

Introducing the Postsecular: From Conceptual Beginnings to Cultural Theory

James Hodkinson
University of Warwick

Silke Horstkotte
Leipzig University

1. Secular or Postsecular?

Religion, for decades an apparently marginal area of interest in the dominantly secular Western academy, has been making a remarkable comeback onto degree courses and research agendas. Over the past two decades, this comeback has occurred in overt but also in less obvious ways. Across university departments, questions of religious belonging and identity, of belief and the expression of belief, have been treated with renewed intensity. Besides disciplines like religious studies and theology that are explicitly concerned with religious topics, other subject areas in which religion had not been a major concern since the post-World War II period have also dedicated research and teaching resources to the role of religion in the present.

In the political and social sciences, religion has been recognized as a crucial factor in conflicts, but also as a resource in plural societies. Arts subjects, meanwhile, are paying increasing attention to religion as a topic of contemporary cultural production, as attested by a large number of book publications dedicated to art and religion, literature and religion, and so forth (e.g., Rosen 2015; Weidner 2016). In the field of history, too, interpretations of past events have shifted from ones that favor structural and economic explanations to a renewed focus on the belief structures underlying social and

political change. Thus several studies of the Thirty Years' War in continental Europe that were published to commemorate the war's four hundredth centenary turned to religion as a central explanatory framework (Bähr 2017; Schmidt 2018). The majority of research on the Thirty Years' War from the previous decades had downplayed the importance of religious issues, instead describing the war as driven by territorial interests, social unrest, and shifting power relations among European monarchs. These new studies, however, reinterpreted the war as a religious conflict.

The renewed concern with religion takes place in universities that are also becoming more religiously diverse. Questions of religious practice and etiquette are therefore high on the agenda of university administrators worldwide, who have to answer questions such as: Do universities need dedicated religious spaces? If so, are these to be generic, multifaith spaces, or are individual faiths to receive distinct representation—and which faiths would receive that treatment? Is it okay for students to wear religious clothing during exams, or to request the dates of those exams to be moved to facilitate religious observance? In 2003, Leipzig University, where Silke Horstkotte teaches, opted to erect a combined university/church building on the site of the medieval university church, which had been demolished in 1968 to make space for a secular university building. In 2013, the university senate decided that the Paulinum Building should also be opened to other religious communities (Leipzig University). So far, however, the new church space, completed in 2017, has been used by the Lutheran university congregation exclusively.

In face of the increasing visibility and attention to religious issues in supposedly secular spaces, many researchers studying religion in the present have argued that the once stable conceptual distinctions between “religion” and “secularity” are becoming increasingly blurred. Scholars such as Peter Berger (1999, 2014), Craig Calhoun (Calhoun, Juergensmeyer, and VanAntwerpen 2011), José Casanova (2009, 1994, 2010), Grace Davie (2002), or Monika Wohlrab-Sahr (Burchardt and Wohlrab-Sahr 2013) deconstruct long-held assumptions about the connection between modernity and secularity. New theories challenge the established understanding of “secularism” and “religion,” especially regarding how these function in public life, and they call into question the supposedly clear division between religious and secular institutions and actors. In the collection *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (2011: 7) call “[many] of our dominant stories about religion and public life . . . myths that bear little relation to either our political life or our everyday experience,” concluding that “Religion is neither merely private . . . nor purely irrational.

And the public sphere is neither a realm of straightforward rational deliberation nor a smooth space of unforced assent.”

In this context, the adjective *postsecular* indicates the need to rethink both religion and secularism, as well as their relationship to each other. Building on Jürgen Habermas’s theorizing of postsecular societies (2001, 2011), Kristina Stoeckl, Massimo Rosati, and Robert Holton (2012: 2) define a postsecular society as one in which “religion remains collectively meaningful without being opposed to secularity, because society itself is plural and Christianity has lost its monopoly on the Western imagination.” In postsecular societies, religion is resurgent while “new forms of religious pluralism also emerge within a secular horizon that call into question established institutions and practices” (2). Thus religion is politicized while politics becomes sectarian, believing and belonging often do not go hand in hand, and religious pluralization leads to new and diverse understandings of the secular (Braidotti et al. 2014; Davie 2002; Gorski 2012; Kyrlezhev 2008). Multiple secularities and multiple religiosities coexist in a postsecular society, and thus the sacred can take different forms, immanent as well as transcendent ones. Despite its misleading prefix, the adjective *postsecular* breaks with images of succession (before and after). Instead, it defines the present condition as a “conscious contemporality/co-existence of religious and secular worldviews” and as a “condition of permanent tension” that characterizes the contemporary period (Stoeckl 2011: n.p.).

2. Postsecular Criticism

This special issue takes up the insights generated by the “postsecular turn” (McLennan 2010) in political and social studies to question the role of postsecular art in the present, in a transnational perspective. Through a series of close readings, we explore religion and secularity as overlapping dimensions of places, objects, tropes, and media, and we map out the theoretical and methodological challenges presented to criticism by postsecular art practices. Our articles shed light on the enigmatic place of spiritual connectedness in modern theory, the uncertain or ambivalent status of religious discourse and faith practice within contemporary art and its impact on hermeneutics and critique, and the difficulty of accounting for fragile expressions of faith. The plural in our title *Postsecularities* emphasizes the pluralism of postsecular criticism, as well as the diversity of postsecular art. It is also intended to counteract the essentializing that sometimes occurs when a work of art is called “postsecular.” Instead, the articles in this special issue reconceive the postsecular as a mode of engagement, a way of thinking about religion and secularity in the present with strategic and productive ambivalence.

In this sense, the postsecular turns into a methodological lens through which an open-ended engagement with the intersections of religion and secularity can begin, and it allows us to focus particularly on the convergences between the two paradigms. We critically explore, on a methodological and systematic level, the position and relevance of faith and spirituality in cultural analysis, and in the humanities more generally. In such a systematic perspective, the adjective *postsecular* serves as a heuristic not only for challenging us to think beyond the religious-secular dichotomy but also for reflecting on how individual, social, and scholarly attitudes and convictions have shaped the lenses of religion and secularity through which we view those places, objects, and discourses.

In *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, Habermas (2011) stresses the importance of a postsecular “stance,” an approach that both reckons with the continuing global vitality of religion and emphasizes the importance of “translating” the ethical insights of religious traditions into a “postmetaphysical” philosophical perspective. In a similar vein, Kathryn Ludwig, in a 2009 forum of *Religion and Literature* dedicated to “locating the postsecular,” argues that “‘postsecular,’ like ‘feminist,’ refers to an interpretative stance, as well as to a body of texts” (84), while Magdalena Mączyńska (2009: 76), in the same forum, defines the postsecular as “a revision of the ways in which we have come to conceptualize the modern secular as the opposite of the religious.” The special issue *Postsecularities* adopts such a stance in relation to literature, music, visual, audiovisual, and performance art. It thus further develops the project of a postsecular criticism to account for developments in other arts besides literature, and from different national contexts.

In light of the renewed attention to religion both as an area of research and as a practical concern in twenty-first-century universities, a postsecular criticism acts as a necessary corrective to those secularizing tendencies that still sometimes prevail in the humanities. Literary and cultural theories since the mid-twentieth century have privileged a secular point of view. Maybe the most famous expression of this privileging is Edward Said’s (1978) call for a “secular criticism,” a mode of critique that does not affirm the critic’s own values but distances itself from them. Secularity, for Said, is not associated with irreligion or profanity, but with objectivity; however, because it dismisses religion, Said’s secularity is in fact not a neutral position, nor can such a position exist. As Saba Mahmood (2009: 91) rightly remarks:

Insomuch as the tradition of critical theory is infused with a suspicion, if not dismissal, of religion’s metaphysical and epistemological commitments, it would behoove us to think “critically” about this dismissal: how are epistemology and critique related within this tradition? Do distinct traditions of critique require a

particular epistemology and ontological presuppositions of the subject? How might we rethink the dominant conception of time — as empty, homogenous, and unbounded, one so germane to our conception of history — in light of other ways of relating to and experiencing time that also suffuse modern life?

In the vision our *Postsecularities* contributors elaborate, postsecular criticism brings to light, and thereby opens up to questioning, hitherto neglected religious and spiritual dimensions in, for instance, theories of affect and attunement, of postmaterial culture and of speculative realism (as well as in the objects conceptualized through these theories). For instance, Matthew Wickman's article contemplates how a spiritual quality may inform writing that is not overtly religious. Silke Horstkotte discusses liminality as a quality of postsecular German literature, while James Hodkinson describes how sound and music contribute to an enigmatically postsecular aesthetic in television series. Through a series of close readings, we thus aim to establish a range of new perspectives on postsecular art. This involves, for one thing, discussing the ideas in relation to which works of art adopt a postsecular position that oscillates between religious and secular horizons of meaning and understanding — and illuminating the aesthetic means by which this occurs. Given, too, that the *conditio postsaecularia* is diverse and internally differentiated, as Rosi Braidotti (2008) exhorts, our volume also seeks to give an accordingly differentiated account of postsecular art, examining it in transnational and poly-cultural terms, tracing it across diverse artistic media and considering the plurality of positions from which it can be studied.

3. Transnational Perspectives and New Media

Being postsecular means different things in distinct national, cultural, and confessional contexts. As Talal Asad (2003) has persuasively shown, the concept of the “secular” is itself premised on a culturally specific understanding of religion; being secular or talking about secularity in the Islamic world, with its long-standing traditions of deriving legal procedure and educational, scientific, and cultural practices from religious doctrine, is and means something quite different to what it does in the dominantly Christian West. For this reason, Marian Burchardt and Monika Wohlrab-Sahr (2013) speak of “multiple secularities” which develop distinctively and in conjunction with multiple modernities in diverse territorial and cultural locations. The “postsecular” concept, which is conceptually and historically dependent on the secular, needs to be specified in a similar fashion, as diverse postsecularities operate in relation to one or several religious traditions, to the national politics of religion, and also to established aesthetic paradigms.

Yet while postsecular social and political studies have already begun to account for the diversity of postsecular societies across the globe (see especially Stoeckl, Rosati, and Holton 2012), the majority of postsecular cultural criticism still focuses on anglophone and especially on North American literature (McClure 2007; Kaufmann 2009; Carruthers and Tate 2010; Corrigan 2015)—to the extent that this strand of scholarship already has a sense of its own history and is reviewing its foci, concepts, and methods (Coviello and Hickman 2014). The study of postsecular art in transnational contexts and across diverse media, on the other hand, is still in its infancy. Our special issue broadens the scope of postsecular inquiry to include French and German literature, Russian performance art, and Australian television, showing how diverse locations give shape to distinct postsecularities. When, for example, Michel Houellebecq imagines an Islamic takeover of French politics in his novel *Soumission* (*Submission*), that imagining itself presupposes a dogmatic understanding of *laïcité*, which pertains to a more francophone understanding of the necessary detachment of public life and institutions from religion generally, and is thus quite distinct from the secularism of other European countries (see Douglas Morrey’s article). Similarly, when Russian performance artists invoke religious blasphemy as a means of protesting Putin-style politics, they tap into the Russian tradition of “holy foolery,” which does not easily translate into non-Russian cultural and theological vocabularies and is, therefore, often seen as a critique directed at religion per se, rather than one delivered from within a religious tradition (see Darja Filippova’s contribution). In both of these instances, particular national, historically contingent understandings of the relationship between religion and the state have aesthetic consequences for what can and cannot be said and shown, regulating the alternative imaginaries of the works of art and directing their very narrative and performative structure.

The order of contributions to this special issue follows a narrative arc from the well-established area of postsecular American literature through other national literatures and on to charting the postsecular in television series, music, and performance and installation art. Matthew Wickman lays the groundwork for this inquiry by establishing a place for religious feeling in humanities research. He shows how the currently popular, but undertheorized notion of “spirituality” inflects the writing of US novelist Marilynne Robinson and of Canadian short story writer Alice Munro, discussing what consequences the religious identity of the two authors should have for the interpretation of their work. Reaching beyond literary studies, Wickman advocates for postsecular theory as a tool for diagnosing a spiritual ethos across disciplines and fields.

Douglas Morrey extends this literary discussion into the francophone world, using the narrative ambiguities of Houellebecq's *Submission* to read the novel against the grain of received criticism. Rather than a culturally normative, even reactionary reflex against a perceived Islamicization of French society, Morrey finds in the text a veiled, if ambiguous, conversion narrative, effectively a layer of religious meaning beneath an ostensibly secular rhetorical surface. Silke Horstkotte picks up on the idea of a postsecular ambiguity in the sense of "liminal" narratives that can be read on secular as well as on religious terms, or on both levels simultaneously. She analyzes three recent German novels: Daniel Kehlmann's *Measuring the World*, Ilija Trojanow's *Collector of Worlds*, and Sibylle Lewitscharoff's *Blumenberg*, all of which are concerned with moments of tension between faith and reason, and thus between different ways of seeing and experiencing the world. She argues that this postsecular condition plays out not only on a thematic level but also on a structural one: all three of the novels draw on narrative strategies such as polyperspectivity, unreliability, and the literary fantastic that are designed to create ambiguities between religion and secularity.

James Hodkinson shifts the medium of discussion to examine the trope of the returning dead in recent long-format television dramas from France and Australia. Rather than the ubiquitous zombies or ghosts of much television and film, which both inspired and reactivated the theoretical concerns of the so-called spectral turn, the returning dead demand future-facing destiny narratives and thus experience a form of latter-day resurrection, which, in turn, requires new eschatological articulation. These postsecular resurrections have an obvious religious resonance, though neither traditional religious narratives and institutions nor, for that matter, instances of secular power (science, the state) quite manage to explain, contextualize, or control unfolding events. Significantly, at key moments in their narrative arcs, both series foreground characters who are engaged in creative processes as they seek to understand the unfolding miraculous events. In this respect, both shows not only open up discussions on the religious or secular nature of life after death but also reflect an explicit search for how the phenomenon can be represented in the postsecular moment.

Practicing musician and musicologist Uwe Steinmetz then offers a conceptually pitched history of jazz, treating it as a form that not only has its roots in African American spirituality but also has developed in certain iterations into a form of instrumental, liturgical practice seemingly able to sit both in the concert hall and the church. At the heart of the argument is a close analysis of key aspects of jazz aesthetics and technique. In particular, the core practice of improvisation, by which jazz musicians both evoke but also disrupt established musical structures, gestures aesthetically toward transcendence and

allows jazz to satisfy cultures of listening, dance, and worship, and to bridge the apparent divide between secular and religious music. Darja Filippova introduces the concept of the Russian Orthodox tradition of holy foolery as a framework for understanding politically charged performance artist Oleg Mavromatti. While Mavromatti's work constitutes a form of protest against aspects of Russian anti-blasphemy laws and calls for a separation of church and state, it does so from within a religious tradition and thus, Filippova argues, throws light on the mutually entangled nature of religious and secular worldviews and of cultural traditions when viewed through the postsecular lens.

The collection closes by moving from reflections on art to a more dialogical mode through an interview with contemporary digital artist Michael Takeo Magruder conducted by art historian Aaron Rosen. Surveying several of Magruder's digital art installations of the last decade and from around the globe, the discussion teases out the different ways in which the artist has used the ostensibly secular world of digital technology to respond to and comment on not only religious sources, traditions, and themes but also contemporary social and political concerns. These include explorations of the notion of a creator achieved through the artistic modeling of the digital coder-as-artist and connections between the historically forsaken Jesus and the experience of (Syrian) refugees in recent years.

In extending the discussion about postsecurities to hitherto neglected media, the increasingly self-reflexive nature of what we are calling postsecular art becomes apparent—and this is of particular interest to us in this volume. Working in the early twenty-first century, the writers, musicians, directors, producers, and performance artists whose work we discuss appear to be thinking quite explicitly about not only how religion has returned to inflect and complicate their artistic visions but also how their art can comment upon and shape renewed perceptions of religion and religious experience. They show how aesthetic practice itself can constitute a postsecular stance, thus inviting a corresponding stance on the part of researchers.

References

- Asad, Talal. 2003. *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Bähr, Andreas. 2017. *Der grausame Komet: Himmelszeichen und Weltgeschehen im Dreißigjährigen Krieg*. Reinbek: Rowohlt.
- Berger, Peter L. 1999. "The Desecularisation of the World." In *The Desecularisation of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, edited by Peter L. Berger, 1–18. Washington, DC: Eerdmans.
- Berger, Peter L. 2014. *The Many Altars of Modernity: Toward a Paradigm for Religion in a Pluralist Age*. Boston: de Gruyter.

- Braidotti, Rosi. 2008. "In Spite of the Times: The Postsecular Turn in Feminism." *Theory, Culture, and Society* 25, no. 6: 1–24.
- Braidotti, Rosi, Bolette Blaagaard, Tobijn de Graauw, and Midden Eva, eds. 2014. *Transformations of Religion and the Public Sphere: Postsecular Publics*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Burchardt, Marian, and Monika Wohlrab-Sahr. 2013. "Introduction to Multiple Secularities: Religion and Modernity in the Global Age." Special issue, *International Sociology* 28, no. 6: 605–11.
- Calhoun, Craig J., Mark Juergensmeyer, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen. 2011. *Rethinking Secularism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Carruthers, Jo, and Andrew Tate, eds. 2010. *Spiritual Identities: Literature and the Post-secular Imagination*. Oxford: Peter Lang.
- Casanova, José. 1994. *Public Religions in the Modern World*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Casanova, José. 2010. *Europas Angst vor der Religion*, translated by Rolf Schieder. Berlin: Berlin University Press.
- Casanova, José. 2010. "Sind wir immer noch säkular? Thesen zum Prozess der Säkularisierung." In *Der Westen und seine Religionen: Was kommt nach der Säkularisierung?*, edited by Christian Peters and Roland Löffler, 52–65. Freiburg: Herder.
- Corrigan, Paul T. 2015. "Wrestling with Angels: Postsecular Contemporary American Poetry." PhD diss., University of South Florida. scholarcommonsuf.edu/etd/5671.
- Coviello, Peter, and Jared Hickman. 2014. "Introduction to After the Postsecular." Special issue, *American Literature* 86, no. 4: 645–54.
- Davie, Grace. 2002. *Europe: The Exceptional Case. Parameters of Faith in the Modern World*. London: Darton, Longman & Todd.
- Gorski, Philip S. 2012. *The Post-secular in Question: Religion in Contemporary Society*. New York: New York University Press.
- Habermas, Jürgen. 2001. *Glauben und Wissen. Friedenspreis des Deutschen Buchhandels 2001*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.
- Habermas, Jürgen. 2011. "The Political: The Rational Meaning of a Questionable Inheritance of Political Theology." In *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, edited by Judith Butler, Jürgen Habermas, Charles Taylor, and Cornel West, 16–27. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Kaufmann, Michael. 2009. "Locating the Postsecular." *Religion and Literature* 41, no. 3: 67–73.
- Kyrlezhev, Alesandr. 2008. "The Postsecular Age: Religion and Culture Today." *Religion, State, and Society* 36, no. 1: 21–31.
- Leipzig University. 2013. "Nutzungsgrundsätze für Paulinum und Augusteum." September 10. www.uni-leipzig.de/fileadmin/ul/Dokumente/Nutzungsgrundsätze_Paulinum_2013_inkl_Anlage_2017.pdf.
- Ludwig, Kathryn. 2009. "Don DeLillo's *Underworld* and the Postsecular in Contemporary Fiction." *Religion and Literature* 41, no. 3: 82–91.
- Mączyńska, Magdalena. 2009. "Toward a Postsecular Literary Criticism: Examining Ritual Gestures in Zadie Smith's *Autograph Man*." *Religion and Literature* 41, no. 3: 73–82.
- Mahmood, Saba. 2009. "Religious Reason and Secular Affect: An Incommensurable Divide?" In *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech*, edited by Talal Asad, Wendy Brown, Judith Butler, and Saba Mahmood, 64–100. Berkeley, CA: The Townsend Center for the Humanities.
- McClure, John A. 2007. *Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison*. Athens: University of Georgia Press.
- McLennan, Gregor. 2010. "The Postsecular Turn." *Theory, Culture, and Society* 27, no. 4: 3–20.
- Mendieta, Eduardo, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen. 2011. "Introduction: The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere." In *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, edited by Judith Butler, Jürgen Habermas, Charles Taylor, and Cornel West, 7–15. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Rosen, Aaron. 2015. *Art and Religion in the Twenty-First Century*. London: Thames & Hudson.

- Said, Edward. 1978. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon.
- Schmidt, Georg. 2018. *Die Reiter der Apokalypse: Geschichte des Dreißigjährigen Krieges*. Munich: C. H. Beck.
- Stoeckl, Kristina. 2011. "Defining the Postsecular." Paper presented at the Academy of Sciences in Moscow, February. synergia-isa.ru/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/stoeckl_en.pdf.
- Stoeckl, Kristina, Massimo Rosati, and Robert Holton. 2012. *Global Connections: Multiple Modernities and Postsecular Societies*. New York: Routledge.
- Weidner, Daniel, ed. 2016. *Handbuch Literatur und Religion*. Stuttgart: Metzler.