

# WHAT COMES AFTER THE CRITIQUE OF SECULARISM?

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CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF RELIGION  
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## PANEL FOUR

### **3:30-5:00: The Future of Secular Studies:**

**Moderator:** David Marno

#### **Joseph Blankholm, “Bridging the Gap in Secular Studies”**

Secular studies has evolved from two distinct fields that have yet to merge coherently. In the disciplines of Political Science, Anthropology, and Religious Studies, scholars are more likely to focus on secularism as “religion-making,” to borrow the titular language of Mandair and Dressler’s edited volume. This field has developed from the different, though related critiques of secularism made by Talal Asad and Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini. In this usage, secularism is a name for the legal regime and set of colonial and neocolonial practices that have delimited religion for the purposes of governmentality. The other wing of secular studies has emerged largely out of sociology, though increasingly history, and it focuses more squarely on secular people, and by extension, their ontological and epistemological commitments. Both of these fields remain strangely divorced from the Marxian tradition and its foundations in Epicureanism. In this paper, I sketch a reconciliation of the two wings of secular studies by way of a recovery of Marx and his philosophy.

#### **Joanna Tice-Jen, “Reclaiming Religion’s Body: Saba Mahmood’s Materialist Political Ethics”**

Over the last several decades, political theory has witnessed the co-evolution of two robust discourses around issues of morality and metaphysics. This talk is part of a larger project which interrogates the intermingling of political ethics and post-secular thought—specifically the way some postsecular thinkers forge a connection between religion, ethics, and politics through a sacred perspective on the body and the material world.

While post-secularism and political ethics have intermingled for quite some time--in the work of Charles Taylor, Talal Asad, William Connolly, and Roxanne Euben, for example--in the talk I will argue that the discussion of ethics in contemporary theoretical works on religion only develops fully when an emphasis on the body or the material world accompanies that discussion. Saba Mahmood’s *Politics of Piety* and Jane Bennett’s *The Enchantment of Modern Life* are two examples of works of political theory that engage both ethics and religion in a major way through an attention to the body and the material universe. Mahmood draws out the political

implications of a religious subject formation that is both ethical and bodily at the same time, while Bennett develops her ethics of “enchanted materialism” in response to the Weberian contention that secularism breeds disenchantment. I argue that these thinkers’ re-conception of the subject along bodily and materialist lines works to reclaim metaphysics and ethics as the conceptual partners of politics. The emphasis in the talk will be on Mahmood’s work on religion, with the larger project framing my interrogation.

In the process of exploring and describing this new materialist path to a political ethics, the larger project asks: 1) Does the comparison of Mahmood and Bennett’s ethical visions provide a congruous view of political ethics that can serve as a model for other religio-political theory moving forward, or are their paths too divergent? 2) If there is such a congruous view, can it be described as a sort of pantheistic ethics, and if so, how might that pantheism re-orient political theory as a field, especially in regards to its old touchstones of democracy and liberalism? 3) Does the presence of a secular-rooted materialism at the heart of this political ethics make “post-secularism” an inaccurate designation for their work and the work of others who follow from it? 4) Taking the example of American evangelicalism, which was the subject of my dissertation, how well does this ethico-materialist politics work as a rubric for investigating that movement?

### **Jerilyn Sambrooke, “A Dangerous Certainty: The Spectre of Religious Fanaticism in Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead* Trilogy”**

To investigate the perceived threat that religious fanaticism poses to secularism is to open up an inquiry into perceptions, fears, and anxieties about the bounds of religion in a secular age. Insofar as contemporary English-language novelists engage in such inquiries, their work is often read in relation to “9/11 fiction.” In an effort to step away from tendencies in this field to conflate the figures of the terrorist and the religious (i.e. Islamic) fanatic, my work analyzes a range of figurations of religious fanaticism within contemporary fiction. How is religion coupled with fanaticism across these texts? How does the figure of the religious fanatic generate peculiar challenges for the novel form?

This paper explores these questions through Marilynne Robinson’s trilogy—*Gilead* (2004), *Home* (2008), and *Lila* (2014)—set in Gilead, Iowa at the beginning of the civil rights movement. Haunting these novels is a “bodacious” old abolitionist preacher, and as one character notes, “there was a lot of what you might call fanaticism around here in the early days.” Robinson’s novels do not so much recast fanaticism within the terms of the abolition movement but rather reflect on how this form of fanaticism reverberates, fades, and lingers through time and across generations. How does a person live alongside and in the wake of such a fanatical figure? What kinds of demands does such fanaticism make on a town, on a family, on successive generations? As I attend particularly to the temporal dimension of the trilogy’s figuration of religious fanaticism, I reflect on how these novels prompt us to reconsider the intersection of religion and fanaticism. Robinson’s trilogy, I suggest, prompts us to meditate on the profound loss America blindly endured when a generation of religious fanatics died. What, we might ask, are the implications of such a (forgotten) loss for understanding contemporary American secularism?

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## FOURTH PANEL BIOGRAPHIES

**Joseph Blankholm** as Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. His research focuses on atheism and secularism, primarily in the United States. He has published articles and chapters on local nonbeliever communities, the history of secular humanism, the problem of religious indifference, and the advantages that a polysemous secular affords secular lobbyists. He is currently at work on a manuscript about organized nonbelievers in the United States and their awkward, generative relationship with religion.

**Joanna Tice-Jen** recently completed her Ph.D. in Political Science (political theory and American politics) at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, where she also earned a certificate in Women's Studies. Her areas of interest include political theory, American political thought, feminist and queer theory, and most recently, religious thought as political thought. Tice-Jen's dissertation, titled *Thine Is the Kingdom: The Political Thought of 21st Century Evangelicalism*, explores the revival of America's largest religious group over the last 15 years. This year she is working as a Postdoctoral Editorial Fellow with The Graduate Center's Committee for the Study of Religion, serving as a co-editor (along with Bryan Turner and Yuri Contreras-Vejar) of an edited volume provisionally titled *Exploring Happiness: Historical and Comparative Analyses on Human Fulfillment*. Recently, her work has appeared in *The Immanent Frame* and *Oxford Bibliographies in Political Science*.

**Jerilyn Sambrooke** is currently completing a PhD in Rhetoric at the University of California, Berkeley. Her dissertation investigates figurations of religious fanaticism within 21<sup>st</sup> century fiction. By investigating the conceptual problematics that emerge at the site of the apparent excess (or lack) attributed to the fanatic, this project asks how approaching the contemporary novel in terms of religious fanaticism (rather than fundamentalism, terrorism, atheism, or religion more generally) reorients our study of the novel, particularly in relation to the secular. Prior to arriving at UC Berkeley, Jerilyn studied and taught at universities in Canada, the United Kingdom, Lithuania, Turkey, and Colorado.

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