

On Secularity: Discussing the Göteborg International Biennial for Contemporary Art 2017

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Abstract

In this interview between Professor Ola Sigurdson, Nav Haq and Professor Andrea Phillips, Haq discusses his reasoning for choosing “secularity” as the theme for the biennial while Sigurdson expands on the history and politics of the term. The interview situates secularity within an artistic, curatorial and contemporary context, taking into account the biennial's location in Gothenburg.

Andrea Phillips: Ola could you define secularity in a contemporary context?

Ola Sigurdson: I think, for me the most productive definition of secularity would be a space for negotiation between different modes of life, but that is not a self-evident definition of secularity. To begin with, I think we need to distinguish between secularism and secularity. Secularism is a view of life, which means that society or the state should not contain religion. Secularity is a condition of society. To speak of secularity is not necessarily something normative.

What the secular *is* has of course changed through history. To begin with, in pre-modern or early modern Christian society, the secular wasn't opposed to religion at all. It was just a legitimate dimension of society as it was conceived. The distinction was between the secular, which meant the worldly, and the religious, which was the space of the church or religious institution.

AP: Are you talking within a European context?

OS: Absolutely, yes. You only find the concept of the secular within a Latinised Christian history. It's not necessarily a term you would find used elsewhere—even in Eastern Orthodox Christianity, for instance. The term comes from the Latin *saeculum*, which means “age”. In Swedish, “century” is *sekel*, which is roughly the same. The pre- and early modern idea of the secular was that if the church owned something and sold it to someone, say, a worldly prince, then that thing became secularised. Something changed from one status to another. It did not have an irreligious meaning. In the Catholic church you have secular priests, who are not priests who don't believe in God, it's just that they are working in the secular

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See, for instance: Eisenstadt, Shmuel. “Multiple Modernities”. *Daedalus*. Vol. 129. No. 1. 2000. pp. 1–29.

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See Arendt, Hannah. *Was ist Politik? Fragmente aus dem Nachlaß*. Second edition. Munich/Zurich: Piper. 2005. p. 9: “Politik ‘handelt von den Zusammen- und Miteinander-Sein der Verschiedenen’.”

world and not in holy orders. They don't belong to a particular monastery, for instance.

As European culture developed into modernity and high modernity, the value of the word changed, so that the secular came to be more and more opposed to the religious: if you were a secular person it meant that you were a non-religious person. Now, the way the word is used in the media is usually in opposition to religion. In some Enlightenment versions of the story of modernisation, there is a presumed correlation between modernisation and the disappearance of religion: the more “modern” a country becomes, the less religious it will become. Today the story would go more like this; the more “modern” a country becomes the more pluralistic it becomes.

The Israeli sociologist Shmuel Eisenstadt speaks of multiple modernities.¹ So there are many ways of being modern, some encompassing different kinds of religion and some not religious. In a country like Sweden, which is increasingly plural, it is hard to uphold the idea that there is only one religious option today. The religious market, so to speak, has been deregulated, since there is no longer a state church. The many religious options on the market have meant that the demand for religion is actually increasing and diversifying. This means that secularity has now taken on a different meaning, and this is where we come to my own definition: that secularity is a space for negotiation between different modes of life, some of which are religious, some not religious and some in-between. Secularity is not an anti-religious concept in this way, whereas secularism is. Rather it produces questions about how we should live together if we are so different. Hannah Arendt's definition of politics is how those who are different could live together in a community.² Secularity is about the problem in this definition.

AP: This is actually very contentious within and at the borders of contemporary Europe, is it not? This utopian conceptualisation of secularity and politics?

OS: Right. On the one hand, this process of secularisation means the fall of any traditional state-church regulated religion. On the other, it means the increase in some countries of state religion, which for the most part goes against plurality. Hungary comes to mind. Turkey comes to mind. Other countries too. This idea of secularity is definitively contested. In Sweden it is not contested as such, but I see a

problem in the development of a secularistic hegemony, which tries to avoid religion as much as possible and drive it out of the public sphere. This is also a threat to the idea of secularity as a space of negotiation. It looks different in the Northern part of Europe compared to the Southern part of Europe, obviously, but also different in the West and the East. So secularity is something very specific to a particular context. France, for instance, looks very different than the UK, and some parts of the UK look different than other parts of the UK, and so on. So this problem is very localised.

AP: This reminds me of the ban on the burqa and other forms of head covering in France as a state rendition of the secularisation that you're describing. In the UK, if the UK Independence Party had gained seats in the June 2017 election, they would also have banned the head scarf in public. In France we also witnessed the "burkini" crisis and ensuing disturbing enforcement of headscarf removal on women on French beaches in the summer of 2016. Nav, I know that these violent cultural moments, where the secularisation of European cultures brought about through historical patterns of migration are brought into question, are very much the context of your development of the 2017 biennial.

Nav Haq: Yes, this is absolutely part of the backdrop. I have definitely been focused on the European situation, which is also partly to avoid this bad habit that biennials have developed of attempting to speak to and for a global audience. My experiences are primarily of living in Europe, where this question of secularity somehow seems to have become even more topical in the two years since I was invited to be guest curator of the biennial on the basis of the proposal I made on this subject.

It was only since I started working on the biennial that I learnt about the Lars Vilks story.³ It made me realise that there are things that the world knows about, but there are also more localised events that create a certain climate around ideals of secularity. The burkini fiasco/regulation is one manifestation of that, where secularity itself is used as a form of violence. What is really strange is that a scenario developed in which both sides of the argument are using the exactly same argument: that a burkini ban and the freedom to wear the burkini on a beach are both about the liberation of women. It demonstrates that there is no consensus around what freedom is. This is most palpable in the USA, where for many people freedom might mean having a gun.

3 The Lars Vilks Muhammad drawings controversy began in July 2007 with a series of drawings by Swedish artist Lars Vilks that depicted the Islamic prophet Muhammad as a "roundabout dog" (a form of street installation in Sweden). Several art galleries in Sweden declined to show the drawings, citing security concerns and fear of violence. The controversy gained international attention after the Örebro-based regional newspaper *Nerikes Allehanda* published one of the drawings on 18 August as part of an editorial on self-censorship and freedom of religion. While several other leading Swedish newspapers had published the drawings already, this particular publication led to protests from Muslims in Sweden as well as official condemnations from several foreign governments including Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Egypt, and Jordan, as well as by the inter-governmental Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC). The controversy occurred about a year and a half after the *Jyllands-Posten* Muhammad cartoons controversy in Denmark in early 2006. See Wikipedia (Accessed 16-06-2017.)

4 Mahmood, Saba. "Religious Reason and Secular Affect: An Incommensurable Divide?" In *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech*. Talal Asad, Wendy Brown, Judith Butler, Saba Mahmood. Berkeley/Los Angeles, CA/London: University of California Press. 2009. pp. 64–92.

In the ever-present "state of emergency" in many nations, there is the suspension of the laws of what secularity is at a local level.

Without wanting to dwell on doom and gloom, I wanted to know what happens exactly to secularity in these crisis moments. When I started working on this project, I read a text by Ola in which he suggests that Europe is in a certain sense a religious periphery compared with the rest of the world, but in which he also unpacks the idea that belief in religion is in decline, revealing it in fact to be a myth in a global context. What has actually been happening is a pluralisation, not just in belief but also in non-belief, in different forms of how you might understand yourself as a non-believer.

AP: In the Swedish Lars Vilks scenario—as well as in the Charlie Hebdo shootings in Paris in 2015—the concept of blasphemy was strongly invoked. Blasphemy sounds very alien to the European context of pluralistic belief patterns that you suggest. And yet, the notion of blasphemy is part of legal frameworks, as far as I understand it. Is this right?

OS: Yes, in some countries. I am not an expert on blasphemy, but I think what is put in the spotlight is a particular way of understanding images that has been taken for granted in Europe. This is something that Saba Mahmood has pointed out; images don't mean the same thing to all people.⁴ I am sure you are aware of this in the art world, but this is coming from somewhere else. So definitely, there's been talk about blasphemy, which sounds alien, as you say, although it has been part of the European history. In such situations of accusations and counter-accusations, plurality suddenly erupts. There is a negotiation of power, images, gender, freedom, etc.

AP: In many European states, there are legal frameworks around racial discrimination. You can use the juridical system to punish someone who has been racist, for instance, or has demonstrated racist ideology within an institution, a school, for example. This is a contemporary form of opposing blasphemy. But, from what you say, we must also understand this as blasphemous *production* within a pluriversal perspective.

OS: There was a debate when Salman Rushdie released his book *The Satanic Verses* as to whether it was a case of double standards, in that his satire of Islam was praised in the press, whereas a satire on Juda-

ism was more controversial. There is a certain given understanding in the contemporary European consciousness, whatever that is, that religion should be something private and individual. This can no longer be taken for granted. Since 1648 and the Peace of Westphalia agreement—organised to put an end to the so-called European wars of religion and the ability of one state to interfere with the beliefs of another—we in Europe have had the idea of religious homogeneity and the rights of private belief. But today, no belief, whatever it concerns and wherever it comes from, is taken for granted in the same way it was maybe 50 years ago, or 100 years ago, or 300 years ago.

AP: You referred to Saba Mahmood’s writing on the image. Nav, you and I know that there is a long history of Anglo-European artists making provocative, blasphemous images within contemporary art. Whether it be Andres Serrano’s *Piss Christ* (1987) or Christoph Buchel’s 2015 Iceland Pavilion at the Venice Pavilion in which the artist converted a Catholic church into a mosque (*The Mosque: The First Mosque in the Historic City of Venice*), image-blasphemy can be understood in a broad sense. My impression is that your approach to the biennial is not necessarily through those kinds of images, but you’re trying to work in a slightly different way.

NH: Primarily yes. But I think it’s definitely been interesting for me to see what the parameters are and I am definitely coming across these in different ways. There will be a work we most probably won’t show because of fear from some of what response it might get.

AP: So just to be clear, it’s a work that you were going to show but you’ve decided not to show.

NH: I haven’t made that decision. I have concluded that I can’t be the person to decide not to show something, because then that becomes censorship. Unless it is for whatever practical reasons, if something is not shown it is because someone else has made that decision, and I think it’s important to discuss why that decision might have been made. I’d been really interested to exhibit a work by John Latham from the series he made called *God is Great* (1990 onwards) which, like a lot of his work, incorporate books. In this instance those books are religious; the Quran, the Torah and the Bible (the books are embedded in a shard

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See Smith, David. "Artist hit at Tate 'cowards' over band". *The Guardian*, 25 September, 2005, available online at <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2005/sep/25/arts.religion> (Accessed 2017-06-16.)

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See Andersson, Lars M. *En jude är en jude är en jude ... Representationer av "juden" i svensk skämtpress omkring 1900–1930*. Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2000.

of glass, and the glass cuts through the books). While the work has been shown regularly over the past few years in various international contexts, how people receive the work seems to have changed. The Tate in London, for example, has a work from the series and following bombings on transport in London in 2005 they took it off display without any particular known threats, as far as I am aware.

AP: The books could be understood to be détourned (to use a modernist description) or otherwise destroyed, rendered illegible, etc.

NH: Yes, but for Latham it’s really a work about energy, as well as the connections between religions. These books are containers of energy, energy of the universe, and these are prominent themes in his work. Latham belonged to a certain generation of artists who were somehow very anti-modern and looked to forms of mysticism.

When the Tate took the work off display, the Muslim Council of Great Britain was very critical about the assumptions the institution was making about how religious people might respond. Latham himself called the move ‘cowardice’.⁵ But then there have been one or two other things that have happened in other places that have only just come to light to me. So it seems that these works might never be shown again, for these reasons. This situation, I think, wouldn’t have been like that, certainly when the work was made, in the 1990s. This period of the 1990s is somehow coming up again and again in the biennial in curious ways. It seems important to reflect on the change that has happened since then. I also aim to exhibit some examples of anti-Semitic drawings and comic strips from Sweden, collated in the dissertation by Lars M. Andersson.

OS: Yes, it’s a dissertation completed in 2000 by Andersson, who is a historian, the title of which is *A Jew is a Jew is a Jew... Representations of "The Jew" in Swedish Comic Press 1900-1930s [En jude är en jude är en jude: representationer av "juden" i svensk skämtpress omkring 1900-1930]*.⁶ It contains hundreds of caricatures of Jews from the Swedish comic press between 1900 and 1930. These cartoons, which remind you of some of the cartoons in *Charlie Hebdo*, for instance, were drawn not by Nazis but by “well-meaning” people who believed that they just wanted to be funny. But it was acceptable then to draw these caricatures of Jews, stereotyping them.

NH: I am really interested to exhibit some of these, because I think they hold up a mirror to the society that created them. But of course, for some people they are very hurtful things. So there has to be a negotiation. I think there are many good reasons to exhibit them. So if they are not going to be shown, it won't be me that makes that decision. I hope we will exhibit them.

AP: I am presuming that Andersson's thesis was to highlight this as a neglected part of Swedish history and to demonstrate a criticality around it.

OS: Right, the history of anti-Semitism in Sweden.

AP: And the complex history of Sweden and National Socialism.

NH: I would probably describe these cartoons as lazy stereotypes, especially when you compare them with, say, the anti-Semitic propaganda that you would have found in Germany or other countries. They create an image of the Jew as being the polar opposite of the Swede. The Jew is caricatured as overweight, unhealthy looking, unclean, dark-haired, conniving and ripping off the innocent Swede. In this process, a Swede may create their own self-image in relation to this other presence somehow, which I think is also a very contemporary issue relating to the stronger presence of identitarianism that we have seen developing in various nations: the construction of national monoculture, or the myth of national monoculture created in relation to its supposed other.

AP: Nav, you are opposed to censorship on the grounds of potential offense caused to different religious communities as a result of exhibiting certain artworks. As a curator you won't make the decision to withdraw work from display yourself, but it might be made in the larger context of the biennial organisation, which we don't know yet.

NH: Yes, I would say that is quite possible. But I certainly have no intention to offend for its own sake, nor do I think have any of the participating artists.

AP: This puts you and the organisers in different positions of decision-making and responsibility. If we take Ola's definition of secu-

larity as a "space of negotiation" then the implication here is that such negotiation takes place at different times and involves different groups of people: it is complex but also ambiguous. The title of the biennial, *Wheredolendandyoubegin—On Secularity*, which is a title taken from a work by Shilpa Gupta, suggests your wanting to produce a more complexly ambivalent approach to these contemporary concepts of secularity that also brings us back to Ola's definition.

NH: Yes. The title is, in a way, a piece of concrete poetry, because the spaces are removed between the words. The work will also be presented next to the tramline between the city centre and Angered—a sort of "in-between space" or industrial no man's land which is quite typical for such a segregated city as Gothenburg.

AP: I'd like to dig a little bit further into this choice of title, because it evokes a very clear sense in the reader, or somebody who is approaching the biennial, of knocking certain conventional media-led discourses around secularism and religion off-centre, at the moment when they are rising within our cultures, particularly European and American cultures. To me this seems to be a clear curatorial and political decision.

NH: What I find interesting about this subject is that on the one hand, for a lot of people secularity is a very abstract thing. It's taken for granted to a certain degree. But on the other hand it's also very real, because people feel the impact of it in everyday life in one way or another. It's also a way to talk about many different things at the same time, because it touches on things from gender equality and minority rights to freedom of expression and questions of governance. The notion of secularity joins up a lot of these things.

One of the artists participating in the exhibition, Rose Borthwick, was telling me about the terms "ambiguity tolerance," and "ambiguity intolerance". I had never come across the idea before, which is about a fear of something that you find in one way or other to be ambiguous. This might be, for example, somebody's race, sexuality or gender. So you might be a racist, but actually if you see someone of mixed race it's somehow even worse for you because of the ambiguity.

OS: This may have to do with the idea of the abject as identified by Julia Kristeva. In a sense that something that is close to me but

not different from me, is actually worse than the opposite of me. I don't have to worry about that. But this is close and distant at the same time.

AP: This also has a strong psychoanalytical dimension.

OS: There is a book by Wendy Brown on tolerance, called *Regulating Aversion*, in which she exposes how the concept of tolerance is, as you say, quite problematic.⁷ Because who is tolerating whom? Tolerance exists within a power structure. So the majorities tolerate minorities, but what does it mean to say that minorities should tolerate majorities? Tolerance is, sometimes, a polite way of keeping someone away.

NH: But I think "ambiguity intolerance" also relates to people's experience of art in a strange way. Because people can get really angry if they have an ambiguous experience with a work of art.

AP: This relates to Santiago Mostyn's set of images you will be using in the publicity campaign for the biennial paired with this title *Wheredoiendandyoubegin*. In these images bodies are wrapped together and the photographic images are cropped in such a way that it is difficult to tell their race, sexuality, gender, passion, anger in the ways they relate to each other.

NH: True, true. But they are also somehow not far away from the images you get in magazines, in adverts for Calvin Klein. So they have that sort of familiarity.

AP: Can we address Gothenburg and its relationship to the concept of secularity and how that has emerged within the city itself?

OS: I think one of the interesting recent things that has happened is the inter-religious council in Gothenburg, which gained momentum after the so-called Backabranden in 1998, the fire in Backa, a disco, where a number of young people, who were predominantly Muslim, died. There was big controversy about the fire. This incentivised people to form a council of inter-religious dialogue.

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See Brown, Wendy. *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. 2006.

8
The Million Programme (*Miljonprogrammet*) was an ambitious building project undertaken by the Swedish Government between 1965 and 1974 to build a million homes to tackle the chronic housing shortage developed gradually in the country through its transformation from an agrarian to an industrialised economy over the previous century. Utopian in its planning aspect, the areas chosen for building were largely distant and segregated from town and city centres, with promised transportation links often being provided only years after the houses had been built. Due in large part to this isolation the expected level of integration of class take-up of the homes did not occur, and now the areas are often described as "ghettos" in which migrant communities have historically settled. See, for example: Ziiliacus, C.P. "A Million New Housing Units: The Limits of Good Intentions", available online at <http://www.newgeography.com/content/003811-a-million-new-housing-units-the-limits-good-intentions> (Accessed 2017-06-16.)

Religion has historically always been mixing. Christianity is basically a Jewish sect, right? It hasn't been so clear, which is which, so to speak. And in a pluralistic situation it is not obvious where one religion ends and the other begins, if we don't absolutely want those borders to be very important. I find that interesting and this is also a utopia, right? But contemporary Gothenburg is far from being a hybrid city with fluid borders between different religious groups, in any sense of the word.

AP: My impression and experience is Gothenburg is hugely racially divided and therefore, in many ways, also divided through organised religion. It is also organised through its landscapes, through the river, the port, poverty and through histories of state-building as well as such governmental initiatives as the Million Programme—all of those things feeding into this city being immensely divided.⁸

OS: Yes, you are right. But perhaps this city can draw upon a historical legacy in some way, a tradition of people coming from other countries?

AP: It is a port city, one with a history of violent and non-violent racism.

OS: It is a port city facing towards the West and so to England and Scotland. There is historically a presence of British and Dutch people here, which has made it somewhat culturally different from other parts of Sweden.

AP: I guess we need to acknowledge that there is this political tension and violent tension between the utopia of the term *Wheredoiendandyoubegin* and the realism of the divisions of the city and the violence that is meted out through image-making, etc. And I know that the biennial is dealing with the polarities of that. Art can also be accused of pedaling utopia. In the same way inter-faith centres might also be accused of pedaling utopias.

OS: On the other hand, they are actually in a very small way trying to do work towards reconciliation. They are definitely aware that they don't live in utopia. _____