THE USES OF RELIGION IN PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS: 
THE CASE OF PRISONS

James A. Beckford

This chapter arises from deep scepticism about the notions of post-secularity and postsecularism. I shall argue that there are good reasons for doubting the usefulness of these notions. My claim will be that they actually conceal some important questions about religion in early twenty-first century Europe. The central point of my argument will be that, from a sociological point of view, developments in religion can be better understood by examining continuity and change in the institutional settings in which religion is defined, practised and regulated. Evidence in support of this argument will come from my studies of religion in the prisons of Britain and France. The conclusion will be that it makes no sense to interpret religion in the prisons of these two countries as evidence of postsecularity. In arriving at this conclusion, I shall make two major criticisms of Jürgen Habermas’s depiction of European secularity and postsecularity. On the one hand, I shall claim that the public sphere in Britain has never been as devoid of religion as it should have been according to Habermas’s model of constitutional democracies in Europe. On the other hand, I shall argue that the public sphere in France remains considerably more secular than Habermas allows for in his model of postsecularity.

But before I can tackle some of the arguments about secularity and postsecularity I need to justify my decision to focus on religion in prisons—especially as this has become such a contentious and sensitive issue in relation to the detention of Muslims on charges of terrorism. Two good authorities come to mind for taking the topic of prisons and prisoners seriously: Winston Churchill claimed that the quality of a society can be judged by the way it treats its prisoners; and Dostoyevsky thought that you could measure the quality of a society by the quality of its prisons. It is only to be expected, then, that a sociologist of religion would ask questions about the quality of the opportunities and facilities that prisoners have for practising religions.

A more timely reason for research into religion in prisons refers back to the events of 9/11. Since then, journalists and programme
makers have tended to make a knee-jerk association between prisons and violent extremism among Muslims. There is indeed some evidence—albeit limited—that prisons have been incubators for Islamist ideas and conspiracies to commit acts of violence. The so-called War on Terror therefore demands that the practice of Islam in prisons should be carefully scrutinized and analysed.

But I have three broader sociological reasons for wanting to know about the practice of religion in prisons and its consequences for the lives of prisoners before and after their release. First, prisons are clearly part of the public sphere which is under the control of the state, but they are also places where prisoners consider their cells to be private spaces. Prisons therefore provide a relatively rare glimpse of the way in which the privatized practice of religion can be nested in a public institution. Second, minority religions are overrepresented among prisoners and thereby offer a valuable opportunity to study the state’s ways of selectively recognizing and managing religious diversity. Third, prisons are often settings for intense religious introspection, ‘shopping around’ and conversion—as well as indifference and hostility towards religion. As such, they afford opportunities to study these processes in a partial microcosm of the world outside prison.

The study of religion in prisons throws an unusual light on relations between religions and the state in Western democracies. It also provides a good opportunity for an empirical investigation of the notion—running through the current volume—that the term postsecular can help to explain why religion seems to enjoy heightened visibility in the public sphere these days. After critically outlining the concept of postsecularity I shall assess its applicability to the practice of religion in the prisons of Britain and France.

1. Postsecularity?

This is not the place to consider whether—or how far—a ‘postsecular turn’ has occurred in philosophy, sociology and social theory, although some of the evidence for this view is persuasive (McLennan 2007). But it is certainly the case that a growing number of leading intellectuals now acknowledge that religion calls for more careful consideration and analysis than it tended to receive in the late twentieth century. As Kim Knott’s chapter in this volume shows, a growing number of writers argue that modernity and secularity have been either intensified or