



SECULARISMS IN A POSTSECULAR AGE?

*Religiosities and Subjectivities in
Comparative Perspective*

Edited by

José Mapril, Ruy Blanes,
Emerson Giumbelli, and Erin K. Wilson



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Editors

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Introduction: Secularities, Religiosities, and Subjectivities

*José Mapril, Ruy Blanes, Emerson Giumbelli,
and Erin K. Wilson*

What has become of secularism following the so-called postsecular turn? As a consequence of the demise of modern twentieth-century secularization theory (as per Peter Berger's 'sacred canopy'), we live in an interesting intellectual moment in which the so-called postsecular (understood descriptively rather than theoretically, see, e.g., Habermas 2008; Mavelli and Petito 2012; Wilson 2012; Rosati 2015) coexists with the secular, which in turn has become pluralized and historicized (see, e.g., Taylor 2007;

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Agrama 2012; Burchardt and Wohlrab-Sahr 2013). On the other hand, if, as Habermas argues, the secularist paradigm has learned to cohabitate with the religious, we also witness the conflictual anti-religious stance of ‘new atheist’ movements, which claim a ‘scientific’ argument for the removal of the religious from the public sphere (see Oustinova-Stjepanovic and Blanes 2015). This cohabitation of the secular and the postsecular is revealed, as the new atheism example above shows, mainly through political dialectical processes (see also Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2008; Sullivan et al. 2015). This in turn makes us, editors of this volume, feel that (1) those political statements overshadow the subjective and inter-subjective dimensions of secularity, making it difficult to pinpoint concrete sites, agents, and objects of expression; and (2) for that same reason, they tend to obscure rather than illuminate the pragmatics and empirical dimensions of secularism. We argue that one such move toward the concrete and the subjective will allow us to know more about the plural, heterogeneous, and processual character of the secular/religious conundrum, and thus move beyond the monolithic, immobilized configurations that often flourish in the public sphere.

The objective of this book is thus to ethnographically explore the relation between secularities and religious subjectivities. ‘Secularism’ and ‘the secular’ have been two inter-related topics under intense debate in the past years and have produced several competing proposals concerning their theorization (Cannell 2010; Bangstad 2009; Bowen 2010, *inter alia*). Within this framework, it is essential to mention the works of Charles Taylor and Talal Asad.

For Charles Taylor (2007), secularism is the result of reforms and negotiations between Christians and secular humanists in order to create a common denominator between the religious and the non-religious. Taylor (2007, 2016) thus sees the secular as a general historical condition (in several Western societies) where the religious and the non-religious became increasingly disentangled and thought of as separate in the larger context of the emergence of *modern social imaginaries*, to use his own suggestive title. Although linked to a longer historical process, this decoupling is part and parcel of the making of ‘enlightenment’ and ‘modernity’ ideals. This secularism eventually traveled and articulated with other forms and historical projects for inter-religious conviviality and pluralism, leading to the emergence of different forms of secularism, not necessarily associated with the removal of the religious from public life (Taylor 2016).

Talal Asad, on the other hand, drawing inspiration from Michel Foucault, locates secularism in the context of the modern disciplinary project

(Asad 1993, 2003, see also Bangstad 2009). In this perspective, secularism is immanent to the production of the ‘liberal modern’, and it implies the making of that which is positioned as its opposite, namely, religion, magic, witchcraft (Asad 1993 and see also Latour 1991). It is mainly a political problem associated with disciplinary practice by the secular state and its sovereign power over the religious (see also Giumbelli 2013; Sullivan et al. 2015; Mahmood 2005, 2015). For Asad, the secular has a particular history and role within the making of secular modernity pursued by Europeans in order to make the world in its own image through colonialism and colonial-style relations (even if in the postcolonial moment).

It is in the context of this Asadian proposal that Saba Mahmood (2006) argues that secularism is an ideology/ideological project not only concerned with the separation of state/government from the church but also in the making of a specific religious subjectivity, spirituality, and relation to history. Secularism implies a normativity that ‘(...) reorganizes subjectivities in accordance with a modality of political rule that is itself retrospectively called “a religiously neutral political ethic”’ (Mahmood 2006, 328). Such an objective can only be achieved, so the argument goes, with the help of a particular style of scriptural hermeneutics, which allows a secularized conception of religion. In this sense, religion is

(...) understood to be an abstracted category of beliefs and doctrines from which the individual believer stands apart to examine, compare, and evaluate its various manifestations. Religion is therefore an object of individual free choice whose abstract truths nonetheless have universal value—as long as they do not contradict the dictates of reason and science (Mahmood 2006, 341).

It is precisely this hermeneutics that favors a religious subject ‘(...) who recognizes that material expressions of a particular religion—its rituals, observances, laws, and scriptures—are linked only contingently to religious truth itself’ (Mahmood 2006, 342). Religion in this sense is a system of signs and symbols that are possibly manipulated by individuals according to their life circumstances. Following Mahmood’s argument, this religious doctrine implies that the scriptures can only be interpreted for their symbolic significance, a perspective that is frequently perceived to be the necessary condition for a liberal democratic polity. It is precisely such normative secularity that produces a specific perspective on religion and on religious subjectivity (Mapril 2014).

Mahmood and Asad argue that such normativity has been used to discipline religious subjects in general and Muslims in particular. Either in

majority Muslim countries or in contexts where Muslims are minorities, this secular normativity has been used to attempt to produce a specific kind of Muslim subjectivity. Implicit in such technologies of government is, as Moors and Salih (2009, 375) argue, a ‘(...) culturalisation of citizenship and a transformation in the meaning of integration from participation in society to an assimilation to dominant normativities’. In such contexts, access to citizenship rights becomes dependent on the training and education of cultural values. Either one acquires them or one cannot belong and participate in the public arena as a legitimate citizen (Fernando 2014; Mapril 2014). This correlation between secular normativities and processes of governance of the religious are clearly visible in projects such as those carried out by several governments in Europe to train *imams* and religious leaders in order to transmit the so-called European way or life-world (Landman 1999; Frank Peter 2003; Kraler 2007; Maussen 2007).¹ They are also at stake in what Maité Maskens (this volume) describes as the bureaucratic encounter with non-hegemonic conceptions of intimacy and subjectivity.

This concept of normative secularism or secularity (or secular culture) provides a lens for interpreting how the religious is governed and how, in the process, states (in all their complexities and contradictions) and non-governmental organizations are engaged in the making of disciplinary programs for religious subjectivities themselves in order to establish secular modernity as a hegemonic political project (Asad 2003; Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2008). Here, an important point must be made concerning the specificity of the Muslim case in this history. Arguably, the issue of secular normativity has emerged as a critical question for those engaged in debates on religion’s place in contemporary society largely because of the constitution of Islam as a (political, ethical, epistemological) ‘problem’, against the backdrop of its historical production as Europe’s ‘significant other’ (pun intended). This becomes explicit in several of the contexts approached in this volume, such as Madrid (Télliez), Barcelona (Martin-Sáiz), Flanders (van den Brandt) or the Netherlands (Verkaaik and Arab). It is here that postsecular theorizing has been particularly insightful, highlighting the violence that is done to religious subjects

¹What is at stake here is not so much the effectiveness of such programs, if they indeed end up producing the type of subjects they propose, but what they tells us about the making of certain kind of subjectivities.

through secular constructions. Where secularism has attempted to frame ‘religion’ as chaotic, irrational, and dangerous in order to discipline and exclude religion from public life, and position itself as neutral, rational and peaceful, postsecular theorizing has emphasized that ‘values such as democracy, freedom, equality, inclusion, and justice may not necessarily be best pursued within an exclusively immanent secular framework. Quite the opposite, the secular may well be a potential site of isolation, domination, violence and exclusion’ (Mavelli and Petito 2012, 931, see also Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2008; Fernando 2014). As Hussein Agrama recently put it, secularism works in and around juridical paradoxes, as in the case of pre- and post-Arab Spring Egypt (2012).

One question that arises out of these theorizations is: does secular normativity imply a homogeneous notion of subjectivity? Is it possible to think about distinct localizations of secularity and thus different religious subjectivities? Isn’t the problem of secular normativity in fact one of pluralism and cohabitation of values in general? If that is the case, one is forced to look within the genealogies and detect the specific historicities and contexts behind the concept (see, e.g., Berger et al. 2008; Cady and Hurd 2010; Bilgrami 2016; Taylor 2016). For instance, as Fenella Cannell (2010) argues, Indian secularism has its own history and social and political processes and thus, although partially² connected to the *imperial encounter* (van der Veer 2001), it has been rethought/reworked in the general context of postcolonial Indian society. The same applies to Bangladeshi secularism (Jahan 2000, inter alia) implemented as a state policy soon after independence. The question then is: are these types of secularisms associated with distinct religious subjectivities? In Bangladesh, for instance, certain sectors of the secular left are not supporters of *laïcité*; on the contrary, they participate in several religious movements—associated with the renewal of individual religious/ritual practice—but simultaneously claim that the religious be kept away from the affairs of state. (see Shehabuddin 2008).

²We say partially because, it is possible to find in India (and elsewhere in the world) historical and political processes designed to foster harmonious modes of coexistence between different religions and the non-religious long before colonialism and Western modernity. In these cases, what is at stake is not so much the removal of the religious from public life but continuous intra-dialogue between the religious and the non-religious (Taylor 2016).

The situation in several Latin American countries also offers more food for thought from this particular angle. In the nineteenth century, secularism had an important penetration and impact in several countries in this region. This was reflected in both constitutional innovations and ideological conflicts. On the other hand, the result of the juridical adoption of secularist principles was quite diverse. In Argentina, for example, the Catholic Church retained a privileged status and has ultimately revived with the nomination of Pope Francis (Morello this volume), while in Uruguay its status became increasingly precarious. Uruguay is known today as one of the most secularized countries in the world (da Costa 2009). Brazil, in turn, adopted an essentially liberal juridical framework, which does not prevent religious agents, institutions and objects from abundantly populating public spaces, in an even more conspicuous fashion than in Argentina (see Frigerio this volume; Montero this volume). By contrast, in Cuba the juridical framework develops from within an initial atheistic denial of all things religious (see Panagiotopoulos this volume). We see, therefore, that there is a complex and diversified set of variables to be considered in the study of secularism—of which the juridical framework is but one point of reference. But this point, in turn, cannot be disconnected from the notion or ideology of ‘public space’—as Patrícia Birman (this volume) and Emerson Giumbelli and Rodrigo Toniol (this volume) show us for the case of Brazil.

Concomitantly, the argument can be made that, in terms of ‘models of secularism’ (Bangstad 2013), French and American secularisms are very distinct and both are very different from secularism in, say, Italy, Spain, or Portugal (see Giumbelli 2002 for a comparison with Latin America; or Verkaaik and Arab this volume, for a discussion of the Dutch case). In Portugal, secularity or *laicidade*, of French inspiration, was developed soon after the implementation of the Republic in 1910 and led to the confiscation of Catholic Church properties. Later, in 1940, the *Estado Novo* dictatorship signed the concordat, an agreement with the Vatican state, therefore becoming a confessional state (Vilaça 2006). Through the concordat, the Portuguese state—in similar terms as in the Argentina case—was financially responsible for the presence of the Catholic Church in public schools, in the army, and in the asylums. Furthermore, the church was awarded a juridical status of international law, it was free to hold and acquire properties, and the clergy and church properties were exempted from paying taxes, among others. The state, for its part, was to give advice concerning the nomination of Portuguese bishops by the

Catholic Church and a missionary agreement was celebrated, in which the rules of cooperation in the Portuguese colonies were defined (see Vilaça 2006). This agreement implied a regime of privilege for the Catholic Church and a hierarchy of religions, some of which were often called sects, and resulted in the creation of second-class citizens according to their religious belonging (Protestant churches were by then considered the enemies of the church and the state, which had implications in Angola and Mozambique during the colonial period [see Blanes and Paxe 2015 for the case of Angola]).

The law concerning the regulation of religious affairs was enacted in 1971 and maintained the regime of privilege of the Catholic Church long after the revolution in 1974. Although in the decades after the implementation of the democratic regime, several minority religious groups saw many of their claims accepted, it was within a legal framework coming from the previous political period. After pressure from several sectors of Portuguese society, including minority religious segments, in the late 1990s a new religious law was finally developed and eventually approved in 2001. This new legal regime, which was initially met with suspicion by the Catholic Church, applied to all religious groups present in Portugal, for at least 30 years and to all those religions internationally recognized for at least 60 years, and attributed to everyone the same rights and duties (See Vilaça 2006). In the same process and in spite of the contestation from several sectors of Portuguese society that argued for a complete secularization of the state, the Catholic Church renegotiated the concordat in 2002 due to, so the argument goes, the sociological importance of Catholicism in Portugal and thus kept a regime of privilege when compared to other religious groups. For instance, the Catholic Church is the only religious group that does not need to be registered in the Ministry of Justice; it has the highest percentage of time in the public broadcasting system; and it is, to this day, the main partner of the Portuguese state in the negotiation of the religious field (Bernardo 2010).

The Portuguese case illustrates an historical process of politico-judicial negotiation of ‘secular states’, one that was to a large extent lacking in conflict but unable (or unwilling) to remove privilege and hierarchy in what concerns state–church relationships (see also Dix 2010). It is, however, one among many observable paths. Thus, and as Annelies Moors and Ruba Salih (2009) emphasize, it is essential to acknowledge the very different manifestations of secularism as a form of statecraft and, we would add, the historical processes that implied its localizations (see also Cady and Hurd

2010; Calhoun et al. 2011; Sullivan and Beaman 2013). Further, however, this volume seeks to interrogate *where* such processes are localized, negotiated, and experienced. To say that most of these negotiations take place in the public sphere is simultaneously correct and nevertheless insufficient: they occur in the courts and parliaments but also in the streets, liturgical spaces (Verkaaik and Arab this volume), media outlets, clothes, bodies, hospitals and health institutions (Bernardo this volume; Giumbelli and Toniol this volume), state departments (Maskens this volume), urban configurations (Frigerio this volume), and so on. Our call here is for an observation of such spaces, where the ‘public sphere’ and the ‘political’ are continually (re-)constructed (see Giumbelli 2008; Mapril and Blanes 2013; Birman this volume; Montero this volume).

From this perspective, it is important that we do not conceive secularism as a regime that only involves the ‘domestication’ of the religious sphere. This may occur, and indeed arguably is occurring in the case of Islam in Europe, where secularism as a discursive formation and disciplinary practice reveals manifold moral claims and political effects, rendering many as illegitimate citizens (Bowen 2007; Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2008; Fernando 2014). However, we can also discern other situations in which the religious groups, even those that are produced as ‘minorities’, participate in the conception and enactment of ‘religion’ in the public sphere. For instance, in Brazil today, we cannot ignore how Evangelical leaders are actively engaging in the processes of regulation of religious freedom, while in Portugal it is important to acknowledge the role of several minority religious groups in the creation of a regime for the ‘religious’ in which many are able to claim a place for themselves in the public domain comparable to the Catholic Church (Mapril 2014). These actors mobilize secularizing arguments not necessarily based on the privatization of religion (*laïcité*) but on the conviviality and pluralism of the religious landscape in contemporary Portuguese society that should imply equal treatment in relation to the state (Mapril 2014). In other words, the state is not a homogeneous institution with common ideas and practices and, consequently, it does not act from a necessarily determinant position. This is why the question of normativity and the enveloping of the religious sphere require an analysis from the perspective of social definitions of ‘the religious’. Asad and others demonstrated that such definitions are historical and thus it follows that they are not the same everywhere, nor are they ‘protected’ from reformulations. Such definitional processes are the outcome of the mutating relationships between state, religious agents and other social segments (such as media, as is shown by Frigerio this volume).

A second aspect that we consider in this book is in what sense do religious movements themselves relate to—and thereby produce—such secularities and normative arguments? Subjectivation implies not only an individual that is subjected, through techniques of government and collective moralities, but also the one who wants to affirm him or herself in a certain way, through ‘techniques of self’ (Foucault 1997). Thus, the ethical subject is associated also to the work one does on oneself. Now can we consider secularism and a secular hermeneutics as a technique of self? This is of course intimately related with relations of power but can also be seen as a way of circumventing restrictions and constraints of several sorts. What if religious groups are themselves contributing to the expansion and redefinition of secular imaginaries? For instance, Ruba Salih (2009) shows how Italian Muslim women are reproducing secular arguments and perspectives on religiosity in a context where they are frequently accused of being ‘bad’ citizens due to their unsecularized religiosity. Against such ‘moral panics’, Salih’s interlocutors are frequently engaged in the reproduction of a concrete religious subjectivity in the general context of specific citizenship claims. Another example is the research of Nadia Fadil (2011) on unveiling Muslim women in Belgium. Her argument is that non-veiling Muslim women reveal a complex agency that goes beyond ‘forced unveiling’. They have developed technologies of self that are tied to the formation of a particular moral self, an ethical subject, in which unveiling assumes a central importance. Both these examples reveal, as Nadia Fadil argues (2011), the complex ways in which secular normativity is inhabited, reproduced and/or contested—beyond, on one hand, the notorious processes of ‘heresy’ and ‘blasphemy’ (Giumbelli 2003) or, on the other, accusations of false consciousness—and how several secular discursive regimes become part and parcel of the making of distinct citizenship projects, subjectivities, and claims (Birman this volume). These are not simply dominated subjects but are themselves actors, within the existing constraints, in the creation of plural political regimes that will recognize them as legitimate citizens. This is in part what Virtudes Téllez Delgado describes in her contribution to this volume, where she discerns the generational dimension of this subjectivity, in particular among young Spanish Muslims.

Finally, in what ways do these secular normativities and religious subjectivities condition and (re-)produce relationships between different social groups, particularly in relation to sensitive issues such as migration, public health, citizenship, rituals and gender equality, among others? In what ways do the subjective and the normative engage across diverse traditions

and movements of allegiance? These are some of the questions that the different contributions to this volume tackle ethnographically.

The objective of this book is thus to address some of these empirical complexities and ambiguities by suggesting concrete angles that critically address the mutating relationships identified above.

THE CHAPTERS

These themes are addressed in 13 chapters organized in two sections. The first is entitled *Producing subjects and publics* and gathers seven contributions about the contentions, debates, and the making of secular and religious subjectivities and publics.

In Chap. 2, Maité Maskens explores the cultivation of secular selves and bodies of state agents in charge of implementing the fight against so-called marriages of convenience in Brussels. The argument is that civil servants operate a shift between the official goal of preventing cheaters who use marriage as a way to cross European boundaries, and the ‘civilizational project’ at work by selecting ‘modern’ couples and rejecting those somehow perceived as ‘archaic’. Throughout this chapter, it becomes clear how at the core of the professional routines of the civil servants there are two contradictory activities: (i) the ideal of neutrality and the principle of impersonality at the core of the secular state; and (ii) the concern and concrete implementation of the fight against ‘marriages of convenience’ (especially directed at Muslims).

Anastasios Panagiotopoulos (Chap. 3) aims at shedding a comparative light between Afro-Cuban religiosity, secularism as a theory, and Cuban revolutionary practice. The point of departure is the apparent paradox of how religious traditions can exhibit secular-friendly attitudes that may equal or, even, surpass those of the political regime it is surrounded by. The author proposes a broad distinction between ‘secularism-as-substance’ and ‘secularity-as-a-relation’ and argues that a ‘secular-friendly’ environment is not necessarily the sole outcome of its most immediate actor, the state, and with overt ideological claims of sorts but may derive from other interacting agents, even religious ones. More crucially than ‘secularism-as-substance’, within the ‘space’ of ‘secularity-as-a-relation’, a vital room of ‘indifference’ is also necessary, and this may refer to both political and religious actors.

Chap. 4 takes us to Barcelona, where Guillermo Martín Sáiz argues that the Islamic movement *Tablighi Jama'at*, of Deobandi inspiration, calls into question the hegemonic secular segmentation of time and space dedicated

to religion and daily activities. Working hours emerge as a central domain for proselytizing and the cultivation of everyday life virtues and ethical self-making. Thus, the *Tablighi Jama'at* produces a creative way of experiencing Islam while engaging in city life, challenging hitherto dominant orders of secular governance and representation of Islam in Spain.

In Chap. 5, Virtudes Tellez Delgado shows how as a consequence of the terrorist attacks of 11 March 2004, in Madrid, security forces began looking at Muslims and Islamic bodily images with suspicion, which became an excuse to take action against demonstrations of religiosity in the public sphere. As a consequence, Muslims were encouraged to follow the path of secularism, with its invisibilization of all religious appearance or content in the civil public sphere. For young Spanish Muslims, who are the subject of this study, this context led to an increasing feeling of vulnerability and insecurity while, simultaneously, leading to the emergence of counter-narratives about being a 'good' citizen. This chapter reveals how bodies are spaces where social tensions converge and are represented.

Addressing a similar theme but in a different context, Nella van den Brandt's Chap. 6 focuses on 2014–2015 instances of Flemish public renderings of the 'Jihadi threat', and explores counter-voices emerging from small initiatives in civil society. The counter-voices respond to discursive formations on 'the Muslim question'—in which Muslims and Islam are produced as a radical alterity and a threat to 'Western cultures and societies', whatever these might mean—and as such create space for the construction of various forms of agency, religious/secular subjectivity, morality, and citizenship, for Muslims as well as non-Muslims. Moreover, the counter-voices are considered as local actors of religious critique/theory of religion.

In the last contribution of this section, Emerson Giumbelli and Rodrigo Toniol raise the issue of progressive and pluralistic recognition of spirituality as a health issue. Since the 1980s, medical scientists have engaged in that theme, global government agencies such as the World Health Organization included the thematic in its official documents, and health care policies have mentioned spirituality as a permanent dimension of primary care. Each of these formulations has legitimized, at different levels, the idea: 'spirituality is health'. Is this process also a new way to institutionalize the relationship between state and religion? This chapter presents reflections about the way in which the idea of spirituality, in healthcare settings, have configured a special frame for religion in the public space.

The second section is entitled *Placing the secular and the religious* and gathers six chapters that ethnographically and theoretically analyze the diverse places where the secular and the religious are made.

In Chap. 8, Oskar Verkaaik and Pooyan Tamimi Arab engage with the emergent ethnographic study of secular practice by focusing on how local bureaucracies manage Muslim public presence in the Netherlands, particularly the construction of new mosques and the amplifying of the Muslim call to prayer. Whereas the public debate about mosque issues is often dominated by what we call a ‘culturalist’ or ‘nativist’ form of secularism, in practice bureaucrats are often led by a ‘constitutional secularism’ that protects the constitutional rights of Dutch Muslims. Constitutional secularism is one way of tackling Islamophobia and protecting the rights of religious minorities in general. Moving beyond the critique of secularism, we show that the ethnographic study of actual secular practice remains crucially important to avoid monolithic text-based understandings of the secular.

Patrícia Birman (Chap. 9) analyzes how the secular/religious binarism came to operate in the context of the recent rise in Evangelical dominance among the urban poor in Rio de Janeiro. By focusing on this social sector, Patrícia takes it to be constituted through specific religious policies relating to distinctions and associations between practices identified as secular and religious. Her argument is, therefore, that the relations between religion, violence, and governance of the poor feed back one on the other. Policies promoting the death of ‘society’s enemies’ are linked to policies of religious, social, and moral protection, on these uncertain and slippery boundaries between good and evil, the religious and the secular, morality and sin, marginality and citizenship.

Chap. 10 (Paula Montero) seeks to demonstrate that the decline of Catholic hegemony over civil society in Brazil is related to the progressive expansion of a reflexive attitude that considers religions as an object of debate and dispute. Her argument is that to understand the meanings attributed to this concept in the Brazilian case, and the morality that sustains it, it is essential to examine some categories present in practices of justification that support the public debate against intolerance in the recent period.

Gustavo Morello’s (Chap. 11) contribution proposes (a) to explore the process of religious transformations due to modernization in Argentina from World War II to the election of Jorge Bergoglio as pope, (b) to identify some features of ‘transformed’ Catholicism, meaning the lived religion of Argentinean Catholics; and (c) to speculate how this specific background may affect Francis’ tenure at the Vatican. In the particular context of Latin America, many Catholic believers (laypersons, ministries, bishops) in different countries became involved in the processes of social transformations and even fostered revolutionary movements. Argentine

Catholics' positions toward their country's social changes were shaped by their political context as well as by the transformation of religious identity. Gustavo highlights here some events and transformations in Argentinean Catholicism that, according to his argument, may provide an interpretative framework for Francis' tenure as head of the Catholic Church.

Luis Pais Bernardo's contribution (Chap. 12) focuses on spirituality, secular formations, state-religion relations, and lived religion by looking at spiritual/religious assistance in Portuguese hospitals. Through participant observation and semi-structured interviews with hospital chaplains, Bernardo shows an emerging understanding of spirituality as a comprehensive theory of mind and society supported by Christian theology. These actors employ cognitive and social resources in order to make sense of their daily experience within hospitals and toward their legitimation as caregivers in complex organizations. They look beyond morals to ethics and beyond sacramental to relational performance. In this sense, these are postsecular strategies, as they seek to deconstruct the religious and the secular as standing in binary opposition. However, these are also strategies which stem from very specific organizational contexts; it will be argued throughout the chapter that healthcare secularity is densely packed with challenges to religious care and forces religious representatives to swerve forcefully in search of identity.

In the last chapter, Alejandro Frigerio argues that secularism has a strong, often overlooked, spatial dimension that involves the control and/or invisibilization of certain religious practices in socially significant places where they should not be present. The study of the expansion of Pentecostal churches in the city of Buenos Aires, during the decade of 1980, shows how their visibilization was accompanied by newspaper articles that found this new presence odd and a symptom of urban decay, belying the prevalent ideal image of the city as 'European', 'white', and 'Catholic'. The chapter contends that religious regulation, a necessary feature of secularism, has social as well as governmental dimensions and that public space is an important social arena where it must be enforced.

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Secular Selves and Bodies: The Case of State Agents in Charge of Implementing the Fight against Marriages of Convenience in Brussels

Maité Maskens

During the workshop, I told to your colleague who worked on Swiss civil registrars [Anne Lavanchy] that for me, before, in my head, the anthropologist studied primitive tribes of remote Africa. I never considered that they could study us!

(Field notes, informal discussion with the Head department of Cityville,¹ Brussels, 6 March 2013)

INTRODUCTION

The quote above describes the surprise of a civil servant I met on fieldwork when she realized she was the “target” of anthropological attention. She shared her astonishment after her participation in a workshop I organized

¹ Cityville or Steenzeel are fictive names for existing municipalities of Brussels in order to preserve anonymity.

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in Brussels,² where the practice of bureaucrats involved in migration policies was under anthropological and associative scrutiny. This consideration reflects the challenge taken by anthropologists doing ethnography on contemporary objects at the core of industrialized societies in the last decades (see Schwartzman 1993). This shift also reflects a change of anthropological focus from the fascination for the margins (the “exotic”, the poor, the vulnerable or the victim) to the study of sites of power. Those ethnographies had the merit of highlighting the informal dimensions of the daily functioning of the state and to question the discrepancies between the official goals of policies and their concrete results. In the case I studied in Brussels, of the implementation of the fight against marriages of convenience, I argue that civil servants operate a shift between the official goal of preventing “cheaters” who use marriage as a way to cross European boundaries, and the “civilizational project” at work by selecting “modern” couples and rejecting those somehow perceived as archaic. It is thus not unusual to observe administrative employees diverting the legislation on marriage of convenience to refuse Islamic arranged marriage on the grounds that the concerned parties are ignorant of each other and/or the fact that union is the result of a “fast” process.

In this chapter,³ I propose to explore the possibility of such diversion from the civil servant point of view. In this sense, this is also an essay on bureaucratic power in a secular setting. I will develop a twofold reflection on the concrete application of two apparently contradictory activities at the core of the professional routines of the civil servants I worked with. The first is about the vicissitudes, the banality and the difficulty to concretize the ideal of neutrality and the principle of impersonality, the Weberian landmarks of bureaucracy and gatekeepers of the secular ideal. The second reflection concerns the concrete implementation of the fight against marriages of convenience as a particular case study where judgments arising from the emotional economy of the face-to-face encounter are in many ways determinant. If the secular is “a concept that brings together certain behaviors, knowledges, and sensibilities in modern life” (Asad 2003, 25), if it is a way of thinking “the human”, what is its particular content in bureaucratic encounter oriented through the

²The day before Saint Valentine’s Day of 2013, I organized a one-day conference (Journée d’étude L’amour et ses frontières : la régulation étatique des mariages transnationaux, Université Libre de Bruxelles, 13 February 2013, <http://is.ulb.ac.be/uploads/pdf/pour%20Agenda/2013/affiche%20JE13fev13.pdf>) in an effort to establish a dialogue between scholars from different European countries and associative groups working on cross-border marriages. I invited people from my fieldwork (administrative employees and policemen specialized in these cases) to be part of the public (see Maskens 2013).

³Thanks to Nadia Fadil for her generous comments on a previous version of this chapter.

verification of the authenticity of the intimate life of a partner requesting for marriage in Brussels? To answer this question, I'll respond to the invitation of the editors of this volume by focusing on the concrete, the subjective, and intersubjective dimensions of secularity.

THE BELGIAN REGULATION OF LOVE AND ITS BOUNDARIES

In Belgium, since 1999, the municipal councilor in charge of marriage ceremonies has been vested with a new power: he or she can postpone or refuse to officiate a wedding if he or she suspects what is popularly known as a “marriage of convenience,” that is, a marriage contracted between two individuals who transaction money for a residency permit. Legislative authorities hope this initiative will offer a response to a situation perceived as problematic: the Ministry of Justice provided statistics revealing that during the previous ten years, at least 3000 people had contracted marriages of convenience (Foblets and Vanheule 2006, 265). The legislative change put emphasis on the active role of the municipal councilor in charge of marriages to prevent sham marriages. According to the article 146bis of the Belgian civil code introduced in 1999, “there is no marriage if, even though formal consent has been given in preparation for, it emerges from a combination of circumstances that the intention of at least one of the spouses is obviously not the creation of a lasting life community, but aims only at the procurement of a residence permit, tied to the spousal status”.⁴ The law on marriages of convenience is accompanied by a memorandum detailing the elements that indicate that the marriage may not be based on the aim of creating a lasting, life-long community.⁵

⁴ My translation.

⁵ An administrative circular is provided to help employees in their task of assessing fake marriages. Elements that may indicate a sham marriage include:

The parties do not understand each other or have difficulties in having a dialogue, or appeal to an interpreter;

The parties never met before the marriage;

One of the parties lives with somebody else in a long-term arrangement;

The parties do not know the name or the nationality of the other;

One of the future spouses does not know where the other one works;

There is an obvious difference between the statements of the two parties regarding the circumstances of their meeting;

A sum of money is promised to contract the marriage; One or both are engaged in prostitution; There is the intervention of an intermediary; A significant difference in age.

In the Brussels civil registrar offices where I did my fieldwork,⁶ suspicion appeared at several moments of the assessment process, usually beginning with the first encounter of the fiancés (or couple married abroad in quest for recognition) with state representatives. It was selectively directed toward two types of couples: firstly, those perceived as “mixed” because they include a Belgian citizen—or, to be more precise, a Belgian citizen with no recognized migratory past—and a non-EU-citizen and thus considered “ill-matched” because of an implicit norm of racialized homogamy (Lavanchy 2013a, b).

In this case, the broader context of suspicion based on a perceived polarization between the wealthy North and the poor South affects the daily work of agents. The invention of the French term “mariage gris”⁷ encapsulates this generalized suspicion because it implies the existence of a “self-interested” southern migrant deluding a naïve European citizen by simulating affection in order to gain legal status in Belgium.

Secondly, suspicion can be directed toward unions between a Belgian citizen of immigrant descent and a partner from his/her country of ori-

⁶ My fieldwork took place in various civil registrar offices in Brussels, between January 2012 and June 2013. My participant observation and field descriptions included administrative procedures, 15 two-hour interviews with couples wanting to get married, and interviews with 15 members of staff in these offices. I also conducted interviews with ten deputy town mayors of various Brussels civil registrar offices. My work involved the examination of various types of stored data, meetings with specialized police, interviews with lawyers representing municipalities, and the examination of trial proceedings of a typical “grey marriage.” The study was enriched with interviews with the founder of a non-governmental organization called “Trapped Hearts” which defends the rights of the victims of such grey marriages and also interviews with Belgian citizens who have engaged in sham marriages.

⁷ H el ene Neveu Kringelbach notes that it was in 2007 that the French Integration Minister Eric Besson coined the term “grey marriage” to describe a union between a French partner marrying for love and a foreign partner marrying solely for “migratory purposes” (2013, 1). She adds that this “term has since made its way into parliamentary debates, legal texts and bureaucratic practices, and the public debate around the notion has contributed to the emergence of a generalized climate of suspicion towards French-foreign couples”. The term spread in Belgium at the same period and also fuels the climate of suspicion regarding migrants in this country. This term federates civil registrar officers who gathered years earlier alerted by reports of abuse of some of their colleagues. To explain their initial need for collective meetings, many of them related the cases of young women coming in their office shortly after their wedding, crying because they realize their partner only wanted to obtain residence permit. Civil registrar officers base their commitment on forms of “rescue narrative” (Bracke 2012) that gives their ungrateful task of inspector of affects an extra touch of soul. Those meetings prefigured a change of legislation since 1999 through preventive measures and punitive means since early 2006 (Foblets and Vanheule 2006, 264).