SIKH FORMATIONS
2022, VOL. 18, NOS. 3–4, 374–382
https://doi.org/10.1080/17448727.2022.2104029

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Europe in dialogue with Manav Ratti's *The Postsecular Imagination*

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that among Manav Ratti's distinctive theorizations of postsecularism in his landmark book *The Postsecular Imagination* (Routledge, 2013) is the concept's function as a hermeneutical key for inspiring critical analyses and insights across both secularism and religion. I juxtapose Ratti's book with some of the proposals for understanding postsecularism in Europe. The difference in understanding postsecularism in the Indian subcontinent and in Europe is related to different historical and cultural experiences, especially with reference to colonial heritage.

KEYWORDS

postsecularism; colonial heritage; Eastern Europe; Mikhail Bakhtin; Zygmunt Bauman; Jürgen Habermas

In 1848, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels published *The Communist Manifesto*, which begins with the words 'The specter is haunting Europe—the specter of communism.' Their words turned out to be fruitful. It is difficult to predict whether it will be the same with the specter of postsecularism that has been circulating around the world since at least the beginning of the twenty-first century. It haunts the desks of philosophers, sociologists, cultural anthropologists, religious scholars, literary critics, and theologians. It has entered popular culture and everyday language and constantly arouses vivid emotions. For some it is an empty concept that does not bring anything new, for others it is a magic trick that opens almost all locks of reflection on human life. As is usually the case with concepts constructed by the humanities, the truth is somewhere in the middle. Postsecularism points to possible solutions, but does not prejudge their final outcome.

Manav Ratti's book *The Postsecular Imagination: Postcolonialism, Religion, and Literature* is a major and compelling theoretical contribution in using the concept of the postsecular imagination to understand cultural and even civilizational changes taking place not only in the Indian subcontinent, but in multiple global contexts, including Europe. His work has been drawn upon by European scholars working within multiple disciplines and across the major regions of Europe (see, for example, Cloke et al. 2019; Bowyer 2020; Di Tullio 2018; Grall 2020; Grosu-Rădulescu 2021; Harris-Birtill 2019; Kerrigan 2018; Qadiri 2018; Sorvari 2016). Each of the seven chapters of Ratti's book is a kind of hermeneutical laboratory providing an interpretive key that allows us to understand the diverse behavior of the characters within the analyzed literary works.

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This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

Ratti's interpretive perspective resembles the classic approach by Mikhail Bakhtin of the dialogical imagination (Bakhtin 1981) and what he theorized as the polyphony of Fyodor Dostoevsky's novels (Bakhtin 1984). In both cases, the concepts of negotiation and polyphonic signification, so central to Ratti, are crucial. It is difficult to attribute to Bakhtin himself postsecular sensitivity because it would be an ahistoric attribution. Nevertheless, in Bakhtin's texts, especially those analyzing Dostoevsky's novels, it is possible to distinguish strategies that Ratti uses in interpreting the works of authors writing in and about South Asia. Each of the literary works analyzed by Ratti reveals the multiple entanglements of their characters in various religious and belief traditions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Sikhism, and animism. These systems of belief are situated in relation to the Indian secular state, which theoretically represents an attitude of neutrality towards particular religious traditions. In practice, however, it turns out that the ideological neutrality guaranteed by the constitution of the state established in 1947 is illusory because it supports Hindu nationalism in various ways by discriminating against ethnic minority groups and religious minorities.

The novels that Ratti analyzes are inevitably intertwined with the lives of their authors, almost all of whom write in English and from a diaspora. Thus, we are dealing here with a dynamic process of shaping cultural identity in rapidly changing circumstances. There is also a critical attitude of the authors and their fiction's characters towards religious traditions. In the case of Salman Rushdie, one of the writers analyzed by Ratti, the situation is complicated by a violent and arbitrary decision of a religious authority that placed the writer and his work outside the Muslim community. What follows are some of the variants of these constellations featured in *The Postsecular Imagination*.

Ratti's book opens with an analysis of Michael Ondaatje's novel *The English Patient* (1992), in which there are questions related to the notion of a nation read from a postsecular perspective. Ondaatje was born in Sri Lanka and has spent his adult life in Canada, with his work growing out of this diasporic position. The setting of the novel is an Italian villa during the Second World War, with its characters, of different nationalities, connected with one another seemingly randomly. The uniqueness of the situation encourages a sense of community and friendship (Ratti 2013, 56). Here, too, in this microcosm, tensions play out between the characters who belong to different religions. And it is here that the postsecular potential for establishing understanding among them is born. A similar view of national identity was proposed in the 1960s by Witold Gombrowicz, who, due to external circumstances, found himself in exile in Argentina and wrote his most important works as an émigré writer (Gombrowicz 1988, 2005; Tischner 2013). For the Polish writer, the microcosm will only be his mind, which creates an interpersonal church that is in opposition to the Catholic church with which he parted as a teenager. Gombrowicz's dispute with Polishness is one of the most important disputes related to national identity. It can be said that nationality is a subject of constant negotiation in the pages of the writer's literary output, not of ethnic determinism.

A similar negotiation of national identity is shown in Allan Sealy's novel *The Everest Hotel* (1998). Sealy shows the situation of Christianity as a minority religion. Looking from the European, and especially Polish, perspective, this is a difficult situation to imagine because Christianity has been here for centuries not only a majority religion, but also a hegemonic one. Therefore, a national context that places this religion as a minority and also within a secular and at times averse state can be extremely instructive. And

that's what *The Everest Hotel* is. Thanks to it, we learn how the clash of Christianity with the ideology of a secular state becomes a postsecular experience. As Ratti argues: 'It is in this intimate combination of the everyday secular (in "India") with an inspiration not unlike that of a religion ("Christianity") that we could see Sealy pursuing a space and possibility that is postsecular' (Ratti 2013, 77). Postsecularism understood in this way allows us to capture the process by which the novel's characters, who represent religious minorities, redefine their religious and national identities. The reader is a witness to constant negotiation and working out a place for a minority religion.

Perhaps this is the right time to propose a working definition of postsecularism that can serve as a hermeneutic key for understanding the various strategies for overcoming existing social tensions. Of course, postsecularism is very much about the tensions and conflicts in which religion is entangled. Its advantage is that it offers clear criteria—the common good and the dignity of every human being—that enable the assessment of specific behaviors. The final shape of this definition emerges in the process of successive attempts to understand contemporary culture. As I mentioned, it is a working definition, subject to further clarifications. Here is its wording: postsecularism is not only a way of thinking, but above all a way of acting, the aim of which is to build social structures based on respect for mutual distinctiveness, serving the common good. The most important determinant of this new form of interpersonal coexistence is the suspension of the evaluation of specific worldviews on the basis of religious, political, or national criteria, which until now were polarizing elements of social groups. The only evaluating determinant is the contribution to the created common good and the dignity of the human person.

One of the most difficult dimensions of religion is its relationship with violence, a relationship which took on special importance after the 9/11 terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York. Here, too, literature comes in handy by pointing to the complexity and non-obvious nature of these relationships. One of the hotspots on the global map of religion's relationship to violence is Sri Lanka and Buddhism's ties to state-inspired acts of violence against religious minorities. Michael Ondaatje, himself from Sri Lanka, in his novel *Anil's Ghost* (2000) successfully attempts to question, and even show the conflicts within, overly obvious answers to violence, such as human rights. A similar questioning in Europe after the Second World War was performed by Czesław Miłosz in his novel *The Captive Mind* (1953), in which the author shows the conflicting reasons behind specific ideological choices. Although in the case of Miłosz, religion does not play such an important role as in *Anil's Ghost*, to this day, however, it is interpreted as an important voice in the discussion on responsibility for acts of violence in public space. Miłosz's book provoked Thomas Merton to correspond with its author, which may be an indirect sign of the book's religious dimension. This is all the more intriguing as Merton experienced a kind of illumination in Polonnaruwa, Sri Lanka during his journey there. Thus, the relationship between South Asia and the West can be surprising at times. However, among the most important conclusions drawn from the pages of Ondaatje's novel is the awareness that the postsecular attitude is not related to religious doctrine, but to the secular ways of experiencing the world (Ratti 2013, 117).

In a sense, the main character, Anil, who returns to the country of her childhood after many years, finds the hermeneutic key to understanding her complicated history thanks to the empathetic acceptance of complex and often mutually exclusive reasons guiding

human actions. This can also be seen in the thinking of Michael Ondaatje, who, on the one hand, thanks to his diasporic location in Canada, is able to understand certain aspects of the conflict, and, given his connections with Sri Lanka, like the protagonist of his book, cannot be indifferent to the conflict's arguments. Undoubtedly, a similar dynamic can be discovered in the aforementioned novel by Czesław Miłosz, whose work Karina Jarzyńska also reads from a postsecular perspective (Jarzyńska 2018). It is not surprising that Jarzyńska is fascinated by Manav Ratti's theory, which she has expressed in her latest publications (Jarzyńska 2020). The Polish critics Alina Mitek-Dziemba (2018a, 2018b) and Darius Skórczewski (2020) have also fruitfully drawn upon Ratti's work.

If Ondaatje's *The English Patient* reveals the boundaries of nationalism in a diasporic situation, then Shauna Singh Baldwin's *What the Body Remembers* (2000) points to the boundaries of secularism combined with nationalism, represented by the two states that emerged from Partition, India and Pakistan (Ratti 2013, 120). In a situation of deterritorialization, it is the individual who can determine his or her national belonging; and in the context of violence resulting from arbitrary political division, individuals can define themselves by referring to their religious traditions. In Baldwin's novel, the power of religion that falls victim to conflicting nationalisms favoring majorities (Islam in Pakistan; Hinduism in India) becomes embodied in the two women characters, Roop and Satya. Both women interpret Sikh teachings in highly individual ways in order to empower themselves, away from nationalism, colonialism, and patriarchy. So it is the power of religion that carries the postsecular message. Sikhism's founder, Guru Nanak (1459–1539), influenced by revelation, rejected Hindu polytheism and Islamic dogmatism, proposing a new religion that to him marked a return to pure faith and that posited the equality of men and women. These elementary features of Sikhism must be borne in mind in order to discern the postsecularism of *What the Body Remembers*. Of course, one should also remember that our perception of Sikhism is mediated to a large extent by categories developed in and imposed by Europe on the dynamic religious reality of South Asia. The question is to what extent these categories, including 'theology' itself, objectified South Asia's religious diversity (Mandair 2009, 2013).

There are parallels between Ratti's analyses of Baldwin's novel and the German sociologist Ulrich Beck's book *A God of One's Own: Religion's Capacity for Peace and Potential for Violence* (2010). Beck begins with a reminder of Etty Hillesum. It was this Dutch Jew who created 'her own God' in the borderline situation of the Holocaust, who decided to help God in a situation in which his expression of omnipotence was put to the test. The story of Hillesum helps Beck develop his own understanding of postsecularism. Beck argues that 'secular society must become post-secular, i.e. skeptical and open-minded towards the voices of religion' (Beck 2010, 156). He adds: 'Permitting religious language to enter the public sphere should be regarded as enrichment, not as an intrusion. Such a change is no less ambitious than the general toleration of secular nihilism by the religions' (Beck 2010, 156). Not only do I agree with Beck's postulate, but I see it as the only way out of the growing religious fundamentalism. Such an openness might cause the followers of religion to stop being afraid of secularization, and humanists and rationalists of various types might see religion as an ally in the return of religion to the public sphere (postsecularism). Reading Beck's book may be a good introduction to such an attempt to overcome mutual fears.

It can therefore be said that thanks to his formulation of the postsecular imagination, Manav Ratti not only allows us to understand the reasons behind the specific choices of the analyzed authors and the characters in their novels, but also captures the multidirectional tensions within South Asia. Ratti's perspective also allows us to understand the civilizational processes that are currently taking place in European countries. One of Ratti's most important achievements is in pointing to the ambivalent relationship, across the postcolonial politics of religion and secularism, of the Indian subcontinent to the West. This problem is aptly captured in the title of Arvind-Pal Singh Mandair's book, *Religion and the Specter of the West* (2009).

An example of the ambivalence of mutual relations between South Asia and the West is seen in the work of Salman Rushdie. We start with the reaction of the West, especially politicians and media in Great Britain, to the *fatwa* issued by the Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989 against Salman Rushdie for the blasphemous, in Khomeini's opinion, novel *The Satanic Verses*, published a year earlier. Both the novel and the controversies related to its reception are an opportunity to rethink secularism and its limits. An important commentary by Talal Asad appeared in 1990 in the journal *Politics & Society*, in which he writes about the *fatwa* and points to the limits of British multiculturalism. According to Asad, it was the unprecedented politicization of religion and the double standards applied to Muslim communities that were the reason for these reactions. Also, some politicians' use of paternalistic language (enthusiastically taken up by the media) that reminded Muslims of the need to respect the values and rules of the host country was, according to Asad, marked by colonial rhetoric (Asad 1993, 248). In his analyses of *The Satanic Verses*, Ratti draws attention to the boundaries of Rushdie's own position, which could be a source of tension between him and some Muslims: 'Rushdie's class privilege and the elitism of his 'art' make him insensitive to those followers of a religion who might not be able to appreciate or even perceive the subtlety of his postsecular explorations—or even be interested in any of his literary explorations' (Ratti 2013, 151). In Rushdie's life after the *fatwa*, attempts to bring the religious authorities closer to the writer were unsuccessful. Although on December 24, 1989, Rushdie met with Muslim scholars, apologized for the scandal caused by the publication of *The Satanic Verses*, and made a profession of faith, he still had to go into hiding and the *fatwa* was not revoked. Years later, on May 12, 2008 and on British television, Rushdie admitted that he had met with the Muslim scholars and professed his faith in Islam only to regain freedom and security.

Rushdie of course continued to write after the *fatwa*, and among these works considered by Ratti is the novel *The Enchantress of Florence* (2008), set during the reign of the Moghul emperor Akbar (1542–1605). In his analysis, Ratti invokes Akbar as a non-Western model of secularism. Akbar's reign as a paradigmatic model of a ruler who made possible the peaceful coexistence and debates of various religious traditions brings to mind the history of one of the most powerful European kingdoms that arose in the second half of the sixteenth century. The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was established in 1569 as a result of the merger of the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and lasted until the end of the eighteenth century. The multiethnic and multireligious character of this area made it possible to create one of the most interesting religious experiments within Judaism, the Frankist movement. Its founder, Jakub Frank (1726–1791), continues to arouse great interest to this day, although in

later historiography he was almost completely forgotten. Thanks to the literary imagination of the Nobel laureate Olga Tokarczuk, who centers her novel *Księgi Jakubowe* (*Books of Jacob*) (2022) around the story of Jakub Frank, both Frank and his religious movement have reappeared as part of collective memory. It can therefore be said that it is literature that allows topics and characters that have been replaced by the dominant model of culture to be re-incorporated into religious and cultural discourses. In the case of India, it is a secular state that supports dominant Hinduism, and in the case of Poland, it is also a secular state that favors dominant Roman Catholicism. As Ratti convincingly argues in his book, the postsecular perspective enables one-sided models to be negotiated by giving voice to marginalized groups.

I agree fully with one of Ratti's final reflections on the work of Rushdie: 'Whether [religion and secularism are] poised antagonistically or amicably [. . .] postsecularism is the name of the possibility of their encounter, an encounter made of human choices. That encounter signals epistemic changes—and its futures are unknown' (Ratti 2013, 197). In this context, it is worth recalling the conversation between Jürgen Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger in Munich in 2004, in which they admitted that their different perspectives, secular and religious, not only complement each other, but also require self-limitation. Habermas called this process of self-limitation postsecularism, pointing to the need to take into account religious sensitivity in the public sphere. Ratzinger not only agreed with his interlocutor, but added that religion without rational constraint easily turns into fanaticism (Habermas and Ratzinger 2006). This perspective has been present in the Catholic Church since 2013, when the Argentinean Jorge Maria Bergoglio became Pope. According to Michele Dillon, Pope Francis' gestures and subsequent documents fit into postsecular dynamics (Dillon 2018).

It can be said that the number of supporters of postsecular thinking far outweighs the number of its opponents, or at least the skeptics. Not everyone sees the features of original and creative thinking in postsecularism. I myself not only support postsecular thinking, but see it as the only way to overcome increasing social tensions and contradictions. I also have an overwhelming impression that postsecular thinking is gaining new followers. By way of example, let me quote the latest book by Peter Sloterdijk, who has been critical of religion in his earlier work. In 2020, however, he published *Making Heaven Speak: About Theopoesie*. According to Sloterdijk, it is time for religion to increasingly free itself from its social, political, and cultural functions and focus on its own task of interpreting existence. In his opinion, thanks to religion, we should understand the randomness and finitude of human existence more deeply and articulate the needs of happiness and communication (Sloterdijk 2020). Religion has always performed these functions; what is interesting is that the author who reminds us about them has thus far been rather reluctant about religion and its presence in the public sphere.

A similar openness to religion in the public sphere is found in one of the late Zygmunt Bauman's last books, *Retrotopia* (2017), in which he emphasizes how important Pope Francis is to him and endorses the Pope's support of refugees and migrants. This seems to me a classic example of the shared postsecular sensitivities of a religious leader and of a secular sociologist with leftist views. For many years I had the opportunity to observe firsthand Bauman's changing views on the place of religion in the public sphere, views which transformed from indifference to empathy full of approval. In our conversations and co-authored books, we have repeatedly returned to the pontificate

of Francis, finding in it signs of hope for a better future (Bauman and Obirek 2015a and 2015b). We can say that Bauman, a sociologist first interested in religion as one among other elements of human activity, became a promoter of religion as something that releases emancipatory and liberating potential both in individual and social structures. This was particularly evident in his private meeting with Pope Francis in 2016 in Assisi, where he referred to the Pope as 'the light at the end of the tunnel of negative globalization' (Diaz 2018; see also Wagner 2020, 396). In turn, the Pope asked for Bauman's books, and in his speech in 2018 at the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile, the Pope invoked the concept of a 'liquid society,' in reference to Bauman's *Liquid Modernity* (2000) (Diaz 2018). Manav Ratti's concept of the postsecular imagination captures and extends Bauman's thinking by allowing for the inclusion of such different realities as religious faith and critical analyses of sociopolitical inequalities as components of the same civilizational processes.

Ivo Pospíšil, an expert in Russian literature based at Masaryk University in the Czech Republic, assesses Manav Ratti's scholarship in a similarly positive manner (Pospíšil 2018, 2019), and positions Ratti's theorization of the postsecular imagination as more 'elaborate and inventive' than Jürgen Habermas's approach to postsecularism (Pospíšil 2018, 179). Pospíšil also proposes an intriguing concept for interpreting the development of Slavic literatures. He theorizes in them what he terms the 'pre–post effect,' which can be described as an imperfect imitation of Western European models of secularization, and an openness and unfinishedness of political and cultural processes (Pospíšil 2018, 180–182). Pospíšil's term lends new understanding to Russian culture's religious and metaphysical dimensions, which have always been present within it ('pre'), as reflected in the unfinished secularization of Russian literature. However, the ideological schemes imposed during the communist period attempted to carefully silence and erase these dimensions. Only the political changes ('post') introduced by Mikhail Gorbachev (*perestroika* and *glasnost*) made it possible to reintroduce and revitalize Russian culture's religious and metaphysical dimensions, earlier artificially removed by the communist regime (for the use of Ratti's work within Russian contexts, see Герасимов 2017 and Sorvari 2016). In fact, this also applies to the entire bloc of Central and Eastern European states that fell under the influence of the Soviet Union. This new, postsecular sensitivity has also made it possible to integrate the achievements of Mikhail Bakhtin's school of thought into today's research, literary and otherwise. It is thus not without reason that Bakhtin's work is experiencing a renaissance also in Poland, where for decades it was underestimated precisely because of its metaphysical sensitivity.

What opens up here is a space for reflecting on the similarities and differences between postcolonial South Asia and the inferiority complex of Central and Eastern European countries towards the West. Pospíšil concludes his essay on the postsecular dimensions of Russian literature with an evocative reflection: 'Postsecularism enables the literary artifacts to preserve the openness that was accessible to other approaches and attitudes: open to multistratified returns to religiousness, enriched by the stages of a secular vision of the world' (Pospíšil 2018, 187). Perhaps the two postsecularisms—South Asian and European—that I have attempted to distinguish here by analyzing Manav Ratti's important and illuminating work meet precisely in this openness to the unknown future while maintaining optimism.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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