

Towards a Postsecular Society

Mike King

April 2003

London Metropolitan University

mike.king@londonmet.ac.uk

www.jnani.org/postsecular

Table of Contents

[Introduction]	3
Physics	5
Consciousness Studies	6
Transpersonal psychology	7
Postmodernism	8
Radical Orthodoxy	9
Art	10
Deep Ecology	11
[Conclusion]	12

[Introduction]

The word 'religion' means different things to different people. At one extreme it represents everything primitive and superstitious that we have struggled to eradicate over the last three hundred years, and at the other extreme it represents a quiet joy of recognition and warmth in the heart for everything we hold most precious. Hence, to use the word properly is to recognise the spectrum of its reception. The word 'postsecular' on the other hand represents little to anyone, because it is recently coined and not much in circulation. The term implies that there might emerge, or already be emerging, a quality of thought that goes beyond the secular, a thinking that celebrates our hard-won democratic rights and freedoms, but which is more open to the spiritual than the secular mind has generally been. In the late 20th century an increasingly casual atheism became central to Western culture, if not to Western society. This casual atheism was a precocious and extraordinary part of Marx's thought in 1860, but by 1960 most Western schoolchildren would be culturally impelled to adopt it, almost without question.

The origins of the secular mind in the 17th century are complex. It is useful to think of Western thought as following a presecular form up to the 17th century, and then, over a three-hundred year period, developing into the secular form familiar in the middle-late 20th century. The emergence of a possible postsecular mode of thought has to be dated from about 1980, and its origins, rather ironically, may lie in science. In the 1980s Fritjof Capra in 'The Tao of Physic' and Gary Zukav in 'The Dancing Wu Li Masters' popularised the parallels between mysticism and quantum theory. Commentators from a wide spectrum of thought began to see quantum holism and quantum indeterminacy - which these books explained to a lay audience - as undermining the classical mechanistic view of the universe, and allowing new modes of thought to surface. This is ironical because it was physics that underpinned the Age of Enlightenment, and which led to the secular, even atheistic, late 20th century outlook. It looks like physics is again underpinning a transition, this time from the secular to the postsecular.

I shall quote just one recent notable event in support of this idea: the award of the million-dollar Templeton prize for progress in religion to the British physicist Paul Davies in 1995. Davies won the prize on the basis of a series of books including 'God and the New Physics' which ends with the proposition that 'science is a surer path to God than religion.' This ought to be considered remarkable, at the very least prompting the reflection that religion must be rather unsure of itself to reward such a statement with such a prestigious prize (other recipients include Mother Teresa of Calcutta and the Rev. Dr. Billy Graham). It is also part of the irony previously raised when one considers that Giordano Bruno was burned at the stake in 1600 for his views on science and religion - these views, when compared to Davies's statement, now look mild indeed. (Many consider Bruno to have been condemned to death for his Copernicanism, but it now looks more likely that it was merely his heterodoxy and quarrelsomeness. However he could never have conceived of anything as radical as the above statement by Davies.)

We might sum up the religious trajectory of the last four centuries in the West as follows: in the middle of the 17th century thinkers were all theists with a few deists appearing; in the middle of the 18th century thinkers were mostly deists with a few agnostics appearing; in the middle of the 19th century thinkers were mostly agnostic with a few atheists appearing, and in the middle of the 20th century atheism dominated Western thought. This atheism ranged from casual, as in Marxism, to vituperative, as in writers like Richard Dawkins and Gore Vidal. Indeed it is often surprising how vehement the rejection of religion can still be today, when our secular freedoms have been so long guaranteed in the West. What the postsecular begins to question is the assumption that the spiritual impulse itself has to inevitably create the presecular religious hierarchies that we so rightly reject as inimical to freedom and democracy. It is an accident of history that religion is associated with feudalism, and a Western accident in particular that it is associated with spiritual intolerance and persecution. Neither is a rejection of the spiritual a necessary outcome of the scientific worldview but rather an accident of a parallel historical process that had falsely identified religion as a repository of *knowledge*. We begin to see the Western prejudice against the spiritual as arising out of a series of accidents, and not as an inevitable process. This opening up of thought is what we are characterising as postsecular.

To say that the spiritual life of the new millennium has to some extent found an ally in science is to state only part of the current dynamic however. A renewal of the spiritual life as a genuinely 21st century phenomenon, as opposed to the embattled survival into the secular world of presecular religion, emerges in a variety of contexts. We can list these as:

- 1- the 'new' sciences of quantum mechanics, relativity and chaos (complexity) theory, which challenge the deterministic, mechanistic and reductionist worldview
- 2- the emerging field of consciousness studies
- 3- transpersonal psychology from Jung to Wilber
- 4- sections of Postmodern thinking including Heidegger and Levinas
- 5- sections of Christian theology, in particular the 'Radical Orthodoxy', inspired by Postmodernism
- 6- the creative arts in the 20th C, for example artists from Constantin Brancusi to Bill Viola who have explored a wide range of conventional and unconventional spiritualities in their art
- 7- Deep ecology and 'ecosophy,' mystical approaches to Nature, from Thoreau to Dillard.

Let us examine each of these contexts in turn.

Physics

The relationship between physics and mysticism is a contentious one, and my own contribution to this debate (“Against Scientific Magisterial Imperialism” published in *Network*, April 2002) argues forcibly against the idea that physics directly supports the mystical worldview. (We noted too that Ken Wilber was one of the first to point this out in his book ‘Quantum Questions’.) However as a cultural phenomenon, there is no doubt that the stream of writings begun by Capra and Zukav has had an enormous impact in terms of a new receptivity to the spiritual. And there is no doubt that the parallels between the ‘new’ physics and mysticism deserve close scrutiny, though a postsecular interpretation - which makes the spiritual a more equal partner in this debate - may yield quite different insights. What the ‘new’ sciences carry in common is what Stephen Hawking has called the ‘end of physics,’ that is, by analogy with Gödel’s theorem in mathematics, an implication of the limits to understanding as pursued by science. Beyond this is what Tipler and Barrow have called the ‘anthropic’ principle, a quality in the new physics that refers us back to ourselves, indeed which raises what to the philosopher is the spectre of solipsism, but what to the mystic is the bread and butter of spiritual experience.

Consciousness Studies

The emerging field of consciousness studies has taken these ideas as a starting point, and become a broad discipline drawing from physics, biology, psychology, neuroscience, cognitive studies, philosophy and even art. While some outside the field would reject its status as a science, and some within it reject any spiritual implication in its enquiry, it seems that the majority engaged with it are sympathetic to the spiritual, whether connecting the discipline to presecular religious tradition, or interested in what we are calling a postsecular openness. Even if one is sceptical of its achievements as a science, there is no doubt again that as a cultural phenomenon it has considerable momentum and influence.

Transpersonal psychology

The transpersonal tradition of Jung, Hillman, Grof, Maslow and Wilber pursued a vision embracive of the spiritual quite different to the previous two strands. Its origins, ironically, are with Freud, one of the 20th century's most sceptical voices on religion. His immediate disciple and successor, Carl Gustav Jung, took most of Freud's psychoanalytical insights, but shed the aversion to the language of religion, finding instead important psychological insights in the Gnostic, Hermetic, Neoplatonist and Alchemical traditions. True, this was not mainstream Christianity, but this opening in the 20th century for presecular spiritual insights has been a significant route for the spiritual, enabling it to bypass the secular extremes of that age and emerge into the 21st century with clear voice.

Postmodernism

Amongst postmodern philosophers the hospitality to the spiritual is mixed. In general the postmoderns, while rejecting most of the Enlightenment project - including the remnants of religious thinking - created small intellectual spaces where the spiritual could flourish. This is because they also rejected the modernist insistence on a scientific description of a 'given' rational universe. These lacunae were permitted as long as they did not arrogate themselves to the status of a system, and as long as any central spiritual discourse was near-buried under the weight of postmodern terminology. We can better understand this phenomenon if we look back to the 17th century. At its dawn stood the sobering spectacle of Giordano Bruno's murder by the Church, a warning to the thinkers of that age. Descartes's ideas were banned, Newton kept his heretical Arianism a secret, and Spinoza was unable to publish at all. It is perhaps Spinoza's 'Ethics' that best demonstrates the lengths that these thinkers had to go to in order to hide their ideas. They firstly avoided any direct expression of their religious insights, and secondly were seduced into using the emerging language of maths, physics and reason. As a result the postmoderns inherited an intellectual tradition of extreme circumlocution - Derrida is one of its most eloquent practitioners. The phenomenological tradition of Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Emmanuel Levinas offers many opportunities for spiritual discourse, and the exchanges between Levinas and Derrida are a unique encapsulation of an ancient creative tension between the Hebraic and the Hellenic in Western culture and spiritual thought.

Radical Orthodoxy

A number of Christian theologians, including Rowan Williams - the current Archbishop of Canterbury - have adopted strands of postmodern philosophy to invigorate 21st century Christian theology. The group of theologians following this investigation based in Cambridge are developing a line of thought sometimes known as the 'radical orthodoxy,' a term that underlines the possible contradictions. In the terminology adopted here these thinkers and writers (which also include Don Cupitt, founder of the 'Sea of Faith' movement) are giving a postsecular slant to presecular religious thought, and it is an open question as to which era the end result belongs to. Nevertheless the radical orthodoxy belongs with interfaith initiatives and other recognitions of the democratic and pluralistic world of today, and hence form an important part of the postsecular context which derives from the presecular.

Art

The arts are one of the few areas in the 20th century where the cultured elite were 'permitted' to some degree to retain an interest in the spiritual. The contemporary composer John Cage and video artist Bill Viola have no difficulty in airing their commitment to Buddhism, while it seems that the Sufi poet Jelaluddin Rumi has reached the best-seller lists in the US, and is read by many thinkers and media figures including the popular singer Madonna. Looking further back we find strong spiritual interests amongst the American Abstract Expressionists in the 1950s, and before WW1 many abstract painters were drawn to new spiritual movements such as Theosophy, Anthroposophy and the teachings of Gurdjieff and Ouspensky.

Deep Ecology

The terms 'Deep ecology' and 'Ecosophy' were introduced by Norwegian philosopher and mountaineer Professor Arne Naess in 1973, and attempt to convey something beyond ecology as a branch of the biological sciences. At the same time there has been a history of nature writing since the mid-19th century that either verges on the mystical or is explicitly spiritual, including Walt Whitman, Henry Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, John Muir, John Burroughs, Richard Jefferies, Aldo Leopold, Jiddu Krishnamurti and Annie Dillard. More recently the 'Gaia' hypothesis, as put forward by scientist James Lovelock, has had a wide influence. Journals like 'Resurgence' edited by Satish Kumar promote the spiritual aspects of ecology, while the lesser-known 'The Trumpeter' provides a forum for deep ecology and ecosophical thinking. All these strands can find a common ancestry or debt in the pioneering work of John Muir (1838-1914), credited with being the founding father of the ecological movement (he set up the National Park system in the USA in response to his perception of the wilderness as under threat). Less well understood is his profoundly spiritual vision of the natural world, a spirituality perhaps inherited from his pastor father, but at the same time in revolt against the constraints of Victorian Christianity. While conventional ecological thinking today bases its arguments on survival of the biosphere, and can be reduced to a utilitarian philosophy, the spiritual or holistic impulse in Muir and his modern-day inheritors speaks of an additional imperative: a *transcendent* vision of nature. This transcendence can only be understood by drawing on mystical traditions, or by examining Buddhism, or through the ideas of transpersonal psychology, or by pitting the rational mind against the limits of science, or by engaging with the aesthetics of the sublime in art. In other words by engaging thoroughly with the whole postsecular context.

[Conclusion]

With these seven contexts I am suggesting that the postsecular is emerging from the secular in a patchy way, with elements contributing to it that run at different speeds and over different timeframes, and that they include science, art, and postmodernism. But what of the relationship between the presecular and the postsecular, that is between the religions of old and the emerging spiritualities? We have to observe that parts of this even larger picture run with still greater variation of speed, there being entire sectors of contemporary society that are untouched by modernity and postmodernity, let alone the postsecular. There are estimated for example to be 70 million Christian fundamentalists in the US today. The presecular survives in great swathes into the secular world, but the fact is that it contributes very little to popular or highbrow *culture*. We might say that religion flies below the cultural radar of the West, largely due to the intellectuals of the West having poured their energies into less problematic projects, such as science and politics. It is also rather shocking that Eastern ideas have been known in the West since the mid-18th century, but, with the exception of Schopenhauer, they have been ignored by almost all important thinkers, whether modern or postmodern. The presecular religions of the West have therefore been largely insulated both from modern and postmodern thought, and from exposure to the East. Yet religion up to the 17th century - and Eastern religion prior to its contact with the West - has historically shown itself to be remarkably adaptable and even an engine for progress and change. By contrast, in the secular world of the 20th century it has been ghettoised and insulated from the crucibles of change that have forged the contemporary worldview, making the adherence to it almost as embarrassing today as frankness in sexual matters was in the Victorian era. The result is that presecular religion may not be able to make the transition to a postsecular world, rather that entirely new forms of spirituality may emerge, perhaps the most promising arising out of deep ecology / nature mysticism.

But the postsecular lays a potential trap for new spiritualities as they emerge, and we can anticipate this from the seven contexts suggested above. Each one extracts a price for allowing its practitioners the new freedom to engage with the spiritual. These include the scientisation, the psychologising, the philosophisation, the theologising and the ecologising of the spiritual, in other words a dynamic that requires the spiritual to be interpreted by each discipline, to be given a language from each discipline. It is science of course that poses the greatest danger, and hence my article "Against Scientific Magisterial Imperialism" mentioned above. However the psychologising of the spiritual is just as big an obstacle to recovering a genuinely spiritual language and a genuinely spiritual sense of self, indeed the 'self' is almost entirely understood today in psychological terms. (It was not always so.) Not that science and psychology do not have a great deal to contribute to the new spiritualities, far from it, and not that imperialisms of one kind or another are not being questioned: the logical positivism of the last century is for example less of an influence today. But the spiritual needs to assert its own language again, independent of the past, and independent

of science and psychology, and even for that matter, philosophy. Possibly the simplest way to do this is to make sure that the postsecular impulse does not draw on one of the seven contexts alone, but cross-references each one of them. Art - by which I mean all the creative fields, including poetry - is a great corrective to science, and the creative fields, where they have explored the spiritual impulse in the 20th century, yield many insights. For example the series of paintings by Mark Rothko, the American Abstract Expressionist, which were hung for many years in the 'Rothko room' at the Tate Gallery in London, point to a non-verbal language of the spiritual which invoked spiritual insights for generations of gallery visitors.

With these points in mind I have set up a Centre for Postsecular Studies at London Metropolitan University. Its focus will be to support research, including Doctoral studies, from a range of disciplines in such a way as to foster an open enquiry into the spiritual. It is fitting that a University should be the setting for this. In the Middle Ages Universities supported the intellectual efforts of religious Scholasticism, in the Modern period Universities defended the secular freedom to question authority, and in a postsecular spirit, perhaps the University setting can restore the creativity and vigour of intellect to spiritual questions. The key to the work of the centre will be interdisciplinarity, which is always a challenge to traditional subject divisions. Yet the very word 'university' originated from a perception that a universality of mind was required to study any specialism, for unless one knew the topology and boundaries of other disciplines and the nature of the intercourse within and across them, one could not claim to have a rounded university education, or any proper insight into the world. I have suggested that the postsecular emerges from the seven contexts listed above, but these are not exhaustive and only a guide. Debate and research in postsecular studies will undoubtedly take many new turns and draw from unexpected sources. However, it will be characterised by a respect for what I have called 'epistemological pluralism.' We are seeing this broader respect for different forms of 'knowledging' in Universities in the example of the relatively new practice-based Doctorate in Fine Art. This allows art practitioners to submit a body of work which encapsulates their research, and is examined, usually in conjunction with a written contextualisation, by experts who can 'read' the artwork as well as the dissertation. This would have been unheard of 20 years ago when positivism held sway within University research degree committees.

But, looking somewhat into the future, what shape might a postsecular society take? In essence it will celebrate a spirituality that has emerged out of the confrontation with the scientific worldview, and as such it will owe much to it. While the intensely secular nature of the 20th century has involved the very real loss of provision for a fundamental need of the human spirit - a need expressed in the etymology of the word religion 'to re-bind or re-connect' - it has provided humanity with a profound recognition of the worth of the individual. The spirituality of the postsecular era cannot but reflect this in a 'bottom-up' spirituality, forms of communal spiritual practices that listen rather than preach. More important still is the ecological imperative, a possible doomsday clock set ticking by technology,

anticipated by science, and only resolvable by a science harnessed through a spiritual sense of union with nature and the planet. This is an ecology that goes beyond utilitarian survival or obligations of stewardship, but which instead makes nature a site for a profound spiritual love. This is an ecology that can succeed. Of course a futurology is to be avoided, in particular a futurology of the spiritual, but one cannot help asking also whether culture might change. The fact is that, barring the Sunday 'godslot,' and 'televangelism' - that is TV channels paid for by religious organisations and found mainly in the USA - the cultural outpourings of the west through TV, cinema, journals, newspapers, novels and other media, portray an intensely secular worldview. Portrayals of the spiritual are either through worn-out and faintly embarrassed stereotypes of the presecular religions, or they fall into the X-Files category: a culturally permissible indulgence in the spooky or occult, also found in a range of science-fiction genres. Where is the cultural excitement provoked by the discovery in 1945 of the Gospel of Thomas in the Nag Hammadi excavation, comparable to the interest taken in the human genome project? Christianity, immune to the power of intellectual curiosity driving the rest of the world, dismissed it as heretical, while the secular world was not even tempted to read it. Only in the recent film 'Stigmata' (starring Patricia Arquette and Gabriel Byrne) did a phrase from Thomas turn up as a central and sobering theme in an otherwise rather melodramatic invention. Still, maybe the film is a harbinger of more thoughtful treatments of spiritual issues marking the shift towards a postsecular culture.

The Network could be involved in the work of the new Centre in several ways. It could participate in the general discussion around the concept of the postsecular, and, more practically, members could put themselves forward as potential Doctoral supervisors. My aim, within the Centre for Postsecular Studies, is to form a kind of clearing house for interdisciplinary research in this field, by providing a register of suitable and willing supervisors. I would also be delighted to hear from any members interested in undertaking doctoral studies themselves. I anticipate that many applicants will be mature practitioners in their field, possibly already holding higher or research degrees, or even amongst the so-called 'third age.' After all, in the spiritual life, is this not the time when one grows closer to the eternal?

In conclusion I want to consider how the Doctorate in Postsecular Studies might take shape and serve the Network. The Doctorate has traditionally provided a period of reflection and study, structured in such a way as to cement a community of thought through the twin tracks of consolidation and innovation. Consolidation means that the doctoral candidate makes an assessment of the field in both a broad sense, which may rather skim the surface, and in a deeper sense where it homes in on the research questions being posed. Innovation means that a substantial and original contribution to the field is made. The doctorate also implies an intellectual or creative *rigour*. While intending no criticism of Network members, I would guess that many of us have at times read articles or heard presentations where we felt that this rigour was somewhat lacking, but might not necessarily be able to pin down why. I suspect that while our

training in science or medicine has given us the instinct for rigour, our cultural lack of exposure to rigorous discourse around the spiritual has created the context where it often goes out of the window. In other words a *spiritual literacy* is needed, a point I argued at one of the Network's annual gatherings some years ago. Hence my vision for this programme of doctoral studies would include breadth, drawing on the seven contexts outlined above, rigour, as we have learned through science (though not degenerating into a scientism), and a spiritual literacy.

Of central importance to the Network is the relationship between science and religion, and this provides many potential topics for doctoral research. In a postsecular society one of the most pressing questions would be to re-examine the assumptions made about the origins of modern science and thought in the seventeenth century. All the scientists of that time were deeply religious individuals, who could not possibly have anticipated or relished the idea that science would be held up in later centuries as contradictory to their spiritual impulses. Even Pierre-Simon Laplace, famous for his remark to Napoleon about God: "I have no need of that hypothesis," is now known to have been a genuine Catholic all his life, requesting not one but two priests to administer his last rites. (Atheists of the less thoughtful variety still seize on Laplace's remark as a vindication of their secular views.) A postsecular examination of the three great 'rationalist' philosophers of the period, Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz, also reveal not just deeply religious men, but spiritual geniuses whose spiritual thought has never been examined or allowed to take its rightful place in the spiritual life of the West. (Poor Descartes in particular needs rehabilitation having been long and unfairly vilified as the author of the mind-body 'split.')

It is as though we still believe that priests are the only ones allowed to contribute to religion, whereas it is clear that great scientific minds are very often great spiritual minds.

It is with that last thought that I approach the Network regarding these ideas concerning a possible postsecular society.