

# How to Talk about Religion and Literature: A Modest Proposal

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**Abstract** This article explains the puzzling but persistent marginalization of religion and secularism studies—despite long-standing critiques of secularism and the secularization thesis—by examining a vignette from a doctoral exam in English. The article argues that in professional and pedagogical settings, secularism is ritualistically reinstated in informal exchanges such that scholarly disregard for religion becomes, in Peter Coviello's words, "a part of our untheorized and offhand real." Such informally but intensely pedagogical moments bear inextricably scholarly implications and suggest that, if we wish to speak differently about religion, we should replace this implicit pedagogy of dismissing religion and reinstating secularism with an explicit pedagogy engaging the secular/religious binary. As a discipline, we need to take up religion in our literature classrooms in ways that dovetail with our operative methodologies, even as they catalyze and alter them, and that neither reboot the secularization thesis nor reify the secular/religious binary and, more important, that are helpful to our students, our society, and ourselves. The article then addresses a concrete example of how scholars from a range of methodologies can develop and implement such postsecular pedagogies.

**Keywords** religion, secularism, postsecular pedagogy, postsecular studies

**S**cholars working on religion and literature have long complained that the discipline minimizes and isolates the discussion of religion; as a result, when we do talk about religion, as articles in this special issue point out, we often get it wrong.<sup>1</sup> If we ask why this is, our training is surely among the plausible explanations. Most of us teaching in departments of English today have been trained since the 1970s in methodologies that, even when they pertain to language as such or at its most psychological, are explicitly political and/or materialist in orientation. Few of us in the

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, many of the thirty-four commissioned essays on the current state of literature and religion scholarship in the landmark special issue of *Religion and Literature* (41, no. 2 [2009]), among them Jasper 2009 and Jay 2009. See also Levitt 2009.

English professoriate have had formal training in the critique of the categories of the secular and the religious that marks the “religious turn” in the humanities since the 1990s, and those of us who teach doctoral seminars in religion, secularism, or postsecular studies are a minority.

Yet as a discipline, we talk about religion much more than we realize, to no small effect. As Talal Asad (2012: 38–39) taught us across his monumental investigations *Genealogies of Religion* and *Formations of the Secular*, the secular and the religious are conjoined concepts, twins birthed in modernity, with inseparable vocabularies that “bring persons and things, desires and practices together in particular traditions in distinctive ways” (see also Asad 1993, 2003). Or as the Harvard literary critic and novelist James Wood (2010: 6) has it more pithily, “The history of our secularism is the history of our religiosity,” and vice versa. Just as modernity produces race and sexuality as categories per se, so via secularism it is continually constituting and policing the religious. Nancy Bentley identifies this work as “the secularization two-step” (quoted in Coviello 2019: 27), which Peter Coviello glosses as a process whereby the dominant term in the primary hierarchy or “cleavage”—between reason and faith—inaugurates a second cleavage, splitting the secondary category into good and bad versions of belief (27). Secularism is, Coviello writes, a knowledge-power discourse and an interlocking set of disciplines with a gendered, sexualized, and racialized biopolitics (29–42), and the ideological effects of secularism among educated Westerners run deep. As Joan Wallach Scott (2017) shows in *Sex and Secularism*, for instance, the Western “civilizational polemic” since 9/11 has made gender equality synonymous with secularism and gender inequality synonymous with Islam, crucially distracting us from historical and current gender inequalities both east and west, in which secularism has far from guaranteed women’s liberation, based as it remains on a division of labor that makes women subordinate to men. Put another way, our particular configurations of talking and not talking about religion are intricately related with our implicit secularity, of which we often are only vaguely aware.

In talking about religion, then, we should realize that in some sense we are always talking about religion, because we participate in and re-constitute secularism by virtue of our places in modern universities, through scholarly practices, and also through seemingly casual demeanors. As Kevin Seidel (2020: 17) notes in his elegant and generous

*Rethinking the Secular Origins of the Novel*, the scholarly dispositions with which we discuss religion and secularity are as important as the definitions we ascribe to them. To examine the disposition and demeanor with which we discuss religion, I want to begin with a concrete, instructive example of the sort of talk about religion that hasn't been uncommon in the years I've taught in a lovely, affable English department, at the University of Iowa. I hope that by considering this vignette thoughtfully and critically, scholars both inside and outside the study of religion and literature might arrive at a shared imperative to talk better about religion, even to entertain a modest, positive, counterintuitive, and confessedly non-Swiftian proposal for doing so.

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The setting was the one in which such unanticipated kerfuffles most often occur in our department: a doctoral exam in the reading room where such events are typically staged, a seminar table beneath towering bookcases on one side and the imposing portraits of former faculty, from René Wellek and Gayatri Spivak to the charming Shakespearean Miriam Gilbert, on the other.

For the written portion of their exams, our students prepare a robust portfolio of materials: a “historical” list of primary texts with questions, a “special-interest list” with annotations and a review essay, upper- and lower-level syllabi in these areas, and a twenty- to twenty-five-page draft article suitable to send out for peer review—a professional anthology of sorts and inevitably also a crystal ball into which faculty gaze, hoping to glimpse the dissertation that is to come. The committee takes two weeks to read the portfolio and then meets with the student for a two-hour oral examination.

The student in this case was particularly interested in religion and postsecular studies; she was the daughter of prominent Mormon theologians, converts from Catholicism who had been excommunicated by the Latter-Day Saints due to their heterodox views on gender. Her proposed dissertation was ambitious and provocative: a feminist reading of “romance” that connected with Margaret Anne Doody's (1996) account of the ancient, feminine, and religious origins of the novel, on one end, and with Janice Radway's (1991) work on contemporary romance, on

the other. Her historical period was the eighteenth century, her special-interest area was “romance,” and her article was an eloquent, clever, postsecularly theological reading of Angela Carter’s novel *The Passion of New Eve* (1977).

The first two-thirds of the exam went as one would hope: professorial probings uncovered pleasingly particular and counterintuitive readings across an array of primary texts, and the special-interest list’s center of gravity made for lively conversation. The trouble came with the article. The external committee member, brought in for her familiarity with romance and expertise in affect theory, proved quite irritated at the article—angered, in fact, that it attempted a simultaneously feminist and religiously attuned reading of the novel. No fewer than four times she protested, “*I’m not interested in religion,*” and once she followed with, “You need to *show* me why I should be interested in religion.” The student retained her composure admirably, as did my colleagues, lobbing an occasional non sequitur, meant kindly, as I took it, to distract and redirect.

The really interesting part of the exam came at the end, after the student had been ritually dismissed, faculty determined that the performance was more than passable, and the student returned to the congratulatory signing of forms. The colleague who had inveighed against the religious bent of the article attempted a return to the idea, a little penitently perhaps. She told the story of how her teenaged daughter, who was either exploring or converting to Judaism (I forget which), had recently invited her to a synagogue service. “It was beautiful,” she said, with a palpable feeling of revelation: “there was *chanting*; people *stood* during the reading from the Torah; it was so *reverent*.” Her tone was effusive, if condescending, like an anthropologist reporting on the untouched tribes of the Amazon. “There was really something to that—something *embodied*, something that *affects* you. It was *real*.”

There is much, very much, that could be said about this vignette, not least about professorial anxieties and their unfortunate, routine emergence during doctoral exams, dissertation defenses, and conference Q&A. But we can begin by noting how a usually generous, affable colleague as much as declared to the student that her very fine essay on Carter was boring because religious, without seeming to realize the two most salient facts of the exchange.

One, she surely did not recognize that her extemporaneous pique enacted a sacred ritual accomplishing what such aggressions routinely accomplish: the coercive inculcation of the secularism of respectable, “really interesting” scholarship. Indeed, this plenty-savvy student went on meticulously to closet her lively religious background, her theological curiosities, and her intuitions about religion in the emergent novel and produced an immaculately secularized dissertation. She also elected to forgo the academic job market.

Two, the faculty member seemed unaware of the integral relationship between her avowed disinterest in religion and her discovery of the hitherto unknown world of the synagogue: the secularism that she no doubt absorbed in her own graduate training and that was ritually reinstated during the exam was the very precondition of her experiencing and to some extent exoticizing the ancient worship of the local synagogue as a novelty and, more sadly perhaps, of her having been deprived of exploring its possibilities, academically or otherwise, for decades.

This was talk about religion of the kind that happens all too frequently in our departments. The student’s scholarship on religion, secularism, and the postsecular was never called into question or even examined but was simply rebuffed. The seemingly impromptu yet revealingly insistent nature of this dismissal goes a long way toward explaining the marginalization of religion and secularism studies despite longstanding critiques of secularism and the secularization thesis. In professional settings, secularism is ritualistically reinstated in informal exchanges that lend it precisely an off-the-cuff quality. A certain scholarly disregard for religion becomes what Coviello (2019: 25) calls “a part of our untheorized and offhand real,” even what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2008: 22) calls in *Epistemology of the Closet* something “imbecilically self-evident.” Secularism thus takes on a Teflon-like status; the very casualness with which it is asserted ensures that meaningful challenges slide away, that critique doesn’t stick. Religion is simply uninteresting.

On the other hand, we might consider how the pique in this vignette and in dozens of similar skirmishes reveals secularism as something altogether more sticky. The oppositional, embattled mentality and the palpable need to condescend to religion, to disavow it for fear of endorsing the phenomenon, are much in evidence. A second premise of an effort

to speak more intentionally about religion would simply be to aim to speak about religion and secularism as though we were playing on the same team. And we are, whether we see ourselves as religious or secular, if we take the critique of the secular/religious binary as in any way a worthy endeavor. Playing on the same team would mean moving past mutual suspicion, coercion, even disgust, cultivating self-awareness about our own intellectual assumptions and affective demeanors with an intention to understand how we arrived at this oppositional place, what is problematic in both camps, and how we might move forward together.

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I've hinted that this free-flowing, adamant secularism is something the professor in question likely absorbed in similarly unscripted exchanges in graduate school and conferences, perhaps also in early years in the professoriate. So in this special issue we might also ponder the extent to which some of our most important talking about religion happens on the stormy, narrow shores of a great continent of teaching and scholarship where, at a safe remove from the coast, we by and large talk about religion very little except to rehearse commonplace assertions of its colonial, patriarchal, or opioid connotations. Squalls during doctoral exams or Q&A thunderclaps have lots to do, I suggest, with releasing affective anxieties about religion and maintaining the placidity of that secularism.

This coast-hinterland distinction explains why seemingly similar ways of speaking about religion elicit such different results, depending on their context. A sure way to gild the pill of talking about religion is to do so under the aegis of the secularization thesis: as long as the relationship between religion and secularism is an arm-wrestling match and religion is slowly forced to the table, as long as one implicates religion in something problematic or seems to imply its decline or (alas) imbecility, or is sufficiently alarmist when it does not decline, all shall be well. Problems are more likely to arise whenever the discussion of religion is nonindicting, references its resilience or ongoing transformation, or explores mixed, even positive, creative, religious developments as though they were worthy of humanistic attention on their own, without being cashed out in terms of other meanings or outcomes. One senses that this is why the word *postsecular* sometimes sticks in the craw: as though

the word itself, in implying a perhaps positive persistence of something akin to religion, were irritatingly threatening to a secular status quo, triumphalist even.

This line of analysis brings us closer, I think, to answering the lingering questions as to why religion remains present but peculiarly marginalized in our departments, and why it remains acceptable to be “not interested in” or “bored by” religion in a damning way not admissible when our students profess interest in issues of sex, gender, race, class, or even narrative or poetic form. There is a growing body of scholarship that critiques the professional and psychoanalytic labyrinth of academic secularism (e.g., Branch 2006, 2014; Warner 2004, 2007). However productive a little professional navel-gazing might be, I won’t rehearse such criticisms here. In the context of this special issue, I’m more interested in making a concrete, feasible suggestion to help remedy this situation. How might we generate a culture of speaking about religion, and secularism, in English departments such that the exchange at the ill-fated doctoral exam are as unthinkable as a professor saying, “I’m not interested in class struggle” or “You need to show me why I should be interested in feminism”?

I think of all the arguments that *haven’t* worked for mainstreaming meaningful conversations about religion and secularism in many of our fields: arguments from historicism and anachronism, from women’s interests, from class interests, from a postcolonial perspective or the subaltern. These intellectually compelling cases have been made for years, yet scholarly methods and identities in literary studies remain, to repurpose Charles Taylor’s (2007) term, resolutely buffered against hybridizing with religious and postsecular approaches. Clearly something is needed beyond a high level of scholarly conversation (which already exists) or an effort to “make religion interesting,” methods beyond simply continuing to critique the secularization thesis and professional secularism, though certainly as long as those things are ritually reinstated, they should be critiqued as well.

So my modest proposal for talking about religion—for improving our disciplinary conversations around secularism, religion, and various possible postsecularities—begins by understanding that doctoral exam as an intensely *pedagogical* moment (the off-the-cuff secularism, the sanitization of the subsequent dissertation) with simultaneously, inextricably

*scholarly* implications (noninteraction with postsecular scholarship, maintenance of disciplinary secularity) and from there moves to the insight that, if we wish to speak differently about religion, we should replace this ubiquitous informal pedagogy of dismissing religion and reinstantiating secularism with an explicit pedagogy of engaging the multifaceted critique of the many-headed hydra that is the secular/religious binary and the resulting cleavages it engenders. If our training is at least in part to blame for the disciplinary secularism that keeps perpetuating itself, my counterintuitive but pragmatic suggestion is that we work on training our own students differently: that we forgo the luxury of saying that we simply “aren’t interested” in the critical study of either religion or secularism in our field. We are all already talking and teaching about religion and secularism implicitly; I’m suggesting that we do so explicitly.

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To be clear, I’m not merely urging tolerance of colleagues’ and students’ religious curiosities, even if that would seem in some cases a relief. I’m claiming that an effective way, perhaps even the only way, forward out of our long-standing status quo is for all of us to take up the charge of better talking and teaching about religion, secularism, postsecularity, and literature: explicit teaching, not casual and implicit, or one-sidedly critical, in survey classes, in units and subunits of syllabi, even in whole courses. We as a discipline need to take up religion in our literature classrooms in ways that dovetail with our operative methodologies, even as they catalyze and alter them, and that neither reboot the secularization thesis (whether in performative or wistful forms) nor reify the secular/religious binary and, more important, that prove helpful to our students and to our society. Maybe even to ourselves.

Some time ago in *New Literary History* Tracy Fessenden (2007: 634) noted the polarizing, balkanizing, antidemocratic consequences of banishing meaningful discussion of religion from the public sphere and the seminar classroom. The intervening decade and a half have only bolstered her claims and suggested that we go another way. Rather than allow religion in its myriad manifestations to remain the object of disinterest, dismissal, or derision so as to maintain the status quo of our commitments to the secularization thesis, while religion remains a myriad



phenomenon in our culture and more alarmingly becomes in its virulent varieties the ghettoized subject of angry fundamentalist talk shows, paranoid evangelical chat rooms, and the conspiratorial internet bowels of QAnon theorists, perhaps we could welcome religion into our pedagogy, with a critical but nondismissive analysis of all its strange modern transformations. This is what the hour, not to say the human condition, calls for.

In so doing, we would help students, religious and secular alike, to think more cogently about religiousness and secularity, to understand how we got to this polarized and antagonistic place and how we might go forward differently together. Our academic status quo contributes, as I fear our much-touted (in religious circles, anyway) academic antireligious secularism has done for decades now, to the polarization that threatens to decimate our society. By virtue of our accessible literary texts, our eclectic mix of cultural studies and other approaches, and our required composition and general literature courses, English departments are better equipped and better situated than any other academic forum to help our culture and our political discourse move beyond the rancor and reductive secular-versus-religious balkanization that compounds much of our political discontent.

Moreover, the literature classroom is an ideal place for scholars to teach and to learn awareness of the history of religion and secularism in our countries and even to encounter a larger human reality, namely, that the tools for shaping ourselves and our sensibilities are not simply secular, technological, economic, or sexual but also include spiritual practice and all manner of ritual, religious or no—which is, as I read it, a major point of Asad’s (2018) most recent volume, *Secular Translations*.

I can speak to my own experience teaching literature and RS&PS (religion, secularism, and postsecular studies), which is that it can be an enlightening, bracing adventure for faculty and students alike. A *dixhuitièmiste* by training, schooled in the New Historicism and nonetheless a secret lover of high theory (deconstruction, neo-Marxism, and Lacanian psychoanalysis), like many of us, I’m part of what Jennifer Howard (2005) described as the reigning paradigm of theoretical and methodological eclecticism in literary studies, and I can say without hesitation that broaching the religious and spiritual notes that pervade literature from a postsecular perspective—accepting as fundamental the insight that “religion” and “the secular” are conjoined products of modernity,

equally worthy of creative critique—feels very much of a cloth the way other critical perspectives are integrated in my pedagogy. In this sense, even if we have never taken a course in postsecular studies, trying on postsecular perspectives pedagogically is not completely *terra incognita*.

One sometimes hears in our field that “I’m not trained to teach X or Y,” but in reality virtually all of us are continually educating ourselves, retooling our pedagogy, integrating new scholarly insights into our classes, and tweaking syllabi in ways that allow us to explore primary and secondary texts that are new to us. And again, we are already teaching about religion inasmuch as we implicitly instantiate an underexamined secularism. I’m suggesting that, to talk about religion more, and more effectively, teaching is a fine place to begin, and that there is much to be gained by exploring RS&PS in the classroom, both for students and for faculty, including and perhaps especially those who think that they have absolutely no interest in and nothing to say about religion, secularism, or the postsecular, and also for the discipline at large.

But how to begin? A concrete example might be helpful.

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If we can indulge in thinking about scholarship and pedagogy together for a few paragraphs, I will briefly narrate the creation and structure of such a course and then use that description to suggest how one might design similar courses or units in courses that allow one to explore recent conversations around literature, religion, secularism, and postsecular studies—to get one’s feet wet, as it were, to cross the stream and at least feel comfortable camping in the woods, if not building a cabin there.

The University of Iowa’s English undergraduate curriculum is famously diverse—in place of traditional surveys, a single required course plus period and area requirements that give students and faculty immense freedom—so I’m fortunate to bridge my research and teaching in a range of classes. In addition to an evolving PhD seminar titled *Religion, Secularism, and Modernity: Towards a Postsecular Criticism*, I’ve long taught a range of postsecularly inflected undergraduate courses, from the perhaps obvious *The Bible among Its Readers*, to *Postsecular Studies and the Novel*, to classes on Wordsworth, children’s literature, and many other topics, all of which to varying degrees incorporate the critical study of religion, secularism, and postsecularity. By

2014 The Bible among Its Readers had enough of a following and had become such a pleasure to teach that I created a whole course around postsecular methods and themes, experimenting in pilot honors seminars, my favorite method of beta testing. These early iterations included all sorts of primary texts outside my eighteenth-century wheelhouse—W. H. Auden’s *For the Time Being* (1944), Flannery O’Connor’s *Wise Blood* (1952) and *Prayer Journal* (2013), Michel Houellebecq’s *Submission* (2016), Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead* (2006)—which made for adventuresome first-time teaching experiences as I groped toward an organizing set of concerns for the class, which ultimately made its way into our undergraduate curriculum as *Mystery, Uncertainty, and Hope: Postsecular Studies and the Novel*.

*Mystery, Uncertainty, and Hope* is the subtitle of a section of ENGL 3100, *Topics in Criticism and Theory*, which I pitch to majors (and the curriculum committee) in these terms:

Mystery, uncertainty, and hope color the mood and motivate the characters in many great novels. What are we to make of these spiritual and supernatural undercurrents in fiction?

The English novel arises as a genre during the 18th century, a period noted for its secularization, and critics often assume that the novel’s realism and focus on the individual promote secular perspectives. But realist fiction, it turns out, is haunted from its inception by mischievous doubles, from the Gothic novel to mysteries, to magical realism and dystopian fiction, all often with supernatural undertones.

Scholars who study secularism have begun to suggest that religion does not so much decline as transform under the powerful crosscurrents of modernity. If this is true, then fiction’s strange manifestations of religion, spirituality, and the supernatural may have much to tell us about the creative *postsecularity* of our age, reflecting the various ways writers and readers navigate, combine, and transcend supposedly opposed secular and religious ways of viewing the world.

This course follows these postsecular insights through 20th- and 21st-century fiction, beginning with the flourishing of mystery and detective fiction at the opening of the 20th century and moving into 21st-century novels concerned with uncertainty and doubt, despair and hope. As a “Topics in Criticism & Theory” course, it also exposes students to exciting new scholarship on literature, religion, and postsecular studies. At its heart, this course explores what literature, religion, spirituality, and secularism have to do with each other, encouraging students to formulate their own responses and related questions.

Across the semester, we read seven novels alongside chapters from two extremely helpful volumes—*The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Religion*, edited by Susan Felch (2016a), and *An Introduction to Religion and Literature*, by Mark Knight (2009)—as well as secondary sources posted online. Our reading takes place in four units: a methodological/conceptual introduction, followed by units on mystery, uncertainty, and hope, respectively, thematics that anchor students who might otherwise flounder in deep conceptual waters and that keep our discussions of religion, secularity, and postsecularity tethered to the literature. (I emphasize along the way that the course could draw on an infinite variety of foci; when I poll students toward the end of the course, they suggest units on death, love, conversion, parenting, war, apocalypse, and zombies, or profess that they “wouldn’t change a thing.”)

On the first day, we spend some time talking about what makes postsecular studies unique, namely, that we take a critical perspective on stories about religion and secularism that sometimes operate unchallenged in culture and the academy: that secularization is the straightforward result of modernity or rationality (glossing Asad [1993, 2003] and others on the connection between secularization and colonization), or that it evacuates the illusory and leaves us with reality (previewing Taylor’s [2007] brief against “subtraction stories”); that religion simply is violent (gesturing toward William T. Cavanaugh’s [2009] monumental achievement in *The Myth of Religious Violence*); that secularism is necessarily progressive, particularly regarding gender (shorthand Scott’s [2017] *Sex and Secularism*); and so on. In other words, we prime the pump for surfacing assumptions about religion and secularism and examining them critically.

In the first unit, then, we forge precise understandings of key terms for the class: secularization, postsecularity, religion, and literature.<sup>2</sup> Taylor (2007) helps us think about the Westernness of secularization, about porous conceptions of the self in premodernity and the buffered sense of self that accompanies modernity and secularization;

<sup>2</sup> On secularization, we read Taylor 2007: introd. and chap. 1, on buffered and porous selves. On the postsecular, we read, from Caputo’s (2019) witty and erudite *On Religion*, chap. 2, “How the Secular World Became Post-secular,” and, on “religion reconsidered” postsecularly, chap. 1, “The Love of God.” Linking all three categories to literature, we read Knight 2009: chap. 1, “Sacred Wor(l)ds: The Doctrine of Creation and the Possible Worlds of Literature,” and Ni 2016, “Postsecular Reading.”

fellow philosopher John Caputo (2019) fetchingly recasts the story of secularization such that Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche become prophets of related but vastly different postmodernities and postsecularities; Caputo in his urbane way also helps us imagine a postsecular vantage from which we might look differently at premodern, modern, and postmodern religion. Finally, Knight (2009) and Zhange Ni (2016) help us consider literature as a natural site for connecting language and creation, myth and religion, persons and community, elements of belief and practice that are sometimes neglected in culture and in scholarship, and for enriching our sense of multivocality. In Ni's words:

Postsecular reading . . . challenge[s] the hegemonic universalism of “secular” reading . . . to address the failures of the protectionist exclusionism of “secular” aesthetics. But rather than working within the comfort zone of one literature and one religion, postsecular reading ventures outside those boundaries to question the formation of the sacred or sacralization in a whole range of interlinked “secular” spheres. Postsecular reading asks the reader to encounter the world and human lives as radically more than what secular modernity has made them—even more than what a text, given its inevitable limits and situatedness, may possibly imagine—and to embrace a rigorous openness to the wholeness of reality, including the multiplicity of faith commitments, the alterity of religious traditions beyond the model of confessional communities, and the intertwined power relations of religion and politics. (51–52)<sup>3</sup>

Ni's call to “embrace a rigorous openness to the wholeness of reality” becomes for not a few students a revolutionary, liberating imperative for integration, including but not limited to religion and spirituality, both in literature and in life.

The idea that reality includes paradox and mystery leads naturally yet counterintuitively for students to our unit on mystery, via detective fiction. We launch the unit by screening a short 1927 interview with Sir Arthur Conan Doyle in which he reflects on what his fans consider the two great, if unrelated, achievements of his life: his creation of Sherlock Holmes and his research into spiritualism—a fetching starting place to consider the desire both to be perplexed by mystery and to comprehend

<sup>3</sup> See also Ni's (2015) study *The Pagan Writes Back*, an important and dazzlingly original work of postsecular criticism.

or solve it scientifically (Fox 1927). Doyle's 1902 novel *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, G. K. Chesterton's 1911–35 Father Brown stories, and Dorothy Sayers's 1923 mystery *Whose Body?* provide wonderful opportunities to examine the literary forms and techniques—characterization, setting, plot, suspense—that serve these novelists as they bring together the modern sensibilities of the scientist and the sleuth with a deeply literary exploration of mystery (Doyle 2003; Chesterton 2012; Sayers 2013). The moor becomes in Doyle's hands a strange space between the secular and the straightforwardly supernatural, marking the physical reality of abiding mysteries and the layering of present on past; all three writers fascinate over the prerational experience of seeing the whole or intuiting the truth, as in the glorious eighth chapter of *Whose Body?*; they cater to a nearly insatiable desire to marvel at the workings of the (most often, male) mind, whether criminal or detective; by generic convention, they make death central to the question of human flourishing and entertain the possibility of the supernatural in their plots; and they make mystery instrumental for the friendships—Holmes and Watson, Father Brown and Flambeau, Wimsey and Bunter—that constitute a profound part of the texts' abiding appeal.<sup>4</sup>

From detective fiction's desire to know, the next unit leads us to explore uncertainty, its experience, and its relationship to meaning per se. In *The Book against God* Wood (2003), an outspoken atheist, creates the first-person narrative of Thomas Bunting, a confirmed "secularist," pathological liar, and stalled-out PhD who can abide neither his urbane Anglican priest father's comfort with uncertainty nor the contingencies that would accompany siring the child his pianist wife so desperately desires. In *A Certain Ambiguity* the mathematicians Gaurav Suri and

<sup>4</sup> Secondary readings here include Contino 2016, "Roman Catholicism," helpful for thinking about the legacy of Doyle's childhood Catholicism and for the role of Dante in Lord Peter Wimsey's book collection; Knight 2009: chap. 2, "Beings in Relation: Otherness, Personhood, and the Language of the Trinity"; Knight 2004, providing aesthetic and historical context for Doyle and Chesterton; Monta 2016, a fabulous work, helpful for thinking about the repetitions of genre fiction; and Wilson 2016, misleadingly titled "Confessional Reading," which explores aestheticism in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as a microcosm of secularism, centered on a concept (the aesthetic, the secular) that can function only through exclusion (of the true and good, or of faith and practice). We also read two classic defenses of the genre: Chesterton 1901, "In Defense of Detective Stories," and Auden 1980, "The Guilty Vicarage."

Hartosh Singh Bal (2007) weave a fascinating detective story, spanning the arts, the humanities, and mathematics, in which Ravi Kapoor, a Stanford senior from an immigrant Indian family, endangers his four-year, business-major graduation plan by taking a class on infinity from a charismatic math professor, researching the blasphemy trial of his deceased mathematician grandfather, exploring the sort of faith in mathematics that propels mathematical reasoning, and debating with his classmates whether any meaning is possible in a universe where Euclidean and non-Euclidean geometries are both true. If for Suri and Bal uncertainty paradoxically may provide the grounds for meaning, for Louise Erdrich (2017), in *Future Home of the Living God*, a global pandemic that makes evolution run backward generates an uncertainty in the comfortable Minnesotan narrator, Cedar Hawk Songmaker, that bridges her Native identity, practices, and Catholicism and seems linked to the very possibility of (pro)creation and love.<sup>5</sup> Taking our departure from Cedar's hope for her child in Erdrich's novel, the shorter final unit considers hope, particularly in its creative, literary dimension of imagining a good that seems unlikely or even impossible, as in the case of Robinson's *Lila* (2014) and the protagonist's hope for the redemption of her murderer surrogate mother, or in the boy surviving without the father and finding others who don't eat people in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006).<sup>6</sup>

Describing a semester in a few sketchy paragraphs feels painfully insufficient, begging all sorts of questions beyond the scope of this essay. A course not tilted toward criticism and theory would look vastly different. The role of historicity in such a course is also certainly worth consideration. Though the course leaps from the early twentieth to the early

<sup>5</sup> Secondary readings include Knight 2009: chap. 4, "Interpretive Communities: Scripture, Tolerance, and the People of God"; Tate 2016, which considers how refutations of religious narratives (such as *The Book against God*) end up repeating them; Kerns 2016, "Hinduism," which helps us consider the non-Western religious framework that may undergird Suri and Bal's scientific openness to mystery; Vanzanten 2016, "World Christianity"; and, as preparation for the final unit, Knight 2009: chap. 6, "A Hope and a Future: Suffering and Redemption in Eschatological Perspective."

<sup>6</sup> Secondary selections for this shorter final unit include Jennings 2016, "Protestantism," apropos issues of class and race that function as subtexts of *Lila*; Lupton 2016, "Dwelling," which speaks to wandering and making a home fitting for both *Lila* and *The Road*; and Knight 2009: chap. 5, "The Stain of Sin: Tales of Transgression in the Modern World," and Felch 2016b, "Ethics," which provide multiple vocabularies for the sense of evil and goodness in both novels.

twenty-first century and touches English on three continents, the units each have an internal historical continuity, which allows for situating them meaningfully within various contexts (fin de siècle aestheticism, our narrative of World War I and ensuing European secularization, etc.). But the course's historical and geographic reach also addresses post-critical aims urged by Rita Felski (2015: 154), which include moving beyond "ways of thinking about historical context [that] are unable to explain how works of art move across time" toward "models of textual mobility and transhistorical attachment that refuse to be browbeaten by the sacrosanct status of period boundaries," a kind of mobility that post-secular texts frequently exhibit by virtue of concerns addressed by spiritual practices and religions across time. The historical and geographic range of the course also means that its novelists represent a range of diversities that I and my students find fruitful, including members of three nationalities, women and men, four people of color, and writers from a wide variety of religious backgrounds or adjacencies (spiritualist, Catholic, Protestant, atheist, Hindu, Native American, and agnostic). Queer concerns surface in discussion of Holmes and Watson's relationship and in the queerness of religion or unbelief in various texts, and certainly a different selection of primary texts could foreground LGBTQ+ issues more deliberately.

From experience teaching this class and others on religion and secularism, I can make several relevant observations. These classes fill. Students are passionate about them and recommend them to their friends. For reasons I don't entirely understand, the more explicitly postsecular the approach, the more students seem drawn from other disciplines (the relationship of physics to cosmological concerns has occurred to me). They generate fascinating honors and capstone projects, both critical and creative; after taking *The Bible among Its Readers*, an atheist student later nominated for the Marshall and Rhodes scholarships wrote a novel in chiasmic form that features a nonbinary teen exploring their deceased mother's college diaries and spiritual journey. It has happened multiple times that students stop me on the Iowa City pedestrian mall or in the local co-op, long after the fact, to tell me how a class affected them, with references to particular novels, poems, and theoretical works we read years ago and to life events during and after college. We surely have similar experiences teaching about race, colonialism, gender, class, and sexuality. My point is that the effects of



teaching critically and compassionately about religion, spirituality, and secularism can be just as salutary and life changing.

And just as strange. Once the postsecular cat is out of the bag, discussion may dodge under sofas and into thorny hedges, as we well know from teaching around other sensitive topics, such as gender and race. That said, in our culture of identity politics, I find my students uniformly eager to identify themselves religiously, spiritually, or secularly in class. If your experience is anything like mine, in such a class you are likely to encounter students whose parents are agnostic but who in early adulthood have converted to a particular religion and are grateful for the conceptual and historical space to frame the ongoing misconnection with their families; children raised in fundamentalist homes likewise embrace the chance to situate their experience not as the totality of religion but as one experience among others. You may find that you have in your class an avid reader of tarot cards, a Mormon, a Wiccan, a student whose defensive, Richard Dawkins–style New Atheism is tempered by ongoing discussion with traditionally religious and SBNR (spiritual but not religious) peers. You will undoubtedly be broadsided by conversations about *Game of Thrones*, Marvel, *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, yoga, Jordan Peterson, and church camp. Your tattooed, pink-haired, lesbian honors student will make you profoundly uncomfortable, despite your pride in her newly postsecular sensibilities, when she relates how your esteemed colleague, her Milton professor, turned down her proposed paper on gender and the fall “because *he* said” (here imagine a blistering ageist imitation) “*theological approaches to Milton are so old-fashioned*” — WTF is up with that?!

With all that free-flowing strangeness, the way my students talk about religion in these classes is for me inspiring: sometimes surprisingly self-searching, sometimes edgy, always thought-provoking and lively. We connect across spiritual and secular identities and generate new languages for articulating why literature matters to us. In two decades of increasingly explicit postsecular pedagogy, I have never once seen my worst fears materialize by having a student explode with zeal or condemnation, or invite classmates to accept Jesus into their hearts (at least not in class), or tell people that they will “go to hell” for whatever mode of licentiousness you choose. It’s worth mentioning, though, that in every class I teach LGBTQ+ students, usually several, express relief to

find a space in which they can talk about their gender/sexual identity and spirituality as though those were not mutually exclusive, since they regularly infer from “both sides” that they are. Likewise, for not a few mainstream, middle-class students, it is palpably liberating to find a place in the university where they can disaggregate thoughtful religious practice from presumed social or political conservatism, since both religious and academic voices so routinely insist on welding the two together. I’m gratified by how many students—Jewish, Christian, Hindu—have expressed delight in learning new things about others’ religious traditions and their own, their intricacies and histories. And unfailingly, my students are interested in the extreme about what spiritual practices and the rituals of literature have in common and how they shape us into people who can or can’t live out better politics and relationships. They acquire a kind of postsecular fluency that broadens their ability to engage in conversations at home, in the dorm, on the job.

This is all to say that postsecularity in the classroom has given me the desire for postsecularity in the discipline, and the hope that it is not impossible. I offer the sketch of this course, bare as it may seem, as one strategy for imagining how to wade into postsecular pedagogical waters and see where the adventure leads.

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I’ve suggested that an important step on the road to better conversations about literature and religion is to recognize that most of us in the professoriate today were trained in doctoral programs that passed on the (not so) silent habits of secularism, teaching us how to turn a blind or dismissive eye to the myriad religious topoi in early and contemporary texts, or else how to explain them away in terms of our more familiar materialist categories, and intellectual critique of that secularism hasn’t been enough to change it. So I’ve also implied that better discussion of religion in our discipline inevitably means talking about the sorts of stories I’ve told here, the anecdotal and personal, which require us to think about the real-world effects of our offhand secularism, the way it evacuates the classroom of meaningful discussion of religion—and of existential concerns more generally—in the resulting secularized space and makes religion strictly the provenance of antiacademic spaces,

which many of us are realizing we cannot afford to ignore. I want to inch out on this not-so-Swiftian limb and suggest that we might further improve our effort to talk about religion by talking better about it among ourselves, at the water cooler.

Here we should be explicit: religion, like other identity categories protected under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (and we do sometimes need to remind ourselves that religion is one of them), should never be brought up during job visits and hiring meetings—both of which happened in my own case at Iowa, to my dismay on the campus visit, and to my complete terror for the entirety of the tenure clock, once a colleague informed me that someone had worried aloud during hiring deliberations that I was a “religious fundamentalist” (perhaps because my job talk had focused on Christopher Smart?)—nor should it be in tenure and promotion hearings, or in any situation in which we are in relationships of power, such as doctoral exams or dissertation defenses. But beyond circumspection about such power relations, there is much we can do to bring the full range of religious, secular, and spiritual attitudes that make up the average person’s creative negotiation of the secular/religious binary—as we may well say—out of the closet.

If a colleague mentions a spiritual practice like meditation or yoga or centering, if she has an icon in her office, if he teaches a class on Milton (ahem), all sorts of entirely appropriate, noncoercive, friendly, even helpful conversations might be broached. What does your spiritual practice consist of, how does it relate to your intellectual life, why do you do it? How do students talk about religion in your Milton class? Do you think that I might approach Julian of Norwich from an affect-theory perspective that doesn’t delegitimize her religious experience? When colleagues or students, in the hall or during office hours, make a point of identifying themselves as Hindu or Mormon or Wiccan or Eastern Orthodox, it is entirely possible, appropriate even, to respond without awkward silence, in an affirmative, noncloseting, and non-secularist way: That’s fascinating, I don’t know much about that religious tradition. Were you raised in it, or did you convert? What is your favorite thing about it? Of course, as good communication theory teaches us, we should be ready to complete the loop by describing our own positionalities in similarly personal, noncoercive, nonnormative, non-universalizing terms.

Based on my classroom experiences, I don't doubt that such open-minded and openhearted exchanges are possible. However, I suspect that for a few readers, suggesting that better talk about religion in our field might mean discussing spiritual experiences with students or colleagues seems as outrageous as roasting a baby for Christmas dinner. Our wariness of talking or teaching about religion without a secularist thumb on the scales illustrates, I submit, just how much we need to stop talking about religion as we most often do, and implies that the benefits of revising our methods would be personal as well as pedagogical. What sticks with me about the doctoral exam I described is not so much the familiar ritual resecularization of the discipline but my colleague's genuine sense that there was something in that religious experience, that practice, that could surprise her, that was positive, engaging of her whole humanity, irenic and life giving, even related to her own intellectual work. If we open spaces for considering issues surrounding religion, secularism, and the postsecular in the literature classroom in ways that are hospitable to the methodologies we already practice, the result may be new experiences not unlike the refreshment my colleague reported after attending synagogue with her daughter.

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