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Stuck in a revolving door : secularism, assimilation and democratic pluralism

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Introduction: Assimilation, Secularism and Cultural Memory

In this study I present a critical analysis of two central concepts in the history of the incorporation of ethnic and religious minorities in Europe: 'assimilation' and 'secularism'. While in public discourses on 'integration' the notion of assimilation has been either forgotten or rejected, secularism retains a rather unshakable reputation.¹ Nevertheless, I will argue that secularism is inevitably intertwined with assimilation, particularly in the context of European history. I believe it is useful to revisit the historical and conceptual intersections of the two concepts for rethinking our present-day debates about the place of culture and religion in the public sphere. I even think that exploring these affectively loaded concepts—with their long interrelated histories, during which they were infused with shifting meanings in different power constellations and with different practical effects—is crucial for understanding how religion, and Islam in particular, has gained importance in contemporary public life and politics, as well as for evaluating the possibilities for acting wisely in the face of this fact.

Certain scholars and other participants in public debates on integration have recently suggested that reintroducing or re-emphasising assimilation,

¹ Following the habits of contemporary political theory, I use 'incorporation' as the most normatively neutral 'umbrella' concept for dealing with questions surrounding cultural and religious diversity in the context of migration. When talking about public debates I use 'integration', since this is common practice. It should, however, be clear from the start that 'integration' is a normatively charged concept.

secularism, or both, might be of help in the struggle against segregation, poverty and fanaticism that increasingly needs to be waged in Western countries. They have proposed that these concepts and the practices related to them have lost their old negative connotations and effects now that they have been made compatible with democracy and liberalism and have lost their connection to nationalism (in the case of assimilation) and dogmatic anti-religious positivism (in the case of secularism). Indeed, these notions are presented, by some of the authors whose views I will discuss, as conceptual tools for dealing with the problems caused by a multiculturalism which, in their view, has helped to produce an institutional context for the flourishing of fundamentalism and for the internal repression of minorities within minorities.

One of the main thrusts of my argument will be to complicate these 'new' alternatives. To achieve this I will follow a twofold approach. First, I analyse the ways in which assimilation and secularism occur in two contemporary debates. The first is a debate in contemporary sociology and political theory on the need to reintroduce a revised concept of assimilation as a critical reaction to multiculturalism. The second is the public debate about *laïcité* [secularism] in France, which has become well-known internationally in the context of the headscarf affairs.² In commenting on these debates, I scrutinise the use of the concepts of assimilation and secularism from a pluralist perspective or, more precisely, from the perspective of what I call 'democratic relational pluralism'.

Second, I provide an in-depth reading of Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* [*In Search of Lost Time*], a novel which bears witness to the position of the French Jews in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, when their position was greatly influenced by intersecting expectations that they would assimilate and secularise. Proust's novel provides us with a unique perspective on the way these expectations 'worked' in the long run and in practice, and I believe that tracing a critical genealogy to precisely the period described by Proust is crucial to establishing the 'history of the present' of ethno-religious diversity in France—and in some respects also more generally in Europe. A second reason for reading the Proustian novel is that it enables us to scrutinise cultural memory—and cultural forgetting—in ways critical of the heritage of modernist secularism, which may help us to sharpen our intuitions about what would be the conditions for 'democratic memory', a term I borrow from Rainer Bauboeck (1998b: 339).

Let us consider the following two stories connected to some crucial questions about the two central concepts—and the practices related to them—in my research: assimilation and secularism.

² Following common translation practices, I translate *laïcité* by 'secularism', which is more explicitly normative than the French concept. I will comment on this significant particularity in translation practices in Transit II.

Assimilation

In contemporary Europe, the status of migrants (and their children) who also happen to be Muslims has become ambivalent. Mutual trust between Muslims and non-Muslims is no longer self-evident in the context of the rise of deeply conservative or fanatic Islamism on the one hand, and increasingly ethno-religiously determined poverty and discrimination on the other. A decrease in trust is not only sensible in public debates, but also in small everyday experiences and decisions that may not be dramatic, but that I nevertheless consider significant. Of one of these small decisions I was told by two people, Ferozah and Atique, with whom I have become close friends since I started as a 'neighbourhood-volunteer' with the organisation for refugees (Vluchtelingen Werk Nederland) in Amsterdam in 1999.³ Ferozah and Atique are both Afghan refugees, separated from their family members who are living in precarious situations in Afghanistan. They married a few years ago and live in East-Amsterdam.

On 15 November 2004, thirteen days after Mohammed Bouyeri killed the Dutch writer and film-maker Theo van Gogh in East-Amsterdam, Ferozah and Atique's first child, a son, was born. On the evening of that day, Ferozah told me that she and Atique had wanted to call their son Mohammed, after her grandfather. But they had decided not to do so, 'because he would perhaps have problems if he were called Mohammed'. Atique added that people like themselves should not act 'provocatively'. Ferozah and Atique's explanation shows how the local and the temporal can resignify a name as old as a world religion. Although it remains to be evaluated how reasonable their precautionary decision will turn out in the long run, it is, in my view, significant because it shows that, at the level of personal experience, people strongly sense a risk that being a Muslim—or having a Muslim background—is no longer unproblematic in European societies, if it ever was.

Let us assume that, basically, assimilation means the adaptation of newcomers or members of linguistic or other minorities to a dominant culture, usually related to a specific nation-state. Questions about the usefulness of this concept today could include: what exactly does 'adaptation' imply in today's democratic societies? To what exactly do migrants (have to) assimilate, to what extent, and to whose culture? At this point in time, what is a dominant culture anyway? Aren't we all hybrids now? What is the relation between culture and

³ A so-called 'neighbourhood-volunteer' is someone who, at the request of VluchtelingenWerk Nederland, contacts a refugee living in the neighbourhood who has indicated an interest in such contact. In principle, a volunteer merely introduces this person to the neighbourhood and helps her or him with the language, with finding her or his way at school or at work, etc., but quite often volunteers and refugees become friends.

the nation-state and in what ways is this relation changing in the era of globalisation? Isn't assimilation merely another word for 'integration'?

In spite of these questions, or rather in relation to them, the concept of assimilation is returning to academic discourses about incorporation. For over forty years, the concept of assimilation was not considered a dominant one; it had even acquired a rather bad reputation. First of all, it was rejected in its normative sense of *assimilationism*, since this was understood to legitimise enforced cultural homogenisation at the expense of minority cultures. But the concept was also abandoned in its more sociologically informed empirical sense, after Nathan Glazer and Patrick Moynihan (1963) had argued that the 'melting pot'—the expected end result of the process of assimilation in mid twentieth-century American sociology—just 'did not happen'. Multiculturalism, in different shapes and to different degrees, critically came to replace or at least qualify assimilation. 'Multiculturalism', too, had normative and empirical levels: we started talking about *multicultural* societies, and about *multiculturalism* as a general umbrella concept for pluralist ways of dealing with cultural and religious diversity.

Yet when Glazer wrote in 1997 that 'we are all multiculturalists now', he could not have surmised that only ten years later being a 'multiculturalist' was no longer that self-evident, or that 'assimilation' would be on its way back. Though not in a very widespread way, 'assimilation' has returned as a viable, in some views even necessary sociological concept for understanding and governing incorporation. With regard to Europe, and in the first place France, this has been particularly the case in the work of the socio-historian Gérard Noiriel, who basically argues that a realistic understanding of incorporation must acknowledge the force of assimilation as a historical process, and that this has to make us sensible to the 'real' issue, which is socio-economic mobility (see chapter one).

But we do not need to worry, others argue, because assimilation has lost its old *assimilationist* tendencies, and now functions within a liberal democratic framework. By reintroducing assimilation, they suggest, we only contest those naïve forms of multiculturalism that defend conservative, essentialised or even 'religionised' notions of culture, which have mostly occurred in the service of patriarchal 'majorities' within 'minorities', or of majorities wanting to exclude migrants because of their imagined irreparable 'difference'.⁴ According to such a view, the transformed concept of assimilation does not designate the imposition of majority cultures on minorities, but rather indicates one direction in the processes of convergence, negotiation, adaptation and differentiation that are inevitably taking place in liberal democratic societies today.

⁴ For example Brubaker (2001) and Joppke and Morawska (2003). See chapter two.

This study begins by addressing the web of contemporary definitions, distinctions and oppositions in our understanding of the concepts and practices related to 'assimilation', as well as their relation to different kinds of pluralism. To curtail my range of questions to a central one for now, I would like to propose that Ferozah and Atique's small decision problematises Jürgen Habermas' suggestion that we can distinguish, 'philosophically', between 'two levels of assimilation':⁵

- (a) Assent to the principles of the constitution within the scope of interpretation determined by the ethical-political self-understanding of the citizens and the political culture of the country; in other words, assimilation to the way in which the autonomy of the citizens is institutionalized in the recipient society and the way the 'public use of reason' is practiced there; (b) the further level of willingness to become acculturated, that is, not only to conform externally but to become habituated to the way of life, the practices, and customs of the local culture (Habermas 1994: 138).

Habermas distinguishes here between what he calls a level of 'political socialisation' and one of 'ethical-cultural integration' (138). The first only implies adaptation to the receiving country's 'public use of reason', while the latter also implies adaptation to the more particular, more clearly culturally specific *ethoi*, customs, habits, language(s), perhaps even beliefs and faiths, dominant in that country. To require the first, Habermas suggests, is legitimate: this is the kind of assimilation that is required by liberal immigration policies like those practiced in the United States. To require the second is illegitimate and nationalist, and Habermas mentions the Bismarckian Germanisation policies with regard to the Poles as an historical example (Habermas 1994).

The central query emerging from these discussions is whether 'liberal' requirements for assimilation, which strive to leave habits and beliefs free and which only require adaptation to a central but limited publicly shared moral, legal and political set of rules and values, summarised under the heading of 'public reason', can ever be neatly separated from pressures to assimilate more comprehensively in the everyday context of today's European societies. This leads me to the question of how we should deal with the normative questions ensuing from this problem. How should we relate the 'philosophical' distinction between levels of assimilation to the problems encountered by a philosophy interested in experience and the complexities of everyday life? What exactly does it imply when we think that building a 'common civic culture' implies the necessity of a process of cultural convergence, which

⁵ Habermas makes this distinction in a comment on Taylor's 'Politics of Recognition' (1994).

requires 'assimilation on the part of all, especially newcomers' (Baumann 1999: 14)? In any case, Ferozah and Atique's small decision—and we can easily imagine many other examples—strongly suggests that the 'public' aspects of culture may have far-reaching repercussions on private, even intimate decisions made by newcomers, such as naming your newborn son.

Secularism

Secularism has a relatively high status in European public culture and politics as a fundamental principle of the modern state's religious neutrality. It acquired this rather unshakable reputation in the context of its role in conceiving of a political organisation of society able to put an end to the religious wars dividing the European continent in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Specifically, the liberal option of 'privatising' religion and maintaining a religiously neutral state is often viewed as a proven solution to prevent or ameliorate religious conflict and to limit religion's impact on people's lives and decisions.

Secularism's high public status is accompanied by a more contested status in critical political philosophy and critical studies in the humanities and social sciences. In part, this contestation is motivated by recent events. Particularly since 9/11, but actually at least since the Rushdie affair in 1988-89, secularism has become something of a fighting creed for public defenders of 'the Enlightenment'. As such, it has been identified as a basic premise of liberal democracy and has played an important role in the confrontation with fundamentalist Islam, but also with other religious fundamentalists and neo-conservatives. In these contexts, secularism has been invoked to defend democracy, women's rights, sexual minorities' rights, and is often regarded as indispensable to equality, parity and democracy.⁶ However, in reaction to secularism's role in legitimising politically contested decisions such as the French law prohibiting the wearing of 'conspicuous religious signs' such as headscarves, kippahs and 'large crosses' in public schools and similar Turkish laws, in recent years secularism has also become a contested concept, particularly in the context of postcolonial migration.

In order to understand why and in which ways secularism is considered problematic, we have to focus on the status and role of religion in the public domain, and particularly on the heritage of the modern understanding of religion as a private affair or even as something 'interior' or purely subjective

⁶ I use parity in the sense of equal opportunities to participate in society; as Nancy Fraser says, 'on a par' with others (2001: 24).

that has its source in the 'heart' of the individual.⁷ Once again, I will enter into conceptual details—and headscarf affairs—later, and start by introducing a few central questions. I will introduce these questions by analysing, first, a quote from Uriel Acosta's autobiography. Acosta was a so-called 'freethinker' who influenced Spinoza in the early modern Amsterdam of the seventeenth century (see Smith 1999: 9). Second, I will briefly trace a few ways in which Acosta's critique of religion returns in modern philosophy and then, third, raise some of today's critical questions.

The central phrase in Acosta's account of his life is the equivalent of a sigh: 'By religion has my life been made a scene of incredible sufferings' (Acosta 1967 [1740]: 10). Acosta was born in Portugal in the second half of the fifteenth century and raised as a Catholic. During his youth in Portugal he decided, after long hesitations, to convert to 'the law of Moses' (12), when he began to consider the Old Testament as God's own revelation, since it was shared by Jews and Christians, whereas he considered the New Testament, which was only accepted by Christians, less universal.⁸ Because it was unsafe to be Jewish in Portugal, Acosta moved to Amsterdam, like so many others of his era.

In Amsterdam, Acosta soon entered into debates with the rabbis and in 1618 he was excommunicated, which had severe consequences for his life. After seven years, he decided to ask forgiveness because he could no longer bear the isolation from his community. In order to be forgiven, he was forced to expose his 'sins' in front of everybody in the synagogue. At the end of the service, he had to lie at the threshold of the synagogue and all the visitors had to step over him to leave.⁹

His autobiography precedes Acosta's reflections on the relation between religion and politics, and, specifically, between religious and natural law, or, analogously, between revealed religion and reason:

⁷ I use modernity in a broad philosophical-historical sense here. It usually indicates the period which emerged with great force when medieval Catholicism as a comprehensive world view and Rome as a central world power were crumbling and when philosophers like Bacon, Spinoza, and Hobbes started to develop their philosophies concentrated on the 'new' and the natural temporal world; a development that is aptly summarised by the German term 'Neuzeit' [literally 'newtime']. Later in this introduction, I will turn to Foucault's understanding of Enlightenment and modernity, which defines these concepts in terms of an attitude rather than a specific period.

⁸ Another reason may have been that his family had forcibly converted to Christianity a few generations before, but Acosta does not mention this as a reason for his conversion to Judaism.

⁹ Sometimes Acosta is also called Uriel De/Da Costa. He figures prominently in Robert Menasse's great novel *Die Vertreibung aus der Hölle* [*The Expulsion from Hell*] (2001), which narrates the Menasse family's European (Spanish-Portuguese, Dutch, Austrian) history. At the end of the novel, Spinoza is portrayed as a young witness to Acosta's trial and the novel suggests that Acosta's unjust punishment was a crucial moment in Spinoza's turn away from revealed religion. Incidentally, Acosta was excommunicated several times.

Granting then that this [natural] law is the common rule of action to all men, and suitable to them as they are such; it does certainly lead them together in the ties of mutual affection, and is an utter stranger of those divisions, which occasion hatred and animosity among men, and are the greatest evils that infest society. It is that which teaches us of the art of living well, which distinguishes between right and wrong, and points out what is decent and indecent. Whatever is excellent in the law of Moses, or any other institution, is perfectly contained in the law of nature, from which if we deviate ever so little, contentions and divisions are the natural consequences; but if we err widely from it, who can describe the distraction, confusion, and terrible disasters that must result from such defection? (...) Now there is nothing in these which is not dictated by the law of nature, and does not entirely agree with that rule of right of reason. (...) Indeed many of the evils that happen in life do arise from hence, that men have invented the laws directly repugnant to those of nature; and thereby give occasion for one man to injure and persecute another (Acosta 1967 [1740]: 34-35, 43).¹⁰

Acosta's judgement about what should be done to end oppression within religious groups and persecution among them, brings to mind a crucial element in the early modern understanding of the relationship between reason and religion. It is the idea that the 'reasonable', universal kernel of religion could grant certainty and insight into justice, while revealed, particular religions, insofar as they diverge from this universal kernel through specific religious laws, obstruct such insight. Hence, together with Acosta's critique of religion went a certain problematisation of moral plurality and religious difference. This aspect of Acosta's reasoning was basically shared by secularism's early modern inventors such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and Baruch Spinoza, and was inherited by Immanuel Kant. I will very briefly trace this aspect of secularism's development here.¹¹

Hobbes, thinking in the midst of a world divided by religious wars, thought that the greatest miseries for mankind had been produced by the conflation of religion and politics. He strictly separated religion from a 'secular' sphere by claiming that he had 'derived the Right of Sovereign Power (...) from the Principles of Nature onely' (Hobbes 1651: 195; quoted from Hampsher-Monk 1992: 64).¹² He argues that there is no 'other Government in this life, neither of

¹⁰ I quote from the re-edition (1967) of the first English translation of this Latin text, published in 1740.

¹¹ In briefly sketching the different early secularist institutional 'models' of Hobbes, Locke and Spinoza, I draw on Balibar (2004).

¹² Hampsher-Monk quotes from the original edition of Hobbes' *Leviathan*, the page numbers of which are indicated in the 1990 edition by Tuck.

the State, nor Religion, but Temporall' (248). The 'temporal', worldly status of modern sovereignty is what makes it 'secular'.¹³ The Hobbesian modern state finds no legitimation in religion, but does so in reason, because God has delegated the power of his will, through natural Law, to the sovereign rather than to the many (and conflicting) revealed religions. The state should therefore become the 'principal agent of the institution of truth' and in Hobbes' *Leviathan* there is little room for religious pluralism (Balibar 2004: 365).

Philosophers like Locke and Spinoza advocated more tolerance of religions. Locke invented the liberal option, which relaxed the Hobbesian state monopoly on reason and truth by explicitly opening up a separate, 'private' sphere *free from* the state, a realm guaranteeing freedom of conscience to deal with our ultimate questions about the 'ends of life', while maintaining a public, 'worldly' sphere in the form of the religiously neutral state. Locke was a believing Protestant very attached to religion, but he considered it something of the heart, something interior. His early liberal concept of religion is crucial to 'secularisation' in the sense of the privatisation of religion into 'belief', where the relation of the individual believer to God becomes primary.

Spinoza was more radical in dividing reason and religion than Locke, because he considered revealed religion in general as superstition. Yet although Spinoza wanted full freedom of thought (*libertas philosophandi*) for philosophers so that they could entirely replace religion by reason, he advocated tolerance toward particular religious groups for political reasons and developed the early version of a model of religious pluralism admitting of 'parties' in an ongoing process of 'public-opinion formation' (Balibar 2004: 365; Rosenberg 2003).

A few centuries later, Kant drew out the radical consequences of religion's interiorisation as it had been inaugurated by Locke, by arguing that reason itself can construct the universal moral law and in principle needs no 'exterior',

¹³ 'Secular' is derived from the Latin *saeculum*. It means 'century', like *siècle* in French. Its connotation is the 'earthly world' in (countable) time as opposed to eternity. Hobbes can talk about this worldly domain as separable from religion because of what José Casanova has called a 'double dualist system of classification' in pre-modern Christendom. Medieval Christendom separated not only a 'sacred' sphere from a worldly sphere, but separated the church from the 'secular' proper within the worldly sphere itself. With regard to time, it distinguished between the Age of God, the sacred-spiritual time of salvation, and the secular age proper, the *saeculum* (Casanova 1994: 15). For historical precision: the substantive 'saecularisatio' was most probably used for the first time by Jean Papon in 1559; the verb dates from 1586. Originally, these terms had canonical juridical meanings related to the distinction between clerics and monks. Only from 1646 did *saecularisatio* receive a constitutional-political meaning as the abolition of church properties or their confiscation by the state. The term 'secularism' was coined in 1851 by George Jacob Holyoake to distinguish his goal of promoting 'thisworldly' happiness for all from atheism, which was at the time still considered amoral by many. 'Secularism' came to be used more generally after the world mission conference in 1928 (see also Casanova 1994; Asad 2003; Bader 2006b). For the relation of secularism to *laïcité*, see Transit II and chapter five.

practical, particular religion at all. Kant crucially added, however, as Locke had also done, that Protestantism was the religion which prepared reason's autonomy. I return to Kant's view in chapter five.

Thus, while proposals were made in early modernity for religious pluralism within a public sphere, or at least for the creation of a separate sphere to be governed by religious conscience, reason's claims to a privileged place in determining the polity's directions simultaneously remained strong. As modernity progressed, it became common to suggest that religions in general had just been a phase in the development of humanity, and that modernity actually meant that reason alone could do the jobs of acquiring theoretical knowledge, determining our moral laws, and helping us to institutionalise them. Thus, secularism as a principle of the separation of State and Church came to be strongly linked to a sociological concept of secularisation, of *Entzauberung*, of a 'sortie de la religion' ['exit from/of religion'], to borrow this happy term from Marcel Gauchet.

I would like to raise here three clusters of recent criticisms that have been made of secularism and the related concept of secularisation. It is not always entirely the same 'secularism' that is concerned; like all contested concepts, secularism, too, has shifting meanings related to shifts in the distribution of the power to define it. However, I think we can safely suggest that, generally, the criticisms of secularism concern its inheritance of the strong distinction between interiorised, reasonable, or at least private religion (or, in Kantian terms, 'reason alone') on the one hand, and 'particularising' yet public practices on the other. This heritage can be traced in some of today's political theories, which strictly separate religion and politics, or at least a private and a public sphere, or which suggest that the modern state is religiously neutral.

The *first* cluster concerns the empirical basis of both the sociological concept of *secularisation* and the political theoretical concept of *secularism*. With regard to 'secularisation', critics ask whether a full 'sortie de la religion' has taken place in modernity. Some scholars suggest that we should speak of a 'desecularisation of the world' in postmodernity, and of a return of (public) religion (for example Casanova 1994; Berger 1999; Gauchet 1998). Does Europe have a special status as a relatively 'secular' region or is this notion also contestable?

With regard to secularism's status in political theory, critics point to the fact that general assumptions about the actual separation between Church and State and about the state's religious neutrality in western societies should at least be nuanced and complicated. In the 'real' world, the neutrality of the state is usually not as strict as secularism intimates. For example, there are established churches in England, Norway and Denmark, tax exemptions for specific churches in Germany, a Protestant queen with a constitutional status in the Netherlands, and Christian political parties participating in governments all

over Europe (see for example Bader 1999; 2006b; Willems and Minkenberg 2002; Koenig 2003). With regard to *laïque* France, we might anticipate my upcoming argument in a preliminary metaphor: it is the Sainte Chapelle which is enclosed in the Palais de Justice, and not the *grande Mosquée*.¹⁴ Some have suggested that contemporary France also 'recognises' religions, Islam included, in contrast to its *laïque* principles (for example Bowen 2005). In Turkey, to raise a final example, religious signs may be banned from public places, but the state to a large extent finances and controls Turkish Islam.

A *second* cluster concerns the concepts of the 'secular' and 'secularisation' themselves, insofar as they are related to the modern understanding of religion as an interiorised (and universalisable) 'belief' that is separable from specific cultural practices. Such a concept of 'secularised' religion, critics have argued, presupposes, on the one hand, essentialised notions of belief, but also of reason and morality, as something purely interior, and, on the other, of ritual, or cultural practices related to religion, as something mechanical and exterior. This is a dubious assumption to make on philosophical grounds alone; it is contestable that such a thing as a purely interior belief is possible at all (I return to this in chapter six). The American political philosopher William Connolly recently summarised the essential point nicely: 'Even Kant discerned a connection between "gymnastics" and belief' (2005: 58).

According to Connolly, secularism has resulted in a structural privileging of non-religious motivations over religious ones in political deliberation. But more important, perhaps, is that we have also come to lack a sensitivity to the ways in which practices in general, habits, customs, *ethoi*, and also non-reasoned motives such as affects and drives—in sum, 'the visceral register of intersubjectivity'—are relevant to our moral and political actions (Connolly 1999: 27). Following Friedrich Nietzsche's critique of 'belief' (or 'pure reason') as *just* a mental state, infinitely less important than practices and affects, Connolly (1999) develops an immanentist critique of God but also of Reason, and connects his critique of secularism to an *ethos of pluralisation* closely related to Gilles Deleuze's micropolitics and Michel Foucault's *ethos* of Enlightenment.¹⁵

This critique of secularism is connected to a *third* cluster of contemporary critiques of secularism which are not based on a special sympathy for religion, but rather on an attempt to nuance and amplify our understanding of reason

¹⁴ And the *mosquée*, in its turn, was partly financed by the city of Paris as a gift to the Muslim community in honour of the many Muslim victims that had fallen in the First World War.

¹⁵ Similar critiques of Enlightenment's universalism have been made since Romanticism, but recent critiques of secularism concentrate on problematising the status and role of 'practices' (customs) and 'intensities' (affects) in secularist concepts of both reason and (interiorised) religion.

itself and of its relation to power, particularly with regard to interfaith and intercultural relations. Talal Asad (2001; 2003), for example, has argued that the strong distinction between reason and religion has resulted in quite stereotypical understandings of what have been called 'pre-modern' religions, especially insofar as they are related to specific cultural practices. In early modernism, Protestantism was often seen as the modern religion *par excellence*, precisely because of its link to interiorisation, while other religions were considered mechanical and ritualistic.

We can learn something about these interfaith aspects of secularism if we briefly return to the story of Uriel Acosta. The 'Editor's Introduction' to the first English edition of Acosta's *Account* (1740) starts by saying that Acosta 'too hastily' concluded that all religion was 'fraud' and 'invention' upon his confrontation with the 'absurdities in Popery, as well as modern Judaism', and that he failed to examine 'what had been wrote in defence of the *purer* part of it, professed by the Protestants' (Acosta 1967 [1740]: 83, my italics). In the course of this study, I will scrutinise these intercultural and interfaith aspects of secularism in more detail, which is where the question of assimilation will arise.

A second aspect of the *third* cluster *a propos* the relation between religion, reason and power, concerns the place of the heritage of the 'truth claim' of modern reason with regard to the question of what we consider the normative principles of a plural, democratic and cosmopolitan polity. What should remain of the privilege of Reason in our concepts of justice? Could it be helpful or necessary, as Veit Bader argues, to give 'priority to democracy' above secularism (1999; 2006b)? At first sight, to argue that we should give priority to democracy and to multiple-sourced reasons over Reason may seem superfluous in Western cultures pervaded by postmodern deconstructions of grand narratives and truths, including those of Reason. However, particularly in reaction to religious fundamentalism, a new type of idealisation of the Enlightenment and its modern, secular achievements, which is a little forgetful of its own complicated history, seems to be emerging. I will return to this issue in chapter six.¹⁶

What remains is a final, crucial question: do the critics of secularism offer solutions to contemporary problems similar to Acosta's, namely the argument that he suffered from religious dogmatism and oppression?¹⁷ If it is not

¹⁶ The latest manifestation of this idealisation is France's new law, adopted in January 2005, prescribing that in secondary-school history education, the 'positive' achievements of France in North-Africa should also form part of the curriculum.

¹⁷ Ayaan Hirsi Ali's (and others') early twenty-first-century attacks on Dutch 'tolerance' and 'multiculturalism' as a politics that only serves to empower conservative religious elites sometimes sound like echoes of Uriel Acosta's complaints. Acosta strongly rejects what we might call early modern multiculturalism: 'There is one thing beyond many others, that I

secularism in general that we have to defend against self-righteousness and intolerance, what *do* we need to defend? What are the options for democracy?

Research questions and outline of the chapters

Let me summarise the issues raised above and explain how I try to reflect on them in this study. My central questions are: Do we need the concepts of assimilation and secularism—and the practices related to them—within a pluralist liberal democracy, particularly in the context of migration? If so, how should we use these concepts, and if not, what are the reasons for rejecting them and what are the alternatives? If we agree that these questions cannot be solved by conceptual discussion alone, what can we learn from past instances in which these concepts have been ‘brought into practice’? I have split up these questions into four central clusters, which I will explain in what follows.

- I. Do we need a concept of assimilation in a theory of cultural and religious diversity in the context of migration? If so, what should be its normative status and how should we understand its relation to proposals for pluralist democracy? (Chapter one and two)
- II. What did assimilation actually mean in nineteenth-century France in the context of the Emancipation of the French Jews, and what, in practice, were its long-term effects? What did the concept ‘do’? (Transit I, chapter three and four) Here, a central theme will turn out to be the relation between requirements to assimilate and requirements to secularise.
- III. To what extent can we recognise the past of assimilation in the present of secularism in France? (Transit II, chapter five and six)
- IV. What can we learn from Proust’s novel with regard to revising secularist concepts of the relation between individuals and collectives in modernity, and, more specifically, what can we learn about collective aspects of memory in the context of ‘tense intercultural situations’? (Chapter seven)

Ad I. In the first two chapters, I analyse the two contemporary currents in sociology—briefly introduced above—which have pleaded for the return of

wonder at, and very surprising it is; how the Pharisees, living in a Christian country, come to enjoy so much liberty, as to judicial power and authority! (...) This is certainly just matter of reproach, and what ought not to be tolerated in a free city, which professes to protect men in the feasible enjoyment of their liberty, and yet does not screen them from the insolence and injurious treatment of the Pharisees’ (Acosta 1967 [1740]: 44).

assimilation as an acceptable, even necessary concept for understanding incorporation. In the first chapter, I address French *socio-histoire*, and in particular Gérard Noiriel's defence of assimilation in the 1990s. Most important is his suggestion that the crucial problem for migrants, and particularly for their children today, is socio-economic marginalisation, and that theories of cultural difference only encourage ethnicised explanations of this marginalisation. In the second chapter, I analyse the views of the social scientists Rogers Brubaker, Ewa Morawska and Christian Joppke, who have recently suggested that we need a concept of assimilation to counter tendencies of segregation, which they partly consider the result of multicultural policies.¹⁵ In these two chapters, I analyse the conceptual webs in which assimilation functions in its shifting meanings, and I particularly try to put my finger on how normative and empirical uses of the concept are connected and intertwined. The first crucial question is whether assimilation can function as a conceptual tool for understanding how we may counter trends of segregation, poverty, culturalism and fundamentalism. The second question asks if and how assimilation is compatible with proposals for pluralist democracy, and, if it is not, what the pluralist alternatives are. For reasons to be explained in chapter two, I conclude with the suggestion that if we want to develop a serious and critical view of assimilation, it might be wise to analyse the French nineteenth-century concept of assimilation, which motivates my turn to reading Proust's *Recherche*.

Ad II. In chapters three and four, I explore the *Recherche's* perspective on the history of Jewish assimilation in the French nineteenth century. The choice to take this novel as a primary source of insight is based on my previous reading experiences and on the intuition that exploring the novel in detail could provide us with insights into assimilation on historical, discursive and intersubjective levels. In Transit I, which precedes chapters three and four, I reflect on the transitions we have to make when choosing to address contemporary questions about assimilation by making a comparison, however careful, with the pre-World War II history of the European Jews, and, more specifically, on the transitions we have to make when we want to address the questions about nineteenth-century assimilation via a reading of the *Recherche*.

Turning to Proust's novel enables us to scrutinise the long-term discursive, social and political effects of the demand to assimilate in the specific form in which the Jews were asked to do so after 1791, when the Enlightenment ideals of freedom, equality and solidarity had been 'put into practice' and the Jews had acquired full civil rights. It will quickly become obvious that the demand to

¹⁵ For a recent overview of debates in the U.S. social sciences about the return of a concept of assimilation, see Kivisto (2005). (I only encountered this title just before finishing this study.)

assimilate was closely related, in fact partly coincided, with the demand that had been placed upon the Jews to 'secularise' their religion, which meant a specific way of privatising and 'decollectivising' it, insofar as it had been linked with collective particularity before the Revolution. The secularisation of Judaism was seen as a prerequisite for the assimilation of the Jews as 'Frenchmen only' as far as the public sphere was concerned. This was considered necessary for the unity of the French Republic.

In my reading of the *Recherche*, I focus on the ways in which it presents, narrates, ironises, performs and analyses the *oblique* practical and discursive effects of the requirement to assimilate. My reading here has been informed by Hannah Arendt's interpretation of the *Recherche*. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1979 [1948]), Arendt suggests that Proust was witness to a central problem that the Jews were confronted with at the end of the nineteenth century: after they had left all the 'objective', particularising and collective aspects of their religion behind, and thus had fully 'secularised' and interiorised Judaism into what Arendt calls 'Jewishness', they were confronted by the fact that this did not at all mean that 'being Jewish' had lost its social or political relevance. Instead, this relevance had increased in unexpected and quite undesirable ways that became manifest in the anti-Semitic Dreyfus Affair (1894-1906).

I will explain the Affair in detail later, but I can summarise it here as the history of a French army officer called Alfred Dreyfus, who was falsely accused of high treason (in the service of the Germans) in 1894, and its aftermath in French society, which became thoroughly divided by it. Dreyfus was a fully secularised, 'assimilated' Jew, very loyal to the French Republic. However, some people considered him a likely suspect of treason because of his 'multiple' identity as a Frenchman *and* a Jew. Dreyfus himself considered this latter 'identity' private and irrelevant to his functioning as a citizen of France. Partially on the basis of her reading of the *Recherche*, Arendt suggests that the Dreyfus Affair brought to light how Christian anti-Semitism had not been eradicated with the advent of modernity, but had instead been transformed: the crucial problem the Jews encountered was that their assimilation had led to *new* forms of particularisation and exclusion. By reading the *Recherche*, I will further scrutinise these unexpected results in their full complexity, while amending Arendt's interpretation in some regards by focusing on the role of cultural memory.

In chapter three, I examine the *Recherche's* suggestion that certain cultural aspects of Judaism—practical, visible, partly public aspects—did not disappear as a result of its privatisation, but rather were transformed into cultural memories, inhabiting a nearly unspeakable semi-private, semi-public sphere. I do so by tracing the peculiarities of the character Alfred Bloch's 'Jewish identity' as it appears at the threshold of the Catholic family of the novel's

protagonist Marcel, a family which is itself in the midst of an unfinished process of secularisation.

In chapter four, I further explore the cultural memories of 'difference' by focusing on how these memories are made accessible by Proust's literary techniques, in particular his metaphors. I do so in the context of a reflection on the ways in which Proust's novel complicates the French historian Théodore Reinach's definition of Jewish 'assimilation' and its relation to secularisation, as well as Arendt's explanation of the issue. Here, I also address Zygmunt Bauman's and Esther Benbassa's suggestions that the problematic sides of assimilation were crucially related to questions of class, social mobility and 'who came first'. In the fourth section of this chapter, I provide an interpretation of the Proustian metaphor which I used as a title for this study: getting *stuck in a revolving door*.

Ad III. The third question is what we may 'learn' from our reading of the Proustian novel towards understanding present-day questions around cultural and religious diversity. Here, I start by shifting the questions about assimilation to the debate about secularism and, in particular, the French debate about *laïcité*. This version of secularism has become internationally well-known because it was the central concept invoked by the so-called 'Stasi committee', when offering its decisive advice, in December 2003, to the French government to issue a law prohibiting the wearing of 'conspicuous religious signs' at public schools.¹⁹

In the course of my reading of the *Recherche*, I have become more and more convinced that the future relation between assimilation and pluralism in France, but also more generally in Europe, crucially depends on how we understand 'secularism', and that some quite common assumptions about secularism cherished by academics and politicians from very diverse backgrounds have to be critically revised. While I will concentrate on France, my argument to some extent pertains to a more generally European context, if we consider Europe as a region which has inherited the conceptual schemes of philosophical modernism and Enlightenment thought.²⁰

As said, the concern from which I raise my questions about secularism is not religion or even the intensity of moral experience to which we do no justice by using an overly superficial, abstract or mentalistic concept of morality. Rather, it

¹⁹ Initially, the 'Stasi committee' was officially called the 'Commission de réflexion sur l'application du principe de laïcité dans la République', but this was soon abbreviated into 'Commission Stasi', named after the president of the committee, the Christian Democratic politician Bernard Stasi.

²⁰ Jonathan Israel has emphasised the European scope of Enlightenment thinking in early modernity (2001).

is the suspicion that secularism, in a context of explicit or hidden pressures to assimilate (and hence, in the context of intercultural minority-majority relations), may pose an obstacle to a more or less equal distribution of people's opportunities to live relatively safe and happy lives, in which they themselves have a strong voice; hence, my concern is democracy. In this context, I believe that if we remain forgetful of the paradoxes of assimilation as they are connected to secularism, we risk repeating crucial mistakes, leading to misunderstandings between citizens and to processes of exclusion. This is why I think that the ambivalences and paradoxes that played a role in the nineteenth-century process of Jewish assimilation should find their way into a self-critical attitude by present-day Europeans toward the heritage of secularism.

Thus, the central question to be addressed is what we can learn from the nineteenth-century history of assimilation towards analysing today's questions about culture and religion in the public sphere, particularly in the context of migration. The law prohibiting the wearing of 'conspicuous religious signs' at public schools has caused more people to make comparisons. In the first place, this was done by the Stasi Committee itself. In its by now famous 'report', the committee brings up the 'melting pot' and Franco-Judaism, both crucially related to the history of assimilation, as models for the secularisation of minority religions today (see chapter six).

Comparative tracks have also been explored in more critical ways, for example by the historians Pierre Birnbaum and Esther Benbassa, whose respective perspectives I tend to share. For them, the ground for comparison is not a similarity between the groups themselves, but the question of what we can learn from the combined history of assimilation and secularism as it has affected the Jews, towards evaluating the position of today's groups whose cultural or religious practices transgress the boundaries of a public sphere conceived as 'secular'. Benbassa summarises this perspective in the title of her 2003 book *La France face à ses minorités; Les Juifs hier, les Musulmans aujourd'hui* [France facing its minorities; yesterday the Jews, the Muslims today]. The special link between Jews in the past and Muslims now is that these groups seem to acquire something of a paradigmatic status in defining the relation between state, religion and the individual (see Birnbaum 1998; Laborde 2005).

I specify my central question in this context as follows: What have we inherited today of the strong distinction developed in what we could call philosophical modernism, and particularly in French neo-Kantianism, between interiorised religion and religious practices? Can we trace the secularist heritage of wanting to 'purify' religion from publicly collective, particularising practices, in contemporary interpretations of public aspects of religion, and of Islam in particular, as the signs of a 'political religion'? And, if this is the case, do we

perceive the actual problems in the right way, and do we propose the right solutions? ²¹

In Transit II, I suggest that we should not seek the heritage of modernism in immediate practices, policies or laws trying to render religion invisible, or even in attempts to ban religious arguments from the public sphere. For these two interpretations of *laïcité* are explicitly excluded from the Stasi Committee's rethinking of the concept, which is unequivocally presented as a liberal *laïcité* that leaves religion free and even encourages religious pluralism. Rather, I argue, the problem lies in the dichotomous conceptual distinctions that are still being used to understand the relation between religious *appartenance* [belonging] and the freedom of the individual citizen. ²²

These hypotheses will be further scrutinised in chapters five and six. In chapter five, I trace the concept of the interiorisation of religion in the neo-Kantian ideology of *laïcism* in the Third Republic (1870-1914), and I also reflect on one of the early Republican deconstructions of neo-Kantianism by the French sociologist Émile Durkheim. In chapter six, I critically analyse the Stasi committee's report and return to the democratic critique of secularism. Furthermore, I interpret some fragments from the work of the contemporary French *islamologues* ['islamologists'] and scholars Gilles Kepel, Alain Touraine, Marcel Gauchet and Olivier Roy concerning the relation between religion, culture, and politics in the public sphere.

Ad IV. A last central question concerns the possibilities of understanding the interaction between political participation and social relationships differently from the ways common in secularist discourse. Here, I return to reading Proust. In the last chapter, I trace the *Recherche's* alternative narrative of the complexities of individual autonomy and belonging in a situation of 'tense intercultural' exchange. This narrative may help to outline the prospect for a pluriform democracy on the basis of the complexities of our political, cultural and religious solidarities and inequalities, without presupposing secularism's desirability. In this context, I provide a critical interpretation of Walter Benjamin's and Gilles Deleuze's modernist readings of Proust's novel by bringing together assimilation, secularism and cultural memory. I try to

²¹ This approach is also connected to Connolly's. While reflecting on the position of Jews and Muslims in Europe, he has recently argued that across Europe Muslims today are widely considered as a 'special minority (...) with distinctive rituals residing outside the orbit of the Enlightenment distinction between private faith and public reason' (Connolly 2005: 55).

²² Balibar (2004) suggests that the French concept of *laïcité* is strongly marked by the Hobbesian model, where the state retains a monopoly or at least strong control over education by diffusing rational knowledge and relativising 'mere' opinion. I will argue that *laïcité* should rather be considered as a liberal concept, which is crucially indebted only to the modernist interpretation of secularisation as religion's interiorisation.

contribute to answering a question that has been formulated by Rainer Bauboeck: if we think that a 'presentist' concept of liberal democracy will not do, because 'citizens of a democratic polity must see themselves as sharing a common future', what then is needed for a democratic memory which can 'include the divergent pasts of all groups who share a common future in a democratic state' (Bauboeck 2002: 8)?

Methods

The research presented here was executed in an interdisciplinary context in which methods and academic 'tracks' familiar in French studies, philosophy (particularly critical theory and political theory) and cultural analysis have been combined. For my scrutiny of the debates surrounding the concepts of assimilation and secularism, I mainly follow a critical political philosophical approach. I consider the internal consistency of the arguments and bring the different views into debate with each other, while trying to add a historical layer to the views presented. My aim is not primarily to comment on the empirical material provided by the diverse contributors to the debates, but rather to analyse the sometimes implicit, sometimes explicit normative viewpoints that the diverse participants in the debates draw from these analyses. The democratic pluralist perspective from which I approach these questions stands in close relation to the versions of democratic pluralism developed, among others, by Iris Marion Young, Melissa Williams, Ayelet Shachar, Will Kymlicka, Joseph Carens, Rainer Bauboeck and Veit Bader.

In my reading of the *Recherche*, I combine a cultural analytical approach with a rethinking of earlier interpretations of Proust's work in the tradition of critical philosophy. Cultural analysis implies a self-reflexive interdisciplinary practice of interpreting cultural objects 'that seeks to understand the past as *part* of the present' (Bal 2002: 1). Particularly attractive about this approach is its consideration of the object under scrutiny as 'present, showing, arguing, and speaking' (Bal 1999: 7), and indeed, its exhortation to try, as a scholar, to 'make the object speak back', to 'empower the object', and to make the 'subject matter into subject, participating in the construction of theoretical views' (Bal 1999: 13; see also Peeren 2005). This is what I try to do by reading Proust intensively and by deriving my specific 'method' of reading Proust from the material itself, in particular from the abundance of metaphors and intertextual references in the novel, which enables us to analyse what the past 'does' in the present in very specific ways.

I combine this method with an attempt to learn from Benjamin's and Arendt's ways of reading of the *Recherche*. They succeed in doing justice to the

literary character of the work, while at the same time being sensitive to the ways in which it gives access to certain aspects of the history of the French Jews. Reading Proust can then become a method for deepening our insight into the intersected problems related to assimilation and secularism. It not only helps us to acquire an insight into the subjective and intersubjective ambivalences of assimilation, which may affect our evaluation of its political and moral merits at a convoluted level, but the literary character of Proust's work, in particular his deployment of intertextuality and metaphor, also makes it possible to study the complicated social and political effects of the 'expectation' of assimilation in a way that includes its effects on social imaginaries. This helps us to gain insight into the multi-levelled effects of assimilation(-ism) in such a way that it is no longer fully tied to the specificities of the historical situation which the novel represents.

I would like to add a brief reflection on the larger question of how to practice 'critical philosophy' today, a question whose urgency has become clearer to me in talks with Ruth Sonderegger that took place over the last few years. In this study, I hope to continue the heritage of critical Enlightenment thinking as it was understood by Michel Foucault when he argued that

the thread which may connect us with the Enlightenment is not faithfulness to doctrinal elements but, rather, the permanent reactivation of an attitude—that is, of a philosophical *ethos* that could be described as a permanent critique of our historical era' (Foucault 1997 [1979]: 312).

Foucault argued this point against what he called a certain 'blackmail' of the Enlightenment, and against the suggestion that one either has to be 'for' or 'against' it:

It even means precisely that one has to refuse everything that might present itself in the form of a simplistic and authoritarian alternative: you either accept the Enlightenment and remain within the tradition of its rationalism (...) or else you criticize the Enlightenment and then try to escape from its principles of rationality (...) (Foucault 1997: 313).

This is a useful perspective specifically in the French context, but it is valuable also more generally in the current European context, where public discourses have increasingly been filled with arguments presenting the Enlightenment heritage as a fixed set of norms that we can be *for* or *against* by being 'pro' or 'anti'-modernes, particularist *or* universalist, religious *or* rational, worthy inheritors to the 'radical Enlightenment' *or* rather somewhat cowardly, overly pragmatic defenders of a moderate Enlightenment that compromises with

religion. By tracing the genealogy, i.e. the 'historico-critical' layers, of the nineteenth-century concept of assimilation in relation to present-day questions of secularism and pluralism, I hope to contribute to overcoming this modernist tradition.

However, I do *not* think that political philosophy from now on will have to remain silent on anything more specific than *ethos* when asked about what a just, or perhaps even an 'enlightened' society would entail. We do not have to abstain entirely from trying to specify the minimal norms for democracy, equality and liberty for fear of being dogmatic or of reifying a norm. Here, I agree with those critics of post-modernism who do *not* oppose its critiques of dichotomous thinking and of dogmatic modernism and rationalism (in sum, the privilege of Reason), but who *do* oppose the suggestion that this should prevent us from trying to reach understanding about minimally defined universal norms. For example, I agree with Bader when he writes, in a debate with Connolly about the 'ethos of pluralisation', that

it seems advisable not to replace (moderately universal) principles of justice and 'rights' by ethos and virtues, or simply to declare the latter more 'fundamental' (...) and instead, to specify the multiple ways in which principles/rights and virtues are or might be productively combined (Bader 2006b).

Here, we arrive back at the main points of debate surrounding secularism that this study seeks to address: I hope to contribute to combining the *ethos* of pluralisation with a proposal for a moderately universal normative view of justice by backing up my arguments for democratic relational pluralism by an extensive genealogical, historico-critical analysis of the intersections of assimilation and secularism, trying to 'separate out, from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do or think' (Foucault 1997: 315-16).²³

²³ For a thorough reflection on the relation between the Kantian critical project and Foucault's genealogical concept of critique, see Sonderegger (forthcoming 2006).

