Pluralism and Secularism

An international expert seminar at the University of Humanistic Studies (UvH), Utrecht, the Netherlands, on November 7th and 8th, 2013.

Introduction

The seminar 'Pluralism and Secularism' is part of the Pluralism Knowledge Program in collaboration with the Humanist Institute for Cooperation with Developing Countries (Hivos), and a new international research initiative on 'Human Dignity in a Post-Secular Society', initiated by the Kosmopolis Institute and the Department of Globalization Studies at the UvH, the Centre for the Study of Culture and Society (CSCS) in Bangalore and the National Law University in Delhi, India.

In a small group of invited experts we will present and discuss research-in-progress which is related to complex issues of secularism and secularity, humanism and human dignity, within a pluralist world, as sketched below. We plan to convene three half day sessions, each devoted to one paper presentation, and a concluding half day session. Each speaker will have half an hour to present his/her paper. They will structure their presentation in such a way that it will start with a brief summary, followed by a number of statements and theses for discussion.

The three papers that will be the focus of discussion are presented by:
1. Prof. Jonathan VanAntwerpen (Social Sciences Research Council, New York)
2. Prof. Sitharamam Kakarala (National Law University, Delhi; CSCS, Bangalore) and Mr. Khalid Anis Ansari (School of Media & Cultural Studies, The Glocal University, Saharanpur (UP) India)
3. Dr. Carolina Suransky, Prof. Henk Manschot and Dr. Laurens ten Kate (Kosmopolis Institute and section of Globalization Studies, UvH, Utrecht)

On page 4 to 7 you will find a brief summary of these papers.

A concept note as starting point for the seminar

An important feature of contemporary complexities of human dignity in a plural world is the so-called *post-secular* condition of many present-day societies. In a globalizing world in which most 'symbolic cages are opened up' and have to confront one another (Sloterdijk, 2009), secular foundations for the public realm are increasingly put under pressure. Both

globally and locally, people with a plurality of world views are interacting, and secularity is just one of the prevailing world views, in addition to, for instance, religious, ethnic, tribal or nationalist world views. This implies that the post-secular is by no means a farewell to the secular world, but rather a new phase *in* secular history, in which the secular gradually loses its dominance and self-evidence (Taylor, 2007). The post-secular condition challenges us to explore new modes of secularity that accept their being mingled with spiritual or religious imaginaries, like that of transcendence.

Such an understanding of the post-secular condition also rejects the nowadays common idea of a 'return of religion' in the global socio-political arena. This research proposal starts from the view that this idea is counter-productive when new concepts of dignity, difference and social justice are at stake. Religion has not simply *returned* to our secular societies, so that it now has to be given its place within the framework of the secular, democratic state, as Habermas (2008) sometimes seems to presuppose. Rather, secularity, modern humanism *and* religion are all involved in a process of transition, in which they are opened up toward one another in new ways (Nancy, 2008; ten Kate et al., 2012). If the post-secular condition implies that:

1. the secular can no longer be postulated as a neutral and universal basis of 21st-century societies, and
2. that the 'old' religious traditions have to re-invent and re-create themselves instead of simply returning,

then dignity and social justice will have to be rethought against this background of complex and fluid new identities. As a matter of fact, the entire concept of an 'identity' needs revision. The 'I', the individual, does no longer result from the 'we', and neither is the 'we', the community, the simple addition sum of 'I's'. Dignity then is no longer a value that can be attributed to a certain behavior, attitude or identity. Dignity is not something 'I' or 'we' *have*. In the post-secular age, dignity becomes first and foremost a *relation* between 'social imaginaries' (Taylor, 2007) – whether religious, secular, national, ethnic, tribal etc. – that go beyond the discourse of identity and identification. Dignity, and the justice it can enhance, is nothing 'in itself', it is the simple 'accepting of the other', the 'taking' the other as other, the 'opening' toward the hopes and risks plurality can bring about. Dignity 'is' not, but it happens. Such an understanding of dignity traces the term back to a Greek etymology of '*dekhno*', meaning 'to take', 'to accept'.

One of the aims of the UvH seminar 'Pluralism and Secularism' is to critically explore salient concepts and practices which contribute to important contemporary socio-political processes. These are concepts which derive their potential in a twilight zone between secular and religious imaginaries: such as reconciliation, catharsis, forgiveness, mourning, but also revenge, retribution, and sacrifice. How do these imaginaries 'perform' (Butler, 2004) new meanings of dignity in difference?

Literature

- Butler, Judith. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence.* London etc.: Verso, 2004.
- Habermas, Jürgen. *Between Naturalism and Religion: Philosophical Essays.* Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008.
- Kate, Laurens ten, Alena Alexandrova, Ignaas Devisch, Aukje van Rooden (eds.). *Re-treating Religion: Deconstructing Christianity with Jean-Luc Nancy.* New York: Fordham University Press, 2012.
- Nancy, Jean-Luc. *Dis-enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity.* New York: Fordham University Press, 2008.
- Sloterdijk, Peter. *Du musst dein Leben ändern. Über Anthropotechnik.* Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2009.

The Birth of Truth Commissions and the Heresy of Reconciliation

Prof. Jonathan VanAntwerpen

In the aftermath of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), "reconciliation" has come to the fore as a keyword in global political culture. An old concept and practice, rooted in the history of Christianity, became reactivated within a secular political process taking place in a complex context of pluralism.

The new visibility of the language and politics of reconciliation is due in large part—though certainly not exclusively—to both the international prominence of the South African TRC and the transnational proliferation of truth commissions. With its captivating and controversial spectacles of truth and reconciliation, the South African commission has frequently been heralded as an institutional archetype and peddled as a model for newly forming commissions, even as international experts and jet-setting consultants cautioned against uncritical attempts to reproduce it elsewhere. Although the possibilities associated with the transitional politics of truth and reconciliation have been widely touted, however—and the TRC much celebrated—the South African commission and its master narrative of truth and reconciliation have also been vigorously and repeatedly critiqued.

As its promoters and critics have struggled to come to terms with reconciliation's problematic promise—and as transitional justice has increasingly became an academic fascination, as well as a more established practical field of urgent and widespread transnational activism—debates over reconciliation have gotten caught up, in particular, in struggles over how to define and delimit the normative and descriptive labors associated with the workings of truth commissions.

In this paper, I trace the birth of the "truth commission" as a distinctive and ostensibly reproducible institutional form within the field of transitional justice, examine some of the ways that reconciliation has figured as both an alternative approach and a keyword to be avoided in prominent understandings of the truth commission, and reflect briefly on the complex nature of reconciliation's challenge to prevailing secular conceptions of transitional justice. The politics of reconciliation is at odds in important respects with the dominant secular, juridical framework that has shaped and defined the field. Tied to forgiveness and

amnesty, the idea of reconciliation has been stained by an association with both theology and impunity. This is an affront to orthodoxies that are well entrenched, if contested, within the field. Reconsidering reconciliation's ascent and controversial positioning within the field of transitional justice is thus one way to call attention to the field's dominant and at times implicit assumptions about the building of peace, the pursuit of justice, and the possibility of social transformation.

Post-Secular Secularizations:

Pluralism and Post-Minority Identity Politics in Contemporary India

Prof. Sitharamam Kakarala, Mr. Khalid Anis Ansari

Much has been said and written about 'Indian' secularism, both by scholars from and on India. The critical concerns were that of comparative nature, especially given the fact that India is often characterised as a 'religious' society while being able to straddle a liberal democratic constitution for over six decades. Some of the key focused themes ranged from the 'unique' nature of Indian secularism as equal or principled distance between state and religion, to a Western transplant which is woefully ill-equipped to manage the peaceful coexistence of a complex set of religious and ethnic identities. During the last three decades, ever since the rise of Hindu revivalist movements and escalation of inter-religious violence (communal violence) and violence between caste groups, the secularism debate in India has been dominated by concerns about the failed secular state in maintaining peace and harmony between religious and ethnic communities. While these debates are immensely useful in understanding the reasons for the secular failures of the state, they have very little to offer in understanding the changing nature of the social fabric in India and its implications for transformatory politics. Does the failure of the secular state indicate increasing communalisation of Indian society? Are sites of violence and inter-religious conflict the only way of understanding the deeper metamorphosis of a society? Are there any alternative methods, ways that could help identify newer forms of 'secularizations' both within communities as well as in the society at large?

The current paper is an attempt at identifying some of the negligible or invisible sites or processes in which articulations of the idea of 'pluralism' help open up newer possibilities of imagining 'secularization' beyond the conventional modes. In doing so, the paper will draw theoretical linkages with the contemporary debates on immanence, transcendence and the dynamics between the two ideas, and contemporary developments in India.

Re-composing the Secular in Globalizing Times:
 The World According to Balibar and Latour

Dr. Carolina Suransky, Prof. Henk Manschot, Dr. Laurens ten Kate

What does the 'secular' mean'? More and more, it appears that the two of the traditional answers to this question are under pressure. These answers can be summarized as follows: (1) it would be a neutral and universal value system and mode of existence in the modern public sphere; and (2) it would oppose and even refute religion. Why do these answers fall short in the 21st century?

Both these answers build on an idea of the secular as a western achievement of European humanism. However, this reduction of secularity becomes untenable in a globalizing and pluralizing world, as Talal Asad, among many others, has analyzed. Secondly, they build on an understanding of humanism as atheism, thus neglecting the many old and new complex connections and complexities between humanism and religion , in the history of modern culture as well as in contemporary times, as demonstrated by Charles Taylor.

This paper starts from the conviction that modern humanism will have to reconsider its straightforward identification with secular atheism, and needs to redefine itself in a completely different way. Secondly, the paper argues that since globalization creates new and complex situations of plural co-existence on a global scale, new ideas of secularity will need to be developed in order to 'secularize' traditional understandings of secularism.

The paper will bring to the fore two groundbreaking thinkers who explore new meanings of secularity: Bruno Latour and his attempt to formulate an *ecological* and *compositional secularism*, and Étienne Balibar and his orientation towards a *cosmopolitanist secularism*. We will argue that both thinkers paint the contours of a new, radically open relation to and involvement in the world, which may open new possibilities to rethink our understanding of human dignity.