

Afterword

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The state of our world in 2020 is a far cry from the high expectations of modernity that arose in the aftermath of fascism, decolonization and the Fall of the Berlin Wall. As the social sciences and humanities emerged along with—and were shaped by—the unfolding of the modernist project, their theories, concepts and methods are inflected with it. How to come to terms—epistemologically, politically and ethically—with the ugly, irrational and uncivilized faces of current politics of inclusion and exclusion, in which nativist culture and identity are mobilized for the sake of political agendas that violate the rights of citizens and refugees guaranteed by democratic constitutions? And in so doing, how to reconfigure the social sciences and humanities from a critical, non-eurocentric and postcolonial angle that, moreover, does not downplay bodies, things and emotions in favor of abstraction and rationality? Such questions trigger critical reflections about how to analyze culture and society in our time, in ways that acknowledge continuities from antiquity and the

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middle ages to modernity (rather than postulating sharp breaks) and similarities between Western and non-Western cultures and societies (rather than postulating sharp differences between a developed 'West' and a backward 'Rest').

Calling attention to the arousal of emotions in political settings in which 'sacrality and secularity mutually inform, enforce and spill over into each other' (Balkenhol, Hemel, Stengs, this volume p. 1), this volume is part of this critical endeavor. All contributors form part of a longstanding, international network for scholarly exchange and public activities in which the Meertens Institute, the home base of the three editors, forms an important node and hospitable forum. Concomitantly, for Markus Balkenhol, Ernst van den Hemel and Irene Stengs this network is important in redirecting the focus of the institute from 'Dutch (folk) culture' to 'culture *in* the Netherlands,' against a broader global horizon that allows for comparison and the tracing of transregional connections. The volume's grounded case studies place societies in Europe, Africa, Asia and Latin America in one conceptual frame, thereby showing how 'the perils of nation and religion' play out across the world. The rise of populist identitarian movements with their highly exclusivist, discriminating and racist agendas across Europe reminds us that modern democracy both facilitates *and* is threatened by such perils. There is little reason to maintain an idea of Europe as the global vanguard of modernization, democracy and well-being. The point is to conduct research and theorize from 'the middle of things' as proposed by this volume, which combines featuring a frightening parade of the ugly, unsettling side of the dynamics of belonging and exclusion in modern nation-states with plastic critical analysis.

The anchor-point for this analysis is the notion of the 'secular sacred.' The coinage of this notion is grounded in the insight, as developed by Talal Asad and Saba Mahmood, that secularity is not religion's opposite. Such a take on religion would merely reiterate the master narrative of modernization, according to which religion was bound to vanish or at least withdraw from the public into the private sphere. The starting point for a critical approach to modernity is the recognition that secularity is not only the frame for regulating the role and place of religions in society but is also shaped by, and yet concealing, its Christian foundations. The editors introduce the 'secular sacred' composite as a conceptual and

methodological device to spot unexpected and partly hidden links between secular and religious in contemporary nation-states.

In so doing, they make the secular-religious binary intersect with the profane-sacred binary. The latter is grounded in the work of Durkheim, who advocated a non-substantive, sociological understanding of the sacred, according to which anything could be sacralized and thus made to enshrine common representations and values that arouse sentiments of effervescence, thereby affirming the bonds of those experiencing these sentiments. The attraction of Durkheim's binary is that it allows the expansion of the notion of the sacred beyond the narrow confines of what is conventionally recognized as religion (e.g. Chidester 2012). By the same token, this notion of the sacred blinds attention to the specific ways in which secularity produces and regulates religion. Combining the two sets of binaries, however, felicitously opens up new possibilities for thought. Next to the 'secular sacred,' the central focus of this volume, other possible combinations are the 'religious sacred,' the 'secular profane' and the 'religious profane.' If we add the pure-polluted binary (as mobilized in Verrips's chapter), even more heuristic possibilities for analysis open up that allow the taking into account of the positive and negative dimensions of sacrality.

As this volume shows, the notion of the 'secular sacred' indicates some kind of canalization and cannibalization of 'belief energy' (Certeau 1984: 187) into the sphere of politics. This idea is also deployed in the literature on political theologies (e.g. Vries and Sullivan 2006) which, somewhat to my surprise, is not discussed in the context of the volume. Clearly, many of the contributions show in a detailed manner how in the face of a presumed 'enemy' political power taps into—or even 'hijacks' (Marzouki et al. 2016)—religious cosmologies and affective repertoires, or engages in new modes of sacralization steeped in religious emotions and wow-effects. Thereby they are echoing Carl Schmitt's (2005, orig. 1922) point that modern political concepts are secularized theological concepts, and that sovereignty means the right to declare a 'state of exception' and curtail the rights of those considered to not belong. For future research, it would be interesting to explore in detail how theories of political theology align with, and possibly differ from, the notion of the 'secular sacred' proposed by this volume, and possibly the other related binaries

mentioned above. A salient convergence, in my view, forms the importance of resilient religious forms, that are not easy to identify from a modernist perspective and instead require detailed genealogical tracing grounded in knowledge of theology and the history of religion (as proposed by Yelle 2019). What I find particularly compelling and distinctive about this volume is that many contributions situate the embracement of political theologies under the aegis of the ‘secular sacred’ in *plural* configurations, in which people with different cultural, religious and ethnic identities co-exist. It seems that the marked mobilization of a ‘secular sacred’—on the part of the state, nationalist movements, or contestations thereof—gains momentum in moments of political precariousness, and a shared sense of instability and insecurity.

Looking across the chapters, it can be noticed that the ‘secular sacred’ appears in different modalities. Let me distinguish four. One, it appears that *secularity can easily be fused with a privileged religious tradition* into a nationalistic project, as in the case of Dutch right wing populism and nativism where Christianity is embraced as part of national culture (Hemel, Kešić & Duyvendak), the appraisal of Hinduism as part of Indian secularism at the expense of Islam and other religions (Binder), the privileging of Sunni Islam in North-Nigerian secularism and the violent rejection of Shia public performances (Ibrahim), or the—ever more contested—idea of Brazil as a secular country with a Catholic national culture and Afro-Brazilian undercurrents (Oosterbaan and Godoy). In all these settings, we encounter an appraisal of a particular religion as conducive to nationhood and identity, while at the same time members of other religious groups are discriminated against or even persecuted. Clearly, nationhood does not simply come in as a secular substitute for religion; it may be made to embrace and privilege a particular religion, albeit in a more or less culturalized form, while rejecting others. Such embracement, of course, triggers contestations. As Oosterbaan and Godoy show in their study of the contestations around carnival, evangelicals re-religionize this festival in their own terms, thereby striving to shift the Brazilian national-religious configuration in their favor.

Second, the volume shows how *sacralization plays a key role in dynamics of Othering*, as in the populist idea of a German *Leitkultur* to which Islam and Muslims are irredeemably foreign (Götz), or the dismissal of ‘gypsies’

and ‘Arabs’ as ‘shit’ in public space in Berlin (Verrips). While Götz focuses on the sacralization of a secular German nationhood that fiercely rejects Islam as an instance of ‘bad’ religion, Verrips points at the peculiar sacrality of the despised Other—an echo of longstanding sacrificial traits in secular times.

Third, one can note a *sacralization of secular values and history*. This may occur in the face of postcolonial criticisms, as in the sacralization of the figure of Black Peet (Stipriaan) or contested statues of Jan Pieterszoon Coen and colonial history (Balkenhol) in the Netherlands. In both cases, sacralization is to protect items of national pride and heritage against removal, going along with a repressive use of proverbial Dutch tolerance to which protestors are expected to succumb. But such a sacralization may also pertain to the valuation of human rights and heritage in hypersecular socialist settings, in which this valuation offers possibilities for religious resilience, albeit in culturalized form, as shown in Salemink’s analysis of the reframing of spirit possession rituals in Vietnam as cultural heritage and a matter of human rights.

Fourth, and lastly, Irene Stengs’s analysis of Thai divine kingship in modern times appears to make the secular-sacred implode, in that nationalist royal celebrations incorporate more and more Western cultural forms, and aims to envelop people in a claustrophobic manner into the production of sacredness of the monarchy, as epitomized in mourning rituals.

Striking in these modalities of appearance of the ‘secular sacred’ is the mobilization of emotions and affective energies. As Herman Roodenburg shows in detail in his examination of Rothko’s secular sacred chapel of art, the sphere of art has long featured a site in which belief energies, and Christian modes and experiences of looking, are brought to bear on experiences of an artistic sublime. Interestingly, such evocation of affects and emotions also occurs in the context of the various modalities of the ‘secular sacred’ in political contexts. The question how to grasp the systematic arousal of affects and emotions—and the profiling of grandiose feelings of belonging to a certain body, such as the nation—has become a major issue in social-cultural research. This becomes more pertinent in plural configurations, which are prone to trigger tensions and clashes between sensibilities and emotions that are grounded in different sensational

regimes and aesthetic formations (e.g. Meyer 2018). In my view, the analysis of big and hot feelings generated through an involvement with a 'secular sacred' requires a 'cool' analysis which details meticulously how they emerge, and how they may be grounded in (past) religious sensational regimes or generated in new modes of sacralization that tap into longstanding belief energies. While both the nation and religion do not form perils per se, this volume shows that under the aegis of a 'secular sacred' they may form rather toxic combinations, that, though difficult to unhinge, must be traced and deconstructed via a genealogical and praxeological approach.

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