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The Postsecular Imagination. Postcolonialism, Religion and Literature

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Manav Ratti presents a study that, far from exclusively aiming at literary criticism, tackles one of the most virulent problems of cultural policy head on: the increasingly embattled relation of secularism and religion, in some parts of the world complicated by a nationalist agenda. The author explores this triangular relation concentrating on India, Sri Lanka and the English speaking Western World, in the hope that literature might prove a source of imaginative coping strategies and possibly even of viable solutions. He discusses “Anglophone novels that reflect the multireligious nature of India and Sri Lanka, including animism, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Sikhism,” focussing

on the work of Michael Ondaatje [*The English Patient*] and Salman Rushdie [*The Satanic Verses*, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, *Shalimar the Clown*, *The Enchantress of Florence*], as well as that of Shauna Sing Baldwin [*What the Body Remembers*], Amitav Gosh [*The Hungry Tide*] and Allan Sealy [*The Everest Hotel*],

all of them incorporating “a diasporic position, giving them access to the lived experience of at least two different national and cultural worldviews.” (preface, xix). He also takes into account the work of Mahasweta Devi [*Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha*] as the only non-anglophone and non-diasporic writer treated in the study, arguing that her position between “majoritarian Hindu India” and that of the “tribals” (*ibid.*) implies an oscillation between two world-views as well. The period covered stretches from the late eighties to 2010.

The interpretations Ratti offers are illuminating and sensitive. In most cases the reader will feel tempted to discover the books they have not yet read themselves, a positive effect rarely produced by academic literary criticism. The many details about daily life in India and Sri Lanka come as an extra bonus. However, the main interest of the book does not reside in literary history. As mentioned above, the author is aiming at a bigger picture, offering a specific concept of the “postsecular,” a term he burdens with considerable expectations. But what exactly *is* it he calls by that name?

He defines it his

task [...] to explore secular alternatives to secularism: ones that can gesture to the inspiring features of religious thought, without the violence that can attach itself to religion. The paradox thus becomes to find a non-secular secularism, a non-religious religion. It is this broad sense that I denote by the term ‘postsecular’. (xxi)

Secularism, in turn, is defined as a set of “ideologies that emerge [...] as a result of secularization, such as the ideology that people should confine their beliefs to what they can observe in the material world, or that to have a secular outlook [...] is to be modern, progressive and rational.” (5)

For Western observers it is frequently difficult to see this attitude as one ideology among others, because the idea that religion is a tide receding with historical necessity is deeply rooted in modernist mentality.¹

It is therefore highly meritorious that the author opens up an alternative perspective, especially as he refuses to opt for either secularist or religious rule in the sense of mutually exclusive alternatives. Ideological partisanship and one-sidedness (not generally rare in cultural studies, where they touch on political issues) is gratifyingly absent from the whole book. Also, the book shows a full command of state-of-the-art literary and cultural theory.

Yet, the paradoxical definition of the term “postsecular” quoted above shows that there may be a problem with the study’s methodological basis. This becomes more clear from the following quotation:

But the postsecular is neither a rejection nor a substitute for the secular. It does not signal a teleological end of secularism. Rather, it is an intimately *negotiated* term. Crucially, the postsecular does not represent a return to religion, especially not in postcolonial nation-states where the combination of religion and nationalism continues to be explosive and often violent. The postsecular can be a critique of secularism and religion, but it cannot lead us back to the religious, and certainly not to the violence undertaken in the name of religion or secularism. Postsecularism advocates neither a religious, sectarian nation-state nor the espousal of religious belief at the personal level. (20f.)

¹ The most telling example is certainly the triumph of Francis Fukuyama’s book *End of History* (1992) that, a late echo of Hegel’s philosophy of history, defined liberal (and that means, of course, secular) democracy as the ultimate and crowning stage of history. Today, less than 25 years later, this conviction would seem more than dubious, and what provokes this scepticism is a large-scale return of religion in great parts of the world.

But then the question is: what does it advocate?! The concept seems to fade away in a series of “neither-nor”s, avoiding any positive statement. The answer lies, not astounding for a study in literary criticism, in the aesthetic field. The “act of writing” is seen as a counterpart to religious practice:

[...] such qualities [writing as “creative, fecund and regenerative”] are not the provision of religion alone, whether Christianity, Hinduism, or any other religious tradition and practice. Throughout this book, I will consider writers’ affirmation of the creativity of literature, of the generative qualities of writing, as part of my argument on the importance of the aesthetic as a form of postsecular resolution. (80)

It must be kept in mind that the study is dedicated to a topic that is fraught with tensions, resentments, aggressions and moreover permanently subject to power claims from differing sides. What Ratti is setting up against these very material problems is basically the alleged power of literary imagination. In doing so, he repeats a famous, at least two hundred year old model: The “Erste Systemprogramm des Deutschen Idealismus” for instance, probably devised by young Hegel and Hölderlin around 1797, tries to establish a similar concept, confirming the leading and redeeming role of art and beauty. Overestimating the possibilities of literature has remained a constant feature, first of idealist aesthetics, later of most literary criticism. The author misconstrues literature as a force that stands beyond and above the divide of the secular and the religious. This is correct, when it comes to the *contents* of literature: these can, of course, address any topic whatsoever. It also applies to the writer or poet who may take whichever stance they choose. However, it does not apply to the institution of modern literature as Ratti himself describes it, as the free play of the imagination is

legitimate and assured in a secular environment only: the case of the Fatwa against Salman Rushdie makes this very plain. On the other hand, literature (or art in general) is definitely unable to functionally replace religion, because religion, unlike art, does not produce and multiply possibilities, but *limits* them, thus creating stable frames for social interaction. Given that “writers explore some affirmative values in the wake of the ideologies of nation, religion, and secularism,” it still remains true that “they [i.e.: the values] remain tenuous, fragile, experimental.” (207) Likeable as the idea of redeeming postsecularism may be, it is therefore not to be expected that a “postsecular imagination” will do more than literature in this respect always did: exploiting the inexhaustible gold mines of religious symbolisms for the benefit of fancy.

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