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# The secularism of post-secularity: religion, realism, and the revival of grand theory in IR

ADRIAN PABST\*

**Abstract.** How to theorise religion in International Relations (IR)? Does the concept of post-secularity advance the debate on religion beyond the 'return of religion' and the crisis of secular reason? This article argues that the post-secular remains trapped in the logic of secularism. First, a new account is provided of the 'secularist bias' that characterises mainstream IR theory: (a) defining religion in either essentialist or epiphenomenal terms; (b) positing a series of 'antagonistic binary opposites' such as the secular *versus* the religious; and (c) de-sacralising and re-sacralising the public square. The article then analyses post-secularity, showing that it subordinates faith under secular reason and sacralises the 'other' by elevating difference into the sole transcendental term. Theorists of the post-secular such as Jürgen Habermas or William Connolly also equate secular modernity with metaphysical universalism, which they seek to replace with post-metaphysical pluralism. In contrast, the alternative that this article outlines is an international theory that develops the Christian realism of the English School in the direction of a metaphysical-political realism. Such a realism binds together reason with faith and envisions a 'corporate' association of peoples and nations beyond the secularist settlement of Westphalia that is centred on national states and transnational markets. By linking immanent values to transcendent principles, this approach can rethink religion in international affairs and help revive grand theory in IR.

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## I. Introduction

For twenty years or so, the study of international relations has been confronted with the global resurgence of religion that challenges the dominant logic of secularism in mainstream International Relations (IR) theory.<sup>1</sup> In response, IR scholarship has

\* I would like to thank William Bain, Mariano Barbato, Joe Camilleri, Charles Jones, Jonathan Joseph, Luca Mavelli, Fabio Petito, and three anonymous reviewers for the *Review of International Studies* for their comments on earlier drafts of this article.

<sup>1</sup> Recent surveys of the growing IR literature on the global religious resurgence include Jeffrey Haynes, 'Religion and International Relations in the 21st Century: Conflict or Co-operation?', *Third World Quarterly*, 27:3 (2006), pp. 535–41; Eva Bellin, 'Faith in Politics: New Trends in the Study of Religion and Politics', *World Politics*, 60:2 (2008), pp. 315–47, esp. 315–19 and 338–47; Daniel Philpott, 'Has

attempted to accommodate the role of faith in international affairs either within existing IR traditions or in terms of new paradigms such as the ‘clash of [religiously rooted] civilizations’.<sup>2</sup> New concepts in other disciplines such as sociology and political theory have also attracted attention in IR. Sociological research on desecularisation explores the revival of religion in international relations against the premises and predictions of the secularisation thesis.<sup>3</sup> Amid the crisis of secular reason, the notion of post-secularity developed by Jürgen Habermas and William Connolly suggests that the moral intuitions of faith should be part of public discourse and be allowed to contribute to the common good.<sup>4</sup> As such, the nascent ‘turn to religion’ rejects the ‘secularist bias’ of conventional IR theories and disputes the normative claims of an immanentist analytical framework that has prevailed in the modern humanities and social sciences since the positivist passage from revelation via metaphysics to science.<sup>5</sup> Thus IR may move from a secularist to a post-secularist phase in which world religions are central to political debate and academic analysis alike.

However, this article argues that the concept of post-secularity does not advance attempts to theorise religion in IR because it remains trapped in the logic of secularism. First, the article revisits the ‘secularist bias’ of mainstream IR theory. By contrast with existing interpretations, my contention is that secularism is not confined to the public settlement of the relationship between religion and politics or the functional differentiation of religious from political authority. Rather, the secular rests on three elements that also inform the post-secular: defining religion in either essentialist or epiphenomenal terms; positing a dualistic logic that underpins ‘antagonistic bipolar opposites’ (Roland Bleiker); de-sacralising and re-sacralising the public square by investing the secular space with quasi-sacred significance.

Second, post-secularity fails to overcome the hegemony of secular reason. Rationality so configured rejects religious faith as irrational and is predicated on the separation of natural immanence from supernatural transcendence. As a result, only secular reason is ultimately permitted to define the procedural and majoritarian norms that govern the public square (Habermas). Other conceptions of the post-secular rest on an immanent

the Study of Global Politics Found Religion?, *American Review of Political Science*, 12 (2009), pp. 183–202. On the secularist assumptions of mainstream IR theory, see Michael W. Doyle, *Ways of War and Peace: Realism, Liberalism and Socialism* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1997); Daniel Philpott, ‘The Challenge of September 11 to Secularism in International Relations’, *World Politics*, 55:1 (2002), pp. 66–95; Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, *The Politics of Secularism in International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), pp. 1–45, 134–54; Erin K. Wilson, *After Secularism: Rethinking Religion in Global Politics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 1–90.

<sup>2</sup> For a useful discussion of how religion might fit into existing IR traditions, see Jack Snyder, ‘Introduction’, in J. Snyder (ed.), *Religion and International Relations Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), pp. 1–23. On combining several IR theories, see in the same volume, Daniel H. Nexon, ‘Religion and International Relations: No Leap of Faith Required’, pp. 141–67; in contrast, see Bellin, ‘Faith in Politics’, esp. p. 316. On ‘new paradigms’, see, for example, Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> Peter Berger (ed.), *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999); see also Adrian Pabst, ‘The Paradox of Faith: Religion beyond Secularization and Desecularization’, in Craig Calhoun and Georgi M. Derlugin (eds), *The Deepening Crisis: Governance Challenges after Neoliberalism* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), pp. 157–82.

<sup>4</sup> Mariano Barbato and Friedrich Kratochwil, ‘Towards a Post-secular Political Order?’, *European Political Science Review*, 1:3 (2009), pp. 317–40.

<sup>5</sup> On positivism in IR theory, see Morton A. Kaplan, ‘The New Great Debate: Traditionalism vs. Science in International Relations’, *World Politics*, 19:1 (1966), pp. 1–20; Klaus E. Knorr and James N. Rosenau (eds), *Contending Approaches to International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969); Chris Brown, *Understanding International Relations* (2nd edn, Houndmills: Macmillan, 2001), pp. 1–42; Fred Dallmayr, ‘Post-Secularity and (Global) Politics: A Need for Radical Redefinition’, this Special Issue.

philosophy of difference (Connolly) that is residually transcendental. That is because it elevates alterity into the sole transcendental term, which sacralises the 'other'. Both accounts of post-secularity foreclose the possibility of substantive, plural unity and a shared commitment to the common good on which polities depend both nationally and globally for genuinely peaceful coexistence and human flourishing.

Third, the article suggests that neither secularism nor post-secularity can rethink religion in international affairs because both bracket metaphysics out of the picture and accordingly separate immanent values from transcendent principles. Bound up with this immanentist ontology are a number of assertions about the nature of 'reality', our knowledge of it and the kinds of things that 'make the world hang together' (John Ruggie), including religious beliefs that translate into transnational bonds. Thus, the shared post-metaphysical outlook of both secularism and post-secularity precludes a proper theorising of religion and the revival of grand theory in IR.

Fourth, the alternative that this article outlines is an international theory, which develops the Christian realism of the English School in the direction of a metaphysical-political realism. The latter differs fundamentally from the realist school in IR because it rejects the primacy of national states and transnational markets in favour of a 'corporate' association of peoples and nations in which religiously framed ideas and practices are central.

Drawing in part on the foundations of the English School, I argue that metaphysical-political realism shifts the focus away from methodology and narrow debates towards first-order principles and questions of substance. In charting a conceptual map and suggesting a number of avenues, the article focuses on three areas: first, linking international theory to metaphysical ideas; second, synthesising reason and faith; and third, envisioning a 'corporate' association that rests on a relational ontology beyond the dichotomy of the states-based ontology connected with international society and the individual-based ontology associated with world society or world community.

## **II. Secularism and IR theory**

The role of religion in international affairs has not so much been neglected and overlooked as misrepresented and under-theorised. Even during the heyday of the secularisation thesis, scholarship on religion in politics abounded in response to events such as the Islamic Revolution in Iran, liberation theology in Latin America, the global rise of evangelical Christianity, or the contribution of the Catholic and Orthodox churches to the collapse of Soviet communism.<sup>6</sup> However, most research was either purely descriptive or an analytical exercise in structured comparisons. There was no new theorising beyond secularist categories that either reduce religion to transcendental beliefs, which are private and apolitical, or equate religious convictions with immanent values, which are subordinate to cultures and civilisations. Both conceptions of faith rule out any specifically religious impact on international politics.

For its part, the field of IR has remained wedded to the Westphalian system that privileges absolute state sovereignty over matters of faith, which formally removed religion from interstate relations and subordinated the transnational church to the

<sup>6</sup> Recent overviews include Anthony Gill, 'Religion and Comparative Politics', *Annual Review of Political Science*, 4 (2001), pp. 117–38; Kenneth D. Wald, Adam Silverman and Kevin Fridy, 'Making Sense of Religion in Political Life', *Annual Review of Political Science*, 8 (2005), pp. 121–43.

national state. Paradoxically, the religious roots of Westphalia – the Protestant Reformation and the ‘wars of religion’ – gave rise to a secularist settlement that was partly influenced by Luther’s ‘Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms and the Two Governments’ and separated the realm of the spirit from the realm of the body politic.<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, faith was either relegated to the sphere of religious transcendence that is apolitical or subjected to the hegemony of secular immanence – or both at once. This account is key to the modern invention of the antagonistic binary opposition between the religious and the secular to which this article returns below.

*The secularism of positivist and post-positivist IR theory*

The modern conception of religion, which views faith as either apolitical or politicised, is part of a secularist logic that has dominated IR theory since the 1950s and 1960s. The turn to positivism has imposed an empirical epistemology that analyses social reality by using natural-scientific methods. Whether Comte’s positive science, logic positivism, or deductive-nomological models, all three variants of positivism dismiss unobservable values and practices such as religion by reducing reality to empirically observable facts. As Steve Smith notes, ‘[I]y at the very heart of value-neutrality was a very powerful normative project, one every bit as “political” or “biased” as the approaches marginalized and delegitimized in the name of science’.<sup>8</sup> Positivist approaches have eschewed grand theory and debates about alternative accounts of ontology and epistemology in favour of increasingly narrow discussions on issues of methodology. In the words of Smith,

[t]he discipline has tended to accept implicitly a rather simple and, crucially, an uncontested set of positivist assumptions which have fundamentally stifled debate over both what the world is like and how we might explain it. This is not true for those who have worked either in the so-called ‘English school’ or at the interface between international relations and political theory, because these writers never bought into the positivist assumptions that dominated the discipline.<sup>9</sup>

Post-positivism is critical of positivism but no less secularist in outlook. Different approaches tend to replace the positivist focus on methodology with a post-positivist emphasis on both ontology and epistemology. But like positivism, post-positivism presupposes that social reality is autonomous and excludes any transcendent horizon, which subsumes religious beliefs and practices under general analytical categories that are secularist.

Mainstream IR theory is characterised by ontological, epistemological, and methodological commitments to secularism, above all subordinating agency to structure and subjecting both faith and intentionality to secular reason. Even the 1980s renaissance of normative theory occurred within the dominant secularist parameters of an academic discipline, which had been Christian in origin but ‘was, by this time, an

<sup>7</sup> Daniel Philpott, ‘The Religious Roots of Modern International Relations’, *World Politics*, 52:2 (2000), pp. 206–45; William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>8</sup> Steve Smith, ‘The Forty Years’ Detour: The Resurgence of Normative Theory in International Relations’, *Millennium*, 21:3 (1992), pp. 489–508, at p. 490.

<sup>9</sup> Steve Smith, ‘Positivism and beyond’, in Steve Smith, Ken Booth, and Marysia Zalewski (eds), *International Theory: Positivism and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 11–44, at p. 11.

organized International Relations profession [in which] the question of religion had been firmly relegated to the private sphere, and mainstream theorists either subordinated agency and motive to structure or else aspired to weave international society with the thin thread of universal optimizing rationality'.<sup>10</sup> Thus it is surely no coincidence that grand theory and religion disappeared together from IR.

The discipline's 'secularist bias' explains why mainstream IR theory struggles to incorporate the role of faith in international affairs. Most IR scholars theorise religion in one of two ways: either within the existing traditions of (neo-)realism, (neo-)liberalism, (neo-)Marxism and social constructivism or else by positing new paradigms such as the 'clash of civilizations', 'multiple modernities', 'the revenge of God', and the rise of religious fundamentalism or the conflict that opposes faith to secular reason.<sup>11</sup> The former approach subsumes religion under conventional conceptual units in IR such as power, wealth, interest, social values, or identity. As such, it subjects religious faith to a determinism that is variously more materialist (as in liberalism and Marxism) or more ideational (as in realism and constructivism).<sup>12</sup> The latter approach enthrones religion as the central analytical category that underpins cultural sources of conflict and other driving forces of international affairs. In this way, new paradigms claim that religious faith systematically trumps other ideas in the making of international relations. In the first case religion is defined in epiphenomenal terms as a general motivation alongside other factors without any independent, specific import. In the second case it is defined in essentialist terms as an inner impulse and/or an abstract set of beliefs grounding individual and collective identity. Neither conception captures the specificity of religion and the particular ways in which faith shapes politics.

### *Inventing 'religion'*

Defining religion in either epiphenomenal or essentialist terms is itself a distinctly modern, Western invention.<sup>13</sup> Historically, the sixteenth and the seventeenth century saw the construction of a new category of 'natural religion' that coincided with the rise of modern science.<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, religion as a concrete practice of faith within a community of believers was gradually supplanted by new notions of religion as a

<sup>10</sup> Charles A. Jones, 'Christian Realism and the Foundations of the English School', *International Relations*, 17:3 (2003), pp. 371–87, at p. 372.

<sup>11</sup> In addition to Huntington, *Clash*, see Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, *Patterns of Modernity Beyond the West* (London: Pinter, 1987); S. N. Eisenstadt, 'Multiple Modernities', *Daedalus*, 129:1 (2000), pp. 1–29; Gilles Kepel, *La Revanche de Dieu. Chrétiens, juifs et musulmans à la reconquête du monde* (Paris: Seuil, 1991), trans. *The Revenge of God: The Resurgence of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism in the Modern World*, trans. A. Braley (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994); Benjamin Barber, *Jihad vs. McWorld* (New York: Times Book, 1995); Mark Juergensmeyer, *The New Cold War? Religious Nationalism Confronts the Secular State* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); M. Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

<sup>12</sup> Jonathan Fox and Shmuel Sandler, *Bringing Religion into International Relations* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 9–33.

<sup>13</sup> Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

<sup>14</sup> Amos Funkenstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination from the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986); Peter Harrison, 'Religion' and the Religions in the English Enlightenment (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

set of abstract, generalisable principles, beliefs or emotions. These could take one of two forms: either 'inner' psychological phenomena linked to human nature (rather than the entire cosmos) or 'outer' social phenomena tied to formal institutions and general spiritual exercises (rather than specific communities and practices of worship) – or both at once. This modern shift of focus from objective revelation to subjective belief equated religion with 'a set of propositions to which believers gave assent, and which could therefore be judged and compared between different religions and as against natural science'.<sup>15</sup> The dominant modern definitions privilege private faith at the expense of a community of believers, which reduces religion to subjective values and removes faith from its communal embeddedness.<sup>16</sup>

Closely connected with this critique is the argument that religion is a marker of social identity because 'religious ideas don't simply express interest, they constitute them'.<sup>17</sup> Religious faith precedes the calculation and defence of individual and collective interest or the construction of social identity that is central to mainstream IR theories. Crucially, religion is not just a 'moral statement to which rational autonomous individuals give their intellectual consent'; rather, it is constitutive of a 'cognitive script ... [that] people internalize ... not out of conscious choice ... [and] in ways that can override rational choice or utility-maximizing behavior'.<sup>18</sup> Belief is part of a broader reason that seeks the public common good. Indeed, faith is neither a sort of innate, natural religion nor a blind, fideistic belief in an external divinity whose arbitrary intervention determines reality. On the contrary, religious ideas and practices constitute distinct visions of the world that are irreducible to any other sphere (nature or consciousness), while at the same time being embedded in narrative and culture. Just as there is no pure reason, so too there is no absolute unmediated faith.

### *The modern logic of binary opposites*

Linked to the secularist definition of religion is a series of binary opposites that underpin IR: the secular *versus* the religious, immanent nature *versus* the transcendent supernatural, reason *versus* faith, unbelief *versus* belief or the private sphere *versus* the public realm. As Roland Bleiker suggests, 'IR theory and Western conceptualising in general have traditionally been based on the juxtaposition of antagonistic bipolar opposites.'<sup>19</sup> Like 'natural religion', such and similar binaries are a distinctly *modern* invention. Binary opposites are grounded in the dualistic logic of modern thinking that is often attributed to Plato's legacy of separating things from ideas or to Descartes's division of mind and body. However, modern dualism can be traced to fourteenth- and fifteenth-century philosophical shifts and political changes, as John

<sup>15</sup> Asad, *Genealogies*, p. 41.

<sup>16</sup> On conceptual and methodological reflections about religion in IR theory beyond an instrumental and an essentialist view of faith, see Mona Kanwal Sheikh, 'How does religion matter? Pathways to religion in International Relations', *Review of International Studies*, 38:2 (2012), pp. 365–92.

<sup>17</sup> Scott M. Thomas, *The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Transformation of International Relations* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 12.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas, *Global Resurgence*, p. 95.

<sup>19</sup> Roland Bleiker, 'East-West Stories of War and Peace: Neorealist Claims in Light of Ancient Chinese Philosophy', in Stephen Chan, Peter Mandaville, and Roland Bleiker (eds), *The Zen of International Relations* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), pp. 177–201, at p. 181.



Milbank, Charles Taylor and others have argued.<sup>20</sup> In this period, the meaning of 'sacred' and 'secular' changed fundamentally. In pre-modern societies the sacred tended to be seen as a cosmic reality that is diffusely mediated through signs and symbols in the natural and social world. By contrast, modernity views the sacred as an immutable essence and the object of an internal human experience which Durkheim calls 'religious'.<sup>21</sup> Likewise, pre-modern accounts of the secular accentuated the temporal dimension (for example, the interval between fall and *eschaton*), whereas modernity defines the secular spatially as an autonomous domain separate from God and the Church.

The dualism that underpins the secularist logic of IR theory is ultimately based on the modern separation of secular immanence from sacred transcendence: in his seminal work *A Secular Age*, Taylor writes that '[o]ne of the great inventions of the West was that of an immanent order in Nature, whose working could be systematically understood and explained on its own terms.'<sup>22</sup> As such, the notion of a self-sufficient secular order of nature either relegates religion to the supernatural realm known by blind faith alone or else equates religion with a purely natural epiphenomenon of human consciousness or social construct (or both at once).

Moreover, the modern primacy of pure nature reconfigures the sacred as the opposite of the secular.<sup>23</sup> Just as 'the sacred' is now confined to the supernatural sphere of absolute transcendence that is divorced from the natural sphere of pure immanence, so too 'the secular' now institutes 'the religious' as its opposite. This reduces religion to a private creed rather than the communal practice of a shared faith within living social traditions that involve metaphysical questions about the nature of the world and the finalities of life in the polity. The secular space of politics is henceforth sundered from faith and governed by reason alone. So configured, both religious faith and universal human virtues or passions (such as sympathy, reciprocity, mutuality, or justice) are subsumed under the purported universalism of formal, procedural and instrumental rationality.

### *De-sacralising and re-sacralising the public sphere*

Secularism is not limited to the functional differentiation of religious and political authority and/or the public settlement of the relationship between church and state that writes faith out of international relations.<sup>24</sup> By subordinating faith to secular

<sup>20</sup> John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory. Beyond secular reason* (2nd edn, Oxford: Blackwell, 2006 [orig. pub. 1990]); Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007); Louis Dupré, *Passage to Modernity. An essay on the hermeneutics of nature and culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); Michael Allen Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

<sup>21</sup> Émile Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. J. S. Swain (London: Allen and Unwin, 1915), p. 37.

<sup>22</sup> Taylor, *Secular Age*, p. 15.

<sup>23</sup> Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2003).

<sup>24</sup> See Taylor, *Secular Age*, p. 2; Hurd, *Politics*, pp. 5–13; Shah and Philpott, 'The Fall and Rise of Religion', esp. pp. 25–37; Wilson, *After Secularism*, pp. 13–24; Monica Duffy Toft, Daniel Philpott, and Timothy Samuel Shah, *God's Century: Resurgent Religion and Global Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2011), pp. 20–47.

categories, the secularist logic does not merely de-sacralise the public square. It reinvests it with quasi-sacred meaning by sacralising secularity – the king, the nation, the state, the market, the individual, or the collective. As such, secularism does not so much mark the demise of faith or the exit from religion as it represents an alternative sacrality – a secular capture of the sacred.

This twin transformation was neither universal nor exemplary nor normative but instead particular, contingent and in some sense arbitrary, linked to both ideational shifts and material changes. Accordingly the secular does not constitute a naturally given base that determines the sacred superstructure. There is no historical determinism according to which secularism will always remain hegemonic in Europe. Nor does it follow that other parts of the world will necessarily follow Europe's 'exceptional example'.<sup>25</sup> On the contrary, the secularist logic in IR theory and other disciplines is linked to a certain kind of historicism that views the peculiar history of religion and politics in Western Europe as an exemplification of a fated and all-determining evolution. This reflects the positivist pathway from revelation via metaphysics to science, as Comte advocated.<sup>26</sup> Post-positivist approaches in IR challenge the idea that politics and IR are reducible to a positive science but they do not break out of secularist categories, as I have already indicated.

Crucially, the secularism of mainstream IR theory institutes a new account of the sacred. Modernity created a new economy of power and knowledge enforced by the institutions of the modern state and the modern market. By progressively subjecting everything to standards of abstract value, the system of national states and transnational markets did not simply subordinate the sanctity of life and land to a model of central, sovereign power. It also supplanted such older notions of the sacred with a new, secularist simulacrum of sacrality – the 'glorious reign' of capitalist market commodities and the disembodied state.<sup>27</sup> Insofar as they replace real relations among existing things with standards of nominal value to which they nonetheless ascribe quasi-sacred status, both modern commerce and politics can be described as 'quasi-religions'.<sup>28</sup>

For these reasons, the modern system of sovereignty requires for its very operation (and not just as mere ideological obfuscation) a redefinition of sanctity. The dominant strand of modern theory and practice is ultimately secularist because it invests both the instrumental, economic sphere and the immanent social/political space with quasi-sacred significance. Thus the issue is not so much whether secularism privatises faith. Rather, from the perspective of religious traditions the problem with secularism is that it profanes the sacred and sacralises the profane.

<sup>25</sup> See Adrian Pabst, 'The Western Paradox: Why the United States is more Religious but less Christian than Europe', in Lucian Leustean (ed.), *Representing Religion in the European Union: Does God Matter?* (London: Routledge, 2012), pp. 168–84.

<sup>26</sup> Andrew Wernick, *Auguste Comte and the Religion of Humanity: The Post-Theistic Program of French Social Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); in contrast, see Aziz Al-Azmeh, *Islams and Modernities* (London: Verso, 1993); John Gray, *Al Qaeda and What It Means to Be Modern* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003).

<sup>27</sup> Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), pp. 42–86, 193–313; Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*, trans. Lorenzo Chiesa (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2011).

<sup>28</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Capitalism as Religion', in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings – Volume 1 (1913–1926)*, eds Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. 288–91.

### III. Post-secularity, secular reason, and the limits of pluralism

In response to the global religious resurgence, a number of scholars have challenged the secularist logic of IR and related fields.<sup>29</sup> Compared with the ‘de-secularisation thesis’, post-secularity, and cognate notions such as ‘multiple modernities’ go further by challenging the hegemony of secularism and defending the freedom of religions to express themselves directly in their own terms within the public square (nationally and globally).<sup>30</sup> Common to different accounts of post-secularity is methodological and political pluralism and also the idea of a post-secularist society in which religions are an integral part of a reinvigorated political sphere: ‘The contemporary context may be described as a postsecularist space [...] a period in which, for the first time, multiple modernities, each with their respective relationship to religious belief and practice, are overlapping and interacting within the same shared, predominantly urban spaces’.<sup>31</sup> However, this section argues that post-secularity is trapped in a residually secularist logic.

#### *Unbelief and secular reason*

First of all, the post-secular fails to challenge the secularist account of religion that essentialises faith or views it as an epiphenomenon (or both, as I have argued). The work of Jürgen Habermas encapsulates the oscillation between a more philosophical (essentialist) conception of faith as a source of moral intuition or meaning, on the one hand, and a more sociological (epiphenomenal) idea of religion as an archaic mode of political unity or social control, on the other hand. In his recent work, he fuses these two definitions by arguing that faith is socially useful because ‘particularly in regards to vulnerable social relations . . . [religion] possesses the power to convincingly articulate moral sensitivities and solidaristic intuitions’.<sup>32</sup> Habermas and other theorists of the post-secular, who have influenced IR theory, cling to conceptions of religion that fail to contest the modern transformation in the nature of belief itself (especially in the Judeo-Christian tradition).<sup>33</sup> This applies to the shift away from the cultural mediations of objective revelation and the communal practice of faith towards subjective assent and a private, sacramentally unmediated relationship between the individual and the divine.

<sup>29</sup> Fabio Petito and Pavlos Hatzopoulos (eds), *Religion in International Relations: The Return from Exile* (London: Palgrave, 2003); Fox and Sandler, *Bringing Religion*; Thomas, *Global Resurgence*; Toft, Philpott, and Shah, *God’s Century*; Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (eds), *Rethinking Secularism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (eds), *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

<sup>30</sup> Philip S. Gorski, John Torpey, and David Kyuman Kim (eds), *The Post-Secular in Question. Religion in Contemporary Society* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

<sup>31</sup> Luke Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics. The Conditions and Possibilities of Faithful Witness* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), p. 15, emphasis in original.

<sup>32</sup> Jürgen Habermas, ‘Secularism’s Crisis of Faith: Notes on a Post-Secular Society’, *New Perspectives Quarterly*, 25:4 (2008), pp. 17–29, at p. 29, originally published in German in *Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik* (April 2008), pp. 33–46.

<sup>33</sup> Craig Calhoun, Eduardo Mendieta, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (eds), *Habermas and Religion* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012).

Therefore post-secularity accepts uncritically ‘the change . . . which takes us from a society in which was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others’, as Taylor puts it.<sup>34</sup> Implicit in this secularist account is the assumption that enlightened citizens choose unbelief over belief: ‘[t]he presumption of unbelief has become dominant in more and more . . . milieux; and has achieved hegemony in certain crucial ones, in the academic and intellectual life, for instance, whence it can more easily extend itself to others’.<sup>35</sup> Unbelief constitutes the default position and the supposedly neutral vantage point from which religion is defined and the impact of faith on international affairs can be analysed. The post-secular implies that the moral intuitions of religious traditions should be included in political debate and be allowed to contribute to the common good, but merely on secular terms and in instrumental ways that serve the purposes of secular politics.<sup>36</sup>

Second, post-secularity fails to overcome the hegemony of secular reason. Despite inflecting his long-standing Enlightenment stance, Habermas still claims that faith is arational or even irrational and that the gulf separating post-metaphysical, secular rationality from religious revelation cannot be bridged.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, he assumes that only reason sundered from faith can preserve state neutrality *vis-à-vis* rival and conflicting religions: ‘the domain of the state, which controls the means of legitimate coercion, should not be opened to the strife between various religious communities, otherwise the government could become the executive arm of a religious majority that imposes its will on the opposition’.<sup>38</sup> Thus Habermas’s vindication of the secular state is more concerned with the clash of fanatical faiths than it is with the violent wars of secular utopias. It is true that his argument in favour of translating the moral sentiments of religious believers into the discourse of secular reason encourages a measure of mutual learning between religious and non-religious traditions.<sup>39</sup> However, for Habermas the common language in both public debate and political deliberation must be free of any religious references to transcendent principles and governed by secular reason alone. As a result, post-secularity does not transform the secularist terms of debate and engagement between religions and other perspectives. For faith is not permitted to make any substantive or critical contribution to public discussion that could undermine the primacy of formal, procedural reason.<sup>40</sup> Paradoxically, the post-secular uses religion to compensate for an instrumental rationality whose shortcomings are the result of divorcing faith from reason in the first place.

<sup>34</sup> Taylor, *Secular Age*, p. 3.

<sup>35</sup> Taylor, *Secular Age*, p. 13.

<sup>36</sup> In contrast, see Antonio Cerella, ‘Religion and Political Form: Carl Schmitt’s Genealogy of Politics as Critique of the Secular/Post-Secular Dichotomy’, this Special Issue.

<sup>37</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking: Between Metaphysics and the Critique of Reason*, trans. William Mark Hohengarten (Cambridge: Polity, 1995); Jürgen Habermas, ‘An Awareness of What is Missing’, in J. Habermas et al., *An Awareness of What is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Post-Secular Age*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge: Polity, 2010), pp. 15–23.

<sup>38</sup> Habermas, ‘Secularism’s Crisis’, p. 28.

<sup>39</sup> For a critical account of Habermas, see Dallmayr, ‘Post-Secularity’, and Joseph A. Camilleri, ‘Post-secularist Discourse in an “Age of Transition”’, this Special Issue.

<sup>40</sup> Jürgen Habermas, ‘Prepolitical foundations of the democratic constitutional state?’, in J. Habermas and J. Ratzinger (eds), *The Dialectics of Secularization* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006), pp. 19–52.

*Habermas's post-metaphysical politics*

In section four, this article returns to the possibility of synthesising reason with faith, understood primarily as a form of pre-rational trust in the reasonableness of reality. For now, a third point needs to be made about the concept of post-secularity. In his recent work, Habermas has somewhat broadened his model of translating religious intuitions into the secular language of political discourse, which permits faith traditions to contribute to the common life within the shared public square. Contrary to his earlier, Enlightenment rejection of faith as irrational superstition and dangerous belief, he now acknowledges 'the shared origin of philosophy and religion in the revolution in worldviews of the Axial Age'.<sup>41</sup> Likewise, he welcomes the religious contribution to a new, post-secular normativity that provides resistance to the purely instrumentalist reason of both utilitarian ethics and liberal capitalism. However, Habermas's proposed procedure of translation remains residually secularist. He convincingly contests the liberal public-private divide and the exclusion of faith from politics, but rather like Rawls he defends the hegemony of the secularist settlement and the post-metaphysical outlook of the Enlightenment legacy. The transcendent is now permitted within the public square but merely as a source of morality and strictly limited to informal communication among citizens.

In contrast, formal deliberations at the level of the state and its agencies must be protected from religion by an institutional filter, which suspends all metaphysical questions and reduces religious belief to a purely private decision. In this manner, Habermas draws an absolute line between the public square and the state, on the one hand, and communities and groups, on the other hand – a divide that religious arguments are not allowed to transgress.<sup>42</sup> The overriding reason for rejecting metaphysics is to secure immanent, secular values without appealing to transcendent religious principles. This ignores not just implicit metaphysical assumptions that are inherent in supposedly post-metaphysical thinking like, for instance, the nature of justice, the source of rights and responsibilities or the finality of politics. It also leaves unresolved the conflicts between rival, incommensurable non-religious values like freedom, equality, or security that cannot be reconciled by secular rationality.

Fourth, the secularist bias against metaphysics also reinforces the dominance of immanentist reasoning that characterises both positivism and post-positivism in IR theory. With few exceptions, they are united in ruling out a teleological ordering of politics towards a substantive, plural unity such as the common good or the duty to uphold the dignity of the human person, which goes beyond notions of utility, happiness, or individual human rights.<sup>43</sup> In turn, the denial of shared ends serves to disallow the particularity of universal religious principles in the name of a secularist universalism for which everything is an expression of immanence that cuts out the possibility of a transcendent outlook.

<sup>41</sup> Habermas, 'Awareness', p. 17; see also Habermas, 'Secularism's Crisis'.

<sup>42</sup> Jürgen Habermas, 'Religion in the public square', *European Journal of Philosophy*, 14:1 (2006), pp. 1–25; J. Habermas, 'On the Relations Between the Secular Liberal State and Religion', in Hent de Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan (eds), *Political Theologies. Public Religion in a Post-Secular World* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), pp. 251–60.

<sup>43</sup> One exception in IR is the debate generated by Alexander Wendt, 'Why a World State is Inevitable', *European Journal of International Relations*, 9:4 (2003), pp. 491–542.

As such, both positivism and post-positivism rest on a grounding in the pure immanence of nature or culture (or both at once), which on closer inspection turns out to be a transcendental foundation. For example, positivist theories of IR, which rely on empirical epistemology as the sole path to progress, elevate the empirical into the sole transcendental term and seek to enthrone humanity as the measure of all things.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, post-positivist theories of IR, which reject all meta-narratives, view the particular as the only permissible form of universality and deny meaning and perennial principles in the name of perpetual flux.<sup>45</sup> Most world religions, by contrast, reject any absolute separation of immanence from transcendence. Various faith traditions suggest that the immanent order of politics and international relations benefits from transcendent reference points (not a transcendental grounding, as in Kant) that can uphold normativity beyond power, wealth, instrumental interests or constructed values.

*Sacralising difference or converting the 'other' into the 'same'*

The fifth argument against the post-secular relates to notions of difference and alterity. The appeal to the diversity of difference, which underpins the post-secular pluralism advocated by figures such as Habermas or Connolly, is but an intensification of modern positivism and transcendentalism.<sup>46</sup> For postmodern philosophy elevates difference into the sole transcendental term, which overrides any notion of normative unity or substantive shared ends that embed the legislating reason of citizens and states. Difference so defined either sanctifies the power of Kant's transcendently regulative reason or else it sacralises the 'other'. Neither conception works on its own terms, and both are ultimately secularist. The use of reason requires and involves some form of trust in the reasonableness and regularity of reality, which is neither reducible to the forces of unalterable nature nor the power of human artifice (the social contract or the will-to-power) nor pre-rational moral sentiments (empathy or the 'invisible hand' of the market).

Rather, to trust that reality is to some extent reasonable and regular implies that the natural and the social world are endowed with some intelligible meaning and that they are governed by some knowable finality. Rationality appeals to something beyond the individual mind that links us to symbols, signs, and narratives, which we all inhabit and which embed the exercise of reason itself. Seen from this perspective, the post-secular turn of theory that has influenced IR theory is in reality 'intra-secular', as Gregor McLennan has argued.<sup>47</sup> However, the purported neutrality of political reason that now admits religion into the public square must also be questioned. As Milbank contends against McLennan,

<sup>44</sup> Smith, 'Positivism', and Martin Hollis, 'Probing puzzles persistently: a desirable but improbable future for IR theory', in Smith et al. (eds), *International Theory*, pp. 11–44 and 301–8.

<sup>45</sup> Zaki Laidi, *Un monde privé de sens* (rev. edn, Paris: Fayard, 1996), trans. *A World Without Meaning: The Crisis of Meaning in International Politics*, trans. J. Burnham and J. Coulon (London: Routledge, 1998).

<sup>46</sup> William Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

<sup>47</sup> Gregor McLennan, 'The Postsecular Turn', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 27:4 (2010), pp. 3–20.

even this sense of the neutrality and immanence of pure reason is the upshot of a specific Western legacy and has to remain debatable from a genealogical and meta-critical perspective, like that of Talal Asad. Can rational neutrality really engender sufficiently thick shared values to sustain social and political unity? Is reason really just a matter of subjective hope and not of religious faith, as McLennan claims? Surely, to the contrary, to think that reason will disclose reality is precisely (as Kant declared) to have faith in a link between reason and the real!<sup>48</sup>

According to Kant's *Opus postumum*, reason gives us access to reality insofar as we always already trust that reality is reasonable and that rationality is linked to a real, objective order – not just to our nominal, mental categories. Thus, reason properly configured seems to point to a transcendence that is somehow present in immanence. To restrict rationality to regulative reason is to impose a secularist limit of finitude on the human desire for transcendent infinity that finds its expressions in both religious and non-religious traditions. Such a limit means that '[e]verything is to be negatively tolerated, but nothing is to be positively allowed',<sup>49</sup> an account that favours the empty formalism and proceduralism of secular reason over religious faith embodied in communal practice.

Moreover, the shift in emphasis away from the modern dialectics of positivism and transcendentalism towards post-modern difference (however spelled) merely reinforces the sacralisation of the secular, which is the mark of secularism. By enshrining difference as the new 'absolute', post-modernism elevates alterity or otherness into the sole transcendental term that rules out any substantive, plural unity which might bind together the national polity or the international system. Thus post-secular pluralism involves one of two positions. Either difference is absolutised, in which case incommensurable values and violent conflict become self-fulfilling prophecies that can only be settled through the use of power. Or else the only mode of attaining unity or at least some form of peaceful coexistence is to convert the 'other' into the 'same' through ahistorical, supposedly universal but in reality modern, Western categories. The most prominent examples are perhaps the values of 'liberation' or 'emancipation' linked to the political left or the values of 'freedom of choice' and 'opportunity' associated with the political right. Both variants of liberal progressivism are part of the Whig interpretation of history that Herbert Butterfield rebutted in his eponymous book.<sup>50</sup> In this sense the post-modern diversity of difference, which is celebrated by post-secular pluralism, is akin to the modern promise of boundless, linear progress that secularism purported to provide but failed to deliver.

### *Post-secular determinism*

Sixth, post-secularity is wedded to a historical and materialist determinism that characterises modern secularism. The rise to power of secularism in the West was the product of particular, contingent and in some sense arbitrary processes that were neither exemplary nor necessary nor normative, as the previous section indicated. Precisely because historicism treats history as a fated and all-determining teleological process, the genuine alternative is not to opt for ahistorical, secular categories that are supposedly universal. Instead, it is to embrace history in such a way as to view

<sup>48</sup> John Milbank, 'The Postsecular and Postcolonial', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 29 (2012), in press.

<sup>49</sup> Milbank, 'The Postsecular'.

<sup>50</sup> Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (London: George Bell, 1949).

social and political developments in terms of their specific historical roots and their unfolding over time and across space. Apparently universal ideas and structures such as the global system of national states and transnational markets, which underpins modern international relations, can thus be traced genealogically to particular periods such as the Protestant Reformation or the religious wars in the 'long sixteenth century' (ca. 1450–1650). Far from being isolated events or absolute breaks in history, they were part of an era spanning the early fourteenth to the late seventeenth century during which both ideas and practices already nascent during the Middle Ages achieved fuller maturity and developed into the modern model of international affairs.<sup>51</sup>

That is why, in the well-known words of Martin Wight, '[a]t Westphalia the states system does not come into existence, it comes of age.'<sup>52</sup> Certain new ideas such as national sovereignty came to shape the way that international relations were conceived and instituted.<sup>53</sup> Likewise, new institutions and practices like the national state or inter-state warfare led to changes in conceptions of international affairs that still shape IR theory.<sup>54</sup> Thus, theory and practice influence one another, and intellectual history and the history of actual international relations interact as part of 'living traditions' that encompass both action and enquiry, as the work of Wight suggests.<sup>55</sup>

Contrary to the historical determinism of (post-)secular thinking, the notion of tradition serves the heuristic function of mediating between theory and practice and outflanking both dualism and monism. Indeed, the English School's appeal to three traditions of international theory breaks with the causal, determinative interpretation of history by rejecting the diametrically opposed extremes of Hobbesian/Machiavellian realism and Kantian/Marxian revolutionism and by embracing Grotian rationalism as a *via media* – even if this reading of Grotius and classical thinking more generally has been too narrowly focused on the human artifice of modern states and abstract rules.<sup>56</sup> Linked to the actuality of a third tradition is the argument that English School international theory seeks to overcome the double divide between the historicism of secular ideology and the 'presentism' of empirical or rationalist science and also between the empirical and the normative by developing an integrated, historicised account of 'how states *do* behave and how they *ought* to behave'.<sup>57</sup> Based on

<sup>51</sup> Brian Tierney, *Religion, Law, and the Growth of Constitutional Thought, 1150–1650* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); J. H. Burns, 'Introduction', in J. H. Burns (ed.), *Cambridge History of Medieval Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 1–8; Francis Oakley, *Natural Law, Laws of Nature, Natural Rights: Continuity and Discontinuity in the History of Ideas* (New York: Continuum, 2005).

<sup>52</sup> Martin Wight, *Systems of States* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1977), p. 152; see also Ludwig Dehio, *The Precarious Balance. Four Centuries of the European Power Struggle*, trans. C. Fulman (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962), esp. p. 23.

<sup>53</sup> See, *inter alia*, Jens Bartelson, *A Genealogy of Sovereignty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Daniel Philpott, *Revolutions in Sovereignty. How ideas shaped modern international relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

<sup>54</sup> See, *inter alia*, Michael Howard, 'War and the nation state', *Daedalus*, 108 (1979), pp. 101–10; Thomas Ertman, *Birth of the Leviathan: Building States and Regimes in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Polity, 1997).

<sup>55</sup> Martin Wight, *International Theory: The Three Traditions*, eds B. Porter and G. Wight (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1991), esp. p. 260.

<sup>56</sup> On other conceptual limitations of the English School and new avenues, see Barry Buzan, 'The English School: an underexploited resource in IR', *Review of International Studies*, 27:3 (2001), pp. 471–88; and the response by Andrew Hurrell, 'Keeping history, law and political philosophy firmly within the English School', *Review of International Studies*, 27:3 (2001), pp. 489–94.

<sup>57</sup> Tim Dunne, *Inventing International Society. A History of the English School* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1998), pp. 54–5.



first-order political questions and a method that historicises perennial principles such as justice, the English School attempts to offer an alternative not only to the dualism of realism and idealism that has characterised the field since E. H. Carr but also to the monism of mainstream IR theory that subordinates international relations to secular standards (which are variously more positivist or more post-positivist).

In contrast, post-secularity locks IR theory into the logic of secularism by treating the modern secularist settlement either as an ahistorical norm or as an example of historical evolution. Accordingly, the post-secular perpetuates the idea that religion is ultimately subordinate to the political authority of national states and represents merely one among many, equally valid voices within the nascent cosmopolitan public square. Thus, post-secularity's claim to pluralism barely disguises the hegemony of secular reason and liberal market democracy.<sup>58</sup> Connected to this is the tendency to reject the traditional universalism of both church and empire while simultaneously defending the modern universalism of sovereign states, free markets, individual human rights, and global civil society that accepts modernity's secularist outlook.<sup>59</sup> Here one can suggest a parallel argument: just as post-positivist approaches have remained trapped within positivist parameters, so too post-secular theory is residually secularist. The dominant schools foreclose the possibility of grand theory in IR because they bracket religion and metaphysics out of the picture, notably debates about the nature of 'reality', our knowledge of it and the kinds of things that 'make the world hang together'.<sup>60</sup>

#### IV. Beyond secularism: metaphysics, religion, and the revival of grand theory in IR

The emerging 'turn to religion' in IR theory is in large part based on the post-metaphysical thinking of contemporary political theorists like Habermas or Connolly. But if, as this article has argued, the notion of post-secularity remains trapped in a secularist logic, perhaps it is the case that the overcoming of secularism in IR requires the recovery of metaphysics and not its abandonment. Moreover, if the 'end of metaphysics' evokes Nietzsche's proclamation that 'God is dead', perhaps it is then also the case that the 'return of God' to international affairs portends the revival of metaphysical thinking. Since the decline of grand theory in IR can be traced to the rise of post-metaphysics, the end of 'the end of metaphysics' offers a prospect of alternatives to the fixation with methodology and other narrow debates that have dominated the discipline since its secular turn in the 1950s and 1960s.

In the remaining available space, this article charts a conceptual map and suggests a number of avenues. The objective is to shape the terms of debate on theorising religion in international relations and on reviving grand theory in IR, not to state a fixed position. The focus is on three associated areas: first, the link between metaphysical ideas and international theory; second, the relationship between reason and belief in a way that avoids the clash of unmediated secular rationality with blind

<sup>58</sup> Justin Rosenberg, *The Empire of Civil Society. A Critique of the Realist Theory of International Relations* (London: Verso, 1994); Benno Teschke, *The Myth of 1648. Class, Geopolitics, and the Making of Modern International Relations* (London: Verso, 2003).

<sup>59</sup> Pierre Manent, *Les métamorphoses de la cité: Essai sur la dynamique de l'Occident* (Paris: Flammarion, 2010).

<sup>60</sup> John G. Ruggie, 'What Makes the World Hang Together? Neo-Utilitarianism and the Social Constructivist Challenge', *International Organization*, 52:4 (1998), pp. 855–85.

faith; third, the notion of an ‘corporate’ association of peoples and nations, which is not only more primary than the modern subsumption of individuals, groups, and the intermediary institutions of civil society under the shared supremacy of national states and transnational markets, but also more fundamental than either the concepts of ‘international society’, ‘world society’, or ‘world community’.<sup>61</sup>

*‘Grand theory’, metaphysics, and the foundations of the English School*

What stands in the way of renewed grand theory in IR is secularism, notably three specific problems: first, the limits on reason; second, the dominance of secular standards that are variously more empirical or more normative (or both at once); third, a series of ontological, epistemological and methodological commitments that preclude debates about first-order political questions and the possible links between immanent values and transcendent principles. Up to a point, the exception to this has been the English School and those scholars who work at the interface of IR and political/social theory. However, neither approach has so far properly theorised religion in international affairs, and the reason is to do with metaphysical ideas. Starting with social/political theory, one can suggest that the contemporary post-metaphysical project ultimately rests on the very secularism that it purports to overcome, as the previous section has already indicated. For example, Habermas’s and Connolly’s notion of post-secularity rejects the ideological hegemony of secular liberalism and the dystopia of global capitalism, which are complicit with one another and represent the highest contemporary expressions of secularism. But by the same token, the post-liberal politics of pluralism remains locked in the secularist logic of de-sacralising and re-sacralising the political sphere by investing either the national-republican state or the global-cosmopolitan public square with quasi-sacred significance. In this sense, post-secularity marks an intensification of secularism rather than a new mode of theorising religion in international affairs.

Just as general IR theory took a secular turn in the 1950s and 1960s, so too the specifically Christian terminology of early English School writings was gradually replaced by a discourse that focused on the institutions of international society, ‘leaving many Christians trading in secular currency, where formerly agnostics had quite comfortably used religious coinage’.<sup>62</sup> With the growing influence of Hedley Bull’s work, the dominant strand of the English School privileged the formal-procedural dimension of international society over questions of substance such as natural law, community, association, or the common good that constitute the unity of the social world and humankind. Bull and his English School contemporaries offered an alternative to the scientific dystopia of realism and the idealistic utopia of revolutionism. But the price they paid for making Grotius’s rationalist tradition part of the mainstream IR debate was to eschew a metaphysical worldview connected with Christianity in favour of a secular discourse centred on increasingly abstract, vacuous categories

<sup>61</sup> In his article ‘One order, two laws: recovering the “normative” in English School theory’, *Review of International Studies*, 33:4 (2007), pp. 557–75, William Bain shows that the English School lacks an account of obligation beyond procedural norms. My article draws on Bain’s argument to suggest that the common good and other substantive ends are similarly missing from the work of Butterfield, Wight, and other English School members.

<sup>62</sup> Jones, ‘Christian Realism’, p. 372.

such as ‘common interests, common values ... a common set of rules ... [and] common institutions’.<sup>63</sup> As with IR thinking in general, the English School’s secular, post-metaphysical turn coincided with the decline of grand theory.

It is surely right to view the legacy of Herbert Butterfield and Martin Wight as a better starting point to develop a metaphysical IR tradition that can conceptualise religion in international affairs and revive grand theory. Common to their work is a critique of secularism and an attempt to reintegrate religion into politics. Both men viewed the Cold War as the final destruction of Christendom. In 1951, Butterfield warned of a ‘serious collapse of civilisation’ across Europe and suggested that the violent clash of secular totalitarianism marked a point in history at which ‘the Dark Ages have actually returned’.<sup>64</sup> Three years earlier, Martin Wight had made the point that the modern secularist settlement culminates in post-1945 bipolarity, which licenses absolute power without ethical limits:

It is in the international sphere that the demonic concentrations of power of the modern neopagan world have their clearest expression. Russia and America are the last two Great Powers within the Westernized system of sovereign states. And the characteristic of that system, after centuries in which the Church has had no influence upon its development, is the emancipation of power from moral restraints. Leviathan is a simple beast; his law is self-preservation, his appetite is for power. The process of international politics that has followed from this is equally simple: the effective Powers in the world have decreased in number and increased in size, and the method has been war.<sup>65</sup>

Likewise, Butterfield and Wight believed that the modern separation of the sacred from the secular does not reflect the nature the world we all inhabit. On the contrary, heavenly and earthly powers are inextricably intertwined and interact with one another according to certain patterns – in line with the idea that immanent reality bears the trace of its transcendent source and in part reflects the divine warrant. As such, for Christians like Butterfield and Wight the world is not just fallen and sinful but also preserves the original promise of peace and harmonious ordering *just because* that is what the personal Creator God intends for His creation and has revealed to Israel and in Christ.

Crucially, the two men defend variants of Christian realism that are not dualist but instead emphasise the plural unity of the world. Against the Hobbesian fear of a violent state of nature and the war of all against all (which underpins much of mainstream IR theory), Butterfield and Wight shifted the focus back on the social nature of mankind and the idea that human cooperation precedes the contractual arrangements both within and across nations. Just as national societies are bound together by much more than contracts, so too the international society of states is governed by a set of customs and traditions that are more fundamental than either formal rights or commercial exchange. Precisely in the absence of a single sovereign who wields coercive power, the glue that most of all holds together societies both nationally and internationally is ‘an antecedent common culture’, which is more primary than

<sup>63</sup> Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (2nd edn, London: Macmillan, 1996), p. 13. This procedural vision is developed in Hedley Bull and Adam Watson (eds), *The Expansion of International Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

<sup>64</sup> Herbert Butterfield, ‘Christianity and Human Relationships’, in H. Butterfield, *History and Human Relations* (London: Collins, 1951), p. 39.

<sup>65</sup> Martin Wight, ‘The Church, Russia and the West’, *The Ecumenical Review*, 1:1 (1948), pp. 25–45, at p. 30.

the rights of individual citizens or sovereign states.<sup>66</sup> Culture so configured rests on a shared ‘cosmic, moral constitution’ that is metaphysical in nature because it links immanent values to their transcendent origin and outlook.<sup>67</sup>

Instead of scholastic casuistry, Butterfield and Wight appeal to the principle and practice of love or charity, which complements both power politics and natural law by relating the dignity of all persons to their shared transcendent origin and finality. This metaphysical vision of perfectible unity differs markedly from the dualism between the violent ethic of coercion and the peaceful ethic of love that characterises the thinking of the Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. In his most influential writings, he limits charity to personal piety and justifies warfare as the fulfilment of divine volition.<sup>68</sup> As ‘tutors of mankind in its pilgrimage to perfection’,<sup>69</sup> Christians (according to Niebuhr) have a duty to join America’s divinely sanctioned mission of spreading democracy and freedom across the globe. As such, Niebuhr’s defence of American exceptionalism is neither Christian nor realist. In contrast, Butterfield and Wight posit the primacy of peace over violence and emphasise the ethical constraints on state action within and across national borders. The legacy of Butterfield and Wight can be developed in the direction of a metaphysical-political realism that centres on the synthesis of reason and faith, the relational nature of the world’s ontological structure and various forms of association around notions of the common good, as the remainder of this article briefly outlines.

#### *Towards a synthesis of faith and reason*

English School rationalism seeks to outflank the diametrically opposed extremes of realism and revolutionism in favour of an account that stresses the centrality of reason – the rationality of humankind and the divine logos as the ultimate transcendent source of the world. But for all its foundations in Christian realism, the work of Wight and Butterfield tends to view faith as private and morality as a matter of individual conscience. Thus, only reason is universal and can mediate between rival worldviews. This conception does not so much neglect the role of religion in politics as it under-explores the relationship of faith to rationality. On this question, IR theory in general and the English School in particular can learn from debates in political theory on the global religious resurgence and its implications for public reason. In his debate with Habermas in 2004 and his controversial Regensburg address in 2006,<sup>70</sup> Josef Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI) changed the terms of debate on the question of rationality and belief in politics and international affairs. He argued that the modern separation of natural immanence and supernatural transcendence sundered faith from reason and accordingly impoverished both. The former

<sup>66</sup> Herbert Butterfield, ‘The Historic States System’, unpublished paper, quoted in Adam Watson, ‘Foreword’, in James Der Derian (ed.), *International Theory: Critical Investigations* (Houndsmill: Macmillan, 1995), p. x.

<sup>67</sup> Wight, *International Theory*, pp. 13–14.

<sup>68</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1955); R. Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of Its Traditional Defenders* (London: Nisbet & Co., 1945).

<sup>69</sup> Niebuhr, *Irony*, p. 71.

<sup>70</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *The Regensburg Lecture*, trans. James V. Schall S. J. (Chicago: St. Augustine’s Press, 2007).

was either 'positivised' as an inner impulse or 'transcendentalised' as a blind, irrational creed. Likewise, the latter was either enthroned as the sole transcendental absolute or reduced to the positivist rationality of calculus and scientific experimentation. Instead of securing their respective specificity and integrity, this secularist conception pitted faith and reason against each other. The ensuing opposition between fideism and rationalism fuelled the clash of religious fundamentalism and secular extremism that has characterised international relations for much of the twentieth and the early twenty-first century.<sup>71</sup>

A non-secularist account, by contrast, offers a synthesis through which reason and faith are mutually corrective and augmenting. Without each other's import, both can be distorted and instrumentalised at the service of egoism or state power: 'distortions of religion arise when insufficient attention is given to the purifying and structuring role of reason within religion'.<sup>72</sup> Likewise, 'without the corrective supplied by religion, though, reason too can fall prey to distortions, as when it is manipulated by ideology, or applied in a partial way that fails to take full account of the dignity of the human person'.<sup>73</sup> Just as rationality acts as a controlling organ that binds belief to knowledge, so too faith can save reason from being manipulated by ideology or applied in a partial way that ignores the complexity of the real world. Without each other's corrective role, distortions and pathologies arise in both religion and 'secular politics'. For example, fanatical believers use faith as a vehicle of hatred and seek to refashion the whole world in their own puritanical image. Similarly, the totalitarian ideologies of the twentieth century were variously more pagan or more atheist, and they legitimated genocide and total warfare in the name of an exceptionalism that was expressed in the language of secularist messianism. The impact of globalisation risks exacerbating existing extremes and marginalising a mediating middle that blends reason with faith.

This synthesis binds together rationality and belief in mutually beneficial ways. Faith can reinforce trust in the human capacity for both reasoning and understanding and also trust in the reasonableness of reality. Likewise, 'secular' rationality can help religious belief make sense of its claims and give coherence to its intuitions. Crucially, reason and faith can assist each other's search for objective principles and norms that govern personal and political action. What binds rationality to belief is the shared commitment to universal standards of truth beyond mere logical coherence and empirical validity. As such, the relatedness of reason and faith is not merely a concern for religion but in fact lies at the heart of politics, the economy and society both domestically and globally.

The difference with Habermas and other theorists of pluralism is that they associate religion primarily with moral intuitions and potential for meaning. A more metaphysical approach emphasises the proper cognitive import of faith, especially the idea that faith precedes and exceeds reason – a pre-rational trust in the reasonableness of the world that can direct rationality beyond a purely formal, instrumental focus and open it to the possibility of shared ends, which can unite members of different polities. Crucially, faith does not necessarily impose a set of dogmatic truths

<sup>71</sup> See, *supra*, note 12.

<sup>72</sup> Pope Benedict xvi, Meeting with the Representatives of British Society, Westminster Hall (17 September 2010), available at: {[http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/speeches/2010/september/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20100917\\_societa-civile\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2010/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20100917_societa-civile_en.html)}.

<sup>73</sup> Benedict XVI, Meeting.

on reason, which would warrant accusations of religious fundamentalism. On the contrary, both faith and reason share a commitment to the quest for truth – faithfully and reasonably. Faced with threats to the universal respect of fundamental freedoms and the dignity of the human person, politics, and international relations cannot dispense with notions of truth and goodness, especially in situations where the conflict of rival values provokes absolutist or relativist responses. To uphold genuine pluralism requires standards of truth and goodness that can order conflicting values such as freedom, equality or security, an argument to which I return below. For now, one can conclude that the metaphysical principles and moral intuitions of faith offer conceptual and practical resources to foster mutual understanding and peaceful co-existence among different countries and cultures.

*A 'corporate' association of nations and peoples*

Faced with the global religious resurgence, theorists of post-secularity argue for pluralism either by defending procedural and majoritarian terms of debate (Habermas) that pit secular reason against faith or by embracing an immanent philosophy of difference (Connolly) that is residually transcendental. By contrast with the secularism of both positions, this article argues in favour of a plural search for the shared common good and substantive ends that can mediate between the individual and the collective will and thus help bind together members of diverse bodies and polities. Such an argument challenges the view that the incommensurability of rival values either requires central sovereign power to arbitrate conflict or else leads to a fragile *modus vivendi* in which peaceful coexistence merely regulates a violent state of nature that rules out the ontological possibility of a just, harmonious order.<sup>74</sup> To suggest that competing values are incommensurable (especially in the late modern context of multiculturalism and the global clash of fanatical faiths) is to assume that different values have equal claim to normative validity and that no hierarchical ordering can command popular assent. In the absence of higher-order universal principles from which particular norms derive their moral character, general values such as freedom, equality, and security constitute their own foundation and finality.

However, no value is valuable in itself or as such, not even ancient liberties or modern human rights. Values are valuable because they originate from an 'invaluable' source and because they are ordered towards an equally 'invaluable' end – a transcendent principle that provides an intelligible account of what is valuable and how it ought to be valued, blending the empirical with the normative. For example, the sanctity of life and the dignity of the human person underpin the principles of liberality like fair detention, fair trial, or *habeas corpus* that are central to notions of freedom, equality, and security. Crucially, this argument shifts the focus away from unilateral practices centred on self-interest and individual entitlements towards more reciprocal arrangements that rest on the balance between rights and responsibilities – what Wight called the link between 'common interest' and 'common obligation'.<sup>75</sup>

<sup>74</sup> In contemporary political thought, the thesis of incommensurable values finds perhaps its clearest expression in the works of Isaiah Berlin, Richard Rorty, and John Gray.

<sup>75</sup> Martin Wight, *Power Politics*, eds H. Bull and C. Holbraad (2nd edn, Harmondsworth: Pelican Books, 1986), pp. 293–4.

Unlike the rather sterile debate on liberal values that are self-referential, the alternative that this article puts forward helps revive 'grand theory' by raising fundamental questions about shared substantive ends, which exceed instrumental reason or arbitrary volition.

Linked to this argument about the common good is the reinvention of 'constitutional corporatism' in a more plural guise against both market individualism and state collectivism, in particular the principle of 'mixed government' and the role of corporate bodies in both politics and the economy. Beyond Connolly's 'deep pluralism', this non-statist corporatism diffuses sovereign power away from the institutions of the central state and the free market by promoting the constitutional recognition and political participation of mediating institutions such as professional associations in both the public and the private sector, manufacturing and trading guilds, cooperatives, trade unions, voluntary organisations, universities, and free cities. More so than the formalist separation of powers that ends in institutional stalemate or the primacy of executive power, the constitutionalist principle of 'mixed government' can help balance the three branches while at the same time upholding the autonomy of both individuals and corporate bodies within the free, shared social space – the realm of civic institutions and civil society that is more primary than either the national state or the transnational market associated with the modern secularist settlement. This argument develops Wight's recognition that in modernity '[s]overeignty had indeed passed to different states, by social contracts, but the original unity of the human race survived'.<sup>76</sup>

Taken together, the common good and constitutional corporatism have far-reaching implications for international theory. First of all, the focus on notions of goodness and shared substantive ends can correct the mainstream IR fixation either with instrumental relationships (such as national or international interests) or with procedural ties (such as a commitment to common rules and institutions). A strictly instrumental approach or procedural ethics forecloses the possibility of universal ends that unite individuals, communities, and societies in an ordered relationship towards the realisation of equality and freedom in conditions of security.<sup>77</sup> Second, the emphasis on constitutionalism serves to direct the increasingly hollow debate away from the abstract standards of liberalism and democracy towards substantive ideas and practices such as constitutional rule (as emphasised by Wight),<sup>78</sup> embedded institutions and 'mixed government' that can blend the power of the 'one' (for example, nation, parliament, monarchy), the 'few' (for example, regions, localities, professions, or virtuous elites) and the 'many' (the people or the citizenry). Such an approach can rebalance the growing power of the executive *vis-à-vis* the legislature and the judiciary and also incorporate the organised but non-state (and non-market) components of national and global civil society.

Third, the theory and practice that links the common good to constitutionalism is association. Ontologically, the idea of association accentuates the relational nature and outlook of the human and social order, which translates into habits of cooperation and gift-exchange (like trust or communication) involved in all forms of exchange.

<sup>76</sup> Wight, *International Theory*, p. 38.

<sup>77</sup> See, for example, Robert Jackson, *The Global Covenant. Human Conduct in a World of States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>78</sup> Martin Wight, 'Western Values in International Relations', British Committee paper (October 1961), published in Herbert Butterfield and Martin Wight (eds), *Diplomatic Investigations: Essays in the Theory of International Politics* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1966), pp. 89–131.

Association begins with the anthropological insight that over time and space, human beings form mutual bonds and build bodies and polities with overlapping membership, which amount to something greater than the sum of their individual parts. However, this argument also acknowledges that such communities, corporations, and societies require legitimate authority, political power, and civilising practices in order to strive for the common good and mutual human flourishing. Accordingly, association points to an ontological account of interpersonal relationships and corporate partnership that are more fundamental than the states-based ontology of ‘international society’ and the individual-based ontology of world society or world community. As such, the alternative of association that this article puts forward is more primary than the pluralist society of states that rests on natural anarchy and the solidarist global community of humankind that is grounded in a rival vision of natural unity.<sup>79</sup>

### *Rethinking religion in international relations*

Finally, seen from the perspective of association, the English School (as developed in the work of Wight and Butterfield) gets it only half-right when it suggests that ‘a states-system will not come into being without a degree of cultural unity among its members’.<sup>80</sup> What is underplayed is the role of religious communities in fostering associative ties across the globe. Transnational links among members of the same faith have created bonds even as they are embedded in local communities and overseas diasporas alike. Religious transnationalism has been an integral part of history since the Axial Age and existed long before modern international relations. Perhaps more so than other traditions, different world religions alert us to the existence of a social order that precedes and underpins the modern system of national states and transnational markets, which have become increasingly disembedded from the religious practices, cultural habits and social ties within and across nations. Among the ideas and practices that unite societies nationally and internationally, the flow of religions and religiously framed cultural customs is what most of all integrates individuals into a global community and nations into a global polity.

Such associative models are of course not limited to religious believers. On the contrary, modes of association and corporation constitute neighbourhoods, communities, cities, regions, and states. The possibility of a global public square is linked to the idea that national states are more like ‘super-regions’ within a wider international polity – a subsidiary federation or confederation of nations rather than a centralised super-state or a simple free-trade area. A corporate polity is something like a ‘nested’, interlocking union of various levels of association, which seeks to embed politics and the economy in civic bonds, social relations, cultural habits, and

<sup>79</sup> Since Hedley Bull’s ‘The Grotian Conception of International Society’, in Butterfield and Wight, *Diplomatic Investigations*, pp. 51–73, some of the most important interventions in the recent debate include Nicholas J. Wheeler, ‘Pluralist and Solidarity Conceptions of International Society: Bull and Vincent on Humanitarian Intervention’, *Millennium*, 21:3 (1992), pp. 463–87; Chris Brown, ‘International Theory and International Society: The Viability of the Middle Way?’, *Review of International Studies*, 21:2 (1995), pp. 183–96; Jackson, *Global Covenant*; Barry Buzan, *From International to World Society? English School Theory and the Social Structure of Globalisation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), chaps 5 and 8; Jens Bartelson, *Visions of World Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

<sup>80</sup> Wight, *Systems of States*, p. 33.



religious practices. These ties embody principles of reciprocity and mutuality that are upheld by different religious and non-religious traditions. Thus, one effect of the global religious resurgence is to promote forms of corporate association among nations and peoples that are beyond the modern dualistic divide between the religious and the secular on which mainstream IR theory rests.

## **Conclusion**

This article has argued that notions of post-secularity do not advance the debate on religion in international relations. To speak of the post-secular assumes already that we know what the secular is. By contrast with existing accounts, the article contends that secularism is not limited to the public settlement of the relationship between faith and politics or the functional differentiation of religious from political authority. Instead, secularism rests on the modern invention of the category of 'religion' and on the de-sacralisation and re-sacralisation of the public square by investing the secular space with quasi-sacred significance. By operating a secular capture of the sacred and bracketing religion out of the picture, secularism forecloses the possibility that immanent values might have a transcendent origin and finality.

This article has also showed that the concept of the post-secular remains wedded to the logic of secularism. First, post-secularity views reason as essentially secular and religious faith as irrational or arational. Second, post-secular thinking has a tendency to elevate difference into the sole transcendental term, which either sacralises difference and views alterity in quasi-sacred terms or seeks to convert the 'other' into the 'same' by imposing categories such as negative liberty or emancipation on cultures worldwide. Third, theorists of the post-secular such as Habermas or Connolly wrongly equate secular modernity with metaphysical universalism, which they seek to replace with post-metaphysical pluralism. Finally, post-secularity proclaims the 'end of metaphysics', which precludes a transcendent ontology that can challenge the secularist bias of mainstream IR traditions and reverse the decline of grand theory.

The alternative that this article outlines is an international theory, which develops the Christian realism of the English School in the direction of a metaphysical-political realism. Such a realism can theorise the link between metaphysics and international theory, provide a synthesis of reason and faith as well as develop the notion of a 'corporate association' of peoples and nations that are bound together by the flow of ideas and practices embodied in religions, customs, and traditions rather than abstract rights or commercial contracts. Realism so configured can rethink religion in international affairs and help revive grand theory in IR.