

The Postsecular Imagination

Postcolonialism, Religion, and Literature

Manav Ratti

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The Postsecular Imagination

The Postsecular Imagination presents a rich, interdisciplinary study of postsecularism as an affirmational political possibility emerging through the potentials and limits of both secular and religious thought. While secularism and religion can foster inspiration and creativity, they also can be linked with violence, civil war, partition, majoritarianism, and communalism, especially within the framework of the nation-state. Through close readings of novels that engage with animism, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Sikhism, Manav Ratti examines how questions of ethics and the need for faith, awe, wonder, and enchantment can find expression and significance in the wake of such crises.

While focusing on Michael Ondaatje and Salman Rushdie, Ratti addresses the work of several other writers as well, including Shauna Singh Baldwin, Mahasweta Devi, Amitav Ghosh, and Allan Sealy. Ratti shows the extent of courage and risk involved in the radical imagination of these postsecular works, examining how writers experiment with and gesture toward the compelling paradoxes of a non-secular secularism and a non-religious religion.

Drawing on South Asian Anglophone literatures and postcolonial theory, and situating itself within the most provocative contemporary debates in secularism and religion, *The Postsecular Imagination* will be important for readers interested in the relations among culture, literature, theory, and politics.

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Preface

The Literary and The Postsecular

Cold—the New Delhi night air clings with unrelenting cruelty. It is late November 2008, and a light fog has descended upon the city, muting it into a fantastical nightscape whose contours are illuminated by the occasional orange-yellow glow of street lamps. I am waiting for an autorickshaw. I have come to India from the UK for a research visit, my winter coat warmly enveloping me. The streets are virtually empty until a driver expertly veers toward me. As he approaches, I notice he is in his mid-twenties. He stops the vehicle, and we proceed in Hindi to negotiate the destination and cost. Before we begin the journey, he tells me that I must be prepared for security checks. It is a day after the Mumbai attacks, security checkpoints around the city, alerts issued by various foreign embassies. *Theek hai, chalo*. That's fine, let's go. Clearing several checkpoints, we continue into the darkness. And then, materializing before us in the left margin of our world—almost invisible, almost unbelievable—is a large elephant, shadows among shadows, each of its steps slow, majestic, measured. I ask the driver to slow down. Can the ancient elephant of India be seen through the modern eye of terrorism's needle?

There is yet another animation in the air. The world's largest democracy is on the brink of elections. Will Sheila Dixit, Chief Minister of New Delhi and member of the Congress Party, be voted into an historic third term? I arrive at my destination and through the darkness, smoke, and music, I see the face of Sheila Dixit—on tv, speaking of her dedication to the city. My driver had decided I would be his last passenger for the night. During our journey, he had enthusiastically discussed his views on the election; right before we parted, he reaffirmed his support for Dixit, stating that she truly cares about his city. Everyone is following the elections closely—autorickshaw drivers, the night guards outside my accommodation, academics and journalists across the city—the colour and noise of this momentous event flickering across radios, newspapers, televisions, and shops alike. Heads are literally turned toward tvs, everyone has something to say, everyone waits anxiously for the results. And so do I, my gaze fixed on the tv as I reflect on the amazing diversity of peoples throughout the city, hoping for the best possible outcome for them all.

I offer the above opening experience because what fascinates me is that on one hand there are powerful modes of living together in spite of the divides of religion and nation: indigenous, personal modes that can be marked by fellowship, community, open-mindedness, and an acceptance and embracing of others. On the other hand, political systems, concepts, and forms of organization—such as state concepts like multiculturalism and secularism—fall short of recognizing and organizing “the people.” What can we make of this difference between individual practices of good will toward others and state-sanctioned, political ideas about how we should relate to one another?

Secularism: it is a political concept in India asking the state to respect and recognize citizens of all religions, guided by values of freedom and equality, with allied consideration for ethnicity, language, and caste. The word has tremendous resonance in India—used and overused in media, politics, academia—polarizing and unifying people alike, reaching across the domains of religion, public policy, and ethics. But is this resonance simply the sound of one hand clapping? Is it disconnected from other parts of the nation’s body, whose sound can only be heard by those privileged with the modern gifts of elite citizenship? What a privilege to be in the thickness of location, each of us holding on to a different part of the elephant: the tail, the tusk, the ear, the hide, the foot. But this is no ancient elephant. Can it be constructed to fit through the needle of everyday life, the political demands of the vanishing present, the real struggles of real people? Can we believe in it? In India, my secular has to be *your* secular: *our* secular is the secular of the nation-state, extending to the promise of freedom, equality, and democracy. How could we not want this?

After my visit to India, I return to the UK and witness David Cameron proclaim in February 2011 that state multiculturalism has failed the UK, given extremist ideologies that lead young people to violence, instead of their being drawn to a cohesive concept of “Britishness” (Cameron 2011). Angela Merkel, a few months before Cameron, had made a similar pronouncement, on the failure of “multikulti” in Germany. History then produces a figure like Anders Breivik, the Norwegian who on July 22, 2011 bombed government buildings in Oslo, killing eight, and then shot sixty-nine youth at a camp on a Norwegian island near Oslo, making sure to shoot teenagers lying on the beach who were hoping to survive by feigning death. Breivik was enraged by immigration to Norway, viewing immigration and Islam as the enemies of the pure nation, a position he elaborates in a manifesto over a thousand pages in length. At Breivik’s trial, a Norwegian hurled a shoe at Breivik, avenging the honour of his murdered brother. The attack echoed the shoe hurled at George Bush in 2008 by an Iraqi journalist at a press conference in Baghdad. With European leaders exasperated by the uncontrollable violence inside their borders, and with South Asian intellectuals and politicians struggling to create a viable secular

state, what are the large questions about religion, secularism, and nation raised by our small world—and how can we tackle them?

We can go back even further in time. In a provocative September 2006 speech, Pope Benedict XVI expressed his worry about the increasing secularization of the west, by which he meant that western science and philosophy have divorced themselves from faith (John Paul II 2006). He argued that such secularization makes it impossible for the west to communicate with those cultures that have worldviews to which faith is fundamental. Such a polarization of secularism (as reason) and faith (as religion), along the lines of the “secular west” and the “non-secular non-west,” has become especially problematic after 9/11. The negative reaction by Muslims to the Pope’s speech is a sign that much work still remains to address such differences and divides. For an effective dialogue of cultures to occur in such a global climate, the solution might lie in a discourse which offers the ethical, imaginative, and generative intensities of religious thought within a viable and robust framework of political secularism.

Political science, cultural studies, sociology, religious studies, history, anthropology: these are just some of the disciplines that have been compelled to address the issues I present above. This book joins this collective effort by pursuing how literature can provide insights into thinking through the limits of secularism and religion. Such a focus seems especially necessary in a world where political and clerical leaders, religious groups, ordinary people, and concerned citizens must face realities they perhaps never had to face before. In a globalized world where Twitter, texting, Facebook, and BlackBerry® smartphones can catalyze a movement like the Arab Spring and where cell phone photographs taken by soldiers and aid workers in the battlefields of rural Sri Lanka can catalyze international awareness of a civil war, it compels us to ask how we should live with one another, when the other is no longer distant, and perhaps even emerging within us—and now that the stakes are high everywhere.

Literary criticism will be at the heart of this study, inviting readers to consider how questions raised by close readings of literary texts can resonate with questions of religion, culture, and politics. I discuss Anglophone novels that reflect the multireligious nature of India and Sri Lanka, including animism, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Sikhism. I focus on the work of Michael Ondaatje and Salman Rushdie, as well as that of Shauna Singh Baldwin, Amitav Ghosh, and Allan Sealy. I choose this set of writers because they allow me to explore the range of religions I list above. All the writers also embody a diasporic position, giving them access to the lived experience of at least two different national and cultural worldviews. I also consider the work of Mahasweta Devi, although she is neither an Anglophone writer nor situated as part of a diaspora. Her work interests me for its ability to move between the worldviews of majoritarian Hindu India and that of the tribals, as I elaborate in the Introduction.

I argue that this set of writers struggles toward seeking some values that might emerge by working within and against the ideologies of nationalism, secularism, and religion. Their questioning is very much a process: a risky, open-ended, individualistic path they hew and which treads the borders of received pieties and orthodoxies of nationalism, secularism, and religion. In their exploration of the dilemmas of faith and the dilemmas of ethics—*what should we believe, how should we live?*—these writers seek possibilities that avoid the ideologies of politicized religion, and in doing so are avowedly secular in their politics. Ondaatje and Rushdie, for example, cannot be viewed as anything but secular, Rushdie insistently so.

Yet secularism has been unsatisfactory, particularly as a state policy in India, as evidenced, for example, by the continuing eruption of violence motivated by the real and imagined affiliations of religion. Nationalism also has had its failures in the postcolonial world, marked especially by violence, civil war, partition, majoritarianism, and communalism. In India and Sri Lanka, the “god” of religion has often been linked with the “god” of nationalism. The combination continues to be explosive, with religion and nationalism either in alliance or in conflict, in spite of the nation-building aspirations of secularism, seen as religion’s antidote and nation’s succour. I examine these potentials and perils of secularism in India and Sri Lanka in depth in the Introduction.

In western societies, what began as the Enlightenment separation of church and state is now manifest, however real or imagined, as a “secular west,” ideologically contrasted with the “non-secular non-west.” In Max Weber’s well-known diagnosis, industrialization and the emphasis on scientific-rationalist worldviews that western societies have developed have resulted in disenchantment (Weber 1946: 155). Although Weber’s notion of disenchantment resulted in part from the Protestant Reformation of Catholicism and the latter’s associated practices and perceived valuing of magic (Pecora 2006: 11), the idea of disenchantment becomes reinforced by the increasing mechanization of societies and their privileging of technologies. Alongside disenchantment, Charles Taylor adds a lack of “fullness” or richness, where life could be “fuller, richer, deeper, more worth while, more admirable, more what it should be. This [fullness] is perhaps a place of power: we often experience this as deeply moving, as inspiring” (Taylor 2007: 5). Apart from its function as a state policy in India, secularism’s western inflection as an existential outlook has produced its dissatisfactions.

In the wake of such crises, how can the need for faith, awe, wonder, and transcendence find expression and significance without the political and ideological constraints of nationalism, secularism, and religion? Writers understandably seek some form of belief, however tenuous such a space of belief might be. The task then is to explore secular alternatives to secularism: ones that can gesture to the inspiring features of religious thought, without the violence that can attach itself to religion. The paradox thus becomes to find a non-secular secularism, a non-religious religion. It is this broad sense that

I denote by the term “postsecular.” I elaborate upon this relation in greater detail in the Introduction.

Literature is powerfully poised to demonstrate the undoing of the ideological oppositions between secularism and religion, for in its ability to represent a multiplicity of voices and in its acceptance and juxtaposition of contradictory and conflicting perspectives, it can represent, imagine, and pursue a rich array of possibilities. The postsecular possibilities that writers can gesture toward through literature are not anti-secular, nor are they abandoning secularism or turning to religion. The postsecular neither proselytizes secularism nor sentimentalizes religion. It can recognize that enchantment is not the provision of religion alone, and can tackle the hard questions of the political while acknowledging the dimensions of religion.

I explore how literature can form a valuable contribution to the emerging terrain of scholarly work in the social sciences, political theory, and religious studies that is interrogating the limits of the secular (Asad 1993, 2003; Connolly 1999; Derrida 2002; Mahmood 2005; Taylor 2007; Viswanathan 1998). I focus on India and Sri Lanka, for they are both democracies, republics, and places of great religious, ethnic, and linguistic diversity. They contain exemplary coexistence—yet also strife—between religious communities, historically and into the present. The world’s largest democracy, and the largest country to emerge from European colonial rule following World War II, India remains a secular state. Sri Lanka offers a point of comparison, for its constitution privileges Buddhism. Also importantly, there has been significant Anglophone writing within India and Sri Lanka and from their diasporas, and this study limits itself to this Anglophone writing. There is a vast amount of literature in the other Indian languages, and in Sinhala and Tamil in Sri Lanka, which is beyond the scope of this study.

I do not focus on Bangladesh and Pakistan, for I do not wish to make “religion” a defining national feature for a comparison between different South Asian nation-states. Both Bangladesh and Pakistan are of course grappling with questions of how practices of religion and secularism can shape the nation-state. In Bangladesh, Taslima Nasreen’s novel *Lajja*, first published in 1993 and critical of majoritarian Muslim violence against Hindus, was famously banned by the Bangladeshi government and provoked a *fatwa* against Nasreen. And now in contemporary Bangladesh, practices such as women’s *taleem* or Qur’anic discussion circles—which do not affiliate with any political party or religious group—are blurring the divide between secularism and religion and their associated public and private spheres (Huq 2012). In 1973, Pakistan integrated the phrase “Islamic Republic” into its constitution, and debates have flourished on whether, and to what degree, Pakistan can and should become a secular state. What interests me is the diversity of religions and ethnicities within nation-states, and how writers will represent and think through such differences. What models for personal, interpersonal, and intercultural understanding can the examples, national and diasporic, from India and Sri Lanka offer?

Most of the novels I discuss were published between approximately the late 1980s and the late 1990s, in addition to the Rushdie and Ghosh texts published between 2005 and 2007; most of the theoretical work I draw upon stretches from approximately the late 1990s to the present. A series of crises of state secularism mark the decade of the 1990s in India, which I elaborate upon in the Introduction, to say nothing of the ongoing war at the time in Sri Lanka. The liberalization of the Indian economy in the 1990s—its opening onto the global stage—might at the same time have provoked majoritarian Hindu sentiments trying to assert nationalist pride and recapture a sense of “nation.” From the Ayatollah Khomeini’s death sentence against Rushdie in 1989, to the rise of religiously-inflected terrorism in the west beginning with 9/11, to the economic crisis in Euro-America that has called into question the nature and vibrancy of capitalism, the world has become a smaller place. Contemporary theoretical work is arising from these and other crises of the late 1980s onward. The intellectual response to the Rushdie controversy, including the articles by Talal Asad (1990) and Charles Taylor (1989), has sparked enormous scholarly work about secularism. The literature of the 1990s could perhaps be part of the historical force shaping contemporary paradigms about nation, secularism, and religion. The question could not be more compelling: how do we understand and live with one another, across differences of nation, religion, and ideology?

Saba Mahmood has argued that

we can no longer presume that secular reason and morality exhaust the forms of valuable human flourishings. In other words, a particular openness to exploring nonliberal traditions is intrinsic to a politically responsible scholarly practice, a practice that departs not from a position of certainty but one of risk, critical engagement, and a willingness to reevaluate one’s own views in light of the Other’s.

(Mahmood 2001: 225)

Postsecularism emerges in that precarious space of risk. The postsecular is caught in a double bind between religion and secularism. It cannot be captured through dichotomies like “neither religion nor secularism” or “either religion or secularism.” If it emerged in such stark and easy dichotomies, then the intricacies and subtleties of postsecularism’s arguments, potentials, cautiousness, and debates would devolve to become something like “religionists versus secularists,” with a series of banal phrases clustering around it, such as “identity politics,” “reactionary polemics,” and “self-loathing colonialism.” To justify or attack any pole among the dichotomies, arguments or assertions could feature an insecure, absolute turn to the prestige and tradition of “great western institutions” or “great Asian traditions” in order to appear rational while consciously or unconsciously perpetuating pride and prejudice. Exploring the postsecular within literature and also within everyday life—for example, as individual practice, the indigenous secularism with

which I began this Preface—requires a self-vigilance. It requires an awareness that posting the secular can be productive as long as it is not polarizing, so that it is not simply, for example, European secularism as “rationality” versus the Subaltern School as “fundamentalists.”

The postsecular affirmative values that emerge for the writers I analyze include love, friendship, community, art, literature, music, nature, the migrant’s eye-view, hybridity, and “newness.” These in themselves might not seem particularly novel or “new.” What interests me is *how* these affirmative values emerge, how they subsume and demonstrate the edge of the postcolonial, the national, the diasporic, the minority position. I am interested in how writers write *through* religion by invoking its great signifiers and great ethics, and then translate and secularize them within the contingency—and urgency—of material and historical circumstance. The postsecular moments in the literature that I analyze contain decisions made out of human choices and human risks, without the fixity of the nation-state. Such moments will not result in immediate juridico-legal change, but they can gesture to an epistemic change, which is unpredictable, and the trajectories of which are unknown. The process of pursuing such possibilities will take an immense imaginative manoeuvre, and an immense form of “belief” as well. This is where I am interested in how writers and individuals can radically *imagine* postsecularism.

This book seeks to offer a new conception of the secular, one that links it intimately with literature, diaspora, and postcolonialism. I endorse the insights of Jürgen Habermas in his recognition that there must now be a respectful and mature engagement with the full diversity of religions, secularisms, beliefs, and practices within nation-states (Habermas 2008). Habermas focuses on Europe and the west, but I extend this focus to include not only western nation-states like the US, Canada, and the UK, but also India and Sri Lanka. Studies of secularism have often been confined to the single nation-state. Can and should India be secular? What does it mean for Sri Lanka to strive toward secularism? How is the Christian right in the US challenging the secular foundations of the country? How can Israel become secular? What has secularism meant for modernization in Turkey? How can France preserve the secularism of its public spaces? These are important and necessary questions. What *postcolonial postsecularism* can bring to these discussions is a consideration of how the interactions and collisions between at least two different worldviews, variously philosophical and political, can provoke the imagining and re-imagining of some of the greatest ideas of our times: what it means to be secular, religious, a citizen, a minority, a majority—and, by implication, an intellectual, a writer, an artist, each committed to making a difference in the world, whether it be by exploring what constitutes religious thought, or by trying one’s best to represent with dignity and seriousness the violence and injustices of war.

In that act of imagination and reimagination, literature can contribute to the workings of civil society, as a critique of the state. Postsecularism does not

mean the wholesale abandonment of the principles of political secularism as an alternative organization of the state. It does not advocate classical anarchism by turning to the affirmation of humanitarian feelings as a complete rejection of the “political.” In discussions of secularism, such as in the work of John Rawls (1993) and Achille Mbembe (1992a, 1992b, 2001), the concept is often tied to the relations between civil society and the state as well as the norms that govern civil society. My focus will be mainly on features of intercultural and interreligious relations within and between nation-states rather than a detailed investigation of civil society as such.

In India, civil society organizations are important for keeping watch over how well the state can deliver its constitutional guarantees, such as secularism and minority rights (Aiyar and Malik 2004). At the same time, civil society should not reproduce the hegemonies and elitism of the state itself, so as to prevent its component parts—social movements, non-governmental organizations—from representing the full spectrum of a group, including the socioeconomically disadvantaged (Chandhoke 1993). In Sri Lanka, civil society organizations such as the International Centre for Ethnic Studies (ICES) are crucial for challenging and re-thinking questions of democracy, minority rights, and human rights. The ICES was founded in 1982, precipitously before one of the strongest periods of violence during the civil war, July 1983, marked by an anti-Tamil pogrom in Colombo. Certainly the engagement of scholars there with a novel like *Anil’s Ghost* demonstrates the ability of literature to enable civil society organizations to be thoughtful about their own work—about the *fullness* of their representation, across culture, religion, and socioeconomics. Such organizations might also see how literary imaginings can inspire ethical commitments, including across nation-states.

The call for expanding the discourses and imaginaries of civil society is echoed in the work of the US-based scholar Nancy Glazener, who argues that “the cosmopolitan sampling of world beliefs risks putting in jeopardy the heart of belief: its power to constitute a meaningful version of reality that presses on unbelievers as well, requiring some form of response. In order to engage belief, we need to avoid dismissing it as superstition, reducing it to personal preference, or reifying it as tradition or custom” (Glazener 2008: 227). Interrogating the secularist biases of civil society, Glazener draws upon an example offered by the US statesman Benjamin Franklin, who had affirmed civic virtue, republicanism, and religious pluralism (Isaacson 2003: 93). A Swedish missionary has just told a group of Native American chiefs the story of the Garden of Eden. In turn, an orator among the chiefs narrates the story of the sacrifice of venison to a magical woman, for which staple plants are received in return. The Swede is not impressed:

The good Missionary, disgusted with this idle Tale, said, what I delivered to you were sacred Truths; but what you tell me is mere Fable,

Fiction & Falsehood. The Indian offended, reply'd, my Brother, it seems your Friends have not done you Justice in your Education; they have not well instructed you in the Rules of common Civility. You saw that we who understand and practise those Rules, believed all your Stories; why do you refuse to believe ours?

(quoted in Glazener 2008: 227)

Glazener begins her article by quoting the work of Sunil Khilnani, who argues that civil society requires a self that is flexible, one that is open to debate and deliberation and a revision of one's views (Glazener 2008: 203). This is precisely the openness to revising one's beliefs and values that writers can represent in their novels—and which we will see in the pages that follow.

Writers are doing this work of the postsecular. In the very act of their writing, in the very search for affirmative values, they are creatively on the borderlines of received ideas of the secular and the religious. Philosophers and theorists within the west have also been taking these imaginative and intellectual risks on borderlines, undertaking the difficult work of imagining the boundaries of the secular, the religious, and even the aesthetic—and here I think of the work of Jacques Derrida, Emanuel Levinas, Maurice Blanchot, and Mieke Bal. In the chapters that follow, I engage with these thinkers to explore how literary fiction and theoretical work—emerging from Europe, India, North America, and Sri Lanka—can together constitute the imaginative inroads into the “newness” of postsecularism. Could Blanchot's writings on disaster and his search for some “outside” to the limits of representing disaster find their arc in the fiction of a writer like Michael Ondaatje, born and raised in Sri Lanka, now living in Canada, and striving to represent the civil war in Sri Lanka? Could European theoretical production find its arc in South Asian diasporic literary production? These are some of the questions raised by the transnationalism of the postsecular, and the chapters that follow will elaborate these questions, through close readings of the literature.

Imagining the postsecular is provoked by the real historical embeddedness in which we find ourselves. By “we” I mean not just those of us writing about secularism, but all of us “in this world” (certainly not all as “citizens,” and this is also not to suggest that “we” all constitute a form of “world history”). Can this effort at “speaking for” secularism, for thinking *through* it, be connected in any way to the individual's real, on-the-ground struggle for protection, for basic rights? If this book is a small step toward achieving genuine national and transnational social justice, the evidence that that dream is coming to fruition has to be manifest “on the ground.”

Although scholarship in theological studies is marking a turn to “postsecular” Christianity, I see this usage of the postsecular as reinforcing Christianity, and as Christianity rediscovering itself. The postsecularism that I pursue is a different concept, informed intimately by the historical and ongoing struggles of postcolonialism's and literature's role within such struggles.

The 2011 volume *Rethinking Secularism*, even while interrogating the limits, contradictions, and complexities of secularism, reinforces secularism. The articles in this collection are not debates about issues of faith, doctrine, and the good life. The debates are not about religious matters. Even while essays in this volume might be against Islamophobia, they are not *for* Islamic teachings, wisdom, and doctrines. I recognize that my work joins this trajectory of scholarship. This book is scholarship: it is not a manifesto, it is not a religious tract. But the issues it explores raise the question of *raising* the question of how writers pursue and work through the intertwined dilemmas of secularism and religion, both inside and outside South Asia and the west. This final caveat marks my own immersion, as indeed it marks anyone's, within the hegemonies of the secular, the religious, the postcolonial, and diaspora. Yes, it is a risk. But it is one worth taking. This risk is inspired by everyday life: ordinary people around the world peacefully live their lives because of their faith in secularism and religion, in spite of the pressures of nation, colonialism, and other forms of control. And with that openness and humbleness toward knowledge that I admire in the unsung heroes who have achieved dignity and self-respect in spite of inherited and ongoing inequality and oppression, I invite you to join me in the following pages.