

Issue Editorial Team

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Nav Haq is Senior Curator at M HKA—Museum of Contemporary Art Antwerp—and guest curator of the Göteborg International Biennial for Contemporary Art 2017. Haq was previously Exhibitions Curator at Arnolfini, Bristol, and Curator at Gasworks, London. He has curated many solo exhibitions with artists, including Hassan Khan, Cosima von Bonin, Shilpa Gupta, Imogen Stidworthy, Hüseyin Bahri Alptekin and Otobong Nkanga. Group exhibitions have included *Superpower: Africa in Science Fiction* (2012) together with Al Cameron; *Museum Show*—a historical survey of (semi-fictional) museums created by artists (2011); and *Contour Biennial 2007*, Mechelen, Belgium. At M HKA he co-curated the group exhibition *Don't You Know Who I Am? Art After Identity Politics* together with Anders Kreuger in 2014, and he curated the interdisciplinary exhibition *Energy Flash: The Rave Movement* in 2016. In 2012 he was recipient of the Independent Vision Award for Curatorial Achievement, awarded by Independent Curators International, New York.

Dr Ola Sigurdson is Professor of Systematic Theology at the Department of Literature, History of Ideas, and Religion, University of Gothenburg, Sweden. He finished his doctorate in 1996 at Lund University and is the author of more than twenty books in Swedish and English. His interests lie in theology and contemporary continental philosophy, theology of culture and arts, political theology and medical humanities. His most recent books in English are *Theology and Marxism in Eagleton and Žižek: A Conspiracy of Hope* (2012), and *Heavenly Bodies: Incarnation, the Gaze and Embodiment in Christian Theology* (2016). He has been a Research Fellow at Uppsala, Cambridge, and Princeton universities, as well as Guest Researcher in Nagoya, Stellenbosch, Rome and Oxford. He is also active as a culture journalist in the Swedish media.

Introduction

This issue of PARSE JOURNAL, developed in collaboration with Nav Haq (Curator) and Stina Edblom (Artistic Director) of the Göteborg International Biennial for Contemporary Art 2017 (GIBCA 2017), comes at a critical time for European social and political attitudes within a global context, in which many attitudes and principles are fundamentally being challenged. In particular, the very European truce between secular humanism and religious traditions has come under increasing scrutiny, challenged both from within and without. While there may certainly be good reasons to challenge any particular societal configuration, the question inevitably arises how human beings of different beliefs, or no particular belief and of different modes of life should be able to live together in peace and with a sense of equality, rights and freedom. This is the question of secularity. The subject for this issue of PARSE is taken directly from Nav Haq's curatorial thematic for GIBCA 2017 that he has been developing throughout 2016 and 2017, titled *WheredoIendandyoubegin—On Secularity*, and is launched to coincide with the opening of the biennial to act as part-catalogue, part-contextual (re)source and part-imaginative interpolation in tandem with events that will be held throughout the biennial.

From early discussions within the editorial team, it became clear that, alongside the high-profile flashpoints of violence, misunderstanding, anger and despair caused by events in Europe over the past decade, including the killing of editors at the *Charlie Hebdo* offices in Paris in 2015, the fatwas issued against *Jyllands-Posten* for the publication of cartoons perceived to be blasphemous in 2005, the attacks by Anders Breivik on the island of Utøya in 2011, the recent suicide attacks in Brussels, London and Manchester, alongside the continued aggressive policies by Anglo-European governments and their agencies in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Somalia, Kurdistan and Syria, and the rise of right-wing nationalist and identitarian movements, the idea that the early-twentieth century is a time dominated by a consensualised secular humanism needs to be radically disturbed. Secularity itself needs to be negotiated not simply from the hermetic perspective of the Euro-American world, where it is broadly understood to be hegemonic, but from the perspectives from which belief offers spiritual and social freedom rather than the threat of persecution. As Ola Sigurdson points out in our editorial discussion, many confusions arise between secularism and secularity: "Secularism is a view of life which means that society or state shouldn't contain religion. Secularity is a condition of society. To speak of secularity is not necessarily something normative." In this issue, secularity is raised as a topic apropos questions about a space for negotiation between different modes of life, not as a particular world view or a political doctrine.

Such troubled territory is complex in the context of both an art biennial and Gothenburg—an apparently bourgeois city on the West coast of Sweden with a strong working class history, a lengthy trading history and a concomitant and still very present history of ethnic and class division. In the discussion carried out between us in this issue that serves as an extended editorial, we grapple with this context, along with the cautionary question of what is to be done, said, produced, by artists and curators within such conditions. As Haq points out in the discussion, there is a long history of visual culture prompting accusations of blasphemy and idolatry due to provocation, naivety and sometimes through new social sensitivities arising. Contemporary art, it seems, has

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Derrida, Jacques. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*. trans. Peggy Kamuf. London: Routledge. 1994. pp. 22-23.

its own forms of iconoclasm, but such a legacy does not simply belong to the twentieth century and the epoch of modernism. Art, design, music and craft's relation to religion is ingrained in many cultures for differing rationales; useful, observant, subservient, doxological, economic, etc. As is discussed by many contributors to this issue, the historical entanglement of secular humanisms and religious traditions means that humanism is never rid entirely of its European religious forbearance; it is haunted by religion as much as majority religion in Europe has never been rid of challenges from other modes of life, religious or otherwise. This hybridity marks the great and violently affective ambivalence of our age. Perhaps ironically, the search for mutual disambiguation, an exorcism of the ghost of the other, has given rise to a profound lack of comprehension between cultures of belief and non-belief. As Jacques Derrida asked in *Specters of Marx* (1993):

How to distinguish between two disadjustments, between the disjuncture of the unjust and the one that opens up the infinite asymmetry of the relation to the other, that is to say, the place for justice? Not for calculable and distributive justice. Not for law, for the calculation of restitution, the economy of vengeance or punishment... Not for calculable equality, therefore, not for the symmetrizing and synchronic calculability or imputability of subjects and objects, not for a rendering justice that would be limited to sanctioning, to restituting, and to doing right, but for justice as incalculability of the gift and singularity of the an-economic exposition of others.¹

In order to disambiguate a shallow narrative of "them" and "us" as the basis for religious and cultural difference, we begin this issue of *PARSE Journal* with the essay "Sealanguage: Field Notes from the Anthropocene" by philosophy and theology scholar Simone Kotva, who proposes a form of religious parsing in her ethnographic study of language, myth and belief on the Faroe islands. Spending time on the islands, Kotva studies and becomes intimate with words that, rather than "underwriting a 'savage'" ontology, demonstrate "the mental dexterity required to understand (and perhaps invent) names." She goes on: "sealanguage did not

decline because the beliefs which it presupposed had begun to erode. Rather, it had begun to decline because the practices from which it is inseparable had begun to vanish, and beliefs immaterial to sealanguage (but important to scholars) were proposed in order to make sealanguage comprehensible as an object of study." In this we understand that Kotva is pointing to the processes of study as a device which produces hierarchies of beliefs, sustained by the structure of the Anthropocene.

In his essay on "Secularisation in a Post-Secular Age", philosopher and theologian Bengt Kristensson Uggla traces a historical lineage of Northern European religion, particularly through Luther, to find "sacrality" in the secular. He moves from this to posit a question perhaps provocatively within the pages of a journal devoted to artistic research: "Just the thought that a religious room, a cathedral, could in certain situations be more tolerant, as well as accommodate a richer expanse of interpretation interests, than an artistic room, an art museum, is something that feels very challenging in our time and age. Why do we become so surprised, and maybe provoked even, of the state of things?" In "Art as an Escape from Secularity: the Maryamiyya Case", curator Klas Grinell explores the fact that in response to growing Islamophobia in the West many museums have dedicated room to new galleries for the exhibiting of Islamic art, but calls for "an islamisation of Islamic art [that] might open a space for addressing secularity." Continuing the exploration of the role and emphatic power of cultural institutions, in her article "Seeing from Secular Spaces" curator Ruba Katrib uses her experience of working with Congolese artists whose practice registers differently in different situations. She says, "The gaps between the construction of Western secular knowledge... and other forms of knowledge must be acknowledged—and without falling into the impulse to transform what is unknown into something that can easily be understood or studied through Western secular lenses."

The broader conditions of cultural production are tackled in "On the Curves of Turkish-Islamic Heritage: Understanding Turkey's Contemporary Secularity across 'Ottomania'", by PhD scholar Fahrettin Ersin Alaca. He describes how the growing power of

Turkish Islamic capital and the ensuing politicisation of consumption forces designers, artists, and architects to challenge their modernist educational background when performing professionally. Establishing the possibility of his own "internalised orientalism", Alaca says, "commodification may represent... that both Islamism and secularism, as constantly reproduced co-constitutive ideological and political positions in Turkey, are socially constructed. This construction cannot be formulated and solved in a certain and linear fashion. In addition to political and ideological affiliations, commodification incorporates a myriad of socio-cultural and politico-economic domains with no regular boundaries, but rather with interpenetration of these domains and related positions."

Artist and PhD scholar Azdeh Fatehrad looks at the momentous and controversial implications and political situatedness of Reza Shah's 1936 Unveiling Act in Iran. In "State/Religion: Rethinking Gender Politics in the Public Sphere in Iran" she analyses how one of the consequences of Shah's modernising project, which allowed for more open and progressive gender norms, which gave women access to education, work, and other opportunities, was the alienation of the vast majority of conservative Iranian families who no longer recognised the new secular public sphere they found outside their door.

Moving back and forth between mysticism and politics, the issue continues with "Differences and Sameness: Secularity in the Case of Nicholas Roerich", in which historians and curators Eszter Szakacs and Mi You explore the continued legacy of Roerich, theosophist and Buddhist; "a curious figure who rose on the ashes and ruins of multiple broken orders: the empire/transnationalism, traditionalism, religiosity and Communism, as opposed to nation-state, modernity, secularisation and liberal democracy, yet paradoxically his failures surmount the categorical limits of the latter."

Returning to the location of our own ventriloquism of secularity within a Northern European academic context, in "The Idea of the University and the Process of Secularisation" intellectual historian Thomas Karlsohn sketches the history of the development of education—and particularly university education—from a monasterial project towards a post-Enlightenment tradition

of thinking "independently". Rather than wanting to support the idea of a distinct space of education Karlsohn says, "[b]y elucidating the religious impulses that determined guiding ideas when the modern academic institutions once were established and reinforced we also better comprehend what is at stake in our own day. Moreover, the normative power of these ideas now tends to diminish and orientate us to a lower degree than before."

Interspersed throughout this special issue of PARSE Journal, five of the participating artists to GIBCA 2017 have contributed with a series of interventions. These contributions, which range from textual provocations to visual interpolations, relate to the new projects the artists have developed for the biennial. The Kingdoms of Elgaland-Vargaland (Leif Elggren & Carl Michael von Hausswolff) present a visual project on historic figures of monarchy, who in many nations embody the union of church and state. Maddie Leach looks at the phenomenon of Swedish black metal subculture, in particular the story of Jon Nödtveidt, vocalist of the band Dissection, who murdered Josef Ben Meddour in a homophobic hate-crime in Gothenburg in 1997. Francesc Ruiz's visual project depicts, via the comic-strip medium, the plurality of cosmopolitan street life, including signs of its subcultures, minorities and other modes of living, which he will also install in Gothenburg. Jonas Staal reflects on how capitalism has replaced religion as the dominant form of faith in society through an analysis of the curious mirroring between the construction of each of the world's tallest buildings and the biggest collapses in the stock exchange. Finally, Måns Wrangé and Maria Karlsson contribute an essay which discusses the recent discourse around freedom of expression and censorship, using case studies from contemporary art.

We hope that this issue of PARSE Journal provides food for thought regarding the relations between religious histories, their socio-economic and territorial foundations and contemporary visual cultures. We are delighted to be collaborating on this issue with GIBCA 2017 and believe that the biennial provides an important locus for these debates, both within Gothenburg and within its growing international context. _____