

## Race and Religious Joy

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The eighteenth century is not going to save us. But, like any literary-historical period, it affords countless perspectives on joy, justice, and meaning that are foreign to our own and are, therefore, capable of renovating our moral imagination as we seek to live well in our current state of crisis. Of course, for most authors in the period, terms like “joy” and “justice” were intimately tied to religious belief. Thus, if eighteenth-century literary studies “remains dogged by religion to the degree that it stakes its credibility” on distinguishing between the “secular” and the “religious”—on continually instantiating the secular/religious binary that, according to Tracy Fessenden, “lies closest to the heart” of our “professional identity”—I’m afraid we’ll miss much of what the eighteenth century has to offer in this moment.<sup>1</sup>

Rather than ignoring religious sentiments or tying those things we rightly detest in the period (racism, misogyny, homophobia) to religion’s mast while citing secular progress for the period’s more generous impulses, I therefore suggest we remember Talal Asad’s claim (made almost twenty years ago!) that secularism is not religion’s opposite. Rather, it is a form of power that decides what even gets to count as religion in the first place. Religion is not static, and nothing is *essentially* religious. Religion takes shape in the ways historically-situated communities inhabit and think about the world.<sup>2</sup> Placing religion in this framework prohibits us from fetishizing religious authors of the past, naively exculpating religious traditions for injustices committed in their names, and *prima facie* declaring those things we most admire in the eighteenth century as either irreligious or “secular.”

Building on Asad’s insights (and insights gleaned from secularization studies more generally), our eighteenth-century colleague Lori Branch has recently invited us to free our scholarship from “the secularization thesis’s overdetermination,” thereby opening our work to “myriad accounts of the construction of secular perspectives and subjectivities and ... the transformation of religion in dialogue with them.” Branch’s “postsecular” model of scholarship approaches religion “as a shifting range of practices and experiences in different times and places”; it refuses to misrecognize itself as “universal reason”; it is “honest about our inability to separate knowledge from implication in belief”; it accounts for the “extra-rational and non-consuming dimensions of human persons”; and, finally, it recuperates “ultimate questions”—What does it mean to live a good life? Why do we exist?—while viewing such “questioning, uncertainty, and faith” as “the very condition of possibility for freedom and meaning-making and as the prime concern of our scholarly and pedagogical endeavors.”<sup>3</sup>

In our present circumstances, I find Branch’s call appealing.<sup>4</sup> (And, judging by my graduate students’ enthusiastic responses to a course I recently taught on “The Postsecular Eighteenth Century,” many of our students do as well.) I don’t say this simply because I myself am religious, though certainly that contributes to my understanding of religion as something potentially generative and meaningful. I say it because I’m convinced we can’t do justice to many of the authors we study or the students we teach if we leave religion out of the equation. This is especially the case in our current moment. In a time defined not only by a global pandemic but also by radical calls for racial justice (and, of course, the two issues are entwined), many eighteenth-century authors—particularly Black authors like Ottobah Cugoano, Olaudah Equiano, James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, Ignatius Sancho, Phillis Wheatley, and (potentially) the anonymous author of *The Woman of Colour* (1808)—allow us to think in

exciting new ways about the intersection of race, religion, and secularism. For me and my students—many of whom come from religious backgrounds in my current context in Central Texas—these authors stand as firm reminders that white American Evangelicalism isn't the only religious game in town, that the most destructive religious voices aren't monolithic, and that students therefore needn't disavow their various religious identities and affiliations to pursue justice and peace in the present. In other words, these authors allow us to imagine a better world by helping us imagine better forms of religious life and meaning.

For instance, Cugoano's jeremiad against slavery, *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species* (1787), with its vigorous repudiation of racism, insists that God is incensed by injustice and that much of what passes as white "Christianity" is, in fact, damnation in disguise. His antislavery stance is thus both political and theological. Ignatius Sancho's infectious joy, his humor, and his verve are likewise theological. His commitment to interfaith generosity and his good-humored opposition to bigotry were informed by his conception of the Deity (particularly as manifested in the life of Jesus Christ) as one who welcomes and receives all. Thus, neither Cugoano or Sancho fit neatly into stereotypical (and notably white, secular) categories of religion. Theirs is not a staid, otherworldly Christianity unconcerned with the things of this world. Moreover, they did not uncritically adopt the oppressor's religion; they full-heartedly identified themselves with the meek who will inherit the earth (Matthew 5:5), the redeemed of Israel (Exodus), the crucified Christ who wrestled with the problems of evil and suffering yet never foreswore hope ("Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?" in all its moving intensity is not the last word; that honor belongs to, "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit" [Luke 23:46]).<sup>5</sup> By doing so, they simultaneously

challenged the white religious complacency of their day (and ours) and offered readers a Christianity that is committed to racial justice and political reform.

Thus, we unwittingly reinscribe secular power when we insist (or tacitly imply) that authors' religious views and sentiments can be neatly disentangled from their various critiques of racism and slavery. For instance, just as we would be doing Equiano an injustice were we to focus solely on the slavery portions of his *Narrative* (1789), ignoring the fact that he spends his opening chapters describing the pleasures of life in Africa at length, reminding his British readers that Africans' lives aren't solely defined by slavery and oppression, so too do we wrong him if we sideline his Methodism and end our studies and classroom discussions at the moment of his manumission. I've witnessed a similar secular dynamic play out in the classroom when students suggest that Olivia's self-assertion at the end of *The Woman of Colour* is somehow separable from her understanding of her own piety; or when students (and professors, too?) imply that unless Phillis Wheatley's religion was the white religion of her enslavers, it cannot properly be called Christian. Reading Wheatley in this way forces one either to discard her religious expressions as ironic or to insist that she was unwittingly tricked into accepting the colonizer's poisonous Christianity. As I frequently remind my students, however, both of these readings deny Wheatley's own agency and prohibit her from being an active, generative participant in the Christian tradition.

By engaging eighteenth-century authors' religious expressions in all their nuanced complexity, we can move beyond shallow secular depictions of faith, producing better literary-historical scholarship while also allowing ourselves to reimagine our individual religious traditions and spiritual, ethical commitments. Cugoano, Sancho, Wheatley, and other Black authors contributed to the development of Christianity just as much as any white author, and they

frequently present us with a Christianity more humane, more generous, more attuned to injustice. Many of our students are longing for a more capacious understanding of the spiritual traditions in which they were raised (and I know I was as well when I was an undergraduate). In our teaching and scholarship, we have the privileged opportunity of introducing students to religious possibilities already imagined in advance. And, though I have largely focused on Christian authors here—and speak from within a Christian tradition myself—these possibilities are of course not limited to Christianity. The histories of colonialism, secularism, and religion are thoroughly imbricated, as Saba Mahmood and Urs App have shown in different ways, and we therefore cannot rightly understand our period and its import for our present moment if we do not carefully attend to the myriad religious expressions of those who are all too often undervalued in European histories of “religion,” including the many Muslims, Hindus, Jews, and non-white Christians whose faiths stood firm despite the oppressions of empire.<sup>6</sup>

For me, as a scholar and teacher of British literature, this means taking seriously the religious yearnings, thoughts, and sentiments of those who were marginalized within eighteenth-century British society. It means learning from the life-affirming humor of Ignatius Sancho, the righteous anger of Cugoano, the subtle ironies of Wheatley’s poetry. There is pain in these authors’ narratives, to be sure. And there is crisis. (I’m thinking of scenes like Equiano’s separation from his sister or Gronniosaw’s desperate, fruitless attempts to find a white British minister willing to perform a burial service for his recently-deceased daughter.) But amidst this pain and crisis, there is also an incredible amount of hope, affirmation, and generosity. And, of course, there is joy—*religious* joy that might just invigorate and sustain us in our own desperate times of crisis.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Tracy Fessenden, “‘The Secular’ as Opposed to What?” *New Literary History* 38.4 (Autumn 2007): 631–636, 633.

<sup>2</sup> See Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003). It’s also worth noting that, following Asad’s lead, Ethan H. Shagan has recently historicized the category of religious “belief” itself. Belief is not a stable category, Shagan convincingly argues; it meant very different things at different historical moments. From an eighteenth-century perspective, we can see this in the work of someone like Swift, for whom belief was constituted primarily by devotion to the Church, not to personal intellectual conviction, as we typically tend to conceive of belief today. See Ethan H. Shagan, *The Birth of Modern Belief: Faith and Judgment from the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> Lori Branch, “Postsecular Studies,” in *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Religion*, ed. Mark Knight (New York: Routledge, 2016), 91–101, 95–97, 99.

<sup>4</sup> Even so, I am not wholly satisfied with the term “postsecular,” primarily because it often denotes a historical present that has somehow moved beyond secularism, a present that does not, to my mind, actually exist. However, despite my reservations about the term itself, I believe Branch’s *methodological* postsecularism is worth taking seriously.

<sup>5</sup> James H. Cone’s essential *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011) makes this point about Black Christianity and culture in the United States during the lynching era (1880–1940), and he does so much more powerfully and poignantly than I can possibly hope to do here. To give just one concrete example of such identification in an eighteenth-century author: In his *Interesting Narrative*, Olaudah Equiano repeatedly aligns enslaved Africans’ plight with Israel’s in the book of Exodus, while his strategy of castigating “nominal Christians” by bombarding them with loaded rhetorical questions is a strategy that he likely picked up from the Christ of the Christian Gospels.

<sup>6</sup> See Saba Mahmood, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016); and Urs App, *The Birth of Orientalism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).