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Conjugating the Modern/ Religious, Conceptualizing Female Religious Agency Contours of a 'Post-secular' Conjunction

Sarah Bracke

Abstract

This article is concerned with thinking transformations of the secular, and does so in relation to two theoretical terrains, while empirically grounded in ethnographies of Christian and Islamic pious women in the Netherlands. A first theoretical terrain under consideration is that of how the relation between modernity and religion is elaborated, notably in secularization theories, and how these established frameworks are challenged by a different kind of articulation between modernity and religion that I observed in narratives and practices of young Evangelical and Islamic women in the Netherlands. The article traces the contours of a 'pious modern', showing how from a faith-centred perspective the modern can be incorporated and indeed produced. In this context, I argue that the way in which notions of modernization and secularization have been theoretically hinged on each other needs to be further revisited, and I propose to consider the 'post-secular' as a new disarticulation between the modern and the secular. A second theoretical terrain concerns questions of agency and subjectivity. Here I trace how situating religious agency in its own grammar makes secular assumptions in social, critical and feminist theory visible, and generates different understandings not only of agency but also of notions such as autonomy, and the capacity to act and shape the world.

Key words

(female) agency ■ (female) subjectivity ■ modernity ■ post-secular ■ secularization theories

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Introduction – Thinking the Post-secular

THIS ARTICLE is concerned with thinking the secular and its transformation. It is situated within a larger body of scholarship revisiting the ways in which the secular is understood and conceptualized. Reconsidering the secular, and notably the paradigm of secularization, is anything but new (e.g. Hadden, 1987). Yet contemporary religious vitality has invigorated new conversations and debates. ‘Religious vitality’ and ‘the post-secular’ go beyond the often-noted revival and sociological observations of renewed participation in religious movements in a transnational and cross-religious perspective. They are closely related to a new geo-political conjuncture, as the Cold War script lost its explanatory and performative grip on our world and the ‘new strategic era’ of the last decade became defined along civilizational and religious lines. Moreover, they also pertain to the terrain of academic knowledge production and a theoretical conjuncture in which post-structuralist insights and approaches are brought to bear upon the phenomena of religion and the secular. The work of Talal Asad (1993, 2003) is particularly important in this respect, for the new insights and line of inquiry it enables. Asad (2003) proposes an ‘anthropology of the secular’ – an investigation of how we have come to think of the secular in the ways that we do.

The arguments I elaborate in this article are related to this post-structuralist approach to religion and the secular. My theoretical claims are grounded in a study of Christian and Islamic movements in Europe, yet the arguments are in fact not about religion; rather, they pertain to the organization and transformation of the secular. This raises a methodological question: how to approach the secular and its transformations? In this article I do so in a two-fold manner; first through looking at theories that elaborate the relationship between modernity and religion (notably secularization theories), and, second, through engaging with current debates on agency and subjectivity inspired by the scholarship on pious women.

I have framed and grounded these two theoretical discussions through ethnographies of pious (Christian and Islamic) women in the Netherlands. The questions of women, gender and feminism are in fact of crucial significance to the post-secular. On the one hand religious movements are criticized for the notions of gender and sexuality they sanction, while on the other hand widespread participation of women in contemporary religious revival is noted and even put forward as a characterizing feature of these movements. The gender politics of ‘the return of religion’ intensively interpellates European feminist thought, with its largely secular roots (at least in its majoritarian modes) in which religion has systematically been connected to women’s oppression. In epistemological terms, I rely on a crucial impulse running through feminist knowledge production: thinking from women’s lives (for our specific take on feminist standpoint theory, see Bracke and Puig de la Bellacasa, forthcoming). Thinking from the lives of women who most often fall out of the realms of those considered as ‘emancipated subjects’ simultaneously makes use

of feminist methodologies while investigating and challenging existing feminist theories.

Ethnographic Tales of Religion and Modernity

The narratives of the young Protestant and Islamic women I did ethnographic work with are pregnant with interrogations of and challenges to the secular status quo, or a secular contract within Dutch society. I do not mean to suggest that dynamics within the Dutch traditions of Christianity and Islam would be the only two factors shaping this conjuncture coded as ‘post-secular’. Secular responses to a sense of threat (of Islam), to name just one other factor, equally deserve attention when considering the transformations of the secular. Nor do I mean to suggest that the religious traditions of Christianity and Islam stand in a symmetrical relation to the crisis of the Dutch secular contract. The Dutch secular contract, with its particular form of pillarization and management of religion, took shape in a Christian context, as I have argued elsewhere (Bracke, 2007), and is particularly resistant to (symbolically and institutionally) incorporating Islam. Rather, I wish to focus on what a study of the dynamics within Christian and Islamic traditions within the Netherlands could reveal about how the secular is challenged and transformed.

Ruth shared, with her Orthodox Protestant and Evangelical friends, a sense of social engagement that was lacking in the Orthodox Protestantism in which she was raised, yet indispensable to her religious way of being in the world. She was, however, one of the few among her friends who had ventured into a (relatively) liberal church in search of a more socially engaged faith. The liberal church she found, anchored in an inner-city Amsterdam neighbourhood where many homeless people live and unemployment is high, housed social projects with income-generating activities for those in need. Yet the church did not meet Ruth’s pious yearning; it wasn’t really clear what the church believed, Ruth deplored, and, moreover, its members did not seem to care. Liberal Christianity, Ruth concluded, does away with God. *Like in ‘God is love and beautiful’ because then it’s not really about God. . . . They [liberal Christians] consider the Bible as a very human book, and they turn religion into . . . well maybe I’m saying things now that aren’t entirely true, but this is my image of them. All what we say about God . . . God might not even exist, let’s say that you could even leave Him out of the picture, it’s more a kind of image or anchor upon which people put their notions of happiness or something like that. God becomes more of a concept, I feel. In their scheme, He doesn’t really have to exist in fact.*¹

Like most of the young Christian women I had conversations with, Ruth was profoundly dissatisfied with the orthodox Protestant tradition she came from, the so-called ‘heavy churches’ of Dutch Bible-belt Protestantism, whose sclerotic rules and traditions, the young women felt, had managed to drain out authentic faith. They refuted the emphasis on sinfulness, and perhaps even more importantly the lack of joy. But above

all, they identified an inability of the churches to be relevant for society as the heart of the problem. Moreover, they sought a piety that could not be confined or bounded in time and space to a religious service in a building designed for the purpose, to a set of activities one does or is supposed to do, or to a separate niche of society tucked away in the forests and heath lands of the Dutch Veluwe.

Yet their rejection of the separatist logic of orthodox Protestantism pushing faith away from the world did not imply that their piety could easily be accommodated within liberal churches and their humanizing impulse – to which Ruth's story testifies. The piety they sought to live, and for which they used expressions such as 'doing church' and 'believing with hands and feet', combined theological orthodoxy and social engagement. In Ruth's words: *I found that a great pity, that they [the believing and social aspect] could not be combined. . . . [I want] the combination of both. I find holding on to the fundamentals . . . I am still convinced when I read the Bible, and I'll stay convinced, that it's not the aim to let go of a number of things, thinking 'Oh well, they don't matter.' I simply cannot read that into the Bible. I do believe that is important to hold on to the Bible, it is the word of God. . . . But I do find that in many churches there is way too little concern with the world around us. Yet that is also very clearly written in the Bible. I cannot see how you cannot read that. And even if it were not written, I would still find it very important. But I am happy to see that God also finds it very important.*

A theologically orthodox piety that seeks to be world-shaping sits uncomfortably within a tradition of orthodox Protestantism, which in a Dutch context relies upon a distinction between faith and the world that is constitutive for the orthodox worldview and identity (Stoffels, 1995).² Dutch orthodox Protestantism under conditions of modernity is marked by a separatist logic pushing faith away from the world; a logic propelled by an understanding that the slightest 'compromise' with the modern world would be enough to break 'a dam' and let the believer be swept away by the tide of modern secular life. Relying on Susan Harding's analysis of orthodox Protestantism in a North American context, this separatist logic can be considered in the light of how it co-constructs and sustains the secular contract (Harding, 2000), through orthodox Protestantism enacting the 'other' of modern Dutch society. Questioning this separatist logic, not through rejecting biblical orthodoxy but precisely through relying on it, is at the heart of an Evangelical impulse that has transformed the landscape of Dutch orthodox Protestantism in the last decades.³ More importantly for my argument, this Evangelical impulse transgresses the lines drawn in the Dutch secular contract.

A similar kind of challenge can also be traced within Islam, a newer and minority religious tradition in the Netherlands, connected to post-colonial migration but even more so to Turkish and Moroccan labour migration to the Netherlands from the 1960s onwards. While for first-generation migrants piety and religious identification largely remained 'silent', tucked

away in the private sphere, subsequent generations of Muslim Dutch citizens expressed a more visible Islamic identity and piety, in particular the generation coming of age in a post-Cold War and post-9/11 geopolitical context. My ethnographic work focused on women adhering to Milli Görüş, an Islamic movement within the Turkish diaspora in Europe (Sunier, 1996). The narratives of young Milli Görüş women were marked by a repeated concern with the multiple layers of compartmentalization of their lives, such as the separations caused by a week/week-end scheme (mainstream Dutch education devoid of any cultural or religious reference to Islam during the week, and attending Quranic classes at the local Diyanet mosque during the weekend),⁴ and a school year/holidays scheme (with a more intense presence of Turkish culture and Islam during summer holidays in Turkey). This set of separations, moreover, was strongly articulated with, and gave more gravity to, a public/private divide.

Yasemin was one of the young women who had shifted her religious belonging from the Diyanet mosque, where she taught the Quran to girls for a while, to Milli Görüş. This occurred as she felt the Diyanet mosque to be complicit in keeping the separations mentioned above in place, and failing to offer a vision and practice of faith firmly anchored in Dutch society. Yasemin struggled against all that stood in the way of a piety allowing her to integrate her faith and quotidian life, and this struggle included a profound dissatisfaction with a widespread understanding of Islam as ‘the five pillars’. Such a conception of Islam, she felt, once more delegated faith to particular well-circumscribed acts and practices, while evacuating it from the rest of her (quotidian) life. *But I say, there are more things you can practise than only the five pillars. Things that turn you into a better human being in society. Islam, for instance, also teaches you that you cannot hurt other people. That is really important. But such things are not considered ‘rules’. They are not integrated in the ‘five pillars vision’. The fact that you can do certain things for others, that you can signify certain things for others. For my parents those things are not so important. They only want to signify something for the people they know, and the rest is not so important. But I also want to signify something for people on the street, even if I don’t know that person. Because it’s for God, do you understand? I do not merely comply with the five pillars, for myself and for God, but I want more structural things, deeper things. . . . I also want to be active in associations, I want to organize things . . . those kinds of things are very important for me. I want to be very active as a woman, do certain things. That you can signify something.*

With parents from largely rural backgrounds in Turkey, as well as with the absence of Islam in the shared cultural and religious references of Dutch society, the Islamic tradition in which young women like Yasemin were raised (mainly at home) had been narrowed down to a strongly cultural and traditional form of religiosity. For Yasemin, the faith and religious experience of her parents remained tied up with the Turkish migrant community, both culturally and ethnically marked, and limited in terms of education. It

boiled down to fulfilling a number of religious duties and rituals. Her own vision of Islam, in contrast, encompassed a transformation of daily life, social relationships and, indeed, the world. While Yasemin's vision relies on a longer history of religious renewal within the Islamic tradition, in many ways her words also recall the language and imaginary of canonical theories of modernity and modernization. In Ferdinand Tönnies' account of the genesis of Western modern society, for instance, societal transformations are conceptualized in terms of the transition from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft*. If for a moment we consider Yasemin's words in those terms, we can almost hear her saying that her parents' Islam was '*Gemeinschaftlich*' as it was entangled with the ties of family, kinship and community. She in contrast was looking for a '*Gesellschaftlich*' experience of Islam, relevant and significant to social configurations organized according to a different logic than kinship or community, whether through associations or in the anonymity of 'people on the street'. She sought to articulate, in other words, a conception of Islam relevant to modern society – instead of being positioned as its antidote.

Conjugating Modernity and Religion with a Difference

The narratives of my interlocutors propelled me to investigate transformations of the secular on the theoretical terrain of the relation between modernity and religion – and notably secularization theories as a site *par excellence* where that relation is fleshed out. The relation between religion and modernity has been set up both in terms of continuity and rupture. The narrative of *continuity* is elaborated with respect to Christianity and sounds very familiar by now: the modern work ethic and the very spirit of capitalism as the secularization of monastic asceticism and Puritanism (M. Weber), or the modern notion of sovereignty as a secular form of the Christian God's sovereignty (C. Schmitt, 2006). Carl Schmitt in fact goes so far as to suggest that all concepts of modern political thought are secularized theological concepts. The effect of such an argument, which positions Christianity as the fabric which makes modern secular society intelligible, is that secularization becomes an operation of mutated Christianity – Christianity with a difference, so to speak. It is interesting to note a renewed interest in political theology these days, and it is timely to recall Hans Blumenberg's critique: this understanding of secularization considers one reality or structure as derived from another, thus thinking the transformations of the modern age through an underlying substantial identity (Blumenberg, 1995 [1966]). This makes for an impoverished understanding of the modern and the secular, Blumenberg suggests, which relies on metaphorical borrowing from theology and renders secular realities overdetermined with 'hidden meanings'.

At the same time, theories of secularization are crucial sites of the articulation of *difference* between the religious and the modern. It is difficult to miss the fact that most of sociology's early authoritative accounts of modern industrial society ascribe a central role to religion in their

explanatory schemes (Comte, Tönnies, Durkheim, Weber and, to a different and lesser extent, Marx). While the meaning and significance of religion varies in these accounts, they converge in a partial agreement that traditional forms of religion are to wither away in modern society (Hadden, 1987). The decline of religion is indeed an early and primary understanding of secularization. When in the social sciences of the post-Second World War era, marked by a positivist drive, the secularization paradigm proved difficult to operationalize, and empirical research did not yield unequivocal evidence for religion's decline,⁵ secularization was conceived of with greater theoretical sophistication. One line of thought has elaborated secularization along the lines of functional differentiation, i.e. the process of differentiation in which a religious worldview ceases to be the overarching framework – 'the sacred canopy' – but instead becomes only one of the institutions (or functions) within society (Berger, 1969; Casanova, 1994; Dobbelaere, 1984). Another line of thought further developed secularization through the lens of the privatization of religion (Taylor, 1998), relying on a private/public distinction, pluralism and toleration, and is tied up with the widespread understanding of secularism as a political doctrine. However distinct these ways of understanding and conceptualizing secularization, they do set up a horizon in which religion provides the background against which a grandiose and tragic unfolding of modernity takes place. These theoretical accounts are structured by a dialectic in which religion is cast as modernity's 'other'. Religion operates as one of the principles by which modernity has tried to recognize itself and specify its difference (Jameson, 1991).⁶

Against this background, religious revival is often conceptualized as either a return of religion, or a juxtaposition of the modern and the religious. A 'return of religion', we must insist, cannot be cast or contained within the terms of this dialectic. It cannot be understood, in other words, as a simple turning back to something always already there, as more popular accounts suggest – accounts of contemporary religious resurgence as merely turning back to traditional and backward forms of religion, untouched by modernity so to speak, untouched by time as they are frozen and simply waiting to burst out again. Asad's inquiry into the genealogy of religion demonstrates that both the very identification of 'religion' as a separate entity, as well as the understanding of religion as a belief (a quality of internalized subjectivity), anterior to practices, reflects a profoundly modern understanding of religion (Asad, 1993). Hence discussions of contemporary religious revival or vitality must begin with the recognition of the modern regime that marks the religious phenomenon, that is, modernity and religion cannot be positioned as if they were mutually exclusive. Contemporary religious resurgence, in other words, always already fails to be a straightforward *rejection* of modernity, a return to an obscurantist pre-modern past.

Beyond the recognition of a necessary intricacy between the terms of debate, there are different ways to conceptualize these entanglements. Religious resurgence and contemporary religious movements are often conceptualized in terms of a *juxtaposition of modern 'infrastructure' and*

religious beliefs. Such accounts rely on a separation between a technical impulse of modernization (emphasizing technological and scientific progress) and an ideological one (a certain notion of modernism or modern culture). They suggest that contemporary religious movements embrace all kinds of technical and economic features of modernization while refusing its ethical values and infusing it with alternative religious worldviews. Scholarly descriptions of such an articulation are often marked by surprise, or the invocation of a paradox: the believers are very pious *yet* they participate in modern life and the labour market; the movements are religious *yet* they make use of high-tech technology and media. Sometimes, moreover, these accounts suggest an *inauthenticity* on the side of religion, as it incorporates modern elements. This understanding of religious resurgence as a juxtaposition of modern and religious elements raises a number of questions. What precisely are the assumptions that make the articulation surprising? What if the separation of modernity into a material realm, on the one hand, and an ideological realm is not so simple to perform at any give moment, let alone to stabilize and sustain? And to what extent does such an account continue to cast religious revival solely *within* the terms of Western modernity, now globalized, and hinder a view of the emergence of new formations and ontologies?

A more fruitful way to approach the ‘conjugation’ of modernity and religion, I would argue, can be elaborated when we move away from attempts to analyse or characterize particular movements, towards a more epistemological line of inquiry that investigates the theoretical lenses through which religious movements are viewed, and that starts from the recognition of religion as an ‘outside’ or margin of modernity which is simultaneously a constitutive part of it. Harding’s analysis of Protestant fundamentalism in the US draws a precise picture of this mechanism. Fundamentalism, Harding (2000) argues, has not only always been *inside* the modernity of North American society, but has also helped to *produce* that modernity – precisely through representing and enacting what it was not. The establishment of a modern secular contract entailed the consolidation of a heterogeneous array of conservative Protestants into a unitary cultural other – fundamentalists – and their subsequent exile from public life. This is an instance of narrative encapsulation, that is, ‘a moment in which the cultural story of one people was subordinated to and reframed by the terms of another’ (Harding, 2000: 65). And it implied the fundamentalists’ collaboration with the production of modern secular hegemony and the definition of modern America as secular. Conservative Protestants indeed separated themselves: they left their denominations and formed new churches and organizations ‘uncontaminated’ by modern theology. Their emphasis on separation in effect co-constructed a public sphere that was to a large extent off-limits to biblical literal rhetorics and practices. ‘As long as they remained in exile, accepting their pariah status as outsiders, as inferior, backward “others”, they enabled other Americans to see themselves as modern, superior and progressive’ (Harding, 2000: 21). In other words,

conservative Protestants were essential protagonists in the social contract of American secular modernity; as Harding puts it, they became the ‘them’ who enabled the modern ‘us’ within North American society. It is against this background that the Evangelical revival of the last couple of decades can be understood as a particular (and crucial) religious sector ending the ‘collaboration’ (as ‘the other’) with the established secular contract.

Thus ‘the return of religion’ can be understood as a ‘return of the other’, but in the sense of ‘the other’ challenging, and rupturing, the very dialectic through which ‘self’ and ‘other’ are set up in the first place. Many questions, however, remain, and notably questions about *how* religion and modernity get conjugated anew – in a post-secular mode, we could argue – along the way. In her work on Shi’i piety in Lebanon, where she investigates how the ‘modern’ figures in her subjects’ pious lives, Lara Deeb (2006) characterizes a process through which a contemporary conjugation of modernity and religion takes place (for which she proposes the notion of an enchanted or pious modern) as ‘authentication’. By this she means a process within a religious tradition, grounded in textual study and historical inquiry, as well as in a notion of rationality, and driven by a desire to establish a ‘true’ meaning of faith, taking distance from tradition. Deeb’s use of authentication aptly captures the process that the Christian and Islamic women in my ethnographic work in the Netherlands were engaged in, notably the reliance on scriptures to de-legitimize and transform the religious universes of the generation of their parents.

From the perspective of the longer histories of the Christian and Islamic traditions in which the women I did ethnographic work with inscribed themselves, one could argue that perhaps the post-secular conjuncture represents a new moment, in the ‘scattered hegemonies of modernity’ (Grewal and Kaplan, 1994), in which the question of modernity or modern society does not pose itself in a tragic way – propelling a response of rejection, retreat or assimilation (becoming liberal). Rather, the religious formations the respondents were involved in asserted the modern, in a self-confident way, as part and parcel of their religious universe. The modern, in other words, becomes envisionable without the secular. My point here is not to suggest a more general de-secularization of society, not least because of the problems in conceptualizing secularization. Rather, I emphasize the need to revisit the way in which notions of modernization and secularization have been hinged on each other in social theory.⁷ This historically novel *disarticulation between the modern and the secular*, I argue, is a way of characterizing the post-secular conjuncture.

An Ethnographic Tale of Religious Agency

Debates on agency (and subjectivity) provide a second theoretical terrain where we can explore the ways in which ‘the secular’ is revisited. To a great extent, these debates have been inspired by studies of pious women, and in particular Muslim women. An ethnographic account that zooms in on one instance of intense piety and love of God serves to introduce the debate. In

contrast to the ethnographic accounts I mobilized in a previous section, Yasemin's love of God was not representative of the narratives of all the respondents. In both the Christian and Islamic environments in which I did ethnographic work, some women stood out as particularly pious, and other women tended to direct me towards the particularly pious ones, like Yasemin. I focus on this intense piety in order to highlight the contours of a mode of agency and subjectivity that differs substantially from liberal and secular economies of self and O/other. (For an insightful analysis of how orthodox religious subjectivities, in the context of second-generation Maghrebi Muslims in Belgium, are shaped by liberal/secular as well as non-liberal/Islamic forms of governmentality, see Fadil, 2008.)

The story of Yasemin's faith was filled with great spiritual yearning, accompanied with a great amount of self-discipline aimed at reaching a higher level of spirituality. Her devotional interest had a 'mythical origin' in stories from her (early) childhood – that was the time when she first heard about the figure of Rabia al-Adewiyya, an important early female mystic, who came to provide Yasemin with a spiritual model she aspired to follow and in whose image she sought to construct herself. Rabia al-Adewiyya was born in Basra, Iraq, around 717 AD and became a spiritual authority in the emerging mystic tradition at the time. She led an ascetic life spending her nights in prayer as a way of seeking communion with God, with whom she longed to merge her own being. God's love was central to her life, which was set on fire with love and longing. The story goes that she once walked the streets of Basra with a torch and a bucket of water, in order to burn heaven and extinguish the flames of hell, so that the people could see that the only reason to love God is God itself. The figure of al-Adewiyya took on an overwhelming importance in Yasemin's life. *And of course our prophet Muhammad is also our example. But that woman, also because she was a woman, was a great example for me.*

A devotion to al-Adewiyya guided Yasemin's life in various ways. It made her understand that marriage and children would lead her away from the piety and spirituality she longed for. Al-Adewiyya was never married, Yasemin emphasized, *also because of Islam, because she loved God so very much. Because if she loves God so very much, she said, she could not fulfil her duties towards a husband and children in a good way. Therefore she only wanted to commit herself to God. Praying in the morning, sleeping very little and living Islam in a very spiritual way.* Al-Adewiyya inspired Yasemin to seek for spiritual authority. She wanted to study theology in Turkey, but since her parents objected, insisting she should get a 'useful' diploma in the Netherlands instead, she continued secular higher education. She did this, however, only after having taken up more responsibility in a local Milli Görüş mosque as an alternative way to access spiritual teaching and achieve spiritual growth. *Yes, because most of the time you only hear male imams in the mosque, or references to other important men, our Prophet, and as a woman you might start believing that there are few female imams that play an important role in Islam. But so she [al-Adewiyya] was someone like that.*

And it is mentioned [in the books], but some imams pay less attention to it. For me it is very important to know that a woman could also reach this. Apparently we women can also achieve a lot, in terms of Islam, in terms of spirituality, but usually you don't really realize this. Other women to whom I talk about her [al-Adewiyya] are also very pleased that women can achieve such high positions within Islam. In the world, within education and so on, all that is different, but with respect to the spiritual we do lag a bit behind. For me it was very important that she is a woman. [. . .] One does feel some kind of connection. Instances of women achieving positions of religious authority were precious to Yasemin, and reclaiming spiritual authority of women within Islam was crucial to her. It was precisely the scarcity of female role-models and female authority, she argued, that accounts for how the realms of religion, spirituality and Islam lag behind when it comes to women's emancipation.

Conceptualizing Religious Agency

The question of agency has emerged as a central focus of the theoretical debates on contemporary religious vitality and the secular. This is, no doubt, connected to a renewed interest in agency within social and feminist theory in relation to the changing nature of economic and social structures in late capitalist societies (McNay, 2000). Debates on post/modernity and globalization, Lois McNay argues, raise new questions about agency and the constitution of subjectivity in conditions of late or global capitalism. This theoretical interest, moreover, is also connected to a renewed attention to oral history, life stories and narratives of the self, and the way these methods rely on and animate certain understandings of agency. Yet beyond a general political economy and theoretical conjuncture, the subject of religion also puts the question of agency particularly in relief. The interest in agency in relation to religion, Peter van der Veer (2008) argues, is fuelled by a secular scepticism towards religious understandings of agency.

Notions of agency and subjectivity, moreover, are profoundly gendered and ethnicized. The classical Eurocentric subject, Braidotti argues, has been structurally constituted and affirmed in his dominant subject-position through a number of 'others' of modernity, such as – notably – the sexual other and the ethnic or native other (Braidotti, 2003). While the postmodern conjuncture consists precisely of questioning the constitution of this dominant subject-position, the Eurocentric genealogy of subjectivity is prolonged in a number of ways, notably through the frame of 'false consciousness' I would argue. False consciousness is an exhausted mode of thinking about agency and subjectivity, yet it is nevertheless widely resurrected in relation to pious women in general, and (pious) Muslim women in particular. As I have argued elsewhere (Bracke, 2004), 'false consciousness' in this context serves as a technology of gender and ethnicity (drawing on Teresa de Lauretis' understanding of 'technology'), through which (a lack of) agency and (deficient) subjectivity are differentially ascribed to certain subject positions.

The ‘turn to agency’ emerges in response to this problematic reliance on false consciousness. From the 1990s onwards, studies of women and religious movements became increasingly focused on women’s agency, to the extent that a ‘metaphor of agency’ (Bauer, 1997) has come to inform part of the scholarship. This focus has raised a whole set of problems and questions. Reading Yasemin’s narrative through a ‘metaphor of agency’ – with a secular understanding of women’s interests – draws attention to the ways in which Yasemin resists social pressures of various kinds, such as the expectation that she marry and establish a family. In other words, such a reading considers that, as Amy Hollywood (2004) puts it, theological language and a reference to divine agency is used in a strategic way to mask the pious women’s own agency. This, however, misses out on the very logic of what drives Yasemin.

The turn to agency is problematic in various respects; it is important to investigate the theoretical work that ‘agency’ performs. A problematic division of labour emerges in those studies on pious women that take a women’s studies approach to focus on agency in contrast to mainstream scholarship attending to structural power relations, including women’s oppression. Such a division of theoretical labour effectively produces an impoverished understanding of agency (and of women’s studies for that matter) through evacuating structural constraints and conditions from the very notion of agency (Bracke, 2003).

Another line of questioning emphasizes the use of agency as a mode of *integration into modernity*, or more specifically, modern conceptions of humanity (Asad, 1996). Religious agencies are ‘defective’, Asad argues, and this deficiency begins with an ironical operation that grounds religious identity: believers very often insist on circumstances ‘outside of their own will’ or conditions ‘of divine intervention’ that ‘made’ them into a believer or that push them to act in a particular way. Then why, Asad pertinently asks (1996: 271), does it seem so important to us to insist that believers are ‘agents’? If the familiar false consciousness scheme runs something like ‘they might say they know what they are doing but *in fact* they do not know’, the insistence on agency in relation to religious discourses sometimes seems to become a variation on that scheme, asserting that ‘they might say they don’t know what happened when *in fact* they were exercising their own free choice’. A doctrine of agency, Asad argues, has become essential to our recognition of other people’s humanity. The (re)current emphasis on agency can thus be seen in terms of using a certain modern ‘form’, or epistemic structure, to ‘integrate’ categories of people into modern – liberal secular – subjectivity.

A third line of questioning reveals *how agency became tied up with resistance* (Mahmood, 2005). The work of Saba Mahmood puts in relief a number of assumptions and elisions that inform the emphasis on agency, notably the way in which resistance is ascribed to agency. Within feminist theory, she argues, ‘women’s agency’ is most often understood as the realization of one’s own interests against the weight of custom, tradition or

transcendental will. Yet considering pious women through this particular lens of agency effectively implies that agency comes ‘to describe a whole range of human action, including those which may be socially, ethically, or politically indifferent to the goal of opposing hegemonic norms’ (Mahmood, 2005: 9). Mahmood proposes conceptualizing agency not only in terms of those acts that resist norms, but also in the variety of ways in which norms are lived and inhabited, aspired to, reached for and consummated (Mahmood, 2005) – thus (re)locating agency in a tradition of thought about habitus.

Mahmood makes an argument for the need to explore the meaning of agency within the grammar of concepts in which it resides, which in this case implies the need to de-link agency from a teleology of progressive politics. This argument resonates with Spivak’s critique of the exclusions of European epistemic regimes through which female subaltern subjectivity and agency remain illegible. Yet questions remain about what agency means in relation to specifically *religious* grammars.

A notion that allows this question to be explored is that of *submission*. Relating (female) agency to submission has a long history. As Hollywood (2004) argues, for almost every woman who produced religious writings in the Christian Middle Ages, submission to the divine has functioned as a precondition for their agency. This has left scholars with a dilemma of ‘how to take seriously the agency of the other [. . .] when the other seems intent on ascribing her agency to God’ (Hollywood, 2004: 524) – a dilemma, Hollywood contends, which remains unresolved.

Religious agencies and subjectivities urge us to rethink vocabularies and understandings of the forces that constitute and drive subjects. Yasemin’s agency is driven not by a desire to resist social pressure, nor by a desire to comply with it. Instead, her subjectivity is marked by a desire to submit to God, in an economy of profound love and yearning for God, mediated through the charisma of al-Adewiyya. The resulting relative autonomy vis-a-vis her social environment produced by such desire needs to be recognized as an *effect* of the desire to submit to God. This relative autonomy is legible by secular liberal frameworks (as agency), while at the same time those frameworks also read her submission as lack of agency. What often remains unrecognized is the connection between this mode of submission and relative autonomy and agency.

Here I find it useful to displace, or perhaps better to more thoroughly connect, discussions on agency to questions of subjectivity. One way of doing so is through Foucault’s understanding of subjectivation, that is to say, the modes in which human beings are made into subjects, through practices such as the modes of inquiry that try to give themselves the status of science, dividing practices, and the ways in which human beings turn themselves into subjects (Foucault, 1982). With Foucault we can trace how the very conditions that bring about subordination are themselves a source of subjectivity and hence agency. This point of departure allows for different (non-liberal, non-secular) understandings of the capacity to act and shape the

world, and notably understandings of autonomy, of subjectivities shaped within a tradition and by the dynamics of that tradition, including their capacities to transform a tradition.

Yet another way of engaging with subjectivity emphasizes the affective, libidinal and therefore contradictory structures of the subject (Braidotti, 2003). Any compelling account of agency, Henrietta Moore (2007) argues, must include an account of fantasy and desire, both in regard to compliance and resistance. Subjectivity then refers to the ensemble of modes of perception, affect, thought, desire, fear and so forth that animate acting subjects, as well as the cultural and social formations that shape, organize and provoke those notions of affect, thought and so on (Ortner, 2005). Here the emphasis on profound love in Yasemin's story, as a vital force that binds her to God, remains to be explored.

By way of conclusion, we can argue that contemporary transformations of the secular are difficult to think for many reasons, and not least because of the complexity of a multilayered and differentiated conjuncture. Yet such transformations are also hard to think because of the profound secular assumptions and epistemes in social, critical and feminist theory. If the 'post-secular' has begun to code a particular moment in social theory, it is precisely the inquiry into such assumptions and epistemes. In this article, I have traced and discussed such inquiries on the terrains of theories that establish the relation between modernity and religion, as well as debates on pious (women's) agency and subjectivity. In these discussions, dominant secular modes of thinking and framing are made visible, and perhaps even decentred, and the contours of different epistemes might begin to show.

Notes

This article draws upon various instances of collective work done with Nadia Fadil, Maria Puig de la Bellacasa and Maggie Schmitt (Bracke and Fadil, 2008; Bracke and Puig de Bellacasa, forthcoming; Bracke and Schmitt, 2006). I would like to thank Rosi Braidotti and the post-secular reading group at Utrecht University (and in particular Eva Midden and Bolette Blagaard), Susan Harding and the Anthropology Department at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and Saba Mahmood and the Secularism and Liberal Political Rule class at the University of California, Berkeley. Brian Goldstone was a careful reader of an earlier version of this article.

1. I have adopted a methodological device of putting narratives produced in the process of ethnography in *italic* and in continuous text. This device is borrowed from Susan Harding (2000), who deploys it to explore belief as a language of faith expressing a way of inhabiting and making sense of the world.
2. For an account of the piety of the strictly orthodox or 'heavy' Protestants, concentrated in the Bible-belt stretching from the south-west to the north-east of the country, see Van der Meiden (1968).
3. Evangelical tenets include: the centrality of the Bible, a personal relationship to God, a missionary (evangelizing) emphasis and social engagement. A world-wide Evangelical revival took place from the 1950s onwards, with the establishment of a number of important Evangelical institutions in the Netherlands in the 1970s.
4. Diyanet (short for Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı) is the Turkish Presidium of

Religious Affairs, i.e. the highest authority of Islam in Turkey, which thus represents 'official' Islam. The Diyanet, in the words of Valérie Amiraux (2001), epitomizes the ambiguity of a religious institution created to protect the *laïcité* of the Turkish state.

5. An important geopolitical difference should be noted: the decline of religion thesis is tied up with a 19th-century European world, while empirical research of the 1950s and 1960s (notably Lenski, 1961), which was unable to corroborate that thesis, to a large extent took place in the US. See Casanova (1994) on the significance of the difference between Europe and the United States for the secularization paradigm.

6. Another crucial 'principle of difference' in relation to modernity, which strongly intersects with the secular vs. religion dichotomy, needs to be mentioned: the West vs. the non-West (see Hall, 1992; Sayyid, 1997). The point is crucial as it establishes a fundamental dissymmetry between the two religious traditions I refer to here, Christianity and Islam. While Christianity is positioned both in continuity and difference vis-a-vis secular modernity, Islam is situated in the intersection of these binary oppositions that shape hegemonic narratives of secular modernity – a 'constitutive outsider' in at least these two respects. See Bracke and Fadil (2008), where we focus on how Islam gets positioned in relation to Western secular modernity.

7. One theoretical response, rethinking modernity in the light of critiques on uniform and linear definitions of modernization, and notably in the light of the challenge of religious vitality, can be found in the notion of 'multiple modernities'. Multiple modernities emphasizes that modernization should be considered as a fundamental reflexivity in the social organization of society, and that this reflexivity knows different forms and translations dependent on the context. A good overview of the multiple modernities debate can be found in the winter edition of *Dædalus* on multiple modernities, edited by Shmuel Eisenstadt (2000). While such an approach provides possibilities to rethink the knot of modernity, secularization and westernization, and loosen or de-link the ties that usually keep the knot together, once more many questions remain (see Bracke and Fadil, 2008).

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