

Brill Research Perspectives in Religion and the Arts

# Brill Research Perspectives in Religion and the Arts

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# Brill Research Perspectives in Religion and the Arts

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## Beyond the Return of Religion: Art and the Postsecular

*By*

Lieke Wijnia



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# Contents

<b>Beyond the Return of Religion: Art and the Postsecular</b>	<b>1</b>
<i>Lieke Wijnia</i>	
Abstract	1
Keywords	1
1 Introduction	2
1.1 <i>Visibility of Religion</i>	2
1.2 <i>The Return Narrative</i>	5
1.3 <i>Approaching the Postsecular in the Arts</i>	9
1.4 <i>Outline</i>	12
2 Secularization	15
2.1 <i>The Secular as Default</i>	16
2.2 <i>Enchantment</i>	24
3 Diversification	30
3.1 <i>Translation and Its Strategies</i>	32
3.1.1 Reformulation	35
3.1.2 Ludification	37
3.1.3 Re-presentation	41
3.2 <i>Liquid Boundaries</i>	43
3.3 <i>Alternative Imaginaries</i>	48
4 Spiritualization	53
4.1 <i>Acknowledging the Spiritual in Art</i>	54
4.2 <i>Art as Spiritual Alternative to Religion</i>	62
4.3 <i>Spiritual Engagement with Art</i>	66
5 Concluding Perspectives	73
5.1 <i>One Dutch Fall</i>	74
5.2 <i>The Postsecular Is Work in Progress</i>	78
5.3 <i>The Postsecular Exists through Negotiations</i>	79
5.4 <i>The Postsecular Is a Public Affair</i>	80
5.5 <i>The Postsecular Defies the Religion-Secular Binary</i>	80
Acknowledgements	82
Bibliography	83



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# Beyond the Return of Religion: Art and the Postsecular

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## Abstract

*Beyond the Return of Religion: Art and the Postsecular* explores the conceptual potential of the postsecular for investigations of (late) modern art and religion. Indicating a public co-existence and merging of religion and the secular, the postsecular is approached as an alternative to the return of religion narrative. Rather than framing artistic concerns with religion as a recurrence after temporary absence, it is argued how the postsecular allows for seeing the interaction between art and religion as enduring, albeit transforming relationship of mutual nature. Whereas secularization theories are intrinsically connected to modernity, the postsecular requires a pluralized perspective, covering the processes of secularization, diversification, and spiritualization. The postsecular reinforces the interconnectedness of these processes, which are, in turn, embodied in the concept's interdisciplinary nature. While this essay predominantly focuses on visual art and its institutional context of the museum, the postsecular has interdisciplinary relevance for broader artistic and academic disciplines.

## Keywords

postsecular – secularization – spirituality – diversity – art history – art museums – late modernity – modern art – contemporary art

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## 1 Introduction

Throughout the twentieth-century study of modern and contemporary art, the most dominant critical narrative was that of secularization. Even though terms like ‘secular’ or ‘non-religious’ may not be directly applied to art objects or artists themselves, art historical categories have been largely shaped in concordance with secularization theory. This bore assumptions of a so-thought proper, neatly framed, and often invisible, place of religion in artistic practices, musealization, and critical reception of the works of art. While in the study of fine or high art, religion and spirituality is generally treated as a neatly boxed category, the study of that which is called folk, naïve, outsider, and primitive art is usually exuberant with historicized or exoticized portrayals of religion. While during the last decades scholarship has increasingly demonstrated how many modern artists made work strongly rooted in religious or spiritual convictions, in most studies religion still takes up a conspicuous position. Rather than being presented as a fundamental category of, on the one hand, the life worlds of the artists and their works, and, on the other hand, the critical scholarly framework, religion continues to be approached as a category that can be isolated or even ignored in the understanding of artworks.

Through the following, this essay will posit the conceptual framework of the postsecular as a significant tool to further scholarly efforts in the acknowledgement of religion’s foundational and pluriform presence in modern and contemporary art. Some readers may feel I am too optimistic about the conceptual potential of the postsecular. Yet, as I hope to argue throughout this text, the reasons why the concept has emerged and the potential roads of enquiry it presents cannot be ignored just yet. Despite its highly debated nature, the notion of the postsecular offers a way of moving scholarship beyond the dominant conception of a return of religion, which seems to haunt academic and public discourse. The generally popular observation that religion was gone for several decades in the twentieth century, but has returned in the late twentieth- and especially in the early twenty-first century is historically inaccurate and too inattentive towards the nuances and varieties of religion’s manifestations in artistic practices throughout modernity.

### 1.1 *Visibility of Religion*

An initial attempt to explore the implications of the postsecular for the study of the arts was the 2017 symposium *Art in a Postsecular Age* at Biola University.<sup>1</sup>

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1 The symposium was organized by the Center for Christianity, Culture, and the Arts, Biola University, La Mirada, CA., 4 March 2017. The video registration of the symposium can be found online: <http://ccca.biola.edu/resources/2017/mar/6/art-postsecular-age/>.

The symposium not only featured theologians, but also artists, art historians, and art critics.<sup>2</sup> In his introduction to the event, Jonathan Anderson was the first to admit to the contested nature of the postsecular, while simultaneously positioning it amidst numerous recent developments in the field of religion and the arts. He described how over the past two decades, the dominance of secularization theory has been compromised. Scholars increasingly attest to how modernization processes have not led to a decrease, or even disappearance, of religion in the Western public sphere. Even though the societal and cultural position of its institutions are strongly transforming, alternative formations of religion joined the traditional institutions on the public stage. Like in other societal domains, these developments had a large impact on the field of the arts and its institutions. Anderson described three phenomena to illustrate this impact.

First, religion has a visible presence in the production of contemporary art. Artists like Theaster Gates, Kris Martin, and Mark Wallinger work with explicit religious themes and imagery in their practice. This art, in turn, receives prominent public presence. For the prestigious Fourth Plinth commission for London's Trafalgar Square, Wallinger placed his sculpture of a life-size Christ figure with bound hands behind his back and a head crowned with gold-colored barbed wire. Titled *Ecce Homo*, this sculpture first appeared in public on Trafalgar Square in 1999, for the duration of the Fourth Plinth commission, and was later placed on the west steps of St. Paul's Cathedral in 2017. Its placement at St. Paul's was not only a Cathedral initiative for the purpose of Holy Week celebrations. Rather, it occurred in partnership with human rights organization Amnesty International and was presented as an occasion to reflect upon—and call for action regarding—contemporary injustice, torture, and suppression, just as much as on the figure's Christian implications.

Second, artists are commissioned to make new work in response to religious sites and are invited to create lasting contributions to liturgical spaces. Prominent examples are Anthony Gormley's *Sound II* (1986) in Winchester Cathedral; Tracy Emin's *For You* (2003) in Liverpool Cathedral; Gerhard Richter's window (2007) for the Dom in Cologne; Anish Kapoor's *Ascension* (2011) in the San Giorgio Maggiore, Venice; Bill Viola's *Martyrs (Earth, Air, Fire, Water)* (2014) in St. Paul's Cathedral, London; Xu Bing's *Phoenix* (2014) in St. John the Divine,

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2 Biola University has an Evangelical Christian signature. During the symposium there was an interesting discrepancy between speakers that argued for a necessary inclusion of theological discourse in public debates about art and religion, and those who sought for a (non-theo)logical and informative place for religion in the study and criticism of art. The parts I reference in this work predominantly reflect to the latter type of contributions, in which theology has a place in the postsecular understanding of art, but is not a fundamental prerequisite.

New York City; and, more recently, David Hockney's *The Queen's Window* (2018) was unveiled in Westminster Abbey, London. These commissions contribute a contemporary, reflective dimension to the religious spaces in which they are installed, appealing to art audiences that may not necessarily visit the sites otherwise, and demonstrate that contemporary artists find inspiration in sacred sites, their histories, and traditions.

Third, art museums have staged, and are staging, large exhibitions with themes on religion in general, religious figures, or religious artists. Much-cited examples are *100 Artists see God* at the Laguna Art Museum and Institute of Contemporary Art, London (2004–2005); *Traces du Sacré* [*Traces of the Sacred*] in Centre Pompidou, Paris (2008); *Heilig Vuur* [*Holy Fire*] in the Nieuwe Kerk in Amsterdam, with the collection of the Stedelijk Museum that was then closed for renovation (2008); and *The Problem of God* in K21, Düsseldorf (2015–2016). All these recent endeavors are presented as following in the footsteps of what is regarded as the grandmother of exhibitions on religion in modern art, *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890–1985*, organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Gemeentemuseum in The Hague (1986–1987).

It is notable how two of these described developments relate to institutional settings. The contexts of commission and display are important features to this essay's exploration of the postsecular, because the situatedness of visual art in museums—and artistic practices in institutional settings in general—are crucial to the postsecular as an analytical instrument. Religion and art do not exist in secluded, isolated places of artist studios and the private homes of collectors. Instead, the dynamics between religion and art consist of a variety of forms, manifestations, and encounters in both private and public domains. Its manifestations both represent and shape how individuals and collectives experience and interpret religion and the arts.

The contemporary public presence of religion raises a set of significant questions, offering the groundwork for the relevance of the notion of the postsecular. How to characterize the omnipresence of religion in public institutions like art museums? How to make sense of the dynamic between religion and art in public sites, which equally exist to represent its visitors, respond to popular demand, and to educate about the unknown, misunderstood, and underrepresented? And what is the position of artists within this dynamic relationship between religion, artworks, and public institutions? Do they respond to contemporary complexities, envision and present unthreaded territory, or walk their own private spiritual paths, which are translated into their works of art?

The three developments, as described by Anderson at the 2017 symposium, underline religion's visibility in the contemporary art world, both in artistic