We traveled the length of Coney Island Avenue, that low-slung scruffily commercial thoroughfare that stands in almost surreal contrast to the tranquil residential block it transverses, a shoddily bustling strip of vehicles double-parked in front of gas stations, synagogues, mosques, beauty salons, bank branches, restaurants, funeral homes, auto-body shops, supermarkets, assorted small businesses proclaiming provenances from Pakistan, Tajikistan, Ethiopia, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Russia, Armenia, Ghana, the Jewry, Christendom, Islam…¹

This is how Joseph O’Neill, an Irish-born writer who was raised in Holland, evokes the colourful cultural diversity of New York, a city which may be characterized as a postsecular city *par excellence*. What strikes me in this quote is the dazzling heterogeneous mixture of cultural activities and identities: the economic and commercial business of the globalized capitalistic world, mixed with national, ethnic and religious identities which cannot be sharply distinguished.² All are found together on ‘a shoddily bustling strip’ of New York.

According to Edward W. Soja, cultural heterogeneity is the first characteristic of what he calls the ‘postmetropolis’—the postmodern urban structures of the last 30 years.

The more specific globalizations of capital, labor, and culture have had the cumulative effect of producing the most heterogeneous cities in history, and this extraordinary diversity (often too simply labeled multiculturalism) has become the landmark of postmodern urbanism (Soja 2001: 41).

Cultural heterogeneity is the main characteristic of postsecular society, and it is in megacities such as New York where this comes to the fore.

² As Gerd Baumann (1999) has lucidly shown, cultural identities are constructed with the help of diverse social markers, of which nationality, religion and ethnicity are the most important ones.
When I was visiting Ellis Island last year, the ranger in charge proudly told the audience that because of its very long history of international immigration, New York had always been the city with the greatest amount of languages spoken in the world: as much as 23 languages in 1800. Perhaps this is not correct, but apparently the public self-image the City of New York enhances and promotes is that it welcomes all people of the world, promising them that they can feel at home here. In a similar vein O’Neill speaks of ‘the distinctive largeness of experience that a simple walk down a Manhattan street can summon’ (2008: 180–1).

However, it is not easy to put this ideology—or dream—into practice. Urban and global theorists stress not only the diversity of cultural identities in our time but also the increasing complexity of symbolic communication this brings: all the different cultural collectives have their own ‘codes’ (Castells 2002) and what psychologists call ‘emotion rules’ (Hermans and Dimaggio 2007: 47)—ways of behaving and interpreting behaviour in public. The postmodern city has become a metaphor for living in a myriad of imagined communities, extended to the extreme because of Internet and other electronic ways of communication in our digital information age (Hermans 2004a). We are constantly engaged in many discourses, which are often conflicting and power-laden. ‘With globalization economics becomes metaphorics. The sites of power are now within people’s minds’, as Castells notes (2002: 246). Cultural misunderstandings abound, and, as we all know, this goes especially for the conflicts in which religious and ethnic identity elements are involved. Therefore, individuals are required to develop strong communicative skills and imaginative, creative capacities in order to be able to deal with diversity.

Postsecular society, with its increasing complexity of religious-symbolic communication due to the deinstitutionalization of religion on the one hand and the hybrid mix of religious-economic-political activities on the other, also calls for a psychological examination. The perspective taken in this chapter is that of psychological identity theory. Point of departure is the conviction among identity theorists that modernity has made it increasingly difficult to establish a cohesive sense of self and a meaningful personal and social identity. Identities have become

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3 ‘Thus, in the absence of a unifying culture, and therefore of a unifying code, the key question is not the sharing of a dominant culture but the communicability of multiple codes’ (Castells 2002: 399).