

CALL FOR PAPERS

Topic: Negotiating Terrain: Gender and the Postsecular

Editors: Beatrice Marovich & Alex Dubilet

Secularism is modern. But religion itself, as a generation of scholars ranging from Talal Asad to Russell McCutcheon has brought to our attention, is also a product of modernity. Through a set of boundary-drawing exercises that produced, regulated, and enforced the silhouette of religion, the secular took on its own contours. Against the backdrop of this intimately wrought, mutually parasitic, and often hostile tangle, the category of the postsecular has emerged. But it may not—yet—be clear what the postsecular has emerged to do, or what role it has emerged to play.

Concerns have already been voiced about the postsecular. Namely, there is trepidation that the postsecular marks either a fresh validation of the religio-theological or (on the other hand) a subtle triumph of the secular.¹ The postsecular, in other words, is under suspicion as another apparatus that threatens to bifurcate religious from secular once again, and to endorse one over the other. Examining the discourses that appear under the name of the postsecular, such suspicions are not unjustified. Tracy Fessenden has argued that deployments of the postsecular (especially, though not exclusively, in literary studies) are underwritten with a kind of teleological triumphalism: the postsecular seems, always, to be promising “redemption from a constraining past.”² Fessenden sees this as a postsecular promise to redeem us from the constraints of a *religious* past. But two influential articulations of the postsecular seem to confirm that this triumphalism can work in both directions. On one side, Radical Orthodox theologian John Milbank utilizes the postsecular to overcome forms of modern secular nihilism through a renewed theological imperialism.³ On the other, Jürgen Habermas’ recent postsecular turn is marshaled for the recuperation of a secular European reason in crisis. Triumphalism easily traverses boundaries between the religious and the secular.

This issue of the *Journal of Religious & Cultural Theory* proposes a different path. Rather than a category that seeks redemption from the past, can the postsecular name a critical approach that works to make a different sort of sense of it? Rather than imagine that we can wash our hands of the wreckage that *both* the religious *and* the secular have made of the modern world, can the postsecular name the attempts, amidst the wreckage, to rethink and repurpose elements that have been traditionally enclosed by the terms of that binary? This issue seeks to explore the postsecular not as a name of a new epoch confidently or triumphantly entered into, but a more ambivalent index for the catastrophe that is the modern secular world, and a site of experimental questioning and enactment that troubles the clear demarcation or tidy distribution of the secular and the religious. If it has never been possible to live as if there is a clear line between the religious and the secular, can the postsecular be a critical tool that exposes this impossibility—and generates modes of speaking and thinking that bear a kind of witness to it?

Frequently, building a new terrain wherein life can be lived otherwise calls for a rejection of both religious and secular claims over life, combined with a more indiscriminate, heterodox, or even promiscuous rapprochement between the two. Conversations about gender have served as a powerful locus through which to confound rigid binaries between the religious and the secular. While claims have been made that feminism is a secularizing movement, early and late feminist preoccupations with religion and theology have kept the movement tangled up with the religio-

theological. Struggles for gender equality are both religious and secular, yet can also reject either religion or the secular.

As Joan Scott and others have shown, secularism's relation with gender has been more vexed than its self-congratulatory stories would have us believe.⁴ And, if secularism has embraced feminism so strongly of late, it has done so to buttress the power of the state – one has only to remember George W. Bush's use of women's liberation as a pretext for war, or the punitive logic of the French headscarf laws.⁵ Postcolonial theorists such as Saba Mahmood have likewise complicated facile liberal presumptions that secularism is a necessary component of feminism, revealing how such presumptions have theoretically reduced Muslim women's piety to nothing but abject submission.⁶ More than merely a critique of liberalism, Mahmood's work also offers a reflection on the practices of ethical self-formation that Muslim women are resourcing through the religio-theological. Perhaps feminist and queer discourses are products of modernity that serve as a kind of critical tissue between the religious and the secular, helping to shape the way that these social spheres speak to one another. Can feminist and queer discourses help to frame, or model, another sort of postsecular?

Beyond the feminist and the queer, other progeny of the modern stage critical questions of *both* the religious and the secular: decolonial, critical race, and disability thinkers have all borne witness to the failures of modernity and have embodied struggles that seek other modes of existence. These embodied struggles have witnessed the violence and failures of religious institutions no less than secular ones. While focusing on gender, this volume also aims to engage forms of thought emerging from other embodied struggles, helping us to engender alternate modes for thinking and interrogating the postsecular.

Perhaps the category of the postsecular is the best name that's yet emerged to describe the double, simultaneous, critique and deployment of tools from both the religious and the secular. Or perhaps it's a name that itself merits critique and displacement. The essays in this volume will not rule, conclusively, on this front. Instead—with a focus on the lived experience of gendered bodies—these essays will seek to critically explore the limits and potentials of the postsecular. Where does the postsecular merely reiterate the secular, and secular forms of governance, particularly in its failure to attend to gender? If the universalism of secular thought has found theology (as a relic of the religious) parochial, when might this parochialization open new forms of critical possibility for gendered bodies? How does the postsecular merely reiterate imperial Christian cosmologies or politics, and when can it deactivate, subvert, or realign them? We seek essays for this volume that will work to negotiate the rich, complex, and often problematic terrain that has chosen not to confine itself neatly into either the religious or the secular.

Deadline: October 1, 2016

Submission Details: Full articles are due by October 1, 2016. Notification of acceptance will be sent by November 1, 2016. Articles between 6000 and 8000 words will be considered. Questions about submission topics are welcome at any time. Queries and articles should be directed to editors Beatrice Marovich (beatrice.marovich [at] gmail.com) and Alex Dubilet (dubilet [at] gmail.com).

¹ For a varying set of reservations about the postsecular as the return of the religious, see the articles in *boundary 2*, vol. 40 no. 1 (2013).

² Tracy Fessenden, "The Problem of the Postsecular", *American Literary History*, vol. 26 no. 1 (Spring 2014), pp. 154-167, 157.

³ 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).

⁴ See Linell E. Cady & Tracy Fessenden (Eds.), *Religion, the Secular, and the Politics of Sexual Difference* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

⁵ Mayanthi L. Fernando, *The Republic Unsettled: Muslim French and the Contradictions of Secularism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

⁶ See Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004, 2012).