

POST-SECULARISM – A NEW DIMENSION OF DEMOCRACY

Craig Calhoun



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■ *What is this notion of post-secular all about? What is a post-secular society? What is the debate surrounding this concept?*

The discussion on post-secular started because the prevailing assumption that modernisation must mean secularisation turned out to be wrong. This secularisation ideal was that modernisation would necessarily eliminate religion or that it would become a very small minority thing, and post-secular is a way of describing the fact that this did not happen.

But I have one reservation concerning the notion of ‘post-secular’. It implies that, previously, everyone was secular and I don’t think that this is true. I think, for example, how in the Soviet Union, state policy was previously secular, but that did not mean that every person became secular.

■ *How do democracy and post-secularity correlate? Is post-secularity a necessary feature of modern democracy?*

Most thinking about modern democracy assumes that secularity is a necessary feature and that people could be religious in private but that, in public, they would have to leave that aside. Now post-secular thinkers – even Jurgen Habermas thinking about this – would have said: No! We have to let the religious discussion enter the public sphere. We can disagree and we have to agree to somehow translate into terms that both sides can understand. **But democracy forbids exclusion, and so religious voices must be heard, even if people don’t all agree.**

Of course, religious voices must accept that they must give reasons for their opinions. You cannot just say: Well, that is the Divine truth – end of discussion. You must enter the discussion.

■ *If we take two concepts: one put forward by John Rawls, which claims that religious people have to translate their views into secular terms, and the view held by Habermas, which claims that the burden must be symmetrical – that both the secular and religious must translate... Which do you prefer?*

I prefer Habermas without question. I think that Rawls’ concept is biased against religious opinions because it requires a kind of translation, which must involve the loss of some semantic content. I think that the image of translation that both Habermas and I use is a problem in a way. So Habermas, when pushed, would say: translation is a metaphor. I don’t mean exactly translation but I mean symmetry. I mean entering the discussion with an open mind to be able to understand another person. And I agree with Habermas on that.

■ *Actually, in Europe and in Russia, we have had a lot of conflicts between advocates of religious and secular values. Take the cartoons scandal, for instance, and then in Russia, we had this controversial exhibition ‘Beware of religion’. Also, several years ago, we spoke about tolerance. For example, after the death of Theo Van Gogh, Ian Buruma published the book ‘Limits of Tolerance’. Can we speak about the limits of post-secular?*

I think there are limits of the so-called post-secular – if post-secular means a society where religion is part of the public discussion but does not control it. There are two limits. One limit is pure secularism forbidding religion. The other limit is enforcing the dominance of religion. If any one religion dominates and says, ‘this is the truth, we don’t accept any other’ - that is also a limit. So post-secular does not mean theocratic society. But I think that tolerance is not the only concept. So we need tolerance, but I think what Habermas says is true: what we need is not only a kind of

passive tolerance, like ‘I’m not bothering you’. We need active mutual engagement; we need discussion with each other, and that goes beyond tolerance.

■ *The next problem concerning the post-secular is the problem of incommensurable values. So when we have different groups, they stick to different traditions and so, if we take Habermas, we see that these groups strive to achieve dialogue. But what if, within society, we have groups that do not strive for dialogue?*

That’s an excellent point and I have two responses to that. One is that groups who are unwilling to enter into dialogue in this sense are a real problem. That doesn’t mean that we kill them or we eliminate them, but **it must be recognised that they do not have the same capacity to participate in the public sphere. The condition to enter public sphere is the agreement to participate in dialogue.** Most religious groups are actually willing to participate in dialogue. But if they completely refuse than that is a problem.

The second response, however, is that this is an example of why translation is a problematic metaphor. Because that implies that there is a completely equivalent statement without anyone changing his or her mind. The first person, the second person – each understand the other by a translation. If you speak Russian and somebody translates, I understand it. But, in fact, what is needed is an openness to change. **The people who are engaged in the discussion occurring between secular and religious people each may be changed by it.**

If you look at the Christian religion today, it is changed by a history of changes in the secular world and by technology, for example. Even if you look at Islam, which to some looks very old, medieval, and old-fashioned – yet it is changed by the

circulation of ideas on the Internet.

So it’s not enough to say: we translate. We have to see that it’s a question of being willing to change. And you don’t necessarily become converted to religion because you have a discussion. But you may see some new ideas. And the importance of religion in the public sphere is from what Habermas would call new semantic content. This means in a more simple language that old ideas of the left may sometimes be exhausted. There were sometimes secularists who are intolerant and extremists as well. And the religious ideas of peace, of love, of caring for other people may make sense even if you don’t accept the whole religion. You may begin to accept some of these ideas or they may make you think harder about other ideas and so you are changed by the dialogue. I think that’s what it really means to have a constructive dialogue in public: the potential that you think new thoughts and that you are even changed as a person.

■ *The incommensurability of values and refusal to engage in dialogue are a problem. But then there is the question: what holds us together?*

Every society is now more diverse, and even those that resist outside influences are still more diverse than before. Still, we have some common culture. And even **this culture of dialogue, this culture of appreciating dialogue can be a source of solidarity and can help to hold society together. But beyond that, there is recognition of the contributions of different groups to the social whole.** A recognition that in the economy, in politics, in culture – in all these areas – the country is not based on being the same; it is based on sharing the different contributions from different regions, just as we eat food that comes from different regions. I think that we can build solidarity out of that kind of mutual engagement.

■ *What trends in the post-secular discussion seem to be most interesting to you?*

Not so long ago at Yale University, there was a conference that was focused on Habermas and religion with a variety of philosophers and political scientists and other people considering Habermas’ new ideas about religion, and Habermas himself participated in the discussion. We had an interesting panel with four very different views on this. The public entailed a thousand people in the audience and on the radio – it was a very big event with Habermas, Judith Butler, Cornel West and Charles Taylor.

It was a very interesting discussion. Cornel West is very much a Christian believer who represents the Black American Church, Judith Butler is both Jewish and more of a kind critical secular voice, Charles Taylor is a religious Catholic, and you know Jurgen Habermas is a kind of secular but interested voice. So I would say this produces a strong representation of different views, including even different styles. There is one difference at the level of rational argument, but there is another at the level of an emotional appeal.

And the point that Cornel West makes very well is that religion is not only rational arguments – it is music, it is preaching, and it is a kind of emotional appeal. He was very funny at the conference because he was using a preacher’s style. ‘Sister Judith and brother Jurgen, I am talking to you!’ I think this made a deep impression on Jurgen Habermas. And he said to me later: ‘Oh, you’ve been telling me for several years I’m missing something about religion by thinking it is only a set of rational propositions. When I heard him I knew what you meant.’ ■

Dmitry Uzlaner exclusively for the Yaroslavl Forum