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NEGOTIATING TERRAIN: GENDER AND THE POSTSECULAR?

*Introduction*

This volume of essays seeks to stage a conversation about a potentially exhausted category—the postsecular—that has not yet been staged. Approaching the category of the postsecular critically, the work in this volume will raise questions about whether or not difference—especially the difference marked by gendered bodies, gender issues, or gender politics—has been sufficiently addressed by either the proponents of postsecular forms of discourse, or its critics. Perhaps the postsecular is a name that merits critique and displacement. Or perhaps it's the best name that has yet emerged to describe the simultaneous critique and deployment of tools from both the religious and the secular. Ultimately, perhaps we do not yet know what the postsecular marks, or what it can do.

Religion and the secular are abstract and highly politicized categories that seek to frame practices, populations, symbols, texts, and discourses. And yet, for all of that, these abstractions do have their powerful material effects on the lived experiences of bodies. The charged distinction between religion and the secular is funneled into law, into text, into institutions, into financial transactions, into habits of thought. And, thus, this charged distinction impacts the legal status of intimate relationships, the food we consume, the shape of communities to which we turn for support. Arguments have been launched that one or the other (either religion or the secular) offers a more potent or liberating set of possibilities for our bodies that consume, and that commune. More convincing, perhaps, is the argument that *neither* provide this form of possibility: that both religion and the secular are, themselves, fundamentally problematic. This has been especially true for gendered bodies that have been subject to punitive measures—related, especially, to the patriarchal politics of sex and reproduction—by both religious and secular regimes. Feminist and queer theorists have launched critical attacks on both religious and secular regimes, while often (simultaneously) making strategic use of the content and relics within these regimes of meaning to make possible novel forms of living, seeing, speaking, and thinking. The approach to the postsecular that we lay out in this introduction

is informed by this engaged and dynamic critique of a transcendent regimes of power, and seeks to explore, instead, an immanent reconfiguration of thought and action.

The postsecular often appears in the guise of another, highly particular, critique: either a critique of religion *or* a critique of the secular. Within this critique the postsecular then manifests as either the revaluation of religion or the revaluation of the secular. If modern secularism has failed us, for example, then perhaps the postsecular can rescue us, through the return of religion. Alternatively, if modern secularism has been eroded by the return of religion, then perhaps the postsecular can offer a reinvigorated secularization that renegotiates its relation to religion. What if, however, the postsecular were to be read as a critical terrain that does not monolithically replace either religion or the secular—as if it were just the newest epoch or episteme to temporally succeed the others? What if the postsecular were not read as either a space to supplant the secular or the recuperation of an unreconstructed theological tradition? Can the postsecular, instead, be a name for what constructively troubles and opens up the enclosures assembled by modern secularism (itself created via the cultural patrimony of Christian theology)? Can the postsecular rupture the status of both religious and secular regimes of meaning, without authorizing a concrete replacement or promising a liberation from them?

The essays in this volume do not rule, conclusively, on this front. Instead—with a focus on the lived experiences of gendered bodies or the politics generated by gendered questions—these essays seek to critically explore the limits and potentials of what might go by the name of the postsecular.

### *The Problem of the Postsecular*

The postsecular, as a term and a theoretical terrain, has had a short but contested life. The postsecular has come to mean many things in contemporary academic circles: it has flirted with the possibility of detaching itself from both religion and the secular. In the process, it has more or less failed to do so and remains connected to both of them, inheriting their patriarchal, racist, and colonialist legacies. The concerns surrounding the term have been multifaceted – some have taken it to name yet another triumph of religion against the secular, while others have taken it to be, quite on the contrary, yet another subtle maneuver in the secular's triumph, now under a new name.

The postsecular exists as a construct, says the literary scholar Tracy Fessenden, because of a paradox. The secularization thesis (the claim that modernity marks the retreat of the religious and the rise of the secular) seems “amply confirmed at the level of

institutions," such as the academy. And yet, she notes, the more we look, the more it appears that facets of western secularism are actually, themselves, genealogically bound to particular forms of Christianity.<sup>1</sup> The closer we look, in other words, the harder it is to see any clear division between the religious (more specifically, the Christian) and the secular. The postsecular presents itself as the new, adequate, thing that is born from the inadequate crucibles of religion and the secular. The problem with this, as Fessenden sees it, is the deep and "lingering impress" that the secularization narrative has left on the postsecular. This impress is left, perhaps primarily, in postsecular temporality. Theorists of the postsecular, says Fessenden, propose it as a kind of "liberalizing, pluralizing move" that "implies redemption from a constraining past." In this way, the postsecular presents itself as an emancipatory leap forward, not so different from the original promise offered by secularization's future-oriented "progressive emancipation."<sup>2</sup> So although the postsecular may emerge as kind of third way between what are presumed to be the fixed, immobile, and expired alternatives of religion and the secular, on this reading, the postsecular narrative (of liberation from a constraining past) ultimately reveals itself to be merely the reiteration of a secular liberation from the confines of the religious, in a new form.

There have also been, within the fields of theology and philosophy, a quite different set of deployments of the postsecular than what Fessenden has observed in the field of literary studies. Yet, as we will see, within these fields the postsecular also adopts a liberationist discourse that (when you examine it closely) begins to look more like triumphalism. On the surface, for instance, theologian John Milbank and philosopher Jürgen Habermas seem to be coming at the postsecular from two very different directions. One understands the postsecular as the triumph secular reason. The other understands the postsecular as the triumph of religion. But there is a deep, underlying, resonance between their positions.

Habermas is concerned that secular modernization has begun to "spin out of control"<sup>3</sup> during an era in which the west has lost faith in practical (secular) reason. His turn to the postsecular is marked by a desire to give secular reason a bit of a makeover—primarily by borrowing some of religion's undeniably robust social authority. Secular reason, for Habermas, needs to be

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<sup>1</sup> Tracy Fessenden, "The Problem of the Postsecular", *American Literary History*, Vol 26, No 1 (Spring 2014), pp. 154-167, 156.

<sup>2</sup> Fessenden, 157.

<sup>3</sup> Jürgen Habermas et al, *An Awareness of What is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Post-Secular Age* (Cambridge & Malden, Mass: Polity Press, 2010), 18.

humbled and reminded that it cannot rightly “set itself up as the judge concerning the truths of faith.” It also needs to be reminded of its own genealogy: reason is historically bound to faith, a genealogy that Habermas understands to begin during the Axial Age. If secular reason is willing to do this—to become postsecular, to accept its genealogical bonds with faith—then Habermas believes that religion should return the favor. Religion “must accept the authority of ‘natural’ reason as the fallible result of institutionalized sciences” and “the basis of the principles of universalistic egalitarianism in law and morality.” In essence, if secular reason is willing to humble itself into a postsecular condition, reason will thereby gain enough authority to obligate religion to humble itself in turn. Habermas, however, admits that the purpose for doing all of this is above all “to mobilize modern reason against the defeatism lurking within it.”<sup>4</sup> This form of the postsecular is, then, in the end, dedicated to the triumph of reason—secular reason.

The triumphalist registers of Milbank’s postsecularity are more decidedly on the side of religion. Milbank’s critique of the secular in texts like *Theology and Social Theory* is dedicated to the revelation that the secular is a kind of “artificial space”, constructed by modernity.<sup>5</sup> Critiquing the radical orthodox use of the term postsecular, Anthony Paul Smith and Daniel Whistler have argued that, in its turn against the alleged nihilism of secularity, this movement effectively seeks to establish “a new imperialism, this time tending toward the premodern by means of a persistent polemic against the value of the modern.”<sup>6</sup> Milbank is dedicated to the claim that in the wake of a critique of the secular, “a Catholic Christian account of reality might be entertained as the most finally persuasive one.”<sup>7</sup> But he also wants to claim reason itself for his own postsecular purposes. Milbank suggests that though the heritage of reason is pagan, this pagan reason was itself taken up by Catholic Christianity. Modern secular reason has, he suggests, always been a kind of false imposition—willfully ignorant of its genealogical heritage. For Milbank, if reason is to become suitably postsecular, it needs to be “supplemented” by faith.<sup>8</sup> In the end, then, Milbank’s postsecular objection to secular reason begins to sound more like that of Habermas: secular reason can be reformed, or converted, by supplementing it with faith.

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<sup>4</sup> Habermas, 16-18.

<sup>5</sup> John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Malden, Mass & Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1990, 2006), 18.

<sup>6</sup> Anthony Paul Smith & Daniel Whistler (Eds.), “What is Continental Philosophy of Religion Now?” in *After the Postsecular and the Postmodern: New Essays in Continental Philosophy of Religion* (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011), 10.

<sup>7</sup> Milbank, xi.

<sup>8</sup> Milbank, xvii.

Habermas' vision of the postsecular seems to be an opportunity to remake reason *just enough* so that it can regain dominance and control over the religious. Milbank's critique of the secular, and his vision of the postsecular, seems to be an opportunity to remake reason *just enough* so that it can take on the authority to erase the secular itself. But in each case, this space *after secularism* (this postsecular) is charged with the task of reforming and converting reason. And, in each case, we're offered a teleological vision in which this converted reason triumphs. But what does it triumph over?

Tariq Modood has suggested that the "crises" that postsecularism claims to be responding to have less to do with religion or secularism as such. Instead, he argues, the discourse of the postsecular masks a crisis in multiculturalism—the challenge of responding to the increasing presence of what is alleged to be *non-western*.<sup>9</sup> For both Habermas and Milbank, this postsecular converted reason, it seems, can "save" us from the woes of multiculturalism—the waning of western power and authority. The west will not die, because we will have reason (not "thought", not "imagination", not "wisdom", not "knowledge") on our side. Here, to the reader no longer committed to colonialist politics, the postsecular begins to look like a triumphalist defense of (neo-)coloniality.

If the postsecular stands (and can only stand) for a reassertion of tradition, the reinforcement of identity in danger, the remoralization of society, and the reproduction of legitimacy, all in a triumphalist key during a time of crisis ... If this all that the postsecular is and names, then it should not only be allowed to go down, but one should aid it in the process. Perhaps, however, this is not all that it can name. Perhaps the signifier can be wrested away from these projects, orientations, and concerns.

The postsecular is often a moving target, and when it becomes the subject of critique, it's not always clear what this critique is aiming at. A relatively recent issue of *boundary 2* struck a combative and polemical tone, offering a set of reflections on why each of the contributors was "not a post-secularist."<sup>10</sup> But the issue displayed a whole host of projections on the term: the postsecular became single-handedly accused of theoretical myopia, fascism, a lack of theoretical clarity and coherence, traditionalism, and a failure to understand the postcolonial

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<sup>9</sup> Tariq Modood, "Is There a Crisis of 'Postsecularism' in Western Europe?" in R. Braidotti, B. Blaagaard, T. Graauw, E. Midden, and Tobijn de Graauw (Eds.), *Transformations of Religion and the Public Sphere: Postsecular Publics* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014), 30.

<sup>10</sup> *Boundary 2*, vol. 40 no. 1 (2013).

predicament. Moreover, it targeted figures like Talal Asad, Charles Taylor, and Saba Mahmood – all of whom have themselves expressed deep reticence about the term, and certainly do not apply it to their own work.

Michael Warner, in a clarifying defense of Charles Taylor, criticized the term, writing: “In order to believe that we are postsecular, one must have a narrow and inadequate conception of what it means to be secular.”<sup>11</sup> For Warner, in defense of Taylor, the postsecular fails to understand that the capaciousness of the secular age already includes all sorts of religious modes of life and speech within its immanent frame. The point for Warner, and for many scholars who engage in what could be called the critical study of the secular, is that the secular and secularism are not the opposite of the religious, but something that transforms, maintains, and regulates religion. In a rather convergent assessment, in her recent book, Mahmood expressed a “basic disagreement” with the presumptions of the postsecular: “At the most fundamental level, the term *postsecular* expresses a sense of surprise that, despite the prediction that religion would wither away in modern society, it continues to be important to political and social life.” Yet such a focus, “in its temporal accent on the *post-*” seems to indicate that there is something “unexpected and novel” about the perdurance of religion, when in reality, as much recent scholarship has suggested, religion has been a “constitutive feature of secularism” throughout the course of modernity. Moreover, Mahmood also suggests that the category of the postsecular deploys what Taylor has called a “subtraction theory” of the secular—where that which is secular is understood to be the remainder that exists when religion is taken away. This fails, she argues, to “take stock of their mutual imbrication and interdependence.”<sup>12</sup> In other words, there can be no return to religion in a postsecular key because religion itself was never displaced by the secular; rather, secularism repeatedly recreated, produced, managed, and interrogated it as its polemical other. One could say that from such a perspective, there is no need to introduce the postsecular because a critical engagement with the secular and secularism suffices.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Michael Warner, Jonathan VanAntwerpen and Craig Calhoun eds. *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 22.

<sup>12</sup> See Saba Mahmood, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016), 22.

<sup>13</sup> Examples of such a perspective would include, among others, Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); and Webb Keane, *Christian Moderns: Freedom & Fetish in the Mission Encounter* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

But is this really the case? Do the categories of religion and the secular really give us the language we need to talk about the struggles of the present? Do the categories of religion and the secular give us a critical and theoretical field that is variegated enough to name and describe the postures we adopt—as living, reading, thinking, moving, breathing, engendered, racialized, and economic bodies—toward rituals, traditions, practices, concepts, movements of the spirit, and transformations of the flesh?

### *Gender and the Postsecular*

In many cases the categories of religion and the secular fail to illuminate the complicated ways that facets of tradition, practice, texts, ideology, and concepts shape our gendered politics and performances. Indeed, it is often the case that those who seek to uphold the present contours of the secular or the religious simply render the complexities of gendered performance as incoherent. Sociologists Steve Bruce and Marta Trzebiatowska, to give but one illustrative example, remain confounded by what they call the “great divide” in religious observance—the fact that, in spite of feminism, more women than men seem to be filling the church pews in places like the US and the UK. To their question –“Why are women more religious than men?” – they offer an answer as expected as it is problematic: women are “lagging” behind in the secularization process.<sup>14</sup> Surely, they surmise, women are simply slow to realize that secularity ultimately holds forth the most robust and liberating possibilities for women. Eventually, women will not be able to hide from this.

What positions like those of Bruce and Trzebiatowska fail to acknowledge, however, is the problematic fact that neither religion nor the secular has proven truly liberating for women. This has been apparent since the beginning of the feminist movement within the United States. Because of this, feminists have often fought to renegotiate their relationship to both the religious and the secular.

While men may have experienced new forms of liberation in the early French Revolution, scholars like Joan Scott have revealed how women were banned from political meetings and active citizenship not on religious grounds but on the radical new ground of arguments from nature.<sup>15</sup> Revolutionaries did not

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<sup>14</sup> Marta Trzebiatowska and Steve Bruce, *Why Are Women More Religious Than Men?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 172.

<sup>15</sup> Linell E. Cady & Tracy Fessenden (Eds.), *Religion, the Secular, and the Politics of Sexual Difference* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 6.

want women involved—not because God would disapprove, but because women were simply inferior, biologically. It is, of course, also the case that many feminists have critiqued religion. That religious communities have sought to regulate and enforce a regime of heterosexual behavior and reproduction—particularly through the management of women’s bodies and sexualities—is no secret. Indeed, the project of bringing this to our attention was at the root of feminist politics, visible in work such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s *The Woman’s Bible*.<sup>16</sup> In this text, Stanton and other feminist contributors used the critical tools of Enlightenment modernity to denounce the use of biblical passages, in the attempt to sacralize the oppression of women. Of course, it should not be forgotten that Stanton’s bold critical approach to the biblical text—secularizing the gospel message, leaving repressive religious elements in the dust—was made possible by the labor of servants who cared for her children while she toiled with the text.

We see theology utilized differently by Stanton’s feminist contemporary Sojourner Truth—born into slavery as Isabella Baumfree—whose approach to theology is robustly confessional, without leaving critique behind. Sojourner Truth’s 1851 speech to a women’s rights convention begins not with a critique of religion but with a confession that, when she watched most of her thirteen children sold off into slavery, she “cried out with [her] mother’s grief” and yet “none but Jesus heard me!” Sojourner Truth doubles back into the theological, rather than cutting it away. And, yet, she is also clear that this cradle, or shield, is also an expression of alienation from the white world, and the male world. In response to a male claim that women cannot have rights, because Christ wasn’t a woman, she asks: “Where did your Christ come from?” Responding, “From God and woman! Man had nothing to do with Him.”<sup>17</sup> Rather than cut religion away, as a chain from which to be unbound, Sojourner Truth finds allies within the theological.<sup>18</sup>

Feminist voices have, from the beginning, labored differently at the terrain where religious and secular discourses intersect. Liberations have been differently practiced and realized. The reduction of religious practices, and theology, to a simple tool of regressive ideology obscures a host of richly complicated positions. And shrouding religion in a protected space, sealed off

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<sup>16</sup> Published in two editions, in 1895 and 1898. Edited by Stanton, who wrote it with the help of a committee of 26 other women.

<sup>17</sup> Sojourner Truth, “Ain’t I a Woman” speech given at the women’s rights convention in Akron, Ohio, May 29, 1851.

<sup>18</sup> For a classic discussion of the way questions of gender interact with questions of class and race, see Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race & Class* (New York: Vintage, 1983).

from Enlightenment modernity, prevents us from appreciating the transformation of religious culture in recent centuries, through critical conversation with modern movements such as feminism. Yet it should also be acknowledged that those who make use of, and deploy, theological materials are not always doing so by robustly inhabiting an identitarian position within a religious tradition. Indeed, sometimes they do so with an agonized antagonism in relation to religion.

As feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti has emphasized, subjectivity is a form of auto-poiesis, or self-styling. For many, of course, the auto-poiesis of feminist subjectivity has spiritual dimensions that are, themselves, at odds with religious tradition. Braidotti notes that many visions of feminist subjectivity have seized select tools of both religion and the secular (while rejecting others) and used these to cultivate forms of feminist spirituality, with alternative forms of spiritual practice that can resonate with or empower those who struggle against patriarchal oppression. Writers and poets such as Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, and Adrienne Rich have acknowledged that there are spiritual dimensions in women's struggles for equality and liberation. Feminists working within the fields of theology, biblical studies, or religious studies—such as Mary Daly, Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, Catherine Keller, Rachel Adler, Amina Wadud—have launched scathing critiques of religious tradition while still promoting theoretical work with religio-spiritual dimensions. Philosophers such as Isabelle Stengers have championed the neo-paganism of figures like Starhawk as producing important performances of “blasphemy and sacrilege.” And, since the revelation of Donna Haraway's cyborg (which she elects as an icon, rather than the goddess), posthumanist feminism has been charged with its own resident forms of spirituality.<sup>19</sup>

The struggle against patriarchy, against obligatory reproduction, against heteronormativity, against workplace inequality: fights like these have made strategic (yet enduringly critical) use of both the religious and the secular. Is there a way to name this critical deployment that also leaves itself open to a kind of double incoherence in each of these realms? In what follows, we reflect on two concrete examples that suggestively illuminate some of what we are attempting, theoretically, to express.

The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence is an activist and protest organization: an order of queer “nuns” who inhabit the retired habits of a group of Roman Catholic sisters. The first public appearance of the SPI was on Easter weekend of 1979, when they

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<sup>19</sup> Rosi Braidotti, “In Spite of the Times: The Postsecular Turn in Feminism,” in *Theory Culture Society*, 25:1 (2008), 7.

marched through the streets of the Castro District of San Francisco and down to a nude beach. According to the group's "Sistory," published on their website, one of the order's nuns carried a machine gun for protection. But the group was surprised to be met with a warm public reception. Over the decades the nuns have continued to don their habits, and the mission of their order has grown. In the 1980s, the Sisters (some of them registered nurses) worked with the community to raise awareness about HIV and AIDS. They've campaigned against street violence. They've spoken out about transgender issues, and worked to provide safe spaces for queer youth. They've collected wigs for women undergoing chemotherapy. Their list of service projects is long, and storied.<sup>20</sup> What may appear like an ironic mockery of the Catholic nuns may be interpreted, perhaps more powerfully, as a community of sisters dedicated to one another and to the justice they fight for, together.

Of course, there is certainly an implied gesture of satire—or, at the very least, a rather thick residue of camp. In her sociological analysis of the Sisters, however, Melissa Wilcox has made the case that we should reject a reading of their performance that entirely eschews religion. In interviews with twenty-five of the Sister's nuns, Wilcox learned that most of them do not actively identify with Christianity. But some of them (three, in fact) do. Regardless of their religious affiliation, however, Wilcox found that many of them sought spiritual fulfillment or satisfaction through their work with the "order." In some cases, the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence actively invite comparison with their shadow sisters—nuns of the Catholic Church, that is. Sister Goldee tells Wilcox that the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence require one to—like a Catholic nun—offer spiritual guidance through example, and to offer concrete aid to those in need. The Sisters also take vows—promising to give back to the LGBTQ community for the rest of their lives. "They serve the community; we serve the community. They raise money for charity; we raise money for charity. They take vows of celibacy, we... serve the community," one of the sisters tells Wilcox.<sup>21</sup>

Rather than reject their association with religion, the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence inhabit the habit, Wilcox argues, performing a "serious parody"<sup>22</sup> of religiosity that repeats it,

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<sup>20</sup> See "Sistory" at The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, Inc. ([www.thesisters.org/sistory](http://www.thesisters.org/sistory)). Accessed on April 21, 2016.

<sup>21</sup> See Melissa M. Wilcox, "Spirituality, Activism, and the 'Postsecular' in the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence" in Peter Nynäs, Peter Yip, and Andrew Kam-Tuck (Eds.) *Religion, Gender, and Sexuality in Everyday Life: The Politics of Collective and Individual Identities* (London: Ashgate, 2012), 50.

<sup>22</sup> Wilcox, *Religion, Gender, and Sexuality*, 50

with a difference. In their performances, the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence seem to borrow at once from the social spaces and practices of the religiously pious *and* from the secular discourses around gender and sexuality that appear in direct opposition to the Church's policies. Because of the way that they confound the rigid separation of religiosity and secularity, Wilcox suggests that this movement be labeled *postsecular*. This movement, then, cannot be taken as simply religious or as simply secular but, rather, requires an attention to the more complex negotiation that these sisters are staging.

These sisters occupy a gender queer role that is, at least on an official and doctrinal level, eschewed by the religious institution their habits have originated within. And, yet, these sisters also find openings and possibilities within the resources of this tradition that might not be open to them, should they reject this religious institution entirely. The sisters do not transcend either religiosity or secularity but, instead, immerse themselves queerly in each. We might say that both religion and the secular have failed to accommodate the complex performance of these gender queer nuns.

We might consider alongside the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence another example. On February 21<sup>st</sup> 2012, members of the feminist punk protest collective Pussy Riot performed their now infamous "Punk Prayer" at Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Savior. Their subsequent arrest, trial, and imprisonment have rendered the act, and the controversy surrounding it, a seminal international event of the second decade of the twenty first century. Over the past several years, scholars have analyzed the performance by situating it in a number of contexts, including those of post-Soviet art and culture, international geopolitics, Marian theology, and Orthodox spirituality. But instead of situating the performance in a context that would render it intelligible, it may be more valuable to use it to critically rethink some of the dominant ways of articulating the nature of and relation between the secular, the religious, and the postsecular.

What is important to highlight is the ambiguity, even the undecidability of the performance. It is structured and presented in such a way that renders it uncategorizable: neither straightforwardly secular, nor straightforwardly religious. The elements that have been used to read this act as "clearly" secular are as follows: the ascription of subjective intentionality and the concomitant evaluations of sincerity, the equation of aesthetic (especially "punk") performance with secularity, and the highly-problematic normative delineation of religious spirituality (e.g. the exclusion of disruption, transgression, politics, or anonymity from what is deemed proper religious practice). But such techniques of identifying the act as unproblematically secular

fail. After all, sincerity is a dubious and difficult to establish criterion – one that relies on a questionable understanding of what comprises religious life. Reading the act as secular simply because it is fundamentally aesthetic or political merely reinscribes a rigid separation of a religious sphere, something that the performance actively belies. Moreover, it is clear that in such judgments it is not politics or aesthetics *as such* that mark the act as non-religious (given that the aesthetically-rich ritual ceremony of an archbishop in the same cathedral would not be disqualified). Rather, it is excluded from the religious precisely because the act is deemed fundamentally disruptive, transgressive, or subversive. Ultimately, however, any judgment that excludes such acts from the religious domain does nothing but allow the hierarchy of religious institutions, and their spiritual and policing authority, to have the last word on what counts in the realm of the religious.

More broadly these equations fail because they do not grapple with the material and performative complexity that comprises the act itself (e.g. its staging, its mode of address, its appropriations of Christian forms). After all, the performance is not just a concert or a disruption within a holy site; it is an active adaptation and mutation of a set of Christian elements – including the act of prayer, a call to the divine Other, a staging of collective anonymity, an enactment of holy foolery.<sup>23</sup> Yet, this did not render it legible as directly appertaining to the religious sphere as such, precisely because it instantiated something in excess of the ecclesiastico-religious, or the moral, or the political, or the aesthetic. The act enacts a kind of dispossession that withdraws theological and practical materials from the authorities that claim monopoly over them, and their usage. It suggests that that it is important to not be afraid of religious discourses and theological archives, but also of not being afraid of radically repurposing them, because this is what *both* secularism and the various conservative forms of postsecularism are afraid of.

If the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence make us rethink the status of parody, Pussy Riot's performance might suggest a rethinking of the status of blasphemy. It is undeniable that questions of blasphemy have been a pivotal node of secularist discourse: from the Rushdie Affair, to controversy over the Muhammad cartoons, to, more recently, the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks, questions of blasphemy are never far away from the secularism's own

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<sup>23</sup> For an exploration of some of these motifs and a reading within the "religious" context of Russian Orthodoxy, see Nicholas Denysenko, "An Appeal to Mary: An Analysis of Pussy Riot's Punk Performance in Moscow" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, December 2013, Vol. 81, No. 4, pp. 1061–1092 doi:10.1093/jaarel/lft053

triumphal self-definition and concomitant self-differentiation from the religious.<sup>24</sup> But perhaps the “Punk Prayer” allows us to put the question of blasphemy into a new theoretical light: it disallows reading blasphemy as an unproblematically secular gesture. In this case, the target of the action is, after all, precisely not “religious” piety or sensibility, and its source is no longer a supposedly “free” and “secular” subject. Rather, the act targets the complex entanglement and convergence between statist politics and authoritarian religious forms. It is not accidental that the prayer pleads for Putin to depart. The prayer seeks to evacuate the seat of transcendent sovereignty that blocks the process of an immanent rearticulation of reality.<sup>25</sup>

The “Punk Prayer” radically confounds and displaces the accepted conceptual distributions that structure the problematic of the secular. It brings into relief the very difficulty of identifying an act as religious or as secular within the regime of modern secularism, and, in the process, forces us to confront the instability inherent more generally in the regulation of religion. In its subversive undecidability (“what sort of act is it?”), this performance helps us theorize the postsecular as a phenomenon that puts into question the dominant binary – between the secular and religious – on which the secular and secularism relies. Its subversive character, in other words, lies not in the critique of traditional religious piety or political authority, but first and foremost in the way it renders visible the ambiguity at the heart of the demarcation of the secular and the religious that secularism creates and upholds.

With both the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence and Pussy Riot’s “Punk Prayer” we witness a kind of double incoherence: a gendered performance that relies on *both* religion *and* the secular yet still fails to be comprehensible, or to fit comfortably, in either realm. These political gendered performances stage immanent critiques of allegedly transcendent realms of meaning and authority. The power of these performances, however, comes not from the displacement or reoccupation of the site of this transcendent authority, but instead from the undecidable nature of the performances themselves. To name these acts *either* religious *or* secular – to force them into one regime of meaning or another – is to evacuate them of their power. To call these acts

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<sup>24</sup> For discussion of blasphemy and free speech in the context of the secular, see Talal Asad, “Freedom of Speech and Religious Limitations,” in *Rethinking Secularism*, eds. Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 282-297

<sup>25</sup> For a theory of immanent re-expression, see Daniel Colucciello Barber, *Deleuze and the Naming of God: Post-Secularism and the Future of Immanence* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press).

postsecular might be a way to underscore their provokingly uncategorizable nature.

To follow such examples is to see that the postsecular might name something entirely different than the proclamation of a new triumphalism. No longer a space that supplants the secular, or offers the recuperation of an unreconstructed theological tradition, can the postsecular become a name for grappling with those modes of being, speaking, thinking, and acting that confound the clear distributions of the secular and the religious—and do so precisely to fight against the violences carried out in the name of both? This would entail becoming attuned to what might be called the micrologics of the postsecular—those events and phenomena that rupture the secular regime of meaning, without authorizing a replacement—rather than understanding the postsecular as a monolithic displacement of either religion or the secular, as if it were the name for a new epoch or episteme.

### *The Contents of the Special Issue*

The essays in this volume are the result of several different conversations. In 2014 Karen Bray and Beatrice Marovich organized a panel at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion called “The Eclipse of Gender?: Postsecularity & Difference in the Future of Continental Thought.” Papers from Bray, Marovich, and Noelle Vahanian asked, from a variety of perspectives, what it would mean to take gender seriously in debates over the postsecular in continental thought. Elaine Graham offered a response. The conversation was continued at the Association for Continental Philosophy of Religion meeting, in Liverpool, during the summer of 2015 where the discussion galvanized around the question “Political Theology: Liberation of the Postsecular?” Bray and Marovich, along with Alex Dubilet, Amaryah Armstrong, Eric Daryl Meyer, and Marika Rose all contributed papers. A version of Katharine Sarah Moody’s paper in this volume was the keynote address at that conference. In the fall of 2015 at the AAR, another panel, organized by Beatrice Marovich and Alex Dubilet, explored what Dubilet termed the “micrologics of the postsecular.” The panel included papers from Marovich, Dubilet, Armstrong, and Yountae An as well as a response from Anthony Paul Smith.

This Introduction suggests one theoretical approach to the postsecular, but the essays collected in this volume instantiate a variety of overlapping perspectives and approaches to this problematic. Some essays take the occasion to constructively interrogate a set of theoretical concerns generated in and around the postsecular. Others offer more explicit critiques of the

postsecular, and point to the ways in which it, while claiming to offer a kind of liberation, merely repeats or reiterates the foreclosures and failures of secular modernity.

Amaryah Armstrong's essay "Of Flesh and Spirit: Race, Reproduction, and Sexual Difference in the Turn to Paul" critiques the postsecular turn to Paul, so influential in political theology over the past decade. Reading the narrative of Hagar, Abraham, and Sarah with Delores Williams, Armstrong explores the "crucial difference the flesh makes" when we attend (as Paul does not) to the slave-mother Hagar who both marks, and is made to disappear into, the universal in Paul's thought. Armstrong reflects on the social importance of troubling these universalized discourses with the "mark of the mother" in our own world, today so marked with increasing economic inequality, as well as the criminalization of black women's sexuality.

Karen Bray's essay "On Ignorant and Insightful Chickens: Why Žižekian Postsecularity Might Need Halberstam's Shadow Feminism" offers a critical reading of the work of Slavoj Žižek, particularly as he has influenced recent projects in political theology. Bray acknowledges the importance of Žižek's politics of negativity and refusal, which resists the capitalist process of subjectification. But Bray critiques the way that Žižek also seeks to erase and refuse the marks of identity left by those who stage feminist, queer, or critical race critiques of capital. As an alternative Bray turns toward the negative politics of queer theorist Jack Halberstam, arguing that postsecular political theology should "travel in the shadows" with Halberstam's disruptions of identity politics, rather than with Žižek's enduringly misogynistic disruptions.

Alex Dubilet's essay "The Catastrophic Joy of Abandoning Salvation: Thinking the Postsecular with Georges Bataille" explores the way Bataille belies the established divisions between theological and philosophical modes of thought in order to develop a critique of subjection as being enacted by theologico-religious concepts, operations, and structures no less than philosophico-secular ones. Building on Bataille, Dubilet proposes rethinking the status of immanence and transcendence, by decoupling them from their usual semantic associations that align immanence with secularity and transcendence with the religious. Dubilet finds an important element for a novel theory of the postsecular in Bataille's elaboration of catastrophic joy as a critique of investments in futurity and salvation found across the secular-religious divide.

Beatrice Marovich's essay "Religion, Secularity, Gender Violence & Death" examines resonant attempts—in both religious and

secular regimes—to transcend or overcome death. Against Habermas’s claim that religion provided superior methods for quelling mortal dread (thus leaving the secular with no option but to return to religion, when coping with death), Marovich argues that both religion and the secular have failed to address our mortality, often collapsing misogyny and mortal dread together in a double rejection. Marovich examines feminist attempts to “transfigure mortality,” working within and against both religious and secular thought, posing the question of whether this transfiguration might be deemed “postsecular”.

Eric Daryl Meyer’s essay “Beyond Ecological Democracy: Black Feminist Thought and the End of Man” interrogates presumptions embedded in the political theology surrounding the category “humanity” (focusing on the work of Giorgio Agamben and Carl Schmitt), then follows these presumptions as they appear within the idealized notion of an ecological democracy. Turning to the work of thinkers such as Sylvia Wynter, Saidiya Hartman, and Delores Williams, Meyer explores the possibility of an environmentally-attuned postsecular political theology that fragments the operation of humanity and its extension into ecological democracy.

Katharine Sarah Moody’s essay “What’s Missing in the Turn to Paul?: Identity and Difference in Postsecular Theology” also examines the postsecular turn to Paul, and its consequences for the radical theological work that takes its cues from Peter Rollins. Moody critically examines the erasures of difference in Rollins’s postsecular Paul, which he inherits from the work of Slavoj Žižek. Against figurations of Paul in service to a polemic against identity politics, Moody uses a gender and empire critical reading of Paul, working with Davina Lopez, to propose that Paul’s own identity practices could inspire postsecular political identifications. She argues that Paul might thereby be read as the figure of a politics of solidarity amongst minoritarian subjects against capitalist imperialist ideology, without erasing difference.

Marika Rose’s essay “Machines of Loving Grace: Angels, Cyborgs, and Postsecular Labor” explores the contemporary conditions for work/life and argues that we find ourselves not within a disenchanting secular regime of labor but instead within a mechanically re-enchanting world: a world of postsecular labor, produced through recent transformations in capitalism. Rose places a theological figure (Dionysius’s angel) in conversation with feminist theorist Donna Haraway’s figure of the cyborg in order to tease out a kind of resonance between them, thus revealing and highlighting the postsecular dynamics within the machinic re-enchantment of the world. The fact that the theological has been resurrected within this postsecular regime

of labor forces the question, for Rose: *What are we worshipping?* Is the labor into which we are being conscripted something that we want to hack, smash, or take apart? In this sense, perhaps, the realization that we exist within a postsecular condition can help to generate a more rigorously critical perspective.

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