



Making sense of the postsecular

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**Umut Parmaksız***Bilkent University, Ankara, Turkey*

Abstract

This article critically examines the postsecular literature with the aim of dispelling the scepticism about the concept's theoretical import, critical power and analytical utility. It first presents an overview of the literature identifying two major fields, social theology and politics, within which three major critical leitmotifs are developed: (1) disenchantment and the loss of community; (2) the impossibility of absolute secularity; and (3) the exclusion of religion from the public sphere. In the second section, the shortcomings of problematizations (1) and (2) are highlighted, originating from social theology, and it is argued that they have limited critical potential as they intend to renaturalize the religious. Instead, it is asserted that the concept has critical power when used within the context of a postreligious denaturalization of the secular. In the last section, the focus shifts to the analytical utility of the concept, and the article examines 'postsecular society' and 'postsecularization' in the light of the previous discussion.

Keywords

critical theory, postsecularism, secularnormativity, secularization, social theology

The term 'postsecular' has become a widely employed concept in various disciplines including theology, sociology and normative political theory.¹ Yet despite its wide usage and increasing academic popularity, there is still no uniform understanding of the meaning of the concept and there are serious doubts whether it has any intellectual power, import or utility. As there is no specific, clear-cut postsecular position that immediately presents itself, but rather a family of different positions under the banner of postsecular exists, the complexity in the literature has led some scholars to question the explanatory

Corresponding author:

Umut Parmaksız, Department of Political Science and Public Administration, Bilkent University, 06800 Bilkent, Ankara, Turkey.

Email: umut.parmaksiz@bilkent.edu.tr

capacity and theoretical power of the concept. Rosati (2011: 245), for instance, notes that there is 'widespread scepticism on the very meaning and usefulness of the category' and McLennan (2009: 98) has voiced concern over the concept's capacity to 'bear the normative and analytical weight that is starting to be placed upon it . . . whether taken as a space of general debate, or as specific lines of philosophical argument'. Beckford (2012: 13) similarly expresses scepticism and argues that the concept is 'no more likely than are crude notions of the secular to help resolve any long-running debates or questions in the scientific study of religion', while Bader (2012: 5) cynically questions if it is just a 'buzzword' that goes into research proposals to secure grants.

While the criticisms voiced in these and other texts express valid concerns, they should not lead us to dismiss the concept altogether. On the contrary, these sceptical remarks highlight the need to thoroughly examine the concept's origins to better make sense of its limitations and potential. In what follows, to clear a path forward in the discussion, I present a historical overview of the literature focusing on different employments of the concept.

Plotting the postsecular

The literature on the 'postsecular' has been the subject of a few reviews (Beckford, 2012; Cistelecan, 2014; McLennan, 2007, 2010, 2011). While these studies of the literature have highlighted many important issues, they are not very informative for those seeking to develop a historical account of the concept. In this article, I take a slightly different approach to the literature and, through a chronological reading, trace and identify how the concept has evolved in different fields.² This historical perspective enables us to see how the concept has changed course with the emergence of the 'postmodern'.

The term first came to prominence in social theology in the 1960s to denote the emergence of a new age/world in which the religious plays a vital role in overcoming the pathologies of secularity. In this first phase, which spans from the late 1960s to the early 1970s, the early postsecular texts (Borowitz, 1970; Graham, 1973; Greeley, 1966; Morris, 1970) are concerned with the question of how religious communities, Christian or Jewish, can adjust to the secular age and by doing so provide secularity with much-needed inspiration to overcome its pathologies. Greeley (1966: 125), concerned about the future of Catholicism as it adapts to the 'post-Christian age', identifies the crisis of the age as modern man's desire to have the 'best of both possible worlds', i.e. 'the intimate support of *gemeinschaft*' while enjoying 'the freedom, the rationality, and the technological flexibility of a *gesellschaft* world'. For Greeley (1966: 119, 126), the answer to this crisis lies in the Catholic Church, which should play a fundamental role in helping modern men arrive at 'the postsecular age', that is 'the age after the post-Christian age', when men 'combine the freedom and affluence of a technological society with the warmth and fellowship of a tribal society', culminating in 'the post-secularist society'.³ For Borowitz (1970), a Jewish scholar writing after the war, the Holocaust undeniably established that the hopes many placed in secularism as the path towards overcoming 'evil' proved to be baseless. Confronted by Auschwitz, Borowitz (1970: 470) asserts that secularization had not been successful in countering the evils of modern society as there was 'little or nothing in the secular approach to things . . . which [was] productive and empowering of human

value' – a lack that leads civilization into a crisis as 'all its major instrumentalities [were] value-free or even antihuman'. Borowitz's dissatisfaction and disillusionment with the secular age throw him back to Jewish theology to bring back the human to the forefront and his solution is to replace the 'cultured man' of secularism, who had proved not automatically to be the 'ethical man', with the Jewish man of the old tradition. In this respect, the 'postsecular situation' and 'stance' to him mean the revival of the orthodox Jewish tradition to accommodate Jewry in the secular age.

While these scholars hold that the secular order is lacking, they do not propose a radical alternative to secularity but find in new religious and spiritual sensibilities solutions to secularism's state of crisis. For them, the postsecular symbolizes the overcoming of the malaises of the disenchantment, the re-establishment of a sense of community and a reconciliation of the secular world with the 'human'.

In contrast, in the 1990s, a new set of theologians inspired by the postmodern critique of modernity asserted the necessity of a fundamental, *radical* critique of the secular. It is in this phase that the postsecular takes on a new shape, signifying a new engagement with transcendence made conceivable by the postmodern. In their understanding, these social theologians (Blond, 1998; Dallmayr, 2010; Dooley, 1999; Tacey, 2000; Ward, 1997) following Milbank's (1990; 1992a; 1992b) lead, see in the postmodern the potential to exhaust immanentism and open up a space for the comeback of religion and transcendence.⁴ Milbank (1992a: 42) argues that theology can problematize the secular in a way that could serve better than postmodernism 'in demonstrating how the tradition of immanentism, as well as the "modernist" tradition of subjectivism, is constituted through the erection of a new but concealed symbolic order, a new religiosity and a new version of transcendence'. By drawing attention to the complex relationship between the secular and the sacred, Milbank (1992a: 37) boldly asserts that 'there is no purely secular space, outside the constitutive opposition of this term to that of "the sacred"' and argues that 'the secular as a self-regulating, immanent space . . . is something sustained only by a conventional symbolic coding'. Hence, Milbank (1992a: 37) declares that the religious is essentially the core of the secular as 'the secular is in fact composed out of rearranged fragments of religious discourse, which are not its "subtexts", but rather make up its whole substance'.

Others have followed in Milbank's footsteps.⁵ Ward (1997: xxi–xxii), embracing the postmodern for making possible 'post-secular thinking', holds that 'with postmodernism God emerges from the white-out nihilism of modern atheism and from behind the patriarchal masks imposed by modernity's secular theology'. Yet, further from this instrumental relationship, he goes on to argue that only theological discourse can provide a logic for the postmodern, and this logic, which should 'recover for our time the world before and beyond the secular', is what we should recognize as the postsecular. Ward (1998) later gives us a clue as to the nature of this new world when he praises Jean-Luc Marion's work for 'turn[ing] the icon, the face, of Christ towards postmodernity, offering it a return to a pre- and post-secular cosmology: the world as a sacrament of love mediated by and on the authority of the community called the Church'. Blond (1998: 27), similarly, calls for an 'end to the secular' which 'should reverse the dreadful consequences of the liberal erasure of God and take myth back from out of the hands of the fascists where it has all too often fallen'. Dooley (1999: 170), in a commentary on

Kierkegaard, locates the postsecular within the postmodern, as the postmodern, he holds, inhabits ‘a certain prophetic religious spirit or postsecular impulse’ which ‘recognises the best way to proceed in the ethicopolitical sphere is to have as a guiding criterion, not the deeply secular ideals of formal reason or subjective autonomy, but a quasireligious fidelity to singularity’.

Also in the 1990s, there emerged a political interest with the postsecular, characterized by a critical engagement with the institutional and spatial arrangements implied by secularism – particularly the marginalization of religion from the *public sphere*.⁶ These authors affirm the positive gains of secularism, but wish to question secularity’s authority over the public sphere. Neuhaus (1982: 309), briefly mentioning the term, declares confidently the emergence of a ‘postsecular era’, which signifies ‘the end of the hegemony of secular Enlightenment over public discourse’, and Gedicks (1991: 115) suggests an ‘antithetical’ approach to public discourse, which forms the basis of a ‘post-secular public culture that does not merely exchange secular power for religious power in measuring the legitimacy of public discourse’. Connolly (1999: 3; 2000: 155) promotes ‘a postsecular affirmation of the protean diversity of life’ which intends to restore vitality to the politics of becoming that he believes is necessary to ‘sustain the creative tension’ that is democratic politics, and overcome ‘modern secularism’s pathological forfeiting of some of the very resources needed to foster a generous pluralism’. Geoghegan (2000: 206) offers the clearest expression of the postsecular as being grounded on the secular. Instead of representing a ‘deeply antagonistic stance toward secularism, involving the call for a resurgent religiosity, where “post” really implies “pre” – a dismantling of the secular culture of the past few centuries’, he defends a view that construes it as ‘an attempt to overcome the antinomy of secularism/religion’ which ‘betokens not a rejection of the secular, but a recognition that the achievements of the secular will not be lost by a more nuanced approach to religion’. Habermas (2000: 4) joins these debates, first mentioning the term in an interview as ‘post-secular culture’ when he cites ‘the trend towards pluralism in modes of life, ethical orientations and world views’ as constituting ‘a challenge’ to modern societies. The concept occupies a central place in his later writings, after 9/11, both in the philosophical and political sense, when he argues that religious discourse could provide us with a semantic pool that we need to *sustain* the foundational values of modern public spheres.

This brief chronological review of the literature reveals that the postsecular as a concept has mainly been in circulation in two fields, *social theology* and *politics*, comprising the core of three different critical themes: (1) disenchantment and loss of community/meaning; (2) the impossibility of absolute secularity; and (3) the exclusion of religion from the public sphere.⁷ In general, while social theology calls for a return of religion through either re-enchantment or a reconnection with transcendence, the political interest with the postsecular opens the way for the construal of the concept not as an overcoming of the secular, but more so as its reform, an improvement based on a critical rethinking of the normative exclusion of religion from the public sphere.

Apart from these two theology-based critiques, there is another sympathetic form of engagement with religion that in some ways bridges the theological and political strands identified above. Cistelecan (2014), in his overview of postsecular literature notes the ‘post-metaphysical theology’ of Derrida, Nancy, Vattimo, Caputo, and Critchley, along

with what he calls the 'Leninist messianists', Žižek and Badiou, as part of a genre that seeks to rechannel the 'messianic moment' in religion to the service of democracy and revolution, respectively. McLennan (2009), in a similar spirit, has brought Unger and Eagleton's writings into the postsecular spectrum, noting their engagement with transcendence signifies an attempt to open politics into a terrain that empowers the ascent to a progressive society.

While these thinkers do not use the term postsecular, they seek to recruit aspects of religious thought in the struggle to construct a vivacious political sphere that can promise, inspire and mobilize for that which is to come, going beyond the pragmatic formalism of modern democracy. In that, theological postsecular and political theology share a suspicion about secular modernity's capacity to provide sufficient motivation for social and political action that goes beyond instrumental utility-seeking. Whereas for Milbank and others, it is religion in its purest form that can do the trick, for political theology, there is a need for an active filtering process, after which the vitality of messianic moment in religion can be embedded in political action and transposed into the realm of politics.⁸

Before addressing the issues that these critiques have brought to the foreground, it is necessary to examine the return of religion thesis, that some of these texts take inspiration from, and, more importantly, to interrogate its relation to the postsecular. While a growing number of scholars (Berger, 1999; McClure, 1997) have proclaimed the return or survival of religion and some see it as evidence of the coming of the postsecular age, there is room for healthy scepticism and one can imagine various objections to this conviction.

One way of challenging this widespread view is to note that religion has never gone away, therefore, it is not meaningful to speak of its return.⁹ According to this view, religion has moved towards a less organized and more individualistic form (Crippen, 1988; Glasner, 1977; Luckman, 1967; Martin, 1969, 1991; Warner, 1993), making it invisible in an institutional form in the public sphere, however, its public character and influence have not disappeared (Casanova, 1994). Recently political theorists (Kuru, 2009; Modood, 2009, 2010), focusing on the state-religion connection, have argued, in relation to Western Europe, that even in these secularized countries, religion has had a place in governance at the institutional level and secularism has not necessarily meant the exclusion of religion from the public square.

Köhrsen (2012) argues that the worldwide return of religion is widely overstated and is the result of an 'excessively vast definition of religion' which leads to observations of the religious in a wide variety of social phenomena. This strong criticism shows that any return of religion argument needs to carefully establish the conception of religion it operates with in order to avoid a selection bias.

Even if there was a return, the conclusion that secularization has come to an end may not be valid. In other words, a modified secularization thesis can explain the return of religion or the differences in how secularization takes place in different contexts without compromising the core of the theory. Indeed, many sociologists of religion have been sceptical about declarations announcing the end of the secularization thesis and have instead argued that a nuanced secularization thesis can explain the resurgence or persistence of religion (Bruce, 2011; Voas, 2008; Yamane, 1997). Norris and Inglehart (2004),

for instance, note that a modified secularization thesis that emphasizes the lack of 'existential security' can explain the high levels of religiosity in non-western parts of the world. Bryan Turner (2010: 659) notes that an 'alternative secularization thesis' may explain the return of religion through the 'growth of religious markets'. As such, the argument is that even if one can admit that there are strong indications of problems with the secularization theory, it is not clear as to why these problems should declare the demise or futility of the theory. The increasing presence of religion may only reveal some shortcomings of the thesis rather than lead us to conclude, like Berger (1999), that 'desecularisation' is in progress.

What these objections demonstrate is that the postsecular literature generally avoids problematizing the return of religion and, as Turner (2010) points out, there is a general lack of acknowledgement and engagement with the sociological works that have rigorously examined religion and secularization in the last 50 years. Even if the return of religion is an empirically observed phenomenon, there is still the need to explain how this return is qualitatively unique, to the extent that it cannot be explained by our existing explanatory repertoire. Scholars of the postsecular have generally chosen to take for granted the return of religion and aggrandize its importance by locating the concept in the more grandiose realm of macrosociology where one speaks in terms of 'ages' and 'eras'. They have consequently abstracted this return from the realm of conventional politics and social relations, and in the process depoliticized it. We must remain open to the prospect that a thorough examination of the return of religion on a case-by-case basis might yield mundane explanations, including religious revivalism, reactionary fundamentalism or, as a Marxist political-economy reading may demonstrate, capitalist hegemony's solution to a solidarity crisis. Perhaps there is no need to exaggerate like Voas (2008: 47) does, that 'we shall be in our graves until the truth about secularization is known', but it is safe to assume that the jury is still out and it is premature to conclude that there is a lasting, undisputable return of religion that warrants the declaration of a new era.

While the criticisms I highlight warn us about rushing to judgement about the return of religion, they should not lead us to conclude that the 'postsecular' as a concept does not have any theoretical import and not a lot to contribute to critical social and political theory as, while the return of religion thesis might be problematic, the issues that postsecular critiques identify with secularity may still be valid. However, what these criticisms demonstrate is the necessity to deconflate the return of religion/end of secularization thesis from the postsecular at a theoretical level, and construe the postsecular as an autonomous concept. Such a move is critical to appreciate not only the concept's theoretical potential but also to envision how it can be used empirically to analyse contemporary social and political phenomena.

Renaturalizing the religious or denaturalizing the secular?

Although there are certain overlaps, the two strands in the postsecular literature problematize secularity differently, identifying different issues. For the social theology scene within which the concept first emerges, the problem with secularity is its inability to inspire human-oriented politics, generate meaning and promote a sense of community.

Radical theology goes further and deeper than this critique. Milbank's problematization, through a critical reading of modernity and 'immanentism', essentially questions the possibility of absolute secularity and falls within a family of critiques, most notably developed by Schmitt with regard to politics and more recently by Gauchet (1997), which posit the secular order as a concealed continuation of the religious. This radical line of thought construes secular political and social thought as being in a state of denial not only in terms of its indebtedness to religious thinking but more so with relation to its own true theological nature. These critics find in the secular world a new religiosity that is corrupt and unsuited to respond to the challenges it faces.

Social theology, in both of its variants, directs serious criticisms against secularity, yet there are glaring holes with these problematizations and they are not convincing. When we look into the early theological texts' limited problematization of the secular, we see that it is based on the assumption that modernity has failed to produce any credible reservoir of meaning upon which individuals can draw. These texts emerged in a post-WWII context and bear the marks of a pessimism about the modern technological world that haunted this generation. They echo the Weberian opposition to the technological, industrial, secular culture that presumably deprives us of meaning due to disenchantment. In that they follow in the footsteps of the 'crisis of secularism',¹⁰ argument, which has been around for a while (Mollegen, 1961), but it is really doubtful if there really is an inadequacy of meaning in the secular world, or if we need to take for granted the Weberian diagnosis that 'the crises of modern culture is . . . primarily the result of the impoverishment of the sources of meaning, which came about with the disenchantment and rationalization of the world' (Chowers, 1995: 130). Undoubtedly, the self-interpretative resources and possibilities that secular modernity has made available to human intellect are enormous. It has not only made it possible for non-religious sources of meaning to flourish, it has also preserved a space for traditional religious narratives of meaning to survive and develop in their own way. It has enabled individuals to be authoritative in their search for meaning, creatively experimenting with eclectic and patchy forms of spirituality to the scorn of many traditionalists. While one could criticize this multiplicity as a hodgepodge, a farce on belief, it testifies to the diversity that the secular world has made possible, not only for the non-religious but also for the religious.

Even if we are to take the impoverishment of meaning for granted, it is not clear as to why we should be rushing back to religion to recover our lost sense of community, meaning and motivation for political action. Robbins (2011: 81) notes that the lack of meaning and loss of community that re-enchantment is supposedly meant to overcome, is not 'produced by progress, but on the contrary by the failure of progress . . . to integrate social constituencies that the premodern world made no effort to integrate'. What Robbins alerts us to with this observation is the problematic assumption that the premodern world was a warm, peaceful, endearing world, abundant with meaning and solidarity. Once we question this assumption, we can recognize that any lack of sense of community in the modern world exists not because we have lost it, but because the promise of the secular world has not been realized to its fullest extent. Hence, the panacea to loss of meaning cannot be a return to religion, but is to go further with the secular.

The third problem with the impoverishment argument is the implicit assumption that modernity and secularity are *supposed* to be a source of meaning or political action,

rivalling religion. This expectation originates from a soteriological thinking that posits the human condition as defined by a state of natural despair.¹¹ This line of critique can be extended to include political theology's longing to reinvigorate politics through religion. Ironically, Žižek (2000: 152), who has himself been positioned in this category, diagnoses that 'postsecular ethics' is defined by a 'Messianic longing for the Otherness that is forever to come'. Although these thinkers do not portray the human condition as being defined by a lack, with their emphasis on the messianic, they still posit the political as a realm of quasi-salvation. This soteriological yearning reproduces the conviction that humanity needs to be saved from its natural state of miserable existence – a view that modernity has fundamentally challenged.

Finally, we can claim in hindsight that the diagnosis upon which this longing rests, that secular politics lacks vitality and natality, incapable of producing a radical and sustained resistance to the malaises of the system, is itself problematic. The recent global economic turmoil saw the emergence of the Occupy Movement, the rise of the anti-austerity left in Greece, Spain and now in the UK, all of which testify to the fact that modernity and its secular politics are capable of producing vital, spirited and inspiring politics. While some of these movements have been somewhat transient, others, such as environmentalist, anti-nuclear and human rights movements, have produced lasting effects.

When we consider radical theology's attack on secularity, the picture is not very different. Perhaps most importantly, radical theology misidentifies secular reason's self-destructive, critical aptitude as nihilistic, ignoring the positive and affirmative potential it offers. Adopting a strategy of *reductio ad absurdum*, radical theology attempts to show the unsustainability of secular reason by turning its critical powers against itself (Milbank, 1990: 5). Yet, problematizing and historicizing the power of secular reason are not necessarily the gateway to a nihilistic downward spiral to nothingness that radical theology makes it out to be. On the contrary, it can be the source of a new critique that affirms the possibility of a postsecular, postreligious social and political horizon, affirmative of new human interpretations and practices. Radical theology, in the quest for a destructive critique of secularity, selectively appropriates postmodernism and ignores the positive, creatively destructive postmodern moment.

Milbank blames secularity for 'erecting' its own transcendent order and he is not alone in this sentiment. The immanentism of secularity, unless reduced to a crude naturalist positivism, does not necessarily mean a denial of transcendence per se. The secular world can 'erect', and the key word here is 'erect', its own transcendent order, but what is critical is that this erection is an active process, the provenance of which can be grounded in the immanent realm. Secularity cannot passively receive from 'somewhere else', accept or take granted any transcendence whose origins it cannot trace, interrogate, problematize and reject. This does not mean that transcendence or any symbolic order does not have any place in secularity. Rather it means that whatever relevance it has must be measured and evaluated in the immanent sphere against human practices and interpretations. In that respect, secularity can embrace transcendence at an operative level rather than a purely ontological one.

Finally, radical theology's critique, in contrast to its grand statements and ambition, remains very limited in its inspiration. It is not difficult to see why this is so – radical

theology never hides its intent is the establishment of the supremacy of the Christian metaphysics over its alternatives (Milbank, 1990; Ward, 1998). As Smith and Whistler (2010: 14) note, radical orthodoxy's engagement with the postsecular is a 'misappropriation and misuse' that centres on an attempt to overcome the secular by a return to an Augustinian and Thomist theology. Indeed, to the extent that the postsecular is defended as an exaltation of 'transcendence', the literature finds its inspiration in Christian theology. The new 'supra-critical' domain of theology that is proposed as a replacement for philosophy is too deeply invested in Christian notions and heritage to signify a global, comprehensive project against the pathologies of the secular that the postsecular as a concept implies. If such a project is ever to have the potential to mount a formidable critique, it would necessitate a transreligious theology as its basis.

Taking all these criticisms into account, it is not too far-fetched to conclude that postsecular theology problematizes the secular to usher in the renaturalization of the religious. While for Milbank and his followers, this is a pronouncedly anti-immanentist, grand project, for the early social theologians, renaturalization is limited to the sphere of meaning which facilitates an enrichment at both the individual and community levels. If the postsecular is to have some lasting impact in social, cultural and political theory as a novel concept, it cannot simply imply the total or partial failure of secularity and the return to religion as its remedy. This is not to say that the secular should not be problematized or that there is nothing to learn from the religious tradition; on the contrary, there is the need for such a project, however, to the extent that this problematization is conducted for the sake of re-establishing the natural primacy of the religious in any sphere of human conduct, it cannot serve as the foundation of a critical and emancipatory project. Rather what is needed is a postreligious perspective that does not have a religion-first agenda.

In the political postsecular that emerged in the 1990s, we can see in a nucleic form a postsecularism that attempts such a denaturalization with respect to the public sphere. These scholars do not deny the public sphere or the possibility of secular politics, but rather attempt to rethink its normative limits. Calhoun and Casanova provide a fruitful starting point as to how such a postreligious project can be developed. Calhoun (2012: 335) observes that social and political theory has treated 'secularism' largely 'as a sort of absence' and within this paradigm, the secular has been conceived as that which is 'left if religion fades'. Similarly, Casanova (2011: 55) notes that the secular has been construed as the 'in itself neutral', 'natural social and anthropological substratum' that defines all societies. The postsecular turn essentially symbolizes a break away from this dehistoricizing tradition and a move towards problematizing and critically interrogating the natural status ascribed to secularity.

Already, within social anthropology there are attempts to denaturalize the secular in such an anti-essentialist manner. Asad, for instance, invokes a problematization of the secular that refuses the claim, held by many, that the secular is a mere continuation of the religious. What defines Asad's (2003: 24, 25) engagement with the secular is 'an exploration of [its] epistemological assumptions' which involves approaching 'the secular' as 'a concept that brings together certain behaviours, knowledges, and sensibilities in modern life'. The secular, in this view, functions as a vessel that makes it possible for a set of definite practices and sensibilities to be thought of together. It brings together

diverse and contingent practices in a particular form and is itself a presence rather than the substratum that makes the presence possible.

The postsecular has critical power when taken as a postreligious denaturalization of the secular rather than a set of issues that we identify with the secular, be it the malaises of disenchantment or the complicated relationship of secularity with transcendence. Hence, rather than the content of the critique, what matters is the critical outlook which opens up theoretical venues for denaturalizing both the secular and the religious. Such a critical denaturalization is theoretically bound within the immanent sphere as it is concerned foremost with power and its relationship with knowledge. To the extent that religion or the secular are conceived as categories for sets of behaviours, knowledges and sensibilities, they find their locus within human affairs, and any critique that will challenge the natural authority of both has to do so within this realm.

Postsecular society and postsecularization

Much of the scepticism about the postsecular originates from the concept's unclear and complicated relationship to religion. As I highlighted in the first section, there are serious problems with the return of religion thesis and, as Beckford (2012) notes, when understood in relation to religion, the concept has serious limitations and does not help us much in making better sense of the state of religion in contemporary modern societies. Furthermore, the religion-oriented conceptualization promotes simplistic accounts of the 'postsecular society', which construe it as being defined by the return of religion – an approach that, in light of the discussion in the first section, makes the concept's analytical utility questionable.¹² To overcome these limitations, social and political scientists need to move away from this religion-centred paradigm and deconflate the postsecular from the return of religion.

The postsecular can help us understand certain social and political phenomena in modern societies when construed independent of religion, in relation to the secular. To use an analogy, just as the 'postmodern' can be understood as a change in the self-understanding of modern societies and postIslamism is about a change in Islamism, the postsecular makes sense, in analytical terms, when understood as a change in the self-understanding of secular societies/groups. This is not to say that religion does not have any place in these conceptualizations – the denaturalization of the secular *may* and is likely to produce a change in these secular societies'/groups' relation to religion. Hence, problematization of the secular may usher in the return of religion, but not all returns of religion have to indicate a postsecular condition. Once we stop construing the religious and the secular in essentialist terms as inseparable and in a zero sum relationship at a theoretical level, we can see how the vacuum caused by the denaturalization of secularity is no longer necessarily filled by the religious.

There have been attempts to conceptualize the postsecular society in relation to the secular; for instance, Habermas (2009: 63–4) describes postsecular society not only as one in which religious citizens have a newfound confidence in terms of being actively involved in public matters, but more importantly as one in which secular citizens have lost the confidence that they once had in the demise of religion. Dalferth (2010: 324) presents a similar construal of 'postsecular society' as being 'neither religious nor

secular' but indifferent to both in all respects 'because it is irrelevant for their self-understanding and without import for the communicative, civic, legal, political, or economic operations by and through which they define themselves'. While both these definitions go further than the simplistic accounts, they still operate in the religion-oriented paradigm and identify the change in secularity as being limited to the secular's stance towards religion.

The secular-oriented perspective comes with its own challenges. As Habermas (2009: 59) notes, a postsecular society 'must have at some point been in a secular condition'. This is a common-sense conclusion, yet it is difficult to ascertain as to what exactly constitutes the '*secular condition*'. The two predominant conceptualizations of secularization, i.e. the decline of belief and the separation of Church and state, do point us towards a direction yet they do not conclusively help us understand what the secular condition entails because the development of one does not necessarily lead or follow the other. The continuing institutional links between some states and churches in Europe, such as the UK, Denmark, Norway and Finland, yet the gradual decline in religiosity in these countries make institutional links an unreliable marker for spotting the secular condition. On the other hand, high levels of religiosity can also be accompanied by a separation of Church and state, as is the case in the USA. While these theoretical issues stand, at the same time we do have an operative understanding of the secular condition when we speak about secular societies, states, countries and era/age. In that we have an understanding, a sense of what a secular society looks like although we might not quite grasp the exact particulars of this presence.

The way out of this problem involves taking a more pragmatic approach and concentrating on the outcome of these processes, instead of the processes that are active in the formation of the outcome, i.e. the secular condition. In this regard, I suggest that the term *religionormativity* can help us overcome the difficulty in explaining what secularization achieves. I use religionormativity to refer to the privileging as the norm a set of practices and thoughts that are predominantly designated as religious. A religionormative system organizes its social, cultural and/or political spheres around structures of understanding and thinking, as well as practical orientations, which make religiosity privileged. This privilege can take several forms. Religionormativity can manifest itself as a set of norms that amount to a body of doctrine and can be as obvious as an exaltation of the religious as an ideal or moral accomplishment. However, it can also be as discrete as an unconscious sense of rightness, the assumption in everyday interaction that the other is religious per se, the prevalence of the religious vocabulary as the language of experience, and the spirit through which law approaches and categorizes society. How this religionormative system manifests itself depends to a large extent on that particular religion's attributes.

Secularization, in a *negative* sense, can be understood as the dismantling and weakening of the religionormative social, cultural and political world. Secularization weakens the Church's position as the disseminator of social and cultural capital, and thereby opens up the cultural sphere to the circulation of alternative modes of knowledge production. Politically, this means not only the separation of Church and state, but also the change in our political common sense that the question of power is to be resolved in the realm of the public sphere among equals. As such, the political is recast

within the immanent, and whatever transcendence anyone can claim over it paradoxically needs to do so from within and through this realm. As a result, religion needs to prove its worth by rebranding itself, as essential to solidarity or the individual's search for existential meaning, as religion loses its natural force to demand a privileged cultural and social status. Secularization in this negative sense captures to a great extent what rationalization, differentiation, desacralization and this-worldliness – processes identified by many sociologists of religion (Shiner, 1967; Tschannen, 1991) as fundamental to secularization – have achieved, i.e. the denaturalization of the religious and the weakening of religionormative social and political order.

This perspective shifts the focus from the institutional separation of state and religion and the level of belief/unbelief towards everyday life and values, and focuses on the authority and pervasiveness of religion in social and cultural spheres. It is the spirit of sociological works that emphasizes the decline of religion's relevance in 'integration and legitimation of everyday life' (Dobbelaere, 1981) and more generally in society (Chaves, 1994; Yamane, 1997). This emphasis on everyday life is important because while the separation of religion and state is a big step towards the dismantling of religionormativity, as it frees the state from the power of religious institutions, it is not in itself a sufficient condition for the disappearance of religionormativity. Even though the state may have no links with religious institutions, religionormativity can be sustained, encouraged and facilitated by certain state policies. A politically secular state can pursue policies that strengthen and deepen religionormativity in society. This means that a view that focuses only on the institutional relationship of the state and religion may miss the complex ways that religionormativity is advanced.

Yet the dismantling of religionormativity can also be accompanied by the emergence of a new normative order. In this respect, secularization can be understood, in a *positive* sense, as the establishment of a new normative order that cultivates its own sensibilities, practices, values, particular view on life and the human condition. This new secularormative order creates its own exclusion and control mechanisms over what constitutes legitimate knowledge and thereby privileges certain cognitive structures, ideological and symbolic commitments, along with the practices, habits and reflexes that are attached to these commitments. It attempts to set up an order that devalues certain forms of cultural capital and sources of knowledge.

The 'secular condition' can entail elements of both negative and positive secularization. I take a 'postsecular society' to mean one in which the effects of positive secularization are being problematized and the secularormative order that stems from it is destabilized and denaturalized, while the effects of negative secularization remain intact. It is in this sense that the postsecular is both for and against the secular. In such a society, there is a predominant understanding that neither the religious nor the secular are taken to be the natural state of things, the yardstick against which all social and cultural relations are judged and evaluated. In this context, postsecularization refers to a transformation that takes place in the self-understanding of secular societies and groups, which creates an awareness of the historicity of secularity leading to the destabilization of the secularormative social and cultural order. In such circumstances, the secular is reimagined as a *way of life* rather than the natural anthropological substratum.

Perhaps, the most significant outcome of such a denaturalization of the secular would be the destabilization of the secularnormative practices/exclusions that regulate the public sphere. Normative political thinkers have long been occupied with the role and place of religious language in the public sphere. While in their efforts they have, more and more, moved towards accommodating religious language, they still largely operate on the secularnormative assumption that secular language constitutes the natural substratum and is capable of exhausting religious language. For instance, Rawls (1993) argues that in the public sphere religious reasons can be provided if one can also provide some secular reasons in due course, and Habermas (2008) has proposed the translation of religious language to secular language, both unwilling to place secular and religious language on the same plane. This secularnormative thinking also puts restrictions on what constitutes legitimate truth claims, casting religion in an epistemic category that calls for its exclusion from power-related public debate. This aspect too has been addressed and there is some movement towards a more accommodative stance. For instance, Habermas (2008) has argued that religion can have a truth-value that we can draw upon. However, this admission has been limited and not extended beyond the sustainment of solidarity. The second generation of Frankfurt School scholars has taken a step back from their predecessors and have stuck with the functionalist paradigm in their engagement with religion, despite their claims otherwise. This doctrine of religious restraint (Eberle and Cuneo, 2008), which has its roots in the Kantian critique of metaphysics, is problematic for democratic politics as it can *a priori* exclude religious language worthy of consideration in public debate. The early Frankfurt School in this regard went further than their successors in their acceptance that religion's concern with truth was a feature to be cherished and harnessed (Brittain, 2012).

Conclusion

The debate on the postsecular centres on whether the concept makes sense as an anti-secular critique that symbolizes the end of the secular era or if it can serve as an intra-secular critique that is both for and against secularity. There exists a loose connection from the Frankfurt School to contemporary scholars who have argued that secular modernity and progressive politics can benefit, in different ways and to different degrees, from a sympathetic engagement with religious thought. In that regard, critical theory has been postsecular to a certain extent from the start. Although one may not be convinced by the problems this school identifies with secularity, as I am largely not, we can still find, in their method, some value and the prospect of a critical postreligious outlook that is promising. Indeed, as McLennan (2010) points out, and as I have summarized, there is a large body of postsecular texts that is best understood as 'intra-secular' rather than anti-secular. At the other end of the spectrum, there is a tradition, which draws on the insights of political theology to radically question immanentism and the possibility of absolute secularity. This tradition defends the replacement of secularity with Christian theology as the source of inspiration for our social, cultural and political world. This has manifested itself in different forms, from the idea that without religious thought our world of meaning is empty, to the idea that in religion we can find, in a positive sense, the answers to our social and political problems.

The postsecular has value for critical social and political theory to the extent that it challenges the natural status ascribed to the secular, interrogating secularnormativity in the social, political and cultural realms. However, to the extent that it means a reinstitution of the religious and the reversal of the accomplishments of negative secularization which has enabled the political, social and cultural spheres to function independent of any natural or given order, the concept cannot be much more than an eloquent way to disguise a sophisticated religious revivalism. For critical social and political theory, the challenge is to carefully divorce what belongs to secularity as a historical presence, a form of life, and what belongs to the critical, emancipatory human thought that this historical entity, through its presence, both as practices and ideas, has brought about on the human horizon.

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Notes

1. A Google Ngram (Books.google.com, 2014) search shows that the usage of the word has almost quadrupled in percentage between 1990 and 2000, and after 2000, it has increased close to five times, totalling a 20-fold increase in two decades. Some of these different uses include 'postsecular situation' (Borowitz, 1970); 'postsecular world' (Graham, 1977; Morris, 1970); 'postsecular era' (Neuhaus, 1982; Peursen, 1989; Wuthnow, 1989); 'postsecular thinking' (Ward, 1997); 'postsecular cosmology' (Ward, 1998); 'postsecular public culture' (Gedicks, 1990); 'postsecular community' (Martin, 1992); 'postsecular ethics' (Connolly, 1996); 'postsecular caritas' (Coles, 1997); 'postsecular culture' (Habermas, 2000); 'postsecular civil society' (Hudson, 2007). Going even further back, we see that the earliest use of word 'postsecular' dates back to 1853, in the writings of British physician John Forbes (2001 [1853]).
2. In this brief summary, my intention is not to provide an exhaustive review but to draw out the different strands within which the concept has historically found use. Hence, there are some texts that do not readily fit into the taxonomy presented in this article. For instance, McClure (1995; 1997) uses the term in relation to culture when he construes the postsecular in relation to the resacralization of contemporary culture, which represents 'a complex and variously inflicted reaffirmation of premodern ontologies – constructions of reality that portray the quotidian world as but one dimension of a multidimensional cosmos, or as hosting a world of spirits' (McClure, 1995: 143). Recently, there has emerged an interest in the concept within

- the context of the 'social scientific study of religion' (Gorski, 2012: 15). These examples demonstrate that the concept has the potential to manifest itself in different fields in the future.
3. Martin (1992: 5–6), similarly, argues for a 'postsecular community' that takes its inspiration for solidarity from 'pre-secular communities' but are nonetheless regulated by the 'real achievements of modernity'.
 4. It seems the only exception to this project is Caputo's (2001) critique to the Milbankian appropriation of the postsecular, which advocates a conceptualization of the postsecular at peace with modernity and the secular.
 5. Taylor, who has been an important contributor to the recent debates on secularity, does not use the term postsecular. Yet, Taylor (2007) does take a postsecular stance when he criticizes predominant secularization theories as 'subtraction' theories that construe secularization as the disappearance of religion and instead, asserts that secularity ought to be understood in positive terms as a change in the conditions of belief. While Taylor does not exactly follow in the footsteps of Milbank, he acknowledges that his historical narrative of 'secularity' as a change in the conditions of belief, ought to be read as complementary to Milbank and others (Taylor, 2007: 295, 774–5).
 6. In this overview, I mention only some of these texts. Arguments that similarly conceptualize the postsecular in relation to the public sphere can also be found in Coles (1997), Eder (Bosetti and Eder, 2006), Dosert (2006), Braidotti (2005; 2008) and Hudson (2007).
 7. Although there are texts that do not straightforwardly fit into this scheme, this classification covers most of the literature, providing a good point of departure to understand what the concept can mean and the reasons why it came to be used as it has in different disciplines.
 8. In many ways, this political theology line follows in the footsteps of the early Frankfurt School as it strives to harness the power of religious thought for emancipatory purposes. Horkheimer, Adorno and Benjamin have problematized modernity's relationship with religion, trying to find in religion a critical potential that can be put to the service of emancipatory politics (Brittain, 2012).
 9. Another possible objection rests on the argument that religion was never as prominent as the secularization thesis assumes, therefore even if there is a surge in religion/religiosity, it cannot be understood as a return. This objection rests on the argument that the conviction that past societies were religious is based on a bias that focuses on the beliefs of the elite rather than the ordinary people (Douglas, 1983; Goodridge, 1975). This means that secularization is fundamentally misconstrued as it concentrates on the religiosity of the masses, which has always been at low levels. Consequently, the perceived return is nothing more than the adjustment of our flawed understanding of the religion-society relationship.
 10. For a different discussion of the 'crisis of secularism' that focuses on political secularism in Europe, see Modood (2012).
 11. This soteriological narrative is perhaps most openly displayed in the works of Cavanaugh (1999), who takes aim at the modern state and the social contractarian model for failing to provide the peace it has promised while instead creating violence. A similar argument is advanced by Voegelin (1987). Reacting to Communism and Nazism, Voegelin problematizes secular forms of transcendence as prone to destruction with catastrophic consequences. Voegelin asserts that these ideologies are built on a 'gnostic' access to truth which legitimizes projects to 'immanentize the eschaton', in turn, justifying the use of violence and power. Yet, while it is clear, as Cavanaugh and Voegelin point out, that secular constructions of

transcendence can be violent and catastrophic, to what extent their destructive power is the result of the secular nature of these transcendences, or the means that are available to the proponents of these ideologies, is questionable.

12. Some authors (Beaumont and Baker, 2011; Beaumont and Cloke, 2012) have used the post-secular to indicate a 'rapprochement' between religious and secular citizens as a result of which urban spaces are being transformed. However, there is historical precedence of religious discourse being used as part of progressive, emancipatory politics. Gandhi's anti-colonialist message, and Martin Luther King's fight for civil rights, equality and freedom of African Americans have both invoked religious sensibilities and notions in the struggle against oppression. In other words, secular politics and modernity have not done without religion's input and resourcefulness for progressive purposes, and if there is a synergy between these groups, it can best be described as a revitalization, rather than a novelty.

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Author biography

Umut Parmaksız received his PhD in Sociology from the University of Bristol in 2015, and was an Honorary Research Associate at the same university from June 2015 to Sept. 2016. He is currently an instructor (part-time lecturer) lecturer at Bilkent University in Ankara, Turkey.