

# Disenchanting secularism (or the cultivation of soul) as pedagogy in resistance to populist racism and colonial structures in the academy

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This article explores pedagogic strategies for resisting the racism of contemporary populism and age-old coloniality through challenging secularism in the academy, especially in social theory. Secularism sustains racism and imperialism in the contemporary academy and is inscribed, in part, through the norms of social theory. Post-secular social theory has been positioned by some as the decolonial answer, but often replicates the most problematic aspects of secularism. Whereas post-secularism affirms the previously denigrated side of the secular vs religious dualism, I am more interested in unworking those classificatory schemas, setting the critical thought of religious teachers *in relation to* ‘secular’ social and political theorists such that boundaries erode. The ambition in this is to resist the hierarchical orderings of knowledge that pit Islamic, indigenous, feminised subjectivity as backwards, dangerous or intrinsically inferior to secular, Christian, rational knowledge. It is also to disenchant the secular gods (progress, money, growth, health) and hold open space for critical play in relation to the transcendental—to create a permissive, legitimising, space for students’ spiritual dimension, *conocimiento* or the ‘cultivation of soul’. The article draws theoretical inspiration from Gloria Anzaldúa, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Sylvia Wynter. It also draws on a practical experiment in disenchanting secularism through teaching an undergraduate module in social theory called Capitalism and Religion.

**Keywords:** decolonising social theory; pedagogies of resistance; racism; secularism

## Introduction

This article explores pedagogic strategies to survive and resist torrents of populist racism and authoritarianism in the university that involve challenging secularism, especially in social theory. Secularism is deeply imbricated in the age-old coloniality of knowledge, which legitimises and partially effects the racial hierarchies and genocidal thrust of imperialist and extractive capital. In the era of neoliberal authoritarianism, the old supremacist secularism of the academy has recombined with Islamophobia in the service of ‘counter-terror’ and racialised policing. In universities, such policing stretches from very concrete structural violence, such as the UK’s Prevent Agenda, to far more subtle forms of hostility that pattern discomfort and

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disqualify forms of subjectivity that resist. Taking inspiration from Gloria Anzaldúa, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Sylvia Wynter, the article explores pedagogies that seek to cofound supremacist secularism, as well as to cultivate spiritual-activism, *conocimiento*, ethical capacity and modes of being human that already exist beyond the realm of Man.

The article begins with a search for inspiration. I explore two essays (by Anzaldúa and by Spivak) that seem to articulate a common call to challenge secularism and cultivate imaginative/spiritual pedagogies as a vital part of our political response to the racist-populism and vengeful nationalism that characterised the USA in the wake of 9/11 2001. That moment of dissociation and woundedness foreshadows our own. I then move on to a discussion of secularism as the ‘coloniality of social theory’, identifying imbrications of secularism with imperialism and reflecting on social theory as an especially intense vector of supremacist secularism in the academy. The recent post-secular turn in social theory is then considered as a potential source of decolonial and anti-racist pedagogy, as best engendered in the work of Boaventura de Sousa Santos. I argue that post-secularism is a limited approach. I then go on to detail some of my own teaching practice—a pedagogic experiment in disenchanting the secularism of social theory through teaching an undergraduate social theory module on Capitalism and Religion. I attempt to articulate the approach of the module by drawing on Dipesh Chakrabarty’s strategies for provincialising Europe. Whereas post-secularism affirms the previously denigrated side of the secular vs religious dualism, I want to unwork those classificatory schemas, setting the critical thought of religious teachers in relation to mainstream social and political theorists such that boundaries erode. The final section of the article returns to weaving the threads of theory and inspiration, to call for a shift from post-secularism to the cultivation of soul as decolonial anti-racist pedagogy.

### **Drawing inspiration from Anzaldúa and Spivak**

In 2002, Anzaldúa wrote an essay in resistance to the warmongering of the Bush administration, the wars on terror and Afghanistan, and the populist racist nationalism that was being fomented at the time as the dominant US response to 9/11. The essay is entitled ‘Let us be the healing of the wound: The Coyolxauhqui imperative – La sombra y el sueño’ (Anzaldúa, 2015).

The 9/11 attack has cracked the world open, or rather revealed the world as already cracked, leaving her/them/us wounded, disorientated, caught between clashing realities, commitments and authorities; recognising our own and other’s failures and complicity with violence. She writes: ‘Chaotic disruptions, violence, and death catapult us into the Coyolxauhqui state of disassociation and fragmentation that characterises our times. A collective shadow – made up of the destructive aspects, psychic wounds, and splits in our own culture – is aroused, we are forced to confront it’ (Anzaldúa, 2015: 18).

In this nepantla space—torn between ways—we face both the inevitability of transformation and the possibility of raising consciousness. She continues:

In trying to make sense of what's happening, some of us come into deep awareness (conocimiento) of political and spiritual situations and the unconscious mechanisms that abet hate, intolerance, and discord. I name this searching, enquiring, and healing consciousness "conocimiento". (Anzaldúa, 2015: 17)

As we thrash about in our inner and external struggling grounds trying to get our bearings, we totter between two paths: the path of desconocimiento leads human consciousness into ignorance, fear, and hatred. It succumbs to righteous judgement and withdraws into separation and domination, pushing most of us into retaliatory acts of further rampage, which begets more violence. This easier path uses force and violence to socially construct our nation. Conocimiento, the more difficult path, leads to awakening, insights, understandings, realisations, courage, and the motivation to engage in concrete ways with the potential to bring us into compassionate interactions. Self-righteousness creates the abyss; conocimiento build bridges across it. En estos tiempos de la Llorona we must use creativity to jolt us into awareness of our spiritual/political problems and other major global tragedies so that we can repair el daño. (Anzaldúa, 2015: 19)

The path of conocimiento is the alternative to a politics of retribution, righteousness and right-wing populism. Anzaldúa emphasises that this is a path that specifically brings together the spiritual and the political: 'engaging the spirit in confronting our social sickness' (Anzaldúa, 2015: 19). Conocimiento is a spiritual-political-material process of transformation that entails community building, passionate dreaming, deepening awareness, integrative perception, becoming conscious of spirit and openness to healing as a perpetual, unfinishable, process.

These difficult processes of transformation can be supported through practices of art, activism, ritual and teaching that amalgamate spiritual and political work—what she calls 'spiritual activism'. Here, as elsewhere in her writing, Anzaldúa emphasises the interdependency of ritual, perception, relations with more than human forces (sea, snake, spirit-in-the-world), art, imagination and the capacity to create alternative futures and to heal. She affirms and situates herself alongside those who saw in 9/11 a 'psycho-spiritual/political call' who 'gathered in public spaces to pray ... set up peace organisations, vigils, marches, and interfaith prayer meetings', who connected with community and who 'made art' (Anzaldúa, 2015: 19).

In the same year, Spivak wrote the essay 'Terror: A speech after 9/11' (Spivak, 2012). Spivak was also writing in resistance to the drums of Bush's wars and also points to creative practice and imagination as the ground of ethics, alternative politics and futures. She also frames 9/11 as a potentially educative moment and positions that education as the possibility of escape from the violence, populist racist nationalism and retributive politics of Bush and his ilk and their counterparts.

An aesthetic education, she argued, is 'the remedy after 9/11' (Spivak, 2012: 398). 'What seems important today, in the face of this unprecedented attack on the temple of Empire [the World Trade Centre], is ... training (the exercise of the educative power) into a preparation for the eruption of the ethical' (Spivak, 2012: 374).

She continues:

I understand the ethical ... to be an interruption of the epistemological, which is the attempt to construct the other as object of knowledge. Epistemological constructions ... [seek] to know the other, in his or her case, as completely as possible, in order to punish or acquit rationally, reason being defined by the limits set by the law itself. The ethical interrupts this imperfectly, to listen to the other as if it were a self, neither to punish not to acquit. (Spivak, 2012: 374)

Imagining the other is crucial work, she argues: ‘an imaginative exercise in experiencing the impossible – stepping into the space of the other – without which political solutions come drearily undone into the continuation of violence’. She herself sets out to imagine the terrorists of 9/11, alongside Palestinian suicide bombers and the massacring Hindu mobsters of Gujarat (Spivak, 2012: 383). It is the very impossibility of this task—its requirement to embrace irreconcilable demands and truths—that renders it so powerfully educative.

This is part of Spivak’s wide-ranging argument for an aesthetic education as a training in ethical capacity and habit, which involves learning to live with and through impossibility and contradiction to find the movement and play that can also be the escape from oppression—playing the double bind (Spivak, 2012). In universities, such aesthetic education can potentially be carried out through humanities and qualitative social science teaching. But it is a possibility, and an ethico-political necessity, in any educative context—from schools, to activism, to literature, to therapy (Spivak, 2012), to ritual (Spivak, 2001).

Spivak’s essay moves on to a discussion of secularism and the irreconcilable tensions—or double bind—between the demands of secularism and the intuition of the transcendental. Spivak argues that a rethinking of secularism is crucial to ethical resistance. Secularism as currently constructed, she suggests, is both an expression of race-, class- and gender-privilege and a block on ethical capacity.

‘Those sanitised secularists who are hysterical at the mention of religion are quite out of touch with the world’s peoples and have buried their heads in the sand’ (Spivak, 2012: 390). They have buried their heads in the sand in the sense of ignoring the perennial nature of something that ‘we might as well call religion’, that exceeds the private conscious and ‘is always ready to bite because it is a species of the public sphere ... “affiliation in filiation”’ (Spivak, 2012: 392, citing Said, 1983). They ignore the reality of the religiosity of the politics of the world’s peoples—including themselves as such people.

The most common version of secularism is, Spivak effectively suggests, itself a species of religion, both in that it is a ‘laundered version of Judeo-Christianity’ and in that it is a kind of fetishisation—a treatment as God—of reason itself. Like the politics of ‘tolerance’, which it promotes, this secularism ‘allows you to de-transcendentalize all other religions [except] the religion–culture language that governs your own idiom’ (Spivak, 2012: 393):

It is clear, in other words, that the two pieces of machinery bequeathed to us by the European 18<sup>th</sup>-century – the separation of church and state, separation of the public and the private – are too race- and class-specific and indeed gender-specific to hold up a just world. Privatisation of the transcendental works for a handful. (Spivak, 2012: 394)

Moreover, these standard secularists have also buried their heads in the sand in the sense of stepping back from the travails of ethical contemplation and true critique—playing the transcendental. They make themselves incapable of ethical engagement. Even Kant knew that mere reason is inimical to ethics (Spivak, 2012). The privatisation of the transcendental—and thus of ethical capacity—serves only capital (Spivak, 2012: 10).

In place of this standard version of secularism—what we might call supremacist secularism—Spivak makes the case instead for a different idea of secularism as an active and persistent critical practice. This practice aims not to deny the reality, or public nature, of religion, but rather to make all religion merely mundane, a part of the world. Crucially, this means de-transcendentalising *all* belief, including the secularist's belief in reason. As per Edward Said, the secular critic is she who 'is oppositional to *every* system' (Spivak, 2012: 391, italics added).

And here again Spivak makes the case for an aesthetic education. Imagining others, entering radical alterity, is the practical, imaginative, work that brings the transcendental down to earth. It is such a training that enables us to see even our own belief, even grace itself, as figurative—as both real and inherently incomplete, as modes of life, as materialised/experienced effects. It falls to the pedagogy and scholarship of the humanities, Spivak concludes, to undertake a persistent effort to keep the university secular 'by persistently de-transcendentalising the radically other into a space of effect' and 'persistent acknowledgement of religion/culture as idiom rather than ground of belief' (Spivak, 2012: 398).

Whilst one calls for spiritual-activism, and the other for a renewed (ab-used) secularism, these two essays seem to pull in a common direction. Both Anzaldúa and Spivak are fierce critics of institutionalised religion (Anzaldúa, 2007: 59; Spivak, 2012: 397), and yet both also fiercely refuse the rationalist equation of reality with *mere* matter, or of knowledge with objectivity and calculation. Both insist on the power and irreducibility of imagination and of what we encounter there—even if they (the shaman-poet-writer; the secular-philosopher-critic) have very different encounters. In the post-9/11 moment—in the face of a mounting wave of religious and racist nationalism, state terror, vengeful militarist populism, war and chaos—both place faith, or at least some hope, in the power of imagination, aesthetic pedagogy, art, creativity and the cultivation of what we might call ecological or relational perception (seeing from multiple perspectives, experiencing ontology as connection) as the locus of alternative politics—rooted in a growth of *conocimiento*; an eruption of the ethical. And both identify a challenge to secularism, or the policing of spiritual-vs-political, private-vs-public divides, as crucial in these efforts.

Our current moment in history, almost two decades later, appears as a kind of supercharged version, or elongated expression, of that described by Anzaldúa and Spivak in the wake of 9/11. Event after event induces states of chaos and shock, whilst *desconocimiento* is institutionalised in the violent, racist, nationalist populist projects that are taking charge of many of the world's most powerful governments—with those who profiteer on war, debilitation, dispossession and ecocide growing their wealth all the while (Klein, 2007; Puar, 2017; Bhattacharyya, 2018; Byrd *et al.*, 2018; Venn, 2018; Roy, 2019).

Teaching social theory at an elite UK university in this context, I am developing pedagogic practices that aim to pull in the same direction that Anzaldúa and Spivak set out. Like them, I seek to challenge secularism in the hope of opening up space for the growth of ethical subjectivity in resistance to waves of racist nationalism, militarism and despair. I situate such hopes alongside the movement to decolonise the university classroom (Savransky, 2017; Almeida and Kumalo, 2018; Bhabra *et al.*, 2018; Lowe and Manjapra, 2019; Mehta, 2019; Dawson, 2020), wherein Anzaldúa

might have recognised the growth of *conocimiento*. More specifically, these hopes come in the wake of Sylvia Wynter's call to disenchant secularism as a crucial step in the effort to decolonise thought; to open up the relational, experimental, participatory modes of awareness—modes of being human—that are foreclosed by the epistemic fortifications of racial capitalism (Wynter, 1989, 1995, 2003; McKittrick, 2006; Cornell and Seely, 2016; Lowe and Manjapra, 2019; Scott, 2000; see also Chakrabarty, 2000; Stengers, 2002, 2012, 2015; Seth, 2004; Anzaldúa, 2015; Blencowe, 2016; Danowski and Viveiros de Castro, 2017; Savransky, 2017; Szerszynski, 2017).

As Spivak could already argue in 2012, the conditions for aesthetic education in the university have become even harder in the years since 9/11. The corporatisation (or 'neoliberalisation') of the academy flattens difference, as knowledge is commodified for the easy digestion of stressed-out student 'consumers' (Spivak, 2012; see also Ahmed, 2012; Dawson, 2020). In the UK, the marketising reforms of the past four decades have embedded the war mentality of competition and the promotion of inequality as the very grammar of academic subjectivity; whilst the violence of this agenda has been crystallised in the racist religious/political policing of thought in the name of Prevent;<sup>1</sup> and through the incorporation of universities into the newly distributed technologies of national border control (Kundnani, 2009; Kapoor, 2013; O'Donnell, 2016; Murtuja and Tufail, 2017; Venn, 2018). Explicit racism and abusive politics are on the rise on university campuses, often taking up the Islamophobia of supremacist secularism (Busby, 2018). At the same time, the advocates of the racist-populist new authoritarianism attack both universities and secularism as supposed bastions of an unpatriotic liberal elite (Steinmetz-Jenkins, 2016).

These conditions are such that hopes for ethical, egalitarian, pedagogy within the contemporary university might be deeply naïve.<sup>2</sup> However, they also confirm the university as a significant ground in the struggles over what we are to become, and render such hope (albeit naïve) all the more vital (Dawney *et al.*, 2017).

### **Secularism as coloniality in social theory**

If challenging secularism has become so urgent for anti-racist, anti-imperialist pedagogies in our times, this is in part because of the specific role that muscular secularism plays in post-cold war imperialist politics. As Joan Scott sets out, Euro-American imperialist discourse, deprived of Communism as its defining enemy, has revived the Muslim fanatic as the dangerous enemy the defence against whom justifies authoritarian politics at home and appropriations of sovereignty abroad (Scott, 2017).

Secularism has, since its inception, been a signifier of western civilisation figured as progress or political maturity (Wynter, 1989, 1995, 2003; Asad, 1993, 2003; Derrida, 1998; Masuzawa, 2005; Osuri, 2013; Scott, 2017). This has passed through different iterations, but in the current era finds a formula that equates secularism with Christian culture, and the non-secular primarily with Islam—alongside, I would argue, African tradition—defined as 'backwards' and 'dangerous', framed especially in terms of gender relations (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Puar, 2007; Brown, 2012; Medovoi, 2012; Scott, 2017).

Defending people, especially women, from regressive religious culture became a rationale, or smokescreen, for US-led wars and extensions of control throughout the global south, especially the Middle East. At the same time, a logic of policing so-called 'extremism' and cultivating secular virtues of moderation has infused and legitimated the increasingly authoritarian 'counter-terrorism' programmes of control that run throughout the domestic infrastructures of Europe and North America—from border control to public services and especially education (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Mamdani, 2005; Puar, 2007, 2017; Massoumi, 2016; Farris, 2017; Bhattacharyya, 2018; Kapoor, 2018; Kapoor and Narkowicz, 2018; Venn, 2018).

However, the problem of imperialist secularism long precedes the post-cold war political moment. Secularism has always been integral to the ways in which the western academy contributes to Euro-American colonialism and white supremacy (Wynter, 1989, 1995, 2003; Asad, 1993, 2003; Derrida, 1998; Chakrabarty, 2000; Masuzawa, 2005; Osuri, 2013; Blencowe, 2016; Scott, 2017). Not only as a political doctrine, but also as an epistemic regime, secularism developed in conjunction with European colonialism and its attendant racialised hierarchisation, and genocidal abjection, of different peoples and modes of life. Secularism provides a rationale for claiming that some knowledge (secular) is universally valid and has a rightful claim to determine public life, whilst some (religious) is rightfully restricted to matters of private consciousness and cultural particularity, whilst others (animist, magical, superstitious, indigenous) do not count as knowledge at all. These designations map onto a hierarchical racialised classification of peoples that situates western scientists, politicians and businesses at the helm of the world.

It is crucial to note that secularism was never simply about the prioritisation of State over Church, but was also always about the prioritisation of Christianity over Islam, paganism, polytheism and magic, and other modes of thinking deemed 'irrational' or 'demonic' belief—a hierarchy that is also treated as an index of human development (Asad, 1993; Derrida, 1998; Chakrabarty, 2000; Osuri, 2013; Scott, 2017). 'Flexibility', amenity to change, is encoded at the centre of this hierarchy—contiguous with a supposed arrow of human progress. With the colonial project of dispossession in mind, we might identify this lionised 'flexibility' as the demand that damned inflexible people give up their bodies and land to commercial exploitation.

Wynter argues that it was the experience of colonialism, and the Europeans' attempts to make sense of their encounter with different peoples and to justify the destruction of those people and the appropriation of their land, that actually prompted the invention of secularism (Wynter, 2003). What took place, she argues, was not so much a reversal of the hierarchies between the secular and the profane, as an appropriation of the position of God on the part of European Man—or rather, the substitution of the function of God by the function of Race, which now becomes the thing that secures the reality of the order of being (Wynter, 1989). Differentiations between the sacred and the profane were 'degodded'—enfolded into humanity—with rationality coming to figure as the divine within the world, and as the basis of an assumed sovereignty on the part of the (male European) possessors of said rationality. At the same time, distinctions between the elect and the damned that had previously been taken to exist in the hereafter were re-territorialised to life on earth, to manifest as the differentiations of race.

The sciences, the social sciences and the universities have played—and continue to play—a central role within this, characterising knowledges and practices—especially regarding health care, agriculture, land management and political organisation—of ‘non-modern’ indigenous, subaltern and peasant peoples as backwards, ignorant modalities of superstition (Chakrabarty, 2000; Stengers, 2002; Anzaldúa, 2007; Danowski and Viveiros de Castro, 2017). Such characterisations of subaltern knowledge are not only deeply denigrating, they also function to both effect and legitimise genocides of peoples—usually functioning in tandem with the ecocidal destruction of land and ecosystems (Stengers, 2002, 2012, 2015; Stengers *et al.*, 2008; Shiva and Mies, 2014; Povinelli, 2016; Danowski and Viveiros de Castro, 2017; Simpson, 2017). By marking racialised bodies and lifeways as archaic or backwards, secularism disguises the procession of imperialist exploitation and murder as the inescapable progression of a reality that is already written in evolutionary destiny.

In social theory teaching at universities it is common to replicate and reinforce these supremacist–secularist assumptions. This is most obviously the case where we teach canonical theories about the nature of society that define modernity in terms of a progression of enlightenment, rationality, development or evolution treated as contiguous with a movement away from religious authority, conflated with dogma (Chakrabarty, 2000; Seth, 2004; Osborne, 2005; Bhabra, 2007; Szerszynski, 2008). But even where these modernisation/secularisation narratives are explicitly called into question—as is the case in post-structuralist, post-colonial, decolonial, feminist and other critical genres of social theory that have themselves become a new kind of canon—the pedagogic norms of the classroom continue to foster and reward secularist assumptions.

To be autonomous, radical, critical, revolutionary or progressive is rewarded in assessments and affirmed in class. These attributes are most easily performed through conformity to a set of norms that are defined against tradition and religion—most frequently articulated through abstract (implicitly white/western) feminist narratives (see also Mehta, 2019). Students and academics who wouldn’t dream of explicitly denigrating non-western cultures can nonetheless unthinkingly equate religion with unfreedom, or spirituality with naïvety or ideology, in ways that replicate the assumptions of imperialist Islamophobia and supremacist secularism. Standard social theory pedagogy not only fails to challenge, but actually rewards conformity to those assumptions.

Isabelle Stengers (2015) argues that the academy polices against taking indigenous knowledges, animism and spiritually informed reflection seriously through the ‘knowing remark’ or the ‘sneer’ that is directed at the (ostensibly) insufficiently critical. In the social sciences and humanities, ‘being theoretical’ is often treated as synonymous with this kind of performance of being critical—being the one who sneers, rather than the one who is sneered at. Social theory is a key vector of the discomfort through which the raced, gendered and classed supremacist–secularist order of knowledges is policed in the social sciences. How then can we transform the teaching of social theory into a space for the cultivation of *conocimiento* and disrupt the performance of supremacist sneers?

### Problematising post-secularism as a decolonial strategy

One possible resource for social theory teachers who are interested in challenging secularism is the recent movement of ‘post-secularism’, which demands a turn to religion, or taking religious thought seriously, in the secular domains of both politics and scholarship. Perhaps the most pertinent post-secular thinker for our discussion is Santos, who is a prominent exponent of decolonial epistemology and sociology. He argues that political theology can be a source of much-needed moral agency and indignation in a world of neoliberal individualism and indifference, as well as a site of counter-hegemonic ‘globalisation from below’ (Santos, 2015; see also Escobar, 2012). As part of his broad decolonial agenda for epistemic justice, Santos argues for a turn to ‘post-secular human rights’ as a politics against the possessive individualism of neoliberal hegemony. He draws distinctions between ‘traditionalist–fundamentalist’ theologies—which, he argues, seek only to re-inscribe capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy in even more oppressive terms; and ‘progressive–pluralist’ political theologies—which constitute a powerful, genuinely liberating, *counter*-hegemonic force.

Santos’s post-secular human rights sit amidst a wide variety of positions in post-secular social theory. From post-secular feminism—which aims primarily at the affirmation of the agency and capacity for self-determination of devout Muslim women against the denigrations and imperialist implications of the Islamophobic secularist supremacism (Vuola, 2002; Bracke, 2008; Braidotti, 2008; Mahmood, 2012; Singh, 2015; Deo, 2018)—through to western supremacist thinkers who propose a turn specifically to Christian religion as both sociologically inevitable (a historically inescapable expression of ‘post-secular times’) and constituting a desirable, critical difference to the political inertia of the neoliberal capitalist state (e.g. Berger, 1972; Berger & Neuhaus, 1977; Habermas, 2008; Milbank, 2008a,b; Žižek, 2010). Some post-secular theorists, such as Peter Berger, John Milbank and Slavoj Žižek, resonate with the populist right’s rejection of liberalism, such as Steve Bannon’s denunciation of secularism and call for a ‘return’ to religious values (Cooper, 2008, 2015, 2017; Steinmetz-Jenkins, 2016; Steinmetz-Jenkins and Jager, 2019).

Post-secular social theory often replicates and reinforces the very hierarchical, abjecting and eco/genocidal colonial logics of secularism. In calling for a turn to religion, as constituting a move beyond secularism, post-secularism confirms the past veracity and classificatory schemas of secularist discourse in ways that actually ignore the decolonial critiques of secularism and return Europe to the centre of human history (Terman, 2016). Explicitly Christian supremacist post-secularism obviously replicates the very worst aspects of imperialist secularism (Cooper, 2013). But even post-secular feminism is problematic in reifying the categories of secular vs religious in ways that specifically exclude from view indigenous and immanentist life ways—including much of the most important feminist thought on spirituality (such as Bennett, 2001, 2009; hooks, 2001; Anzaldúa, 2007, 2015; Keller, 2007; Lorde, 2012; Simpson, 2017). However well intentioned, even Santos’s delineation of (implicitly good) progressive theologies contra (implicitly dangerous) conservative theologies echoes the immensely pernicious discourse of good (moderate) vs bad (fundamentalist) Muslims that underwrites the racist authoritarianism of contemporary counter-terror policy.

Another pedagogic strategy that is suggested by the post-secular perspective (instead or in addition to teaching post-secular theory) involves bringing religious thought into the teaching of ostensibly secular subjects such as feminist, legal and social theory (Bracke, 2008; Hotam and Wexler, 2014; Wexler, 2014; Santos, 2015; Deo, 2018). This is an important tactic that can radically diversify the social theory curriculum and affirm subjugated knowledges, such as feminist and black liberation theology, as valid forms of theory. I have gained a great deal from adopting this curriculum-diversifying strategy in my teaching, as will be discussed below. However, affirming religious thought does not in itself guarantee against replicating the colonial gaze in which the religious other is the *object* of secular scholarship (Spivak, 2012; see also Ahmed, 2012; hooks, 1994; Almeida and Kumalo, 2018).

In Spivak's terms, simply bringing religious thought into the secular classroom does not, in and of itself, interrupt the epistemological construction which seeks to know and to judge—rather than to imagine and engage ethically with—the other. Moreover, the inclusion of religious thought does not challenge the most radical exclusions of secularist supremacism, which is to say, the discounting of subaltern indigenous knowledges and spiritual-materialist perspectives—an exclusion that is, in fact, often upheld most fiercely by religious leaders. Post-secularism is not, then, an adequate strategy for the task of anti-racist decolonial pedagogy.

### **An experiment in disenchanting secular social theory: Teaching capitalism and religion**

Dipesh Chakrabarty discusses different ways of holding religious and secular knowledge together as part of his work to 'provincialise'—Spivak would say to 'de-transcendentalise'—Europe. He writes: the 'assumption running through modern European political theory and the social sciences is that the human is ontologically singular, that gods and spirits are in the end "social facts", that the social somehow exists prior to them' (Chakrabarty, 2000: 16). This assumption makes it impossible to grasp the complex realities of Indian modernity—in which few areas of life exist without gods or inhabit the linear course of secular time—or to study subaltern lives without reactivating the colonial/capitalist contempt for peasant knowledge. But how do we study the knowledge of Gods and spirits without activating that assumption? How do we unlearn and resist our well-trained capacity to interpret everything in terms of the social?

Chakrabarty contrasts two models of exchange. On the one hand, there is the commodity model of exchange that operates through reference to an abstract middle term. Phenomenon A is translated into phenomenon B by virtue of common abstraction—both phenomena are, for example, interpreted as expressions of bourgeois ideology. Social science normally operates in this mode—with sociological generalisation functioning as the middle term, occupying the position of 'the translator'. The challenge, Chakrabarty suggests, is to relinquish this role.

On the other hand, he offers the model of barter exchange—direct processes of exchange that don't require an abstract third term. Crops can be swapped for produce without passing through the abstraction of money. Everyday languages translate inexact terms between themselves without passing through transcendent universal

abstractions. Chakrabarty gives as example the direct translation between Islamic and Hindu gods that is commonplace in Bengali religious literature. ‘The translations here are based on very local, particular, one-for-one exchanges, guided in part . . . by the poetic requirements of alliterations, meter, rhetorical conventions . . . it makes no appeal to any of the implicit universals that inhere in the sociological imagination’ (Chakrabarty, 2000: 85). There is always a sense of opacity and that much is lost in such barter exchange. But Chakrabarty identifies as a strength of this mode of exchange that it can never claim to be wholly clear. We might say that creating opacity—requiring students to see in the dark—is an essential part of the decolonial pedagogic practice (constructing borderlands).

Chakrabarty’s barter model of exchange helps to describe my own pedagogic experiment, which has taken shape as a final-year undergraduate social theory module called Capitalism and Religion.

The module has been patterned by my own positionality as a white, western woman with a permanent academic contract at an elite UK university; and by that of my students who are mostly middle class, relatively diverse in terms of nationality, race and ethnicity, but majority British and majority white. These factors shape the kinds of solidarities that are, and are not, accessible to us; the range of experiences and power relations that the classroom holds; and what risks we are able to take. As with any experimental pedagogic practice, the module is imperfect and incomplete—a perpetual work in progress.

Half of the module explores the role of religion in the establishment of, and resistance to, global capitalism: especially the role of Christianity in establishing and legitimising colonialism, development and neoliberalism. In positioning colonial Christianity as integral to the ongoing formation of global capitalism, the module adds to students’ grasp of the colonality of the present—highlighting the place of religious persecution, demonisation and state terror in the facilitation of dispossession and profiteering. The other half of the module explores various theories to the effect that capitalism can itself be considered a kind of religion—devotion to a cult of the commodity, debt, guilt, rape, evolution or infinite growth.

We study texts of anthropology, indigenous studies, theology and spiritually informed activism, alongside ‘social theory’ as more conventionally defined. We explore the dispossession of the Tswana in nineteenth-century Southern Africa, alongside the valorisation of markets under neoliberalism since the 1980s. We place the fifteenth-century witch hunts and Spanish Inquisition in resonance with the misogyny of Donald Trump and contemporary nationalisms. We set theological critiques of the prosperity gospel in relation to Marxist analyses of the commodification of life. Indigenous and ecofeminist scholar-activists, process and liberation theologians, converse with biopolitical theory and philosophy of science in the diagnosis of ecocide. We interrogate the reliance of money on faith, and the authoritarian transcendental terror—the threat of Hell—that sustains the economic regimes of racial capitalism and international development.

The inclusion of religious history and critique facilitates a dramatic expansion upon the usual canon of social theory—it diversifies the curriculum and re-patterns the distribution of expertise. We discuss Pentecostalism, and suddenly the previously quiet Korean or Nigerian student becomes the animated expert in the room—a

transformation in power relations and in who feels entitled to speak that carries over into subsequent meetings of the group and different topics. Students' achievement is exceptionally high on this module, and my hope is that this indicates success in the confidence of some of those students who more often feel undermined and silenced on campus.

This post-secularist-style disruption of entitlement and the authorship of social theory is hugely important to what the module is trying to do. But equally important is that the module is not simply an exercise in religious studies, is not just about bringing in religion, but is also situating secular sociological explanation alongside and in relation to religious thought. Direct, inexact, barter-style, this-for-that exchanges occur between social theory arguments, religious arguments and other forms of knowledge. Through this process of barter, secular social theory becomes but one mode of thought in the world amongst others, as a singularity that might be exchanged with, but cannot explain and cannot be the mediator between, all others.

A literary example of such exchange is provided by Leslie Marmon Silko's epic novel *The almanac of the dead*. A key character, Angelita, is a charismatic and brutal militant leader of an indigenous uprising somewhere in the mountains of Mexico. The Cubans have been providing her community with resources for many years, on the condition that they participate in Marxist education programmes. They have never believed in the Cubans' pedagogy, but have played along with it for the sake of the guns and the funds. But one day their Cuban contact crosses a line. Angelita puts him on trial for treachery and 'crimes against history'. The Cuban is condemned to execution, but then Angelita launches into a defence of Marx:

Marx had been inspired by reading about certain Native American communal societies, though naturally as a European he had misunderstood a great deal. Marx had learned about societies in which everyone ate or everyone starved together, and no one being stood above another – all stood side by side – rock, insect, human being, river, or flower. Each depended upon the other; the destruction of one harmed all others. Marx understood what tribal people had always known: the maker of a thing pressed part of herself or himself into each object made. Some spark of life or energy went from the maker into even the most ordinary objects. . .

Marx of the Jews, tribal people of the desert, Marx the tribal man understood that nothing personal or individual mattered because no individual survived without others. Generation after generation, individuals were born, then after eighty years, disappeared into dust, but in the stories, the people live on in the imaginations and hearts of their descendants. Whenever their stories were told, the spirits of the ancestors were present and their power was alive. Marx, tribal man and storyteller; Marx with his primitive devotion to the worker's stories. No wonder the Europeans hated him! Marx had gathered official government reports of the suffering of English factory workers the way a tribal shaman might have, feverishly working to bring together a powerful, even magical, assembly of stories. . . He had sensed the great power these stories had – power to move millions of people. Poor Marx did not understand the power of the stories belonged to the spirits of the dead. (Silko, 1991: 519–521)

In these passages, Angelita/Silko barter Marx directly into indigenous cosmology and politics—addressing Marx's thought as interlocutor and partner of the Indians. This is worlds apart from the approach of the Cuban, the great translator/educator,

who uses Marx to explain the situation of the Indians to the Indians, and who dismisses as insignificant any aspect of their spirituality and politics that does not fit the narrative of proletarian emancipation. I love this—and I think Silko does a better job of bringing Marx to life for the twenty-first century than many a social theory textbook.

Another example of bartering Marx that has come up repeatedly in my module is when the students start talking about Marxist cultural theory as a genre of idolatry critique. The students decide that Marx, like Moses in the Bible, is despairing of the worship of false gods. The ‘commodity fetish’ is the ‘golden calf’—the false god that the people in the desert made to worship in lieu of God when they thought themselves abandoned by Moses in the desert.

A consequence of taking this exchange between idolatry critique and ideology critique *seriously* as an act of barter, rather than assuming that scripture is a metaphor for the social, is that it leads us to ask: ‘so what is the *real* God to which commodity is the false alternative?’, and thus to start to see divinity in Marx’s vision of collaborative labour.

Such discussion deflates the easy, dismissive atheism that is often adopted by Marxist and feminist students, unsettling underlying supremacist–secularist assumptions. Such unsettling deflation is extended further when we come to explore the legacy of liberation theology in Latin America and global egalitarian pedagogy, or the role of faith in the Civil Rights movement and Black Power.

Deflating the sneering subjectivity of white/western feminism and critical posturing is central to the political work of the module. Whilst we only spend a portion of time directly discussing Islamophobia and the anti-blackness of secularism, the whole module is dedicated to a tangential critique of Islamophobic and anti-black tropes, aiming to untether the groundwork of supremacist secularism (aspects of the metaphysics of Race).

This way of teaching refuses to present the issues of metaphysics and spirituality as problems *for* non-western, or non-secular, thinkers. It challenges students to ask the same questions of secular thought as they do of the religious. They are encouraged to draw on parts of themselves that are usually well hidden in the social theory classroom—to engage in questions at an ethical level, to interrogate their own relation to transcendentals, to draw on their own spiritual experiences and intuitions. This style of engagement creates, I think, a possibility—a space of play—in which different, irreconcilable forms of knowledge can be held in relation. In their essays and class discussions, these students have engaged in some remarkably profound interrogation of the secular gods, calling out the racism, spiritual and material devastation that is wrought through devotion to capital, growth, progress, health, development and white salvation. Many students feed back that the module has ‘opened their mind’ or felt particularly ‘challenging’. I like to think that what they are describing here is the experience of coming undone.

### **From post-secularism to the cultivation of soul**

Whereas the post-secular perspective seeks to affirm the previously denigrated side of the secular vs religious dualism, Anzaldúa’s pedagogy of the borderlands, Spivak’s

aesthetic education and Wynter's—or Lowe and Majapra's (2019)—comparative 'humanities after Man' all suggest it is the *relation* between forms of knowledge, not simply the content and authorship of those knowledges, that matters most. We need to diminish the classificatory ground that racialises and hierarchises knowledge into so-called secular, religious and 'animistic' forms. As Wynter argues, these classificatory schemas—Race—is the metaphysics of modern man; it is that which performs the God-function, securing the order of being. The aim, then, is to de-transcendentalise, disenchant and de-exoticise the gods of all the systems of thought—including the secular gods.

The conclusions of Santos's book on post-secular human rights actually push him beyond the post-secular frame. This move at the end of his book is testament both to Santos's commitment to the practice of decolonial pedagogy, and the ultimate inadequacy of the post-secular perspective to that task.

Taking up the speculative question that is the title of his book, he writes:

If God really were a human rights activist He or She would come to the conclusion that the God of the subalterns can but be a subaltern God. The logical consequence of such a conclusion would be rather illogical . . . a monotheistic God making a plea for polytheism as the only solution, if the invocation of God in social and political struggles for progressive social transformation is not to lead to perverse results . . . a monotheistic God pleading for a polytheistic set of Gods and thus for His or Her own suicide. I wonder if the role of most theologies has not been to prevent us from confronting this absurdity and drawing the conclusions therefrom. As if all along the logos of God had been a human exercise meant to prevent God from speaking Her or His plurality. (Santos, 2015: 86)<sup>3</sup>

This passage echoes Anzaldúa, who argued that institutionalised religion is a bulwark against true perception of a world that is plural and plurally spirited. There has been a deadening of our capacities for perception, achieved, she argues, through the insistence on a division between spirits and matter, the body and intelligence—a dichotomy that has made us forget parts of ourselves and disconnected us from our world, making things and people into objects—a dichotomy that is 'the root of all violence' (Anzaldúa, 2007: 59).

Moreover, where Santos most fully affirms the value of religion, it seems that the thinkers he is actually talking about are less conventional religious teachers or theologians than they are 'heretical visionaries' who challenge and transfigure religious traditions. He writes:

when they decide to go at their own risk to the roots of established truths, religious thinkers tend to be greater bricoleurs than any other thinkers, combining in innovative and chaotic ways fragments from different provenances, and on that basis offering new meanings and interpretations. . . They excel in occupying the contact zone among different cultures and ways of knowing, borderlines, thresholds, nepantlism (the Aztec word for 'torn between ways'), twilight zones neither outside nor inside, neither familiar nor foreign, neither subject nor object, conditions of exile without ceasing to be an insider. (Santos, 2015: 75).

To my mind, the pedagogical imperative that derives from this insight is less about the importance of teaching religious texts than it is about enabling our students themselves to become what Santos is calling here 'religious thinkers': creative bricoleurs or heretical visionaries. I am less interested in teaching students about the theoretical

fruits of theologians' labours than I am in creating a space in which their own participation in spiritual–political exploration, *conocimiento* and visioning is welcomed.

It is not enough to pull our students, and ourselves, into the space of borderlands and disruption. If Race—supremacist secularism and the developmentalist classificatory schema—is, as per Wynter, 'the metaphysics of modern Man', then it is the ground of meaning on which we and our students stand, even as it is also that which we need to destroy. We are trying, that is, to destroy the God-function, the security of the order of being, even as we are also rejecting secularist normativity. It is crucial to take seriously the extent of psychosomatic difficulty and spiritual depth that such work entails. As Anzaldúa stresses (and contra the assumptions of many a macho revolutionary), disruption and destruction does not necessarily lead to enlightenment or 'progress'. As teachers we can easily provoke the shock that throws us and our students into states of chaos and confusion—being torn between ways—but such states contain the possibility of *desconocimiento* (withdrawing into fear, self-righteousness, domination, separation) as much as they do *conocimiento*.

A crucial insight that derives from spiritually inflected feminist philosophy, which gleans the truth from Santos's above observations about the creative capacities of 'religious thinkers', and differentiates them from the glassy, pessimistic critical theory of someone like Theodore Adorno, concerns the role of love, or care for the soul in ethical pedagogic experience.

bell hooks writes:

To educate as the practice of freedom is a way of teaching that anyone can learn. That learning process comes easiest to those of us who teach who also believe that there is an aspect of our vocation that is sacred; who believe that our work is not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students. To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin. (hooks, 1994: 13)

Georg Simmel once remarked that the soul grows in the space that is stretched between irreconcilable truths (Simmel, 1986[1907]: 181). In this sense, the unworking of supremacist secularism in the classroom might be about 'the cultivation of soul'. Or, as in Anzaldúa, the cultivation of 'spirituality'—where spirituality is a kind of knowing that seeks connection, and that depends on relations of trust, love, respect and reciprocity (Anzaldúa, 2015: 38–39).

## **Conclusion**

In an increasingly Islamophobic and white-supremacist university climate, challenging supremacist secularism is vital. Social theory persists as a key vector of supremacist secular values in the humanities and social sciences—wherein the performance of criticality as a sneering subjectivity and denunciation of religious authority or tradition passes as academic excellence. And yet, the post-secular turn in social theory proves inadequate to this task. Simply bringing religion into the secular classroom is not enough to disarm the 'plantation Gods'<sup>4</sup> and their minions:

A collective shadow – made up of the destructive aspects, psychic wounds, and splits in our own culture – is aroused, we are forced to confront it. (Anzaldúa, 2015: 18)

Amidst torrents of racist populism, neoliberal authoritarianism, ethno-nationalism and post-colonial psychoses, Anzaldúa's words ring with even greater truth than when she wrote them. Secularism is one name in the shadows—a septic metaphysics clinging hold of the distribution of meaning. As Anzaldúa, Spivak and Wynter in their different ways have argued, survival and healing in these times of Coyolxauhqui demands spiritual–political pedagogy. A key part of this is to de-transcendentalise, to humble, the secular gods—to make it possible to hold ostensibly very different forms of knowledge in relation.

To create the classroom as a space in which the God-function (the metaphysics of Race) can be unravelled means inviting students into pedagogic borderlands. It means disruption. But it also means creating sufficient trust, reciprocity and respect for spirituality—the spiralling questioning and visioning of *conocimiento*—to begin to emerge. This is a practical spiritual–political–aesthetic challenge. It is a task that goes beyond diversifying curricula, and beyond critical disruption, to relations of love—fostering courage (in ourselves as in our students) to enter the uncontrolled.

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### **Ethical standards**

This article was written in line with the ethical standards set out by the British Sociological Association. The students whose experience is referred to in the article are wholly anonymised and are no longer studying at my institution.

### **Conflict of interest**

No conflict of interest arose in the work reported here.

### **Data availability**

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Prevent is the name of the UK ‘anti-radicalisation’ policy, to which public services—especially education providers, from early years nurseries to universities—are obliged to adhere (Rashid, 2014; Massoumi, 2016; Jerome *et al.*, 2019).
- <sup>2</sup> Indeed, Spivak has herself suggested as much. By 2012, when she published this essay as part of the collection *An aesthetic education in the era of globalisation*, her view on the possibility of an aesthetic education in the contemporary university had become more bleak—her hopes crushed by the corporatisation of the university. ‘In the ferocious thrust to be “global”, the humanities and qualitative social sciences, “comparative” at their best, are no longer a moving epistemological force’ ([ref. 70]Spivak, 2012: 26). Her hopes have now moved beyond the university system, to education in subaltern spaces.
- <sup>3</sup> The exuberance of these lines is tempered for me by the words of Nonso’s chi (guardian spirit)—a character in Chicozie Obioma’s *An orchestra of minorities*—who declares, in contrast, that the God of the subalterns is fear. This duality in the God of the subalterns—the pluralist/polytheist materialism of grounded normativity vs the blind power of fear—is a reminder that the possibilities of aesthetic education, spiritual activism and *conocimiento*—or the ‘politicisation of art’—always runs alongside the possibility of terror, *desconocimiento* and fascism—or ‘the aestheticisation of politics’ ([AUTHOR: Benjamin (2002) cited in the text but not listed in the references. Please supply full publication details.]cf Benjamin, 2002).
- <sup>4</sup> Wynter, cited in Carter (2019, p. 90).

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