CHAPTER 4

A POSTSECULAR GLOBAL ORDER: METAPHYSICAL NOT POLITICAL?

Nicholas Rengger*

It is a relative commonplace, in the political and international theory of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, to talk of the political and philosophical worlds as being “postmetaphysical.” While the idea of “postmetaphysical thinking” is most obviously associated with Habermas,1 other influential contemporary thinkers have also argued that key aspects of the contemporary condition can be best characterized as “postmetaphysical.” This would be true, for instance, of most poststructural thought and of the thought of the late Richard Rorty who described a postmetaphysical culture as one where

what is common to religion and metaphysics—to find an ahistorical, transcultural matrix for one’s thinking, something into which everything can fit, independent of one’s time and place—has dried up and blown away. It would be a culture in which people thought of human beings as creating their own life-world, rather than as being responsible to God or “the nature of reality,” which tells them what kind it is.2

At the same time as the rise of claims about the postmetaphysical character of contemporary human life, however, we have seen the rise of claims about the postsecular character of contemporary politics. As the editors of this volume emphasize in their prospectus for the conference that gave rise to it, a multicivilizational, multiperspectival global order may not be best described in terms of “secularity”—something that in many ways displays a very Western trajectory in terms of intellectual history. However, a question
surely remains as to whether a “postsecular” order is also necessarily a “postmetaphysical” one. In many contexts, including many of those discussed elsewhere in this volume, the assumption seems to be that it would (and should) be. This chapter, however, seeks to examine and discuss a rather different view that suggests the contrary: to wit that the best way to see political authority in a postsecular global order is precisely to see it in metaphysical terms, at least understood in a certain way.

Now I should emphasize that the view I will present for examination here is very much a composite one and, inevitably, there are simplifications and distortions as a result. But it pays us, I think, to consider it—even if, in fact, we want to dissent from it—for important aspects of what a “postsecular order” might look like are, I think, opened up for further discussion through such a consideration. I emphasize too that in what follows I shall largely be concerned with exegesis—with spelling out what this view might mean by a postsecular but most emphatically not postmetaphysical global order—though I will close by offering some critical thoughts and reservations, perhaps to start a conversation going.

**Secular and Postsecular**

To begin with, though, I want to say something about the notion of secularity, since, of course, to suggest we live in a “postsecular age” assumes already we have assigned a particular meaning to secularity. Perhaps the most sustained and profound excavation of the notion of secularity in modern thought is offered by Charles Taylor in *A Secular Age*.3 There Taylor suggests that one can understand the claim that we live in a secular age in three distinct ways. One way of saying we live in a secular age, he says, is “to emphasise that whereas the political organization of all pre-modern societies was in some way connected to, based on, guaranteed by some faith in, or adherence to God, or some notion of ultimate reality, the modern Western state is free from this connection… religion or its absence is largely a private matter” (p. 1). A second way is to see secularity as “the falling away of religious belief and practice, in people turning away from God” (p. 2). Taylor tells us that he is going understand the question in a third way, though it’s fairly closely related to the second and not unconnected to the first. He wants to understand secularity as question about “the conditions of belief” or as he says “the change I want to define and trace is one which takes us from a society in which was virtually