CUTTING THROUGH THE POSTSECULAR CITY: A SPATIAL INTERROGATION

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In terms of the mainstream liberal-left discourse which currently dominates discussion about how we run our society, the orthodoxies of a secular state have become incontestable truths. However, on the ground, things have moved on. Whether due to the burgeoning confidence of the country’s devout immigrant groups, the global importance of Islam, or to some less easily definable ‘Age of Aquarius’ zeitgeist, Britain is becoming re-spiritualised—and government, albeit rather clumsily, is responding to that.¹

In an article on ‘The rise of religion’ in Catalyst, the magazine of the Commission for Racial Equality,² Alex Klaushofer deftly summarized the current context in Britain for interrogating this notion of the postsecular. She noted some of the key players: the mainstream secular left, those with ethnic religious, religio-political and spiritual interests, and government. Furthermore, she distinguished discourse from ‘things on the ground’, the ideological from the material, a useful distinction for this interrogation. I will return to her observations later.

My aim here will be to ‘cut through the postsecular city’ in two ways: first, by examining the idea of the postsecular city in relation to debates about the City of God and the secular city, and, secondly, by interrogating two substantive cases, the British cities of Leicester and Liverpool. I will use a spatial approach, focusing on a field of knowledge-power relations constituted by ‘religious’, ‘secular’ and ‘postsecular’ positions, the boundaries between them and the controversies which arise at these boundary points.

What does it mean to speak of the postsecular city? Can a city be ‘religious’, ‘secular’ or ‘postsecular’, or is it a matter of how it is contested and represented rather than what it is and what goes on in it? In order to answer this, several issues need considering.

¹ Klaushofer (2006).
² The Commission for Racial Equality was subsumed within a new and more inclusive statutory body, the Equality and Human Rights Commission, in October 2007.
20

KIM KNOTT

- What is meant by postsecular and how does it relate to its ideological forebears the religious and the secular?
- Is it appropriate to apply such terms, normally used to denote ideological beliefs and values and their political and social entailments, to bodies like cities? What constitutes the city as an entity to which the term postsecular might be applied?
- Can existing British cities, as physical, social and mental spaces, be described as postsecular?

1. **What is Meant by Postsecular, and How Does It Relate to Its Ideological Forebears, the Religious and the Secular?**

A review of the term postsecular shows it to be utilized in various contexts since the late 1990s: to signal the return of religion or the renewed visibility of religion in contemporary culture and politics (Vries and Sullivan 2006; Habermas 2008), to denote either a postmodern religious position or a theological return to orthodox religion (Blond 1997; Caputo 2001; Ward 1999; Smith 2005), as a key symbol in the critique of modernist or secularist politics or ideology (Abeysekara 2008), to imply a new ethical and/or faith-based political approach to public life, consumption and global issues in late modernity (Curry 2007; Hamilton 2008), in work on the post-Soviet state and its politics (Kyrlezhev 2008; Morozov 2008), and with reference to contemporary art or writing that has a spiritual dimension or context (King 2005; McClure 2008). When applied to the city, these variant uses and attendant meanings have different implications. I will focus in particular on the first and second of these, though will also make brief reference to the third and fourth.

In my earlier work, in order to explore the contemporary location of religion in ostensibly secular contexts, I considered the relationship between the religious, secular and postsecular and proposed a dialectical field of religious and secular knowledge-power relations (2005a: 71–7, 124–6). I will not rehearse the historical account of these terms and their interconnections (61–77; cf. Taylor 2007; Fitzgerald 2007a), but it is important to say a little about the third camp in this field (see Figure 1). Emerging from the engagement of the religious and the secular in the context of postmodern thought, I took the postsecular to mean a re-sacralization or return to the religious (often couched in the language of spirituality) which took seriously secular values such