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Introduction: Transsecular Textualities*

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Political theology and the study of literature

The turn to political theology over the last twenty years has shed much light on the politics of sovereignty, states of exception, and international relations, while also revealing the theological underpinnings of political concepts that were considered to be wholly secular. The events of September 11, 2001 were a key inspiration for the turn to political theology, along with a wider curiosity of intellectuals trying to make sense of a new world no longer framed by the Cold War. In addition, a series of controversial court cases involving religious freedom before the European Court of Human Rights and the US Supreme Court, inspired cutting edge work on the theological presuppositions of the separation of Church and State.¹ While studies in political theology have primarily focused on law, international relations, or political theory, these approaches come at the expense of other prisms through which to view the theological-political.

In contrast to these approaches, the study of literature and political theology has received comparatively less attention, despite literature being a central occupation of the founding figures of twentieth-century political theology. Shakespeare's *Richard II* plays a pivotal role in Ernst Kantorowicz's ground-breaking study of medieval political theology *The Kings Two Bodies*.² Carl Schmitt's political theology was significantly influenced by Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, Melville's *Moby-Dick* and *Benito Cereno*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, not to mention the writings of Dostoevsky, Goethe and the German Romantics.³ In one of the few recent studies of political theology through the prism of literature, Victoria Kahn shows how early modern literature shaped the thought of Leo Strauss, Walter Benjamin, Hannah Arendt, among others.⁴ Given our so-called post-

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¹For an explanation of the various factors involved in the turn to political theology at the end of the Cold War, and especially after September 9, 2011, see: Udi Greenberg and Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins, "What Comes After the Critique of Secularism"

²See in particular, chapter 2 of Kantorowicz's, *The Kings Two Bodies*, 24–41.

³For an overview of Carl Schmitt's scattered reflections on *Don Quixote* see: Seguí, "Carl Schmitt's 'Don Quixote'". On Carl Schmitt and Herman Melville see: Derman, "Carl Schmitt on land and sea". On Schmitt and Shakespeare see, for example: Schmitt, *Hamlet or Hecuba*. And on Schmitt and romanticism see his *Political Romanticism*.

⁴Kahn, *The Future of Illusion*.

This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

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secular age, one might think that political theology could offer literary theorists attractive resources for interpreting contemporary texts – not merely pre-modern literature.

This special issue seeks to fill in a lacuna by showcasing the work of literary scholars receptive to the insights of political theology. In doing so, the editors propose the concept of the “transsecular” as a new way of thinking and reading about the entanglements of “the religious” and “the secular.” Why this proposal? It is regularly assumed that Jürgen Habermas coined the term “post-secular society,” roughly around the time of 9/11.⁵ On account of his interventions – which aimed to bring secular and religious citizens together for enriching the democratic public sphere – the “post-secular” has gone onto to become a kind of umbrella term for a prolific and sometimes contradictory research field in the humanities that seeks to investigate the continuous presence of the religious in the public sphere. The term’s origins, however, are deeply rooted in the Cold War, which could explain why the term was revived after September 11, 2001. As the intellectual historian K. Healan Gaston explains:

The post-secular can be traced back to an earlier generation of religious critics whose sensibilities were decisively shaped by American developments in the decades after World War II. In particular, the term emerged in the 1950s and early 1960s as interpreters of American religion clashed over the authenticity of the so-called “post-war religious revival” and the shape of the religio-political future. Although many of these commentators argued that the moral shallowness and consumerism of much post-war religiosity reflected a secularizing impulse within the faith traditions themselves, other observers contended that what looked like secularization actually signalled the emergence of a new phenomenon, “civil religion.”⁶

To put it differently, Gaston suggests that religious scholars as Martin Marty, Andrew Greeley and Will Herberg used the term “the post-secular” in two main ways. Firstly, they referred to the emergence of a civil-religious tradition in the United States after World War II. This tradition, embodied, for instance, in the notion of the Judeo-Christian tradition, reflects the United States’ foundational connection to secularism as a political doctrine. Secondly, the term was used to simply suggest a perceived failure of the secularization thesis and a return to religious transcendence. In both instances, post-secularism was connected to the larger context of the Cold War, and its need for a kind of religious identity to resist the godless forces of Soviet totalitarianism. Little wonder, concludes Gaston, that the term resurfaced after 9/11 when “the West’s” identity was now threatened by the forces of “radical Islam” – a perspective endorsed by neoconservatives and liberal hawks, who interpreted Islam under the auspices of Cold War totalitarian theory.⁷

Some scholars, such as Peter Coviello and Jared Hickman (2014), have already considered post-secularism as a new way of understanding non-progressive narratives:

In these terms, the postsecular – regardless of one’s empirical assessment of or political hopes for the present or future secularity index – simply names the attempt to examine the historical past unburdened by a particular fantasy of the inevitable or necessary supersession of something called “religion.” For the sake of convenience, let’s call this project – the project of dislodging a particular style of progress narrative.⁸

⁵Habermas, “Notes on the Post-Secular Society,” 17–29.

⁶Gaston, “The post-secular in post-war American religious history,” 40–59.

⁷See: Brenes and Steinmetz-Jenkins, “Legacies of Cold War Liberalism”.

⁸Coviello and Hickman, “Introduction: After the Postsecular”, 645–654. See also: McClure, *Partial Faiths Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison*.

However, the contributors to this forum seek to avoid not only progressive narratives, but also the binary approach implicit in the “post” of postsecular studies. Instead, they introduce, explore, and develop the concept of the “transsecular” as a new analytical category for critical research in literary and cultural studies.⁹ Such an approach focuses on the ambivalences, simultaneities, asynchronies, discontinuities, and dissimilarities of the ongoing entanglements between the secular and the religious in modern culture. In a critical dialogue with related concepts, such as the *transcultural*, *transnational*, *transdisciplinary*, *transgender* or *transhuman*, they stress the genealogical affinities between texts and times that privilege an open, polysemous way of thinking and writing that already transgresses and delimits the rigid dichotomy of the secular and the religious, the rational and the affective, the logical and the poetic. As Roberto Esposito explores in his book *Two: The machine of political theology and the place of thought*, the problem with such rigid dichotomies “lies in the fact that, for at least two thousand years, we have used a constitutively theological-political lexicon. Therefore, we have neither mental schemes nor linguistic models free of their syntax.”¹⁰ The articles in this special issue view literature as offering a distinct way of reading, that is: a transversal reading of the dynamic relation between religion and secularization throughout history.

Consequently, the articles explore how literature presents itself as a privileged field and even as a foundational ground of the transsecular. Its characteristic semiotic openness has always allowed for different and, often enough, competing constructions of the world. At the margin of official discourses, literary texts provide the possibility of multi-layered polysemic readings as a form of resistance to existing power relations. It is precisely this marginal condition of literature that allows it to discern theological-political language. The mystical texts from the Middle Ages and early modern times (e.g., Marguerite Porete, Teresa of Ávila, St. John of the Cross) provide the basis for heterodox readings at the threshold between literal, carnal, as well as allegorical and theological meaning that may not be reduced to the one or the other. In contrast, modern literary texts often contain a spiritual or religious potentiality (e.g., Gustave Flaubert, Franz Kafka, Simone Weil). “Religious” traces can be discerned in modern “secular” texts through their narratives, poetic and rhetorical structures, as well as through intertextual references or religious figures of thought. The articles reveal a double movement aimed at dissolving clear-cut distinctions between religious and secular discourse: religiously encoded texts are analyzed to expose their inherent other, i.e., their potential secular transgressions while simultaneously, bringing to the surface the implicit religious or spiritual figurations in modern texts that have traditionally been categorized as secular.

Overview of articles

In her article, “Is Literature Secular? Transsecular Politics of Literature and the Hermeneutics of Hospitality,” Azucena G. Blanco unpacks the notion of the transsecular for the development of a politics of literature. For Blanco, a transsecular approach is based on a syncretic hermeneutics of texts of both secular and religious origin, which live alongside

⁹The transsecular concept has been developed by the editors within the framework of the research project “Politics of Literature in the Post-Secular Age” (Universidad de Granada) and the research group “Transsecular Textualities” (HU Berlin and Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg).

¹⁰Esposito, *Two: The machine of political*, 9.

and set different cultural traditions to dialogue with each other. Inspired by Foucault and Rancière's view that literature provides a way out of the bypass of binary logic, Blanco explains that a transsecular approach aims to articulate identity and differences between texts based on a principle of "hospitable" reading. She illustrates the transsecular hermeneutic by analyzing the different receptions given to *The Guide for the Perplexed* by Maimonides in Teresa of Ávila's *Las Moradas*, and in a selection of texts by Kafka: "Before the Law," "The Great Wall of China," and "The Departure."

A similar approach is put forward by Maud Meyzaud in her text contribution titled "An Arab Predecessor to Western Secular Thought: The European Enlightenment's Encounters with Ibn Ṭufayl and the Islamic Enlightenment." Here, Meyzaud challenges the geopolitics of Enlightenment secularism by way of offering a case study on the Enlightenment reception of Ibn Ṭufayl's classical work, *Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān* (*Alive, Son of Awake*). It demonstrates how, by appropriating the tropes, literary techniques, and fictional setting of the Islamic "original," Christian (Protestant) culture was about to unknowingly invent its own patterns of secular thought. It argues then, following Ernst Bloch's seminal volume *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Left* (1952), that only the pantheistic Enlightenment's transsecular approach was able to grasp how the "veil" of fiction works in *Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān*. To those readers who were able to "read between the lines" (L. Strauss), this tale, allegorically depicting Islamic philosophy's (*falsafa*) independence from religious orthodoxy and its perfection in mystical wisdom (*tasawwuf*), offered a conception of truth and of "Oriental" Enlightenment that might have felt very familiar. In making these claims, Meyzaud's point is clear: a transsecular approach bears light on how secular patterns of thought were able to migrate from an Islamic environment to the Protestant culture of the early European Enlightenment.

The next article by Jenny Haase titled, "The Blue Horse of Poetry: Decolonial Poetics, Transsecular Reading, and Ecocritical Affinities in Elicura Chihuailaf," combines the insights of transsecularism with a decolonial and ecocritical reading of contemporary indigenous literature in Chile. In doing so, she offers a transsecular reading of the Mapuche poet Elicura Chihuailaf by unpacking the transversal elements in his writings and examining how poetics, spirituality, and conceptions of nature are negotiated in his poetry. To this end, her article focusses on the intercultural dialogue between Mapuche and Western cultures; the hybrid, transcultural moments that this dialogue entails; the essential interconnectedness of spiritual and poetic speech; the convergence of oral and written forms of speech; the simultaneity of tradition and modernity; and the affinities between Indigenous cosmovision and Western academic ecocriticism. All the while she acknowledges frictions and contradictions while also taking into view convergences and correspondences, as envisioned by Sousa Santos call for diverse "ecologies of knowledges."

Finally, Yoav Ronel's, "On Magic and Idleness: Late Agamben's Reaction to Neoliberal Political Theology," shows how Agamben's late work, and in particular his concept of inoperativity, offers a lexicon of idle theological and poetic concepts and forms that divert from late capitalist history and subjectivity. To the end, it explains that Agamben's views of idleness and forgetfulness should be seen as a kind of theological process of diversion. The backdrop for these claims, says Ronel, is the view that neoliberalism is a secularized political theology. Contemporary cultural production is thus engulfed by the growing presence of the neoliberal private self, leading Ronel to affirm that literary

production today is “auto-fictive.” Seen in this light, Agamben’s late work is thus dedicated to a theological struggle against neoliberal imperatives and the forms of narration, phrasing what this article refers to as postcapitalist subjectivities beyond neoliberal political theology. Idleness is transsecular, says Ronel, because it speaks in clear political theological language and calls for a “more blessed life” beyond the pitfalls of secularized political theology.

In brief, this forum aims to be a conversation starter concerning the entanglements between “the religious” and “the secular” from a new literary scholar perspective that assumes a political, performative role, which seemed to be relegated to postcolonial proposals (Rita Segato, Saba Mahmood). Perhaps even more importantly, the secular is not supposed to have been overcome, nor is Modernity, but necessarily traversed by all of the ambivalences, frictions, contradictions and asynchronies of our present and its challenges present that have been exposed here.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Martina Bengert is a Junior Professor of Literature, Religion, and Gender Studies in Romance Cultures at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. Her research focuses on Spanish, French, Italian, and German mysticism of the early modern period and the twentieth century as well as interdisciplinary perspectives on thinking about the soul spatially (current book project: “Mysticism and Neomysticism. Topologies of the Soul in Teresa of Ávila and Simone Weil”). She is co-founder of the “Simone Weil Denkkollektiv” (www.simoneweil-denkkollektiv.de), which is dedicated to the French mystic/philosopher Simone Weil.

Azucena G. Blanco is a Professor of Literary Theory at the University of Granada. She focuses on the relations between philosophy and literature in the 20th and 21st centuries, the politics of literature, world literature, and post-secular thought. She published: *The Interior Castle: Modes of Hospitable Reading and Inhabitant Life* (Rilce, 2024), *Literature and Politics in Michel Foucault* (De Gruyter, 2020), ‘Réclusion et communauté. Techniques de l’émancipation du sujet chez Michel Foucault’ (Königshausen & Neumann, 2024). She is the director of *Theory Now. Journal of Literature, Critique and Thought* and the co-editor of the collection ‘Culture & Big Data’ (De Gruyter), and the principal researcher of the project ‘Processes of subjectivation: biopolitics and the politics of literature’. She worked and stayed at HU Berlin, Berkeley University and Potsdam Universität.

Jenny Haase is a Professor of Spanish and Latin American Literatures and Cultures at Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg (Germany). Her research focuses on Latin American, Spanish, and French-speaking literature and culture from the eighteenth to the twenty-first century, with a special focus on poetry, ecocriticism, new materialisms, post-secular theories, post-colonial and transcultural studies, and gender studies. Her recent monograph “Vital Mystik. Formen und Rezeptionsweisen mystischen Schreibens bei Anna de Noailles, Ernestina de Champourcin und Antonia Pozzi” [Vital Mysticism. Forms and receptions of mystical writing in Anna de Noailles, Ernestina de Champourcin and Antonia Pozzi], DeGruyter, 2022, explores modernist mystic poetry from a trans-secular, neo-vitalist, and feminist perspective and was awarded the Hugo Friedrich und Erich Köhler-Preis 2024 by the University of Freiburg.

Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins is an Assistant Professor in the College of Social Studies at Wesleyan University. He primarily concentrates on such topics as the history of the modern global peace

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