

Literature and Postsecularism: An Analysis

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Abstract:

The primary objective of this paper is to understand the disciplinary exclusion of Postsecularism in the domain of literature as opposed to post secularism's prominent presence in the critical discourses across social sciences, culture studies and politics. We would conclude how literature too was paving the way for the birth of postsecularism as a concept and movement in the late 19th century and early 20th century Europe.

Keywords: Postsecularism, Phenomenology, postmodernism, cultural anarchy, hegemony, private sphere, public sphere
The collapse of Positivist School and the birth of Postpositivist School had ensued a paradigm shift that emphasised on the 'sociology of knowledge' rather than the 'scientificity of knowledge'. However, prior to all these, it was the School of Phenomenology inspired by the Austrian-German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) and the Polish philosopher Roman Ingarden (1893-1970) which revealed the 'intentional' assessment of reality, i.e., a thing is a thing not 'in itself' but because of people's projection of 'intention/thought/insight' on/into it. Consequently, knowledge, reality and academic disciplines were questioned and knowledge were culturally dissected.

Thus, the art and objective of hermeneutics or intellectual discourses took a more critically cultural turn to observe how production, distribution and consumption constituted the tripartite axis of knowledge (Marx). The 'circuits of culture' (Stuart Hall) too contributed to the ontological primacy of cultures in any knowledge. As an aftermath of this, we witness a rise of several theories and critical approaches that articulated the urgency to revisit and review our society and culture. Postcolonialism, Postmodernism, Postfeminism, Posthumanism and, now Postsecularism, are the intellectual off springs of such paradigm shift. Notwithstanding with other 'Post- theories', our current concerns would be to understand how a society which despised religion and pushed it to the private sphere instead reposes faith on it and attempts to bring it from theta secular domain to the very forefront of public sphere. This peripeitic turn of 'Religion' in contemporary times is discursively known as Postsecularism.

Postsecularism decries the political overtones of secularism as civic, rational, and universal. It is a departure from the earlier normative definition of theism, monotheism, and secularism. Religion in its polysemic avatar is the core of postsecularism. In its ubiquitous presence across societies and cultures, Postsecularism espouses for both physical and metaphysical, territorial and transcendental, practical and philosophical, human and non-human, tangible and intangible natures, causes and practices of diverse religions. For the postsecularism, it is a new religion of our neo-theistic-world where secularism and post-secularism both exist together in the private as well as public spheres of individual and society. However, postsecularism cannot be understood as a radical binary to secularism; they are not diametrical opposites. Rather there are theological disagreements, orthodoxical debates, ideological tensions and ritualistic gaps that both of these try to iron out. Postsecularism, therefore, is a dialogical and dialectic response to the religious absurdities propagated by secularism. What postsecularism is to secularism, Protestantism is to Catholicism, or Vaishnavism is to Hinduism. They are different and independent entities but they embody 'religion' as the common element in them. They are different from each other in the manners they believe and treat religion.

Postsecularism is a new text, context, and conditions of our contemporary life world. It is rooted in our religious attitudes to contemporary social and cultural realities. It has forced us to take into account the irrational, emotive, personal, humane and cultural aspects of religion, rituals and other orthodoxical ideas and activities. Seen from such renewed perspective as postsecularism envisages, Foucault can be criticised for not being postsecular as he employed only 'objective' insights into religion and scriptures to decode the objective idea of knowledge and power. Louis Althusser can be critiqued for considering religion as an 'ideological state apparatus', as a mere tool of socio-political control. Levi Strauss could be questioned for his 'phonemical/morphological' dissection or structural analysis of religion as units (mytheme) of human belief and practice. Or Marx can be critiqued for his economic banter on religion as an 'opium of mass'. Postsecularism opposes such mere objective and utilitarian assessments of religion, and advocates for more emotive, subjective, private as well as public assessment of religion. We can, therefore, assume that the utilitarian and enlightenment manifestos are now being challenged by the postsecular manifesto of the postmodern society.

The interface between literature and religion is not a recent debate. Postsecularism is thus a part of postmodern living conditions and discourses. Though it has always had its ontological presence in the European world through the renaissance, enlightenment, capitalism and industrial stages, it is towards the end of the 19th century and early 20th century it finds conspicuous presence in the domain of religion, politics and culture. The futility of rationality, the failure of modern nation state, governments and, of course, the capitalistic cultures to address and mitigate mushrooming problems in human society could be some of the reasons for this resurgence of religion in early 20th century. T S Eliot squarely blamed it on rationality, realism, and political representations that the European world was experimenting with. He attributes these experimentations for the spiritual barrenness or theological apocalypse in 20th century. Read, for example, how he pleads for disassociation of politics and religion in his essays “The Idea of a Christian Society”: “To identify any particular form of government with Christianity is a dangerous error: for it confounds the permanent with the transitory, the absolute with the contingent.” (Eliot, 2016 n.p.).

Though religion had become a text/object of intellectual scrutiny and interpretation for many scholars, such as Emile Durkheim and Max Weber, its textual representations in literature, however, was not sufficiently considered for construing the concept of postsecularism. Nor was modern writers and poets such as G B Shaw, W B Yeats, Matthew Arnold, F R Leavis or T S Eliot, to name a few, were ever accounted for their contributions to the resurgence of religion and rituals in modern period which postsecularism actually vouches for. We would learn about the contributions of these poets and writers later in the article, but, for the current purpose, we can only acknowledge how there has been a scanty theoretical assessment of postsecularism in literature [McClure, John A (2007); Roberts, Michael Symmons (2008); Kaufmann, Michael (2009)].

Litterateurs had already dealt with spiritual crisis related to the social and cultural anarchy much before the social scientists embarked upon the crisis of religion. The secular project considered religion as private, irrational and backward. Instead, the modern secularists always painted intellectualism as a negation of religious paganism, or religion to be practised only at the private sphere. Contrary to such sectarian modern secularism based on prejudices and antagonism, early intellectuals like Francis Bacon or Rene Descartes openly acknowledged the importance of religion in private and public life. We can also discern religions in their intellectual formulations and philosophies. Read for example how Francis Bacon advises for the ‘unity of religion’ in his essay titled the same- “Religion being the chief band of human society, is a happy thing, when itself is well contained within the true band of unity. The quarrels, and divisions about religion, were evils unknown to the heathen” (Bacon). Bacon strongly suggested for unity between believers of church and unbelievers of church. Yet, we only gazed on his ‘inductive method’ or scientific temper!

Nevertheless, it is Shakespeare who alluded to the urgency of postsecularity of religion and God in 17th century England thus – “Had I but served my God with half the zeal I served my king, he would not in mine age have left me naked to mine enemies” (*Henry VIII* [1613]). Shakespeare exposes the religious agnosticism in the Renaissance England and demonstrates through Henry VIII how Kings can exist only under the grace of God. King’s court and God’s court cannot/should not be separated. The crisis of religion and paradox of belief in God is best expressed in John Milton. Milton stands as the first and last poet to construe his epics on secularism and postsecularism. Lee Morrissey rightly observes how “moving from the destabilizing scientific discoveries to the destabilizing political breakthroughs, and by possibly casting these changes as both decentering and recentering” Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1667) and *Paradise Regained* (1671) in the seventeenth century embodied postsecular characteristics in the several sense of the phrase (Morrissey 101). T S Eliot dramatizes this brilliantly in his poetic play, *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935). However, one of the problems of secularism was thus to have obliterated this predominant religious presence in literature and society. Irrespective such coexistence of religion and secularism in human history, modern citizenry were politically coaxed to side with secularism. The continuity of religion was very strong even in the 16th and 17th century science and intellectualism. But we were too much carried away by the utilitarian promises and benefits of science and technology only to be guided to the scientific apogee of biological genesis furthered by Darwin’s *Origins of Species* (1859). Read for example:

The elements common to the new theology and the new science were not perceived for some time. The medieval view of the world had been composed of a theology and a natural philosophy that were closely integrated. It was overthrown only in a piecemeal fashion, on the one hand by the Protestant Reformers who attacked the theological aspects, and on the other by the scientists who controverted the cosmological features. (Mason 28)

In the industrial Victorian age, Matthew Arnold attributes 19th century cultural anarchy in England to the rise of the barbaric, philistines, and populace, the three new classes of British society under industrialism. He warned about the cultural degeneration, aesthetic pollution in the European world- the fall from Hellenism to Hebraism, from Classicism to Philistinism. F. R. Leavis also attributes aesthetic and moral crisis to the erosion of good literatures in England. T. S. Eliot reiterates these aesthetic and moral crises in his works, especially in the essays “Religion and Literature” (1935), “The Function of Criticism” (1923), “Tradition and Individual Talent” (1919), “Poetry and Drama” (1951), “What is a

Classis?" (1944). The resurrection of poetic drama in late 19th and 20th century in England and abroad is a testimony to the resurgence of religious faith, rituals, patterns and practices as an alternative to understand peculiar modern problems. W. B. Yeats such religious capitals were his 'infallible church' to be written and praised. *The Countess Cathleen* (1892) is a perfect example of Yeats employment of myth and religion to address the Irish Potato Famine (1845). Read how Teig a poor peasant boy evaluates famine in the absence of God's grace- "God and the Mother of God have dropped asleep. What do they care, he says, though the whole land Squeal like a rabbit under a weasel's tooth? (Yeats n.p.)". Similarly, in his "Second Coming", he envisioned a theological apocalypse due to men's disobedience to God. Yet, theorists of postsecularism take a detour to posit the secular and postsecular debates only within the ambit of social science discourses. Nietzsche holds science as the source of all sins in modern society. G B Shaw cites the moral dwarfness of modern men for the spiritual crisis. Tagore blames it on the mechanical modern life and nationalism. Aurobindo blames it on the materialistic pursuits of modern men at the cost of aesthetics and heritage.

One would notice the same biasness regrading religion in the 19th century too. No other than Karl Marx himself who gave a clarion call to quit religion, especially by the proletariats. Karl Marx's vision of socialism criticised religion as an opium- "opiate of the masses" (Marx, 1964). By this he meant that religion, like a drug, makes people ignorant of their deprivations, and instead makes them accept and happy with their existing conditions. Karl Marx's phobia of religion was reductive as he envisioned for socialism devoid of religion. Eliot vehemently criticises the secular approaches of Marx for a welfare society thus:

There are a very large number of people in the world today who believe that all ills are fundamentally economic. Some believe that various specific economic changes alone would be enough to set the world right; others demand more or less drastic changes in the social as well, changes chiefly of two opposed types. These changes demanded, and in some places carried out, are alike in one respect, that they hold the assumptions of what I call Secularism: they concern themselves only with changes of a temporal, material, and external nature; they concern themselves with morals only of a collective nature." (Eliot 106)

Contrary to Marx, Eliot has a deeper and inclusive understanding of social milieu. Eliot believed in the inseparable and intrinsic relationship between society and religion, and, therefore, he confessed that there could not be a total separation of us from our religion and imagination:

I am convinced that "we fail to realize how completely, and yet how irrationally, we separate our literary from our religious judgments. If there could be a complete separation, perhaps it might not matter: but the separation is not, and never can be, complete. (Eliot 100)

Max Weber, the German Sociologist and political philosopher, however, negates Marx's denunciation of religion as a deterrent to economic equality by relating religion with capitalism. In his book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904-05), he interpreted early European capitalism as the result of certain religious tenets Calvinism and their religious emphasis on hard work as a religious duty to justify God's creation of human beings. Thus, religion was a means and methods for the rise of modernity and also secular self-sufficiency.

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