

Post-Secular Piety: Interfaith Prospects and Promises

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During a lecture at the International Institute of Advanced Islamic Studies (IAIS) Malaysia in November 2010, the British theologian Graham Ward argued that while religion in Europe's past may have been relegated to the background, in recent years it has returned from exile and increasingly makes its presence publicly visible. Although its expression in institutionalised form, such as church attendance, remains static, the outward religiosity is now even more strongly felt. This hints at a return of religion after years of outcast from the public sphere, ushering in what is called a 'post-secular' age in the vocabulary of philosophers such as Jürgen Habermas, Charles Taylor and Slavoj Žižek. This means that faith-inspired activism is steadily gaining ground, and more importantly, individuals now articulate their concerns in overtly religious terms.

This, no doubt, signals a positive development. The spiritual deficit of modern life has been recognised as early as at the dawn of the twentieth century, when René Guénon, penning his decisive and iconoclastic critique of the modern world, censured modernity's neglect of transcendence or 'higher principle' upon which its values should be based. Religion represents the door through which spirituality may re-enter the worldly theatre, no doubt through the agency of individuals committed to the spiritual aspirations envisioned in religion. In recent years we have witnessed the flourishing of such initiatives, from a spiritual vision of the environment that gave birth to 'eco-theology' (spearheaded by contemporary scholars by the likes of Seyyed Hossein Nasr in the Islamic tradition and Michael Northcott in the Christian tradition) to religiously-based organisations offering social services. Of course, the religious character of social life is not new. For the most part of history, humanity has lived within a religious and spiritual ambience. It is the marginalisation of religion that is radically new in the experience of humanity. Nevertheless, this new piety presents some new challenges while holding immense prospects for interfaith cooperation.

The fruits of such religiosity have always been positively esteemed. But lest it be forgotten, public religiosity too had unleashed undesirable consequences, such as religiously-motivated violence, exclusivism, and persecution of the 'other' (terrorism is a 'fine' example). Although the increasing visibility of religion in the public sphere is a welcome development portending ever more significance to religion, its résumé is hardly a spotless register of innocence – hijacked, as it always

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has been, by excesses in outward piety. As the Malaysian public intellectual, Chandra Muzaffar, often reiterates, these are classic instances of religions failing their own spiritual ideals, when religiosity is on the rampage but spirituality is in slumber. How then, can post-secular piety be cautioned against that and seek rather to foster interfaith initiatives towards the common good? The contemporary Muslim world is no stranger to this experience – ‘jihadist’ enthusiasm is usually short-lived, and even then appeals to only a fraction of the religious populace. The majority seems to find sojourn in the middle way.¹

Reflecting on the manifold problems affecting the contemporary Muslim world, the American journalist, Fareed Zakaria, observed that “in a religion without an official clergy, Bin Laden has as much – or as little – authority to issue fatwa as does a Pakistani taxi driver in New York City”.² Islamic history, however, bears witness that such instances of extremism are often the voices on the fringes. Even when it seized political power, classical Islam knew only two episodes of systematic state-backed inquisition: the Mu’tazilite persecution of their rivals under the Abbasid caliphs between the years 833 and 848, and, in the sixteenth century, the demolition of Iranian Sunnism under the Shi’ite Safavids.³ Closer to our time (and perhaps on a more hopeful note), when in 2006 Pope Benedict XVI made some remarks on Islam which resulted in misunderstandings of various sorts,⁴ Muslim scholars from around the world responded with the ‘Common Word’ initiative. Such a move represents an intellectual engagement and response born of an authentic knowledge tradition.

One is then compelled to ask: if the post-Enlightenment discourse has always borne the secular imprint, from where then do post-secular activists draw their intellectual resources? The Islamic experience, we have seen, demonstrates the efficacy of intellectual response derived from a rich, centuries-old scholarly tradition that always asserts the primacy of the ‘middle path’ against the excesses of overzealous adherents. The ecclesiastical leviathan that kept such reactions at bay is not personalised in a single authority but disseminated in a loose body of scholars, whose only real excuse for people listening to them is not their divine authority but their knowledge and character. If Islam maintains an egalitarian exterior, as Zakaria noted sarcastically, it is because its internal makeup is already profoundly elitist and hierarchical, exalting above all else the centrality of knowledge and those who possess it: “Are they equal those who know and those who do not know?” (Qur’ān, 39:9). A scholar is not an appointed office but an earned one. This runs counter to the post-secular logic which, in the words of the political theorist Fred Dallmayr, “is freed from the hierarchical tross of the past”.⁵

Post-secular piety, if it is to safeguard against the same fanaticism and abuse that the various religions have bitterly experienced at some time or other, ought to be able to develop internal mechanisms of constraint against any prospect of excess. Admittedly, the knowledge tradition to which it is heir is itself a conscious revolt

against religion and the transcendent, born of post-Enlightenment optimism – if not conceit – in reason (restrictively understood) as the sole guide in public affairs. The socio-political life itself is constructed on such ideological infrastructures. Are we then, to echo David Hume's remark about religious works, to "commit it then to the flames"? Most decidedly not – and here lies the promise of post-secular interfaith engagement.

The 'third wave' of globalisation that we witness today may have, in some ways, brought about uniformity throughout the lands which universalises western civilisational preferences.⁶ Yet at the same time and in other ways, it has also introduced new actors into its discourse: no longer portraying the West as the sole superhero in the public sphere, the latter's dramatis personae now enlists people from across the globe. Orientalism, often discredited for its supposedly negative characterisation of the West's 'other', is now mellowed by post-colonial protests that participate in it (aided partly by the 'globalisation' of the English language), but inspired, among others, by the spiritual wisdom of the various religions. The discourse that once instrumentalised to facilitate domination, is now vulnerable to auto-critique fertile enough to welcome domestication of exogenous traditions as part of its own agenda, and simultaneously plant the seeds for its own self-transformation.

These developments are why post-secular religiosity is different from religion's public role in the past that we are familiar with. On the one hand, the socio-political infrastructures were built precisely so they can operate without religious interference; purportedly under the universal auspices of reason (the modern post-Westphalian nation-state is one such example). On the other hand, it is on these infrastructures that post-secular discourse now may capitalise. It is true that many of the outspoken critics of secularism operate within societies where it has been long since established, hence profiting from the very embodiments they wish to do away with. But the orientation has now changed: the public sphere is no longer the realm of 'religious neutrality' but a rendezvous of 'shared values'. These values, however, are dynamic – their continued relevance can only be secured when clothed in rational narratives. The said infrastructures then, are now not the pretext to marginalise religion but an avenue where absolute and transcendent values can find institutional expression. This is then the meeting point that synthesises post-Enlightenment discourse with mainstream religious ones, thus allowing for the latter's vision to be articulated in modern vocabularies.

Interfaith dialogue often insists on shared values to establish a common ground for understanding, but without the adequate intellectual resources rooted in the scholarly tradition, its lofty project risks losing the internal cohesion necessary for dialogue. The abuse and ideologisation of religion that we hinted earlier is only one of its symptoms. Shared values must be invigorated by shared discourse, and shared discourse must ultimately draw its nourishment from the intellectual-spiritual

traditions of the respective religions that serve at once to advance the spiritual vision of each and check against wayward ‘piety’ not supported by knowledge. Significantly, such a project is already underway in the Islamic world. The project styled ‘islamisation of knowledge’ is meant to negotiate with modernity through the prism of tradition. Although its aim is to harmonise contemporary knowledge with the Islamic worldview, other communities may appreciate its methodology, which they may fruitfully utilise to advance their own aspirations by identifying the common principles that bind their agendas together.

These should then establish continuity with the intellectual traditions to which they are heir and lay the spiritual infrastructures necessary for interfaith alliance and harmony.

Notes

1. On the ‘middle way’, see Mohammad Hashim Kamali, “The Middle Grounds of Islamic Civilisation: The Qur’anic Principle of Wasatiyyah”, *IAIS Journal of Civilisation Studies* 1, no. 1 (October 2008), 7–41.
2. Fareed Zakaria, *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2005), 125.
3. Tim Winter, *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 7.
4. See on this issue, Christoph Marcinkowski, “Religion, Reason, ‘Regensburg’: Perspectives for Catholic–Muslim Dialogue”, *Islam and Civilisational Renewal* 1, no. 1 (October 2009), 159–67.
5. Fred Dallmayr, *Post-Secular Faith: Toward a Religion of Service* (Georgetown, Penang [Malaysia]: Penerbit Universiti Sains Malaysia, 2008), 1.
6. On the ‘three waves of globalisation’, see Osman Bakar, “Islam and the Three Waves of Globalisation: The Southeast Asian Experience”, *Islam and Civilisational Renewal* 1, no. 4 (July 2010), 666–84. On the universalisation of western civilisational preferences, see Karim D. Crow, “The World System in Civilisational Crisis”, *Islam and Civilisational Renewal* 1, no. 3 (April 2010), 409–24.