Postsecularism has gained increasing relevance within and beyond international relations (IR) in recent years. Within IR, the term has been employed primarily in two different yet interconnected ways. Firstly, postsecularism has operated descriptively to explain the return or resilience of religious traditions in modern life. This has produced two different responses. On the one hand, scholars have attempted to develop conceptual frameworks that move beyond the dominant assumptions of secularization theory in order to explain religion’s surprising persistence in late modernity. On the other hand, there have been calls for the development of new models of politics able to include religious views. Such calls represent the second and more innovative meaning attributed to postsecularism, in which it operates as a form of radical theorizing and critique prompted by the idea that values such as democracy, freedom, equality, inclusion, and justice may not necessarily be best pursued within an exclusively immanent secular framework. Quite the opposite, the secular may be a site of isolation, domination, violence, and exclusion.

The thriving debate on religion in international politics originally revolved around the ‘return of religion’ in IR. Scholars have focused on how religion could be incorporated into existing conceptual and political frameworks by exploring its contribution to processes of modernization, democratization, and peace building and its wider implications for future world orders. The recent debate on postsecularism, however, has more radical connotations which encompass the idea of a paradigm shift. This is an attempt to move beyond the secular and thus the secular/religious divide, which can be considered one of the foundational dimensions of Western secular modernity. The question raised by the postsecular, then, is not just one of incorporation of the presence of religion into existing theoretical frameworks, but one of conceptual innovation to account for a transformation which affects the very structures of consciousness and power, and existing understandings of political community.

The importance of this transformation surfaces in the latest work of Jürgen Habermas, the thinker who, probably more than anyone else, has contributed to igniting the current debate on postsecularism. For Habermas (2008a, p. 20), postsecularism is a ‘change in consciousness’ that characterizes traditionally secular societies, such as European ones. This change stems from, on the one hand, the perceived emergence of increasingly pluralistic societies, where a growing number of citizens are bearers of religious convictions, which calls for the elaboration of new
frameworks of public engagement and civic coexistence; and, on the other, from the crisis of secularism and secular consciousness, characterized by a progressive fragmentation of values and an underlying incapacity to address pressing ethical and political questions (such as euthanasia or social justice) in a context of increasing neoliberal globalization (Habermas, 2008a). These two questions, according to Habermas, demand new sources of moral inspiration and interpretation and suggest that ‘the modernization of public consciousness’ can no longer be conceived solely as the secularization of religious sensibilities, but demands a reflexive cooperative effort of both secular and religious mentalities (Habermas, 2008b, p. 310). Religion can thus act as a reservoir of moral resources for the secular domain.

The debate on postsecularism has primarily focused on the normative implications of this argument by discussing the possibility of ‘a model of law and politics in which religious arguments are not excluded from political debate’ (Cooke, 2007, p. 225), in order to face the challenges of pluralism, cohesion, and integration in a globalized world in which secularism no longer or not always seems to be capable of providing the framework in which democratic participation, freedom, equality, justice, and inclusion may be achieved. A second, interconnected, but less studied dimension of postsecularism concerns the underlying politics of resistance to neoliberal market rationalities that characterizes this concept. Once again Habermas seems to suggest this path when he argues that postsecularism is an attempt to rescue a ‘pure practical reason’ that ‘can no longer be so confident in its ability to counteract a modernization spinning out of control armed solely with the insights of a theory of justice’ and to oppose the disruptive forces of ‘markets and administrative powers’ which ‘are displacing social solidarity’ (Habermas, 2008b, pp. 211 and 111). As Mariano Barbato (2010, p. 549) points out, postsecularism for Habermas is the use of ‘religious semantic potential’ to oppose ‘the pathologies of neoliberal modernisation and globalisation’. Similarly, Paul Cloke and Justin Beaumont (2013, p. 32) describe it as ‘an expression of resistance to prevailing injustices under neoliberal global capitalism, and an energy and hope in something that brings more justice for all citizens’.

This chapter introduces these two dimensions of the contemporary debate on postsecularism in IR. It starts by looking at Habermas’ understanding of postsecularism and argues that, despite its merit and achievements, his perspective is shaped by an ultimately secular logic that reduces religion to a set of cognitive choices and a function in broader processes of social production, using it instrumentally to address the crisis of secularism by leaving the political authority of the latter fundamentally unchallenged. This, in turn, neglects religion as tradition, practice, and lived experience, an ineffable phenomenon that means different things and indeed cannot always be identified in different contexts. These problems, we argue, rest on a disembodied and cognitive understanding of religion and, accordingly, of postsecularism. In the second section, we discuss the role of emotions in shaping a contending ‘embodied’ understanding of postsecularism. We analyse how cognitive and embodied understandings of postsecularism need not be seen in opposition but can work in cooperation. This requires reconsidering the traditional boundaries between secularism and religion and considering the authority of secularism as a power/knowledge regime that shapes contemporary forms of religiosity and practices of solidarity. To illustrate this argument, we explore contemporary discourses surrounding migration, particularly those concerning responsibility for the deaths of migrants crossing the Mediterranean in the attempt to reach Europe, and how they reproduce in a secular fashion an underlying theological argument (theodicy) that blames the migrants for their own deaths. We discuss how faith-based organizations may be considered postsecular agents who resist this logic, and whose contribution encompasses both reasoned argumentations in the public sphere and embodied practices of solidarity towards migrants.
In the third section, we further explore the contentious issue of the boundary between secularism and religion by questioning Habermas’ idea of the market as the ultimate expression of secular reason. For Habermas (2008b, p. 107), the market is the incarnation of a secularism which has enslaved the modern subject in ‘mechanisms of instrumental action guided by individual preferences’ and the ‘uncontrolled dynamics of the global economy’. Religion as a reservoir of moral resources can help remoralize the market by freeing the individual from the latter’s totalizing instrumental rationality. For Habermas the market is thus in need of an urgent postsecular shift. We contend that the market is already a postsecular entity that combines both secular and religious rationalities, semantics, and modes of argumentation. The religious rationalities that govern the market, however, are not the regenerative forces that should oppose the neoliberal logics of profit, exploitation, and extraction, but modes of belief and acts of faith which have contributed to the sacralization of the market. The latter has become a partially unknown domain, system of relations, and epistemic framework that cannot be questioned or challenged. We suggest that the postsecular sacralization of the market is closely connected to the emergence of a sacrificial order in which individuals and populations regarded as superfluous or even detrimental to the needs of the market – such as the dispossessed, the indebted, the stateless, the poor, and the undocumented migrants – can be disposed of on the altar of economic value. The conclusion explores some of the implications of the arguments advanced in the chapter for future research agendas on postsecularism in IR.

Habermas’ cognitive account of postsecularism

For most of his career, Habermas has overlooked the constitutive role of religion in the public sphere by endorsing a model of dialogic interaction based upon secular rationality. However, since the mid-2000s, he has started to question the extent to which the ideal of a common human reason as the epistemic justification for the secular state can demand that citizens with religious beliefs act in the public sphere as if they were devoid of any religious conviction (Habermas, 2006, 2008a, 2008b; Habermas and Ratzinger, 2007; Habermas et al., 2011). The problem, Habermas argues, is that ‘many religious citizens would not be able to undertake such an artificial division within their own minds without jeopardizing their existence as pious persons’ (Habermas, 2006, p. 8). Moreover, should the secular state discourage religious persons and communities from expressing themselves politically, it would risk cutting ‘itself off from key resources for the creation of meaning and identity. Secular citizens or those of other religious persuasions can under certain circumstances learn something from religious contributions’ (Habermas, 2006, p. 10). ‘We should respect the “power of articulation” of religious language and recover the “regenerative power” it offers for a “dwindling normative consciousness”’, yet ‘without burning the bridges to secular languages and cultures’ (Habermas, cited in Harrington, 2007, p. 544).

To make room for religious contributions in the public sphere, Habermas (2006, p. 9) suggests drawing a line between ‘informal public sphere’, where religious reason can flow unconstrained, and ‘institutional public sphere’, where only secular reason counts. This separation means that for religious beliefs to have institutional representation, they must be ‘translated’ into secular language. Separation and translation are for Habermas essential requirements: separation to protect religious and cultural minorities; translation to allow the wider public – be it secular or of a different faith – to understand and subject religious arguments to rational scrutiny. This understanding of postsecularism is grounded in a shift from traditional to more reflexive forms of secular and religious consciousnesses (what Habermas would call ‘postconventional morality’) capable of questioning their own limitations and recognizing the reciprocal validity of their
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respective arguments. For Habermas, postsecularism is an ethos grounded in the mind: it is the outcome of a cooperative cognitive effort of secular and religious citizens, both conceived as the expression of a postconventional consciousness capable of reflecting upon itself and using religion in a way that may help us ‘express our best moral intuitions without tearing down the bridges to secular languages and cultures’ (Habermas cited in Harrington, 2007, p. 544), thus keeping the boundaries of knowledge and faith firmly in place, preventing that reason may succumb to the potentially ‘irrational effusion’ of religious motives (Habermas, 2008b, p. 243).

Habermas’ account has received two main criticisms. First, it restates the primacy of secular reason, as it requires that for religious arguments to have a space in the institutional public sphere, they be ‘translated’ into secular language. For Fred Dallmayr (2012, p. 968), however, the Habermasian idea that ‘there is a standard [secular] public discourse whose language is readily accessible’ is ‘a myth of the Enlightenment’. He asks: are not modern rationalist texts, from Kant to Rawls, ‘exceedingly difficult texts constantly in need of interpretation and re-interpretation, and hence of translation into more accessible language? . . . Do the judgments of courts not always involve the interpretation, application, and thus practical translation of earlier legal texts, precedents, and judicial opinions? And do members of parliament not always claim to interpret, apply and hence translate the will of the “people”?’ (Dallmayr, 2012, p. 968). The second main criticism concerns Habermas’ instrumental notion of religion, which reduces the latter to a set of cognitive choices and a function in broader processes of social production, where religion’s main (and somehow paradoxical) task is to address the crisis of instrumental secular reason.

This perspective, Luca Mavelli suggests (2012), is the product of a dualistic image of human nature as the unstable mixture of body and soul, which in turn supports an idea of critique and emancipation as a process of transcendence of the body. This understanding finds its most systematic instantiation in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. Kant conceived of man as ‘homo duplex’, that is, as a ‘sensibly affected rational being’ split between the ‘freedom of pure intellect’ (‘a rational nature . . . shared with God and the angels’) and the ‘desires of a sensuous nature’ (Hunter, 2002, pp. 911, 910). For Kant, our bodily and sensuous nature is ‘morally corrupting’, as it constrains our capacity to join ‘the world of pure, self-governing intelligences’ (Hunter, 2002, p. 912), where all concepts have the status of universal frameworks of moral and practical action. Accordingly, Kant grounded the possibility of critique and emancipation on an impulse of self-transcendence whereby the individual rises above the bodily/phenomenal/empirical world to join the transcendental world of pure intellect.

Kant, however, deemed traditional religion as an essential component of this process of self-transcendence for two main reasons. First, religion can act as a motivational force that may elicit a moral life. As Emmet Kennedy (2006, p. 138) explains, ‘Kant thought it impossible to act morally if there were no sanctions to do so . . . He feared how we would be apt to act, if there were no ultimate reward or punishment. If the soul is mortal and all ends at death, man can calculate his pleasures and pains as he likes (hedonism)’. Second, religion endows the secular with an understanding of critique as a process of self-transcendence where communion with God is replaced by communion with our ‘higher intellect’, that is, our soul. However, according to Kant, once traditional religion has motivated us to act morally and embrace a communion with our soul, it should leave the scene to ‘rational religion’, namely a ‘universal moral faith’ that, under the checks of reason, can perform its role of guardianship and source of inspiration for moral life.

Habermas’ idea of postsecularism actualizes Kant’s notion of rational religion. Whereas for Kant traditional religion could act as a source of moral persuasion (often through the threat of eternal sanction), for Habermas it is a reservoir of moral resources. Whereas for Kant traditional religion provided a model of self-transcendence that enables the individual to grasp the universal
law of morality, for Habermas it is part of the dialogic interaction between secular and religious mentalities that may enable us to ‘express our best moral intuitions’. However, inasmuch as Kant considered that ultimately traditional religion should leave the scene for a universal rational form of religion, so Habermas conceives postsecularism as a domain in which secular reason has precedence and traditional religion can find a space only if translated into secular language. Finally, if Kant considered that rational religion was only possible through a process of transcendence of the senses, for Habermas the only dimension of traditional religion that may enable a postsecular public sphere concerns its cognitive moral aspects. Accordingly, Habermas focuses on religion’s semantic potential and almost completely overlooks religion as a sensory and lived experience, practice, emotions, mode of subjectivation, or community of believers. Habermas, in other words, neglects the embodied dimension of religion as the latter is conceived as something that can undermine religion’s semantic potential and lead to ‘irrational effusion’.

Habermas’ postsecularism as an ideal of critique and resistance to the crisis and instrumental rationality of secularism is based on a disembodied rendering of religion. This requires a shift from traditional to postsecular forms of religious allegiances. Once properly translated into secular language (i.e. once turned postsecular), the moral intuitions of the former can be useful to address the crisis of secular reason. This view thus rests on a Kantian process of transcendence of the body, which supports an understanding of critique, emancipation, and resistance as part of the search for universal structures to oppose to the fluctuation of our empirical, emotional, and embodied condition. This rendering of postsecularism has three main limitations. First, by neglecting the body and emotions and confining postsecularism to the instrumental use of the moral teachings of religion to cure the distortions of secularism, Habermas’ approach makes it impossible to grasp the emotional dimension of postsecular resistance and the extent to which it may be linked to embodied practices. Second, Habermas’ view relies on a rather stark separation between secularism and religion. Yet, if one considers Carl Schmitt’s (2007, p. 42) famous argument that ‘all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts’ and embraces the idea that secularism and religion may be political categories whereby regimes of power and knowledge are deployed, the possibility emerges that the boundary that separates them, and the related separation between ‘cognitive’ and ‘embodied’, may not be as ‘hard’ as Habermas suggests. Third, Habermas, like Kant before him, bases his idea of what ‘religion’ is on predominantly European experiences of Christianity. Thus, both Kantian notions of ‘rational religion’ and Habermasian postsecularism are highly Eurocentric, homogenize diverse forms of Christianity into the single category of ‘religion’ and ignore other varieties of belief, ritual, practice, and world-making. These arguments will be explored in the next section by looking at the case of faith-based organization and migration.

Towards a cognitive and embodied postsecularism: the case of faith-based organization and migration

Some contemporary discourses surrounding migration reproduce in a secular fashion an underlying theological discourse – theodicy – which blames the migrants for their own misfortune. This logic is particularly evident in narratives surrounding the appalling conditions in which migrants and asylum seekers are often kept by government authorities across Europe, the USA and Australia, and the callous way in which the deaths of migrants during migration journeys are discussed by some politicians and media pundits. In January 2022, thanks to the controversy surrounding Novak Djokovic’s Covid-19 vaccination status ahead of the Australian Tennis Open, the plight of a group of male asylum seekers being held in the Park Hotel in Melbourne came to public attention. Most of the men in the Park Hotel had been in detention for nine
years, with more than two of those years spent at the hotel. Prior to being incarcerated in the hotel, most had been held in Australia’s offshore detention centres on Nauru and Manus Island, Papua New Guinea, then transferred to the mainland for medical treatment. Conditions on Nauru and Manus are widely acknowledged to be terrible. Detainees were deprived of their mobile phones, only allowed to make phone calls approximately once a month. Health care was limited to visits by nurses who generally only gave out paracetamol (Boochani 2018). Numerous detainees suffered from depression and anxiety, as a result of traumas they had previously experienced and made more acute by the atrocious conditions in the centres, with regular suicide attempts (Cave, 2017). They were also not allowed access to materials to occupy their time, such as games or hobbies (Boochani 2018). They were only allowed out to attend medical appointments, in some cases windows had been screwed shut preventing access to fresh air. They were fed mouldy, maggot-infested food, and regularly had bugs in their rooms (Zhuang and Cave, 2022). Most disturbingly, there was no clear indication of when their detention would come to an end or what, if anything, they could do themselves to expedite that. When asked about the situation of the men in detention, then Prime Minister Scott Morrison stated: ‘it’s not clear that to my information that someone in that case is actually a refugee. They may have sought asylum and been found not to be a refugee and have chosen not to return’ (quoted in Hurst, Martin, and Doherty, 2022). The Prime Minister’s statement lays the blame for the dire situation with the men themselves. It is a result of their own choices that they have been detained indefinitely in these conditions, not the responsibility of the Australian government. The men literally exist in a state of bare life – biologically, they are alive, yet the way their life is lived is in the shadows, prevented from experiencing life in its fullness (Agamben, 1998).

This obfuscation of responsibility and blame for their own misfortune is not new, however, when it comes to government responses to the plight of people seeking asylum. Consider, for instance, the October 2014 UK government announcement that it would no longer support search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean on the grounds that such operations are ‘an unintended “pull factor”, encouraging more migrants to attempt the dangerous sea crossing and thereby leading to more tragic and unnecessary deaths’ (Travis, 2014). The construction and distribution of responsibility that frames this argument portrays the migrants as fundamentally irresponsible as they have chosen to embark on a journey that between January and September 2014 saw 3,000 people lose their lives (Brian and Laczko, 2014), and 20,000 deaths in the 20 years prior to that (Schenker, 2013). Since 2014, however, the number of deaths has sky-rocketed, with an estimated 24,039 people having drowned or gone missing attempting to cross the Mediterranean (https://missingmigrants.iom.int). Blaming the migrants for their own deaths is made possible by deliberately neglecting the ‘push factors’ behind the lives packed on the precarious boats crossing the Mediterranean, namely extreme poverty, persecution, war, famines, and genocide, amongst others, with migrants turned into weapons by European fears of invasion and unscrupulous regimes such as Gaddafi’s and the Islamic State in Libya. By ignoring these ‘push factors’, the UK could portray itself as a responsible actor, whose responsibility consists in letting the irresponsible migrants drown to prevent future ‘unnecessary deaths’. In this account, the migrants are the only ones to blame for their own death. The UK is by no means alone in such a harsh stance, with successive Australian governments using similar logic to justify the excision of the entire Australian mainland from the migration zone for anyone arriving by boat, the ‘stop the boats’ policy of the mid-2010s, and the decision to leave the bodies of drowned asylum seekers in the ocean. As Maley (2013) points out, such policies are not about ‘saving lives’ or preventing ‘unnecessary deaths’. ‘The real message of the . . . Australian [and UK] approach is a simple one: “Go and die somewhere else”’.
This logic enables the construction of migrants as bare lives, namely lives that can be ‘killed with impunity’ (Agamben, 1998). They can be killed by the violence of the secular law (even though they have not yet violated any law), which has decreed the halt of search and rescue operations, and the necessity of indefinite detention, despite its demonstrated harm to the physical and mental well-being of detainees. Crucially, migrants can also be denied compassion for their tragic destiny, since according to this discourse, their plight is the result of their own choices. They are the ones to blame for their own tragedy.

This condemnation, we argue, can be understood as a form of secular theodicy or sociodicy. Theodicy concerns the problems of how to reconcile the existences of God with the presence of evil in the world, namely, ‘How is it that a power which is said to be at once omnipotent and kind could have created such an irrational world of undeserved suffering, unpunished injustice and hopeless stupidity?’ (Weber, 1946). According to Max Weber (1946), the question of theodicy is the fundamental question of all religions, which they have addressed by inscribing suffering, injustice, and violence in the inscrutable God-given order of creation. However, Weber contends, with the process of secularization and the emergence of a human-made order, theodicy does not disappear, but simply secularizes. Suffering, violence, and inequality no longer find their meaning and justification in God, but either in the greater good (of society, the state, the economy) or as the outcome of individual (ir)responsibility.

Secular theodicies include, for instance, the liberal idea that income inequalities can be an incentive for the worst-off to improve their condition with overall benefits for society as a whole through ‘the invisible hand’ of the market (Elster, 1981) or, according to Pierre Bourdieu (1993, 2003), neoliberalism as a whole. The latter, Bourdieu argues, ‘justifies suffering on the ground that it is necessary for economic progress’ and legitimates a ‘racism of intelligence’ which depicts the poor as ‘intellectually incapable’ and therefore responsible for their own condition. When it comes to the drowned migrants, the underlying secular theodicy behind their double condemnation enables the projection of responsibility whereby they are considered to merely deserve their due. In this framework, letting migrants drown or wallow indefinitely in detention centres becomes rational and instrumental to ensure that the social fabric will not be destroyed by the presence of ‘others’, that jobs will not be taken, that identities will be preserved.

These deterrence-driven policies towards migrants raise two important questions in relation to Habermas’ argument on the postsecular. First, while the justification to hold migrants indefinitely in detention or not rescue them from the sea is secular and rational, its underlying logic rests on and reproduces a theological discourse. In fact, one may argue that the justification not to save drowning migrants or to hold them in distant detention centres shrouded in secrecy is not rational, but purely instrumental, as it exploits popular emotional and irrational fears of ‘strangers’. And yet, from the government’s perspective it may be absolutely rational to pander to these feelings for the purpose of preserving power. What seems certain is that at the heart of the matter there is an ultimately dehumanizing logic that constructs migrants as a security issue rather than human beings in need of solidarity. Habermas’ critique of a secular instrumental reason dominated by the disruptive forces of ‘markets and administrative powers’ which ‘are displacing social solidarity’ and incapable to address pressing ethical and political questions speaks to this case. However, the postsecular solution he advocates – drawing on the moral intuitions of faith to infuse values into the secular domain – rests on the problematic assumption that secularism and religion are two different and clearly demarcated worldviews. As the previous discussion suggests, however, these two domains may often be indistinguishable. If this is the case, postsecularism cannot be conceived solely as the cooperative cognitive effort of secular and religious views but should be the very attempt to question...
these categories whenever they are employed to justify forms of violence, oppression, and exclusion. To this end, we contend, the cognitive effort cannot be thought in isolation from emotional and embodied practices of resistance.

Grassroots actors involved in forced migration are a case in point, transcending the religious/secular divide and engaging in embodied practices of solidarity and resistance with asylum seekers and refugees. These practices have emerged largely in response to the secular theodicies described earlier, where asylum seekers and refugees are criminalized, cast as lawbreakers, ’queue jumpers’, and potential terrorists (Abbott, 2014), justifying increasingly harsh policies of marginalization and exclusion. Faith-based actors’ resistance to these policies draws on traditions of sanctuary and asylum that exist across numerous religious traditions (Wilson, 2011). Actions range from providing housing assistance, food, education, and health care; billeting asylum seekers with host families to build understanding (Stapleton, 2014); visiting and praying with asylum seekers in detention centres (Wilson, 2014); and non-violent protest. On the US-Mexico border, faith-based organizations are engaged in providing water, food, and protection to prevent migrants dying horrible deaths from dehydration and exposure (Humane Borders, 2022). Grassroots actors draw on a range of resources, both ‘religious’ and ‘secular’, to critique and challenge the theodicies underlying governments’ asylum policies, offering alternative moral frameworks that utilize ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ arguments to recast migration as a humanitarian rather than a security issue, and emphasize common bonds of shared humanity between asylum seekers and host populations.

Let us consider two cases exemplifying cognitive and embodied postsecular resistance to secular theodicy. Led by a group of multidenominational Christian leaders and including activists from many and no faith traditions, Love Makes a Way (LMAW) is a protest movement in Australia, self-consciously positioned as a continuation of the non-violent civil disobedience engaged in by Martin Luther King Jr and his followers during the US Civil Rights Movement (Gray, 2015). LMAW’s main goal is to raise awareness about the plight of children in detention and campaign for their release. Protesters conduct ‘pray-ins’ at the offices of Australian parliamentarians (Wilson, 2014). When asked to leave, the protesters refuse, saying they will stay until they are told when all children will be released from detention. Consequently, 138 protesters have been arrested and charged, approximately half of whom are clergy and nuns. Some have been strip searched by police. To date, however, subsequent court hearings have resulted in all charges being dismissed, or small fines (Gray, 2015).

Following one court hearing, protesters stripped to their underwear outside the courtroom before walking to the Foreign Affairs Minister’s office as an act of defiance in response to being strip searched by police. As the activists were disrobing, spokesperson Jarrod McKenna read from Matthew 5:38–44, going on to say, ‘Those who thought that strip searches would be enough to stop us; well, we serve with Jesus, who was strip-searched before he went to the cross’ (Wahlquist, 2015). McKenna’s statement, coupled with the simultaneous act of stripping by the protesters, is a moment in which the cognitive and embodied practices of postsecular resistance can be clearly seen operating together.

A second example is the Palm Sunday ‘Walk for justice for refugees’. While Palm Sunday has historically been a focal point of many left-leaning protest and resistance movements, since 2014 in Australia the marches have focused specifically on opposing the Australian government’s treatment of asylum seekers. Participants range from religious leaders, lay people, activists, unionists, people of all faiths and none (Lillebuen, 2014). Protesters assemble outside landmarks in capital cities then march through central business areas. Through the physical act
of gathering and walking together, disrupting traffic, and carrying signs such as ‘Jesus was a refugee’, protesters engage in embodied acts of resistance, while at the same time, through speeches given by leading figures in business, the arts, and civil society, the cognitive form of postsecular resistance is also visible.

At the 2015 Perth gathering, acclaimed Australian author Tim Winton delivered a speech exemplifying the postsecular resistance we are describing in this chapter. Winton challenged the secular theodicy underlying government policies, offering an alternative theodicy in which the Australian government and the fear and apathy of the Australian public are responsible for the fate of asylum seekers, not the migrants themselves:

So great and so wild is our fear, we can no longer see them [asylum seekers] as people, as fellow humans. First, we criminalised them. Then, we turned them into faceless objects . . . for someone seeking asylum, someone arriving by boat, this special species of creature called a “boat person” . . . Pity is forbidden. All the usual standards are overturned. Their legal right to seek asylum is denied. They’re vilified as “illegals”. And their suffering is denied. As if they’re not our brothers and sisters. Yes, we hate suffering. But apparently their kind of suffering is no longer legitimate. And therefore, it’s no longer our problem. Our moral and legal obligations to help them are null and void.

(Winton, 2015)
Figure 21.2  Sign reading 'Jesus was a Refugee' from the 2015 Palm Sunday March for Justice for Refugees in Melbourne, Australia.

Source: Author photo

Figure 21.3  Sign reading 'Jesus, Mary + Joseph/The Most Famous Refugees/St David's Uniting Church/Oakleigh' from the 2015 Palm Sunday March for Justice for Refugees in Melbourne, Australia.

Source: Author photo
Winton offers an alternative moral framework that draws on both ‘secular’ and ‘religious’ resources, including ‘mateship’ and ‘a fair go’, themes central to Australian national identity. He draws on imagery and narratives from the Christian tradition to critique dominant attitudes towards asylum seekers, while at the same time lauding secular egalitarianism as a defining characteristic of Australia:

There’s a punitive spirit abroad, something closer to Victorian England than the modern, secular, egalitarian country I love . . . In this country, a nation built upon people fleeing brutes and brutality for 200 years, we have a tradition of fairness and decency and openness of which we’re rightly proud. Whether we’re inspired by the Christian parable of the Good Samaritan, the universal dignity of humankind, or the sanctity of the individual, we’ve always thought it low and cowardly to avert our gaze from someone in trouble or need, to turn our face from them as though they did not exist . . . That’s where our tradition of mateship comes from. Not from closing ranks against the outsider, but from lifting someone else up, helping them out, resisting the cowardly urge to walk by . . .

Now, of course, we don’t see faces. And that’s no accident. The government hides them from us . . . Asylum seekers are rendered as objects, creatures, cargo, contraband, and criminals. And so, quite deliberately, the old common sense of human decency is supplanted by a new consensus . . .

Jesus said: “What shall it profit a man to gain the whole world only to lose his soul?” And I wonder: What does it profit a people to do likewise, to shun the weak and punish the oppressed, to cage children, and make criminals out of refugees? What about our soul as a people?

(Winton, 2015)

Winton’s speech, arguably, is not a call to a particular kind of secular or religious ethics, but a plea for an ethics that transcends such divisions and instead focuses on a sense of common humanity, a postsecular ethics, a plea echoed and taken up by numerous actors involved in asylum politics, within and beyond Australia.

We have argued, in this section, that the secular/religious divide underpinning much Western political practice and analysis of religion in IR must be rethought, moving away from understanding this division as a description of worldviews and instead conceiving the secular and the religious as political categories where regimes of knowledge and power are (re)produced, the line between these political categories far more blurred than Habermasian postsecularism acknowledges. The analysis of the politics of contemporary forced migration highlights how the secular and the religious operate in this way, firstly in the logic employed by state powers to exclude asylum seekers, which, following Weber, we have described as secular theodicies, and secondly in the responses of grassroots actors challenging and resisting these secular theodicies. Not only do these grassroots actors transcend the division between religious and secular, they also employ cognitive and embodied forms of postsecular resistance to challenge secular formations of power that oppress and exclude. This analysis advances an idea of the postsecular that challenges the secular/religious divide, as well as the argument that, rather than remoralizing the secular, the religious may contribute to accentuate the latter’s distortions. As the theodicy of migrant deaths analysed in this section has shown, religious discourses, practices, and semantics may be deploye in conjunction with secular logics to justify forms of violence, oppression, and exclusion. In the next section, we explore this argument in greater detail by considering the case of the sacralization of the market.
The postsecular sacralization of the market

The idea of postsecularism as the use of ‘religious semantic potential’ to oppose ‘the pathologies of neoliberal modernisation and globalisation’ (Barbato, 2010, p. 549) can be read as a continuation of Weber’s famous thesis of the secularization of the market and attempt to reverse its tragic outcome. For Weber (1946 [1919a], pp. 122–123), religion is not a timeless dimension of life but the first systematic attempt to address ‘the experience of the irrationality of the world’ as manifested by ‘undeserved suffering, unpunished injustice and hopeless stupidity’. Religion is thus, at its inception, the attempt to rationalize the irrational of the human condition. Ironically, however, the very advancement of the process of rationalization marked by the emergence of modern science contributed to shift religion ‘into the realm of the irrational’ (Weber, 1946 [1915], p. 281). As a result, Weber contends, science and bureaucratic rationality have replaced religion as dominant rationalizing frameworks. The emergence of modern capitalism is the epitome of this process. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (2003 [1905]), Weber famously argues that the main driver behind the development of capitalism was ascetic Protestantism. In particular, the Calvinist notion of predestination – the idea that economic and social success may be taken as an indication of future salvation decreed by God – became a disciplinary force that commanded virtuous and sober behaviours compliant with religious precepts.

However, scientific rationalism advanced a process of secularization (which Weber labels ‘disenchantment’) that resulted in the progressive separation of the spheres of religion, morality, and the sacred from that of the economy. Accordingly, the original religious rationale for the process of capitalist accumulation – the Calvinist sacred calling – was eventually replaced by the ‘iron cage’ of capitalism, namely, ‘the technical and economic conditions of machine production’ and ‘care for external good’ – that is, mass consumption – ‘which today determine the lives of all the individuals who are born into this mechanism . . . with irresistible force’ (Weber, 2003 [1905], p. 181). Capitalism for Weber is a secularized version of the Protestant ethic. It is a regime of norms, practices, and aspirations devoid of sacred religious meanings and governed by a bureaucratic rationality that is ultimately an ‘iron cage’ that imprisons modern individuals into a ‘meaningless’ pattern of accumulation and consumption. In the remainder of this section, we wish to challenge this ‘secularist’ reading of capitalism and show how a postsecular reading reveals that the market, far from being a secular domain, has been increasingly sacralized (Mavelli, 2020, 2022). To this end, two trajectories of postsecular sacralization must be considered: one connected to the totaling process of commodification and one resulting from an ‘epistemology of limited knowledge’ (Walker and Cooper, 2011) that understands the market as a transcendent entity.

It has long been argued that capitalism commodifies everything, namely, that it turns every aspect, dimension, domain, space, feeling, and object of human existence into something that can be exchanged for money (Brown, 2015). Commodification can therefore be theorized as the inverse of the process of consecration or sacralization (Agamben, 2007). As philosopher Giorgio Agamben (2007, p. 73) observes, for Roman jurists, ‘[s]acred or religious were the things that in some way belonged to the gods. As such, they were removed from the free use and commerce of men; they could be neither sold nor held in lien, neither given for usufruct nor burdened by servitude’. To ‘belong to the gods’ does not exclusively mean to belong to an otherworldly domain. For Immanuel Kant, for instance, feelings of piety, compassion, solidarity, dignity, and empathy should be regarded as sacred because, albeit experienced and practised immanently, they belong to the transcendental domain of universal morality. By desacralizing these principles through their incorporation into the market system, the totaling process of commodification leaves no outside domain from which the neoliberal market can be questioned.
or challenged. The paradoxical result, Agamben observes, is that the ‘commodification of everything’ entails the very sacralization of the market as a transcendent domain that, following Émile Durkheim’s (1995 [1912], p. 44) classical definition of the sacred, is ‘set apart and forbidden’, hence turned into a source of truth and revelation that cannot be subjected to rational scrutiny but only worshipped.

The question that the market has been sacralized and neoliberalism turned into a quasi-religion has forcefully emerged in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, the worst recession since the Great Depression. Numerous authoritative scholars have described this crisis as the product of ‘theological free-market ideology’ (Eric Hobsbawm, cited in Peck et al., 2009, p. 99) and ‘market fundamentalism’ (Block and Somers, 2014, p. 3) which have become ‘the prevailing religion of the West’ (Stiglitz, 2009, p. 346). Far from being a purely secular domain governed by instrumental rationality, the neoliberal market has turned into a realm of ‘quasi-religious certainty’ (Leeson, 2013, p. 147). In the face of the growing inequality, casualization of labour, impoverishment, and a relentless pattern of local and global economic crises since the end of the 1970s, the celebration of the self-organizing and self-healing capacities of the market – which should be left untouched by human intervention according to the apostles of neoliberalism – suggests a mode of reasoning based on ‘revelation’ rather than ‘empirical verification’ (Block and Somers, 2014, p. 3). To understand how the market has acquired the postsecular status of quasi-transcendent domain beyond human governance that blurs the traditional secular/religious divide, we need to consider the argument of Friedrich Hayek, widely regarded as one of the most important forefathers of neoliberalism.

According to Hayek (2005 [1944], p. 210), the idea that human beings may govern the market to improve its functioning is the expression of an ‘erroneous rationalism’, namely, the mistaken presumption that human minds may have greater computational capacity than the market. For Hayek, markets are ‘complex systems’ comprising an extraordinarily high number of variables that greatly exceed the human capacity to grasp them in their totality. At the same time, markets also have an innate and spontaneous capacity to produce order, progress, and growth (Hayek, 1967; see also Walker and Cooper, 2011). Hence, any human attempt to intervene on the market will negatively affect its performance and potentially threaten our freedom by establishing new forms of tyranny.

Tyranny is for Hayek a direct consequence of the hubris of scientific knowledge. By claiming an unprecedented ability to grasp and successfully intervene upon the complexity of the market, scientific rationalism endows ‘other men’ in the guise of communist dictators, socialist planners, leftist redistributionists, and central bankers with the ‘arbitrary power’ to compress our freedom (Hayek, 2005 [1944], pp. 204–205). It follows that the only way to escape the ‘serfdom of the individual’ and defend our liberty ‘rests chiefly on the recognition of the inevitable ignorance of all of us’ (Hayek, 2011 [1960], p. 80), namely, on the recognition that individuals only possess scattered fragments of knowledge, and that government cannot overcome the inherent unknowability of the market. To preserve our freedom, Hayek intimates, it is paramount to believe in the truth of the market in very much the same way that ‘men in the past’ used to believe in the truth of religious traditions. Hayek (1988, p. 137) admits that this faith in the market is ultimately not ‘verifiable or testable’. Yet, he maintains, the very advancement of progress and civilization is also the product of ‘beliefs which are not true . . . in the same sense as are scientific statements and which are certainly not the result of rational argumentation’ (Hayek, 1988, p. 137). These beliefs or ‘symbolic truths’, as Hayek (1988, p. 137) describes them by citing The Book of Genesis, have forcefully encouraged ‘their adherents to “be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth and subdue it” (Genesis 1, 28)’. Indeed, he concludes, ‘nonfactual beliefs’ have been essential for the establishment of ‘the extended order that we now enjoy’ to the effect
that ‘now the loss of these beliefs, whether true or false, creates great difficulties’ (Hayek, 1988, p. 137).

It can be inferred that for Hayek the Weberian process of disenchantment – the shift from religious rationalism to scientific rationalism and the related downgrading of ‘belief’ to the sphere of the irrational – threatens the advancement of human civilization (Mavelli, 2022, p. 179). Weber’s (1946 [1919b], p. 139) famous idea that, with modernity, ‘there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation’ becomes for Hayek the very condition of possibility for the ‘erroneous rationalism’ (Hayek, 2005 [1944], p. 210) and ‘pretense of knowledge’ (Hayek, 1989) that pose a grave threat to human freedom. Hence, to be free and to advance our material and civilizational well-being, we have no choice but to bow to the inscrutable mysteries of the market by abandoning our ‘pretense of knowledge’ (Hayek, 1989), confessing our ignorance, and letting ourselves be guided by the wisdom of a superior intellect – the neoliberal market – whose impenetrable design we can neither understand nor grasp in its totality.

Hayek’s idea of the neoliberal market offers a remarkable instantiation of postsecularism as a process of transcendence of the secular/religious divide. His approach mixes secular and religious registers. It blurs the divides between science and faith, facts and beliefs, the secular and the religious, as well as the practical and moral divide between knowledge and ignorance. In an almost mystical and transcendent turn, it gestures towards the unknowability and inscrutability of the market, thus asking for an act of faith in its inherent goodness. Yet, this act of faith is justified in purely secular and rational terms concerning the epistemological limits of scientific knowledge. The result is a postsecular process of dislocation of religious and secular discourses that constantly blurs the boundary between sacred and profane. The neoliberal market is sacralized, and yet its sacralization does not seemingly rest on revelation but on a secular rationality that reveals the inherent epistemological limits of our capacity to know due to the sheer complexity of the market. And yet again, Hayek’s secular scientific reasoning also crucially encompasses an element of revelation, a leap of faith, in the natural goodness of the market (Mavelli, 2022, pp. 179–180). As Néstor Míguez, Joerg Rieger, and Jung Mo Sung perceptively observe:

[I]f it is true that we cannot sufficiently understand the factors and dynamics of the market so that we can intervene in it, how can we know that the market always produces beneficial effects or that it is essentially a ‘force for good?’ Is knowing that the market always produces beneficial effects not a pretension of knowledge of the market? Since one cannot prove this providential character of the market, we have here a ‘leap of faith’ in the affirmation of the essentially beneficent quality of free market.  
(Míguez et al., 2009, p. 82)

For Hayek, the ultimate justification for trusting the market is the expression of an eminently scientific and secular rational argument: our epistemological incapacity to fully grasp the complexity of the social world in its sheer intricacy. However, through a ‘leap of faith’, this secular approach ends up advocating trusting the market as a benevolent entity capable of delivering economic growth and advancing the pathway of human civilization. This reasoning performs a paradoxical subversion whereby it is rational to have faith in the market – even when the market delivers crisis, shocks, and failures – and it is irrational not to have faith in the market – as this would express a ‘pretense of knowledge’ that clashes with secular registers. The neoliberal market thus emerges simultaneously as a sacred and profane space that draws strength on competing frames of authority, and results in a power that transcends both secular and religious registers (Mavelli, 2022, p. 180).
Hayek’s neoliberal market is ultimately a postsecular domain, yet not one in which religious traditions are as a reservoir of moral resources which can help govern, control, and smooth the excesses of a secular market rationality ‘spinning out of control’ (Habermas, 2008b, p. 211). Hayek’s postsecular market – the neoliberal market which over the last 40 years has become ‘the prevailing religion of the West’ (Stiglitz, 2009) – draws on religious frameworks of meaning and authority to justify, support, and further advance neoliberal rationalities of inequality, appropriation, dispossession, and sacrifice for those superfluous or detrimental to the needs of the market. These considerations suggest that postsecularism has a dark side beyond the benign and progressive discourse of inclusivity of religious traditions in the secular order that emerged in the mid-2000s. In the perpetual climate of crisis that since 2008 is gripping the global order (global financial crises, refugee crises, Covid pandemic, Russo-Ukrainian war) marked by a widespread decline of the human capacity to distinguish facts from beliefs and exercise critical judgement (the rise of fake news and so-called post-truth politics, which mimic modes of reasoning based on faith rather than reasoned argumentation), it is likely that this hidden, dark underside of postsecularism will become increasingly more prominent in the years to come.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has explored the emergence of postsecularism as a form of critique and resistance to dominant secular, (neo)liberal ethics in contemporary IR. Much of the recent debate around postsecularism has been catalysed by the Habermasian approach, which, as we noted, is problematic as it operates from within the prevailing secular framework and logic. This is evident, firstly, in its construction of religion as a primarily cognitive activity, overlooking the embodied, lived, experiential dimensions of religion. Secondly, Habermas neglects the power of secularism, enabling it to construct religion in narrow ways and delimit where and when religion can appropriately enter and contribute to debates within the public sphere. In essence, then, Habermasian postsecularism reinforces rather than disrupts the secular/religious divide that underpins the structures and logics giving shape to contemporary Western politics and society. It is also primarily concerned with the potentially positive impacts of religious meaning and ethics in the public sphere, a position that overlooks the complicated blurring of secular and religious modalities in seemingly secular formations such as the market.

Following on from this critique, we have suggested several ways in which the debate surrounding postsecularism may be expanded to address the shortcomings of the Habermasian approach and enable further nuance and complexity in the analysis of religion in IR. The first of these is shifting the focus of the postsecular from religion as a cognitive activity to understanding it as both cognitive and embodied. The discourses surrounding people seeking asylum show the limits of a purely cognitive account of postsecularism to move beyond a paradigm in which spheres of ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ are clearly demarcated. However, the necessity of a postsecular imagination capable to consider this embodied, practical, and experiential dimension of faith clashes with the cognitive understanding of religion sustained by the power/knowledge regime of Western secularism. The apprehension for any attempt at reconsidering the boundary between the secular and the religious, the rational and the emotional, is well summarized by Habermas: ‘[Once the] boundary between faith and knowledge becomes porous, and once religious motives force their way into philosophy under false pretences, reason loses its foothold and succumbs to irrational effusion’.

The analysis in this chapter suggests two potential future research avenues on the postsecular in IR. First, although dominant, the Kantian-Habermasian perspective is not the only tradition
of Western secularism. William Connolly (2006), for instance, has pointed in the direction of a minor Western tradition centred on the thought of Baruch Spinoza whose ‘metaphysical monism’ challenges the mind/body dualism, considering them as expressions of the same substance. This perspective, Connolly contends, advances an idea of ethics not as the search for universal categorical imperatives, but as an embodied-spiritual cultivation of ethical dispositions, resisting ‘the thin intellectualism that grips secularism – that is, the idea that thinking can be separated from its affective dimension and that exercises of the self and collective rituals merely represent or symbolize beliefs’ (Connolly, 2006, p. 84). The challenge for scholars of postsecularism in IR is thus to move beyond the Kantian-Habermasian ‘cognitive’ tradition of secularity by considering conceptual resources of contending secular traditions sensitive to emotions, and how these traditions may be ‘harness[ed] for radical purposes’ (Linklater, 1998) such as devising modes of subjectivity beyond the mind/body dualism or disclosing the power/knowledge inscriptions of existing secular formations.

Second, the asylum case and the sacralization of neoliberal market ideology demonstrate that, contra Habermas, the secular and the religious are not distinct, separate worldviews but rather domains of knowledge and power that can be deployed to mutually constitute and reinforce one another in the service of or in resistance to sovereign power. Political actors articulating an implementation of the secular theodicy where migrants are blamed for their own fate are often the same political actors proclaiming the importance of Christianity in their own personal lives as well as the life of the nation. At the same time, activists involved in resisting the secular theodicies of governments on migration draw on both ‘secular’ and ‘religious’, cognitive and embodied modes of resistance. This highlights that framing the postsecular as a cognitive cooperation between two worldviews does not do justice to the complex ways in which the secular and the religious are entangled, and how this entanglement can equally resist or facilitate regimes of oppression.

As we have attempted to show, the postsecular involves rethinking subjectivity beyond the mind/body dichotomy; questioning the naturalness of the boundary that separates the secular and the religious; and challenging the idea that the postsecular may be an inherently benign force, particularly in those instances when religious rhetoric and argumentation are used to justify market rationalities of inequality and subjugation. The postsecular may offer a new critical edge to reconsider the very categories of critique and resistance by turning the boundary between the secular and the religious into a space in which new forms of embodied political agency and imagination may be observed. Yet to realize this potential, postsecular critique and analysis must move beyond its predominant preoccupation with Kant and Habermas, acknowledge the complexity and ambiguity of religious and secular entanglements, and problematize the sacralization of the market as a manifestation of this ambiguity and blurring. Ultimately, postsecular critique cannot ignore that the dissolution of traditional secular-religious divides may generate hope but also monsters.

References


