

Formations of the Postsecular in Education

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Introduction

The place of religion in education has long been controversial. There is no simple answer to the question of how religion and education are related because the complex religious history of each nation state gives form to those relations (see Jackson 2007). From a philosophical perspective, these relations have been usefully arranged into themes: religious upbringing; faith schools; religious education in the curriculum, religious philosophies of education, and issues of religious identity (see Strhan 2014). Arguably more than any other domain, the spaces of education (from parenting, to schooling, and beyond) are where the interactions between public and private are most complex and unavoidable. Therefore, I argue that education is a key consideration for postsecular theory, one in which neutrality is simply meaningless.¹ In other words, to speak of neutral educational formation is oxymoronic. Some key questions must be addressed: What do religion, education and 'religious education' look like in a postsecular age? What philosophical and pedagogical issues are raised by the new context of the postsecular? The terms of this debate are by no means settled and so I explore the varied conceptions of secularism and the postsecular, arguing that the postsecular complicates rather than refutes the secularization thesis. The argument challenges the view of religion as basically reducible to doctrines, creeds or truth claims, showing how that conception of religion skews the discussion of the place of religion in education towards one that considers only issues of indoctrination, and the rights of parents or religious groups to reproduce themselves. I suggest that the post-colonial concern to reveal and challenge assumptions around Western liberalism provides a fresh context to articulate the postsecular and its influence upon education.

The rise and fall of the secular

Detecting the waning influence of secular narratives of culture around the turn of the millennium, Steve Bruce presented a powerful case for secularization in Western societies arguing that many of the strongest accounts of secularization across the social sciences (e.g. Marx, Weber, Durkheim and Freud), were being displaced by weaker less thoroughgoing counter-secularization analyses that emerged towards the close of the twentieth century. Bruce's basic argument, affirming "a long-term decline in the power, popularity and prestige of religious beliefs and rituals" (Bruce 2002, 44), though richly descriptive of trends in 19th Century Britain seems inconsistent with more recent developments and events across the globe. One year after the publication of Bruce's book, the anthropologist Talal Asad announced the end of a certain picture of secularism as a progressive, liberal project in his book *Formations of the Secular*, stating that "[i]f anything is agreed upon, it is that a straightforward narrative of progress from the religious to the secular is no longer acceptable" (Asad 2003, 1). Asad, and those who have developed his lines of inquiry such as Saba Mahmood, José Casanova, William Connolly, Wendy Brown and many others (see Scott and Hirschkind 2006) have enriched the terms of the debate around secularization, but the sense in which secularization has faltered remains an ongoing controversy (Bruce 2013, Scott and Hirschkind 2006). What follows elaborates these insights, by arguing that the formations of

¹ There has been some recent interest in the postsecular within educational theory: (Bowie, Peterson and Revell 2012), (Hotam and Wexler 2014), and (Lewin 2016).

postsecularism influence, and are influenced by, how education interrupts some of the more simplistic accounts of secularism.

The turbulence across many parts of the world since the turn of the millennium (wars, revolutions, insurgencies, and the like), has revealed a world of dizzying complexity where perpetual conflict has become the norm with tensions cutting across political, cultural, religious and ethnic identities. Social, economic and environmental problems magnify – and perhaps may even constitute a decisive influence upon – these issues and differences. A widespread *fear of secularism* in parts of the Middle East and elsewhere is hard to disentangle from increased fundamentalism leading to the now common observation that “secularism and fundamentalism feed off each other” (Williams 2012, 16). A general fear of the ‘other’ is surely bound up with increasing religious fanaticism and fundamentalism that seems built into global tensions. While difficult to explain, these fears cannot be dismissed as a temporary regression that swims against the inevitable tide of progressive enlightenment rationalism. Rowas Williams sees the instrumentalization of social relations as the characteristic and problematic constitution a programmatic secularism, that excludes religion entirely from public life. Society cannot be reduced to the administration of more or less successful methods of maintaining public order and upholding private freedoms but inevitably relies upon moral and social orders grounded in ultimate principles. This is especially true in the context of education. The idea that these principles can be eliminated from public life does, to some extent, feed the fears of the secular and the reactions to the programmatic secularism that disavows principles and commitments in the public domain. Thus, religious revivalism and fundamentalism across the world cannot simply be explained away as conservative reactions against aspects of modernity and postmodernity but may themselves be products of certain formations of the secular.

How can the ‘postsecular’ help us address these tensions? Does education have a particular role to play in forming a more inclusive society, somewhere between the secular and the confessional? Postsecularism offers us an opportunity to engage with the contributions of our religious traditions, implying neither blind obedience, nor a denial the achievements of modernity. Asad’s insights concerning the limitations of the secular have encouraged the development of the concept of the *postsecular*, a term which Asad himself does not use in *Formations of the Secular* (Asad 2003), but one that has come to identify, among other developments, the so-called ‘return of religion’, and though a complex and contested term, it denotes a state of affairs of particular significance for education.

The postsecular in education

These interactions between religion and culture are perhaps most keenly felt in the domain of education. Understanding the postsecular as a complication rather than repudiation of secularism (Lewin 2016, Chapter 2) encourages us to move away from the normative question of whether religion should (or should not) have a role in public education, to the more fundamental question of the ways in which religion already has (and probably inevitably will have) such a role. I make no claim that religion is a force for good (or bad) in education, but it should be recognised that religion is a fundamental force that shapes people, communities and education, a force that is not going away. In that sense the *postsecular* offers a descriptive term for exploring the continued significance of religion within education. Education here is broadly construed as any intentional formative activities. The strong claim here is that there is no neutral educational formation despite the fact that many so-called progressive educators might wish to argue for a neutral education (see Sommers 2002).

I would like to proceed by providing an unambiguous definition of the *postsecular* that goes beyond the notion of a return to religion, but as this volume shows, such a definition remains elusive. In a general sense the postsecular refers to the idea that modernity no longer entails an inevitable march towards secularism and the loss of faith. But already we should be alert to problematic connotations: of *secularism*, a term used to define a worldview in which religion is largely absent from *secularization*, an historical process in which social 'progress' and modernity, is associated religion losing cultural and social significance (Casanova 2009). The latter process is itself easily related to the growth of atheism or humanism, but ought not to be identified with it. This failure to distinguish between a secular worldview and secularisation process makes it all too easy to overlook an arguably more fundamental distinction: namely the secular as the public domain which is free of the private interests of particular individuals and groups (which does not necessarily imply a loss of faith, but rather a privatization of it) and the secular as a broader process in which society is generally less religious. Although secularism, a general loss of faith, and a rise in atheism are by no means identical, there are many complex intersections rendering a neat division between a secular public domain and a private religious sphere untenable. Public life, especially public education, requires reference to evaluative discourse, often informed by, or related to, religious commitments. As Rowan Williams puts it, "evaluative discourse leaks out into the public sphere, sometimes in the moralizing rhetoric of political leaders, sometimes in the improvised rituals (of celebration or mourning or solidarity) that sporadically take over some part of the public territory" (Williams 2012, 13). Once conceived as an inclusive principle of nondiscrimination, the privatization of religion might, in fact, stand in opposition to many central religious perspectives since "the very idea of deriving law from sacred texts is a repudiation of the public/private distinction" (Fox 2002, 22). There are good reasons why we have been so keen to embrace the idea that religion should be contained to the private sphere. It respects the commitments and values of citizens and releases shared dimensions of social life from the weight of those commitments. But as Asad suggests, there are equally good reasons why religion cannot be contained in this way, not least because religion is, by definition, a communal enterprise which could be seen to push against containment within the private sphere. William Connolly has neatly summarised Asad's critical perspective on the secular, a perspective which presents the division between private and public as reflecting a partisan view of social and religious life:

1. Secularism is not merely the division between public and private realms that allows religious diversity to flourish in the latter. It can itself be a carrier of harsh exclusions. And it secretes a new definition of "religion" that conceals some of its most problematic practices from itself.
2. In creating its characteristic division between secular public space and religious private space, European secularism sought to shuffle ritual and discipline into the private realm. In doing so, however, it loses touch with the ways in which embodied practices of conduct help to constitute culture, including European culture. (Connolly 2006, p. 75).

Asad's analysis is broadly consistent with Williams's view who adds a further distinction in the development of a secular public space, between procedural and programmatic secularism. Procedural secularism takes a more pluralist attitude which disavows favour to any religious grouping, while trying to maintain a broad representation for all (as, for example in India), while programmatic secularism seeks to iron out any and every public manifestation of religious allegiance, with France often cited as the paradigmatic case (Williams 2012, 2).

If defining secularism as the neat division between private and public cannot be upheld, then nor can we straightforwardly define postsecularism as the reintegration of religion and public life because something recognisably religious has always formed part of our cultural identities. Thus, echoing Latour, the postsecular suggests that we have never been secular. Clearly the postsecular idea of a 'return of religion' can only take us so far, since the postsecular is anything but a simple return. The analogy for educational theory here might be a simple return to confessional religious education in schools, where a single religious perspective is taught as true, an approach that is out of fashion in most Western education systems (Gearon 2013; Lewin 2017). For many, pluralism and multiculturalism signal cosmopolitanism, tolerance, and progress, values that underpin certain republican values which reflect a particular progressivist view of history. Some forms of progressive education have also been identified with this cosmopolitanism, looking towards an education for global citizenship (Bamber, Lewin, and White, 2018). This broad alignment of progressivism, education and secularism must be shown to be at best simplistic, it not outright wrong.

Complicating progressivism

Whether empirical or normative, our narratives of enlightened progress seem to align with, and reinforce, conceptions of human development that also structure ideas about education. In this sense education is intrinsically teleological since it is concerned with the intended improvement of a particular skill, knowledge, capacity, or disposition. For many progressive educators, the liberal project is oriented by ideals of the formation of a rational and free subject (Gutmann 1982). While defying the aspiration to become rational and free might not, in itself, seem reasonable, such teleological thinking is in danger of making us blind to the variety and complexity of human identity and development because we become wedded to a linear conception of time and progress in which modern Western culture has inaugurated the end of history (Fukuyama 1992). Opposition to this rather limited view of human development and progress may be reflected in the concomitant suspicion, even fear, of secularism as a project of Western progress. No doubt the strident tone within 'aggressive secularism' and the increasingly passé 'new atheism' reflects anxieties of resurgent religious bigotry, which itself seems more reactionary than substantive. If we are to escape this *reactionary circle*, then we will need a more nuanced and circumspect analysis that first of all would challenge a naïve, rather Eurocentric, progressivism that places a narrow form of rational subjectivity as the singular anthropology. So, as many postsecular theorists have argued, history has turned out to be more complicated than any neo-Hegelian narrative of *Geistesgeschichte* (roughly understood as cultural history in progressive development).² This complication should expand the debate within educational philosophy away from rather narrow considerations of curriculum issues around how to reconcile competing truth claims within religious education, or how to express the rational civic core that all citizens must adhere to (in the UK expressed as the inculcation of 'British Values'), to a broader discussion of how our fundamental commitments and ultimate concerns figure in education today (Lewin 2014). This raises questions of what religion is for people today, since the voluntaristic conception that religious life entails choices and decisions, to commit to a system of beliefs, truth claims or worldviews, is itself a very particular, and rather unhelpful, one. As Wendy Brown puts it:

The conceit of religion as a matter of individual choice...is already a distinct (and distinctly Protestant) way of conceiving religion, one that is woefully inapt for Islam and, I might add, Judaism, which is why neither comports easily with the privatized

² This raises the question of whether Hegel's philosophy of history, and European Enlightenment philosophy more broadly, is irredeemably Eurocentric and colonialist (Tibebu 2011).

individual religious subject presumed by the formulations of religion freedom and tolerance governing Euro-Atlantic modernity (Brown 2013, 17).

The conception of choice is related to a view of religion as a worldview, or set of truth claims, about which one makes that choice. This voluntaristic conception of religion tends to frame debates about the place of religion in education, contributing to a wide misunderstanding of the nature of (religious) commitment: as though only religious positions rely on commitments, while secular worldviews are based on firmer foundations of rationality alone. Secular perspectives embody a range of commitments which are not necessarily visible at level of propositions or worldviews (Lewin 2016, Chapter 3). The postsecular encourages us to recognise that the kinds of binaries that structure our thinking about religion – religious/secular, faith/reason – are deceptive, since the terms and identities are more porous than these accounts assume.

In the field of education we must work with the conceptual fluidity of the postsecular in developing the different senses in which religion plays a part in the social life of public educational institutions. In other words, religion – in one sense or another – will inform public education, whether we like it or not. This does not mean that we shouldn't consider creating spaces within public education that are, as far as possible, free of religious influence. Nor should we turn a blind eye to over-zealous religious inculcation in educational institutions (public or private) in the name of liberalism or tolerance. But the idea that we can leave our religious attitudes at the school gates presupposes a particular conception of what it means to be religious that, I argue, reinforces a parochialism, perhaps even imperialism, since it reflects what could be called a rather protestant view of what it means to be religious.³ We cannot deny the formative dimensions of education which means that seeing religious/worldview 'neutrality' as an educational ideal is itself by no means neutral (Cooling 2010). It entails a narrow and inadequate understanding of religion as the cognitive assent to truth claims, doctrines, or worldviews. I argue against any neat separation of religion and education for both practical and theoretical reasons. From a practical point of view I believe it to be vital that children and young people become religiously literate. From a theoretical perspective a value-laden orientation to life is inevitable and essential whether or not we engage explicitly in religious or humanist formations of those values.

In addition, there is an important pedagogical point here. It is not obvious that the job of educators is to encourage cognitive assent to truth claims, even if those claims are taken to be straightforwardly true. This is because learning is better served by a pedagogy of inquiry (or non-directive pedagogy) than a pedagogy of assent (or directive pedagogy) (see Sommers 2002). A pedagogy of assent supposes that the substance of learning is constituted by relatively stable knowledge, skills and dispositions, all of which can and should be directly inculcated into the student. Education cannot be entirely free of the process of absorbing or assenting to such forms of knowledge, but the craft of teaching is better understood to entail indirect forms, which ultimately give the student the freedom and responsibility to take what they can from it. Trevor Cooling uses the example of a student asking about creationism in a science lesson arguing that it might not be appropriate to simply "dismiss it outright as wrong-headed" (Cooling 2010, 11). The fact that creationism is false is not enough, since the educator must also employ a measure of what Van Manen calls 'pedagogical tact' in handling the situation (Van Manen 2016). Cooling's point is that "grappling successfully with questions of meaning and significance contributes to developing into a healthy, balanced person and is a

³ The use the term *Protestant* here is meant to be broadly inclusive of Protestant traditions that, in the wake of Luther, regard *sola fide*, by faith alone, to be the sole ground for salvation (See Dupré 1993).

fundamentally important component of education” (Cooling 2010, 14). The shift from directive ‘Religious Instruction’ (often referred to as *catechesis* within Christian communities) to non-directive ‘Religious Education’ in the 1988 Education Reform Act in England and Wales, was in part intended to address this issue: that any perception of indoctrinatory intent within confessional religious instruction was mitigated by an exposure to more than one religious tradition. The postsecular complication of linear narratives of culture continues to be felt in the fact that the curriculum of Religious Education is the one place in which the issues around taking religion seriously while simultaneously being inclusive have seemed most intractable (Barnes 2009; Aldridge 2015). Can there be a meaningful religious education for all?

Education for all?

Given the vast range of concepts and contexts that the postsecular evokes, is there a core notion that can be identified and applied to any kind of general education? The political, sociological, philosophical and theological registers of the term hint at a concern that might be understood as a post-colonial appreciation of other ways of knowing, being and educating which can be related to Williams’ definition of the non-secular as “a willingness to see things or other persons as the objects of another sensibility than my own” (Williams 2012, 13). That the Western liberal project, which today is manifest in a highly urbanized and consumerist culture, is the ‘only game in town’ scarcely needs to be stated, so self-evident has it become. That this Western liberalism is bound up with conceptions of universal reason and progress that have supplanted local indigenous communities appears equally, and problematically, self-evident. Mass education in 19th Century Europe seems to have gone hand in hand with a colonialist reach of the civilizing power of Western European education, evident for instance in John Gast’s painting from 1872, entitled ‘American Progress’. And ‘we’ (UNESCO, the World Bank, and the so-called ‘International Community’) now call for an ‘Education for All’ whose noble intention is to bring the benefits of an education “to every citizen in every society” (World Bank 2014). Have we become inured to the one-dimensional nature of the cultural and educational imperialism at the heart of this project? In a series of articles and a powerful film, Carol Black strongly argues that we have:

In “developed” societies, we are so accustomed to centralized control over learning that it has become functionally invisible to us, and most people accept it as natural, inevitable, and consistent with the principles of freedom and democracy. We assume that this central authority, because it is associated with something that seems like an unequivocal good – “education” – must itself be fundamentally good, a sort of benevolent dictatorship of the intellect (Black 2012).

Just as Jacques Rancière has pointed out the contradiction inherent to installing democracy (Rancière 1992), so Black argues that the installation of a particular conception of education for all negates the varieties of indigenous education and culture that have existed across all societies for hundreds of years. Black may be overstating her case, romanticizing indigenous cultures, or failing to recognize the complexity by placing mass education in opposition to indigenous education in this way. But it is hard to refute the totalizing intent of ‘Education for all’ and the near universal assumption that it represents an unequivocal good. For the purposes of my argument, the postsecular offers one way to open up a space for alternatives to a disenchanting, industrialised and urbanized future. It is a political, social, and spiritual concern that we find alternatives to the neo-liberal narratives of the future. But, to interpret

Heidegger's enigmatic claim (Heidegger 1981), only a god can interrupt the totalizing power of that narrative.⁴

One might object that the context and image of colonialist education cannot be identified with secularism. After all, colonialism was initially motivated by more than economic and political interests, but by an evangelizing imperative that moved in a different direction to secularization: seeking to bring others into the faith. This is important in view of education since the missionary spirit of those colonial powers took great interest in schooling: the legacy of British colonialism is evident in that many of the elite schools in India today, for example, are Christian. Surely, then, secularization should be seen in opposition to colonialism. There are many complex points here that can only be briefly touched upon.

First, the influential theory of Carl Schmitt shows how the founding principles of secular society (concepts of science and progress) arise out of the theological traditions of Western Europe (Schmitt 2007). But this brief overview can only hope to indicate the geopolitical dimensions of this debate sufficiently to suggest that the missionary zeal of early colonialists seem largely reflected in the assumptions within liberal democratic societies: that modern industrialized societies are to be exported to every corner of the globe. It is the manner of being-in-the-world that admits of no alternatives, and that therefore fails to recognize itself as just one mode of being. It is, to use Heideggerian language, the oblivion of being. I am not for a moment suggesting that the scientific revolution, the Enlightenment, and modernity in general are not momentous shifts resulting in extraordinary benefits to millions, even billions of lives around the world. One might observe that modernity is a victim of its own success in the sense that it has become so all encompassing, so totalizing or *enframing*, again to reference Heidegger, that all other modes of being are all but invisible (Heidegger 1977; Lewin 2015). Other ways of addressing global problems, environmental, social, political, and spiritual, are silenced. This is not, then, an attack on, or negation of, Western consumerist culture, technology, urbanization, or secularism more broadly, but only to acknowledge that this is not the only game in town. It may be that other ways of being, including religious, spiritual, poetic, aesthetic etc., draw more explicitly on the *postsecular*, inhabiting a world which is more than the projection of the power of subjectivity. We need to bring the discussion back to a more direct engagement with the question of religion, to which I return.

The return of religion and education

We have seen that the postsecular age involves acknowledging that religion has an ongoing influence on culture and on education particularly. Straightforward theories of secularization have to be reexamined in light of the ongoing influence of religion. This means disabusing ourselves of the assumption that “to be secular means to be modern, and therefore by

⁴ In an interview for *Der Spiegel*, withheld from publication until after his death, Heidegger (1991) enigmatically stated that “Philosophy will not be able to effect an immediate transformation of the present condition of the world. This is not only true of philosophy, but of all merely human thought and endeavor. Only a god can save us. The sole possibility that is left for us is to prepare a sort of readiness, through thinking and poeticizing, for the appearance of the god or for the absence of the god in the time of foundering [*Untergang*] for in the face of the god who is absent, we founder.” My intention with this reference is to indicate that an interruption to the prevailing liberal democratic order entails some radical reorientation that seems to require something ‘transcendent’. Either that, or we will be visited by a global environmental catastrophe which will be impossible to ignore – an interruption of a different kind.

implication, to be religious means not yet fully modern” (Casanova, 2011, 59). This statement could be recast for educators in the following way ‘to be secular means to be critical, and therefore by implication, to be religious means not yet fully critical’. I would argue that the existence and development of critical thinking must be uncoupled from assumptions around secularization, and that the fear of secularization in parts of the Islamic world are associated with fears around certain kinds of education because of this association. Attacks on education in Pakistan, for example, are abhorrent. But understanding these fears as arising out of a misunderstanding of the relationship between criticality and credulity is an important step. In other words, I want to call for a softening of the polarization between criticality and credulity, because we all believe and affirm something before we critically engage. This is the hermeneutical condition, perhaps even the human condition.

Softening the opposition between those who are religious and non-religious might also involve giving voice to those who stand betwixt and between the secular and the religious. The site of the postsecular gives form to the spaces or cracks that many people in the present age would recognize, but do not often discuss: the spaces between the secular and the confessional. It is in these spaces that many people find themselves: unwilling to fully negate religious life, nor fully able to embrace the worldviews that seem untenable. Philosophers might see this disposition as heralding a *religion after metaphysics*. Taylor calls this space a third way between orthodoxy and unbelief, a view that Smith, quoting Taylor, neatly captures: “All sorts of people feel themselves caught; ‘in the face of the opposition between orthodoxy and unbelief, many, and among them the best and most sensitive minds, were [and are] cross-pressured, looking for a third way” (Smith 2014, 64). After the putative death of God, the possibility of authentic religious life is an ongoing question, hence the rise in alternative forms of religion and interests in spirituality (King 2009). For those who consider themselves ‘spiritual but not religious’, there may emerge an appreciation of the opportunity to explore the postsecular defined in terms not reducible to either pole of secular/confessional binary. This chapter has attempted, in different ways, to interpret the postsecular as a kind of complication of the secular. This complexity is essential in the domain of education where intentional formative activities require some reflection on the ultimate concerns of education.

Conclusion

I began by asking what education might look like in a postsecular age. This entailed a discussion of the nature of secularism. Recently philosophers of religion have pointed out some of the Eurocentric biases within this notion of secularism and the propositional conception of religion it assumes, an analysis that I have suggested should be extended to education. One view of the postsecular, then, would be to develop the opportunity to ‘return to religion’ in ways that go beyond reductive propositional or voluntaristic views of religion – going beyond an understanding of religions as competing worldviews or belief-systems. Applied to education we might explore how different symbolic systems offer rich narratives to make meaning that cannot be reduced to worldviews. This would encourage a respect for other ways of being-in-the-world that are too often disregarded as primitive, premodern, and uneducated. This kind of respect amounts to a postsecular education, between the secular and the confessional.

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