

Why Has Postsecularism Become Important in the Study of Global Politics?

Written by Josh Holmes

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JOSH HOLMES, AUG 20 2015

Why Has the Concept of Postsecularism Become Important in the Study of Global Politics? What are the Key Advantages and Disadvantages of Deploying the Concept?

Postsecularism has recently acquired substantial scholarly purchase within the study of global politics, opening up a methodological vista orientated toward rethinking the dialectical tensions between religion and secular notions of modernity. The perceived resurgence of religion over the last two decades undermines the paradigmatic assumptions of secularisation theory, provoking the need to articulate a normative epistemic framework that is able to appreciate the blurred boundaries between faith and reason in the contemporary political sphere (Thomas, 2010). In adhering to the prefix 'post', the amalgamated nature of the term implies a certain irenic quality that signals a progressive shift beyond antagonistic aspects of secularism, whilst concomitantly retaining connections to modern political ideology. This essay will firstly probe the contextual emergence of postsecularism, as popularised by Habermas and the crisis of the secular state, before putting forward the contention that recent deployments of the concept offer a more radical critique of western hegemony, mobilising an alternative 'postsecular awareness' (Mavelli and Petito, 2012, 931) that appreciates a broader understanding of power contestations across multiple scales of religious encounters.

Mainstream liberal democratic theory is unequivocally founded upon secular ideals, devoted to establishing political regimes that are entirely detached from religion and its competing comprehensive worldview (Rawls, 2009). The secular tradition can be traced back to the Treaties of Westphalia in 1648 and the birth of the modern state that, as the grand metanarrative follows, sought to overcome the decades of conflict and political upheaval propagated via theological disputes by sequestering religious beliefs to the private domain. Positioning the relationship between secularism and modernity as an indispensable axiomatic truth, this "Westphalian presumption" is firmly situated within the study of International Relations as a condition of its possibility rather than an object of enquiry (Thomas, 2000, 815). As such, the secular tradition of the discipline advances a view of religion as static and irrational, an erroneous historical relic that is irrelevant to political understanding and which will die out with the spread of modernisation. The underlying irony, however, is that the modern Westphalian state is itself more confessional than secular, reliant upon the supreme authority postulated by Hobbes' Leviathan, a name derived from the Old Testament, whereby the sovereign is the worldly God to which the modern citizen owes its peace and security. Furthermore, given that the Wars of Religion were pursued as part of an elitist project to engender social allegiance, the discourse of religious violence purported by Westphalia serves as a legitimating myth of the nation-state that justifies the exclusion of faith in favour of a secular political order (Cavanaugh, 2009). It is precisely this pinpointing of the limits of secular reason that speaks to the core concerns of a postsecular perspective, evolving out of a palpable sense that religion is by no means redundant but in fact endured a resurgence toward the end of the twentieth century as a result of disillusionment with modernity and its suspect promise to deliver egalitarian prosperity. The explosive growth in religious movements that decisively rejected western ideals of secular nationalism, triggered in particular by the 1979 Iranian Revolution, provided a clear manifestation of the need for IR to recognise the shifting political landscape of the postcolonial world (Jurgensmayer, 1995). Postsecularism thus emerges as an important means by which to reconfigure artificial divisions between the sacred and the secular, an attempt to pursue a legitimate form of politics that overcomes the crisis of modernity and the deeply problematic assumption that "to be

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secular means to be modern, and therefore by implication, to be religious means not yet fully modern” (Casanova, 2011, 59).

Postsecularism has been popularised through the sociological writings of Jürgen Habermas, who proposed the concept as a theoretical entry point into restoring religion within global politics. For Habermas (2008), religion offers a collective articulation of moral intuition that is able to address the ethical and political anxieties of the prevailing secular age, recognising in particular the reassuring contributions of religion to vulnerable populations lacking social security. Promoting a shift in sensibilities away from the dualistic models of thought contained within the secularist bias of IR, the Habermasian argument puts forward a compromise whereby the constitutional state must not enforce any asymmetric political obligations that call into question the individual faith of its citizens, while concomitantly, the content of religion must open itself up to normative expectations that appreciate the objective non-alignment of the liberal state (Pabst, 2012). In order for these two presuppositions to be fulfilled, the suggestion is that the formation of a postsecular society requires reliance upon a common language that is universal and acceptable to all – in other words, a secularist discourse. While critical of the positivist failings of global politics, the postsecularism advanced by Habermas (2008) reproduces a secular outlook that places religion in an ambiguous position. The postsecular is framed as a kind of hermeneutic filter, embracing the essentialist moral basis of religion but refusing to believe in its potential as a mode of modern political order. I would argue that the assumption that the language of religion needs to be made intelligible to the public as a guiding moral compass is perhaps naïve, erroneously implying that religious argumentation contained within the Ten Commandments or biblical parables known to have popular and concrete appeal, such as the ‘Good Samaritan’ (Luke, 10: 29-37), have not already been integrated within everyday societal norms. Furthermore, the suggested resurgence of religion professed by Habermas (2008) is based in the context of a European political consciousness trying to adapt to the increased visibility of immigrant communities and the raised profile of faith in public policy debates. Yet, as Bader (2012) points out, immigration is a longstanding issue that has been a founding characteristic of all modern states since the 17th century and so this level of postsecular reflection appears to be offering nothing particularly new or worthwhile. Despite best intentions to posit an inclusive gesture that acknowledges the relevance of religion within civil society, this early formulation of postsecularism appears to merely reproduce a self-evident western-centric outlook on global politics that upholds the secularised distinction between public and private religion.

There has been a tendency within IR to privilege 9/11 as the defining moment that marked the return of religion in global political praxis, with religion suddenly gaining extraordinary academic and foreign policy attention in the aftermath of the attacks. However, the early postsecular impulse had little traction within this restorative turn, as faith became “strategically operationalised” as part of an all-encompassing mission to safeguard the established order against militant religious fundamentalism (Hurd, 2012, 943). In other words, the overt recognition of religion as a political force became emblematic of the “clash of civilizations” paradigm, reinforcing the Westphalian view of religion as the source of instability in international affairs (Huntington, 1993). Herein lies the paradox of the problem-solving approach that diminishes the value of postsecularism as a concept (Cox, 1981), as any move toward restoring religion within IR seems to impose conditions that designate “acceptable” forms of faith that have to be politically regulated both domestically and globally. How do you determine what constitutes acceptable? The logic of marginalising violent religion and empowering peaceful religion, notably pursued by the conservative evangelicalism of faith-based diplomacy (Lindsay, 2007), suggests a binary to religion made up of opposing yet easily distinguishable modes of being. Indeed The Tony Blair Faith Foundation can be seen to naturalise a postsecular perspective, envisaging “a battle between two faces of faith” (Blair, 2012), whereby the transcendent teachings of interfaith cooperation can rescue certain religious identities from a history of secularist neglect. A prime illustration would be the Afghan woman, who the US frequently insisted as part of its occupation, needed to be liberated from the private sphere so as to become a correctly religious almost post-Muslim who was no longer suppressed by the headscarf (Mavelli, 2013). The assumption then is that religion can be quantifiably known and located, deployed instrumentally in such a way that extremist religion becomes the object of securitization while moderate religious identities are publically cultivated according to universal principles of tolerance and pluralism. However, on these terms, the postsecular return of religion still problematically authorises centralised and hierarchical forms of political thinking, further demarcating the ontological boundaries between us and them, secular Europe and Islam (Bosco, 2009).

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More recent approaches to postsecularism have attempted to radically redefine the concept, moving more decisively beyond the pervasive secularist ideology that informs the research, policy and practice of global politics. Rather than attempting to bring religion 'back in' to a secularised IR, Hurd (2012) makes a convincing case to demand a more nuanced approach that would develop a newfound capacity to articulate contextually embedded roles of religious actors and interests in a wider constellation of political power. Religion is not, and never has been, clearly contained outside of power, as secularist perspectives tend to infer, but rather the Westphalian state from the outset has been premised on an estranged kind of civil religion relating to the "sacralisation of a collective political entity" (Gentile, 2006, 12). American society, supposedly the most secularised democracy in global politics, is culturally founded upon religious motifs such as the biblical "City upon a Hill" and the phrase "In God We Trust", which contribute to the neoconservative imagination and exceptionalism of US foreign policy. This goes to show how a greater appreciation of what religion 'does' in politics as opposed to what religion 'is' could potentially mark an important shift in the postsecular agenda, highlighting alternative religious knowledges, histories and experiences that unsettle the ordered rationality of secularism (Wilson, 2011). Rethinking the postsecular along more experimental cultural lines is particularly fruitful given that religion is not always consciously thought but can be viscerally felt and sensed, normatively grounded in certain rituals or encounters that are traditionally understood as personal yet can take on public political significance. For instance, the corporeal nature of prayer, working at the threshold between the material and the metaphysical, constitutes contours of citizenship that harmonises faith and politics in the public body, destabilising arbitrary divisions between the public and private that stem from western constructs of religion as primarily irrational and individual (Tan, 2014). This, it could be argued, was evident during the 2011 Egyptian Revolution when Friday prayers, intrinsic to political life in the Middle East, provided an opportunity to collectively mobilise political activism within Tahrir Square, which became an open-air congregational mosque in addition to a site on which the legitimacy of the secular state was questioned (Mavelli, 2012). Similarly, prayer can also possess symbolic power through the self-immolation of Tibetan monks who, by reciting stories of the Buddha while setting their bodies alight in protest against Chinese secular rule, explicitly show how creative political acts can undermine the secularist monopoly of legitimate violence associated with Weber (2009) and the Westphalian state. This emphasises the need for postsecular studies of global politics that displays an "awareness of the primacy of lived experience over cognition" (Dallmayr, 2012, 964), as a Habermasian focus on hermeneutics would neglect these progressive and resourceful practices of religion.

The major advantage of a radically redefined postsecularism, in focusing on the function of multiple religious actors, scales and practices, is that it encourages a broader focus beyond the one-dimensional privileging of the Westphalian state that has provoked considerable criticism of the study of global politics (Camilleri et al, 1995). Taking religion into account via the role of alternative political actors such as lobby groups, social movements and non-governmental organisations allows for a relational reconceptualization of the sacred and secular, whereby politics is continually reshaped through religious discourse and custom in the public sphere, while likewise, religion is challenged through the same dialectical process. This is best illustrated through the postsecular encounters detailed within the work of Barbato (2012), who makes the provocative suggestion that the Muslim world can make a positive political contribution through precisely what it is most feared for: religion. For Barbato (2012, 1079), the Arab Springs signalled the promise of postsecular revolutions that are able to integrate public convictions of faith, or "strong religion", with a shared desire for liberal democratic goals without, crucially, resorting to religious autocracy as in 1979 Iran. The fact that the violence was predominantly carried out by the secular regime against peaceful protesters not only reiterated the "myth of religious violence" (Cavanaugh, 2009), but also showed how religious discourses in concordance with modern ideals of freedom and justice can mobilise progressive political imaginations. Although there is perhaps a danger of overemphasising the Arab Spring as a transformative moment for the Middle East and global politics, particularly given the rise of Islamic State that casts doubt over Barbato's (2012) claim that the revolutions were a prerequisite for longer term legacies of postsecular democracy, I would nevertheless argue that the collective willingness of the people to achieve political reform through grounded bottom-up encounters designates a novel and provocative focus for postsecularism to pinpoint more ethical modes of political being outside of secular frameworks.

In reworking understandings of the political subject, community, and agency beyond liberal individualism and the Leviathan contract with the state, revitalised conceptions of postsecularism propose a new concept of solidarity where encounters between the self and other are mediated by a transcendental figure. On this reading, the

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postsecular is “no longer the monopoly of secularists with a troubled conscience” but is rooted in ordinary public consciousness through an emancipatory politics of hope (Cerella, 2014, 962). The only problem is how do you begin to fundamentally reinvent global politics along these more experiential lines? While the desire for a spiritually collaborative and ethically engaged political community, or “postsecular cosmopolis” as Dallmayr (2013) refers to, is morally irrefutable, I am not entirely convinced that religious values and transcendence positioned outside of the influence of the nation-state is a realistic expectation given the modern secular episteme where science and rationality are the dominant political ontologies. As Carl Schmitt (2008) argued, the immanence of the technological state offers little room for religion as an organising principle or collective fulcrum, an issue further exacerbated by claims that faith is no longer the default position, at least in the context of an increasingly agnostic western world, for instance the number of people in the UK identifying themselves as Christians has fallen by 4 million in under a decade (May et al, 2014). This highlights the wider issue of postsecularism as empirically fragile, where in trying to provide an alternative path toward a sustainable reconciliation between unity and difference, or politics and religion, the concept becomes too vague making it difficult to determine a way forward for scholarly study. There has subsequently been calls to abandon the use of the term altogether, for instance Bader (2012) argues that the substantial issue facing global politics is not whether a state should be more religious or less secular, which incidentally the various postsecular approaches provide no clear consensus, but rather the key distinction is the extent to which a state lives up to minimal-democratic morals. However, this idea of minimal morality in a liberal system is itself open to challenge by a globalised world of different political and religious belief systems. Indeed how reliable is this minimal universality of morals when modern politics is a priori prone to conflict and violence. This shows that there is no straightforward solution to capturing tensions between unity and difference and therefore perhaps scholars should not be too hasty in dismissing the importance of the postsecular project, particularly given it remains a burgeoning field within the study of global politics.

To conclude, the concept of postsecularism refers to a nascent set of approaches to global politics that grapple with the on-going legacies of the dominant secularisation narrative associated with the formation of the Westphalian state. It is not, as is often misinterpreted with popular “post” terms within social sciences, a chronological term that signals a period after the secular. This essay firstly explored how Habermas originally deployed the concept of postsecularism as a way to demonstrate the resurgence of religion in the public sphere, undermining the secular belief that faith would inevitably decline with the arrival of modernity. However, as the focus on the post 9/11 operationalisation of religion (Hurd, 2012) and rise of faith-based diplomacy sought to highlight, the Habermasian perspective provides an ambivalent account of the postsecular that, whilst recognising the visibility of religion in politics, retains the dichotomous thinking inherent within Western hegemonic discourse. Recent work on the postsecular within IR was shown to have taken a more critical direction (e.g. Barbato, 2012; Mavelli and Petito, 2012), deconstructing assumptions within the language of secularism to show not only how religion has always been involved in politics but also the importance of appreciating wider constellations of power beyond the western state. It is the contention of this essay that this latter approach offers greater conceptual solace by fostering original outlooks on previously marginalised political actors, knowledges and practices particularly in the subaltern world. While it could be deemed a weakness that the postsecular spurs tensions, with no defined understanding of what a postsecular society would represent in reality, perhaps this introduces a degree of openness and flexibility that IR as a discipline has traditionally lacked. As such, the postsecular should be embraced as a radical, albeit slippery, concept that pushes the boundaries of political scholarship.

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