

## “Postsecularism”

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### Introduction

Looking before the complexity of a single historical moment only the most reductive can fail to see the difficulty in giving a name to that moment. And yet in the common creation narrative and their various permutations arriving out of that common story of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic monotheism, that has always been the task given to man (and here I intend the gendered meaning of this term), but is there not a reversibility between the act of naming (a crystal of the rational powers of the human that places men and women over other creatures) and the foolishness implied in thinking the ability to name, to develop a concept, to make a classification and distinction sets the human over the rest of creation? After all, once intelligent human beings thought that one such concept and classification that emerged from an American and European context was a normative demand that bore down upon the whole globe through the process of history. These human beings believed that there was direct-access to rationality, that time was homogenous across the heterogeneous nations and that this homogenous time allowed for no mediation between persons and the rational community. The belief in these concepts, classifications, and distinctions, perhaps like all beliefs, played themselves out in the public realm as the exercise of violence deemed legitimate. This violence has taken many forms historically that stretch from the earliest defenses of colonialism on principles of spreading Enlightenment to those who lived in darkness to today the enclosing in a torturous darkness those determined by the State to be terrorists outside the law.<sup>1</sup>

Beliefs matter. Whether it is the beliefs of the demonized Islamist or the valorized liberal secularist, these beliefs matter in that they bear on matter: beliefs may be inscribed in the flesh, one's own but also, forcefully, into the flesh of the other.<sup>2</sup> But what does this discourse — with its references to belief and matter, to violence said to be legitimate or illegitimate, to the reversibility of reason and foolishness — have to do with the postsecular? What does this the postsecular name? Is it a concept? A distinction? A classification of a historical sequence? Or is it perhaps something else

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<sup>1</sup> See Talal Asad, *On Suicide Bombing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007) for a look at the contemporary effect of this and for a wider historical survey compare William Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> See Philip Goodchild, *Capitalism and Religion: The Price of Piety* (London: Routledge, 2002) for a critical theory of belief and matter (which is flesh in its personal form) and for a more particular reading of pain and belief see as well Talal Asad, “Pain and Truth in Medieval Christian Ritual” in *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1993), pp. 83-124 and Talal Asad, “Thinking and Agency and Pain” in *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), pp. 67-99.

not captured by these names? Perhaps it names the heterogeneous space and time of the lived reality of the social and if so does it name anything at all?

The first thing that is apparent in the term ‘postsecularism’ is its dependence on something other than itself, namely ‘the secular’. So in order to understand the postsecular we are led from the get go to the question of the secular. This dependence may first appear as a weakness of postsecularism, but that would be to move too quickly from the description of the postsecular to an assumed value. This dependence upon the secular may actually be seen from a different perspective and one that opens up to the power of the postsecular. Namely, the postsecular first names the relativising of the secular. An important consequence of the postsecular’s dependence on the secular is that the secular is cast immediately as a kind of power, something upon which others draw, and so something that may also be depleted, something with limits that may be delineated. The postsecular is parasitic upon the secular, something critics of postsecular theory may at times bring attention to, but the very fact that anything may act parasitically upon the secular reveals it to be something akin to a body and not the generalized horizon for thought and action it presents itself as. So in attempting to address the question, what is the postsecular, we see that it is necessary to talk about the secular. That the very act of naming the secular is part of the identity of the postsecular. Talal Asad is perhaps the most influential theorist who has turned his theoretical gaze upon the secular in this postsecular way. So it is to his discussion of the secular that we will first turn. We will then turn to a discussion of the eventual character of the postsecular before concluding with a short discussion of the kinds of subjects that may exist under the postsecular event.

### **Secularism: You Think It’s One Way; But It’s the Other**

In his path breaking work *Formations of the Secular*, Asad breaks up the phenomenon into ‘the secular’, which he defines as an epistemological concept, and ‘secularism’, which he defines as the political project growing out of the secular. Indeed, he describes the relation between the two in a linear way, ‘It is a major premise of this study that “the secular” is conceptually prior to the political doctrine of “secularism,” that over time a variety of concepts, practices, and sensibilities have come together to form “the secular.”’<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that Asad's understanding of ‘the conceptual’ is very different from philosophies infected by the Hegelian virus that unconsciously sees a progressive continuity between concepts and concrete forms; namely, the conceptual is already a site of practices and powers. We may even read this separation of epistemological concept from political project as a simple heuristic device, as they are never fully separated in Asad's discussion as even a cursory reading of the organization of the book attests to. There we find that his consideration of an anthropology of secularism is located in the section titled ‘Secular’ and not the following one titled

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<sup>3</sup> Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 16.

‘Secularism’. However, we will return to this vision of the conjugated secular (here naming the conjugative relationship of Asad's epistemological concept and political project) when we look at the relationship between the concept of the postsecular and the concrete form or political projects that gave rise to it, for that relationship is reversed with regard to the postsecular and understanding that reversal and thus the character of the postsecular may be aided by some other conceptual tools we will bring in.

But, turning back to the secular, Asad's analysis in *Formations of the Secular*, especially in the central essay ‘What Might an Anthropology of Secularism Look Like?’, is prefigured in an important essay that appears in his earlier collection *Genealogies of Religion* (1993). Here, in the essay entitled ‘Ethnography, Literature, and Politics: Some Readings and Uses of Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*’, Asad examines the relation between literature and politics as that relation played out in the publication of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* and the controversy it caused amongst Muslims who were offended by the text and non-Muslim Westerners who were offended at the *fatwa* issued against Rushdie by the Ayatollah Khomeini. The facts of the controversy are well known and the contradictions of the various parties involved almost too banal to mention. Namely, that many Muslims who expressed anger at the text likely had not read it and many non-Muslim Westerners (whom I will refer to as secularists) angry at the reaction are unable to tell the difference between a *fatwa* issued by a Shi'a leader from the various unrelated death threats also directed at Rushdie. Nor did any side, as presented by the media and intellectuals, attempt to put the other into some kind of context. Secularists did not seek to compare the anger in the Muslim world with displays of anger from other groups, including themselves. After all, empty death threats are not, unfortunately, uncommon in the world. But, again, an analysis of a complex situation can become muddled very easily when it focuses upon these sorts of common hypocrisies. Asad's analysis cuts through this to focus on the very question of what counts as reading:

‘Many commentators have insisted that most protesting Muslims have not read the book. Clearly, most of them have not. However, as pastiche *The Satanic Verses* draws on a wide variety of literary texts, reproduces words and phrases from half a dozen languages, and alludes to as many national and religious settings. In what sense, precisely, can Western readers be said to have read the book? One might legitimately respond that reading need not conform to an a priori set of norms and knowledges in order to qualify as reading. At any rate, most people who have used it to commend or oppose particular political positions in Britain have not read it in any conventional literary sense, either. But, then, the way this text has fed into very different kinds of politics it itself, I would argue, part of the reading. *The Satanic Verses* is without doubt a deliberately provocative rhetorical performance in an already charged political field; *that* context has inevitably become part of the political struggle.’<sup>4</sup>

Here he rightly points out that the question of reading is not being asked in the midst of the debate. In a certain sense, the question of reading is assumed by the secularists in a homologous way to the

same fundamentalism they are criticising: ‘Oddly enough, the “fundamentalist” position - according to which the text is self-sufficient for arriving at its meaning - is being taken here not by religious fanatics but by liberal [i.e. secular] critics. For example, the novelist Penelope Lively refers to a recent essay of Rushdie’s: “I think, sadly, it points up the basic confrontation: here is a novelist trying to explain his purpose to fundamentalists who cannot, or will not, understand what fiction is or does”.<sup>5</sup>

The confluence of reading and politics occasioned by Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* is, of course, not limited to this one case study. We may even hazard the thesis that reading is almost always political in the sense that it is located within and conditioned by political practices. One may think of the very ability to publish and the various laws that police what may be published and what may not. With this thesis we may also hazard the corollary thesis that reading takes place within an epistemological frame. Epistemological in the sense implied by Asad as he builds off of Foucault names here the way our reading is mediated, how we think and decide on what we know happens. Thus, Lively, as quoted above, assumes that she knows what fiction is and what fiction does. That knowing is mediated for her through the epistemological framework of the secular, rather than through an experience of reading itself (if such a thing is even possible). Asad says as much writing, not about reading, but about citizenship:

‘When [Charles] Taylor says, that the modern state has to make citizenship the primary principle of identity, he refers to the way it must transcend the different identities built on class, gender, and religion, replacing conflicting perspectives by unifying experience. In an important sense, this transcendent meditation *is* secularism. Secularism is not simply the intellectual answer to a question about enduring social peace and toleration. It is an enactment by which a *political medium* (representation of citizenship) redefines and transcends particular and differentiating practices of the self that are articulated through class, gender, and religion.’<sup>6</sup>

While Asad is not here making a claim about reading, we can extend this analysis of the conjugated secular (again, naming the conjugation of the epistemological concept and the political project) to the realm of reading and the domain of literature more generally. It might immediately be stated that the experience of reading is not always one of a firm articulation of the self, that reading and literature generally may decenter the self, may even cause a cracking up of the self: in other words, the act of reading may be dangerous for those who believe their own selfhood to be consistent and unitary. Such a claim has validity, but where does that validity come from if not from an assumed secular horizon for that reading? This vision of the act of reading as a kind of disenchantment of the self mirrors the vision of the secular as a tragic recognition of the

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<sup>4</sup> Asad, ‘Ethnography, Literature, and Politics: Some Readings and Uses of Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*’ in *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1993) p. 283).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Asad, *Formations*, p. 5.

homogeneity of time.<sup>7</sup> Stated in more concrete terms, the secular is often presented in terms of a "subtraction narrative", as Charles Taylor calls this narrative, or one that Paul de Man and Walter Benjamin present as following the logic of tragedy. One form this subtraction narrative takes is to assume a kind of pure nature outside the realm of belief, a nature that is the domain of pure facts, the pure "that's how it is" of the "natural".<sup>8</sup>

If we wanted a secular myth of this nature we can pull to mind the figure of the seemingly unstoppable criminal. What comes to mind may be scenes with Anton Chigurh (played by Javier Bardem in the film) flipping coins to see what will happen to his victims, to which we will return, or perhaps a particularly poignant scene with Marlo Stanfield (played by Jaime Hector) from fourth season of *The Wire* who, after losing a poker game, goes to a local grocery store and brazenly steals a lollipop in full view of the security guard. The security guard recognizes Stanfield as the leader of a drug gang and presumably knows of his particularly brutal reputation. The conversation that takes place as the security guard confronts Stanfield is remembered by viewers for being particularly chilling:

Security Guard: The fuck? You think I dream of coming to work up in this shit on a Sunday morning? Tell all my friends what a good job I got? I'm working to support a family, man.  
[Marlo looks away]  
Security Guard: Pretend I ain't talking to you. Pretend like I ain't even on this earth. I know what you are. Now, I ain't stepping to, but I am a man. And you just clip that shit and act like you don't even know I'm there.  
Marlo Stanfield: I don't.  
[unwraps a stolen lollipop, throws wrapper on the ground]  
Security Guard: I'm here.  
[Marlo moves closer to him]  
Security Guard: Look, I told you I ain't stepping to. I ain't disrespecting you, son.  
Marlo Stanfield: You want it to be one way.  
Security Guard: What?  
Marlo Stanfield: You want it to be one way.  
Security Guard: Man, I don't want it to be --  
Marlo Stanfield: You want it to be one way.  
Security Guard: [losing temper] Man, stop --

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<sup>7</sup> This vision of the secular as a homogenous time transcendent to subjects and unifying those subjects despite their differences is a common self-understanding of the secular and when considering the question of what an anthropology of secularism would look like in regards to temporality Asad turns to two different literary analyses of tragedy: one by Paul de Man ("The Rhetoric of Temporality") and another by Walter Benjamin (*The Origin of German Tragic Drama*). See Asad, *Formations*, pp. 62-66. This short section is nonetheless a remarkably dense reading of these two texts and I cannot possibly do justice to it in a short summary. However, readers so interested should consult Basit Kareem Iqbal, *Chronopolitics of Allegory in Talal Asad's Anthropology of Secularism*" (M.A. Thesis submitted to the University of Toronto, 2011). The introduction is available online: <[https://www.academia.edu/1507991/MA\\_Thesis\\_Introduction](https://www.academia.edu/1507991/MA_Thesis_Introduction)>.

<sup>8</sup> This is termed the *sékomma* by the French philosophers Christian Jambet and Guy Lardreau term it. See my *A Non-Philosophical Theory of Nature: Ecologies of Thought* (New York: PalgraveMacmillan, 2013) for a fuller postsecular account of the *sékomma* in relation to Christian, Muslim, and secular conceptions of nature and thought.

[pulls himself together]  
Security Guard: Stop saying that.  
Marlo Stanfield: But it's the other way.

Later in the episode Stanfield's enforcers murder the security guard on Stanfield's orders for talking back to him. Here nature, in the guise of the unstoppable criminal, shows no regard for the social order. There is no regard for the symbol of authority, the security guard, a kind of ersatz-police officer lacking any real authority, but a kind of low-level avatar for the meaningfulness of order. The security guard knows that the theft is beyond petty, it barely deserves mentioning, and we also know as viewers that there is a certain disingenuousness to Stanfield's claim to not see the security guard as this very act of theft was occasioned by the diminishing of his power during the poker game (we will return to this in our discussion of the postsecular), but still it is hard not to *believe* when faced with the coldness of Stanfield's declaration, 'You want it to be one way [...] But it's the other way.' The process of secularization is often presented as the diminishing of the effect of a fantasy, a fantasy that one may transcend the assumed meaninglessness of nature, a fantasy that is seen by many secularists as constitutive of religion itself. But, the secularist tells us, it's the other way — how tragic. But, is it the other way?

### **From the Postsecular Event to Postsecular Subjects**

As we move into a more focused discussion of the postsecular beyond its status as parasitic upon the secular, let's return to our myth of the unstoppable criminal as persona for the homologous nature that stands outside of belief, outside tradition, and which the secular constructs. Instead of a deeper discussion of that myth, though, let's consider the counter-myth already carried in some narratives of the unstoppable criminal. There is, as we already mentioned, the fact that as viewers we can see that Stanfield does in fact see the security guard and that is shown in his not simply ignoring him but having him killed. But that counter-myth is too passive, let's instead look to the counter-myth we find in Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men* (adapted for film by the Coen Brothers in a remarkably faithful way). The novel's unstoppable criminal, Chigurh, stands for the randomness of nature as throughout the story he menaces his victims by flipping a coin to decide if he is going to kill them. In so doing McCarthy is quite clearly making a connection between the randomness of Chigurh and the randomness of nature. A nature that, in its secular guise, *just is* regardless of human belief or human meaning. After Llewellyn Moss, the closest thing to a protagonist in the novel, is killed (though not ultimately by Chigurh), his wife (Carla Jean) is tracked down by Chigurh fulfilling a promise he made to Llewellyn that he could turn over money found at the site of a botched drug deal to Chigurh and Chigurh would only kill him. If he did not turn over the money he would still kill Llewellyn but he would also kill Carla Jean.

The scene that plays out as Carla Jean enters her mother's house after her funeral to find Chigurh waiting for her presents to us a personification of the postsecular counter-myth. For

Chigurh sits before Carla Jean, who begins by protesting that she doesn't have the money. Chigurh explains that this is not about the money and that her husband could have saved her. She protests that he does not have to do this. Chigurh finds this funny, 'People always say the same thing.' 'What do they say?', she asks. 'They say, "You don't have to do this"!' He then says the best he can do is to flip a coin. This is one of the scenes where the film differs somewhat significantly from the novel where the novel presents a perhaps more realistic portrait of a woman who is fearful facing her death, in the film Carla Jean is more resolute in her refusal. While in the novel she too protests that the coin is, in reality, just him at the end of the day she does call it (incorrectly) and is killed. In the film this is the truncated discussion:

Carla Jean: I knowed you was crazy when I saw you settin there. I knowed exactly what was in store for me.

Chigurh: Call it.

Carla Jean: No. I ain't gonna call it

[More insistent] Chigurh: Call it.

Carla Jean: The coin don't have no say. It's just you.

Chigurh: I got here the same way the coin did.

In the same way that Chigurh's violence is disavowed through recourse to the coin flip, so too does conjugated secularism disavow its own violence as it was enacted during the period of European imperialism. The postsecular event names the refusal of the colonized to allow the colonizers to hide behind this myth any longer. Like Carla Jean such a refusal was often still met with death but the postsecular event was the global refusal of secularisms naturalization, its self-presentation as simply serving what just is. However, even Chigurh's seeming valorization of the pure homogeneity of chance — a kind of pure secular — by proclaiming that he came to be just as the coin did carries with it its own doing. In the same way that the coin was contingent, so is the violence of the strong over the weak that is so seemingly unstoppable, so too is the naturalized violence of the colonizer over the colonized contingent and able to be overcome.<sup>9</sup>

I am referring to the colonizer/colonized relationship because we may understand postsecularism, not as a historical epoch, but rather as the name for an event which may allow for different subjects to exist in the light of their relationship or reaction to that event. Here I am drawing on the philosophy of Alain Badiou whose idea of "the event" may be useful as a heuristic device to think through the relationship between the secular and the postsecular. The reason we may need a different theoretical framework for understanding this relationship is because the two are heterogeneous to one another. Even in their names we see that difference: secularism names a political project, it names something coherent and a kind of established power in the world, while the postsecular names an opening, it is an antagonism towards that power. Without going into Badiou's theory of the event in detail, it may be faithfully summed up in this way: the way that a

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<sup>9</sup> See Alex Andrews, "Sovereign Autoimmunity: Häggglund, Bataille and the Secular" in *After the Postmodern and the Postsecular: New Essays in Continental Philosophy of Religion*, eds. Anthony Paul Smith and Daniel Whistler (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: CSP, 2010), pp. 257-279 for a philosophical overview of contingency and its relationship to postsecular political projects.

situation names what seems “to just be the case” is radically broken open by an event that changes the very being or constitution of the situation. In other words, while there is room for change within what may “just be the case”, any changes that occur are anticipated and conditioned by the situation. An event changes those very conditions, it occurs outside of the anticipation of that system, and allows for new novel situations to arise.

What we are terming the postsecular event shows the reversal of postsecularism with regards to the secular. Whereas, as Asad argues, the secular is an epistemological concept that undergirds the political project, with regard to the postsecular event it is the rejection of a political project that has lead theorists to attempt to think a new epistemological framework.<sup>10</sup> By naming this an event we are able to unite a great multiplicity of events from the resistance in Algeria and Vietnam to French colonial rule, or in Iran the resistance to a more indirect colonialism, to the resistance in Europe as non-Europeans from former colonies were encouraged to immigrate to provide cheap labour for Europe but whose non-European identities would be seen also as a threat.<sup>11</sup> The response or reaction to this multitudinous postsecular event may be seen as a process of subject formation, again following Badiou in relation to events but calling back to theorists like Asad and those like Foucault and MacIntyre who influenced him as well as figures in contemporary race, gender, and queer studies like Judith Butler and Fred Moten amongst many others.

Thus when considering the postsecular event we have to consider the way secularism as an epistemological framework and a political system was challenged as a naturalizing process, as we have done, but also turn to the subjects formed or deformed by this event. What does post secularism mean beyond the challenge it poses to secularism? What matters about the postsecular event, perhaps as with all events, is that new ways of relating to the world are formed by the event. If the postsecular event is related to the relation or non-relation of traditions, their translatability or untranslatability, as many of its theorists claim, then it is also a call to the creation of something beyond translation. In other words, if the secular is always attempting to defer itself through translations of society into nature and of nature into society, the postsecular is the refusal echoing Carla Jean’s refusal: ‘The coin ain’t have no say. It’s just you.’ Manav Ratti captures this well writing, ‘The postsecular is the sign of not just the limits of translation [...] but of also of untranslatability itself. [...] The postsecular is the sign of a call for a new form of interpretation, one which does not recode prior interpretative systems, and one which does not attempt a convergence of systems where it knows there can be none.’<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> For a useful overview of how this postsecular event played out in the Islamic world see Hamid Dabashi, *Islamic Liberation Theology: Resisting the Empire* (London: Routledge, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> See Asad, *Genealogies*, pp. 253-6.

<sup>12</sup> Manav Ratti, *The Postsecular Imagination: Postcolonialism, Religion, and Literature* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 136. Ratti’s text is one of the most wide-ranging studies of postsecularism with particular attention to the field of literature. On the concepts of translation and untranslatability the reader

Whatever the particularities of these new forms of interpretation or new subject formations may be, Badiou's subject typology may be generic enough to be useful in thinking through some of the generalities of these forms (while of course recognizing the danger, always present, in simply choosing to speak at all). In his recent *Logics of Worlds: Being and Event II* Badiou develops a theory of the three various subject "destinations" (what we might more idiomatically refer to as "identities") he thinks possible in relation to the event. The first is the faithful subject who attends to the reality of the event and the way the event has broken open whatever situation once reigned. This faithful subject, Badiou claims, organizes the *production* of the event as the present; the faithful subject is a 'resurrection (of a truth)'.<sup>13</sup> The paradigmatic case of the faithful subject is St. Paul, to whom Badiou has devoted an entire book despite his underlying antipathy towards religion, and we can see in his portrayal an example of someone holding faithful to an event and creating anew the very ways in which interpretation is possible.<sup>14</sup>

However, not all subject formations take such a productive approach to the event (we must, especially when speaking of the postsecular, avoid speaking in terms of "positivity" or "negativity", for what faithfulness requires in the light of the postsecular event may be a kind of pessimism or negativity as scholars of black religion have argued).<sup>15</sup> There are two other subject formations that ultimately take unproductive stances with regard to the event. These subject formations are named by Badiou as reactive and obscure. The figure of one who reacts is common in political discourse and Badiou is largely drawing upon that familiar trope. The reactive subject *denies* the event and seeks to remove it and its effects from history.<sup>16</sup> Thus, a perfect example of a reactionary type with regard to the postsecular event would be the current crop of thinkers dubbing themselves "The New Atheists". These figures deny the existence of this event and speak as if it didn't happen, as if the old ways of translating still made sense and will indeed force (in both intellectual and political meanings of the term) that sense even where it does not fit.

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should consult the masterful text of Arvind-Pal S. Mandair, *Religion and the Specter of the West: Sikhism, India, Postcoloniality, and the Politics of Translation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009). For more on the translation of certain concepts, in particular feminism, see Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

<sup>13</sup> Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds: Being and Event II*, trans. Alberto Toscano (London: Continuum, 2009), p. 62.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Alain Badiou, *St. Paul: The Foundations of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003) and for a in-depth but accessible discussion of Alain Badiou's peculiar and interesting relationship to religion see Hollis Phelps, *Alain Badiou: Between Theology and Anti-Theology* (Durham: Acumen Publishing, 2013).

<sup>15</sup> See William R. Jones, *Is God a White Racist: A Preamble to Black Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998) and Anthony B. Pinn, *Terror and Triumph: The Nature of Black Religion* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003).

<sup>16</sup> Badiou, *Logics*, p. 62.

The third type (the “obscure subject”) is perhaps indicative of the regnant stance in Christian theology and Continental philosophy of religion. Here the event is *occulted* or passed into what Badiou calls the “full body” where the real body of the event is now hidden. What Badiou means by this is that the obscure subject neither affirms the event nor denies it. Instead the obscure subject is split between a simple return to the past (reaction) and the deployment of the new conditions produced by the event (affirmation). While we would need to interrogate Badiou for his own obscurity in his deployment of “political Islamism” as a paradigmatic example of the obscure subject, we may still see a certain generic element in that the obscure subject always looks to plunge the event back within the fullness of some ‘Tradition or Law’ built off of ‘the invocation of a full or pure transcendent Body, an ahistorical or anti-evental body (City, God, Race...) from which follows that the trace [of the event] will be denied [...] and as a consequence, the real body, the divided body, will also be suppressed.’<sup>17</sup>

Perhaps the clearest example of the obscure orientation to the postsecular event is the attempt by some Christian theologians to claim the event as a way for a explicitly Christian political settlement to emerge as the dominant and dominating settlement. Consider John Milbank's summary of the secular in his *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*:

'Once, there was no "secular". And the secular was not latent, waiting to fill more space with the steam of the "purely human", when the pressure of the sacred was relaxed. Instead there was the single community of Christendom, with its dual aspects of *sacerdotium* and *regnum*. The *saeculum*, in the medieval era, was not a space, a domain, but a time – the interval between fall and *eschaton* where coercive justice, private property and impaired natural reason must make shift to cope with the unredeemed effects of sinful humanity.’<sup>18</sup>

Christian postsecular theologians have turned the opening sentence into an incantation imbued with the power to repeal any secularist critiques of Christian thought or practice. But, taken in itself, 'Once there was no "secular"', it would appear to say very little at all. After all, we could also say, "once there was no Christianity". The fact that an theoretical and social system has an origin in time tells us very little about the value of that system since all earthly things have a beginning in time. And while secularism may present itself as normative in a way that is false, as we will see other theorists have argued, Christianity too has presented itself as normative in a similar way and for many theologians continues to do so. For Milbank, while the secular ushers in some kind of new domain, there was once the *single* community of Christendom with its spiritual rule (*sacerdotium*) and its political or mundane rule (*regnum*). A fullness that only exists in the murky projections of the obscure subject.

What would a “faithful subject” to the postsecular event look like? It would require looking at the “real, divided body” of the new situation. Daniel Colucciello Barber’s work *On Diaspora: Christianity, Religion, and Secularity* is perhaps the best example of a theoretical unfolding of the

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<sup>17</sup> Badiou, p. 59-60.

<sup>18</sup> John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (Oxford: Blackwells, 2006), p. 9. For a less theological and less polemical, but nonetheless similar account, see the popular work of Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

postsecular that provides attention to this division and, more importantly, *thinks* that divide as changing the very *practice* of theoretical work itself. Barber's text brilliantly provides an analysis of the postsecular event which avoids the easy reversion to a new mythology of transcendence (the "obscure subject" of Milbank and those working in similar ways) but which rethinks the category of immanence in a way that avoids some vision of a world that "simply is", existing as a realm of brute facts that one must submit to:

'Secularism [...] is not necessarily immanence, for immanence does not require that we choose between the signification of religion and the affirmation of the world. In fact, secularism is poorly understood as an immediate affirmation of the world, for it is, more basically, an injunction: to affirm the world, one must be against religious signification, since the true image of the world is one in which religious signification has been devalorized, or at least "resituated".<sup>19</sup>

What Barber has done here is take on the challenge figures like Asad have put forward, but in so doing he thinks through the possibility of something common or, in his specific terminology, "significant" that resists being confused as a universal or a term of transcendence (what Badiou has called the full body). He thinks through the way in which immanence, the very realm that the secular claims to derive its authority and against which most religious thinkers imagine themselves to be pitched antagonistically, and thinks that very immanence as diasporic and as the creation of fictions (he calls this "fabulation").

Barber writes, in one of the most important passages of his book, of the relationship between immanence as common or significant and the production of ever proliferating fictive significations for reality:

'Immanence [...] calls for a direct affirmation of the world, an affirmation that proceeds [...] by a double affirmation — an affirmation, that is, both of the world as such, or the namelessness of immanence, *and* the signification that immanence necessarily produces. [...] Nonetheless, to affirm the proper namelessness of immanence is not to have found the true, nameless name of reality; it is instead to realize that one necessarily produces fictive names [inclusive of religious and secular naming] for a reality that, as surplus, is fecund with regard to signification.<sup>20</sup>

Barber, as an example of a diasporic subject where fidelity to the postsecular event requires an ever more serious and playful re-engagement; a fabulation that is melancholic and joyful at once. The postsecular requires another effort of thought from us and Barber dismantles the very idea that the conjugated secular is the end of thought. Indeed, he destroys the idea that there is any end to thought except in that very thinking or "fictive signifying". It is this immanent act, which Barber explores and puts into practice, that literature has the potential to resurrect as the truth of the postsecular event.

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<sup>19</sup> Daniel Coluciello Barber, *On Diaspora: Christianity, Religion, and Secularity* (Eugene: Cascade, 2011), p. 103.

<sup>20</sup> Barber, p. 104.