HOW ETHNOCENTRIC IS THE CONCEPT OF THE POSTSECULAR?

Michiel Leezenberg

In recent years, the concept of the postsecular—made popular, if not coined, by the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas—has steadily gained ground as a way of calling attention to new, or renewed, forms of public and politicized religiosity. At first blush, the term seems to capture social and historical phenomena that are quite real, not to say immediately obvious to anyone following contemporary events with some attention. But what kind of concept is it? Is it an analytical category denoting a particular kind of polity or society, or a historical term indicating a particular phase of social development? In this paper I will argue that it is a less than fully elaborated or defined, let alone explanatory, concept; and that—in its formulation by Habermas at least—it smuggles all kinds of unwarranted and indeed unwanted assumptions into the debate. I will try to explicate some of these assumptions (most importantly, centering around the very particular—if not unique—experience of the modernization of Western Europe, and involving an idea of linear temporality and discrete spatiality), and then argue for an alternative account, drawing in materials from the Muslim world and to a lesser extent from the contemporary Far East; this alternative involves a genealogical critique of the kind originally developed by Michel Foucault (1984 [1967]; 1975), and developed for the colonial and postcolonial Muslim world by Talal Asad (1993; 2003).

Foucault’s brief statement opens the way towards a more properly genealogical analysis of space—and temporality—and in particular of the public-private and sacred-secular oppositions. This genealogical perspective, however, should be supplemented with a characterization of the secular-religious and public-private oppositions on the one hand and the secular-postsecular distinction on the other, not in terms of (symbolic or physical) spaces and temporal periods, respectively, but rather as semiotic categories. Such a semiotic perspective, I will suggest, may better explain the continuing appeal of secularist doctrines, which seem to defy or ignore the demonstrable failure of the secularization thesis. In these terms, I will then briefly discuss processes of
modernization and secularization in the Islamic world, and especially the recent debates about so-called ‘post-Islamism’, especially in the urban context of present-day Iraq.

1. Habermas

I do not know if Habermas was the first author to use the term ‘post-secular’, but he is undoubtedly the most influential one. Originally using it in his famous October 2001 German Peace Prize lecture Glauben und Wissen (Habermas 2001), presented in the wake of the September 11 assaults, it was restated and further elaborated in some of Habermas’s later writings (2008a; 2008b). But even though he first uses the term in a context in which Islam is obviously the main referent for a discourse of novel, politicized and even violent forms of religion, Habermas never pays any great attention to the historical and conceptual particularities of the Muslim world. Instead, he continues talking in terms of analytical categories directly derived from the historical experience of—and from some of Habermas’s own writings on—modern Western Europe, in particular the rise of the modern secular liberal public sphere, which crucially involves, and normatively demands, the public use of reason and the privatization of practices of religion.

It is far from clear, however, that Habermas’s philosophical vocabulary can be straightforwardly applied to non-European religions and contexts. In fact, his analysis is self-consciously—even defiantly—Eurocentric; thus, he argues that the term ‘postsecular’ can only be applied to some, not all, Western societies (Habermas 2008b):

A ‘post-secular’ society must at some point have been in a ‘secular’ state. The controversial term can therefore only be applied to the affluent societies of Europe or countries such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand, where people’s religious ties have steadily or rather quite dramatically lapsed in the post-War period.

This restriction to Western Europe and some of its Anglo-Saxon satellites allows him to dismiss the oft-repeated refutations of the secularization thesis as ‘premature’, and to once again safely relegate the apparent counter-example posed by the persistence of public religion in the United States to a kind of ‘American exceptionalism’. Thus, and in part basing himself on José Casanova’s (1994) conceptual and geographical refinements of the concept of secularization, Habermas tries