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Postsecularism, reason, and violence

Michiel Leezenberg

Introduction

The term 'postsecularism' appears to have been coined in the 1960s by Andrew Greeley, but it was undoubtedly Jürgen Habermas who did most to popularize it, around the turn of the twenty-first century.[1] As developed by Habermas, the postsecular involves the idea that religious convictions and claims may not only persist or gain new strength in secular environments, but may also be considered reasonable by secular actors if they accept the rules and procedures of the secular nation-state. Increasingly, however, one witnesses religious positions and movements that do not simply demand recognition within and from a secular environment, but openly reject the very concepts or values of (gendered) morality, life, law, and reason on which modern secular Western societies rest. Arguably, it has been the increasingly visible assertive presence of Muslim population groups in Europe and America, and the dramatic appearance of both state and non-state Islamic actors on the world political stage, rather than the continuing or renewed self-confidence of Catholic and evangelical Christian demands (let alone Hindu nationalism in India, neo-Confucianism in China, or the Orthodox Christian revival in Eastern Europe), which have most visibly posed a challenge to theoretical debates on the role of religion in the public sphere—that is, on questions of secularism and postsecularism. Hence, as illustrations, I will briefly discuss two forms of contemporary Islam, namely, quietist Salafism and potentially violent Salafi-jihadism.

The experience of partly violent forms of contemporary Islam indeed has been central to the writings on postsecularism by some of the most prominent contemporary thinkers. Here, I will focus on the liberal philosopher Jürgen Habermas and on the anti-liberal anthropologist Talal Asad. In particular, I will discuss the views of both these authors on the explanation and justification of violent politicized religion. Although Habermas and Asad seem at odds with each other on many points, they appear to share several important assumptions: first, a positive appreciation of rational debate and a sweeping condemnation of violence as not only illegitimate but irrational; second, a distinct and problematic notion of terrorism; third, and finally, a somewhat reductionist view of the contemporary world as having arisen out of a confrontation of a generic 'Islamic tradition' or 'traditional Islam' with an equally generic Western 'imperialism', 'colonialism', or 'modernity'.

Violent politicized religion: a short history

The rapid decline of communism after the 1989 fall of the Berlin Wall left a gap that was quickly filled by newly public and politicized religious ideologies. These could be peaceful and involve civil political action; but increasingly, they could also motivate acts of political violence, most visibly, but by no means exclusively, in non-liberal, conflict-ridden settings like the Middle East.[2] Such acts are usually labelled—and condemned—as 'terrorism'. In earlier decades, conceptions of terrorism had included state terrorism and state-sponsored terrorism; however, after the collapse of the communist East Bloc, and especially in the wake of the 11 September 2001 assaults, terrorism has virtually come to be identified with political violence by non-state actors against existing states. As such, it is illegitimate virtually by definition; to the extent that it is practiced by religiously motivated groups or individuals, it has also increasingly come to be seen as irrational and premodern.

It should be emphasized, however, that this 'Islamic terrorism' is a qualitatively novel phenomenon that resists reductionist explanations in terms of either a timeless Islamic essence or a generic imperialist influence. Both analytically and normatively, one cannot and should not isolate it from the complex whole of interlocking factors out of which it has emerged. These factors include a decline or collapse in state power, a heritage of violent authoritarian regimes, Cold War polarization, and interference by neighbouring countries or foreign superpowers. Thus, Osama bin Laden's al-Qa'ida network, which resorted to spectacular transnational actions, and the so-called Islamic State, which briefly held large swathes of territory in Syria and Iraq between 2014 and 2017, are but the most visible, and most widely publicized, examples of a rather broader pattern. The very novelty of these forms of (political) violence by non-state actors, and indeed their unprecedented scale and character, precludes any attempt to seek their causes in any premodern, let alone timeless, Islamic religious tradition.

The same holds for suicide assaults by jihadist actors, perhaps the most spectacular form of violence in the name of Islam carried out in recent years, in the Middle East as well as in the USA and Western Europe. Three aspects of these assaults stand out. First, their perpetrators actively sought to die in their action; second, they were generally transnational, many of them having been committed by second-generation immigrant male youths; third, they have been called 'depoliticized' and 'deterritorialized', as it is increasingly difficult to link them to any clear or coherent political or territorial cause, like, earlier, the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands or the presence of American troops in Saudi Arabia.

It should also be emphasized that traditional Islamic jurisprudence does not sanction suicide for any reason. The first theological justifications of suicide bombings did not appear until the 1980s, that is, *after* the first such bombings had been carried out (cf. Leezenberg forthcoming). Suicide bombings remain controversial in the Islamic world: the (vast) majority of Muslim scholars unambiguously disapprove of them. Clearly, present-day terrorism cannot be explained from religious tradition, and openly defies traditional religious authority.

Habermas on postsecularism and Islam

The persistence, strengthening, and/or revival of religious claims in secular environments have forced liberal thinkers like John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas to reconsider their secularist assumptions. In developing his ideas on the legitimacy of religious claims, Habermas originally focused on topics like abortion, euthanasia, and genetic manipulation in liberal

and secular Western societies; however, the topic of violent political Islam almost forced itself on him. Thus, 'Faith and Knowledge', his acceptance speech for the 2001 Peace Prize of German booksellers, was originally meant to address the rational acceptability of religious objections against, for example, euthanasia or genetic engineering in liberal Western societies. It was presented, however, a mere month after the 11 September 2001 assaults against the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington. Hence, its introduction—clearly written after the main body of the text—addresses the question of religiously motivated or legitimated violence (Habermas 2003: 102). Habermas here sees these attacks as 'motivated by religious convictions' rather than political grievances, claims, or calculations. In later statements, he would shift his position regarding the motivations of these and other suicide attacks; thus, Habermas (2015: online) argues that: 'Jihadi fundamentalism expresses itself in religious codes but it is no religion… It could use any other religious language'.

To put it differently, according to Habermas' later writings, violent politicized forms of religion are not part of that religion itself, as a distinct 'sphere' of social life or as a tradition; as a result, it would seem, they cannot embody or express legitimate *religious* claims almost as a matter of definition.

Apart from this particular change, however, Habermas' views on the character and explanation of such violence have been remarkably consistent over the years. In 2001, he argues that the assaults are 'fundamentalist', and as such, a thoroughly modern phenomenon: for him, fundamentalism marks an 'uprooted' form of modernization and a 'blocked spiritual development'; likewise, in 2015, he states that 'Jihadism is a thoroughly modern form of reaction to uprooted ways of life' (2003: 102; 2015). Thus, Habermas appears to explain violent religious activism in cultural and civilizational terms of modernization, at the expense of attention for possible political motives, while tacitly presuming the Western European process of secularization as the normal course of development. This explanation is not only tilted or biased, in ignoring any political motive or grievance (whether or not legitimate), but also unabashedly Eurocentric, in assuming the Western European secularization process as the normal form of modernization (see Leezenberg 2010). This liberal ethnocentrism is also expressed in Habermas' call for a greater self-reflection 'necessary if we want to present a different image of the West to other cultures' (2003: 103) rather than a self-criticism of what, if any, recent Western actions might have triggered such reactions.

In other words, for Habermas, religiously motivated suicide terrorism falls outside of religion, and requires sociological or civilizational explanation rather than political legitimation. This implies that such acts of violence can *never* be legitimate, let alone 'translated' into rationally justifiable political or societal demands, almost as a matter of definition.

Undoubtedly, rejecting the legitimacy of religiously motivated terrorist violence sounds eminently reasonable—not to say inevitable—from a liberal and secular normative perspective; however, analytically, such an a priori rejection is less than satisfactory. In fact, an ambivalence in Habermas' concept of postsecularism comes to the fore here. Initially, he seems to use the term 'postsecularism' to describe a purely *factual* state of affairs in which religious claims persist or reappear in a secularized environment; later, he also uses it as a *normative* term to denote a 'mutual learning process' between religious and non-religious citizens. Accordingly, he shifts from his earlier view that religious claims are legitimate only to the extent that they can be translated into secular political claims and arguments, to the position that 'religious reasons' as such are not only legitimate but indeed essential parts of a liberal deliberative democracy. Problems like euthanasia, abortion, and genetic manipulation, he argues, are so complex that one cannot be certain that

only the non-religious perspective has the correct moral intuitions. In line with this shift, Habermas reinterprets the separation of church and state as a separation between the public sphere and the formal institutions of the state: in the former, he argues, religious claims are permitted; but they must be translated into secular contributions if they are to be accepted in the latter (2008b).

On closer inspection, however, the concept of the postsecular presupposes both a descriptive historical component, namely, the secularization thesis, and a normative component, namely, secularism, already from the start. This normative dimension appears when Habermas qualifies the Islamic world as marked by 'thwarted spiritual change' (*blockierte Geisteswandel*) and 'derailing secularization' (*entgleisende Säkularisierung*) (2003: 102; 2015). Comparably to Rawls's vision of political liberalism as a neutral framework rather than a 'comprehensive doctrine', Habermas calls his own position 'postmetaphysical', in that it no longer requires the rejection of religiously formulated metaphysical claims. Unlike anti-religious naturalism, which he calls 'pure ideology', postmetaphysical thinking 'is prepared to learn from religion while at the same time remaining agnostic'; he continues by saying that both religious and secular consciousness can, and indeed must, become more reflective over time (2008a: 143). Despite such proclamations of neutrality and acknowledgements of historical change, however, Habermas tacitly assumes religion as, by definition, non- or anti-modern, and as founded on faith rather than rationally justifiable belief; likewise, he characterizes religious as opposed to secular subjectivity as essentially heteronomous rather than autonomous, and as shaped by social power rather than individual liberty. This very opposition, however, presupposes a distinctly modern definition of religion as ultimately irrational and authoritarian, and as primarily, if not exclusively, involving inner faith rather than public practice.

Habermas' position has been criticized for making religious claims appear more reasonable and less authoritarian than they are (see e.g. Flores d'Arcais n.d.). Yet, Habermas, too, would undoubtedly want to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate religious claims and reasons. Initially, he accepts religious claims as legitimate to the extent that they accept the constitutional state and deliberative democracy (2008a: 143). This position presupposes the state's monopoly on legitimate violence, and thus would seem to exclude a priori the legitimacy of any resort to violence by non-state actors. In international politics, by contrast, and especially in constellations in which there is no well-functioning constitutional state or deliberative democracy, acts of violence or civil disobedience may be legitimate (*ibid*.). Yet, an ambiguity remains: Habermas' comment that jihadi terrorism involves the 'abuse of religion for political purposes', suggests on the one hand that it is political rather than religious or civilizational, and on the other hand that in itself, religion is by definition, non-modern, irrational, and/or separated from rational political or other worldly purposes; yet, elsewhere, Habermas' characterization of religiously legitimated terrorism in terms of a failed or derailed modernization process boils down to a *rejection* of its political (that is, rational and potentially legitimate) character.

It is indeed difficult to see how Habermas' account could be extended or modified in such a way as to allow *any* religiously motivated terrorist violence to have a political motivation—let alone justification. Yet, the 11 September assaults at least may be called 'rational' in the restricted sense of 'goal-rational', or having concrete and realistic (political) motivations and aims. As Osama bin Laden's speeches suggest, these assaults aimed at ending US military presence in Saudi Arabia, where American troops had been stationed since the 1990 Gulf Crisis (Lawrence 2005). It is unclear how, if at all, Habermas' account could accommodate such aspects, let alone address questions of the legitimacy of political claims and grievances

underlying terrorist acts, even when one may for good reasons reject the legitimacy of those acts themselves. In the following section, I will argue that there is a deeper reason for this inability.

Talal Asad and Islamic communitarianism

Despite allowing for historical changes, Habermas appears to assume the categories of the religious and the secular, and the spheres of religion and politics, as substantially given and essentially unproblematic. Perhaps no author has been as influential in calling attention to the temporally and geographically specific, constantly renegotiated, and power-saturated character of these categories as the anthropologist Talal Asad. Normatively, too, Asad's anti-liberal position may seem very different from Habermas'; on closer inspection, however, both authors turn out to share a positive appraisal of argument as rational (even if they mean different things by 'rationality'), and a negative valuation of violence as both illegitimate and irrational; that is, as belonging neither to 'reasonable' politics nor to religious traditions.

Proceeding from a genealogically inspired critique of the anthropological category of 'religion', Asad (1993: chap. 1) argues that seemingly universally applicable concepts like 'religion' and 'the secular' have a specifically Christian history, which renders problematic their application to other traditions, like Islam. To the extent, moreover, that such concepts *have* been applied, they reflect a history of Western (imperialist) power. Because of its implication in a post-Enlightenment history of power, modern liberal secularism therefore does not form a neutral framework, and its main concepts do not form a universally valid vocabulary; rather, liberalism is just one moral tradition like others. Subsequently, Asad (*ibid.*) even argues that liberalism is not just a tradition, but a secular political *myth*, and, as such, no more rational or universally valid than 'religious' myths. And indeed, he dismissively characterizes the idea of liberal democracy as 'our contemporary holy cow' (Iqbal 2017: 210).

Paired to this genealogy of the concepts of religion and the secular is Asad's equally influential communitarian view of Islam as a 'discursive tradition', that is, as an essentially reasonable and continuous tradition of Muslim discourse and debate that authorizes Islamic practices of the present by referring them to an Islamic past (1986: 14–5). Asad has repeatedly emphasized that this view involves not a substantial claim about what 'real Islam' is, but a methodological suggestion to construe Islam as an object of anthropological inquiry in a particular way. Despite its emphatically methodological character, however, it does have substantive implications; or at least, it has been read that way by some of his followers, like Saba Mahmood, Charles Hirschkind, and Wael Hallaq. This normative position may be characterized as *Islamic communitarianism*; indeed, Asad quite explicitly acknowledges his indebtedness to MacIntyre's brand of communitarian moral philosophy (e.g., Asad 1986: 21n, 2015b: 167, n8, n12). Against both Marxist and genealogical modernists, Asad emphasizes that religious traditions are given rather than invented (2015b: 168); against both Foucault and MacIntyre, he argues that genealogical critique involves not the rejection but the purification of tradition. This purification, he adds, puzzlingly:

> uses violence (or the threat of violence) to restore an obscured origin that can then accommodate itself more smoothly to the real, progressive world. This process of critical purification (modernization) is a process of what must be transgressed if tradition is to become civilized.
>
> *(2015b: 168)*

In other words, Asad seems to preclude the very possibility that the Islamic discursive tradition is based on power or violence, and as such can be anything other than 'rational'. Instead, he sees not tradition but the *change* of traditions as violent: discontinuities and new traditions, he writes, originate in 'discursive rupture, which means through a kind of violence' (2009: 33).

Here, a remarkable asymmetry appears in Asad's treatment of Western and Islamic concepts, practices, and traditions. The notion of an Islamic discursive tradition, he has argued, is meant to foreground questions of embodiment and power (2015b: 166–7); in fact, however, neither notion functions very prominently in his analyses of things Islamic. Indeed, he turns out as keen to emphasize the reasonableness of the Islamic tradition as he is to expose the power implied in Western secular reason. Moreover, despite his seeming genealogical approach, Asad flat out contradicts Foucault's insistence that genealogy sets out to destroy the semblance or illusion of continuity conjured up by the notion of tradition (Foucault 2000: 373, 385). Normatively, this position is problematic because it places the rejection of tradition out of bounds, and amounts to an emphatic, if largely implicit, denial that violence, oppression, or domination may be located within the tradition itself, witness his suggestion that only the genealogical critique of, or rupture with, tradition, and not tradition itself, involves violence or the threat of violence (2015b: 168).

Most problematically, Asad systematically downplays the power processes involved in creating and reproducing this Islamic tradition. He does so, among others, by strictly distinguishing the religious authority of Islam or its revealed law, the sharî'a (which, significantly, he discusses rather than the legal scholars, or 'ulama), from the political power of amîrs or other rulers. Further, he consistently characterizes this tradition as shaped by disagreement, that is, by '*arguments* about what it means to be a Muslim' (2017: 200; emph. in original). That is to say, he sees this discursive tradition as defined, maintained, and developed by rational debate rather than the exercise of power or the imposition of authority. Following MacIntyre, Asad adds that critique is central to it, albeit not in abstract theories but in 'embodied (and yet criticizable) ways of life' (2015b: 167).

After this discussion of some of the conceptual and normative issues raised by Asad's appeal to discursive traditions, let us now look at some of the empirical dimensions of his writings. Unlike Habermas, Asad sees the secular liberal nation-state, and post-Enlightenment (Western) Europe more generally, as matters of identities rather than rights or obligations. In an article originally published a year before the 11 September assaults, Asad (2003: chap. 5) argues that Muslim immigrants have a problematic position in Europe, not because their religious and cultural backgrounds clash with Enlightenment values and principles, like religious tolerance, secularism, and autonomy, but because these universalist principles themselves exclude Muslims from an identity construed as 'European'. For example, he argues, even when liberals and Far-Right politicians disagree on the question of whether or not Europe can 'tolerate' the presence of Muslims, they proceed from a tacit shared assumption that Muslims may *live in*, but do not *belong to*, Europe—precisely in so far as Muslims are represented as external to the essence of Europe, he concludes, the question of whether 'real' Europeans can coexist with them is problematic (2003: 164–5).

Given his rejection of the universal validity and neutrality of liberal secular claims and framings, Asad's own position may perhaps be qualified as 'postsecular'. And indeed, to the extent that it invites new ways of thinking about how religion can be accepted in the public sphere, Asad welcomes Habermas' concept. He criticizes it, however, for uncritically relying on the concept of the secular, and thus reproducing the assumptions and affects it indicates (Asad n.d.). Whereas Habermas presupposes the language of rational argument, rights and

obligations, and of argument as giving and asking for reasons, Asad describes how appeals to such seemingly universalist principles and values in a modern European setting amount to the a priori exclusion of religious convictions as irrational in themselves, and of Muslim identities as essentially non-European.[3] Thus, affect and identity are crucial to Asad's analyses.

This is certainly an interesting position; now let us see how Asad views political violence, and in particular terrorist violence, carried out in the name of Islam. Asad (2010, 2015a) does not discuss possible political motivations or aims of such terrorist violence in detail. In fact, he does not even seem to countenance the possibility that (political) violence may *ever* be rational, let alone justified, in the sense of serving concrete and realizable goals, witness his rejection of utilitarian or functionalist views that focus on the aims and effects of violence (cf. Anidjar 2015). Instead, he shifts attention to the question of why we find particular forms of violence more abhorrent than others.

This line of argument leads to a systematic blurring of the opposition between legitimate and illegitimate violence, and between warfare and terror. Thus, Asad rejects the opposition between just or legitimate wars of states and the illegitimate if not evil terrorism of non-state actors, arguing that 'the liberal democratic state shares a space of violence with terrorism' (2010: 18). Likewise, he appears to reject the idea of a state monopoly on violence, identifying the 'terror of modern warfare' and 'terror created by militants', characterizing the state's torture of prisoners as 'individualized terror' (2010: 7), and arguing that the notion of 'humanitarian intervention' dissolves the distinction between war and peace (2010: 11). All this leads him to a blanket condemnation of all violence, which he generically qualifies as 'terror'. Unlike, and indeed against, Habermas and other liberal thinkers, he reduces even the international legal order to the sovereign power of the liberal democracies of the West, first and foremost the USA, arguing that the language of law is a mere fig leaf for the self-legitimations of victorious states: 'in international relations, what we call […] war is ultimately brute force and not authority that is decisive [*sic*], even if that force is argued for in a legal language' (2010: 5). Asad undoubtedly has a point in calling attention to the violence of this international order; but my point here concerns his conceptualization of a generic 'terror' and 'terrorist violence' as not only illegitimate but also irrational.

Further, Asad tacitly identifies states with liberal secular democracies. This identification is most clearly visible, and most problematic, in his discussion of post-2011 Egypt. In a 2015 article, Asad returns to the question of Islam as a (discursive) tradition, elaborating on the relation between the discursive and the embodied aspects of this tradition, and exploring how religion, authority, and tradition were linked in the 2011 Egyptian uprising against, and ousting of, President Mubarak. Significantly, Asad only addresses *political* authority here, tacitly avoiding all questions concerning *religious* authority, as involved in, for example, the social power of Shaykh Usama and the Fatwa Council. Apparently, he reduces such forms of power to a presumed sovereignty of the sharî'a, under which a Muslim 'care of the self' is allegedly practiced (2015: 179–81).

Here and elsewhere, Asad once again evades questions of power within the Islamic tradition, while simultaneously conflating liberalism, secularism, and Mubarak's and Sisi's Egypt—as if the latter could by any stretch of the imagination be called a liberal state. This is no mere slip of the pen: elsewhere, Asad writes about 'Egypt's acquisition of liberalism', conflating the economic liberalization of Egypt's 1980s *infitah* policies, or free-market reforms, with the alleged spread of political ideas of individual freedom—a conflation that even leads him to insinuate that Nasser was a liberal ruler rather than, as is commonly thought, a pioneer of Arab socialism (2015b: 199–200).

In positing this Manichean dichotomy or opposition between the intellectual and political tradition of Western liberal secular democracies and the embodied discursive tradition of Islam, Asad not only downplays the non-liberal authoritarianism of the secular Egyptian state, but also overlooks a crucial intellectual and political factor that has arguably shaped both post-independence Arab states and post-Cold War politicized Islamic movements: Marxism-Leninism. Limitations of space preclude a fuller discussion here; suffice it to say that self-proclaimed 'socialist' Arab states like Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen were characterized by a Leninist form of strictly hierarchical one-party rule backed by the pervasive presence of intelligence services. These technologies of ruling were profoundly inspired, and practically and organizationally supported, by East Bloc states like the German Democratic Republic and the Soviet Union. Likewise, the personality cult surrounding Arab leaders like Nasser, Sadat, Mubarak, Hafez al-Assad, and Saddam Hussein followed recognizably Stalinist models.

Asad, however, routinely denies that communism has ever been a major political or intellectual force in the Arab Middle East.[4] But, despite such denials, Marxist-Leninist ideas, strategies, and organizational forms have in fact had an enduring relevance and importance for Islamist political parties and social movements in the post-Cold War and postsecular Islamic world. Arguably, Leninist and Stalinist models have also shaped Islamist thought and practice from the 1960s, if not earlier. Thus, Sayyid Qutb's famous pamphlet, *Ma'âlim fi'l-tarîq* ('Milestones') (2007 [1964]), is emphatically Leninist in its call for the uncompromising ideological purity of a vanguard of genuine Muslims, and even more clearly in its call for revolutionary violence against *jâhilî* states that are based on human rather than divine sovereignty. Hence, legitimations for revolutionary and/or terrorist violence in present-day Islamic authors are thoroughly modern in character, often inspired by modern Eastern European ideologies rather than classical Islamic traditions. Arguably, the challenge—if not the governmental reality—of Leninism has decisively shaped not only the institutions and governmental techniques of modern Arab states but also the outlook and organizational forms of various present-day currents of political Islam. Given his overstating of the continuity of the Islamic discursive tradition, as well as his binary opposition between this tradition and the liberal secular West, Asad's overlooking or downplaying of this Eastern European and/or communist genealogy appears to be quite systematic.

Salafism and jihadism in Europe: a genealogical sketch

One reason for Asad's tendency to slip from a genealogical to a communitarian position may be his focus on sovereign state power: many of his analyses focus on the repressive powers of the sovereign secular nation-state. Foucault himself, however, warned against assimilating all forms of power to a juridical model of sovereignty, provocatively stating that 'in political thought and analysis, we have still not cut off the head of the king' (Foucault 1978: 88–9). Famously, Foucault has explored discipline, a non-sovereign and non-repressive modality of power emerging in spaces and institutions like schools, hospitals, and psychiatric wards. He saw this disciplinary power as typical of early nineteenth-century European states, and as having come to an effective end by the late 1970s. He analyzed neoliberalism (then very much in the process of being formulated and indeed politically realized) in his 1979 Collège de France lectures on biopolitics, specifically suggesting that it is a non-disciplinary technology of government. Simultaneously, he also formulated his famous—or notorious—thesis that the revolt against the secular Pahlavi regime in Iran reflected a novel 'political spirituality', which rejected

secular modernity in the guise of both liberal capitalism and communism (see Foucault 2008: 248ff).[5]

Continuing along these lines, one may ask whether early twenty-first-century forms of politicized Islam amount to a rejection of a secular political rationality while at the same time embodying novel forms of governmentality themselves. Let me therefore conclude this overview with a preliminary genealogy of contemporary Salafism—a reform or revivalist movement in Sunni Islam—as a neoliberal, postsecular post-Cold War phenomenon.[6] Although encouraged, and in part sponsored, by states like Saudi Arabia and Qatar, Salafism is not beholden either to any existing state power or to any centralized religious authority. Salafists may reject the liberal secular nation-state and various liberal-secular concepts and values including, in some cases, the idea of democratic elections; but they are generally quietist rather than politically activist. They are less concerned with state power than with lifestyle: theirs is a religiosity or spirituality which is practiced in private but shown in public, and does not necessarily involve political claims, let alone forming specifically Salafi political parties. In Western Europe, Salafist groups generally do not make political demands beyond visibility in the public sphere, whether in the form of Islamic (and specifically Salafi) schools, prayer rooms in secular public institutions, or face-covering dress for women. Arguably, this depoliticized Salafist concern with religion as lifestyle reflects a novel (dare one say neoliberal?) concern with self-government.

Next to this apolitical Salafism, one also finds a politicized, and potentially violent, jihadism. In Western Europe, the latter became increasingly visible from around 2012, with the escalation of the civil war in Syria. In Sunni Muslim circles, reports of the Assad regime's atrocities against Syrian civilians, which represented the regime in theological terms as Shi'ite 'hypocrites' (*munafiqun*) and/or apostates, mobilized significant (even if statistically almost negligible) numbers of local Muslim youths, mostly of North African descent, to join in what in some circles was called the 'Syrian jihad'. This jihad was led by groups like the al-Qa'ida-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra, and the so-called Islamic State that had emerged in the power vacuum then obtaining in the predominantly Sunni Arab regions of Syria and Iraq. Substantial recruitment for the jihad in Syria and Iraq lasted roughly from 2012 to 2016, but in 2015 and 2016, jihadists also sought targets in Western Europe, leading to a wave of assaults legitimated in Salafi-jihadi terms, most notably in Brussels, Paris,[7] Nice, and Berlin. Generally, indeed almost invariably, the perpetrators were young males of North African backgrounds, with a personal history of petty crime and drug use rather than religious zeal. These assaults were widely seen as having been orchestrated by the so-called Islamic State (IS); indeed, IS was quick to claim responsibility for whatever assault in Europe might be construed as jihadist. On the whole, however, no clear organizational links or chains of command between IS and the perpetrators have been found. In Western Europe, suicide missions hardly if ever targeted state power, but that need not imply they have no political significance. They not only escape sovereign power in radically defying the logic of crime, law, and punishment, but their perpetrators also assert, or arrogate, a power over their very lives—and those of others. As such, they may be seen as biopolitical gestures (cf. Leezenberg forthcoming).

Apolitical and peaceful Salafism and potentially or actually violent Salafi-jihadism should be kept analytically separate, even if there may be doctrinal and, occasionally, organizational links between them. It is an open question how their rejection of various liberal-secular concepts and values should be understood conceptually and valued normatively. In one currently influential interpretation of both, Olivier Roy (2017) argues that Salafism is a deculturalized and deterritorialized form of globalized Islam that appeals to second-generation Muslims in

migration settings and to converts precisely because it is no longer culturally or geographically specific, and that the 2015 and 2016 jihadist suicide attacks in Western Europe were not driven by political claims or caused by social marginalization or European state policies; rather, he writes, they were nihilist, expressing a purely aesthetic cult of death.

Indisputably, there is much to be said for both explanations, which focus on deculturation and youth culture rather than on religious traditions or modernization processes. There are also problems with Roy's claims, however: despite their rhetorical appeals to the entire ummah or community of the faithful, Salafism and Salafi-jihadism are widely seen among Muslims as specifically Arab forms of Islam, that is, as culturally and geographically specific. Obviously, its militantly Sunni Islam has little to attract Muslims of Shi'ite backgrounds or beliefs; but it has also relatively few sympathizers among Turks and Kurds, among whom organized Islam has generally been shaped by Naqshbandi Sufism, which has an enduringly anti-Salafi character (Yavuz 2003). Likewise, Roy's claim that jihadist violence is only contingently linked to Salafi ideology and to concrete political goals seems an overstatement.

On the whole, Roy thus appears to share Habermas' and Asad's denial of genuinely political motivations for terrorist acts. These denials stand in a long tradition of seeing terrorism in moral (or, in Roy's case, aesthetic) rather than social or political terms, and treating with suspicion any attempt to find causal social explanations or rational political motivations for terrorist acts of violence. This refusal to see terrorist violence as 'reasonable' (i.e., as either goal-rational, motivated by identifiable political causes, or justified by reasonable political demands) is not simply an analytical or conceptual shortcoming in the writings of these authors. Rather, it reflects a widespread and persistent tendency to minimize or deny the political dimensions of terrorist violence. American anthropologist Lisa Stampnitzky has argued that from the late 1970s, the question of whether terrorists may have rational, objective motives has itself become highly politically charged (Stampnitzky 2013: 65). Instead, terrorism studies have witnessed the emergence of what she calls a 'politics of anti-knowledge', that is, a predominant *rejection* of the very attempt to understand terrorism in goal-rational terms or to seek causal explanations as a covert or explicit expression of sympathy for its perpetrators (*ibid*.: 194–5). In other words, if terrorism is—implicitly or explicitly—*defined* as irrational and illegitimate political violence, it becomes virtually impossible to coherently raise the question of whether it may in some circumstances be justified or motivated by legitimate grievances. Stampnitzky continues by arguing that terrorism studies are not an established and depoliticized academic discipline, but a field that has long remained, and probably will remain for the foreseeable future, less than fully institutionalized. By extension, the notion of terrorism itself has remained and will remain an unstable, 'undisciplined' object of knowledge. Even if nowadays terrorism is virtually defined as evil if not irrational, this depoliticized and moralizing characterization remains fiercely contested.

Conclusion

Despite their considerable differences, the liberal postsecularist Habermas and the Islamic communitarian Asad appear to converge on a number of points. First, they share a conceptual and normative assumption of debate and discussion as 'reasonable'; that is, even if in practice they mean rather different things by 'reason' both agree that in itself debate is free and fair and rational. In doing so, both downplay, ignore, or deny the presence of power relations or power effects in reasonable debate, if not in the notion of rationality itself.

Second, both Habermas and Asad appear to presume a highly problematic and highly contested notion of terrorism, or terror, as illegitimate and indeed unreasonable; both also explicitly state that Salafi-jihadist assaults stand outside the Islamic religious tradition—which they characterize, respectively, as in essence a distinct sphere of social life and as an essentially reasonable and non-violent tradition of debate under a legitimate religious authority. Hence, both see terrorist violence, even if articulated and legitimated in religious terms, as non-religious almost as a matter of definition. In doing so, however, they fail to provide an adequate account of *why* in the early twenty-first century, such assaults tended to be articulated and legitimated in religious (and more concretely Salafi-jihadist) terms, rather than in the terms of revolutionary Marxism or anarchism, as would have happened several decades earlier.

Third, and finally, Habermas and Asad share a rather reductionist view of the historical development of modern forms of Islam as arising out of a generic confrontation between an Islamic world assumed to be traditional and a modern West assumed to be liberal and secular. This historical oversimplification has non-trivial conceptual and normative consequences, which become most clearly visible in Habermas' claims that the Islamic world is not yet modernized (or secularized), and that it has witnessed a modernization-as-secularization gone astray, in disregard of concrete political processes or conflicts. Likewise, Asad's sweeping condemnation of all political violence as 'terror', and his equally sweeping reduction of modern Islamic history to a confrontation between an Islamic world or 'tradition' and an imperial, liberal, and secular West, precludes him from raising the question of what is historically and conceptually specific about present-day Salafi-jihadism, and of how it has at least in part been shaped by the experience of communism.

The conceptual and normative implications of the genealogical account outlined above are far from clear, but a reorientation towards the (partly) Marxist-Leninist origins of Salafism and Salafi-jihadism and towards the forms of governmentality they imply may be of use here. Likewise, Stampnitzky's argument may force us to rethink the permanently contested character of a concept of terrorism that authors like Habermas, Asad, and Roy appear to take for granted. Against these and other authors, one may—and indeed should—emphasize that religiously motivated or legitimated violence *can* be explained from social and other causes and *can* be driven by political or other motivations or aims that may be qualified as 'rational'. But the very attempt to do so is likely to remain controversial for the foreseeable future, in academic discussions as much as in public debates.

Notes

1 For an overview, see Beckford (2012); see also Molendijk (2015). Beckford, incidentally, expresses scepticism about the analytical usefulness of the term, in view of the various uses to which it has been put.

2 For reasons of space, I can only discuss a small number of examples, all linked to the Islamic world. No implication that terrorist violence is in any way specific or unique to Islam should be read into this restriction.

3 As of 2018, even the secular European identity as signalled and criticized by Asad is increasingly challenged by new xenophobic, anti-European, and anti-Muslim assertions of national identity, which appeal to national and/or religious traditions as much as to liberal secular values. Equally significantly, sexuality plays a central role in defining these identities. Lack of space precludes a fuller discussion of this phenomenon.

4 See e.g., Asad (1986: 20n22): 'Apart from the important Communist parties of Iraq and Sudan (neither of which commanded a massive following), Marxism has had no real roots among Muslim populations'.

5 See Leezenberg (2018) for a fuller discussion of the relations between Foucault's writings on neoliberalism and the Iranian Revolution.
6 On the—surprisingly brief—history of modern Salafism, see especially Lauzière (2016). For a convenient introduction to jihadism, see Schmidinger (2016), which focuses on paths of radicalization and deradicalization among youths in Europe.

Further reading

Asad, T. (2007) *On Suicide Bombing*, New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
A sustained critique of the liberal horror at this particular form of—often religiously motivated—violence.
Kepel, G. (2017) *Terror in France: the rise of jihad in the west*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
An empirical study by Roy's great academic rival, setting out to explain the 2015–2016 wave of suicide assaults in terms of both Islamic theology and sociological conditions.
Roy, O. (2004) *Globalized Islam*, London: Hurst.
Roy's first characterization of Salafi Islam as deculturalized and deterritorialized, and hence as particularly well adapted to a globalized world.

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