**File: Gregor BSA
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START AUDIO

John: Gregor McLennan holds the Established Chair of Sociology at the University of Bristol. He was head of the School of Sociology, Politics and International Studies. He’s been Head of Department of Sociology there and Director of the University’s Institute for Advanced Studies. Now he’s having a rest, and he has to do plenary talks instead.

Following postgraduate studies at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham, Gregor worked at the Open University, and prior to taking up his position at Bristol he was professor and Head of Sociology at Massey University in New Zealand.

As well as being the author and co-editor of numerous articles, book chapters, [in volumes of 0:00:58] social and political theory, for example he’s the author of ‘Marxism and the Methodologies of History’, ‘Marxism, Pluralism and Beyond’, ‘Sociological Cultural Studies’, ‘Exploring Society’, and ‘Story of Sociology’, Gregor most recently has been investigating the challenges to sociology of postcolonial and postsecular thought.

And, as you know from the conference booklet, that’s the title of his talk today.

So, Gregor McLennan. (Applause)

Gregor McLennan: Shall we do a sound check? How am I sounding? Am I getting to the back okay, Ed?

Male: Yes.

Gregor McLennan: Good. Well, thanks very much, John. Thanks to the BSA. It’s terrific to be here.

When I was asked to do this plenary, a while back, I guess not far off the end of the last conference, I was shocked, because I did a plenary in Glasgow. So did Liz Stanley. Is Liz here? And, to my horror, it was nineteen years ago. Nineteen crazily short years.

So I have slightly mixed feelings about doing this, since I'm not sure whether my thought has really progressed that much in that time. (Laughter)

Anyway, yes, it’s great to be here.

The topic I'm dealing with, postsecularism, is murky, messy, reflexive.

In fact, when I did my Glasgow talk, as far as I remember, I was saying, “Look, the postmodernism debate has been great in many ways, but time to call an end. Time to stop all this incessant reflexivity and get down to a bit of positivity.” I think that was my cheap slogan, ‘the new positivity’.

I'm afraid I'm sort of slightly reversing that again. (Laughter) Partly because postsecularism, again to use another slogan, is the last post of all the postmodernity issues, and in some ways the deepest. Or certainly I find it the most, as it were, existentially involving.

So I think we need to think very carefully about what’s impossibly murky about it all, where we can make a little bit of progress, at least in thinking through the issues together.

I would say that I'm operating, as I customarily do, somewhere in that space between proper philosophy and sociological theory.

Sociologists of religion, of whom there are several here, are much more qualified than I am to talk about what the state of belief in anything is in our society, whether that’s good or bad, etc.

I'm trying to occupy this level where we think somewhat philosophically, conceptually, reflexively, and we just see where we go with it.

Now, sociologists of religion, some of the big names anyway, do not like postsecularism. You ask Steve Bruce about postsecularism. He will probably… Well, you know Steve Bruce. He will tell you where to get off. (Laughter)

Equally, from a slightly different, and sometimes very different sociology of religion perspective, so will someone like Linda Woodhead.

James Beckford, a terrific sociologist of religion, a few years ago in his introduction plenary session to I think it’s called the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, did a paper and then a subsequent article on post-secularism.

Where he said, “Well, I've seen the sightings of it all over the place, in fact in five different contexts of inquiry, and I can’t make head nor tail of it. It’s a waste of time. It’s impossible. There’s no conceptual clarity. It doesn’t lead to empirical hypotheses of any useful kind. So I've had a go, and now I'm stopping.” I think that’s more or less Jim’s position.

Now, I don’t necessarily disagree with that, and that will become clear perhaps a bit later, when I get into some more detail, but I think it’s still worth getting in the canoe together and paddling through the murky waters.

Because within that attitude of these excellent sociologists of religion there is a forgetfulness that a quasi-philosophical thinking element is ineliminable from sociology, because we tell stories, or hate the stories we tell, of modernity as a whole engaging with philosophy of history type issues.

This impatience to get to at least the middle level theorising slot, where we can derive from some empirical hypotheses etc., I think there is a danger of a slight empiricism for the sake of it thing there, and I think…

Postsecularism in particular. Because for sociology as a discipline, so the story goes, including by some major sociologists, sociology above all is responsible for this questionable story of secularisation that’s really just a cover for rampant sectarian secularism. This is part of the postsecular climate.

So there’s a sense in which sociologists, even if it leads nowhere, have a particular responsibility to try to work through some of these issues, because sociology is in the frame. Why?

This is all prefatory comments, and the preface goes on quite a while. (Laughter)

But social theorists amongst you, maybe everybody takes this absolutely for granted, it’s all over sociology 101 courses, etc., but the ideal type of modernity, that one way or another, reflexively, critically, whatever we work with, has secularism built into it.

Modernisation more or less requires, entails, causes, secularity, and when you think of certain other associations that have been…

We’re the first to question…. We’re not the first, but certainly do question some of these elements of the ideal type.

I don’t know anybody who teaches at anything other than a kind of faulty heuristic, just to get going, but there’s a certain identification with modern society as nation state bounded.

Someone like Judith Butler, for example. Her postsecularism involves the radical critique of any identification of critical theory with, as it were, a statist project.

It can be argued that in its ideal type of modernity not only is there a secularism there, there’s a kind of statism there that’s related to secularism.

And of course the ideal type of modernity necessarily requires a historical retrojection. To the point where not modern societies, backward societies, are essentially identified with segmental social organisation and religion as culture.

So religion equals backward, equals not modern. That’s the story sociology has been telling. I don’t think it has, but we’ve been playing with it anyway.

Of course, that comes under terrific fire from anybody who considers themselves a postcolonialist. This just seems like out and out Eurocentrism.

So what are we sociologists going to do with all this stuff? The differentiation of society into separate spheres that are relatively autonomous, if not completely autonomous. This marginalises religion and privatises religion. That’s another part of the secularisation story.

Well, when are sociologists going to stop being surprised when it turns out that there’s radical [D 0:10:00] differentiation going on?

And in some ways a certain conception of religion not as isolated beliefs, but as a way of being in the world, as a way of being social, has been marginalised in that sense.

For all those reasons the ideal type that sociology above all plays with, and you can hear this disciplinary accusation very clearly when you read anthropologists…

Somehow anthropologists haven’t been Eurocentric, didn’t you know? Did you know that? They’ve never been Eurocentric. (Laughter)

It’s those sociologists with their modernity this and secularisation that. Sociologists are the troublemakers here. Well, what are we going to make of that?

Even modernity itself. I know there’s a debate about this, and any use of the master concept of modernity means that you're Eurocentric, but I don’t know. I can’t see anybody who wants to get rid of the concept of modernity.

So as you go to multiple modernities can you not therefore go to multiple secularities? Well, no, you can’t. You can have multiple modernities, but that doesn’t follow, multiple secularities doesn’t, because it’s quite patent in certain societies that religion is quite compatible.

Indeed, \_\_\_[0:11:16] was accused of Eurocentrism all his wonderful career, but he was the first one to say that’s part of the picture that doesn’t fit. Modernisation is perfectly compatible, and in some respects can be accelerated by, non-secular religious formations.

That’s the sociology bit of the preface.

The other bit to bear in mind here, I think, is that in parallel with that, but slightly different again, has been two decades of the critique of critique.

Now, the idea here is that sociology, critical theory, especially of a secular kind, engages in critique.

What does critique mean? Critique means showing that your view is not the truth, but is quasi-objective, and those who you are criticising are ideological. So it’s the critique of ideology.

Which, in a sense, I don’t think we can ever lose, but we can now see that it’s a bit problematical, because it always involves having a superior, “We’ve got knowledge. You’ve got illusion.”

Whether it’s capitalism, patriarchy, racism or whatever, that’s the pattern of argumentation. “We know. You don’t. You're a delusionist. For nasty ends by the way.”

That’s the shape of the critique model, but that critique has come under fire from all sorts of directions, including in this postsecular discourse dimension as well.

Why? Well, critique seems to be relentlessly negative. “We good. You bad.” And that seems incredibly simplistic. Why can’t critique…?

The questioners of critique want to have a greater sense of affirmation. Why don’t we say more about the vitality of the lifeforms that exist in society, the diversity of lifeform?

For instance, Rosi Braidotti, the Netherlands postsecular feminist theorist, her postsecularism is very much based on a notion of affirmation and solidarity.

Stop criticising people from a perspective of arrogant superiority. And this includes previous secularist feminists. And start engaging more in an appreciative, affirmative, life-enhancing mode.

Then from Bruno Latour to Michael Walzer, in political philosophy, the idea is that critique is much more effective, much better, much more realistic, when it’s involved rather than detached.

When you are, as it were, part of the communities you're criticising. Part of the same frameworks, rather than standing completely outside the frameworks.

So that notion of detachment and involvement also gets turned around in the critique of critique.

Finally, just in the airways of course, is culturalism. Now, culturalism has almost got to the point where it’s taken for granted these days. By culturalism I mean… Well, various manifestations of it.

Take the new cultural sociology, led by Jeffrey Alexander. Sociologists should never be criticising the forms of cultural belief/practice from an external point of view, because that always involves treating beliefs and practices functionally, and not, “In its own terms.”

Now, I can’t personally make sense of that. I think if you don’t see things functionally you haven’t got an explanation of anything.

Nevertheless, it violates. There’s some moral violation going on if you don’t allow people to be their own cultural selves. And that certainly is a sensitive issue of course when it comes to religion. So that’s in the pile.

Multiculturalist theory tops that up by saying we are culturally saturated selves, and far from the secularist sociological story our religious bearings, beliefs, heritages, are an essential part of that identity. Not something that can just be marginalised.

Those are all the contextual intellectual…

Not political. I haven’t even started on the political context, and I won’t, except to say that I think the question of…

We will go into some arguably too abstract conceptual stuff in a moment, but if you think whatever…

So postsecularism, and the critique of secularism, comes on the scene because there’s been a revival of religion and the de-secularisation of the world.

Sociologists have finally looked up from white little old Britain and looked at the world. “Actually, it was never like what we thought it was.”

Now, all those things are salutary of course.

I've lost my point now.

Ah. But is religion back in the same way? It’s an interesting question. What is the same way anyway?

If we want to say that we’ve had, probably since the late ‘90s, a sense of the revival of religion, clearly not only in the Western countries but pretty globally, what you’ve also got now is the rise of no religion. The nones. The fastest growing belief related indices.

Whatever happens now, I think, for the next 50 years at least, this kind of… It’s not a tension, but this coexistence within lots of different societies, certainly in Britain, between people who demand respect for their religion, and lots of people who do have a religion, coexisting with people who quite clearly don’t have a religion.

It’s not atheism as such, because it doesn’t seem to be that well-articulated. It’s not even really total indifference to religion, but it’s certainly not religion. [It’s a 0:18:39] vague sense, and especially amongst young people. So this seems to be secular in some sense or other.

Now, the complication is that although this is rising rapidly, the nones are rising rapidly, demographically the proportion of rising nones within the unbelieving population is going to be smaller compared to the continued growth of religious populations, just through the apparent demographics of it.

So all this postsecular stuff is not idle chit-chat. It bears on stuff that’s going on and is very interesting.

To give you an example, I'm assuming that most people or some people don’t know this literature very well, if at all, so what do I mean by postsecularism?

Well, one variety of postsecularism has been very influential, and it stems from the philosopher Charles Taylor’s book called ‘A Secular Age’. Published 2007. Very remarkably, within barely a decade, it’s become a classic. The Taylorist terminology, of which I will give you a flavour, is almost…

You can do it without quote marks now. This is it. (Laughter) Chuck Taylor has kind of spoken for everybody, in his own inimitable Canadian sitting on the veranda in a rocking chair kind of way. (Laughter)

This is option one, if you like. This is secularism reframed, is what I call this. Secularism reframed.

The first thing you do as a postsecularist is you say, “Let’s look again with historical precision, rather than ideological blinkers, at the whole history of religion, atheism, what have you.”

Now, there’s a huge caveat here, that just has to come in at every point. Many of these discourses are simply talking about the question of religion within the Christian tradition. Taylor acknowledges this in a way that he didn’t when that book first came out. So this is a big issue.

Nevertheless, within those parameters you’ve got to look at the dialectic between secularism and religion, and one thing they point to is simply the meaning of religion and secularism are not opposed.

Secularism comes out of very clear Christian theological discourse, from Augustine and so on. So the meanings are never as separate as secularists tend to think.

Secondly, if there has been a progression to…

Taylor doesn’t want to talk about secularism. He wants to talk about secularity. And the development of secularity includes certain kinds of secularisation. He makes a distinction between the ism, the secularity, and secularisation.

He says if you look at the history that you find these zig-zagging surges of first of all religious purification, and then secular winding back.

But essentially, until very, very recently, all those zig-zags of apparent secularisation, and then apparent religious zeal within the Christian tradition in the West, it’s a zig-zag pattern. Secondly, whatever secularisation there is, is religious. It takes a religious form.

So secularism hasn’t, as it were, been on the go for hundreds of years. It’s a relatively new thing. And it’s a funny thing.

Where Taylor identifies the growth of secularism as a cultural formation is in the development of the imminent frame. That’s what he calls it. The imminent frame. Otherwise known as exclusive humanism.

The point at which, maybe in the 18th century, maybe within deism as a form of religion, but certainly since then, through the 19th century and so on, the imminent frame has become very prominent as a feature of secularity.

But Taylor asks us to be quite clear that the development of the imminent frame is not the same as the steady growth of unbelief. It’s not that there are more and more out and out atheists. It’s that there are more and more pluralised notions of belief, non-belief, and ways of being sacred.

What Taylor says is that our current situation of secularity, and we should call it secularity, is a series of pluralised options. Options that are somewhat religious, not religious, different denominations. And they fragilise each other.

Pluralisation. Fragilisation. That’s what contemporary secularity is, and these are options for us to engage with, because the modern self is what he calls a buffered self.

A buffered self. The self of modern liberal individualism. We choose our way in the world. We keep traditional and other influences at some kind of distance.

As opposed to the poorest self of ancient, magical, animist, polytheist cultures, and certainly also of more recent religious cultures.

So the buffered self has this range of pluralised options, and we choose. That’s the modern state of secularity.

Now, he’s very clear that what has to be opposed intellectually are what he calls subtraction stories. Again, sociology gets the blame for this by and large.

Namely, sociology seems to be in the business of… Or secular social science, he would say, is in the business of subtracting from the richness of religious and poorer self world views.

We’re always trying to strip down the universe so that it fits modern reductionist materialist science. We want to screen out all notions of the supernatural and supernatural agencies in our world.

That basically means that secularism is what is left when you’ve taken away all the rich but crazy superstructure of religious belief. And modern social science is a whole panoply of different forms of subtraction story. So we’ve got to stop this subtraction story.

A final point about Taylor is, and this goes on in a number of volumes celebrating Taylor, expanding Taylor, Craig Calhoun has been very prominent in this, called ‘Rethinking Secularism’, ‘Varieties of secularism’, ‘In the Secular Age’, etc.

The idea is that we look at secularism itself in a Foucauldian sense really. As a regime of truth. As a productive cultural formation.

It’s not what’s left when religion goes. It’s an active cultural project. And being a project it constructs values and spiritual options, but it also creates its own others. The religious other, the backward other, etc.

So the big plea from the re-framers is to say, “Let’s treat secularism the way secular social science used to teach religion. How did this come about? Let’s leave aside the truth and falsity of it. Let’s look at the power that’s going on in there somehow.”

Well, just a few critical remarks. This has been very influential really. It’s almost become commonsensical. So I think it is important to just stop. Tremendous work. Really interesting. But it seems to be highly problematic.

By the way, the re-framers don’t call themselves postsecularists. This is where postsecularism is a bit like postmodernism. You can’t find anybody who wants to… (Laughter)

But clearly in some sense it has to be a postsecularist position, because I see postsecularism as a spectrum. Maybe the best way to define the spectrum is new atheists at the one end, and sincere, committed, can’t be bothered with anything else religious believers at the other end, and postsecularism is the bit in the middle.

You can be more inclined to religious beliefs and inclinations and ways of being or less, but you’ve got to accept that there’s something in this critique of secularism that’s right, actually. That makes you some kind of postsecularist.

Whether you then want to go and argue that, “Therefore religion will always be with us. Religion has nothing to criticise about it. Why can’t sociologists stop being methodological atheists? Why can’t they have a religious world view?” Just to be part of that conversation, to me, means you're in the postsecular space.

Well, the re-framers say that they are not postsecularists, and it’s mainly because they don’t want to be seen anywhere near Habermas. (Laughter)

Poor old Habermas, by the way. He gets kicked around so much. It’s almost as if if there was a job going in sociology for a lectureship he wouldn’t get on the shortlist. (Laughter) He’s so obviously dim and biased. Anyway, so they don’t want to be seen to be…

Because of course Habermas put the term postsecular most on the agenda in 2004, 2005, 2006, but the predominant postsecularist view is that that’s just a disguise for his still continuing secularism.

He says, “Religious movements and people have a voice. They even have a voice in the public sphere. But don’t let them anywhere near the state.” That’s why he’s regarded as a secularist rather than a postsecularist.

But because he puts the word postsecularist around Taylor and others don’t want a bar of it. But they are postsecularists in my view.

What shall I say? It’s a strange piece of work, because it is itself a secularisation story. His story of the secular age, Taylor’s and his allies, do tell of a steady thinning out, fragilisation, of all commitments to what we call ultimate values, ultimate beliefs. He just doesn’t want to call it secularism. Secularisation is okay, but not secularism.

It’s an interesting feature of this genre that there are very few concrete engagements with secular thinkers. In the whole of the 800 pages of the ‘Secular Age’ book Taylor only engages with Steve Bruce for four or five pages, and it’s very inconclusive. That’s charitable, actually.

Because the suspicion is behind any assertion of secularisationism is some kind of nasty secularism.

I just find intellectually this is, in a scholarly sense, bending the stick too much the other way. For one of the giant philosophers of our age the actual attention to textual argumentation and proper characterisation of arguments is very loose. I don’t think he nails those points very well.

The second aspect theoretically that I think is wrong with re-framer’s position, or is questionable in the re-framer’s position, is this notion of the frame.

What are we doing when we reframe anything? Well, they say they're showing us that secularism is not a natural belief, as it were, that springs out of society’s very nature in modernity. They're saying it’s a construction. It’s a frame.

But then they don’t put themselves in the same position. Namely of having a frame. [They’ve reversed it 0:33:22].

The logic goes like this. Sociologists used to think that there was no frame. Secularism was a natural critical outcome and religion is a frame. Once you realise that religion is a frame, you can see that the natural position, the rational position, is a godless world of modern social interaction.

Well, that’s okay. You can criticise that. But you can’t simply reverse it, which is what the re-framers do. They say, “Ah, now that we’ve seen that secularism is a Foucauldian productive regime of truth, with exclusionary consequences and so on…”

They are adopting the old position of being without their own presuppositions, biases, angles and so on. So [this is the 0:34:10] frame frame, as I call it.

They should read some \_\_\_ or something. (Laughter) You can’t have the frame frame in a prejudicial way. If you're adopting framing as a meta frame everything has to be a frame. Especially when you're dealing with issues of great personal existential importance. So that’s a contradiction there really.

Then three other examples of where I think the re-framers themselves are subtractionist from, if you like, a decent secularist point of view.

First of all, Taylor and the re-framers talk all the time about the malaise of modernity.

How a modern individual, the buffered self, that’s immune to other-worldly and other sources of spirituality, we become these narrow, mean-minded, wintry people, who have got no cosmic imagination, and that’s why modernity is in malaise.

Secularism has produced this narrow, commercialised, horrible culture, where no-one has any spiritual sustenance whatsoever.

Well, that just seems to me very, very simplistic. Why not say the malaise of modernity is about commodification and capitalism, rather than secularism as such? Never discussed, it’s rather remarkable, in some of these volumes by clever social thinkers.

The second thing, which a lot of people from different perspectives have said, taken from [Weber 0:36:15] I guess, is there’s this assumption that modernity in its malaise is also completely disenchanted.

I think there’s a lot of good work in cultural studies saying the equivalent of Latour’s, “We’ve never been modern. We’ve never been disenchanted.”

Popular culture throws up continual versions of modest re-enchantment. That itself is taking the influence of rationalism, and rational science in general modern culture, far too far.

There’s also an identification of secularism in this literature straightforwardly with atheism. I think that’s problematic, because…

And I think this shows the way in which Taylor admits that his project – this is his form of words – tilts towards the believer. He’s not trying to say, “Look, I'm trying to save religion,” but it tilts towards the believer.

I think that rather than give a nuanced and complex account of, “What do we mean by secularism?” It’s a hard question. It’s got to be some combination of naturalism, historicism, materialism, this worldliness. That isn’t necessarily the same or reducible to straightforward, “No gods,” etc.

So I think this whole postsecular position, which I am putting towards the anti-secular end of the spectrum… So I think you’ve got different postsecularist positions, and some of them are almost just straightforwardly anti-secular. I think at times the re-framers just get to that end.

Including the notion that if you're an atheist you will have no sympathy. You will have no empathy. You will have no interest in religious world views. I know quite a few people who are atheists, and I don’t see any of them who have that view exactly.

So there’s a counter reductionism, in other words, going on in this version of postsecularism.

That’s phase two. I've got about three and a half phases.

In ‘The Secular Age’, however, Taylor introduces… He’s got these two frames. The imminent frame, and another frame that he doesn’t exactly call religious. I think that’s what he means, but he calls it ‘openness to transcendence’. Two frames.

Don’t get me wrong. I like binaries. I think you have to have binaries.

So the imminent frame, closed to transcendence, and another frame open to transcendence. And, contrary to wintry secularists, we can never get past the possibility of openness to transcendence. That’s why you cannot be an eliminationist, even if you're a secularisationist.

However, he stacks the scene so far against the imminent frame that it’s a bit of a setup. It’s a frame. Secularism is being framed basically.

However, there’s a curious little fractal split in his discourse, where he says, “Wait a minute. Yes, you’ve got the imminent frame, and within the imminent frame you’ve got two spins. So frames and spins. We’ve had the frame frame. Now we’re getting the spin spin.

Within the spin there are two contrary pools. Two solicitations. I'm using his words. Two solicitations. Two pools. Two contrary senses of ultimate value. Not logically contradictory as such, as rationalists would want, but just in some kind of tension with each other.

The two spins within the imminent frame are, you guessed it, a kind of openness to transcendence, within the imminent spin, and a closedness to transcendence. So there’s been a lot of fractal movement going on, where the big binary now becomes a little binary within the bigger binary.

Now, I find this very interesting, because I think this is where another whole batch of postsecular options arises, and I call this batch expansive postsecularism.

I think essentially Taylor’s reframing secularism brand seems uninterested in how you might do some interesting things between the critique of strict secularism and the embrace of, as it were, full value religion. There must be something affirmative in this space, surely.

So, reframing secularism, Taylor et al, and now expansive postsecularism. What sort of thing are we talking about here? Who fits in here?

I'm trying not to name drop in all this, but one is curious about where the different thinkers fit. And I include in this batch of expansive postsecularism some of the feminist postsecularists.

I will say, maybe, why not, Judith Butler, but certainly Rosi Braidotti, and someone else who I don’t actually call an expansive postsecularist. I call them an exhilarating postsecularist.

I don’t know if anybody knows the work of Roberto Mangabeira Unger, a Brazilian sociological theorist who is at Harvard, and whose lectures are by the thousands, and he’s got…

Do check him out. He’s written many books now on religion and the self-awakening.

He’s written several volumes early on in the ‘80s, and a bit before, that have critiqued the whole project of social theory, in a relentless attempt to explain novelty in the world with regard to the determination of context.

So he’s a very interesting and definitely anti-sociological thinker, but for some reason I find him quite gripping. (Laughter)

I think one of these puzzles is, as sociologists, and this is one of the attractions of postsecularism, I hope it’s not sounding too new-agey, but we do tend to explain things minutely by contextualisation.

If we can show the formative context of anything interesting, from pop music, to political parties, to belief systems, then that’s a sociological project.

Well, except how does novelty come into the world? How do we explain things that break with context?

Unger talks very eloquently and very repetitively. It’s deliberate. It’s a very incantational mode of discourse. Where he talks about ‘we’. Because philosophers always talk about ‘we’. One of the absolutely necessary sociological critiques of all of this genre is to get past the ‘we’.

Don’t get me wrong. I think when we say, “What are we to think about the history of philosophy?” or something, it is personally involving. We are being interpolated, etc. But we have to say, “Well, who is this ‘we’?”

So when Charles Taylor says, “We have been so crushed by the malaise of modernity,” you think, “Well, wait a minute. Who is this ‘we’ exactly? Were you a miner in Durham in the 19th century thinking about the malaise of modernity?”

Similarly, Unger says, “Don’t forget. We are inexhaustible. Within ourselves we have the resources for transcendence.”

He’s a postsecularist, because he doesn’t associate transcendence with God. He calls his philosophy a godless religion. He calls it the religion of the future.

But he says, “We are little prophets, constantly breaking through our context of formation. We’re unfathomable. We’re indomitable. We are context breakers and new novelty makers.”

Now, it is quite religious, but it’s kind of intriguing, because social thought has always been \_\_\_[0:46:02]. It’s a structure and agency question, [isn’t it]?

Or [Sartre] used to talk about it in terms of the progressive and the regressive method. You explain things by looking back, but you can never predict the next burst of energy.

A parallel strand here would be Alain Badiou. Do you know Alain Badiou? You must know at least that he’s meant to be just incredibly brilliant and inspiring.

Badiou’s philosophy has been regarded as Marxist postsecularism. Something vehemently denied by Badiou. Partly on the same sort of basis as Roberto Unger. Except in Badiou’s language it’s the relationship between the situation and the event.

A situation is all the contextual determinations and variables that make sense of a particular identity, but hey, something happens, and it’s only retrospectively that we identify all of the new coordinates, because the event has smashed the context that it was formed in. It’s the same relationship between what constitutes context breaking novelty and contextual explanation.

I think some of these postsecular thinkers are a bit extravagant in the way that they deal with this, but I think we have to agree that these are quite profound issues, that affect how we explain anything in the world, and still credit human beings with creativity.

Where did I get to? So that’s a little bit of Roberto Unger. He wants an upgraded social personality to lead to a radical social world.

Some of his writings on what to do about inheritance, about the necessity for constant social experimentalism, have quite good traction, in terms of semi-realistic attitudes and proposals, but when it comes to religion it’s searing. It’s nothing short of searing.

We must slough off our sluggish, slumbering, unawake selves, and be godlike. Not God. Not even reference to God. It’s \_\_\_[0:48:38] essentially. Within ourselves, our best selves, we can become divine, godlike. The divinisation of humanity at last.

It has to be unpredictable, because we all know how society crushes people. So you need this externally derived inspiration to become awakened selves, fast selves. We don’t want any slow things anymore. Everything has to be fast and moving.

Then we will reach the society of ongoing radical experimentalism. Which is the only solution to capitalism, blah, blah, blah.

So he is in my bracket of expansive postsecularism.

Rosi Braidotti is in there, because she has this – along with people like William [Connolly 0:49:35], Jane Bennett to some extent, if you know those names – neovitalist perspective.

Where what we need for the transformative politics and solidarity is this sense that we don’t celebrate enough the life that is in all of us, in very diverse ways.

Like Saba Mahmood. What this means is secularist feminists really have to… Braidotti says, “Feminists are in a head-on collision. A head-on collision with the secularist feminist ideas that gave the feminist movement birth.”

Now, that’s quite radical. Not just have to adjust something here and there. Head-on collision. Jettison. Because otherwise we’re not going to be able to understand what Saba Mahmood studied, before she died a few weeks ago. Namely pietist Muslim women and their cultures.

Those are just two examples of what I would call expansive postsecularism.

Along with that you have certain theoretical baselines, if you like, that involves saying, “Let’s look again at the [varied 0:51:12] distinctions between religion, secularism, atheism and so on.” And I think what you're finding generally now is a sprawl and a spread of different definitions, including on the secular side.

For example, there’s a Californian sociologist, Phil Zuckerman, who has just brought out ‘The Oxford Handbook of Secularism’, and you will find a very lateral definition of what it means to be a secularist.

It talks about advocacy, yes, but maybe only for partially secular living. It says all those connotations that secularism not only will lead to but even ethically requires the end of religion, or the sense that religion is not good, and so on.

This is all being done under rethinking secularism, as it were, from the secular side.

Philosophers like Thomas Nagel have started [coming to a 0:52:16] sometimes almost banal level of generality, but what he says is, “We’ve got to talk about the religious temperament.”

Not religious belief, but temperament, or a stance, or an attitude. And that attitude needs to be the sense that we need to recognise in our lives our relationship to the universe as a whole.

That’s how Nagel defines religion. Contestable, but you can see what’s going on. There’s a kind of sprawl and a spread of different notions of what it is.

Then of course, both from militantly anthropological positions like Talal Asad, but lots of others too, the new materialism does this, a kind of almost, “Let’s hold off even thinking about religion as being belief. Belief that we can criticise, that we can refute.

Let’s look at religion simply as material cultural practices. Where the materialism is not reductionist, because it includes lots of things like affect, and relationality, and the attachment of sacred significance to things. Where the sacred…”

It’s nothing to do with religion here. It’s almost like maximum popular Durkheimianism. Anything that we value as extraordinary, and that we create little taboos around, that’s the sacred.

Well, what’s that got to do with religion and secularism? We’ve almost bypassed that polarity. So say these people. I think these are all infinitely explorable and arguable questions.

What am I saying? I'm just saying that these are interesting positions. That they cut a new set of terminologies. And I suppose social theory is nothing if it’s not the delight in another bunch of terms that we have to get to grips with, and then chuck out, and then reinvent some new ones. (Laughter) But that’s good.

Richard Rorty used to say that it’s the love of vocabulary, or the fear of vocabulary, that keeps social theory going, and I think that’s fair enough. So there are a whole new bunch of terms around in this expansive postsecular slot.

By the way, very few of those people call themselves postsecular either. This is just my vocabulary. Braidotti does.

Where have we got to? I'm going to do a little bit of critique of expansive postsecularism, whilst acknowledging that I think this is interesting.

Well, what’s in postsecularism? Especially of this variety. You can find even stronger critiques of so-called secularism in this literature as you can in the reframing Charles Taylor type literature.

Secularism is always set up. In the [platform 0:55:33] introductory pages you will find a whole heap of secularism bad sentiments. It reduces the vitality of things, etc.

But all of those people I have named nevertheless could be construed as kind of secularists. They're very naturalistic, for instance.

In other words, none of them say expansive postsecularism should lead to a reconsideration of whether gods, or spirits, or something intervene in the life of societies and in the life of people. Reveal themselves to us.

Now, that’s a secularist sentiment, because it’s what Taylor calls exclusive humanism. Beliefs that human beings have, and their social power, undoubtedly we should explore that. But none of that means that gods and other spiritual supernatural forces are active agents in the world, from the analytical perspective.

If you like, these are what I call methodologically atheist analysts, even though they are absolutely out to be more appreciative of the power and spread of religion.

Similarly, it goes with a kind of naturalism. This is where it’s much more interesting philosophically, I think, to talk about naturalism, materialism, historicism, rather than just atheism.

Unger, who has commanded us in stentorian terms to get rid of our somnambulant mummified selves – he’s quite rude about ordinary people actually (Laughter) – nevertheless says, “We are absolutely bound by historicity.”

He’s written an essay on natural philosophy, a kind of old-style physical theory about the universe, with a very reputable theoretical physicist in the States.

What they're arguing is that the only absolute in human life and in cosmic formation is historicity. Everything comes into being, dies. End of. Well, that doesn’t easily sit with lots of religious beliefs in the conventional sense.

Similarly, again maybe on the feminist new materialism angle, this isn’t straightforward materialism. There’s plenty of room for affect, and relationality, and inconclusiveness. And generally, in my view, I can’t see it in the literature, but to me they're just giving a version of complexity theory, which now everybody, quite rightly, loves.

But, however qualified, the new materialism still says, “We’re listening. We’re listening hard. We’re watching the way in which religious and other subjects invest their material objects, their worlds, their ways of being in the world, with sacred significance.”

But always, you usually find it on page 273, it says, ‘But the new materialism is still a form of naturalism. We do not accept… We cannot. How can we if we’re social thinkers?

We can accept the sincerity and power of people’s beliefs in other-worldly forces, but the new materialist, affirmative, affect perspective itself still has to be kind of naturalistic’.

These are deep tensions, and it’s almost the more you up the ante, the more someone like Unger exhorts us and tells us to shake off our [slumberfied 0:59:44] self…

[Except] there’s no God. What we’re really doing is divinising and reinventing ourselves.

The more you think, “Well, you need to give more traction to the selves that we are now.”

There’s a book by Simon Critchley. I don’t know if you know him. He’s more on what’s called the political theology dimension of postsecularism. His version is essentially envy of religion.

And a lot of leftists have to do it. Marxism is back, but what isn’t back is the automatic personal motivation that Marxism used to require.

That’s why a lot of Marxists have had to say, “Can we not somehow get a piece of that religion stuff? Then we can really get involved again, transformatively. We can even transfigure ourselves.”

Critchley’s book is called ‘The Faith of the Faithless’, because he says, “Well, we need something like faith. Rational explanation is no good, and socialism as a kind of faith has gone. So we need some other kind of faith.”

So it’s a kind of religion envy. But I don’t believe it, actually, because he says, “Look, we don’t believe in gods, but we need to have faith in what is almost the impossibility of infinite demand.”

That’s one of his key phrases. The infinite demand that transforming the world puts on us.

Except we know, because we’re not religious, that our guiding lights are fictions. Democracy. Radical democracy. Feminism. End of patriarchy. Socialism. You name it. We know that these are fictions, but he says we believe in them anyway.

Well, we don’t, actually. Not in that sense. To have hope in a better future, if you get it in a bit of a low-key register, it doesn’t mean the same thing as religious faith and salvation or human redemption.

So that’s a kind of odd form of postsecularism, and Unger is the same. You start to think, “Well, when are the masses of religious and non-religious people, who exist in a mummified form, who is going to pull them out? Are they going to become the saints and prophets?”

He talks about us being saintly, and we’re all little prophets and so on. Except we’re also groundless. We can never provide enough grounds for our existence.

So you’ve got the psychological. It’s meant to be a political psychology. It’s a kind of tension. And there’s a sort of elitist, populist…

There’s a danger here. Who are the saints and the prophets who are going to take us from our previous selves, slumbering selves, mundane selves, to this new transformative, quasi but not quite, religious fervour, and transform the world overnight?

So those are the kinds of questions. It’s almost like the heavier the critique of secularism, the ungenerous way in which ordinary secularism, whether propositional or not, but almost the despising aspects of the secular on the one hand, and yet not actually needing or having God, or the equivalence, as the basis of your transfigurational change of self.

I don’t think Simon Critchley really wants to be anybody else but a New York intellectual. Does he really want to be…? He says he wants to be born again. I don’t believe it. I think he’s just fine thanks very much. (Laughter)

So those are the tensions in what I'm calling expansive postsecularism.

And I suppose my own punchline would be, whether or not it wins the day I don’t know, but it would do no harm, because I can’t quite find it yet.

It would do no harm to think of this expansive postsecularism. To tone it down a bit. Be a bit more deflationary. Be a bit more mundane. Whilst still trying to radically change the world.

And to set out something like expansive secularism, and to see what a modern version of that would look like, that defies the characters but keeps some of the basic tenets.

I leave that with you. Thank you. (Applause)

John: Thank you very much, Gregor.

As I said, we do have time probably for about two comments and [voices 1:05:08], and I can see a hand here.

Female: Thank you very much. \_\_\_[1:05:23]. Thank you so much for that \_\_\_. My name is \_\_\_. I'm \_\_\_ [in the department of] sociology \_\_\_.

You mentioned something that I found interesting \_\_\_[1:05:44]. You talked about how \_\_\_. And indeed there’s a lot of evidence that certain non-religious beliefs, in things like \_\_\_, [are going to be on the increase]. Do you have any kind of sociological explanation for that [phenomenon, do you think 1:06:06]?

Gregor McLennan: Well, first of all I don’t really believe it. I do think people like David [Verse] and Steve Bruce are pretty meticulous about what kinds of belief are really on the increase amongst, as it were, non-religious people and which aren’t.

Or perhaps another approach would be, “Well, what exactly is on the increase, and how thick or thin is it, as it were, by comparison with certain kinds of full-on religious beliefs?”

Undoubtedly, spirituality in some sense, soulfulness, you name it, the sacred, that’s widespread and takes many forms. The question is whether that’s even anything like the same thing as religious revival as such.

I think that’s the way you would have to go about it, empirically and theoretically.

Female: Well, \_\_\_[1:07:13] [point out] that there is quite a lot of evidence that people now who say they're not religious will actually say they believe in [life after death] \_\_\_. [For] non-religious people I find that quite [interesting].

Gregor McLennan: Yes. I wouldn’t like to pronounce on that. I think it’s fascinating. I wouldn’t be surprised…

There will be all sorts of great work in sociology of religion coming out, with close-up views of, “What exactly do people mean by that?”

The reverence for – in New Zealand we call it [whakapapa 1:07:52] – where we came from. Who were our families? They're ours after all. There’s got to be a little aura of sacredness about that, because it produced ourselves and we’ve got to honour that.

So all sorts of things about honouring and so on I'm sure are on the increase, because people give more effective thought to all those kinds of things than, as it were, we used to.

[Break in conversation 1:08:21 - 1:08:35]

Vic: I thought it was a really interesting overview of a particular form of secularism, and I thank you for that.

[But there] seems [to be] two things. There seems to be moments or events, [in 1:08:53] my research, [which is 9/11], that made me realise that the kind of sociology, even though I was a professor of sociology for 30 years, there were forms of thinking that I have been trained into, partly through Marx but also through other developments in sociology.

Which meant the events around 9/11 I couldn’t really understand, I couldn’t really engage with, because I hadn’t been encouraged to think that learning about Islam would be important or significant. Because I had absorbed a tradition of sociology as secular rationalism.

So there is a way in which at least [a lot of the literature in different ways 1:09:36] at least questions that. And opens up a space for different kinds of empirical, historical and political engagement with events.

Brexit is another event, but an event which disrupts, and challenges, and questions the forms of social theory that we’ve inherited.

It says we can’t simply defend them as a [stated 1:10:01] form of secularism, but we might have to ask more fundamental questions, and there are two.

One is the way that you frame, within that Taylor debate, the conception of modernity says nothing about gender and masculinity. Or [modernity is a project 1:10:19] of a particular form of dominant masculinity. Christian dominant white masculinity.

The feminist [vitalism] comes in later in the discussion, but it doesn’t come in, in any way, in relationship to the major frame of modernity and the postcolonial [critiques of it 1:10:39].

Then the second thing \_\_\_, and Taylor does, that we’re thinking of religion in Christian terms.

And in your own narrative it’s very clear that what religion means is the intervention of God, or a transcendent God interrupting, or interfering, or transforming us within this world.

That itself is a Christian framing that’s very different from Islamic \_\_\_[1:11:11] Jewish traditions.

So it’s already there. Not just in your \_\_\_ about \_\_\_, but in the terms of your own critical engagement with that [postsecular] condition.

And it means there’s a certain kind of \_\_\_ that came up, really interestingly, in one of the discussions in the conference. Which was an idea that race and racism could only be real within the scientific rationalist terms of modernity, in terms of American slavery.

So questions of antisemitism and Islamophobia, in the literature and in the histories, could be recognised or valued as forms of racism.

So the ways we construct the notion of modernity has real implications for the everyday research that we can do.

Gregor McLennan: Vic, thanks very much.

Vic: [I could have gone on 1:12:13]. [Crosstalk]. (Laughter)

Gregor McLennan: Yes. I know that. (Laughter)

John: Before you reply, Gregor, I think we just have time for one other question from over here. Then, if you can, if you can hold that and put those together, and then we must go. \_\_\_[1:12:32].

Female: Thank you very much.

I think from of your prefatory remarks you said something about the implications of all of this for postcolonial sociology, and I wondered if there was an opportunity for you to say a little bit more about that.

Gregor McLennan: Well, thanks. Those two tie in.

I don’t think I said anything against what you said there, Vic, and I had to put it in a prefatory way.

I think the ways in which postcolonial thinking has challenged the whole notion of modernity, vis a vis the way in which religion is regarded as backward, unmodern, etc., is completely profound.

I took that as a kind of premise. It wasn’t a prefatory remark. It was a premise.

Of course, the story gets complex at a certain point. Just as, in my view…

And I've written about this. Controversially? I don’t know.

But just as postcolonial critique itself still requires the critique of ideology, the notion of a structural social system globalising world, basically capitalist, and the critique of bad Eurocentric ideologies, are all explanatory and critical motifs that themselves could be said to have come out of the critical enlightenment tradition.

So, in a sense, some of the tools are being used to criticise the origins and ideologies, and I think it’s similar in relation to religion.

A lot of strong postcolonial thinkers, who really object, including in morally strong terms, about any kind of Eurocentric, as it were, defence of secularism, their own belief system, if you like outside postcolonial critique, are not… They are, generally speaking, in a very broad sense, secular. Many of them.

Someone like Dipesh Chakrabarty. A wonderful thinker. But he is probably the most sophisticated, and in some ways the most honest, when he says, “Look, the concepts of modern Western thought, we can’t [get rid of them 1:14:59]. They're tremendously inciteful and necessary, but they're not adequate.”

On the question of religion for him, he says, “There’s a straightforward kind of agonism. A holding on to incompatible worlds and incompatible concepts.” Yes?

So I think that form of, as it were, intellectual honesty about where all this takes us is quite complicated. I don’t find many really good thinkers just simply saying, “Well, it’s all white men stuff. Clear off.” That’s true, and that’s problematical, but that’s the beginning rather than the end of the discussion, I think.

Some of the other points you were making, Vic, I do accept. I think these are pretty profound issues, in terms of the forms of research, and the ways we research religious people and non-religious people in the contemporary political situation, and the way in which that doesn’t pan off around racism. So I think that’s interesting.

John: Thank you very much, Gregor. (Applause)

END AUDIO

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