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Manav Ratti's *The Postsecular Imagination* in the context of African literatures

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ABSTRACT
Manav Ratti's *The Postsecular Imagination* (2013) situates secularism and religious discourse within national and colonial contexts. His literary critical approach, which brings postcolonial critiques of nationalism to bear on the literary registration of secularism, has informed my own work in sub-Saharan African fiction. I focus on Ratti's postcolonial analysis of the secular; his conceptualization of the postsecular as an imaginative and recuperative humanist ethic that foregrounds 'powerful modes of living together in spite of the divides of religion and nation' (Ratti 2013, xviii); and finally how the Nigerian writer, Okey Ndibe, engages with the secular, religion, and the nation as flawed, incomplete projects.

KEYWORDS
Postsecularism; postcolonialism; religion; sacred; poetics; African literature; Okey Ndibe

The swearing in of President Biden, his left hand placed on a centuries-old family bible and Vice-President Harris, daughter of immigrants, palm placed upon three bibles of personal and professional significance, is a timely reminder of the ever-porous divisions of religion and power in a world made smaller and more volatile by populism and pandemic. In my first undergraduate Religious Studies lecture at the University of Cape Town, the professor, David Chidester, held up a dollar bill, explaining that the bank note signified the ongoing import of religion in public and civil life, despite secularism's purported 'domestication' of faith, as well as the complication of capital, faith, and politics: the postsecular trinity. I often return to the anecdote of the dollar bill as evidence that neither religious discourse nor secularism sufficiently attend to the concatenations of contemporary lives, let alone those lived in the postcolony.

Manav Ratti's monograph *The Postsecular Imagination* (2013), addresses these questions by situating secularism and religious discourse within national and colonial contexts. In doing so, Ratti thwarts the simple conflation of secularism with European modernity by demonstrating the historical and socio-political contingency of the ideas and practices exported to British colonies. Ratti's literary critical approach, which brings postcolonial critiques of nationalism to bear on the literary registration of secularism, has informed my own work in sub-Saharan African contexts (Cumpsty 2023). I focus on Ratti's postcolonial analysis of the secular; his conceptualization of the postsecular as an imaginative and recuperative humanist ethic that foregrounds 'powerful modes of living together in spite of the divides of religion and nation' (Ratti 2013,

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xviii); and finally how the Nigerian writer, Okey Ndibe, engages with the secular, religion, and the nation as flawed, incomplete projects.

Ratti emphasizes the spatial and temporal determinants of secularism. The influence of European secularization and British colonial bureaucracy pitting Hindu against Muslim lead Nehru and the Indian National Congress Party to 'adopted secularism as the official state ideology of independent India in order to promote not an irreligious or anti-religious state, but a state that was non-sectarian' (Ratti 2013, 10). Given ongoing religious violence in India, the secular promise of pluralist toleration appears to have failed. The humanist ethic of postsecularism is, perhaps, best underscored by Habermas's question of post-1945 Germany: 'How should we see ourselves as members of a post-secular society and what must we reciprocally expect from one another in order to ensure that in firmly entrenched nation states, social relations remain civil despite the growth of a plurality of cultures and religious world views?' (Habermas 2008, 21).

Similar spatio-temporal vectors are required to situate secularism, and therefore post-secularism, within African contexts. Nigeria, for instance, is a religiously and ethnically heterogeneous country, which, like India, was under British colonial rule prior to independence in 1960. The 1999 Nigerian constitution, the fifth revision, prohibits the government and state from adopting a religion and guarantees 'every person the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion as well as the right to freedom from discrimination on grounds … of religion,' yet it also 'enjoins the state to provide facilities for, among other things, religious life' (Ogbu 2014, 1). So while the government cannot adopt a religion, the state is responsible for furnishing support for religious life. Such provisions are significant, given that there are 373 identifiable ethic groups, with related spiritual and cultural diversity (Yesufu 2016, 2). Christianity and Islam are the two dominant religions, with traditional religions maintaining a large presence, and each takes a different position on religion and the state. While Christian groups tend to support the separation of religion and the state, Muslim groups favor governance by Sharia law (Ogbu 2014, 1). Within a single nation made up of hundreds of distinct cultural, religious, ethnic and political identities it is little wonder such a stark dichotomy exists, especially given the legacies of colonialism and postcolonial nationalism. For as Momoh Lawani Yesufu indicates, British colonists used religious leaders, 'chiefs and Emirs,' for political and economic ends (Yesufu 2016, 5), following the logic of divide and conquer.

One need look no further than the Abuja skyline to see the pluralist democratic demands left by 'colonialism's durable presence' (Stoler 2016, 9). Here the National Church and National Mosque dominate prospect of Nigeria's capital city. Writing about Nigerian publics and their religions, Rudolf P. Gaudio explains that 'these impressive architectural monuments symbolize the crucial place of organized religion in the postcolonial Nigerian state's efforts at forging a unified national public' (Gaudio 2014, n. pag.). While Nigeria's public discourse is dominated by Christian/Islamic oppositions, Gaudio asserts that negotiating the tensions between these transnational, but locally embedded religions offers 'many Nigerians a kind of transnational citizenship that complements and even reinforces national belonging – a sense of oneself as Nigerian.' While pluralism is a founding principle of the kind of political secularism evinced in the

constitution, religious beliefs and affiliations are a powerful source of identification that can either bolster or undermine national belonging.

The confining of religious belief and practice to private domains that Charles Taylor identifies as a fundamental feature of North Atlantic secular societies (Taylor 2007, 2), simply does not have the same applicability in the postcolony where the British used religious and ethnic differences as political fodder. As such, the ideologies of secularism must be, as Ratti observes, contextualized within spatio-temporal coordinates and considered within the oppressive and extractive logics of colonial rule. In this light, the critical insufficiency of 'religion' and 'the secular' is all the more pressing and the need for the analytical and imaginative promise of postsecular thinking more urgent.

While the term post-secular originates from Jürgen Habermas's well-known essay 'Religion in the Public Sphere,' where he observes the emergence of 'new' spiritual movements, the increase in global migration bringing religions into contact, and although changing, that 'traditional' religions are very much present in the public sphere, and in many peoples' private lives (Habermas 2008, 1). Debates about the postsecular (Asad et al. 2009; Caputo 2001, 2013; Mahmood 2005; Mufti 2013) are often focused on a resurgence of religious fundamentalism, especially Islamic, and the threat this poses to Euro-American liberal democracies. In a later dialogue with Joseph Ratzinger, then-Pope Benedict XVI, Habermas argues for an ethical duty of religious and non-religious citizens to determine together the boundaries and functions of the religious and secular, suggesting that this is possible through religio-cultural translation (Ratzinger and Habermas 2007, 47). Thus, like Asad's more expansive explanation of the secular as a concept that helps to explain behaviors and ideologies in modern society (Asad 2003, 27), the postsecular is best understood to exist, as Graham Huggan explains, 'on the knife-edge between skepticism and idealism, much in the spirit of postcolonialism and postmodernism; and to clear a space that allows, as they do, for a continual displacement of the conceptual categories on which all ideologies depend' (Huggan 2010, 766). Similarly, Michael Kaufmann opines that 'postsecularism attempts to qualify' master narratives in a number of ways, by

> (a) complicating our understanding of the terms 'religious' and 'secular' by deepening our awareness of the ideological, cultural, and historical valences of those terms; and (b) complicating our understanding of the relationships between the religious and the secular by moving beyond any model that posits too stark a binary opposition and towards models based on co-existence and co-creation. (Kaufmann 2009, 68–69)

Under this formulation postsecular literary criticism is grounded in the deconstruction of master narratives and the identification of the instability of binary oppositions, both of which are also foundational to African and postcolonial studies. However, unlike postmodern and postcolonial modes of analysis, which are predominantly secular, postsecular criticism foregrounds the congeries of religious and secular spheres. The postsecular ought not to become its own master narrative, but should be understood, as 'an epistemological and methodological reorientation' (Coviello and Hickman 2014, 646). Postsecular literary criticism, Kaufmann affirms, identifies 'thematic and structural traits that are distinctively postsecular,' and articulates 'the critical consequences of identifying these traits for our understanding of postsecularism and literature' (Kaufmann 2009, 69–70).

Ratti further explains that 'the postsecular is neither a rejection of nor a substitute for the secular. It does not signal a teleological end of secularism,' nor a 'return to religion, especially not in postcolonial nation-states where the combination of religion and nationalism continues to be explosive and often violent.' The postsecular is 'an intimately negotiated term,' that 'advocates neither a religious, sectarian nation-state nor the espousal of religious belief at the personal level' (Ratti 2013, 20–21). Parsing Aamir Mufti, Ratti understands 'the relation between the secular and its post' in the sense of "'new combinations,' 'social crisis,' and '[interfusing] the other'" (Ratti 2013, 22). The 'postsecular is caught in a double bind between religion and secularism,' yet it is in this 'closeness and interwovenness' that the critical and productive force of the term is to be found (Ratti 2013, 22). Indeed, Ratti asserts that

> if postsecularism is one of the destinies of postcolonialism, then literature stands as a forum where new conceptions of secularism and religion can emerge, gesturing to ethics that grow from individual and cultural memories of secular, religious, and national violence, combined with the hope of a better future for all. (Ratti 2013, 7)

The representational capacities of literature provide fertile ground within which to explore the limitations of religious and secular dogmatism and the potential of postsecular communities and futures.

The characteristics of postsecular literature include texts which, expose the false binary between religious and secular experiences and spheres; present the secular and religion not as oppositional concepts, but instead as terms in dialectical mediation; include a character or characters that are seen to be negotiating their spiritual or secular condition; and demonstrate a postsecular engagement with terms, such as, sacred, ritual and sublime. This is in addition to the postsecular features identified by McClure, such as narratives of partial, incomplete or unstable conversion and the 'disruption of secular structures of reality' (McClure 2007, 3). Structurally, postsecular literature incorporates religious language and praxis into the content and form of the novel.

A postsecular analysis of African literatures challenges the teleology of secular modernity and decenters Christianity, understanding it as one of many local religions. As Cuthbeth Tagwirei argues in his analysis of post-independence Zimbabwean fiction by white writers, '[t]he colonial concept of religion was one of Christianity and, consequently, African spirituality was discursively marked as pathologically secular' (Tagwirei 2017, 25). Identifying the thematic and structural traits of postsecular literature in contemporary African fiction brings to the fore the cross-pressures of the secular and sacred in varying and sometimes competitive forms. In Okey Ndibe's *Foreign Gods, Inc.*, Ike, the protagonist, is a Nigerian immigrant to the US who plans to return to his natal village, steal the statue of the local deity, Ngene, and sell it to the eponymous Manhattan gallery that trades in deities from previously colonized and still economically peripheral regions. The novel presents a world where the enchanted and disenchanted, the sacred and profane, religious and secular coexist dynamically and unevenly. A New York taxi driver with a degree in economics, Ike seeks to identify himself as a modern, urban, and secular subject; he is equally as skeptical and dismissive of the Pentecostal church his mother belongs to, as he is of the devotees of Ngene. Despite Ike's rationalizations, he is, nevertheless, physically attuned to the 'spectral atmosphere' of the gallery, where he experiences 'an otherworldly chill in the air,'

and a smell 'unsettling and hard to name' (Ndibe 2014, 2). Ike demonstrates an embodied awareness of the 'multicultural' deific energies of the gallery. This cognizance is heightened when he returns to the US with Ngene in hand, having accepted his role as chief priest, and the gallery's smell has become a 'more pungent' 'stink' (Ndibe 2014, 307).

As the author explains, 'our 'modern', 'secular' spaces are not entirely exempt from the intimation or intrusion of the mystical. The modern mind is likely to reach for a rationalist explanation. And that's not to be rejected, by any means. However, fiction – my fictive vision – is capacious enough to accommodate a different, mystical economy of explanation or signification' (Cumpsty 2021, 30). In Ndibe's postsecular imagining, Ike's acknowledgement of Ngene's influence is uneven and in process, reflecting the postcolonial and transnational convergences of 'enchanted' and 'disenchanted' versions of the real.

Ndibe's novel offers a sanctioned space for enchantment, but also contributes to imagining a world in which magic, enchantment and wonder operate in the same realm as modernity, skepticism, and secularism. In her examination of the 'evolution of the literary field,' Gauri Viswanathan notes 'that the primary ruptures are not between reason and religion but, rather, between belief and imagination, pointing to a development in which religious belief is contested by the alternative (even heterodox) knowledge systems it had suppressed or marginalized' (Viswanathan 2008, 468). By studying the development of secular and postsecular literary forms in postcolonial settings, Ratti's monograph provides a conceptual vocabulary with which to explore the heterodoxies birthed by the entanglement of colonialism, monotheistic, and indigenous religions. Extending this dialogue, I would ask how Ratti's conception of a postsecular humanist ethic compares to John A. McClures's notion of open dwelling, and to Habermas's calls for religio-cultural translation. Given the world-literary networks through which the works of Rushdie and Ondaatje travel, how might this ethic be understood to function beyond national boundaries?

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