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Secularisation as the fragmentation of the sacred and of sacred space

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary conflicts about secularity in 'the West' tend to focus on public space. Although collective Christian heritage means that public space is rarely exclusively neutral, conflicts continue to arise over the relationship between secularity and religious symbolism, and especially over those symbols which derive from religious minorities. This contribution critically considers the designation of space as either sacred or secular in political imaginaries, approaching processes of secularisation as part of a fragmentation of the sacred and of sacred space. We introduce the concept of trans-liminal space: spaces which can contain multiple and potentially conflicting ascriptions of meaning. Conceptualising public space as trans-liminal allows for contemporaneous and competing ascriptions of the secular, the sacred, the secular-sacred, the sacred-secular, without being exclusively grounded in either. Trans-liminality does not preclude public space to be predominantly secular, but it does problematise the phenomenon of normative exclusions of religious symbols from public spaces.

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Introduction

Classical narratives of secularisation tend to emphasise processes of differentiation, rationalisation, and disenchantment. Whether these processes lead to 'religious decline', however defined, and what impact any such decline has on public religiosity remain subjects of debate. Meanwhile, 'the secular' is often contrasted with 'the sacred', which may be equated with a particular form of religiosity, namely that of Latin Christianity. Now this picture has been challenged by the twenty-first century 'return of religion', but also by post-secular formations of the sacred which are no longer intrinsically attached to Christianity, and perhaps even to religion as such (Balkenhol, van den Hemel, and Stengs 2020). This is evident in contemporary forms of nationalism and populism, some of which draw explicitly on Christian symbolism while others do not (Brubaker 2012; Gorski and Perry 2022; van der Tol and Rowley 2021). Little has been written, however, about the implications of such formations of the sacred for public space, which in liberal political theory tends to be constructed as secular with reference to ecclesial space, and public with reference to private space. As a result, abstract narratives about secular public

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space tend to function capaciously, taking priority over the complexities of the public/private and the secular/sacred binaries (Low and Smith 2005), as well as over the sociological differences between highly complex urban and rural spaces (Madanipour 2019).

This contribution challenges the conceptualisation of public space as inherently secular from the particular perspective of the fragmentation of the sacred and of sacred space. We argue that public space in contemporary societies is often a *trans-liminal* space: it can and does contain multiple and potentially conflicting ascriptions of meaning, without being exclusively grounded in either the secular or the sacred (comp. Wydra 2015; de La Ferrière 2020). This does not preclude a particular public space from being widely understood as predominantly secular (or sacred), but it does problematise the imagination of public space as teleologically secular. It is impossible to fully elaborate on and defend a full theory of fragmentation in the space of this contribution. We instead attempt something more modest: a brief overview of the secularisation debate, followed by a historical sketch of one dimension of the fragmentation process – the fragmentation of sacred space within the context of Latin Christendom. We argue that space never was mono-dimensionally sacred even under Christendom and that processes of secularisation have led to a narrowed, and relatively reductive understanding of space.

Secularisation or fragmentation? Time, space, and the trans-liminal public space

'Secularisation theory' is not, and never has been, a unified theory. Instead, it is better understood as a 'family' of theories (Tschannen 1991, 1992). And in much the way that a family may share and pass on certain traits, secularisation theories share and reproduce certain concepts. The most widely shared concept is undoubtedly 'differentiation'. It is found in virtually every variant of secularisation theory (Gorski 2000). Some scholars have even argued that 'differentiation theory' is the conceptual core of the 'secularisation paradigm' (Casanova 1994). The roots of secularisation theory, it is often claimed, are to be found in the work of Émile Durkheim and Max Weber (Durkheim and Simpson 1964; Weber 1958). And like many such claims, this one is exaggerated. The word 'secularisation' appears nowhere in Durkheim's writings and only a few times in Weber's, and then only in his writings on the sociology of law; it is altogether absent from his sociology of religion. In truth, the secularisation paradigm is a child of the mid-twentieth century.

The secularisation family also has various branches, which often squabble with each other. The two largest are the 'declinists' and the 'privatisers' (Berger 1969; Bruce 2002). The former argue that functional differentiation leads to declining religiosity, which is usually operationalised as declining levels of Christian belief and church attendance. On this view, sacred space shrinks as differentiation proceeds. The latter acknowledge that the influence of organised religion in public life has declined, but remain agnostic as to whether private belief is destined to follow suit. Here, the tacit assumption is that the religious *qua* the sacred is increasingly confined to private spaces. The radical cousins of the declinists are the extinctualists (Wilson 1985). They believe that the decline of religion is a harbinger of its complete disappearance and of the ultimate triumph of secular rationality. On this view, the public sphere really will be 'naked' one day, that is, devoid of the sacred (Neuhaus 1984). The optimists in the family are the 'generalisers' (Parsons 1971). They understood the core of religion to be 'values' and contended that the

influence of Christianity, *qua* values, was far from dissipating, and in fact retained a more generalised influence on all 'systems' in society. On this view, every 'sphere' of society has its own form of the sacred, whose roots are to be found in religion.

From the 1990s, all four branches of the secularisation family came under attack. Far from dying or even declining, religious belief seemed to be increasing almost everywhere except in Europe (Berger 1999). Certainly, the United States was characterised by high levels of 'religious vitality' (Warner 1993). Europe was the exception rather than the rule, even as the relevance of religion to public space seemed generalised or culturalised (Berger, Davie, and Fokas 2008). Others focused on 'disenchantment' rather than disbelief. Some pointed to the proliferation of personal spiritualities that eschewed churchly Christianity in favour of more individualistic and hybridised beliefs and practices, often of pre- or non-Christian origin (Albanese 2007; Hanegraaff 1999). Some pointed to sacred forms of popular culture, such as the fetishisation of technology or immersion in online worlds (Josephson-Storm 2017; Kripal 2011). But about this much, the critics agreed: religion was not giving way to rationality in the way that the extinctualists had predicted. Something else was going on. But what was that 'something else'?

For Charles Taylor, it was 'something more': secularisation was not a matter of subtracting religion from a reality in which 'the world' minus 'religion' equals 'the secular'. For him, the something more was what he called 'fullness': the sense that there was something more than the sort of ordinary human flourishing of family, friends, work, and recognition (Taylor 2007). For Talal Asad, it was liberalism with its regime of individualism and privacy. He argued that modern religion always had to be understood in relation to liberal secularism (Asad 2003). For Hans Joas, the something else was 'shattering experiences', by which he meant experiences that destroy our sense of self and open the possibility of a rebirth, be it religious or secular (Joas 2021). Hartmut Rosa charted a *via media* with his theory of 'resonance': a sense of being attuned to or even summoned by something outside of ourselves (Rosa 2019). Different as their language was, all four agreed that there was more to the experience of secular modernity than the 'disenchantment of the world'.

The fundamental problem with various critiques of classical secularisation theory is not that they were all wrong; it was that they were all right, or at least partially so. And one of the peculiarities of these debates is that so little attention is given to physical space. In part, this is because social space is not the same as physical space. Take 'the economy': it does occupy physical space, but it is not (just) physical space. Social space is not always localisable in this way. Nor is it mutually exclusive. Physical space that is occupied by, say, a restaurant, is part of 'the economy', but it is also part of 'culture' too. But neither can social space exist wholly outside of physical space. Borrowing a term from philosophy, one could say that social space 'supervenes' on physical space. Thus, when we talk of 'the sacred' or 'the secular', we unavoidably talk of 'space' as well. There are many types of sacred space of course, and almost any space can be potentially sacred to a particular person or group – but secular to another. This ambiguity in the meaning of space is what makes trans-liminality possible: the ascription of multiple meanings to the same space.

Another peculiarity is that debates on secularisation tend to overlook how secularisation assumes a narrowed understanding of time, within which a given space is held to be either sacred or secular. Ascriptions of meaning to time transcend the merely mundane and chronological, and may contain various typological temporalities: metaphors and

ideas that capture how individuals, communities, and societies understand themselves in space and time, and how they differentiate themselves from others (Koselleck 1979; Fabian 1983; van der Tol and Rowley 2021). Latin Christianity entertained many such typological temporalities, for example, through understanding time as 'exilic', 'eschatological', or speaking of people as already or not yet 'redeemed'. One could therefore say that trans-liminality has been a latent possibility within the Christian imagination of time. In light of this, an assertion of the secular at the expense of the sacred in public space could express a narrowed conception of time, and thereby a narrowed conception of space. It is, however, perhaps not so different from post-modern designations of time, such as 'post-Christian', 'post-secular', as well as 'post-colonial', which also indicate certain ascriptions of meaning to time. Moreover, time might be understood in terms of the secular-sacred, for example when right-wing populisms draw on secular Christian apparatuses, referring to eschatological themes (Cremer 2022; van der Tol and Rowley 2021; Strømmen and Schmiedel 2020). Their lip-service to Christianity is of course expressed by a sacralisation and ascription of final authority to 'the people', the nation (Chaplin 2021).

In the context of the modern sacred-secular 'divide', public space has often been interpreted as an agent of the secular which is crowding out sacred space or driving a wedge in the unity of the sacred and of sacred space. The emphasis on public space as a secular space has certainly made many liberal societies less hospitable to public expressions of religiosity, especially where certain beliefs or behaviours are expected to remain 'behind the front door' or confined to spaces that are officially designated for worship (Luckmann 1967; Bowen 2007; Knoblauch 2003; Khomyakov 2013). Even so, religion can hardly be contained in those spaces. Religious communities may engage in social initiatives (Hjelm 2014) or otherwise seek what David Herbert calls '*re*-publicization', for example through media and politics (Herbert 2011). 'Republicization' may be consistent with the idea that space can be secular as well as sacred. For example, someone might see the public space as legally or sociologically secular, but also ascribe religious layers of meaning to that space based on the nature of their (religious) activities in public spaces. In this framework, secularity may be viewed by some as a theological anomaly to the unity of the sacred and of sacred space, but one which may be theologically tolerated in time and space precisely because the Christian layering of time allows for the designation of secular space as trans-temporally sacred (i.e. sacred in its teleology, secular in appearance).

Secular and sacred layers of meaning need not be in tension with each other, but conflicts may arise when there is disagreement about the secularity or sacrality of a particular space, as when someone feels they should be able to wear a certain religious dress, have the freedom to speak about their faith, or invoke the freedom of conscience in a particular space that others consider 'public' and 'secular'. But religions and even religious people are not always on an equal footing when and where these tensions emerge, especially where 'the secular' tends to be pitted against 'the religious'. Stark differences exist in the visibility of certain religious identities and practices, often depending on the use of religious dress and the possibility of concealing them, or indeed the mandate to conceal them. The dynamics of visibility greatly depend on the willingness of dominant groups within a society to accept that public space is shared with minorities. Concealing can also happen through unveiling: this is exemplified by the prohibition of the face-veil in public spaces in many European states as well as ongoing discussions

about the hijab in the workspace, especially in the absence of well-articulated occupational requirements; or, the unwillingness to provide alternatives, e.g. the sports hijab, a uniformed hijab, etc (van der Tol 2020; Jeldtoft and Nielsen 2012). The fact that these issues emerge and may gain political traction demonstrates the contemporaneous ascription of secular and sacred meanings to space, and the reality that this contemporaneity causes theoretical tension that may translate into political conflict.

For all these reasons, we believe public space can and should be understood trans-liminally, as neither exclusively secular nor sacred, and that arguments to the contrary are best understood as assertions of privilege and power. The meaning of shared space is dependent on different layers of meaning that are ascribed to it, which may be secular, sacred, secular-sacred, sacred-secular and so forth – all of which are inherently relational and therefore contestable. The insistence on a particular meaning can marginalise other layers of meaning, especially when backed by the law or the force of power, but it does not change the capacity for space to contain multiple layers of meaning in principle. In this sense, (public) space is *trans-liminal*. It is trans-liminal because it could entertain different forms of sacralities and secularities; it could contain different layers of meaning, some of which might appear to be incompatible; and it maintains the possibility to mediate the 'space' or distance that may exist between people because of different convictions, ideologies, practices, ideas. This mediating dimension to public space depends on access to, and presence and participation in public space, something which tends to be limited by overly restrictive policies that may target religious as well as ethnic minorities, as well as by intolerance.

Trans-liminality does not imply that public space is a free-for-all. It is about normatively creating space for different forms of sacralisation in public space, both for religious and secular forms of sacralisation, and in some cases for the secular, and thereby levelling some of the persistent inequalities between them. This is important, because tolerance and coexistence have historically been dependent on societies' capacities to contain differences within shared, public, or non-private space or spaces. Trans-liminality is to take a different point of vantage: instead of reasoning from dominance through the binary of the secular and the sacred, it would mean taking an interest in ways that ascriptions of meaning to space can coexist irrespective of dominance. In this sense, the trans-liminality of space might offer a political framework for pluralistic coexistence, especially when societies are strongly divided over the relationship between religion, culture, and society. To make this concrete: if public space is not inherently secular, the display of religious symbols would not be a violation of the secular principle, or to put it differently, the display of religious symbols, or rather, the personal expression of faith, is only problematic insofar as public space is conceived to be exclusively secular. The exclusion of religious symbols is more than symbolic: it is a refusal to entertain particular identities as part of the common story. It is precisely the expectation of non-interruption of the stories we tell about secularity that puts sustainable coexistence at risk.

The confessional age: the monopoly of the sacred broken and re-scaled

Christian imaginations have historically entertained a layering of temporalities and spatialities, which despite different functions or vocations coalesced around the sacred unity of God. In this sense, Latin Christendom was always fractalised: it held together

a monopolisation of the sacred, grounded in the Eucharistic union with the transcendental unity of God, with a plurality of sacred spaces (van der Tol 2020). Grounded in the *Imago Dei*, the vocation of man was to resemble the Divine in a stratification of individual and collective expressions of the sacred. From the lowliest parish church through the most opulent archbishopric to the Vatican itself, as well as through patchworks of abbeys, orders, and cloisters, the plurality of sacred spaces hypostasised in the unity of the sacred and of sacred space. This understanding of the world was captured in the imaginary of the *corpus christianum*, the body of Christ, which simultaneously alluded to the figure of Christ and the body of believers partaking in Christ through the Eucharist. The altar, as the space of transubstantiation, was the centre of this unity of the sacred and of sacred space.

It is, however, not the case that the Roman Catholic Church enforced uniformity to reinforce a unity of the sacred, as is sometimes thought or assumed based on collective memories of the persecution of Protestants in the early modern period (Luria 2005). This is of course consistent with the plurality of sacred spaces: religious practice did not need complete uniformity to reflect the transcendental unity of God. Instead, Christian practice existed as a spectrum or a bandwidth in beliefs and behaviours, in which the imaginary of unity was premised on the construction of others more than the unification of religious practice; for example Jews, Muslims, and heretics – those who were temporally othered as those awaiting conversion or those whose faults were presumed to be temporal, and thus would not threaten the oneness of the Eucharistic community indefinitely (Lopez 2016; Bejczy 1997). Some were viciously persecuted, like the Albigensians or Cathars, who had developed their own structures of ownership and authority over the sacred, based on a rather stringent duality of good and evil in space and time and body, and from which only sanctified spirits would escape (Barber 2014). Yet others began to be tolerated based on a developing canonical concept of toleration as a political tool. The political concept of toleration went beyond the theological virtue of enduring evil (as opposed to the good), and came to signify the discretionary competences of local authorities.

The margin of error that made one eligible for toleration was significant, even as eventual conversion or conformity was assumed. Historical research suggests that the push for conformity became stronger when the Roman monopoly came under pressure – most notably during the period known as the era of Reformations, or the confessional age – and was enforced by Catholic as well as Protestant rulers (Kaplan 2007; Te Brake 2017; Terpstra 2014). The Protestant Reformation (Lutheran, Reformed, Anabaptist) is often identified with the beginnings of secularisation, for example through the decline of the power of the Holy See, the emergence of new modes of enquiry and more widely available print, as well as the focus on the religious responsibility of the individual. In return, the Counter-Reformation is often read as a re-sacralisation, for example through the reassertion of episcopal authority, the creation of new religious orders, and efforts to improve lay discipline and education. What is less appreciated is how the Reformations transformed the fractalised nature of Christendom, especially as Eucharistic unity was broken, the plurality of sacred spaces waned under the influence of rising Protestantism, and new states began to emerge. Is it possible to understand the effects of the Reformations as a fragmentation of sacred space?

In Latin Christianity, nothing was of greater significance to the fragmentation of the sacred than the separation of the Eucharistic table between Rome and the churches of the Reformation. The intellectual fury of the 'Eucharistic debates' may puzzle secular moderns,

but contemporaries understood perfectly what was at stake: control over the sacred itself. The Heidelberg Catechism even dared to label the Catholic Eucharist 'cursed' (Article 80), thus asserting that the Roman Catholic Church did not embody the true representation of Christianity. Similarly, the Vatican did not recognise the churches of the Reformation, also asserting its monopoly over the sacred. Whether the multiplication of fractalisations constituted a fragmentation of the sacred depends on one's theological perspectives and commitments, but from a sociological perspective, one might argue that this in fact represented a fragmentation of the sacred. However, the transformation of the sacred and of sacred space expressed itself differently locally, through emerging practices of toleration, dissimulation, and, however rarely, coexistence (Kaplan 2007; Tutino 2006; Walsham 2006).

The underlying question was whether rival churches would endeavour to monopolise sacred spaces, and thus rescale the *corpus christianum* to smaller contexts. In Lutheran regions such as Scandinavia and the Holy Roman Empire, for example, the Lutheran Church tended to take the place of the Catholic Church. Here, it would be more accurate to speak of downscaling as the *corpus* came to coincide with the relevant administrative entities, notably but not exclusively under the influence of the *cuius regio, eius religio* logic. This logic had previously been applied in the East Hungarian Kingdom in the Edict of Turda (1568), which allowed local Unitarian, Catholic, Lutheran, and Reformed communities to elect their religious leaders. In predominantly Calvinist or Reformed regions, by contrast, confessional states usually failed to emerge. This was partly due to the more sectarian character of Calvinism and the more decentralised organisation of the Reformed churches, with the Church of England being the exception. Successful confessionalisation required a strong state as well as a centralised church. Even so, Reformed elites were socially and politically powerful, as in the Low Countries where the Reformed church asserted a monopoly over all 'public' worship and tolerated other forms of Christianity only insofar as they were confined to 'private' spaces like the so-called hidden churches (Kaplan 2007). Many smaller entities that were led by Reformed elites, like cities, villages, and regions, nevertheless adopted a range of practices in toleration that were consistent with the imaginary of a downscaled *corpus* (van der Tol 2020).

One might say that Protestant attempts at re-embodying the *corpus christianum* implied fragmentation as well as consolidation and homogenisation of sacred space: fragmentation insofar as new established churches provided frameworks for political unity, as well as the concentration of religious life in the parish as opposed to non-church spaces such as cloisters, confraternities, and pious foundations. Protestant political thought increasingly drew on a distinction between nature and grace. This distinction helped in making sense of persistent differences beyond the confines of the church and entertained more explicit distinctions between the roles of ecclesial and civil authorities, often with regard to different temporalities: civil authorities as guardians of mundane time, whereas the Communion Table, with ecclesial authorities as its guardians, bound together sacred and mundane time. Concurrently, the unavoidable necessity to integrate relatively large communities of Catholics into now Protestant spaces created a new set of questions about the feasibility of maintaining a conceptual oneness of the sacred and of sacred spaces.

In Catholic regions such as Spain and France, meanwhile, sacred spaces proliferated and became more heterogeneous. New clerical and lay orders were founded, and new sacred

sites and pilgrimage routes were created. Marian veneration underwent a vast expansion, as did the pilgrimage to the shrine of St James in Spain's Santiago de Compostela. But the narrative cannot be that Catholic regions merely saw a proliferation and pluralisation of sacred spaces. One might say that the fractalised nature of the Roman Church now integrated distinct administrative bodies, for example, where crowned heads gained more authority in religious matters. Yet this might be understood as part of a narrative of heterogenisation, whilst the unity of the structure still revolved around the Eucharist, which was eventually under the authority of the Pope. However, there too, was a fragmentation *vis-à-vis* the churches of the Reformation within and beyond their administrative entities, which means that the Catholic monopolisation of sacred space would not hold indefinitely either.

Tensions around the fragmentation of sacred space were also reflected in emerging practices of toleration, which tended to favour outward unity, outward conformity, and dissimulation. Historians Benjamin Kaplan and Wayne te Brake describe a continuum of practices of toleration and intolerance, ranging from forced exile, the right to private worship, the use of ordinary buildings for religious practices, and the sharing of church buildings through practices of parity (Kaplan 2002, 2007; Te Brake 2017). Concerns over visibility and the contested potential for local coexistence of Catholic and Protestant fractalisations of the sacred bind these practices together. Yet they also embodied different attitudes to the potential fragmentation of the sacred and of sacred space, mediated through the categories of public and private. For example, freedom of religion in private space, e.g. the home or a tolerated church venue, did not fragment the imaginary oneness of the *corpus* as much as the sharing of the same church building or permission to hold a procession would in multi-confessional communities. The latter certainly implied a compartmentalisation of sacred space: it was no longer trans-temporally exclusive as the same space could accommodate multiple sacralities.

Early modernity thus saw a fragmentation of the sacred and of sacred spaces on multiple fronts. By around 1700, the confessional map of Europe consisted of three main zones: Lutheran confessional states in the North, Catholic ones in the South, bisected by a crescent-shaped, multi-confessional band running southeast from the British Isles, down through the Low Countries and the Rhineland, on to Switzerland and then northeast through Czech and Magyar lands to Poland. Whereas the significance of civil authorities increased, partially as a result of the Reformations, what might be tentatively called the beginning of secular space still concerned a secularity that was subsumed in the order of the sacred and of sacred space. In each of those areas, practices of toleration at once affirmed an imaginary oneness as well as a fragmentation of spaces, and the possibilities of sharing space gave rise to the contemporaneous ascription of rival sacralities. It shows that although most of these societies struggled to accept minority claims to the sacred or to share sacred spaces, in practice the messy realities of toleration implied the *de facto* sharing of sacred spaces, even as churches continued to draw sharp boundaries.

The rise of nation-states: the sacred dislocated, de-localised, and re-embodied

The late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries typically figure as a pivotal period in secularisation narratives, and understandably so. After all, this was the era of

enlightenments and the French Revolution, as well as the Industrial Revolution and early socialist movements. However, none of these movements were as 'secular' as some orthodox secularisation theorists may like to claim – all had religious strands and influences (Desan 1990; Sorkin 2018; Thompson 1964). Moreover, apart from France, most Western European countries did not develop a clear separation of church and state, much less a coherent theory of state secularism or secular space. That said, nineteenth century history especially is full of localised as well as nationalised conflicts over the relationship between religion and public space (van der Tol 2020). These conflicts were not necessarily sought out by religious or political moderates. They tended to be shaped by polarisation between on the one hand what Charles Taylor has called 'exclusive humanism', that is, humanism that excludes 'transcendence', and on the other hand, what Taylor has called 'paleo-Durkheimianism', that is, revivalism that sought to reintegrate public and private into a religious and political unity (Taylor 2007). Moreover, new forms of secular sacralisations emerged, for example that of national space, but also new clubs and orders such as the Sons of Liberty or the Jacobin clubs that created sacralised spaces of their own. In these and other ways, new and competing forms of sacrality were being forged, and at every imaginable scale.

This period also marks a key turning point in our fragmentation narrative. The rise of nation-states, that is in Western Europe, embodies a secular reiteration of the *corpus christianum* in its binding together of people, space, and a political identity. Although the literature is divided over the question of whether the idea of the nation originated in early modernity or in the nineteenth century, and whether or not it has roots in a precedent of ancient biblical Israel, the function of nation in the modern state is pronounced (see e.g. Gellner 1983; Smith 2003). The idea of nationhood serves as an anchor of common identity, specifically constructed in political philosophy to overcome the religious divisions of early modernity. Discourse on nationhood has long focused on its ethnic, religious, and racial properties, dividing scholars on the question of whether or not European nation-states can be understood as primarily ethnic or civic (Greenfeld 1996; Kohn 1944). However, nations also relate to the sacred in that nationhood potentially dislocates, de-localises, and re-embodies the sacred. It dislocates the sacred by confining it to spaces that are conceived of as sacred as opposed to secular, as well as clerical as opposed to lay; it de-localises the sacred by moving the centre of identity of a body politic from the altar to national identity and sovereignty; and it re-embodies the sacred in the potential sacralisation of nationhood through forms of nationalism.

At the same time, the laicisation of the sacred did not imply a necessary contrast with religion, even as secularisation theories tend to focus on the place of the secular *vis-à-vis* the sacred – that is, the sacred as it was then manifested: the church (Shakman Hurd 2004). None of the European nation-states developed as straightforward secularised states, and this shows in ongoing conflict over the control over space. This is evidenced from conflicts over religious processions in nineteenth century France (D'Hollander 2004). For example, the question was raised if processions violated secular space only when clerics participated (a theological *sine-qua-non*). In response to procession bans, local solutions included processions of the congregation, with clerics participating only from the church porch. Moreover, conflict broke out over the use of church buildings and burial spaces for non-religious ceremonies and burials. These questions signal that neither the secular nor the sacred could be easily mapped onto specific spaces. Instead, they can only

be mapped onto specific spaces if one assumes a narrower temporality of space, e.g. secular space exists in secular time (comp. Heidegger 1962). And this has the power to create ideological conflict over space, and the questioning of the place of religion within space that is conceived of as inherently secular. This leads us to discuss two specific issues: 1) the dislocation of the religiously sacred and 2) new forms of religious sacralisation that emphasise personal holiness.

First, the dislocation of the sacred is implied where space is designated as exclusively secular. This narrowed temporal perspective on the secular resembles the unity of space that Christian majorities asserted in the structures of Christendom, but without the potential to include allusions to the sacred in a fractalised web of social relationships. In other words, public space begins to lose its capacity to contain multiple ascriptions of meaning insofar as they pertain to the sacred – in this context, religion. Thus, the fragmentation of secular space might also be understood as the isolation of the secular within the immanent frame. It is reductive in the sense that public space as an exclusively secular space forces the sacred (e.g. religion) to exist in spatial seclusion, for example, in the privacy of the home, or within the context of places of worship, and in some cases, even in specific buildings that are designated as places of worship. If applied consistently, even personal expressions of connections to the sacred become suspect, e.g. religious symbols that are displayed in public space, or the performance of religious rituals in public space. The point is not that every European state followed this trajectory – in fact most did not. What matters is that the imaginary of public space as an exclusively secular space has the potential to dislocate the sacred and limits the conditions for peaceful coexistence.

Moreover, secularisation narratives tend to focus on the historically most significant churches, whereas most churches, whether large or small, existed as minority churches under the *ancien régime*. This is relevant because the effects of secularisation may be different for each of them. For example, some minority churches may have gradually received greater protections, been able to erect church buildings in the middle of towns and villages, and establish their own schools, and thus gained greater visibility and cultural traction. For example, the 1905 French law on the Separation of Churches and the State could not have been established without the support of Protestant, atheist, and Jewish minorities in a culturally Catholic France (Frankel 1992). Secularisation also transformed the parameters of belonging and made citizenship a possibility for religious minorities, including Jewish minorities, which in principle was a significant step up from regimes of toleration. But belonging was not blind to issues of ethnicity, race, and religion, and required full allegiance to the project of the nation (van der Tol 2021). In Europe, ideas of nationhood created new exclusions and incompatibilities, and in the United States, race continued to dictate the parameters and boundaries of belonging. Even as minority religions may have gained greater standing in secular public space, *qua* voluntary associations who could gain legal personality, this would not undo the principal dislocation of the sacred from public space. At the same time, the secular order of states and of (human) rights became one of the most important tools through which religious communities could uphold the unity of the sacred and of sacred space – and trans-temporally also of public space, regardless of whether or not they could monopolise power. To put it differently, the secular order is a precondition for the unity of the sacred and of sacred space in modernity.

Second, the dislocation of the sacred triggered new forms of sacralisation, often aimed at personal holiness, or a holiness of 'the heart'. The late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw global missions, outbursts of religious 'awakenings' in North America and across the European continent, and the growth of trans-national Christian solidarity movements (McLeod 1990). The awakenings and rise of heart-focused religion furthered the fragmentation of the sacred in several ways. On the one hand, it delocalised sacred space: for the revival preacher, a sacred space could be any space where individual believers came together, perhaps as a spiritual iteration of a sacred space that revolves around the parish church or a church building. On the other hand, they re-localised sacred space within the human heart, focusing on conversion even among the churched. The sacred now emanated from within, regardless of how space might be understood, perhaps especially where expressions of the sacred were contested in public space. It might be tempting to read pietism as an expression of ultra-individuality; this would cause one to overlook the importance of the trans-temporal as well as trans-spatial character of these 'sacred communities'.

However, the awakenings and focus on 'the heart' were also criticised from within Christianity. They gained little traction in Catholic regions, and they were met with fierce opposition from within the Protestant world as well. The heart religion of the German Pietists was virulently opposed by the rationalist religion of the 'Old Lutheran' theologians and German idealist philosophers, for whom systematic doctrine was more important than specific individual experiences of faith. And the mobile revivalist ministries of the First Great Awakening in North America were also met with furious pushback from settled parish clergy, who located the sacred in the local religious community, rather than the individual heart. It is impossible to discuss all forms of sacralisation both within and outside Christianity – for the purposes of this contribution, we would like to draw out several issues: 1) that exclusive secularity has the potential to dislocate the religiously sacred; 2) that religious communities themselves negotiated sacred space both within traditional expressions of Christianity as well as outside, through an exploration of the self as a location of the sacred; 3) that the re-scaling of sacred spaces occurred in response to the transformation of public space in the nation-state; and 4) that forms of secular sacralisation, such as the singling out of national identity, could potentially re-embody the sacred.

New forms of sacralisation: personal purity

If anything, the fragmentation of sacred space has heightened the importance of personal purity within what remains of Latin Christendom. For the individual, the unity of the sacred and of sacred space *in their experience* may well become dependent on how they choose to move through an increasing variety of spaces. They may, for example, choose to build their friendships, leisure time, and communal activities around their religious community, thus spending time in fragments of sacred space. This is, of course, encouraged by Christian influencers such as Rod Dreher and Stanley Hauerwas through ideas of the *Benedict Option* and the ideology of counterculturalism. Moreover, personal purity and holiness is performed through a lifestyle that is disciplined by faith, perhaps through prayer or ritual, but notably also through modest dress and sexual purity (Dreher 2018; Hauerwas and Willimon 1989). In these ways, the individual might maintain a measure of sacredness in their body.

As issues over sex, gender, and reproduction have become paramount in conflicts over the relationship between religion and society, sexual ethics offer a unique opportunity to reassert the sacred within and through the body (Barr 2021; Moslener 2015). This assertion of the sacred in one's personal and communal life expresses an effort to preserve one, uncontested sacred space: one's physical body and the inner self. This longing for the unity of the sacred and of sacred spaces might grow stronger the more one's experience in public space is incongruent with one's religious commitments.

It is not just the fragmentation of sacred space that is at play here, but also its inevitable consequence: the pluralisation of the sacred and of sacred spaces. The most obvious example is religious pluralism and the pressure that is placed on religious others to feel and appear authentic, especially when the differences between that person's faith or faith community and 'the world' feel pronounced. An example of this might be the public visibility of one's identity, especially when this identity can hardly be concealed: think of publicly displayed religious symbols or patterns of behaviour. Discourses on the visibility of religious symbols tend to focus on what certain religious symbols are perceived to communicate: a political message, an attempt at proselytising, a failure of neutrality, etc. What is often overlooked, however, is how religious symbols assist in protecting the unity of the sacred and of sacred spaces *in someone's personal experience*. As such they contribute to the protection of one's identity within contested space, for oneself and for others who may share that identity. Whereas religious symbols have long been understood as 'manifestations' of religion, might it be possible for personal religious symbols to embody the sacred before manifesting it? When seen from this perspective, the restriction of personal religious symbols in public space, the workspace, and even in schools may constitute a deeply felt interference with one's personal experience of faith, and with the integrity of the personal as well as communal orientation to the sacred.

Personal purity may also be expressed through the assertion of the freedom of conscience where a certain conformity of behaviour is expected in public spaces. In American First Amendment litigation, much attention has been given to services that are provided to same-sex couples and the performance of certain duties that may be in conflict with one's religious identity. In Europe, similar arguments may be made about mandatory vaccinations or the performance of certain forms of medical treatment pertaining to the beginning and end of life. Without entering into the details of such cases, the theoretical point is that conscience is, perhaps as a symbol of Protestant culture, an ultra-personal dimension to one's experience of faith and identity. A requirement to do something that may be at odds with one's faith – for which there might be compelling reasons – breaks the unity of the sacred and of sacred space, not only with one's body in action, but also with one's mind through perceived complicity in something one may regard as unholy. If one's personal purity is regarded as a residue of the sacred, it should not come as a surprise that conflicts over gender and sexuality are often fought with such intensity, and tend to contract major theories about the role and place of religion in society.

New forms of sacralisation: the return of sacred politics?

Processes of fragmentation also created the 'raw materials' for new secular as well as religious assemblages of the sacred and of sacred space. Perhaps the two most important

examples within western liberal democracies today are 'nationalism' on the one hand, and 'progressivism' on the other (Brubaker 2017; Gorski and Perry 2022). Both have historical roots in Latin Christianity: nationalism in Christian claims to supersede ancient biblical Israel as God's 'chosen people' (Gorski 2000; Smith 2003; Johnson 2021), and progressivism in 'postmillennial' understandings of Christian eschatology (Heilman, Voegelin, and Embry 2004; Löwith 2011; Voegelin 1952). But both have been at least partially severed from those roots as well.

The holy trinity of nationalist ideology is people, place, and belonging (Gorski 2000; O'Brien 1988). Nationalism has a specific territorial aspect, in which the national space functions as a secular-sacred space. To nationalists, it is of vital importance that this space is set apart and preserved from intrusions of ethno-cultural or ethno-religious others, not simply because of jobs or prosperity, but because – according to them – the nation needs to be preserved, and national space must not be 'polluted' or 'diluted'. It might be tempting to understand nationalism and even religious nationalism as a form of recrudescent religiosity. But this is an error. Many supporters of (religious) nationalism are not themselves particularly religious in any conventional sense. Some are even avowed atheists (Cremer 2022). For them, religion – which may be Christianity, but globally may also refer to Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, or Confucianism – serves as a marker of ethnicity, and sometimes as an alibi for racism (Bell 2014; Jaffrelot 2021; Kaplan 2005; Tambiah 1992). Of course, it also serves as a potential bridge to the traditionally religious, whose religious nationalism might be genuinely grounded in theological beliefs. Specifically, this might concern issues of gender, sexuality from the perspective of the reproduction of the nation, which may intersect with religious anti-genderism and traditionalism (Yuval-Davis 1997). One of the distinctive features of contemporary religious nationalism in liberal democracies is that they attract not only religious conservatives, but also white nationalists.

Conservative cultural critics often point to 'political correctness' and 'wokeness' as a much greater threat to liberal ideals. Whatever one thinks of this threat assessment, it is undeniably the case that contemporary left-wing movements do sometimes have a quasi-religious aspect. Insofar as they refer to the sacred, they allude to something that is ultimate, right, or the echo of some uncontested good, that which should not be resisted and demands eventual submission. Insofar as they embody an aspiration of the sacred, they carry a risk of exclusiveness which renders them immune to challenge or critique. And, more relevantly, they are very much concerned with the sacralisation of space. The sacred space in question is not typically the territory of the nation, but of a particular, usually localised, community. Consider the example of university campuses, communities that have become the focus of many recent debates about free speech. There, the external others might be political or religious conservatives, who are accused of harbouring 'politically incorrect' views, typically about race, class, gender or sexuality. The internal others might be monuments of historic figures who espoused such views. Student activists may have good reasons to seek to exclude certain people or dismantle certain memorials, but this also proliferates conflicts with those who advocate for free speech and with traditionalists who might defend 'history', 'tradition', or 'culture'.

How do these new sacralisations impact on our understanding of public space? The layering of temporalities in Christendom was an important resource for containing differences within mundane time and space: time yielded for deliberation, consideration,

and potentially conversion. Post-secular sacralisations tend to operate on a much narrower conception of time, and perhaps this invigorates the potential for conflict: conflict between actors in public life over the nature of space, and the place of new sacralisations within space, and the negotiation of conflict within mundane space and time. If our experience of time has become temporally more limited, theorisations of secularisation could be aided by re-imagining public space as layered, and as we argue, trans-liminal. Understanding public space as trans-liminal removes more or less stable ascriptions of meaning to space that pertain to the old binary of the secular and the sacred. Instead, trans-liminality acknowledges that the meaning of space always is in some way constructed. Whereas the rise of secular public space served a clear objective, namely to remove the dominance of one particular form of Christianity, the goalposts of the post-secular are different, and an ongoing emphasis on secular public space creates unsustainable inequalities.

Conclusion

The rise of the secular-sacred as well as new forms of religious sacralisation through personal, communal, and political engagement challenge what have long been thought to be the secular formations of public space. Public space may not have a fixed character as secular space as opposed to sacred or religious space. Instead, public space negotiates ascriptions of meaning across a layering of temporalities and spatialities, in which the sacred and sacred space are but fragmented. In this sense, public space is trans-liminal: it can contain various ascriptions of meaning, even inherently incompatible ones, without exclusively or inherently representing any. However, some ascriptions of meaning may gain relative dominance over others, and in liberal constitutional states have done so, like the narrative of public space as an inherently secular or non-religious space.

Religious individuals and religious communities may attempt to reharmonise the unity of the sacred and of sacred space *within their experience*, for example through an emphasis on personal purity or through community withdrawal. For some, a tenuous unity of the sacred and of sacred space may be approximated under conditions of fragmentation: it is the liberal constitutional order and its commitment to the protection of religious freedom that allows for a fragmented reharmonisation. This is enabled by the layering of temporalities in Christianity, which through a tolerance of evils or even the suspension of judgement could allow for a measure of incongruence of temporalities and spatialities. Fundamentally, however, these forms of sacralisation reject the fragmentation of the sacred and of sacred space as final.

Conversely, secular sacralisations – particularly nationalism – cannot similarly draw on a layering of temporalities to contain such incongruences, even as nationalist movements do refer to idealisations of the past and certain projections of an otherwise uncertain future. The secular sacralisation that nationalism embodies fundamentally lacks the transcendental temporalities which allow for the temporal incongruences that have created the possibility for Christianity to grapple with secularisation in time and space. In this sense the secular-sacred is indebted to both the uncompromising character of 'the secular' as well as to the ultimate character of the good or the sacred – the nation, in their estimation. The tensions that emerge from exclusive claims to public space may not be so

different between states that have developed as relatively secular and states that lean into right-wing nationalism: either may question the full political and spatial inclusion of minorities.

Understanding secularisation as the fragmentation of the sacred and of sacred space perhaps helps us to understand some of the intensity of contemporary conflicts that emerge over claims to public space. Moreover, this approach reminds us that public space does not have to be exclusively secular or sacred: such designations stem from power and privilege, and not from the complex social realities that these designations may attempt to marginalise.

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