Because religion is a social and historical fact with domestic, economic, legal and political dimensions, ‘one has to look for . . . the ways in which, as circumstances change, people constantly try, as it were, to gather together elements that they think belong, or *should* belong, to the notion of religion’.⁶⁵ 420 425

Thus basic concepts are embedded in specific contexts and practices. That concepts such as ‘the religious’ and ‘the secular’ are ‘embedded’ means primarily that they function within a particular theoretical discourse, which to a large extent determines the relevant practices. In this view, practices are constituted by meanings, by concepts. Without these concepts, or – perhaps better – conceptual structures, it would, for instance, be impossible to play the game of ‘religion’. It is important to notice that these concepts often form ‘hard’ (as I would like to call them) structures that are designed and enforced by the state. What counts as ‘religion’ and how it functions in a modern society is determined by the ways in which the nation state shapes the relation between ‘the secular’ and ‘the religious’. Here the inquiry into laws is crucial. At this level, we can analyse which space (including constraints) is actually accorded to ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ practice, and this space may vary from country to country.⁶⁶ 430 435 440

Asad stresses the need for inquiry into the constraints that dominate a particular field. Scholars should be careful not to jump to conclusions and characterize, for instance, Islamism as mere nationalism or as a political religion. Instead, we should ask what circumstances oblige Islamism ‘to emerge publicly as a political discourse, and whether, and if so in what way, it challenges the deep structures of secularism, including its connection with nationalist discourse’ (199). Any movement that wants to be more than mere belief has to establish its identity and position within the confines as constituted by the nation state. In this context, Asad distinguishes between ‘the secular’ and secularism: ‘The entire project of the *Formations [of the Secular]* is to argue against such an idea [sc. that the secular is “a unitary system or a notionally complete totality of legal rules”] – not least through the distinction I try to make between the epistemological category of the secular (what are practices, concepts, and sensibilities regarded as necessary for knowledge about reality?) and the political doctrine of secularism (how does the state try to ensure that it is neutral in relation to different religions?)’.⁶⁷ Thus, a categorical distinction is made: the secular concerns epistemology (defining what is real) and secularism is a political doctrine. 445

What is this doctrine of secularism about? Asad gives the following answer: ‘It is an enactment by which a *political medium* (representation of citizenship) redefines and transcends particular and differentiating practices of the self that are articulated through class, gender, and religion’ (5). These latter practices are politically of secondary importance in the modern (nation-) state, which is defined by the primary principle of citizenship that transcends local and individual differences. In this sense secularism is not just a political theory, but has very real consequences as well. The 460

key principle of citizenship, however, does not imply that the modern secular state cannot also be very much concerned with class, religious and regional differences. Asad himself points especially to the presence of 'religion' in the public life of the modern nation state. Against José Casanova, Asad has convincingly argued that religion (when it enters the political arena) 'is not indifferent to debates about how the economy should be run, or which scientific projects should be publicly funded, or what the broader aims of a national education system should be' (182). In *Formations of the Secular*, the concept of the postsecular is not explicitly mentioned, but these new public manifestations of religion such as Islamism to which Asad refers are precisely the reason why scholars have introduced the notion.

In Asad's view, the intervention of religious actors in the public sphere leads to 'hybrids' between spheres, and thus refutes the differentiation thesis, according to which religion, economy, education, science, etc., are located in autonomous social spheres.⁶⁸ This is a rather bold assertion, but it is hard to contest the fact that religion can be part of what are mostly seen as secular structures. Thus, 'the secular' should 'not be thought of as the space in which *real* human life emancipates itself from the controlling power of "religion" and thus achieves the latter's relocation' (191). Religion has a place in the secular domain. How to understand and frame these 'intertwinements' (as I call them for the sake of convenience) is one of the big issues for the future study of religion – and of the secular. One approach is to say that it is all about discourse and labelling. There is quite a difference between saying 'my conscience forbids me to do this' and claiming that your religion forbids you to act this way. The stakes are raised and, as is becoming more and more clear, in the public and political realms such religious claims cannot simply be denied. The 'postsecular' is also to be understood as pointing to this new awareness.

Conclusion

The succinct overview above shows the variety of the uses and perhaps also – depending on one's perspective – misuses of the term 'postsecular'. From an analytical perspective, the question can be asked if the terminology as such contributes much to our understanding of the various (public) roles of religion in the present-day world. This negative view is taken by James Beckford in his massive critique of the uses of the term 'postsecular'. I would rather be inclined to see the variety of uses as an indication of confusion among scholars, intellectuals and religious interest groups to come to grips with what – for some at least – is an unexpected presence and resurgence of religion in the public domains of presumably secular societies. Somehow the secular does not preclude the religious; all kinds of religious arguments, structures, organizations and agents are very much present, and – as the historian may note – have never been away. So, the emergence of the 'postsecular' refers to very real phenomena, the most important being the 'intertwinement' of the secular and the religious in sometimes new forms. This may amaze observers, as the thought that the two form a binary opposition is not only a 'received idea' but is one of the most basic deep structures of our whole understanding of the world. What if the talk of the postsecular would ultimately reveal that the 'secular versus religious' binary does not fit the bill?

Acknowledgements

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Notes

1. Featherstone, "In Pursuit of the Postmodern," 195.
2. Baudelaire, "Le peintre de la vie moderne," 1163: 'La modernité, c'est le transitoire, le fugitif, le contingent'.
3. "The Talk of the Town," 19.
4. Casanova, *Public Religions*, 221.
5. Ibid.
6. Beckford, "Public Religions and the Postsecular," 2.
7. <http://www.jnani.org/postsecular/contexts.htm>. This website of Mike King has a somewhat esoteric and oriental ring to it; cf. King, "Towards a Post-Secular Society," 10–11: 'What the postsecular begins to question is the assumption that the spiritual impulse itself has to inevitably create the presecular religious hierarchies that we so rightly reject as inimical to freedom and democracy'.
8. Beckford, "Public Religions and the Postsecular," 2; and Knott, "Cutting Through the Postsecular City," 20.
9. Jedan, *Constellations of Value*. For further references, see the bibliography at the end of this contribution.
10. Knott, "Cutting Through the Postsecular City". I use Knott's contribution as a complement to that of Beckford.
11. Theologians such as Richard Kearney also explore these dimensions. Kearney invokes the 'sacramental imagination' to overcome theism, as Rick Benjamins shows in his contribution "Postsecular and Systematic Theology" to this special issue.
12. Beckford, "Public Religions and the Postsecular," 6. Beckford does not give a specific reference here to McClure's book, where I could not find it.
13. McClure, *Partial Faiths*, 3.
14. Beckford, "Public Religions and the Postsecular," 6.
15. McClure, *Partial Faiths*, 6.
16. Beckford, "Public Religions and the Postsecular," 7.
17. Bretherton, "Religion and the Salvation of Urban Politics," 207.
18. Bretherton, "A Postsecular Politics?" 358.
19. Bretherton, "A Postsecular Politics?" 354 (*italics* original).
20. Beaumont, "Transcending the Particular," 6.
21. For an overview of the impact of globalization on religious movements, see Wilson and Steger, "Religious Globalisms in the Post-Secular Age".
22. Beckford, "Public Religions and the Postsecular," 3.
23. Knott, "Cutting Through the Postsecular City," 20f., with reference to Knott, *Location of Religion*, 74–76, 163–9.
24. Beckford, "Public Religions and the Postsecular," 4, who refers to Braidotti, "In Spite of the Times," 2; cf. Boeve, "Religion after Detraditionalization".
25. Caputo, *On Religion*, 60f.
26. Habermas, "Notes on a Post-Secular Society" (2008), <http://www.signandsight.com/features/1714.html>. This text is – with minor revisions – reprinted as Habermas, "What is Meant by a 'Post-Secular Society'?"
27. Habermas, "A Reply," 78.
28. Beckford, "Public Religions and the Postsecular," 9.
29. Taylor, "What Does Secularism Mean?" 320; cf. Mendieta and Vanantwerpen, *Power of Religion*.
30. See also the contributions in the last part, 'Public uses of religion' in: Molendijk et al., *Exploring the Postsecular*, 311ff.
31. Habermas, "What is Meant by a 'Post-Secular Society'?" 63.
32. Ibid., 63. Habermas quotes here his famous lecture '*Glauben und Wissen*', which he held in 2001 – just after 9/11 – on the occasion of his receiving the prestigious *Friedenspreis des*

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- Deutschen Buchhandels*. The lecture was translated with the title “Faith and Knowledge,” 104. The term ‘postsecular’ (*postsäkular*) was used here in a discussion of the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon. 565
33. Joas, *Braucht der Mensch Religion?* 124, where Joas asks the rhetorical question whether it would not have been better if Habermas had admitted in a self-critical way that in the past he had underestimated the persistence of religions in the modern world.
34. Habermas, “What is Meant by a ‘Post-Secular Society?’” 63–65.
35. Beckford, “Public Religions and the Postsecular,” 10. 570
36. For a further discussion of Habermas, see Petruschka Schaafsma’s contribution “Evil or Violence” to this special issue, particularly the section on the tension in the postsecular reassessment of religion.
37. McLennan, “The Postsecular Turn,” 12.
38. Kong, “Global Shifts,” 755–56, quoted in Beckford, “Public Religions and the Postsecular,” 12. 575
39. Beckford, “Public Religions and the Postsecular,” 12.
40. Blond, “Introduction,” 1.
41. *Ibid.*, 54; see the perceptive comments of Matthew Engelke, ‘Rethinking Secularism’.
42. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 380.
43. Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy*, 72. 580
44. Joas, “Social Theory and the Sacred”.
45. Caputo, *On Religion*, 112f.
46. *Ibid.*, 136. 
47. See note 
48. Timothy Fitzgerald and others have argued that the category of ‘religion’ makes no sense (certainly not with reference to non-Western ‘religions’) and should, therefore, be abolished. Theoretically this critique may make sense, but in practice this proposal is useless because binaries such as those between the secular and religious have travelled all over the world in the process of imperialism and globalization, and are ingrained even in constitutions of non-Western states; see Molendijk, “Der Kampf um die Religion”. 585
49. Moore, *Touchdown Jesus*, 166. 590
50. Troeltsch, “Religion,” 534: ‘Das “Rein-Religiöse” existiert nur für den Theoretiker und für wenige innerlich tief empfindende Seelen. Auf dem Markt des Lebens gibt es kein Interesse, das nicht durch Verkoppelung mit der Religion gestärkt würde’.
51. Calhoun et al., “Introduction,” 21; cf. 54. 595
52. Nijk, *Secularisatie*; Lübbe, *Säkularisierung*; cf. Tschannen, *Les théories de la sécularisation*, and the excellent books of Ernst Feil on *religio*.
53. Taylor, “What Does Secularism Mean?” 306.
54. *Ibid.*, 313.
55. Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching*, 1008; cf. Troeltsch, *Die Soziallehren*, 982: ‘Die Seelen der Völker entgleiten den Kirchen, und ein guter Teil ihrer Funktionen ist an Schule, Literatur, Staat und Vereinswesen übergegangen’. 600
56. Troeltsch, *Protestantisches Christentum*, second, revised edition, 341.
57. *Ibid.*, 347f.
58. This is not to deny that in recent decades the private sphere has been more and more invaded by the state and the expanding power of commercial (Internet) enterprises. 605
59. See the *Erfurter Programm* of the German Social Democrats (1891): *Grundsätze und Forderungen der Sozialdemokratie*, 42f.
60. Weintraub and Kumar, *Public and Private in Thought and Practice*.
61. For a discussion of ‘religious economics’, see Graf, *Die Wiederkehr der Götter*, 19–30. 610
62. Asad, *Formations of the Secular*.
63. Scott, “The Trouble of Thinking,” 298 (*italics original*).
64. See Asad, “Religion as an Anthropological Category,” 53–4: ‘Religious symbols . . . cannot be understood independently of their historical relations with nonreligious symbols or of their articulation in and of social life, in which work and power are always crucial. My argument, I must stress, is not just that religious symbols are intimately linked to social life (and so change with it), or that they usually support dominant political power (and occasionally oppose it). It is that different kinds of practice and discourse are intrinsic to the field in which religious representations (like any representation) acquire their identity and their truthfulness. From this it does not follow that the meanings of religious practices and utterances are to be sought in 615 620

social phenomena, but only that their possibility and their authoritative status are to be explained as products of historically distinctive disciplines and forces. The anthropological student of *particular* religions should therefore begin from this point, in a sense unpacking the comprehensive concept which he or she translates as “religion” into heterogeneous elements according to its historical character’ (italics original). 625

65. Shaikh, “Interview with Talal Asad,” [1] (italics original). The text is available at <http://asiasociety.org/islam-secularism-and-modern-state> (accessed 28 October 2014).
66. Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 201, 254–6 and passim. I will quote Asad’s book by referring to its page numbers in the main text; cf. Introvigne, “Religion as Claim”.
67. Asad, “Responses,” 228. 630
68. Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 182. In her contribution “Conversion in Postsecularity” to this special issue, Techteld Jansen also points to the diffuse boundaries between the secular and the religious. 630

Notes on contributor

Arie L. Molendijk, Ph.D. University of Leiden (1991), is full professor of the History of Christianity and Philosophy at the University of Groningen. He was a Humboldt Fellow at the Ludwig-Maximilian University in Munich (1992–1993), a resident scholar at the Center of Theological Inquiry in Princeton (NJ) in the Spring of 2008, a senior fellow at the International Consortium for Research in the Humanities “Dynamics in the History of Religions between Asia and Europe” in Bochum (May 2010–April 2011) and a fellow at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in Wassenaar (September 2012–June 2013). 635

He has extensively published in the history of ideas, particularly on nineteenth- and twentieth-century theology, religious studies and philosophy. Among his writings are a book on the German theologian and sociologist Ernst Troeltsch: *Zwischen Theologie und Soziologie. Ernst Troeltschs Typen der christlichen Gemeinschaftsbildung: Kirche, Sekte, Mystik* (Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1996) and a monograph *The Emergence of the Science of Religion in the Netherlands* (Brill, 2005). 640

Molendijk is also engaged in research on religion, identity and the public sphere, which led to a co-edited volume *Exploring the Postsecular. The Religious, the Political and the Urban* (Brill, 2010). Furthermore, he participated in a research programme on new sacred places and emerging rituals, which resulted in two co-edited volumes *Holy Ground. Re-inventing Ritual Space in Modern Western Culture* (Peeters, 2010) and *Sacred Places in Modern Western Culture* (Peeters, 2011). 650

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