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**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

# There is a Sexular Body: Introducing a Material Approach to the Secular

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This article calls for more ‘bottom-up inquiry’ into the secular, departing from the assumption that it features normative ideologies and practices that dominate current societies. I plea for collecting and analyzing manifestations of the secular, as the secular as an phenomenon in society is surprisingly unexplored. To stimulate such inquiry, I suggest a material approach to the secular, as it will provide researchers with tools to conduct empirical research on the secular in contemporary societies. Inspired by Joan Scott, Charles Hirschkind, and Talal Asad, this article explores the notion of a Dutch ‘sexular’ body: a body which affective-gestural repertoires, limited here to the context of sexuality, people in society (historically) associate with the secular. I conclude by arguing that a material approach to the secular will contribute to (1) obtaining a more comprehensive understanding of the secular, including its cultural conceptualizations and manifestations, and (2) clarifying, and hence facing the normativity the secular imposes on the people living in secular societies.

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## Introduction

Although we frequently encounter the concept of the secular,<sup>1</sup> there is no general consensus on its meaning.<sup>2</sup> Much like the concept of religion, the secular knows a huge variety of interpretations, strongly dependent on historical and cultural contexts (see e.g. Asad 2011). During a congress I attended in Turin last year, one scholar described the secular as the complete opposite of religion, as “the Other of religion”. A later speaker, though, disagreed, and preferred considering religion and the secular as sisters: related phenomena that were overlapping regularly. Though the notion of the secular was referred to many times during that congress, we, except for the two times I just referred to, never discussed what we actually meant by it. This is just one example out of the many that I have come across since I started exploring the secular a few years ago. Despite its frequent usage, the term has many interpretations, interpretations which are usually not put on the table as it is implicitly suggested to be part of a certain basic knowledge.

All of this, however, does not alter the fact that the secular – whatever it is – is a crucial part of contemporary Western societies. In his monumental book *A secular age*, Charles Taylor (2007) describes the transformation of the Western religious climate through which the West has moved from a climate in which it is almost impossible not to believe in God, to our current situation in which believing in God simply is one option out of many. In this ‘secular age’, Taylor argues, believers and unbelievers

participate in a spiritual search within the context of an immanent frame: a worldview that distinguishes a self-sufficient immanent natural order from the transcendent.

The West has abandoned the path it has walked for centuries. Currently, religion is an option, not a given. Moreover, the fact that religion has lost its default position in society implies that this particular position has ‘opened up’ for other ambitious candidates that seek to ‘reign’ our Western culture. And indeed, as Taylor writes, a set of ‘unbelieving construals’ (irreligious notions of the world) seems to have been successful in claiming that particular position:

The presumption of unbelief has become dominant in more and more Western milieux; and has achieved hegemony in certain crucial ones, in the academic and intellectual life, for instance; whence it can more easily extend itself to others. (Taylor 2007: 13).

The secular, which happily accommodates this default option,<sup>3</sup> currently is the air that we all breathe, or, as Hirschkind (2011: 634) puts it, the water that we all swim in.

As a scholar studying religion, I am both puzzled and intrigued by this dominance of the secular. In my view, our secular age features some interesting paradoxes, which hint at some of the complex power dynamics at stake. Is it, for example, not strange that I am currently working in a department devoted to the study of religion, whereas such departments focused at studying the secular as a phenomenon do not exist? Or, how can we explain that we are familiar with all kinds of ethnographies that investigate all kinds of religions all over the world, while an ethnography of the secular, regardless of its geographical context, is surprisingly rare? In short: why has the dominant

secular, despite its unclearness, escaped so much of the academic scrutiny that religion has had to face, and is still facing?

This essay is structured around two major questions: 1) Why, despite several authors' plea for more empirical studies into the secular, has the contemporary secular largely escaped empirical scrutiny? and 2) What steps do we need to take to illuminate this particular blind spot? I propose a material approach to the secular; an approach that provides researchers with tools to conduct empirical research on the secular in our contemporary secular age. Then, I illustrate the fruitfulness of such a material approach to the secular by exploring the notion of a Dutch 'sexular' body: a body which affective-gestural repertoires (see Hirschkind 2011), limited in this essay to the context of sexuality, people in society (historically) associate with the secular. I conclude by arguing that a material approach to the secular will contribute to (1) obtaining a more comprehensive understanding of the secular, and (2) clarifying, and hence, facing the normativity the secular climate imposes on the people living in it.

### Cultural secularism

Quite in contrast to the notion of the secular, the concept of secularism has received a lot of academic attention over the years, which explains why I start my theoretical exploration of the secular there.<sup>4</sup> Secularism for a long time appeared to have no ideological significance of its own (e.g. Calhoun et al. 2011). The term 'secularism' itself has its origin in mid-nineteenth century England, where George Holyoake coined the term to name an orientation to life designed to attract both theists and atheists (Cady & Hurd 2010: 3). Holyoake understood secularism as something coordinating a variety of religions and philosophies but not as an oppositional alternative to religion (idem).

In contemporary Western societies, though, secularism is often understood as a necessary defensive mechanism that protects citizens from potential manifestations of religion that neglect the private sphere they have been confined to. In the Netherlands, for example, many Dutch state that they feel protected by the secular government, which is assumed to maintain a strict separation of church and state (see Tamimi Arab, 2015: 140).

In academia, secularism and its features have become subject to intensified academic scrutiny – mainly from philosophical or theological-political perspectives –, which has undermined its alleged 'value freedom' and 'objectivity' (e.g. Calhoun 2011: 4). Secularism is now increasingly perceived as something not neutral in itself; it is in fact *something*, which is in need of investigation. Hence, in academia, the aim of 'rethinking secularism' has been taken up by many (e.g. Calhoun et al 2011; Cady & Hurd 2010; Bangstad 2009), and others have gone even further and have suggested replacing the term with multiple, more-accurate alternatives (Bader 2012).

However, as is also noted by Tamimi Arab (2015: 32), this academic attention so far mainly has concerned *political* secularism, that is, those forms of secularism that manifold ways that the state governs and regulates religions

(idem; see also Asad 2003; Casanova 2009; Wohlrab-Sahra & Burchardt 2012). Or, if the respective studies were conducted empirically, they mainly focused on how these models have been put to practice in different societies over the world. Additionally, such studies on secularism have a tendency to focus on secularism in the context of one religion in particular, namely Islam.<sup>5</sup> Cultural forms of secularism (Tamimi Arab 2015: 162) have not been investigated so thoroughly, which can probably be explained by the fact that a lot of the academic interest on secularism comes from philosophical or theologico-political angles (see also Dressler, M., & Mandair, A. 2011: 21).

Cultural secularism, as I understand it, is a notion that is not per se connected to the state, but rather refers to the interpretations of secularism as we can find them in society.<sup>6</sup> It covers what Taylor describes as a set of 'unbelieving construals'; sets of views in society that are largely based on the assumption that they are indispensable to overcome the "irrationality" of religion (Taylor 2007: 269).

It is important to question what this notion of cultural secularism exactly contributes to our understanding of the secularism, given that both Taylor and Asad both already emphasized that secularism is not limited to political contexts but that it rather is deeply embedded in Western culture. The point I see in using the notions of political and cultural secularism is that it clarifies that we are dealing with two different phenomena, which are of course strongly related but which nevertheless also need separate inquiries to understand them better.<sup>7</sup>

For instance, when anthropologist Orit Avishai (2008) describes the presumed ideology of 'the secular Other' that her Jewish interlocutors perceive themselves to be dealing with, she means something very different than Asad's description of secularism as a political ideology that is part and parcel of contemporary liberal democracies. The secular Other Avishai writes about, for instance recommends "shaky edifices" of marriage (2008: 420), including sexuality driven by passion and hedonist desires (Avishai 2007) and it is seen as religion's primary Other. This, of course, differs from a state's political doctrine regarding religion, though it may be related. Hence, a clarification concerning what form of secularism we are writing about seems helpful to avoid unspoken confusions such as the one I described in the introduction.

Because cultural secularism has largely escaped the academic attention political secularism has been subject to, a somewhat narrow understanding of secularism dominates the academic understandings of the concept. I consider this problematic as cultural secularism does play an important role in society (see e.g. Bartelink 2016; Wiering 2016; Tamimi Arab 2015; Nijhawan 2011; Verkaaik 2009; Jansen 2006), and, hence, ignoring this role contributes to what Dressler & Mandair – probably somewhat too excessive – call a prolongation of "the impasse between theory and empiricism that continues to be a hallmark of many books with a focus on the politics of religion and secularism" (Dressler & Mandair 2011: 21). It seems relevant to me to explore and concretize what secularism

consists of in the different facets of society, but also, supplementary, to investigate how people in society experience and conceive secularity (see Wohlrab-Sahr & Burchardt 2012: 884). To do so, though, we first need to ‘concretize’ the secular; operationalizing it into something that we can actually explore in society.

### A secular body

One scholar who took up such an aim of concretizing the secular, is the anthropologist Charles Hirschkind (2011). In his article ‘is there a secular body’, Hirschkind examines whether it is possible to determine a “particular configuration of the human sensorium – of sensibilities, affects, embodied dispositions – specific to secular subjects, and thus constitutive of what we mean by ‘secular society’” (Hirschkind 2011: 633). Hirschkind considers the secular a concept that “articulates a constellation of institutions, ideas, and affective orientations” (idem).

Following Asad, Hirschkind explains that when one is seeking to make sense of the secular, which is obviously required when one attempts to find a secular body, it is important to realize the secular is inevitably related to the religious, and, therefore, it might be best pursued through its shadow (religion) (Hirschkind 2011: 633–634, see also Asad 2003: 16). The secular’s religious shadow seems easier to determine – religion can more easily be found – and, hence, approaching the secular indirectly through its shadow might be a useful strategy for enabling an exploration.

The difficulty with the question of a secular body, is that it is blindingly direct, which, obstructs the mentioned strategy of exploring it via its religious shadow. In other words: the question challenges us to focus directly at the secular, which in fact also makes Hirschkind’s question so innovative. It does not focus on exploring and revealing particular secular norms that instruct, discipline, and confine religious bodies in current secular societies (e.g. Göle 2010; Fadil 2011; Selby 2014; Fernando 2014; Amir-Moazami 2016) but instead directly looks at the secular body itself.

To illustrate the difficulties one encounters when trying to answer the question, Hirschkind draws on three examples, which are taken from *Why I am not a secularist* (Connolly 1999) and *Formations of the Secular* (Asad 2003). The first example analyzed is Kant’s (1978) analysis of the particular set of guidelines for the dinner host to follow to conform to civilized expectations. The second example discusses Asad’s (2003) analysis of the development of the secular tradition of Romantic poetry, and the third example features Asad’s (2003) famous inquiry into the secularization of pain (Hirschkind 2011: 636–640).

Analyzing the practices in these examples, Hirschkind suggests that it seems unjustified to equate such practices with the secular because doing so would result in losing a grasp of what is so unique to the secular. We would “lose an understanding of the way the practice of distinguishing religious from secular gives impetus to the set of shifts that constitute the secular – and hence we lose a sense of precisely what is secular” (Hirschkind 2011: 640). By

attributing a set of embodied dispositions to the secular, Hirschkind argues, the secular’s fundamental principle of being related to religion is violated.

Hirschkind concludes by arguing that secularism appears to entail a continual skepticism toward itself. It claims to be a theological overcoming of the religious but it cannot really provide an alternative, as its positive attempt to postulate an ethical and epistemological foundation remains dependent on a negative gesture that promises to overcome the religious (Hirschkind 2011: 644).

This interesting instability is at the heart of Hirschkind’s understanding of the secular, and, to me, it seems that it basically complicates any attempt of finding a secular body: when seeking to pinpoint a secular body, we come up with particular images of such bodies only to find out that these images do not meet the ultimate criterion of the secular, which is ‘having a religious shadow’.

Talal Asad (2011), intrigued by Hirschkind’s discussion, also engaged in this discussion of a secular body by looking at it through the lens of pain. In his article ‘Thinking about the secular body, pain, and liberal politics’, Asad examines several grammars of pain to subsequently analyze what they could tell us about a secular body.<sup>8</sup> Asad reflects on many interesting examples to eventually conclude that the existence of a secular body primarily depends on the particular definition of the secular embraced.

For example, Asad asks whether we could think of a secular body as a body that is manifesting particular notions of pain that are also advocated by modern secular societies. When Asad subsequently attempts to apply this understanding in conceptualizing a secular body, he sketches this secular body as a body that is pulling in opposing directions, reflecting the contradictions that are, according to Asad, deeply embedded in such modern societies. On the one hand there is what Asad (2011: 671) calls a democratic ethos (an articulation and acceptance of pain as a condition of life), and hence, compassion and sensibility, and on the other hand, there is a wish for punishment (a particular joy in the infliction of punishment on others in society).

However, as Asad, in my view rightly, concludes, this interpretation of the secular as the collection of notions advocated by modern secular societies is only one interpretation: the assumption that the secular equals a modern secular society’s view is, of course, debatable. Taking this into account, we could argue that there is no essential secular body: there are only particular rules that tell us when a usage of the term ‘the secular’ can be regarded as correct or incorrect, and Asad suggests that we explore who comes up with these rules (Asad 2011: 673).

In my opinion, both Hirschkind and Asad examine the secular body in their own interesting but nevertheless different way. Hirschkind starts his inquiry with a carefully chosen definition, proceeds by presenting three examples, and concludes by discussing why the examples did not really meet the demands of the definition. Asad, however, sets out to discuss many potential examples of a secular body, then literally questions whether the bodies discussed in the examples are secular, only to conclude

that the matter seems to be dependent on the specific definition embraced. The former remains loyal to a particular definition and, by doing so, hints at the impossibility of a secular body, whereas the latter attempts to show that analyzing a lot of examples does not lead to a definition that covers all.

It is at this point that I would like to enter this discussion through shedding some Asadian light on Hirschkind's attempt. When we take into account that the existence of a secular body strongly depends on the particular definition of the secular embraced, it seems interesting to me to temporarily neglect academic conceptualizations, and to explore interpretations of the secular in society instead. A secular body as it is perceived in a lived society might be considered 'incorrect' from an academic, theoretical perspective but it might nevertheless be actually existing and, therefore, worthy of investigation.

My point is that the academic discussions about the potential existence of a secular body should note that these bodies might, in fact, already be subject of organization's policies, the talks parents and their children are having about hygiene, the sex educations at schools (see Rasmussen 2010; Schrijvers & Wiering *in progress*), or the post-match conversations football players are having in the shower. Through an empirical exploration – by which I mean, following Dressler and Mandaire (2011: 21), descriptive-analytical modes of inquiry, often from a historical, sociological, or anthropological perspective – of the secular in society, we might be able to explore how the gap, which gradually emerged as a consequence of the broken secular promises suggested by Hirschkind, is bridged. In other words: I suggest an empirical inquiry into the secular that seeks to explore what ideas and practices have filled up 'the emptiness' that has gradually emerged as a consequence of secularity replacing religion as the default option.

To do so is not easy, though. In contrast to the literature stressing a need for empirical inquiry into the secular (e.g. Verkaaik & Spronk 2011; Cannell 2010; Wohlrab-Sahr & Burchardt 2012; Cady & Hurd 2010), relatively few scholars have actually focused on the conceptualizations and manifestations of the secular in society, as empirical research on the secularity rather focuses on how particular state models regarding religion actually play out in different countries. Obviously, such a focus is important, but I also consider it important to explore how the secular is conceptualized and manifested in other facets of society. What do people and organizations in society, both implicitly and explicitly, understand to be covered by the notion of the secular? What are the practices advocated by the people who have embraced the default option? To explore such questions, I argue that a material approach is helpful, which, when employed in empirical research, provides us with certain stepping stones for approaching the secular.

### **A material approach to the secular**

In the face of recent debates around the presence of religion, long existing taken-for-granted understandings of religion have been subject to substantial critique (e.g. Asad 2003). One of these critiques I would like to set forth

here is headed by anthropologist Birgit Meyer (2006, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014). Building on William Pietz' work on the fetish (1985, 1987), Meyer pleads for a critical rethinking of the relation between religion and materiality (e.g. Meyer 2014: 206). In a nutshell, Meyer (2014: 215) considers religion something that is 'being done', or something that 'happens' in society. Religion is "a particular, authorized, and transmitted set of practices and ideas aimed at 'going beyond the ordinary', 'surpassing' or 'transcending' a limit, or gesturing toward 'the rest of what is'" (see Van de Port 2010).

Building on Bruno Latour's (2010) plea for 'symmetrical anthropology', Meyer argues that religion, much like any sphere of life, is fabricated by a mobilization of "texts, sounds, pictures and objects and by engaging in practices of speaking, singing, being possessed, and so on [...]" (Meyer 2014: 214). Rather than prolonging a 'mentalistic understanding' (2014: 213) of religion as something that primarily takes place in the mind, which, according to Meyer is an important part of the protestant legacy in the study of religion, Meyer suggests to take sets of practices, material cultures, and fabrics of lived, embodied experience seriously.

Intrigued by Meyer's 'protest' against confirming to hegemonic (academic) conceptions of what religion is supposed to look like, I suggest that it is likewise interesting to apply this material approach to the secular. I do not use the term 'materiality' here as it has been used in the wake of the framework of the so-called 'material turn', in which, objects are playfully suggested to have particular forms of power or even agency. I simply understand materiality as the "the stuff and practices of sensual living together, interpreted and crystallized through concepts that could just as easily obfuscate power relations [...] as help us to see them" (Belting et al. 2014). I understand the secular here as we explore people living in secularized countries to perceive it (see e.g. Van der Veer 2006; Verkaaik 2009; Tamimi Arab 2015; Schuh, Burchardt, & Wohlrab-Sahr 2012; Verkaaik & Tamimi Arab 2016).

To empirically approach the secular, I first suggest to develop a provisional typology, based on views about the secular that are empirically gathered, which will help us to roughly categorize several secular positions. In order to do so, we, like Asad and Hirschkind, need to depart from a particular definition of the secular, because I deem it problematic to gather such findings without a conceptual definition. This might appear as an imposition of theory but I consider that an inevitable evil. Every researcher enters the field with baggage, and this becomes particularly clear when we, later, have to legitimize our selection of that what we consider to be secular or not. We could, of course, at first, try stick to our interlocutors' interpretations of the secular, but I do not consider this fruitful as I have noted that, at least in the Netherlands the term in itself is frequently unknown (see Schrijvers & Wiering *in progress*).

So, when we, for example, embrace Hirschkind's definition of the secular as something that is bounded to its religious shadow, we could conceptualize a typology of the secular based on collected expressions, manifestations, or views regarding religion.<sup>9</sup> Obviously, but importantly, such expressions, manifestations, or views do *not* need to

correspond with the definition we initially opted for: it could well be that we find people interpreting the secular as something religious, something entangled with notions of race, something related to gender, something related to agency, something related to food, and so on. Our conceptual definition merely serves as a starting point.

It is in this process of developing a typology of the secular that a material approach is useful. The point is that conducting empirical research that takes materiality serious will enable us to explore how the secular is (perhaps implicitly) manifested in day-to-day life, because the approach stimulates exploring material forms that people in society are – perhaps without realizing it – associating with what they – perhaps also without realizing – consider secular. Once we have explored such material forms, the different interpretations of these forms can be gathered and analyzed in order to add new categories to our typology or to critical reflect on the categories we already had conceptualized on the basis of other empirical findings. So, a material approach to the secular not only seeks and analyzes material manifestations of what is (implicitly) considered secular, it also provides us with tools for reflecting on the categories we already conceptualized on the basis of emic ideologies.

With material forms of the secular, I mean places some consider secular (Gökariksel 2009); particular styles of dressing, regardless of what the people dressing this way think themselves (Fadil 2011; Selby 2014); objects, such as condoms, associated with secular health-care organizations (Bartelink 2016); medicines, assumed to be part of secular, rational society (Hirschkind 2011); food some associate with being secular, e.g. Chelsea Woppers (“chocolate-like, fudge-like strips of goodness”) (Engelke 2015a: 77); particular authorized forms of behavior, including a secular dealing with the coffin (Engelke 2015b) or, as I will argue later, specific practices of sex (see also Engelke 2015a).

Let me first, however, make some crucial implicit matters explicit. First, comparable to Meyer’s plea for a material approach to religion, the suggested material approach to the secular – which I propose here in the context of empirical research, but which is probably also relevant in different branches of research – implicitly critiques hegemonic theoretical conceptions of what a particular phenomenon, in this case, the secular, is supposed to look like. By introducing a material approach to the secular, I criticize the ongoing tendency of approaching the secular pre-eminently from theoretical, or politically-orientated perspectives. Perspectives, which, as has been argued by Dressler & Mandair (2011: 21), sometimes tend to rather be the product of normative trains of thoughts than the result of empirical investigations.

By including different perspectives of the secular, this approach seeks to obtain a less ‘deconstructed’ and ‘denaturalized’ understanding of these phenomena, and, instead, aims to grasp them from a bottom-up perspective (see Žižek 2008; Cady & Hurd 2010; Cannell 2010; Verkaaik & Spronk 2011).

Second, and I consider this of major importance, a material approach to the secular urges us to face that certain objects, acts, bodies or other forms frequently considered

neutral or value free, are definitely not experienced as such by others (see also Mahmood 2009). As long as we do not sufficiently investigate how the secular is understood and ‘done’ in society, some taken-for-granted material forms might be harmful for some, not necessarily religious, people in society (see Butler 2008).

It is now time to illustrate the approach’s relevance through applying it to the discussion of a secular body. Like Asad focuses on the body in the context of pain, I will examine the issue through a particular lens: the practice of sex. I selected sex because it is, and I am obviously following Foucault here, one of the main conduits of power, and an important crossroad of the social and the private (e.g. Spronk 2014; Weeks 2013; see also Hurd, 2011: 173). A word of caution is appropriate here: the upcoming analysis is obviously simplistic in the sense that I have not been able here to take into account all relevant aspects including gender, race, power, and class. This essay, unfortunately, is only capable of showing the tip of the iceberg and, therefore, much more research is needed. Again, I consider this article an encouragement – ‘a little nudge out of the door’ – for more extensive scrutiny.

### Sexuality in the Netherlands

In the Netherlands, cultural secularism, or in Verkaaik’s (2009: 93) words ‘progressive nationalism’ plays an important role in many facets of Dutch culture, including the public sphere, media, and education.<sup>10</sup> Both left-wing and right-wing political parties consider themselves ‘defenders of secularity’, and explicitly attempt to distance themselves from what they consider religion, namely ‘dogmatic’, non-individualistic, non-emancipatory, and non-tolerant (Verkaaik, 2009: 115). The hegemonic conviction is that secularity and secularism, in all their different interpretations, are a fundamental aspect of Dutch liberal society, which has made its way into our society in the 1960s (see also Mepschen et al 2010).

Interestingly, this ‘cherished’ secularity appears to have a particular entanglement with sexuality.<sup>11</sup> Joan Scott (2009) coined the interesting notion of ‘sexularism’ to denote a particular form of embodiment that is part and parcel of secularism (see also Verkaaik & Spronk 2011: 85). Over the past years, interesting findings on the Dutch ‘sexular’ discourse have appeared (e.g. Butler 2008; Mepschen et al 2010; Verkaaik & Spronk 2011; Schuh et al 2012).<sup>12</sup> The Dutch, allegedly liberal (that is, supposedly unrestricted), views on sexuality, often assumed to derive from the ‘sexual revolution’ in the 1960s, are considered to be under threat as a consequence of the growing presence of Islam, a religion that, in the Netherlands, is largely taken to maintain restrictive views on sexuality (e.g. Van der Veer 2006; Verkaaik 2009; Mepschen et al 2010). Anthropologist Verkaaik, for instance, illustrates this by pointing us to the fact that Dutch homosexuals are mobilized in Dutch secularist discourse, functioning as representatives of sexular thought, while, at the same time, Muslims experience great difficulties in becoming accepted as tolerated, integrated citizens (Verkaaik 2009: 144–147; see also Butler 2008; Bracke 2012).

Again, such 'liberal' Dutch values concerning sexuality are often assumed to derive from the 1960s, when the Netherlands supposedly featured the so-called sexual revolution.<sup>13</sup> This revolution is often perceived to have broken the taboos on sexuality that were rampant during the previous pillarization, or the politico-denominational segregation of the Dutch society (Kennedy 1995). During the 1960s, the ideal of progressing towards modernity became a pivotal aspect of the Dutch *zeitgeist*. Modernity, the Dutch assumed, could only be achieved by saying farewell to the 'dusty' pillarization, and hence it became a widely shared conviction that the Dutch culture had to 'depillarize'. Of major importance here was the taboo on sexuality, which was increasingly seen as the flagship of the previous pillarization. Sexuality, the Dutch increasingly agreed, was in need of becoming an open and liberated topic. The taboos were in absolute need of breaking (Schnabel 1990: 15–17).

Consequently, in that period, the naked body was allowed to – or even encouraged to – be publicly shown. In the 1967, Phil Boom was the first woman to appear naked on the Dutch television, which resulted in a lot of controversy in Dutch society (Kennedy 1995). Additionally, videos concerning sex education appeared, developed to break the supposed traditional taboos concerning sexuality (Schnabel 1990: 20). In 1968, naked theater shows entered the Amsterdam scene. These shows were called 'rhythmic pornographic show' ['Ritmiese Pornografie Sjoo']. These improvised shows focused on naked women and men, who usually had used drugs, performing sexual practices (Hekma 1990: 108). Furthermore, sex magazines such as 'Gandalf', 'Chick', and 'The Candy' emerged (Schnabel 1990: 20) and in the 1970s, members of the 'Mad Mina' ['Dolle Mina'], a feminist protest group, in their effort to legitimize abortion, publicly showed their bellies, exposing the writing on their stomachs, which translated as 'boss in my own belly' (Kennedy 1995).

These examples, though quite varying, all indicate that the body was the tool *par excellence* to challenge supposedly outdated restricting social codes, and, hence, the body became the flagship of liberal views on sex-related topics. It functioned as a tool for communicating, but, since the body is an indispensable part of sex itself, it was also capable of showing how these ideals – or rather the lack of such ideals – could be put to practice. The body needed to become 'wild' again, which, for many, implied that the restricting protocols from the past were to be deserted as soon as possible. The idea that people were restricted to have sex with one partner only, for instance, was considered outdated, as sexual pleasure was suggested to be something 'nice and enjoyable' ['leuk en lekker'] (Schnabel 1990: 19).

However, Schnabel suggests that, in hindsight, it was not really sex as such that changed during the sexual revolution. Rather, it was the *publicness of sex* that became subject to transformation. Changes concerning the ethics of sex, for example, having premarital sex, already occurred in the 1940s and 1950s, but it was only during the sexual revolution that they became publicly visible (Schnabel 1990: 18–19). The attempts aimed at releasing sex from social codes in the 60s, which still is an important

association Dutch people have with that period, did not really succeed (Schnabel 1990).

In 1967, the NVSH ('Dutch Society for Sexual Reform') president Mary Zeldenrust-Noordanus, held her 'sextant speech' ['sextant-rede']. The content of this speech was generally perceived to reflect the core ideas underlying the revolution (Schnabel 1990: 20). In that speech, Zeldenrust-Noordanus addressed sex and urged for its 'release', but she did not really address what should be done once this was actually accomplished. In fact, Schnabel argues, a rather uncritical consensus prevailed, which assumed that all problems related to sex would immediately be solved once sex was finally set free.

However, from the 1970s on, an increasing number of sexual health and sexual therapy organizations appeared, which illustrates that the much-wanted release of sex had made the topic more difficult. It became increasingly clear that the liberated wild sex could, in fact, only be wild to the extent that it would not violate the principle of 'absolute mutual agreement' of both the partners involved (Schnabel 1990: 28).<sup>14</sup> Both parties, therefore, had to engage in subtle negotiations. Sex was supposed to be something beautiful, respectable, and healthy, and in order to meet this demand, both parties needed to experience pleasure while, at the same time, they were also expected to respect each other (*idem*). The fact that sex had entered the public sphere contributed to this complexity as it was possible now to publicly address formerly exclusive private matters. The Dutch were able now to compare views and to reconsider their opinions (Schnabel 1990).

The NVSH started to provide people with advice on the difficult topic of sex. People could, for instance, write them questions about sex, which the NVSH answered in a public magazine. In his article 'Samen of alleen' ['together or alone'], Dutch historical pedagogue Röling discusses such questions. One of these letters, written by a 50-year-old man and which originates from 1980, is particularly interesting. In that letter, the author explicitly stresses the problems he and his wife are facing:

My wife has started to dress in her own way. [...] Additionally, she wants me to provide her with the opportunity of letting her sexually approach me when she is ready for it, when *she* wants it. When *she* is in the mood. She also wants to lay in my arms, without having sex. Well, ok, I try to do so. However when we do that, I cannot help myself having an erection and I simply want more... [...] Currently, we have not had sex for *four weeks*. [...] Later that day, the tension was mounting. I said: you are the biggest bitch on the entire planet. She responded scornfully: "well it's simple. My man wants to have sex and if he doesn't, he gets angry". We still read many books, too many, I guess. With every book on emancipation that we read, our marriage becomes more rotten (Röling 1990: 97, my translation).

Though we have seen before that sex supposedly had been 'liberated' from the restrictive social codes of the pillarization, this letter clearly illustrates that shortly after

the supposed sexual revolution, sex had been ‘domesticated’ by different social codes, which had put an emphasis on sex as something ‘difficult’, ‘respectable’ and ‘beautiful’. So, regardless of the many pleas for the ‘unleashing’ of sex, sex only partly succeeded in becoming wild. Still, the idea of the 60s as a wild period during which sex was successfully liberated, is still a widely-shared notion in the Netherlands (Schnabel 1990).

### A Dutch sexular body

The 1960s, during which the requirements of sex we have just seen became part of the Dutch culture, are also supposed to have marked the start of another revolutionary process: secularization. According to scholar of religion Peter Van der Veer (2006: 118), this is still reflected in the “popular narrative among the Dutch [...] that during this decade, they finally liberated themselves from the constraints of religion. Declines in church membership and church attendance were very steep during the 1960s, and in a relatively short period Holland was transformed from a highly religious to a highly secular society”.

The crucial point here is that, both the alleged abandoning of religion and the alleged abandoning of supposedly outdated social protocols of sex, were put under the same umbrella of depillarization, and hence they were put together in the supposedly important process of progressing toward modernity (Kennedy 1995). So, we have returned to that what is captured in Scott’s notion of sexularism, as we see that notions of sex have been mixed-up with interpretations of secularism (Scott 2009; see also Mepschen et al. 2010; Verkaaik & Spronk 2011). In the Netherlands, the depillarization has led to a particular entanglement of cultural secularism with a particular ethic of sex.

Sociologist Marguerite van de Berg (2013) beautifully captures this ethic in her article ‘praten zonder blozen’ [‘talking without blushing’]. Through an empirical investigation of a parenting course on sex education for children, she shows how openly discussing sexual topics is suggested a solution for almost all problems related to sex. Van de Berg describes how, during an education about sex for parents where she participated in, a father – who happened to be one of the few autochthone people visiting the sessions – stated to have difficulties with his seven-year-old daughter’s extraordinary interest in kissing.

Interestingly, the Educator misinterpreted his question – she interpreted his question as if his daughter had been harassed by boys at school – and she recommended the father to openly talk with his daughter, so that she could learn to postulate boundaries regarding what she appreciated and what not. After repeating the question for the third time, the educator finally understood the problem, but she, interestingly, did not really adjust her advice: she though talking about it still should be an adequate solution. The father, however, did not seem satisfied and asked the other parents attending for advice. To the father’s surprise, they recommended ‘simply’ forbidding his daughter’s behavior, implying that it was ridiculous he had not done so before.

Though van de Berg had very different aims with this fragment, it beautifully illustrates the complicated tensions

a sexular body has to deal with. On the one hand, a Dutch sexular body should be free, not being restricted by any norm, and it should be able to openly discuss and do whatever ‘wild’ things it would like to do. To forbid behavior is taboo, as it is outdated: the Dutch have abandoned all constraints somewhere in the 1960s. To openly talk about sexual topics is the adequate solution, and, in fact, from the educator’s perspective, there is not really room for another one. A sexular body, it appears, does not blush.

On the other hand, a sexular body is subject to (additional) social protocols. The educator recommended the father to teach his daughter to set up boundaries; ensuring that she became aware of the behavior she liked and that which she did not. By doing so, the daughter would seek for ‘standard boundaries’: boundaries in films, boundaries implicitly and explicitly recommended by parents or friends, and so on. In fact, this father considering his daughter’s behavior problematic indicates that some boundaries in fact already had been crossed: for the father, his daughter had been too wild already.

One can of course think of many more boundaries that are hegemonic in the Netherlands: one is expected to shave particular body parts, all bodies are expected – and recommended by sex specialists as we have seen above – to conform to specific norms concerning seducing behavior, and it is not accepted to show certain body parts on television. So, a sexular body respects others, controls its needs, and only engages in sex when it is ‘enjoyable for both partners’. A sexular body doesn’t “fuck”, a sexular body “makes love”.

The crucial question is, to return to our initial discussion, whether all of this is secular. Or, in Hirschkind’s words: are the presented norms really part of a particular configuration of the human sensorium – of sensibilities, affects, embodied dispositions – specific to secular subjects? (Hirschkind 2011: 633). Agreeing with Asad (2011), I would, again, argue that this is a matter of definitions. If we, for example, consider a secular body a body that is matching the ideals advocated by capitalist societies and modern empires (Asad 2011: 669), it seems reasonable to call it secular, especially when we take into account the educator’s organization (Rutgers WPF) is (partly) funded by the Dutch secular state. Or, if we embrace other definitions, such as understanding “the secular to be a concept that brings together certain behaviors, knowledges, and sensibilities in modern life” (Asad 2003: 25), or practices discursively identified and valorized through the discourse of secularism (Hirschkind 2011: 663) it also makes sense to call this body secular. As we have seen, it is exactly the historical discourse of the secular that has ‘claimed’ these embodied configurations.

I am not so sure whether the sexular body I have sketched can be denoted secular if we demand that everything secular has to have a religious shadow (Hirschkind 2011: 643–644). Of course, this once again depends on a definition (what exactly is a *religious* shadow?) and it could even be argued that, from a cultural secular perspective, this sexular body indeed features a religious shadow, as religion in the Dutch, lived society is considered differently than it is in academia: many in the Netherlands seem to consider religion as something outdated, dogmatic, and

oppressive (see Wiering 2016). I, however, understand religion as ‘something’ that connects people with ‘the rest of what is’ (see van de Port 2010), so for me it does not really make sense to call this body secular as its religious shadow seems to have been removed: I do not think sexuality necessarily relates to religion.

However, and this is the point I would like to highlight, if we look through the glasses of probably quite some people living in the Dutch society, it seems perfectly suitable to denote the body I sketched secular. As we have seen, in the Dutch 1960s, both sex and religion were perceived to be in need of transformations: sexuality had to be ‘liberated’ and the ‘dusty old forms of religion’ that had marked the pillarization, were considered to be anti-modern. As a result, notions of sexuality, and hence, the body, became entangled with secular notions as they were all brought under the same umbrella of ‘essential parts of modernity’. Therefore, looking from a bottom-up perspective, I argue that a secular body exists.

Like a particular cloak can be considered religious because it is often worn, and hence perceived to be claimed by Christian monks, like a particular embodied posture is considered religious because it is often employed by Buddhist Zen masters, I would argue that particular norms concerning the body that people strongly associated with the secular, for instance because they are claimed by some secular discourse, can indeed be considered secular, because people in society conceive them as such. This also means that I do not think it is likely that there is only one sexular body: I expect that our future typologies will show us that there are many ideas circulating of what the secular is, each of them entailing normative statements, and some of them related to what a body should (not) do, and should (not) look like.

Hence, a sexular body, from a cultural secular perspective, is a body which affective-gestural repertoires, in the context of sex, people in society (historically) associate with the secular. The Dutch sexular body, for instance, should not blush, and, hence, is discouraged to do so. Throughout history, many Dutch have decided to instruct everyone to speak openly about their sexual life, and they have also decided that everyone should be engaged in complicated negations, because, as they also have agreed, sex is a difficult topic. Some, perhaps including myself, would not agree on the ‘secular-ness’ of this body as the religious shadow – at least as how I interpret this shadow – seems to have been removed. That does not matter, though, because my particular view is only one out of many. Other views should come, at least in my understanding, from our lived world.

## Conclusion

I have argued that we are in need of expanding our inquiries of the secular through empirical research. I have encountered many works stressing a need for empirical inquiry into this phenomenon [...] (e.g. Verkaaik & Spronk 2011; Cannell 2010; Wohlrab-Sahr & Burchardt 2012; Cady & Hurd 2010), but relatively few have actually done so.<sup>15</sup> With the material approach suggested in this essay, I

firstly hope to have intrigued other scholars to reflect critically on the naturalness of their secular environment, and to invoke an empirically-based bottom-up perspective of the secular in our academic understanding, theoretically challenging as it might be.

Employing such a perspective enables us to find secular material forms, of which the analysis will contribute to our academic debates on the secular. The example of the sexular body has shown how the understanding of secularity in the Dutch society does not correspond with academic notions of that term, because, in Dutch society, supposedly neutral secularity is in fact dovetailed with particular sexular embodied configurations. I speculate that there are many other normative forms out there. How is secularity, but also the secular more generally, for instance related to – or perhaps even entangled with – topics such as race, gender, aesthetics, politics, the public sphere, Christianity, Judaism, food, dancing, love, sports, development, climate change, death, war, or the transcendental?

This brings me to my second point, which is that I plea for more awareness of the normativity that a secular climate currently entails *besides* its regularly discussed imposing of models that confine religion to particular spheres.<sup>16</sup> The secular is also out there in other facets of society, mobilized, and understood in particular, not neutral ways – potentially contradicting the ‘good’ intentions of the state – and as secularity has become the default option in our contemporary secular age, it urges people, on the pain of becoming marginalized by others, to not only be religious in particular ways, but also to embrace certain objects, sets of behavior, rituals, ideas, statements, and ideal images of bodies.

I do not know whether we can avoid such normativity, and, unfortunately, I tend to think that many in the Netherlands would in fact not like doing so. Not many will appreciate to participate in what they see as going backwards in time. I do, however, consider it necessary to clarify *what* exactly is implicitly imposed. The default option in society, its material forms, and its ‘unbelieving construals’, including all their normative features, are in absolute need of exploration.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In this paper, for reasons of clarity, I use the notion of ‘the secular’ as an epistemic category that refers to “a realm or reality that is differentiated from the religious” (Casanova 2009: 1049). In this ‘secular realm’, I understand ‘secularism’ (secular ideology) and secularity (a secular state of being) to be flourishing. This importantly implies that, when I, for instance, write about empirical scrutiny into ‘the secular’, the later includes secularity and secularism.

<sup>2</sup> This research is part of a broader project: ‘Sexuality, Religion and Secularism’, funded by the Dutch NWO.

<sup>3</sup> I agree with Casanova that it is secularity that has increasingly become the default option (2009: 1053).

<sup>4</sup> This section partly overlaps with a section I wrote elsewhere (see Wiering 2016).

- <sup>5</sup> I do not have space here to elaborate on this particular bias towards Islam but it strikes me how often academia echoes, and hence contributes to, such narrow perspectives dominating in media and politics. The disproportionate amount of academic attention to the headscarf is a case in point (see also Wiering 2016).
- <sup>6</sup> I realize that for some people, the state's dealing with religion is in fact everyday life. Cultural and political secularism, therefore, can perfectly overlap.
- <sup>7</sup> I do not think that it is necessary to, in a similar way, speak of 'the *cultural* secular' or '*cultural* secularity', since these concepts do not know so much literature yet that is focused on their political dimension. In other words: the notions of the secular and secularity, in contrast to secularism, are less likely linked to large amounts of philosophical or theological-political debates that have successfully 'claimed' them as topics that are primarily stuff for politically-oriented studies.
- <sup>8</sup> Although the article is fruitful on many levels, it is not constantly about the secular body. Rather, it seems Asad's main aim is to (implicitly) problematize modern secular democracies. Although Asad states to acknowledge that a secular body's existences and characteristics depend on who is defining, most examples Asad presents explicitly mention and discuss negative features (e.g. sadism) that, as Asad implies, are characteristic for modern secular societies, and subsequently how these features would be manifested in a secular body.
- <sup>9</sup> An example of a comparable typology (though not based on views gathered from contemporary societies) can be found in the work of Barry Kosmin (2007: 3). In his typology of the cultural secular, we could simply replace Locke, for instance, by a particular group of people all supporting one interpretation of cultural secularism, which leads to an overview of the different understandings of secularism in society.
- <sup>10</sup> Note that there are important differences between secularism as it is interpreted in Dutch politics, and secularism as it is grounded in Dutch law (see Tamimi Arab 2015).
- <sup>11</sup> I realize that the idea of a sexual identity is an invention of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (see Phillips & Reay 2011).
- <sup>12</sup> Strictly speaking, these but also my upcoming findings are not sexular in Scott's understanding of the notion. Scott tends to agree with one of Asad's definition of the secular, namely being strongly related to the secular liberal state, and, hence, she considers secularism an ideology of the state that particularly aims to privatize religion. For Scott, sexularism thus seems to refer to the consignment of the passions (sexuality and religion) to the private sphere (See Scott 2009). This emphasis on the private/public domain is not so important in the work cited above.
- <sup>13</sup> Often, such assumptions are incorrect or at least dubious. The supposed acceptance of homosexuality, for instance, is still strongly debated and it was not until the Dutch people experienced 'a larger threat' (Islam)

in the 2000s, that homosexuality suddenly was considered 'accepted' (see Mepschen et al 2010).

- <sup>14</sup> Interestingly, the conviction of sexuality involving two partners remained surprisingly unchallenged (see Rölting 1990: 89).
- <sup>15</sup> Besides the work of Lois Lee [(2014; 2015), the biblio mentions Lee 2014 – is that the reference you have in mind? I also discuss the body in two chapters in 2015, *Recognizing the Non-religious: Reimagining the Secular* Oxford: Oxford University Press? (Thanks for the reference by the way!)], I consider the work of the anthropologist Matthew Engelke an important exception here as his work on secular humanists in England is an excellent example of the fruitfulness of examining the secular through empirical research (see Engelke 2014; 2015a; 2015b).
- <sup>16</sup> One could argue that ascribing such normativities to the secular should in fact not be encouraged because it might contribute to maintain and therefore prolong rather than overcome the stubborn problematic religion *versus* secular binary. I admit that this is a valid criticism. However, taking into account that so many are not familiar yet with the non-neutrality of the secular, I think 'overcoming' the binary, for now, simply is too ambitious. As a first step, we now need to expose the secular's normativity in society.

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### Author Contribution

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