


The Challenge of Religious Identity in the Post-Secular World

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Article Info	Abstract
<p>Article type: Research Article</p> <p>Article history: Received 25 November 2024 Received in revised form 10 December 2024 Accepted 20 December 2024 Published online 28 January 2025</p> <p>Keywords: Religion, Religious Identity, Post-Secularism, Responsible Human</p>	<p>Examining two prevailing realities of today’s social world—namely, the strong presence of religious identities alongside the widespread dominance of post-secular social thought—motivates this study to explore the challenges faced by religious identity in the post-secular era. The fundamental challenge lies in maintaining a religious identity, with its faith-based characteristics, within a diverse and socially constructed post-secular context. When religion is subordinated to the rules of convention and instrumental rationality, it risks losing its direct connection to its divine sources and doctrinal foundations. Key points of tension between religion—as a system claiming ultimate truth—and post-secularism include their divergent anthropologies centered on human responsibility, the essentialist and totalizing tendencies of religions, their teleological orientation, and the complex relationship between religious identity and social relations, which are characterized by both solidarity and otherness. The central challenge emerges when secular norms are prioritized over religious ones, reducing religious identity to a mere shell for other forms of social identity. Drawing on theoretical resources from post-secularism and Islamic religious sources, this study also addresses the critical issue of the truth-claiming nature of religions in their engagement with post-secular thought.</p>
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Problem Statement

Identity and the question of “who we are” have long been among the most significant and enduring concerns of human thought. Humanity has always sought to discover its true identity and has continuously engaged with the issue of identity in both individual and social life. In the social sciences, the concept of identity has come to be regarded as one of the most complex and multifaceted notions, attracting the attention of numerous scholars and researchers.

In contemporary times, however, thinkers increasingly speak of the return or renewed presence of religion within culture and the public sphere. Contrary to the expectations of modernist thought which predicted the decline of religion and its confinement to the private sphere empirical reality has shown that religion has not only persisted in individual life but has also reemerged with a strong presence in public culture.

The concept of the post-secular, which follows from secularism itself, reflects this realization: that modernity has failed to eliminate religion or confine it entirely to private belief. The post-secular condition is therefore proposed by scholars as a framework for understanding the continued presence of religion in public culture. Within secularism, the presence of religion in the public sphere is permitted only insofar as it conforms to the principles of liberalism and globalization, and remains limited to the cultural realm—without extending into political authority or legal structures.

In contrast, comprehensive religions view religious identity as the highest and most authoritative form of human identity for their followers, attributing to it distinctive social characteristics. Religious identity, as one type of identity, maintains a close relationship with social identity, and the expectations that religion places upon the individual both in the private and social spheres represent the highest level of religiosity. Consequently, in the social realm, religious identity faces two normative forces: the expectations of religion and the expectations of society.

At the same time, the self perceives itself through its essential identity structures, while the “Other” as a marker of difference emerges through the reciprocal relationship between religion and society as reflected in religious identity. What must be emphasized here are the challenges that religious identity encounters in the post-secular world. In other words, religions provide their adherents with distinctive norms, laws, and worldviews that may differ from post-secular approaches, leading to tensions between religious and social identities within post-secular frameworks.

The present study seeks to analyze these tensions by examining the conceptual foundations of both religious identity and post-secularism, in order to elucidate the key challenges facing religious identity in the post-secular era.

Religious Identity

To define religious identity, it is first necessary to examine the concept of identity itself. Etymologically, the term identity derives from the Latin word *identitas*, which carries two related but distinct meanings: sameness or uniformity on the one hand, and distinctiveness that implies continuity over time on the other. These two seemingly opposing senses, in fact, complement one another in shaping the full meaning of identity¹.

Thus, in its conceptual sense, identity establishes two possible relations among objects and persons: similarity and difference². In other words, identity is composed of both *genus* (the element of similarity) and *differentia* (the element of distinction)³.

From a terminological standpoint, identity refers to the set of essential social, cultural, psychological, philosophical, biological, and historical characteristics that define the essence of a group signifying the unity or similarity of its members and distinguish them consciously and recognizably from other groups and individuals within a specific temporal and spatial context⁴.

Jenkins further describes identity as a set of subjective meanings that include values, beliefs, norms, symbols, attitudes, and forms of consciousness specific to an individual or social self, along with a sense of belonging and commitment to that self⁵.

Once the general meaning of identity is clarified, the notion of religious identity can be defined. The concept of religion, while satisfying basic psychological needs, is inherently a social phenomenon, for individual beliefs alone cannot constitute a religion unless they acquire social belonging. Consequently, religion responds to both individual needs and social necessities⁶.

For this reason, in clarifying the notion of religious identity, the concept of social identity pioneered by George Herbert Mead plays a crucial role. According to Mead, the image an individual forms of the self, and the feelings associated with that self, are reflections of the attitudes that others hold toward that individual⁷. Building on Mead's approach, Henri Tajfel defines social identity as that part of an individual's self-concept derived from awareness of membership in a social group, together with the emotional and evaluative significance attached to that membership⁸.

¹ Ahmad Golmohammadi, *Jahani Shodan-e Hoviyat va Farhang* (Tehran: Nashr-e Ney, 2017). p.222

² Richard Jenkins, *Hoviyat-e Ejtemai*, trans. Y. Ahmadi (Tehran: Shirazeh, 2002). P. 13

³ Noocheh-Falah, *Hoviyat: Vagheiyati Sabit ya Sial* (Tehran: Pazhuheshkadeh-ye Olum-e Ensani va Ejtemai, Jihad-e Daneshgahi, 2004). P. 27

⁴ Ali Al-Taie, *Bojurūy-e Hoviyat-e Aqami dar Iran* (Tehran: Shadgan, 1999). P. 138.

⁵ Jenkins, *Hoviyat-e Ejtemai*, p. 3

⁶ Alireza Shoja'izadeh, *Din dar Zamineh va Zamaneh-ye Modern* (Tehran: Pazhuheshgah-e Olum-e Ensani va Motale'at-e Farhangi, 1994). P. 29

⁷ Golmohammadi, *Jahani Shodan-e Hoviyat va Farhang*, p. 223

⁸ Henri Tajfel, *Social Categorization, Social Identity, and Social Comparison* (London: Academic Press, 1978). P. 6

From this perspective, identity formation can be viewed as a process through which the social actor seeks meaningful answers to fundamental questions of who am I and what am I. Identity thus entails recognizing the boundary between self and other, a distinction largely achieved through social affiliation and the differentiation of the in-group from the out-group.¹

Accordingly, two essential components define social identity—and by extension, religious identity:

1. Unity and internal cohesion among members of the same group (in-group solidarity), and
2. Otherness and differentiation from those outside the group.

Regarding religion, numerous definitions have been offered by scholars from diverse theoretical perspectives. The preferred definition here is close to that of Peterson, who views religion as a holistic system of individual and collective beliefs, emotions, and practices organized around the concept of an ultimate reality or sacred order. Depending on the particular religion, this ultimate reality may be conceived as singular or plural, personal or impersonal, divine or non-divine².

If we now connect the concept of identity with religion, religious identity may be defined as a cognitive, emotional, and belief-based construct encompassing values, norms, beliefs, emotions, symbols, attitudes, and forms of consciousness that constitute an individual and social self organized around a sacred or ultimate reference point. Through its influence on social action, religious identity both fosters intragroup cohesion and solidarity among believers and produces intergroup differentiation between the religious community and others³

An important point in defining religious identity is that, consistent with the principles of social identity, it rests upon two foundational elements:

1. The shared belonging of individuals to religious institutions and fellow believers, which generates unity; and
2. The differentiation from other religions or sects, which introduces distinction and separateness into the very structure of religious identity.

These dual dimensions make the analysis of religious identity complex, as understanding religious teachings becomes essential for evaluating and interpreting various forms of religious identity.

Post-Secularism

The concept of the post-secular (or postsecularism) is a relatively recent notion introduced by contemporary thinkers such as Jürgen Habermas. Habermas, reflecting on the present condition of humanity, argues that the project of modernity has ultimately failed—particularly in moral terms. He maintains that, rather than drawing a rigid division between the religious and the

¹ Golmohammadi, *Jahani Shodan-e Hoviyat va Farhang*, p. 223

² Michael Patterson et al., *Aghl va Eteghad-e Dini* (Tehran: Tarh-e No, 1998). P. 21

³ Mahmoud Raoufi, “Mo’aleffeh-ha-ye Hoviyat-e Dini,” *Din va Ertebatat* 17, nos. 1–2 (1994): 19–991.

secular, humanity must pursue a peaceful coexistence and mutual learning between the domains of faith and reason¹.

In this framework, Habermas insists that neither religious nor secular perspectives should ignore or exclude the other. Instead, both must learn from one another and engage in tolerant, dialogical coexistence².

Massimo Rosati also argues that, within a post-secular society, religious and secular worldviews are regarded as epistemically and normatively equal. This means that both perspectives must be treated as possessing comparable significance and value. Consequently, modern societies that consider themselves fully secular must revise their systems of valuation and meaning-making in order to make such coexistence viable and sustainable³.

A similar idea appears in the analysis of Zarshenas, who interprets post-secularism as a moderation of *laïcité* (secularism) rather than its negation. He writes:

“Post-secularism represents a moderated form of *laïcité*; that is, secularism itself remains intact and continues to persist as an intrinsic feature of modern civilization. It does not fundamentally change, and its processes will not cease as long as modernity endures. However, as the modern world weakens a decline that, in my view, began a century ago all components of modernity, including secularism, inevitably lose strength. Therefore, those who imagine that post-secularism signifies a departure from secularism are mistaken; rather, it represents a reconfiguration of *laïcité*. In its milder form, *laïcité* allows certain limited spaces for religion, acknowledging that some domains may be less threatening if partially ceded to faith. This does not constitute a retreat from secularism but rather an adjustment of its structure.”⁴

The Religious Imperatives within a Post-Secular Framework

The term secular originally referred to lands that were separated from the economic control of the Church. These lands, once considered sacred due to their ecclesiastical ownership, lost their sacred status once detached from religious institutions. Over time, as the Church’s authority diminished and other social institutions—particularly politics and the state—asserted their independence, secularism came to denote this broader process of differentiation.

It is important to note, however, that secularism involves more than the separation of religion from politics; it refers more comprehensively to the worldly orientation and temporalization of all spheres of human life.

¹ Mahmoud Zarei, “Post-Secularism, Religion, and the Public Sphere in the Thought of Jürgen Habermas,” *Pazhuheshnameh-ye Olum-e Siyasi* 10, no. 2 (2015).

² Ibid.

³ Massimo Rosati, *The Making of a Postsecular Society: A Durkheimian Approach to Memory, Pluralism and Religion in Turkey* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2015).

⁴ Shahryar Zarshenas, “Nizam-e Ejtemai-ye Gharb: Post-Secularism va Emkan-e Gozaresh az Secularism; Goftari dar Sharh-e Tamayoz-e Secularism va Laicism,” *Soore-ye Andisheh* 50–51 (2011).

Habermas, as the leading theorist of the post-secular condition, identifies three main historical factors that sustained the close relationship between modernity and secularization in recent centuries. In his own words:

“First, the progress of science and technology promoted a human-centered, disenchanted understanding of the world, as all objective phenomena came to be explained through causal relationships. The enlightened mind, illuminated by empirical knowledge, became increasingly irreconcilable with theocentric or supernatural worldviews.

Second, the functional differentiation of social systems led the Church and other religious institutions to lose control over law, politics, welfare, education, and science. Religion became confined to the administration of spiritual matters and the salvation of believers, thereby turning into a private affair and losing much of its social influence and legitimacy.

Third, the transition from agrarian to industrial and post-industrial societies increased general welfare and social security. As risks and existential threats diminished, and as life became safer, the need for faith-based assurances of divine protection declined.”¹

Habermas concludes that, contrary to earlier expectations of the secularization thesis—which predicted the eventual disappearance of religion—religion has not vanished. On the contrary, it has re-emerged within the public sphere even in highly industrialized societies such as the United States. Therefore, he argues, we can no longer adequately describe our era as “secular,” but rather as post-secular².

From a sociological standpoint, this development represents a reversal of earlier expectations within classical sociology. For example, Auguste Comte envisioned sociology as a “positive religion,” a new prophetic science designed to replace theology in guiding society. Similarly, other sociologists regarded sociology as a functional substitute for religion, establishing a framework of social ethics and legal systems grounded in human reason rather than divine revelation.

Karl Marx, for his part, famously described religion as “the opium of the people” and sought to abolish it within his theoretical framework. Yet, in his early work *On the Jewish Question* written in response to Bruno Bauer’s essay of the same name Marx took a more nuanced stance in practice. While he criticized the role of religion as an ideological tool, he opposed Bauer’s call to eliminate Jewish religion altogether, arguing instead that Jews should retain the right to private religious practice within the bounds of civil law³.

Richard Rorty and the Limits of Religion in Public Life

The American pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty, in his essay “Priority of Democracy to Philosophy” (1983), supports John Rawls’s view of religion and advocates for the confinement

¹ Habermas, Jürgen. *Notes on a Post-Secular Society*. *New Perspectives Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (2008): 17–29.

² Ibid.

³ Karl Marx, *Darbarezeh-ye Masaleh-ye Yahud* (Tehran: Pouyesh, 1979).

of religion to the private sphere. Rorty argues that religion should be excluded from the domain of social and political life, since its presence, in his view, diminishes the liberal spirit of societies. Furthermore, in his essay “Religion as a Conversation Stopper” (1994), Rorty explicitly criticizes President Carter’s encouragement of religious involvement in public life.

Yet, as both Habermas and Rorty himself observe, what is currently unfolding across various societies is the inability of modern communities to eliminate religion or to neutralize its social influence. Despite the long-anticipated secularization of public life, religion continues to exert visible and persistent effects on society.

Habermas thus proposes that in the contemporary context where religion not only survives in the private sphere but also asserts itself within civil society religious participation must follow two guiding principles:

1. It must remain subject to the social and legal norms of liberal society, without undermining them; and
2. It must respect and conform to the principles of scientific rationality.

As Habermas writes:

“Accordingly, both secular and religious citizens must, from their respective perspectives, accept an interpretation of the relationship between faith and knowledge that enables them to coexist in a reflective and self-critical manner.”¹

Scholarly Interpretations of Habermas’s Post-Secularism

Researchers have correctly noted that Habermas’s concept of post-secularism neither rejects the process of secularization nor seeks a return to theological supremacy. From his perspective, the post-secular society is defined by the continued presence of religious communities within a secular environment.

By challenging the classical assumptions of secularization theory—particularly the claim that secular reason possesses epistemic superiority over religion—Habermas argues that secular reason should occupy a status of parity with religion. Secular rationality, he maintains, must relinquish its presumption of dominance in order to understand the continuing significance of religion in the public sphere.

His effort to reintegrate religion into public discourse can thus be interpreted as a strategic response to the growing relevance of faith in contemporary life and as a call for a peaceful coexistence between religions, free from rigid boundaries between the private and public domains².

¹ Habermas, Jürgen. *Notes on a Post-Secular Society*. *New Perspectives Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (2008): 17–29.

² Rahim Hajaqa and Mahbubeh Paknia, “Habermas va Jaygah-e Din dar Hozeh-ye Omumi,” *Gharbshenasi-ye Bonyadi* 8, no. 2 (2017):80.

Religion and Postmodern Sociology

In postmodern sociology, the analytical focus has shifted from religion as a doctrinal system to the religious phenomenon as a social construct. This means that religious manifestations are evaluated in terms of their constructed and performative nature rather than as expressions of immutable essence.

George Ritzer, in his analysis of religious diversity in the contemporary world, likens modern religiosity to McDonaldization: individuals select and consume religions much like products, according to personal preference and convenience¹. From this plurality emerges John Hick's epistemological pluralism and its social extension, religious pluralism, wherein the guiding principle of social interaction becomes tolerance a notion resonant with Emmanuel Levinas's ethics of the Other².

In such a "McDonaldized religion", faith no longer retains intrinsic essence or teleological purpose; it becomes primarily a behavioral and ethical manifestation shaped by the norms of custom and science precisely the framework envisioned by Habermas.

The Essential Dimensions of Religious Identity

As previously discussed, two fundamental dimensions characterize religious identity:

1. Its social-relational structure, and
2. Its teleological orientation.

Religious identity, as a socially constructed form, rests on two core relational dynamics:

- Unity and solidarity among believers who share the same faith; and
- Otherness and differentiation from those outside the faith community.

Through these dual relations, religion seeks to construct and sustain its own identity.

However, the notion of "otherness" (alterity) in religious identity cannot be fully explained through Levinas's concept of the Other, which emphasizes love and ethical responsibility rather than identity formation. In the religious context, the Other represents the differentiation that defines the believer's identity vis-à-vis non-believers or adherents of other worldviews.

Martyr Sayyid Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr conceives of the human being described in the Qur'an as a responsible and history-making being (Sadr, n.d.). From birth, this human carries the burden of responsibility rather than the absolute freedom celebrated by liberal postmodernism. Freedom, in this sense, is exercised within the bounds of moral and religious responsibility.

Hence, religious identity is grounded in the principle of responsibility. In divine religions, this responsibility extends across all spheres of life, reflecting the totalizing nature of religious worldviews.

¹ George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2010).

² Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1961).

The teleological dimension of religious identity its orientation toward the sacred and the transcendent is what endows the believer's social actions with meaning and purpose. It is directly linked to the religion's truth-claim and essentialist understanding of reality, forming the foundation upon which the believer's religious identity rests. This teleology is what binds the individual to the laws and commandments of their faith, shaping both their inner self and their public conduct.

The Challenge of Religious Identity in the Post-Secular World

Following the examination of the concepts of religious identity and post-secularism, we arrive at the central problem of this study: the challenges faced by religious identity in a post-secular world. In tracing these challenges, several key issues emerge:

1. The Question of Priority

The foremost challenge between religious identity and post-secularism lies in the question of priority: which of the two should take precedence?

In the contemporary world, if religions seek to embody the full scope of their identity particularly through social action they must do so within the framework of customary law and instrumental reason.

This subordination, however, redefines religious identity under the parameters of a secular social order, creating a fundamental rupture with its original essence. Religion, by its nature, is totalizing it provides a complete system of belief and law, and expects the believer to live out a fully faith-centered identity, not one overshadowed by the secular.

From this standpoint, the post-secular approach to "otherness" (alterity) differs markedly from that of religion. It resembles Levinas's notion of the Other, which, in contrast to Hobbesian conflict or Rawlsian contractual fairness, emphasizes human equality as the foundation of social life¹.

However, the post-secular view, being non-essentialist, treats all religious differences as *socialconstructs*, whereas religious identity is founded on *truth-claims*—its *alterity* arises from the conviction of possessing truth.

2. Teleology

Another major challenge concerns the teleological orientation of religious identity. This is distinct from John Hick's pluralistic notion of salvific transformation, which is grounded in worldly salvation and rejects essentialism. Hick's view is a direct consequence of epistemological and religious pluralism².

¹ Aziza Aliya, *Levinas and the Other: Ethics Beyond Reason* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 92.

² Hamid H. Parsania, "Barrasi-ye Pluralism-e Ejtemai-ye John Hick az Manzar-e Imam Khomeini," *Ghabsat* 10 (2005). P.108.

In contrast, the teleology of religious identity derives from its divinely ordained law and truth-centered morality. The responsible human being, in religious anthropology, is expected to strive toward this transcendent goal.

The moral and legal foundations that shape religious identity its norms, values, and social codes are all rooted in sacred law (sharī 'ah).

Religion thus provides a comprehensive framework of identity for humanity. When placed under the dominion of secular custom or post-secular relativism, this identity loses its distinct anthropological and teleological foundations, as well as its relational structure of solidarity and alterity.

3. Anthropology

In all major religions, the human being is viewed as a responsible moral agent, accountable for actions and rituals, and bearing duties not only toward others but also toward nature and creation.

This responsibility-centered anthropology defines society as the outcome of individual moral obligations.

According to Sayyid Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, the individual's will and thought shape the future of society and its institutions; the inner content of human beings determines the external condition of their communities. The spiritual and teleological dimensions of humanity are what drive the wheel of history¹.

In contrast, the post-secular framework is grounded in the primacy of freedom. Individuals enter the social sphere and religion itself as autonomous agents who may freely choose among multiple traditions and rituals. Consequently, a fundamental tension arises between responsibility (as understood in religious anthropology) and freedom (as conceived by post-secular humanism).

4. Totality and Essentialism

The great revealed religions are comprehensive systems that claim to encompass every dimension of individual and collective life. They provide legal and moral frameworks for all human affairs, and assert both truth and innateness (fiṭrah).

This totalizing and essentialist vision, however, conflicts with the post-secular worldview, which is founded on non-essentialism and relativism. In post-secular thought, religion is treated primarily as a way of life a lifestyle choice among many whereas for religious identity, religion is a truth-bearing and transcendent reality.

Thus, while post-secularism may interpret religion as a cultural form of life, religious identity transcends such relativism, asserting its truth and authenticity as essential to human existence.

¹ Mohammad Baqer Sadr, *Ensān-e Mas'ul va Tarikh-saz* (Tehran: Bonyad-e Quran, 1980). p. 64-74.

Conclusion

The challenge of religious identity in the post-secular world closely resembles that of classical secularism with one key difference: whereas secularism sought to eliminate religion or confine it to the private sphere, post-secularism acknowledges religion as a source of social identity within the public order.

However, in this framework, religion is stripped of essence and truth, functioning instead as a social construct that supports liberal norms of order and coexistence.

Religious identity, by contrast, rests upon foundations that are inherently incompatible with post-secular assumptions. It envisions the human being as responsible and history-making, whereas the post-secular paradigm treats the human self as a socially constructed and autonomous entity.

For the believer, the sacred teleology and divine law of religion guide every aspect of life—standing in opposition to the worldly and tolerant pluralism of post-secular thought, which seeks harmony rather than truth.

Within religious identity, solidarity among co-believers and alterity toward others are defining features. Yet, in post-secularism, the notion of the Other is reinterpreted in purely ethical or humanistic terms, forcing religious identity to operate under the authority of secular custom and instrumental rationality.

Consequently, religious identity becomes constrained, compelled to compromise its principles in favor of liberal norms. What remains is not a fully religious identity but a secularized identity with a religious veneer a commodified lifestyle among many in the postmodern marketplace of identities.

The appropriate response for religions that view religious identity as primary over social identity is thus to reassert the priority and authenticity of divine law and principles, even as they navigate the inevitable tensions of the post-secular world.

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