

Stacey T (Accepted Feb 2017) 'Imagining solidarity in the 21st century: towards a performative postsecularism' *Religion, State and Society*

Abstract

Imagining solidarity in the 21st century is particularly difficult in light of three factors: religious diversity, a religion/secular binary, and uncertainty as to the political future. This article employs myth as a lens for exploring and developing responses to these difficulties coalescing around the term postsecular. It suggests that these difficulties are reproduced rather than overcome in Jürgen Habermas' work. It then distinguishes between the postsecular, postsecularity and postsecularism to demonstrate how recent work offers new possibilities. Finally, it draws on original ethnography to develop this work. It claims that myth is central to how both religious and nonreligious people imagine solidarity. It suggests that myth is primarily performed rather than rationally argued, and calls for myths to be judged on the basis of the performances they produce. Finally, it suggests that the content of myths is less important than how and by whom they are constructed. Together, these insights constitute performative post-secularism.

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Introduction

Sometimes it can feel that our ability to imagine solidarity is slipping through our fingers. We lack the shared images and stories that inspire us to 'help others [...] without immediately getting something in return' (De Beer and Koster 2009:15). Some have put this slippage down to the loss of Christianity as a shared imaginary (MacIntyre 1981; Milbank 1990). And certainly much research demonstrates a link between religion and solidarity (Bellah, Tipton, Sullivan, Madsen, Swidler 1985; 1991; Habermas 2006; Williams 1999; Wuthnow 2006). Yet it seems problematic to reconcile this research with the complexly religious and nonreligious landscape facing us at present (Heelas and Woodhead 2004; Lee 2015; Woodhead 2016). Others

suggest secular imaginaries may be the basis of solidarity: from the idea of the secular itself, to a socialist utopia, to the nation state (Calhoun 2014). Yet with the continuing presence of religion, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the rise of globalisation, these imaginaries too seem to evaporate before our eyes (Judt 2010). This article is a small contribution to the search for how we might begin to again imagine solidarity.

Perhaps the biggest hurdle to overcome in the search for a new way of imagining solidarity is the feeling of being caught between two reified poles, the religious and the secular. Academics, policy makers, mass media and increasingly the wider public, too often adopt a religion/secular binary whereby religion is treated as purely imaginary, and for this reason as having too much influence on the ‘real’ world. Meanwhile the imaginary elements of secular narratives are neglected, as if the latter were purely rational (Asad 2003; Fitzgerald 2011). It has been suggested that undermining both religious and secular narratives in this way reifies neoliberal logics that instrumentalise both public and private, changing our understanding of economy, society, community, and our own personal work habits, ways of spending leisure time and relationships (Baker 2016; Sennett 1998; Sandel 2012). In the context of the recent reawakening in academia and policy to the role of religion in developing solidarity, this process turns in on itself, eating away at the last vestiges of solidarity. Policy makers colonise religious discourses, most notably subsuming solidarity into ‘social capital’ (Dinham 2012).

This failure to engage people’s imaginative capacity reflects a wider critique of both religion and secular politics whereby an elite deals in abstractions that fail to resonate with how real people inhabit the world (Baumann 2012). In terms of religion, believers are less likely to listen to traditional religious leaders and more likely to listen to pop heroes or friends (Woodhead 2016). In politics, the social democratic

consensus of the 1960s has given way to a neoliberal consensus (Judt 2010). In this context, the question is not simply what kind of imaginaries we might draw on, or else construct, but how and by whom they should be constructed.

This article employs myth as a means of overcoming the religion/secular binary to provide possibilities for reimagining solidarity. By myth, I simply mean ‘the stories we tell ourselves about moral responsibility’ (Wuthnow 2006). By highlighting myth, I am able to point to a religious/secular, mythic/rational binary, whereby religion is treated as irrational and the mythic elements of secular narratives are ignored. This allows me to suggest that the construction of this binary fails to resonate with how either religious or nonreligious actors inhabit the world.

Drawing on research among non-western people, anthropologists have long argued that myth is not irrational but rather cuts through western understandings of rationality (Kapferer 2002). In the North-Atlantic West, myth is still largely associated with irrationality. Yet myth does not stand in a binary relationship with the rational. Myth is a means of conjuring possibilities for a better world – not of making logically or empirically falsifiable claims about the world we currently live in. To understand myth, we need to adopt an epistemology entirely outside of the religious/secular, mythic/rational binary: the truth of myth is not found in its corresponding to an objectively observable reality – in this sense, myth may be either true or untrue. Instead, the truth of myth lies in its phenomenological resonance: it ‘rings’ true, ignites the imagination and calls on people to live in a different way. Yet in this sense, myth is also rational: its ability to ignite the imagination and its impact on performance can be observed. From this perspective, plenty of secular myths can be observed to be operating in the North-Atlantic West, such as that of the economically self-reliant individual (Wuthnow 2006). Indeed, developments in

narrative theology and the anthropology of ethics suggest that this construction of myth is central to how all people, religious and nonreligious, develop solidarity (Keane 2010: 67; Lambek 2010: 24; MacIntyre 1981; Milbank 1990).

By highlighting how myth operates amongst people in the North-Atlantic West, I thus aim to contribute to an understanding of what is missing from a purely secular public sphere without prioritising religion generally or any religion specifically. Instead, religious and nonreligious people alike draw on myth in the construction of solidarity.

Myth, of course, is not the only framework that might be employed. The trick, I suggest, is in finding a term that conjures what is foreclosed by the construction of a religious/secular, mythic/rational binary without prioritising religion. Most prominently, Taylor employs the term ‘social imaginary’ to indicate ‘the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others’ (2004: 23. See also 2007; Calhoun 2014). As should be clear from my opening reflections, I find the notion of the social imaginary useful in indicating a capacity we have lost that is deeply linked to solidarity. My use of myth does not replace the term ‘social imaginary’, but acts as a specific means of rediscovering a shared social imaginary. Using Taylor’s terms, the religious/secular, mythic/rational binary is itself a social imaginary. But, I suggest, it is that distinct imaginary that refuses to see itself as an imaginary and thus forecloses the possibility of imagining solidarity. Recovering myth is a means of reawakening to the imagination.

Baker and Miles-Watson (2008) have proffered the more practical term of ‘spiritual capital’ as a means of explaining how religious and nonreligious actors alike comport themselves towards public duty. The strength of this approach is also its weakness. By placing spirituality alongside capital, Baker and Miles-Watson are able

to speak to the secular world, especially the policy world, in terms it understands, conjuring an image of a resource that can be accumulated and utilised. Yet in so doing, they risk the same fate as social capital, allowing spirituality to be employed uncritically and instrumentalised as a resource. Myth could be designated a form of social capital, but for this reason I avoid doing so.

Employing myth as a framework allows me to critically engage with recent explorations of the relationship between religion and solidarity. Of particular note is Jürgen Habermas' work around the concept of the 'postsecular'. Once seen as completing the enlightenment project in the face of emerging relativism, Habermas seems uniquely placed to rediscover what is missing from a purely secular public sphere in a way that nonetheless prioritises its standards of rationality. As a result, his (2008) observation that society in the North-Atlantic West might be emerging as postsecular was perfectly poised to define a new research agenda (Dillon 2010; McLennan 2010). Yet in drawing on his work, social scientists rarely and scantily address the theological and philosophical critiques of Habermas' work on religion, which problematise his focus on translating myth into a secular language. This lack warrants a more detailed reflection on Habermas' work.

In the first part of this article, I will draw on these critiques to demonstrate how Habermas' focus on translating myth into a secular language reproduces the religion/secular, mythic/rational binary. I will suggest that failure to focus on these critiques leads scholars to reproduce a purely secular public sphere that merely better accommodates religion, rather than offering possibilities for reimagining solidarity for people of all religions and none.

Yet other research coalescing around the concept of the postsecular draws on Habermas to go beyond Habermas, demonstrating early signs of just such a

reimagining. By way of exploring the contribution of this research, I develop the work of Olson, Hopkins, Pain and Vincett (2013), to distinguish between research into the postsecular, postsecularity and postsecularism. Research into the postsecular, I suggest, constitutes the exploration of trends in the religious landscape – and specifically not a reimagining of the role of myth in developing solidarity within this landscape. Research into postsecularity, on the other hand, explores how organisations and individuals navigate the ambiguities and ambivalences associated with this landscape in seeking to develop solidarity. It is this research that points to possibilities for postsecularism: a politics that better encapsulates the way that people imagine solidarity.

In the second part of this article, I critically explore these developments. I suggest that although they offer useful concepts, these approaches fail to provide a clear alternative to a purely secular public sphere.

In the third part, I seek to offer such an alternative. Drawing on findings from an ethnographic study of two groups seeking to develop solidarity in religiously plural settings, one Christian, one postsecular, I suggest the following five points. First, myth is a means of conjuring possibilities for a better world – not of making logically or empirically falsifiable claims about the world we currently live in. Second, myth is primarily performed, embodied in the way that a life is lived, rather than rationally argued. These two aspects suggest that myth cannot be translated into a secular language, but nor need it be: Third, myth itself, rather than secular rationality, is key to respect for plurality. Fourth, rather than putting the onus on the beholders of myths to rationally translate them, it might be just as easy to imagine the outsider suspending their disbelief to partake in the performance of a myth and to judge it on the basis of the kinds of behaviours it produces. Finally, since belief in myth can be radically

reflexive, the inclusive construction of myth through the performance of consensus can itself produce solidarity in a way that rational consensus cannot. This performed consensus becomes the cornerstone of what I call performative postsecularism.

An awareness of what is missing?

That Habermas' early work reproduces a religious/secular, mythic/rational binary is widely recognised amongst social scientists and only needs cursory restatement. Habermas' (1985) *Theory of Communicative Action* offers a genealogy of the transition from religious myth to secular rationality that interweaves an objective claim regarding a historical shift from religious myth to secular rationality with a normative claim that this is the only plausible social order in a religiously plural setting:

The validity basis of norms of action changes insofar as every communicatively mediated consensus depends on reasons. The authority of the sacred that stands behind institutions is no longer valid per se. Sacred authorisation becomes dependent instead on the justificatory accomplishments of religious worldviews (1985: 89).

Habermas treats a rational consensus as standing over and above the sacred, and as the means by which it is judged. Less acknowledged is the continuation of this attitude in his later work. In 'An Awareness of What is Missing', Habermas stresses that:

Practical reason fails to fulfil its own vocation when it no longer has sufficient strength to awaken, and to keep awake, in the minds of secular subjects, an awareness of the violations of solidarity throughout the world, an awareness of what is missing, of what cries out to heaven (2010a: 19).

If Habermas' lament demonstrates an awareness of what is missing, his solution falls short. Habermas solution is to assert that a secular state ought not to impose 'asymmetrical obligations on its religious citizens' (2010a: 21). To put this another way, a secular state must better accommodate its religious citizens. Thus Habermas moves from a seeming awareness of what is missing to a solution that neglects any reimagining of how to engage either religious or nonreligious people.

Habermas gets closer to demonstrating his awareness of what is missing when he says that '[t]he encounter with theology can remind a self-forgetful, secular reason of its distant origins in the revolution in worldviews of the Axial Age' and thereby provide 'dimensions of a reasonable personal self-understanding which have been abandoned too hastily' (2010b: 82). This is reminiscent of an argument in *Religion in the Public Sphere*, in which Habermas suggests that '[r]eligious traditions have a special power to articulate moral intuitions, especially with regard to vulnerable forms of communal life. In the event of the corresponding political debates, this potential makes religious speech a serious candidate to transporting possible truth contents' (2006:10). Here, more than simply seeking to accommodate religions, Habermas seems to be suggesting that they have unique understandings of how we live together as humans that can provide new insights for secular reason.

These arguments seem undermined, however, by Habermas' neglect of how these reflective processes will play out in reality, alongside his insistence that this type of reflection has less validity in the public sphere. Habermas continues to speak of 'the cognitive advance from *mythos* to *logos*', as though the latter is qualitatively better, and elsewhere stresses that myth must be translated into a 'secular language'. (2010a: 17; 2011: 25). The problem here is that Habermas is neglecting the intimate relationship between *mythos* and alternative visions. From the lens of the religious/secular, mythic/rational binary, everything that does not conform to a secular language is myth. Thus when *mythos* is subjected to a translation process, it is in fact being justified in terms of a different narrative, and so loses the very thing that gives it its power: namely, the claim to a different way of living together. The mythic element is the point; it acts as a creative leap in the way that the world is imagined. To translate a different way of imagining reality into the terms of reality as we know it is not just difficult or counterproductive – it is absurd. This is a point widely recognised by theologians and philosophers, but rarely addressed by social scientists heralding Habermas' postsecular turn (see Calhoun, Mendieta and VanAntwerpen 2013). From here on, I will use the term 'secular language' to connote the idea of a rational realm that stands above myth and acts as the basis on which it is judged.

With "*The Political*", Habermas revises this position only by distinguishing between a formal public sphere, which connotes legal processes, and the informal public sphere, which is supposedly everything else. In the case of the former, 'the potential truth contents of religious utterances must be translated into a generally accessible language before they can find their way onto the agendas of parliaments, courts, or administrative bodies and influence their decisions' (2011: 25-26). In the case of the latter, religion is allowed to thrive.

Two further problems emerge at this point, one analytical, the other practical. The analytical problem, of which Habermas himself seems to be aware, is to point out the mythic (Christian or otherwise) underpinning of many secular arguments (See Williams 1999). Once this is recognised, there can be very little distinction between religious and secular arguments. The practical problem is that the distinction between the formal and informal public sphere is far more blurred than Habermas would allow. Where, for instance, does a publicly funded university or school sit? What would the role of myth be like in such an institution? What kind of shared myths would be permissible to be cultivated? More than a spurious example, public education is particularly worth mentioning since it provides a key place in which the next generation is formed; that same generation that Habermas, and I, hope will play a role in cultivating solidarity. In this time of political uncertainty, Habermas is not only consigning the formal public sphere to further demise as people become further alienated, but as the informal public sphere increasingly takes centre stage, he is equally neglecting the need for a deeper questioning of the role of religion and nonreligion within this sphere. To leave this role unquestioned is problematic. It is thus with these shortcomings in mind that I turn to the next section.

From the postsecular to postsecularity and postsecularism: inklings of another way

Inspired by but not beholden to Habermas' explorations of the postsecular, a number of researchers have begun to explore what might be referred to as postsecularity and postsecularism (Beaumont and Baker 2011; Cloke and Beaumont 2013; Cloke, Sutherland and Williams 2015; Mavelli 2012; Nilsson and Tesfahuney 2015;

Williams 2015). This research explores the way that people navigate the ambiguities and ambivalences associated with working with people of different religious and nonreligious backgrounds to develop solidarity, and extrapolates from these to possibilities for a new politics that better encapsulates these processes.

This research has proved particularly useful in stressing the willingness of religious actors to turn from differences in dogma to similarities found in performance. Much of the research, moreover, deliberately frames its enquiry with a mind to offering new ways of imagining solidarity. Yet two problems remain. First, I will suggest that by observing that people display a *willingness* to turn from dogma to performance, this research risks suggesting that rational construction is ontologically prior to myth, and that myth is something problematic that can be put to one side in favour of performance. Second, the majority of the research focuses on how religious organisations and individuals, as well as some nonreligious individuals within these organisations, approach a messy religious and nonreligious landscape defined as postsecular, rather than exploring how nonreligious organisations and actors do so. In focusing primarily on religious organisations and individuals, this research potentially reproduces the religion/secular, mythic/rational binary in two ways. First, it risks placing the onus on religious actors to shift their discourses and practices. Second, it neglects how nonreligious actors may be disillusioned with a purely secular idea of the public sphere.

A central theme pervading almost all of the research in this area is what Cloke (2010) calls ‘postsecular rapprochement’. For Cloke and Beaumont (2013: 2), postsecular rapprochement is a process whereby religious and nonreligious individuals ‘display a willingness to work together to address crucial social issues [...] and in so doing to put aside other frameworks of difference involving faith and

secularism'. They suggest that, more than the mere 'incorporation of religious capital into neoliberal governance', postsecular rapprochement demonstrates 'both an expression of resistance to prevailing injustices under neoliberal capitalism, and an energy and hope in something that brings more justice for all citizens' (2013: 1; 6). They point to particular spaces that 'cry out for "something to be done about something"' (Ibid.). Drawing on Beaumont and Baker (2011) they explain that these spaces create a sense of liminality 'in which citizens are able to journey from the unshakeable certainties of particular world-views [...] to the unknown real and imagined spaces of rapprochement' (2013: 7; 9). These spaces thus draw out 'values at the heart of which lie significant points of ethical convergence between theological, ideological and humanitarian concern': this is what Cloke and Beaumont call 'crossover narratives' (2013: 8; 15).

Postsecular rapprochement thus demonstrates an emergent reflexivity on the part of religious organisations and individuals, as well as amongst nonreligious individuals interacting with those organisations. In particular, religious actors display a willingness to 'go beyond a practice of faith-by-dogma in order to explore the potential of faith-by-praxis' (Cloke and Beaumont 2013: 15). Nilsson and Tesfahuney (2015: 19-20) too stress that performance, rather than rational articulation, provides a key means through which individuals navigate the messiness of a religious and nonreligious landscape. Williams (2015: 199) goes further, suggesting that by acknowledging that 'different ethical precepts performatively elicit distinct affective registers' religious and nonreligious actors are able to 'recognise the salience of beliefs-in-action'. Mavelli (2012: 1059) uses the concept of performance to critically develop Habermas. He suggests that by focusing on religion as cognitive, Habermas neglects modes of embodied resistance. This focus on performance thus challenges

the religious/secular, mythic/rational binary by moving the debate away from differences found in abstractions and towards possibilities of convergence found in practice. Yet it only begins to do so. The observation that people display a *willingness* to turn from dogma might be read as suggesting that myth is epiphenomenal, and that only rational construction is valid. Moreover, this approach risks reifying myth as something inherently dangerous that must and can be bracketed to enable a turn to performance. Yet I will suggest, first, that myth is more flexible than dogma implies; and second, that myth cannot be put to one side since rather than representing the imagination, myth is constitutive of the imagination.

Moreover, as Cloke and Beaumont are aware, it is unclear whether postsecular rapprochement yet extends to a fundamental critique of a purely secular public sphere such as might enable secular organisations to reimagine solidarity (2013: 15. See also Baker and Miles-Watson 2008). To put this point another way, research has focused too much on how ‘religion has found its public voice again’, as well as how nonreligious individuals interact with this development, rather than on how a secular public sphere may rediscover myth (Cloke, Sutherland and Williams 2015). Postsecularity, the way that organisations and individuals navigate the postsecular landscape to develop solidarity, does not yet entail postsecularism, a reimagining of how politics might encapsulate these new modes of navigation. For this, we require a more systematic exposition of the way that religious and nonreligious actors alike inclusively imagine solidarity in a messy religious and nonreligious landscape.

Towards performative postsecularism: a model for inclusively imagining solidarity in a messy religious and nonreligious landscape.

In the first section I explained that insofar as it relies on Habermas, research into the postsecular is caught in a paradox: religion, by Habermas' own admission, is one of the last forces standing to inspire solidarity in a world cloaked in practical reason, void of imaginative concepts. And yet religion will only be valid insofar as it conforms to this same practical reason, thereby losing its own imaginative capacity. In the second section, I demonstrated how research into postsecularity and postsecularism is beginning to push through this paradox by demonstrating the way that religious and nonreligious actors are able to think about faith as a performance with implications for action, rather than as a rational argument.

In this section, I seek to contribute to these theoretical developments by offering a more systematic exposition of the way that religious and nonreligious actors alike inclusively imagine solidarity in a messy religious and nonreligious landscape. I will make five points:

- 1) Myth is a means of conjuring possibilities for a better world – not of making logically or empirically falsifiable claims about the world we currently live in. Belief in myth can be a radically reflexive or as-if act entailing that the beholder 'holds faith' with a myth, and is inspired by the myth to carry out certain performances of solidarity (Seligman, Weller, Puett and Simon 2008).
- 2) Myth is primarily performed, embodied in the way that a life is lived, rather than rationally argued.
- 3) With regard to respect for plurality, the translation exercise of myth into a secular language is unnecessary, since rationality is not the primary means through which actors recognise the other – rather, myth itself is the key, and

religious and nonreligious actors alike are fully capable of reflexively evolving their myths to include others.

- 4) Rather than putting the onus on the beholders of myths to translate them, it might be just as easy to imagine the outsider suspending their disbelief to partake in the performance of a myth and to judge it on the basis of the behaviours it produces.
- 5) Since belief in myth can be radically reflexive and even subjunctive, the inclusive construction of myth can itself produce solidarity in a way that rational consensus cannot.

I conclude by suggesting the suspension of disbelief as an alternative for drawing on the power of myth to inspire solidarity. Rather than forcing religions through a prism on the other side of which they have lost all of their power, this new methodology seeks ways of opening up to various religious and nonreligious myths by exploring them *as if we believed*: taking a journey from *mythos*, through to practice, and judging visions not by their rationality, but by their power to inspire solidarity in religiously plural settings.

In order to make these points, I will draw on five sets of stories. All of these stories are derived from an ethnographic study of two groups, one Christian (Christians on the Left, or CotL), one postsecular (London Citizens, or LC), seeking to develop solidarity in the religiously plural context of London, UK. Research with these two groups was undertaken as part of a larger study of groups indicatively representing key post-war paradigms for developing solidarity: Christian, secular, multi-faith and postsecular. Here I focus on these two groups in order develop comparative insights. I spent four months with each group between 2012 and 2014 as

a participant observer, combining extensive field notes and interviews with leaders, employees, volunteers and effected members of the public.

CotL is a movement within the British Labour Party seeking to connect theological ethics with conventional political engagement. CotL is rooted in Christian Socialism and all of its staff are Christian. LC is a broad-based community organisation, which works with religious organisations, from churches to synagogues, mosques to gurdwaras, and nonreligious organisations, from trade unions to schools, to empower civil society. While LC was founded by a Quaker, it does not explicitly associate itself with a particular religious vision. The organisation moreover involves a number of nonreligious staff. It is in this sense that I preliminarily describe LC as postsecular, though I hope that my description of their practices further explains this choice.

Rather than presenting two discrete case studies, I focus on developing a systematic exposition of my argument. The first three points draw on examples from each case study to provide contrastive insight. Points four and five build on these insights to take one case study each. Point four provides autoethnographic observations of postsecularity at CotL. Point five draws on these observations to explore possibilities of performative postsecularism observed at LC.

1) Myth as conjuring: the sphere of heaven and the world as it should be

Sitting in the office of the leader of the British Labour Party, I asked Ralph, a senior member of CotL in his early forties, what motivated him in his work:

Pretty simply [...] it is a belief that ummm the Christian call is to be a partner in [...] the mission of God [...] which I believe is seeing the restoration, redemption and reconciliation of all things in creation to the creator

[...] If you imagine a ven-diagram [...] there's this kind of sphere of heaven and the sphere of earth and [...] there's this beautiful little intersection where there is love and joy and compassion and justice and mercy and you see [...] little bits of heaven or what ever you might call it in moments that happen in and out of every day [...] and the belief that there will be a day when those two spheres are actually fused [...] and that is what we are working towards [...]

Christians talk about demonstrating the kingdom, demonstrating that perfection in the way that we live now and living in expectation of it, living in hope of it.

A Christian myth regarding the sphere of heaven is Ralph's key motivation. He is inspired by this myth to imaginatively engage with the possibility of a very different world, and it is this very different world that motivates him. The idea of translating this into a secular language seems not to make sense. Ralph is making a creative leap to what Seligman, Weller, Puett and Simon (2008) have called an as-if world. Ralph is not motivated by the logic underlying what he says but by the specific power of the Christian myth to flare his imagination.

Perhaps more striking than this example drawn from a religious actor, however, is that a similar reliance on myth can be observed amongst non-religious actors too. In my time at LC, I soon realised that while Ralph was inspired by the idea

of heaven, Sally, Nick and Aaron, all nonreligious, were inspired by bringing about the world 'as it should be'. 'Moving from the world as it is to the world as it should be' is a key mantra at LC. It is the means by which organisers envisage themselves and cope with working with all the complexities and oppressive institutions that they see around them: they can imagine a world that is better. And, like Ralph with heaven, each of them will remember little moments when they see a window into that world as it should be – or indeed as it should not be. Members are moreover encouraged to develop their own personal myths. When I ask him if any particular beliefs motivate him to act, Aaron explains that:

I've never been one for values as they exist in particular words [...] The experiences I've had which are meaningful to me [...] Growing up...the massive gulf between the environments, the chances and the choices, the quality of life that different friends of mine had from different sides of the divide. So some of those friends were growing up in a council estate in Clapham Junction, on the 15th floor, with a single parent Mum who worked all the time, and a younger sister that they cared for. And they went to a school where sometimes the classes were so disrupted that you couldn't really learn [...] And then, I think of other friends I had, who were growing up in a 2 million pound mansion house in Dulwich village, and they went to a private school, and when they turned 17 they got bought a car [...] So I guess you could say, yeah that's equality, I believe in equality, I believe in equality of opportunity...But those words aren't particularly...I don't hold them up, it's more the experiences.

Aaron explicitly states that the conjuring of emotive stories has a greater influence over his imagining of solidarity than does the rational content of equality. The telling of these stories is an embodied performance of solidarity. In this way, Aaron is able to push through the religious/secular, mythic/rational binary by developing and enacting his own secular myths.

Similarly, just as Ralph found inspiration in Jesus Christ, so Sally, Nick and Aaron found inspiration in various figures from history: in Saul Alinsky, the founder of community organising and Neil Jameson, the founder of LC; in more famous figures, such as Martin Luther King, Ghandi and Barack Obama; and in their own parents, and indeed sometimes their colleagues. They shared books, exchanged as gifts or simply borrowed, about the journeys of historical or famous figures that they wished to emulate, and they told stories of parents, siblings and friends. Members would seek to emulate these characters, adopting their practices, their style and their energy. While the figures emulated are often themselves religious, members make no mention of this identity in their discussion. Yet this emulation invokes Robbins' (2015) notion of exemplars; these figures transcend everyday reality and demonstrate the possibility of solidarity. Embodying the lives of these figures allows actors to imagine the possibility of solidarity.

At first sight, we might suggest that the observation of LC provides just the translation we have been looking for. Yet one must question whether the conjuring of a world as it should be, and holding faith with exceptional figures, fits within the kind of secular language Habermas has in mind. What these myths are expressing is an imagined world that is barely even fully explicated, let alone rationally construed or empirically observable. It is not an underlying logic that makes these myths appealing, but the imagination-inspiring language of the myths themselves.

2) Myth as performance: 'people will kind of see that I'm living in a different way'

The previous set of stories sought to show that both religious and nonreligious sources of solidarity are primarily mythic. Now I want to show that they are primarily performative. I have already shown that research into postsecularity and postsecularism highlight how religious and nonreligious actors are beginning to focus on belief as performance rather than rational argument. Yet I suggested the focus on performance as 'a turn' risks casting rational construction as ontologically prior to performance. Here I offer an alternative approach. I conclude by suggesting that the key means of judging a myth may be the observation of the types of performances it inspires.

I return to CotL. At Portcullis House, Westminster, in which a number of MPs offices and parliamentary meeting rooms are located, Ralph, Dave and I had just finished a meeting with a prominent Christian MP. Struck by how deeply inspired this MP was by a Christian myth to work hard for his constituents, I quipped to Ralph and Dave that 'if I'd known all Christians were so good, I would have accepted I was Christian a long time ago'. Without missing a beat Ralph replied with a wry smile 'oh you didn't tell me you wanted to meet bad Christians. If you have time, we can show you plenty'. What is important here is that those who operate within a Christian myth, for whom it is the core of their inspiration, are nonetheless well aware that partaking in that myth is not a guarantor of goodness. Rather, only performances demonstrate goodness.

In a conversation with Dave, he went a step further. For him, spreading his myth *as a myth* was senseless. Rather, his myth is embodied in the way that he carries out his life:

I would hope that in my workplace, in my home life, in my community, I live a life where I'm living a distinctively Christian life and people will kind of see that I'm living in a different way

And then think, start to think well [...] you know [...] why is he living in that w[ay] [...] or, you know, is that an example to follow? They don't necessarily have to um then go "Oh, he's living that way because he believes errr Jesus is the Messiah and I should go to church and read into that" ...it's more about actually how are you living, and can I follow that example? Can I be, kind of, more welcoming to people, more kinda, you know, be more approachable and open. Can I be more friendly, can I be more thoughtful...and just kind of leading that, leading by example.

While Dave himself is inspired by a Christian myth, he exhibits what might be called a performative evangelism, whereby he hopes to influence others not by spreading this myth, but by performing its implications and, in so doing, inspiring others to perform a similar role. By embodying myths, people themselves become exemplars.

A few possibilities can be unpacked from this. The first is that the Christian myth may not always operate in the ways assumed by secular theorists of the public sphere. On the one hand, myth is stronger than has been assumed. Putting myth to one

side in order to enter into a neutral debate might not be feasible without undermining the impetus for solidarity. Moreover, beyond other research into postsecularity and postsecularism, Dave is not displaying a mere willingness to turn from dogma to performance. As has been suggested in Queer Theory, Dave's performance does not simply represent his identity, but is constitutive of it (Abes and Kasch 2007: 621). And yet this stress on performance as primary also makes myth weaker than otherwise assumed: actors do not insist on the hegemonic status of the Christian myth; rather, they hope to inspire people through action. The second possibility is that if the key to embracing this myth is through performance, the latter may be open to those that do not share in propositional beliefs, in this case, the belief that God 'exists'. The third is that it may not be necessary to judge the quality of discourse on the basis of its ability to adhere to a secular language, but rather on the basis of the kind of performances it inspires.

Observing LC takes us a step further. Aaron's story shared in the previous point exemplifies one of LC's essential tools for community organisers: having a story to tell about what led one to become an organiser. A key component of the story is that telling it ought to take less than a minute. The aim of the story is to motivate the storyteller and the listener alike to be involved in community organising. LC take a pragmatic approach about the story one develops. It does not have to perfectly represent the whole journey that led one to become an organiser. Rather, it should pinpoint certain emotive experiences that inspired the journey. There is, moreover, no judgement if a story changes. What is more, organisers help one another to develop an interesting and inspiring story. The point then is not to find a story that is rationally coherent or empirically valid, but one that inspires the right kind of performance. It is moreover worth noting that LC's stress on the telling of stories demonstrates a

reflexive awareness of the power of myth to inspire people and transform their behaviour. In this way, an organisation that is not overtly religious is able to appeal to nonreligious people who may feel disillusioned with a purely secular public sphere.

These findings suggest that it makes little sense to translate myths, which are developed without rationality in mind, into a secular language. The stories provided here demonstrate that for both religious and nonreligious sources of solidarity, performativity turns secular rationality's onus of truth on its head: an argument is not valid insofar as it conforms to rational standards, rather rationality is only valid insofar as it produces the right kind of performance. The rationality of myth is not in its logical or empirical falsifiability but in its observable capacity to ignite the imagination and change behaviour.

3) Myth as the lens for recognising the other: 'we all have faiths'

Taken together, the first and second set of stories demonstrated the importance of myth, made manifest through performance, for both religious and nonreligious social actors. These actors were not seeking to spread their myth, but rather were inspired by their myth to spread a performance of solidarity. In the next set of stories, I explore how these same actors are able to recognise the other. I also illustrate that this is done not by drawing on a secular language, but through a language suited to their own myth. Actors are able and willing to stretch their myths not only in order to be inclusive, but also in order to learn from others' myths.

When asked if one requires Christian values in order to consistently engage in the same political and social processes as himself, Ralph answered:

I think absolutely no you don't have to have Christian values but then also that I don't believe in the phrase you have no beliefs whatsoever, I think we all have beliefs, I think we all have faiths [...] for folks to say that they're not, that we're not operating out of a belief system, just because they're not operating according to what we might call a more recognised belief system like Christianity, you know, or Islam, that to be put in a separate category to someone whose belief system that's been cobbled together from different things they've been exposed to [...] and I think that those are both equally belief systems that form their thinking.

What struck me about this sentiment was not merely the cognitive parity between religious and nonreligious beliefs, but the fact that this way of thinking has been imbibed by someone motivated by belief over and above rationality and who is therefore, by Habermasian standards, not fit to partake in discourse in the formal public sphere (Bernstein 2013: 158). Here it is clear that the source of solidarity is not the rational construction of shared moral principles, but the recognition of faith.

Perhaps more importantly, rationality did not appear to be the means through which nonreligious actors recognised or engaged with the other either. At LC, the nonreligious actors with which I worked took the notion of community organising itself as the key lens through which they recognised religious actors. When seeking to inspire religious actors, they would talk of how Jesus was a community organiser, or Muhammad was a community organiser. The actors take their own myth as community organisers and expand it to include positions they might otherwise feel uncomfortable with. This process goes further too. Once actors become comfortable with other myths, they are able to incorporate them into their lexicon, treating Jesus

and Muhammad themselves as exemplars that enable actors to imagine the possibility of solidarity.

Contra Habermas' suggestion that a pluralist society requires that motivations be translated into a secular language that forms the basis on which myths are judged, the stories above demonstrate that seeking a neutral language is not the means by which actors recognise the other. Rather, they do so by referring to the myths with which they are most comfortable, and by expanding those myths to include others. If the first two sets of stories demonstrated the difficulty of translating sources of solidarity into a secular language, this set of stories suggests that doing so may not be necessary.

The case of LC in particular demonstrates the beginnings of an alternative. Rather than treating rationality as ontologically prior to myth, and thus the basis on which myths are judged, actors incorporate other myths into their lexicon. MacIntyre (1981: xiii) suggests that the only way that people are able to understand others' myths is to become fluent in them. Instead of requiring an all-encompassing secular language from which to judge others' myths, actors at LC demonstrate a capacity for a multilingualism from which to incorporate and think in terms of those myths.

4) Suspending one's disbelief: 'isn't that divine intervention?'

Given these findings that translation into a secular language may be neither possible nor necessary, in this section I draw on autoethnographic findings to tentatively explore an alternative: the suspension of disbelief to engage in the performance of a myth and *thereby* judge it. I show how I myself became drawn in by these insights, by the power of performance.

In my time at CotL, I observed the Christian message as it carried through to action, and learnt the openness of these Christians to other narratives. As an atheist, I began to feel that discomfort, that fear and trembling, which comes when one's whole way of perceiving the world is threatened. Perhaps Dave's performative evangelism was slowly working on me. With time, I began to feel more and more Christian, but I could not go the whole way. I still interpreted the world in terms of a religion/secular, mythic/rational binary that treats the former as propositional, as making a claim to objective reality. This came to a head in a conversation with Dave which took place following a meeting which had closed with a prayer (which always made me feel uncomfortable and somewhat hypocritical): I explained to Dave that I was beginning to feel more Christian, but could not call myself a Christian because I did not believe in a God that could intervene in the world. Dave replied: 'do you believe that the stories of Jesus Christ can be transformative?' This utterly struck a chord with me. 'Yes' I said, almost reverently. 'Well isn't that divine intervention?'

One could take from this that Dave is playing a game of semantics, seeking to fool me into accepting his myth. Yet here one must remember that Dave was totally comfortable with my atheism because he could see that I engaged with the world in a similar way to him. So again, I was struck by the elasticity of Dave's Christianity. In some sense translation is taking place, but in the opposite direction: not only from a secular language to mythic narrative, but on the part of the listener.

Yet the key point to reiterate here is that the motivating factor is not the language in which ideas are cast, but the types of performance they produce. What had led me to be more open to persuasion was not Dave's narrative, but observing, as months before he had said he hoped others would, the different way that he was living. By suspending their disbelief, people may be able to judge myths less on the

basis of their logical or empirical falsifiability, and more on the basis of the kinds of performances they produce.

5) Performative postsecularism: showing people they value similar things

By suspending my own disbelief in Christian myth, I had come to appreciate and be transformed by Christian myth. But perhaps more profoundly, this new understanding also doubled back and allowed me to better appreciate my own and others' atheism for all its depth and mystery. I came to think of my own experience, and what I wanted to spread as an activist, as a kind of performative postsecularism.

So now, one final story. At LC, the key way in which they cultivate a sense of solidarity amongst new members is through training sessions. At these sessions, one key activity is to ask the whole group to explore together the notion of taking the world as it is to the world as it should be. They ask everybody present to offer suggestions as to what the world as it should be might look like. Talking to Aaron, I asked whether this process required that everyone was thinking of the same world:

Definitely not. We're not all thinking about the same world. I don't know if we're even thinking about a world. Because we've not experienced that world. I mean it's the way I think about it. I mean what we do, on the training, is to say, everyone think about the way you think the world should be, and some words that are associated with that world. And they tell you some words and they tend to say things like peace, justice, love, equality, happiness – those kind of things. We've run that course a hundred or more times and those are the same words

that come up. We kind of use it to show this diverse group of people that there's enough in common in the way the world should be that they can act together.

What can be drawn from this exercise is that not only is it possible to draw strength from a well fleshed-out set of beliefs without assenting to them propositionally, but it is also possible to draw strength from the process of construction of shared beliefs itself, even if the end is vague. The performance itself creates a liminal space in which people embody consensus. Having undertaken this process, members work in groups to think of ways in which they organise their own communities to work towards the world as it should be: from myth to performance. Just as in training sessions, in the process of organising one's community, the process is deemed as important as the particular end aimed at. Building the power of a community, and of individuals, conscientising them, helping them to understand themselves *as a community* is more important than the individual campaign that awakens them.

Rather than a predefined, purely secular public sphere that better accommodates people of all religions and none, this example illustrates the beginnings of a performative postsecular public sphere, one in which social actors suspend their disbelief in one another's very different myths in order to explore together new possibilities for living together as human beings. They are not rationally constructing an idea of the world as it should be, but partaking in a ritual whereby they come to an awareness of the similarities their various myths produce in performance. It is LC's ability to stage, or, as Baker and Reader (2016: 13) put it, to 'curate' such a space that begins to point towards the possibilities of a politics that better encapsulates the way that people of all religions and none imagine solidarity.

Conclusion

I have suggested that the construction of a religion/secular, mythic/rational binary undermines solidarity by casting religious narratives as potentially dangerous, and secular narratives as purely rational. I have sought to suggest that pushing religion through a rational prism will only diminish its power too. Yet I recognise Habermas' point that finding a deeper religious grounding for politics in religiously plural settings is dangerous. By way of an alternative, what I have tried to show is possibilities of a different method for including various religious and nonreligious myths in the construction of new visions.

This new method does not reflect an outright rejection of Habermas; clearly my suggestions show affinity with Habermas own standards set out in *The Theory of Communicative Action*, whereby '[t]he authority of the holy is gradually replaced by the authority of an achieved consensus' (1985:77). Yet I have expanded on this concept by suggesting that achieved consensus is not drawn merely from rational argument, but from experiential learning, that is, immersion in others' narratives in order to explore their power to cultivate solidarity. Rather than requiring that *mythos* be translated into *logos*, I am suggesting that *mythos* may provide alternative wisdoms whose strength can only be seen in outcome. The aim is thus to cultivate spaces in which people can feel comfortable developing multilingualism and suspending their disbelief to explore one another's myths on the basis of the performances they produce.

Perhaps most importantly, the final point to be taken from my experience with LC is that the process of inclusive construction may create the possibility of shared action even where the endpoint is vague. Indeed, it may even turn out that this process

of construction is in fact more powerful in the absence of an endpoint, since the process is always thereby open to new interpretations.

I thus use the term ‘performative postsecularism’ not only to indicate the capacity to judge myths by the performances they produce, but also the capacity to creatively engage in the construction of new myths. I envisage that these myths will not only be those formed through performances of consensus found at LC, but also in the reflective stories about these performances: stories of exemplary situations and figures may be conjured to ignite possibilities for solidarity. In this sense, perhaps this article itself might be considered such a conjuring. It is the ability to stage or curate such spaces that indicates the possibility of postsecularism: a politics that better encapsulates the way that people of all religions and none imagine solidarity.

This article opened with three contexts for understanding the relationship between myth and solidarity in the modern world: religious diversity, a religion/secular, mythic/rational binary and a failure of traditional institutions to engage people. Performative postsecularism offers an answer to all three. Rather than treating religious diversity as something to be overcome, it embraces the dynamism of placing multiple, conflicting narratives alongside one another. It challenges the religion/secular, mythic/rational binary by recognising the ability of religious actors to creatively engage with plurality, and the tendency amongst secular actors to adopt mythic narratives in developing solidarity. It offers a response to the failure of traditional institutions to engage people by pushing through the temptation to construct a new metanarrative of solidarity for people of all religions and none, instead putting the power of construction in the hands of actors by staging or curating possibilities of inclusive engagement.

Two steps remain. The first is to critically scrutinise the ways in which performative postsecularism might be used beyond the case studies offered here to ask how key domains of politics, policy and professional practice might better stage or curate performative postsecularism. The second is to explore how the curation exercise can be constructed such that performative postsecularism is inclusive and, as such, is able to overcome potentially darker ways in which myth is used to mobilise reactionary forces. These are two tasks that are crucial in the current political landscape, and towards which this article has made the first critical step.

Notes on contributor

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