

# Post-secularity and (global) politics: a need for radical redefinition

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**Abstract.** The past two decades have produced a bulky literature on religion and politics, with many writers being influenced by Habermas's notion of 'post-secularity'. However, despite the vast amount of literature, there is still little agreement on the meaning of this term. The article explores two main directions in which the expression has been interpreted: one direction where religious faith is in a way 'secularised' by being adapted to modern secular discourse; and another where faith triumphs over secularity by expunging its modern corollaries. What surfaces behind this divergence is a version of the immanence/transcendence conundrum which accentuates a presumed contrast of language games in which one linguistic idiom is said to be more readily accessible than the other. In agreement with Charles Taylor, this article challenges the assumption of an 'epistemic break' between secular reason and 'non-rational' religious discourse. Once this challenge is taken seriously, a new and more radical redefinition of 'post-secularity' comes into view: a definition where the prefix 'post' signifies neither a secular nor a religious triumphalism, but rather an ethical-political task: the task of liberating public life from its attachment to 'worldly' self-interest and the unmitigated pursuit of wealth, power, and military adventures.

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I will put my law within them,  
and I will write it upon their hearts.

*Jeremiah 31:33*

In recent intellectual discussions, the term 'post-secularity' has acquired a certain currency or prominence. Like other hyphenated terms (post-modernism, post-metaphysics), the word exudes a certain irenic quality, in the sense that the harsh features of traditional conflicts – between faith and reason, religion and agnosticism – are presumably mitigated if not laid to rest. Unfortunately, this hope may be mistaken. Like many similar labels, the term 'post-secularity' papers over disputes of interpretation which cannot be brushed aside. For some interpreters – clinging to the prefix 'post' – the term signals the end of a loathed or despised aspect of modernity, its lapse into irreligion and agnostic 'secularism', thus heralding a return to old-style religious orthodoxy (possibly under clerical auspices). Seen from this angle, the hyphenated

expression means the correction of an errancy, an outgrowth of what Gilles Kepel has called ‘the revenge of God’.<sup>1</sup> For another type of interpreters – attached to secularity or secularism – the phrase is a concession to the *Zeitgeist*, to the inevitably multicultural and multidimensional character of contemporary democracy. Averse to dogmatism and stirred by their ‘liberal’ conscience, secular agnostics are willing to accommodate or tolerate deviant non-conformists including religious people – provided their conduct and utterances submit to the dominant language game.

Thus, underneath the seemingly irenic phrase, the older animosities and resentments still persist; behind the façade of a hyphenated term, traditional culture wars continue. In some fashion, for both sides of the dispute, the terms ‘secularism’ and ‘secularity’ designate a ‘worldly’ domain basically immune from ‘other-worldly’ intrusion, a realm of ‘immanence’ categorically opposed to religious ‘transcendence’. The two sides differ in placing their evaluative preference respectively in opposing domains; the hyphenated phrase reflects mainly a pragmatic compromise. The question remains, however, whether the stipulated dichotomy – often styled ‘two world’ theory – can really be maintained. At a closer look, the dichotomy is quickly thrown into disarray. On a purely logical level, the two terms – immanence and transcendence – presuppose each other as mutual conditions of possibility – which means that they cannot be radically separated. More importantly, simple etymology contests such separation. Deriving from the Latin ‘*saeculum*’ (age/century), secularism basically refers to the necessary time dimension of human experience – a temporality which inevitably permeates both reason and faith, both ‘worldly’ cognition and religion (thus undercutting their presumed contrast). In the following I want to pursue these issues further. In a first step, I review the persisting conflict within ‘post-secularity’, that is, the conflict between post-secular ‘secularists’ and post-secular (or post-modern) religious traditionalists. What this review yields, I believe, is a basic commonality: namely, the shared and inevitable reliance on interpretation or hermeneutics – a point developed in a second step. By way of conclusion, I want to indicate the genuine relevance of ‘post-secularity’ – properly interpreted – for both domestic democracy and the emerging global cosmopolis.

### Secularity versus faith

In mainstream liberal-democratic theory, the political regime is supposed to be removed from, and hence basically neutral toward, religion(s) or what are called ‘comprehensive worldviews’. This conception was formulated most famously in the early writings of philosopher John Rawls. In subsequent years, however, this formula of sequestering religion in a private faith, removed from the public domain, was found to be too rigid and also not quite compatible with democratic standards (mandating the ‘free exercise of religion’). Hence, religion was allowed – within limits – to reenter the public realm, provided certain conditions regarding public conduct and linguistic discourse were met.<sup>2</sup> It is at this point that Jürgen Habermas – one of the originators of the term ‘post-secularity’ – joins the debate. In several writings

<sup>1</sup> Gilles Kepel, *The Revenge of God*, trans. Alan Braley (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994).

<sup>2</sup> This is the development leading from *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971) to *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

published during the past decade, he has sought to pinpoint clearly the conditions under which religion might reenter the public sphere. Thus, in an essay published in 2008 on 'An Awareness of What is Missing', Habermas stressed the stark distance separating modern enlightened reason from religious faith, a distance which also reflects stages of historical development. 'The philosophically enlightened self-understanding of modernity', we read, 'stands in a peculiar dialectical [conflictual?] relationship to the theological self-understanding of the major world religions which intrude into this modernity as the most awkward element from its past.' From the angle of modern reason, both religion and traditional metaphysical worldviews have an ambivalent status: they are rejected in their present validity though (grudgingly) accepted as historical precursors. While acknowledging metaphysics 'as belonging to the prehistory of its own emergence', modern thought 'treats revelation and religion as something alien and extraneous'. As Habermas insists, 'the cleavage between secular knowledge and revealed knowledge cannot be bridged' – although secular or 'post-metaphysical' reason may concede 'the shared origin of philosophy and religion in the revolution of the Axial Age'.<sup>3</sup>

In his essay, Habermas clearly accepts the Rawlsian formula regarding the relation between the public and private domains. 'The constitutional state', he writes, 'must not only act neutrally towards worldviews but it must rest on normative foundations which can be justified neutrally towards worldviews – and that means in post-metaphysical [that is, secular] terms.' This formula clearly imposes a heavy and primary burden on faith. 'The religious communities', he adds, 'cannot turn a deaf ear to this normative requirement.' In fact, 'the content of religion must open itself up to the normatively grounded expectation that it should recognize, for reasons of its own, the neutrality of the state towards worldviews ... This is a momentous step.' Following the more 'liberal' or accommodating arguments of the later Rawls, however, the essay also seeks to ease the burden imposed on religious belief: 'Conversely, the secular state ... must also face the question of whether it is imposing asymmetrical obligations on its religious citizens. For the liberal state guarantees the equal freedom to exercise religion not only as a means of upholding law and order, but also for the normative reason of protecting the freedom of belief and conscience of everyone.' The upshot of this argument is the compromise that the state 'may not demand anything of its religious citizens which cannot be reconciled with a life that is led authentically "from faith"'. What is presupposed in this compromise, however, is the availability and maintenance of a common language in the public field, and this requisite brings into the foreground the issue of translation.<sup>4</sup>

From a secular or post-secular vantage point (that of Habermas), the situation is not only that the 'cleavage' between secular reason and revelation 'cannot be bridged', but that there are two different languages or discourses whose sharp contrast cannot be overcome except through an effort of translation – an effort designed to render religious idioms publicly available. The assumption here is that there is a standard public discourse whose language is readily accessible, while religious language is odd, obsolete, and esoteric – although secular citizens are exhorted 'not

<sup>3</sup> Jürgen Habermas, 'An Awareness of What is Missing', in Habermas et al., *An Awareness of What is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Post-Secular Age*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2008). See also Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion: Philosophical Essays*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> 'An Awareness of What is Missing', pp. 20–1.

to treat religious expressions as simply irrational' (which is a widespread temptation). If modern liberal democracy is to function, Habermas affirms, a common language is required, and for this requisite to be secured, 'two presuppositions' must be fulfilled:

The religious side must accept the authority of 'natural' reason as the fallible result of the institutionalized sciences and the basic principles of universalistic egalitarianism in law and morality. Conversely, secular reason may not set itself up as the judge concerning the 'truths' of faith – even though in the end it can accept as reasonable only what it can translate into its own, in principle universally accessible, discourses.

What this means is that modern secular discourses are self-contained and wholly accessible or intelligible on their own terms, without the need for translation or interpretation – whereas the very opposite is the case for religious language. The self-containment of secular reason even seems to shield it against philosophical or interpretive questioning. Modern science, Habermas asserts, enables modern rationality to break with all 'metaphysical' issues: 'With this advance in reflection, nature and history became the preserve of the empirical sciences, and not much more is left for philosophy than the general competences of knowing, speaking, and acting subjects.'<sup>5</sup>

About a year later, at a conference held in New York, Habermas reiterated and fleshed out further his views on the role of religion in the 'public sphere'. After touching on a number of issues (including Carl Schmitt's notion of 'the political'), he returned there to the Rawlsian formula mentioned before and its limitations. As he pointed out, Rawls's formula had met the critique that 'many citizens *cannot* or *are not willing* to make the required separation between contributions expressed in religious terms and those expressed in secular language'. Moreover, the formula suffers from a democratic deficit given that a liberal regime 'also exists to safeguard religious forms of life' and hence cannot excise religious language. It is at this point that the translation proposal recurs. 'According to this proposal', Habermas states, 'all citizens should be free to decide whether they want to use religious language in the public sphere' – with the crucial proviso that 'were they to do so, they would have to accept that the potential truth contents of religious utterances must be translated into a generally accessible language before they can find their way into the agendas of parliaments, courts, or administrative bodies'. Fine tuning his proposal, Habermas introduces the further distinction between formal and informal language, a distinction monitored by a screening filter: Instead of requiring citizens to cleanse their comments of religious rhetoric, 'an institutional filter should be established between informal communication in the public arena and formal deliberations of political bodies that lead to collectively binding decisions'. In this manner, a 'universally accessible language' is secured in the public sphere, while 'the "monolingual" contributions of religious citizens depend on the translational efforts of cooperative fellow citizens (if they are not to fall on deaf ears)'.<sup>6</sup>

The emphasis on translation efforts and complex filtering devices attests to the presumed distance between religion and modern rationality – what Habermas earlier

<sup>5</sup> 'An Awareness of What is Missing', pp. 16–17, 22. With this statement, Habermas basically accepts the positivist stage theory (first formulated by Auguste Comte) that history moves from religion to metaphysics and then to (post-metaphysical) science.

<sup>6</sup> Habermas, 'The Political': The Rational Meaning of a Questionable Inheritance of Political Theology', in Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (eds), *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), pp. 25–6. The conference had been held in New York City's Cooper Union in October 2009.

had called the unbridgeable ‘cleavage between secular knowledge and revealed knowledge’. What this means is that religious people and secular rationalists are divided not only by different beliefs but by a linguistic gulf which is as deep as (and maybe even deeper than) the gulf between English and Chinese. Presumably, adepts of religion are proficient in some kind of ‘metaphysical’ or ‘other-worldly’ language, whereas secularists are fluent in vernacular or ‘this-worldly’ language. Clearly, what surfaces here in new guise is the old ‘two-world’ theory, now couched in linguistic vocabulary. Together with that theory, we also encounter again the ancient conundrum which has variously been termed the rift between ‘Athens and Jerusalem’ or (more simply) between knowledge and faith. Curiously, in our contemporary period, the rift is affirmed not only by secularists – including those favouring translation devices – but also by radical religious thinkers thoroughly opposed to secularism and modernity. In the latter case, the ‘post’ in post-secularity acquires a very different meaning: namely, that of a farewell or demise. Insisting on the stark distance between ‘this’ world and the next, an assumption has recently emerged in various quarters which extols the radical ‘otherness’, transcendence, and unintelligibility of the sacred or divine – thereby reviving the famous dictum of Tertullian: ‘What has Jerusalem got to do with Athens?’<sup>7</sup>

Once the division is construed as cleavage, the sacred or divine can enter the ‘worldly’ domain – including the domain of human understanding – only by way of irruption, interruption, or disruption – which amounts to a form of violence or violation. My concern here is not with the different ways in which this conception is expressed in our time. On a popular level, we are only too familiar with such modes of religious extravagance as the celebration of ‘rapture’ and the speedy arrival Armageddon. On a more recessed and sober level, traces of exuberance can also be found among some ‘post-modern’ thinkers, especially supporters of a ‘transcendentalist’ phenomenology and a radical type of post- or anti-hermeneutics. Despite differences of accent, what is common to these tendencies is the stress on divine incommensurability, on the non-reciprocity or non-relational character of the sacred and secular realms. Occasionally, sacred intervention is styled as a divine largesse or ‘gift’ – but with no ability granted to recipients to recognise divine largesse ‘as’ a gift. Carried to an extreme and transferred to a linguistic register, the separation of worlds implies not only a difference of language games but their actual non-translatability. On this and similar issues I find it preferable to follow Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo who counsels us to be ‘suspicious of an excessive emphasis on the transcendence of God, as mystery, radical alterity, and paradox’ and to return to the simplicity of the gospels.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> On Tertullian see *De praescriptione haereticorum* (Freiburg: Mohr, 1892), esp. chap. 7. The conflict between Athens and Jerusalem was also a central theme in the work of Leo Strauss; see on this point my ‘Leo Strauss Peregrinus’, *Social Research*, 61 (1994), pp. 877–906.

<sup>8</sup> Gianni Vattimo, *After Christianity*, trans. Luca D’Isanto (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), pp. 38–9. Compare in this context also Kitaro Nishida’s comment: ‘Just as there is no world without God, there is no God without the world . . . And as Eckhart said, one sees the true God where even God has been lost.’ Nishida, *An Inquiry into the Good*, trans. Masao Abe and Christopher Ives (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), pp. 168–9. For background see Emmanuel Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998); Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Jean-Luc Marion, *Reduction et donation* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1989); and Dominique Janicaud, ‘The Theological Turn of French Phenomenology’, trans. Bernard G. Prusak, in Janicaud et al. (eds), *Phenomenology and the ‘Theological Turn’* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), pp. 16–103.

### Religion and ordinary language

Vattimo's counsel, to be sure, applies not only to exuberant postmodernists but also – with equal force – to secular ‘post-secularists’ championing the integrity of modern rational discourse. As presented by Habermas, modern discourse – as used by rationalist thinkers as well as by legal courts and parliaments – is claimed to be readily and universally accessible, whereas religious discourse is the opposite: mysterious and urgently in need of translation. But how persuasive is this argument? Are modern rationalist texts – from Kant to Carnap, Quine, and Rawls – not exceedingly difficult texts constantly in need of interpretation and reinterpretation, and hence of translation into more accessible language? And what about courts? Do the judgments of courts not always involve the interpretation, application, and thus practical translation of earlier legal texts, precedents, and judicial opinions? And do members of parliament not always claim to interpret, apply, and hence translate the will of the ‘people’ (or at least of their constituents)? And where is there an end to such interpretation and translation, that is, the effort to distil the meaning of texts, utterances, and events and thus to render them accessible to understanding? As recent ‘post-empiricist’ epistemology attests, the range of interpretation extends even to scientific paradigms and the findings of natural science. As it seems to me, these comments only confirm the truth kernel of the hermeneutical claim of ‘universality’ – a claim prominently articulated by Hans-Georg Gadamer (but side-stepped or neglected by Habermas).<sup>9</sup> No doubt, the demand for interpretation also applies to religious teachings; but as I shall try to show, the demand here may be less urgent and involve not so much a strictly linguistic translation but a translation into lived practice.

The one-sided or lop-sided character of the Habermasian translation proviso has been noted by several observers but especially by Charles Taylor. In his 2009 response to the former titled ‘Why We Need a Radical Redefinition of Secularism’, Taylor takes issue with the assumption shared by Rawls and Habermas that modern secular reason is ‘a language that everyone speaks and can argue and be convinced in’, whereas religious languages ‘operate outside this discourse by introducing extraneous premises that only believers can accept’. In the case of Habermas, this distinction amounts not just to a linguistic difference but an ‘epistemic break’ between secular reason and religious thought, ‘with the advantage on the side of the first’. In a somewhat provocative vein, Taylor speaks here of ‘a myth of the Enlightenment’ where the legitimate demand for the use of reason is transformed into a shibboleth and shielded against any intrusions or transformative horizons. In the same context, he links this shibboleth with the ‘principle of self-sufficient [or self-contained] reason’ (which, in turn, seems to be connected with what he elsewhere calls the ‘buffering of the self’ in modernity). For all their differences, he adds, Rawls and Habermas ‘seem to reserve a special status for non-religiously informed reason (let’s call it “reason

<sup>9</sup> See Hans-Georg Gadamer, ‘The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem’, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. and ed. David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), pp. 1–20. In his *Knowledge and Human Interests*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), Habermas had tried to limit hermeneutical understanding to the humanities, while exempting natural science and psychoanalytic self-knowledge from such understanding – a procedure which ignored ‘post-empiricist’ trends in science as well as the issue of depth hermeneutics. See in this respect my ‘Borders or Horizons? An Older Debate Revisited’, in *Small Wonder: Global Power and Its Discontents* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), pp. 176–98; and my ‘Life-World and Critique’, *Between Freiburg and Frankfurt* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1991), pp. 13–24.

alone’),’ assuming that such reason is able to resolve moral-political issues in a way ‘that can legitimately satisfy any honest, non-confused thinker’; by contrast, both find it necessary to ‘restrict the use of religious language in the sphere of public reason’ by circumscribing this use with various translation and filtering devices. Summing up his discussion of this issue, Taylor concludes: ‘This distinction in rational credibility between religious and non-religious discourse seems to me utterly without foundation’ – or else to rest on a rationalist ‘foundationalism’ (stemming from Descartes) which is no longer credible.<sup>10</sup>

At this point, I want to push Taylor’s argument a bit further by calling into question the notion of an ‘epistemic break’ between modern secular reason and religious faith. In Habermas’s account, both modern reason and religious faith seem to have the character of an epistemic or cognitive paradigm, each equipped with a ‘*magisterium*’ designed to guard the integrity or correctness of the respective discourse. But this assumption seems to be implausible and the result of a misplaced ‘intellectualism’. As it appears to me, at least the so-called Abrahamic religions are not at all anchored in an epistemic premise or a claim to special knowledge. The basis of these religions is rather found in Deuteronomy (6:4–6) in the famous *Shema Israel*. What does *Shema* here mean? It is an invocation to the listeners to open their ears, not to harden their hearts, or to become ‘buffered selves’. What are they to hear? Only this: that the Lord God is one and that ‘you should love the Lord with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might’ and that this plea should dwell ‘upon your heart’. So the appeal here is to the heart rather than the head, to the whole human being rather than the knowing ‘subject’. This appeal or plea is extended in Leviticus (19:18) where listeners are exhorted to love neighbours (or fellow beings) ‘as yourself’. As we know, Jesus explicitly accepted these two kinds of love – which ultimately are one – and even affirmed that on these two pleas ‘depend all the law and the prophets’ (Matthew 22:40). Clear echoes of the great *Shema*, however, can also be found in the Qur’an which speaks of the need for humans to love the divine and to extend a similar love to each other. Likewise, the Hindu text *Bhagavad Gita* exhorts followers to bond with the divine through *yoga* and also to implement this bonding through interhuman service. And in Buddhism, compassion and ethical-spiritual service are meant to assist in the ‘awakening’ of all creatures even beyond the inter-human domain.<sup>11</sup>

Given its concrete ‘existential’ appeal, the language commonly used in religious texts is an ordinary language readily accessible to people in all walks of life and at all times; it is not a highly esoteric idiom tailored for theologians and hence in need of vernacular filtering. As it happens, this aspect was emphasised by Moses at the very time when he announced the divine laws. ‘This commandment which I announce to you this day’, he said (Deuteronomy 30:11–14),

<sup>10</sup> Charles Taylor, ‘Why We Need a Radical Redefinition of Secularism’, *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, pp. 49–50, 52–3. Giving some concrete examples, Taylor adds (p. 54): ‘The two most widespread this-worldly philosophies in our contemporary world, utilitarianism and Kantianism, in their different versions, all have points at which they fail to convince honest and unconfused people.’ Extending this point to the relation between himself and Habermas, he states: ‘He finds this secure [secular] foundation in a “discourse ethics”, which I unfortunately find quite unconvincing.’ What Taylor fails to notice is that his rejection of the ‘epistemic break’ also puts pressure on his own ontological or metaphysical break between transcendence and immanence.

<sup>11</sup> See in this context my ‘Postsecular Faith: Toward a Religion of Service’, *Integral Pluralism: Beyond Culture Wars* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2010), esp. pp. 80–1.

is not too hard for you, nor is it far off. It is not in heaven so that you might say: 'Who will go up for us to heaven and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' Neither is it beyond the sea so that you might say: 'Who will go over the sea for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' But the word is very near you: it is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it.

Large portions of the Hebrew Bible are historical accounts – and these are surely accessible to ordinary readers without special expertise. And what about the Psalms? They seem to be addressed to the joys and sorrows, the delights and sufferings of 'everyman' (or every person). Uplifting and braising – and beyond the need for filtering devices – are the words of the first Psalm: 'Blessed is the man [person] who walks not in the counsel of the wicked . . . but his delight is in the law [teaching] of the Lord.' And everyone who has experienced trouble or misery in life is surely touched by the words of Psalm 23: 'The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want; he makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul.'

The Christian (or 'New') Testament is likewise filled with many stories or narratives, and especially the central story of the birth, ministry, and suffering of Jesus. Throughout his ministry, Jesus himself tells many stories, usually in the form of parables accessible to ordinary listeners. What filtering device is really necessary to understand the parable of the 'good Samaritan' (Luke 10:29–37): the story where two Jewish priests (of all people) piously pass by a person who was robbed and brutally beaten – but where that victim is picked up and cared for by a travelling Samaritan (who was not even a member of the Jewish community)? To be sure, the story was not told for mere entertainment, but for instruction – on the question 'who is my neighbour?' And what about the story about the rich man who will have difficulty entering the 'kingdom of God' (Matthew 19:23) – a story told again not for entertainment but instruction. In his ministry, Jesus never proclaimed a doctrine or epistemic paradigm, but simply taught by practical example. When, after Golgotha, two men encountered him and followed him to Emmaus, they did not recognise him through an epistemic formula, but in the simple breaking of bread (Luke 24:30–31). And what is one to say about the Sermon on the Mount and the great 'beatitudes'? Where in modern moral theory – from utilitarianism to Kantianism – can one find similarly stirring words, like these (Luke 6:20–22): 'Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you that hunger now, for you shall be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall be comforted?'

If, in these words, there is a need for translation, it is not so much a linguistic as rather a practical translation, that is, the transfer of teachings into human and social life. Here the letter of James is exemplary, and again it is written in generally accessible language. Elaborating on the great *Shema* in Deuteronomy, James emphasises that hearing or listening cannot just be a passive receptivity, but involves active following. As he states: (James 1:22–25): 'But be doers of the word and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.' For, he adds, someone who remains entirely passive is like a person who glances at an image and soon forgets what s/he has seen. But someone who looks into divine teachings and their message – which is 'the law of liberty' – and perseveres in an active fashion, 'shall be blessed in his doing'. In an effort to underscore this point, James continues (2:14–17): 'What does it profit if someone says he has faith but has no works? Can faith alone save him?' His letter, to be sure, does not say that action without faith is sufficient or commendable; rather hearing and doing should go together. Giving an example, he adds that 'Abraham



our father was justified by his works' – although one should better say that 'his faith was active in or along with his works, or faith was completed by his actions'. Returning to the role of religious faith in action, James offers a memorable definition (1:27): Religion that is 'pure and undefiled' means simply this: 'to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world'.<sup>12</sup>

### Post-secularity and politics

Going back to Habermas's essay of 2008, one can now see fairly clearly 'what is missing': it is an awareness of the primacy of lived experience over cognition, of ordinary language over epistemic paradigms, or (more simply) of doing or practice over knowing. This lacking awareness leads to the postulate of a self-enclosed (or 'buffered') epistemic grid which is immune from disturbing experiences. This deficit has practical-political implications. In a somewhat disarming way, Habermas's essay acknowledges the deficit, stating that 'enlightened reason loses its grip on the images, preserved by religion, of the moral whole – of the Kingdom of God on earth – as collectively binding ideal'. The consequences of this loss are far-reaching. Under the sway of the modern rational paradigm, 'practical reason [too] fails to fulfill its own vocation when it no longer has sufficient strength to awaken, and to keep awake, in the minds of secular subjects, an awareness of the violations of solidarity throughout the world, an awareness of what is missing, of what cries out to heaven'. Unfortunately, Habermas's own carefully guarded epistemic grid provides few if any resources to remedy the acknowledged deficit.<sup>13</sup>

Against this background, it seems appropriate and desirable to take another look at 'post-secularity'. Maybe the time has come to redefine the term in such a way as to extricate it from the grip of both secular rationalists and religious anti-secularists. As it seems to me, once the latter is done, a new meaning of post-secularity comes into view: namely, a social-political meaning endowed with a transformational quality. At this point, post-secularity comes to designate a move beyond a corrupt kind of secular or 'worldly' politics oriented solely toward such aims as power, wealth, and selfish interest; by correcting these aberrations, the 'post' of post-secularity becomes a goalpost pointing toward the pursuit of justice and the good life (which are the intrinsic aims of politics). In his 2009 response in New York City, Charles Taylor seems to gesture in this direction when he speaks of a 'new moral order' (what I would prefer to call an ethical mode of public life) embracing such qualities as the rights and liberties of members, the equality of status among them, and the consensual legitimacy of public rule. If this general orientation is kept in mind, he writes, then what are called secularist or post-secularist regimes should be conceived 'not primarily as bulwarks against religion but as good faith attempts to secure' the qualities mentioned before. And this means that contemporary regimes have 'to shape their institutional arrangements not just to remain true to a hallowed tradition

<sup>12</sup> The above passages can be read as a subtle commentary on the (much later) doctrine of '*sola gratia*'.

<sup>13</sup> Habermas, 'An Awareness of What is Missing', p. 19. For a somewhat more helpful text see Hauke Brunkhorst, *Solidarity: From Civic Friendships to a Global Legal Community*, trans. Jeffrey Flynn (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005).

but to enhance the basic goods to liberty and equality between basic beliefs' and their adherents.<sup>14</sup>

At this point, I believe, one needs to take a few more steps beyond Taylor's recommendations – which still cling too closely to 'liberal' conventions in celebrating universal maxims and cognitive 'beliefs'. In view of the enormous ills besetting political regimes today – large-scale economic corruption, media manipulation, and exploitation – it appears timely to envisage a still more 'radical redefinition of secularism' which resonates more fully with a prophetic idiom – of which religious tradition is replete. Returning again to the book of Deuteronomy, we find this exhortation (16:20): 'Justice and only justice you shall follow, so that you may live.' And the psalmist proclaims in a similar vein (37:28): 'For the Lord loves justice; he will not forsake his saints.' And if we turn again to the Qur'an, we find these lines: 'O ye believe! Stand out firmly for justice as witness to God' (Sura 4:135) and 'Be just, for that is next to piety' (Sura 5:8). Although couched in somewhat different (non-prophetic) language, similar exhortations can readily be found in non-Abrahamic religious traditions in South and East Asia. As the Malaysian scholar Chandra Muzaffar has correctly remarked: 'Justice is the real goal of any religion. It is the mission of every prophet and the message of every scripture.' Nor is the call to social justice narrowly restricted to 'religious' texts: it figures prominently in classical and modern philosophical teachings about civic 'virtues'. In the words of Aristotle – words echoed in the writings of Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Mencius: 'What we call just is whatever produces and maintains happiness or blessedness (*eudaimonia*) for the whole of a political community and its parts.' And as Aristotle importantly adds: justice and other virtues are practiced not for an external benefit or profit, since happiness or well-being is 'choiceworthy in itself'.<sup>15</sup>

This redirection or redefinition of secularism has implications also for the general meaning of 'post-secularity'. Viewed under social and political auspices, post-secularity is no longer the monopoly of secularists with a troubled conscience or else of anti-secularists but becomes available as a term designating all people – religious or not – with a public conscience, a conscience stirring them toward justice and social reform. From this angle, cognitive beliefs of whatever kind become secondary or subordinated to *orthopraxis*. In this respect, I completely concur with religious scholar Karen Armstrong when she states: 'I say that religion is not about believing things. It's ethical alchemy: it is about behaving in a way that changes you, that gives you intimations of holiness and sacredness.' In making this statement, Armstrong has the support not only of upright proponents of secular *praxis* but also of passages in sacred scripture, passages which sketch a development radically different from the well-known positivist trajectory (religion to metaphysics to science): namely, a path leading from cognition to practice, and from head to heart. The main passage can be found in Jeremiah (31:31–34), but its gist is repeated elsewhere:

<sup>14</sup> Taylor, 'Why we Need a Radical Redefinition of Secularism', pp. 46, 56.

<sup>15</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1985), pp. 14–15 (1097a35–1097b15), 34–35 (1103a31–1103b1). See also Chandra Muzaffar, *Rights, Religion and Reform: Enhancing Human Dignity through Spiritual and Moral Transformation* (London and New York: Routledge Curzon, 2002), p. 104; and my 'Religion and the World: The Quest for Justice and Peace', *Integral Pluralism*, pp. 85–101.

Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers . . . And this is the covenant: I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each man have to instruct his neighbor and brother saying 'know the Lord', for thy shall know me, from the least of them to the greatest.<sup>16</sup>

What this and similar biblical passages suggest is a slow maturation or seasoning: a willing turn of people toward social justice and truth without doctrinal inculcation or creedal manifestoes. What is involved here is a patient learning process through concrete experience, an educational transformation which Paulo Freire has aptly called a 'pedagogy of the heart'. Such a process does not lend itself to political platforms or ideological proclamations, and certainly cannot rely on coercion or make common cause with 'top-down' interruption or disruption. People involved in this process are not condemned to passivity or apathy, but their practice cannot be rash or violent and must be seasoned by the virtues of tolerance, forbearance, and goodwill – and above all by the yearning for justice and social well-being. In our time, this yearning can no longer be restricted to one locality, one society or one nation but must extend to humanity seen as a global community of interactive and ethically engaged people. In this manner, the contours of a 'post-secular' cosmopolis come into view – a condition in which the differences between cultures, creeds, and customs would not be erased but subordinated to a shared striving for justice and well-being. This cosmopolis would not be a superstate nor a military-industrial complex but only the emblem of a hope or promise sustaining ordinary human lives: the promise of the 'city of peace'.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> In the gospel of John (4:23–24), Jesus simply says: 'But the hour is coming and now is, when the true worshipper will worship the father in spirit and truth, for such the father seeks to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.' For the statement of Armstrong see {[http://www.ted.com/speakers/karen\\_armstrong.html](http://www.ted.com/speakers/karen_armstrong.html)}. Her words are distantly echoed by Gadamer when he writes: 'Just as health is not known in the same way as a wound or disease, so the holy is perhaps more a way of being than of being believed.' See his 'Reflections on the Relation of Religion and Science', *Hermeneutics, Religion, and Ethics*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 127.

<sup>17</sup> See in this context Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Heart*, trans. Donaldo Macedo and Alexandre Oliveira (New York: Continuum, 1997); also my 'Polis and Cosmopolis', *Margins of Political Discourse* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989), pp. 1–21, and my *The Promise of Democracy: Political Agency and Transformation* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2010).