

Introduction

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This special issue on the “antinomies of the postsecular” began as an internal *boundary 2* project but quickly grew to include contributions from a number of nonmembers who had expressed to us strong agreement with the aims of the project. As word of the project spread, therefore, it seemed to create a community of like-minded colleagues concerned about certain ascendant lines of thinking on the contemporary scene. We received a voluminous response to our queries about possible contributions. In fact, we have had to defer a number of essays, including one of my own, due to space limitations; we hope to present them as a cluster in another issue in the near future.

The goal from the beginning was to compile a series of responses to the growing influence of “postsecular” ways of thinking across the humanistic disciplines in large sectors of the Anglophone world. Our aim was to map this diverse and diffuse intellectual formation, at least partially, to analyze some of the forms of thinking most visibly associated with it, and to understand its relation to larger social forces in our world. Clearly, something that is routinely spoken of as the “return of religion” often functions

as alibi or occasion for these ways of thinking as well as constituting their object of study. We wanted to see not only what kinds of questions were being asked about this supposed return—more or less organized religious formations in our times—but also, perhaps more importantly, what kinds of questions were being foreclosed.

This special issue consists of two discrete but related parts. Part 1 collects a series of contributions under the rubric “Why I Am Not a Postsecularist.” The section title obviously invokes William E. Connolly’s *Why I Am Not a Secularist* (1999), an early statement of the postsecularist turn, which itself referenced Bertrand Russell’s “Why I Am Not a Christian” (1927), a document of an early twentieth-century, positivistic atheism. Our play with these two titles is purposeful: a critical framing of the postsecularist turn, but not—as if that were possible—a supposed return to the “old” critique of religion. Each of the five contributions to this section of the issue reflects very much the individual author’s perspective and line of approach to the question of the postsecular, but together they offer a collective, dialogic introduction to the issue and the concerns and perspectives presented here.

In my contribution to Part 1, I outline what I take to be the internal incoherence of the concept and argue that postsecular tendencies rely disproportionately on contemporary political Islam, and postcolonial societies more broadly, to make their case for a “return of religion,” a kind of “ethnographic philanthropy” that generates a highly misleading view of political Islam as an unmediated and unproblematic return to the tradition of (Sunni) Islam, making it difficult to see that it is in fact a result of the great transformation of Muslim societies under colonial rule. Melinda Cooper places the postsecular within the larger cultural turn and points to the material realities of the neoliberal transformation of societies worldwide for an understanding of the global emergence of radical and conservative religiopolitical formations across the world religions in recent years. Stathis Gourgouris extends his notion of “detranscendentalizing the secular” and rethinks the parameters of atheism itself, fashioning an orientation that is *socially* agnostic about the truth claims of this or that religious tradition. Bruce Robbins views postsecular tendencies as the danger lurking within the larger post-1960s concern with “inclusiveness.” And Vassilis Lambropoulos extends the historical temporality of postsecular ways of thinking much further back still, seeing in them the latest permutation in the relations between secular and religious imaginations and institutions since their early modern emergence.

Part 2 of the special issue, titled “Religion and the Possibilities of

Critique,” offers a series of longer and more focused studies, each an examination of the consequences for particular intellectual constellations—from Byzantine history (Dimitris Krallis) to feminist and queer theory (Sadia Abbas, Nikita Dhawan), political theology (Jason Stevens, Gourgouris), and postcolonial criticism (Robbins, Abbas, Dhawan)—of the way the question of religion is posed. In his extended essay, which takes as its starting point and point of reference Paul Kahn’s recent application of Schmittian notions to an analysis of “American power,” Stevens provides a comprehensive map of the revival of political theology in our times and, more specifically, its inadequacy to the complexities of religion’s relationship to political power in America historically and into our own times. In a more philosophical-anthropological vein, Gourgouris works out the implications of a brief, cap-sular statement in Cornelius Castoriadis—“Every religion is idolatry”—and argues that “idolatry,” which all monotheisms seek to relegate to the space of illusion, is what they all in fact share.

Abbas’s wide-ranging essay takes as its concern the recent scholarly reinvention of the figure of the Muslim woman, critically reopening the question of the relationship between feminist subjectivity and historical agency, which is at the center of a range of postsecular formulations in post-colonial feminist and queer studies. In a related manner, Dhawan argues that a politics of anti-imperialism should not be allowed to foreclose the possibility of a parallel critique of patriarchic and heteronormative dispensations in postcolonial spaces, including and especially those social and political formations that can escape such scrutiny precisely because they themselves contain elements of anti-imperialism. Krallis examines the uses of Byzantine religiosity for modern discourse, his case being a recent essay on the “blasphemy” question in contemporary Muslim societies, which, he argues, reproduces, in the name of a postsecular and post-Enlightenment recuperation of Muslim sensibilities, an Enlightenment, and, in fact, Vol-tairean, understanding of Byzantine civilization. Finally, Robbins asks an important question, namely, why scholars in US postcolonial studies, in particular, display a conspicuous tendency to postsecular ways of thinking.

As will be clear from these brief synopses, the essays collected here bring into play a number of distinct methods, predilections, and objects of study—and this lack of uniformity is germane to the project we have envisioned. They raise a range of different questions—epistemological, historical, sociological, ethical, philosophical—about the rise of the postsecular as an emergent orthodoxy. Our concern and disquiet are as much triggered by the internal conceptual incoherence of postsecular intellectual practices

as they are about the political affiliations revealed by their treatment of modern religiosity. In presenting this material at this juncture, it is our hope to generate further discussion in *boundary 2* about how we think about the relationship between religious and political imaginations and institutions in these times.