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The Secular Sacred: In-between or both/and?
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> The sacred is a special quality in individual and collective systems of meaning. In religious thinking it has been used as an attribute of situations and circumstances which have some reference to the culture-specific conception of the category of God, or, in non-theological contexts, to some supreme principle of life such as love, freedom, equality or justice. Sacrality is employed as a category-boundary to set things with non-negotiable value apart from things whose value is based on continuous transactions … People participate in sacred-making activities and processes of signification according to paradigms given by the belief systems to which they are committed, whether they be religious, national or ideological. (Anttonen 2000, 280-81)

In this chapter the terms 'religion' and the 'sacred' will be decoupled. The sacred will be revisited and re-theorized in relation to the secular, with the term 'secular sacred' being utilized strategically to highlight the break with the commonly-expressed view that the 'sacred' is an exclusively religious category. This theoretical discussion will be followed by an analysis of the controversy surrounding same-sex marriage and the deep-seated convictions about gender difference and equality which underpin it. This case is one among many that undercuts the assumed opposition between the sacred and the secular and demonstrates instead their potential mutuality.

Religion should not be conflated with the sacred, nor should its Other – the secular – be conflated with the profane. To do so is unhelpful and misleading as these concepts have their own distinctive semantic terrains. In the last half century, with relatively few exceptions, scholars in the West have been inclined to use 'religion' and the 'sacred' interchangeably, to assume the latter is essentially a religious matter, and – on the basis of different readings of the secularisation thesis – to equate the decline in social significance or privatisation of religion with the disappearance or retreat of the sacred. As a corollary of this, some of those who have critically questioned the ongoing process of secularisation have referred to the 're-sacralisation' of society, suggesting that the sacred was first swept away as religion met its historical and social fate, only to be revitalized as the latter re-entered public life. The argument in this chapter is that, irrespective of the destiny of religion and its public visibility or significance, *the sacred never left* (Francis and Knott 2011). Rather, its presence within secular contexts went by unnoticed, unremarked or misunderstood.

My aim, then, will be to bring some clarity to the contemporary landscape of religion, the secular and the sacred and their interrelationship, first, by offering a particular reading of the relationship of the religious and secular and, secondly, with reference to recent perspectives on the meaning of the 'sacred' and its value as a scholarly term. Keeping the terms 'religious' and 'secular' in play – and dialectically related – has strategic value as it then allows me to show how the 'sacred' operates in relation to both, as the 'religious sacred' and the 'secular sacred'. My purpose is not to add new terms to our scholarly vocabulary, but to introduce a temporary operational distinction in order to address the limitations of current assumptions and then move on. These terms are not intended to signal distinctive, unconnected or incommensurable domains, nor to suggest that the 'sacred' operates differently in religious and secular contexts. Rather, it is in recognition of the routine assumption of a dichotomy between the religious and secular that I retain

it when discussing contemporary forms of the sacred. To hide or minimize this discursive dichotomy – I suggest – would be to further compound the confusion that already pertains in much academic and popular discourse where the sacred and religion have been rendered indivisible, secular societies are thought to be dismissive of or even hostile to the sacred, and the secular is assumed to profane the sacred.

Giving more attention to what we mean by the 'secular', as well as reconceptualising the 'sacred', is an important move in reconfiguring the experiential, ritual and ideological landscape in which current social identities are forged. I begin though by differentiating 'religion' from the 'sacred'.

Distinguishing the 'Sacred' from 'Religion'

Since the early twentieth century, sociologists, anthropologists and religious studies scholars have discussed both religion and the sacred in relation to modernity, occasionally bringing the two terms together to examine their interrelationship (e.g. Anttonen 1996a, 2000; Appleby 2000; Lynch 2012; Taves 2009, in press; Thomas 2004), but more often than not using them interchangeably. In the introduction to *The Sacred in a Secular Age*, in which he hoped to set in motion a process of revision in the sociology of religion, Phillip E. Hammond (1985, 6) lamented the fact that 'the distinction between the "sacred" and "religion" is one we have lost sight of' in our hurry to witness to the secularisation of Western societies: 'When, therefore, in a period of *religious* decline, the *sacred* seems remarkably alive, we are puzzled and unable to comprehend events surrounding us.' (1985, 4)[1] Using the analogy of love and marriage, he noted that we do not conflate the two just because 'all known societies have marriage institutions' and love is 'sometimes characteristic of relationships within those institutions'. But we have 'mistaken' religion and the sacred. *The Sacred in a Secular Age*, he acknowledged, did not fully achieve the necessary comprehension of the sacred and revision of secularisation to which it aspired, but it did expose the inadequacies of what had become entrenched positions (1985, 5).

Whilst debates about secularisation have continued unabated since the mid-1980s, the question of the sacred has not been pursued with such vigour in the sociology of religion. It was not until the 1990s that it really began to be considered, and then within the comparative study of religion (Anttonen 1996a, 1996b; Idinopulos and Yonan 1996; Paden 1991, 1992; Thomas 2004 [1994]). The dominance of a broadly Weberian agenda within sociology of religion arguably dampened the impact of those neo-Durkheimian voices (Alexander 1988, 2003; Mellor and Shilling 1997; Shilling and Mellor 2001) who sought to reopen the question of the sacred. The idea of a revival of interest in Durkheim and the sacred was dismissed as flying in the face of the evidence of secularisation. Furthermore, within both disciplines, it was assumed by some to be an unscientific, irrational or theological pursuit associated with reopening the issue of the innateness of the religious impulse.

Critics could hardly be blamed for such views given the widespread and loose use of the term by popular authors claiming without question the *sui generis* phenomenon of the sacred and the inherent spirituality of humanity, nature and place. Such anxieties had their roots in objections to the long-standing ontological tradition of scholars influenced by Rudolph Otto's *The Idea of the*

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[1] Hammond's italics.

Holy (1958 [1917]), and epitomized by Mircea Eliade's *The Sacred and the Profane* (1959).[2] Thomas, among other critics, identified three problems with using the term 'sacred' in the study of religion: it was often a mask for theological interests; it was ethnocentric; and it exoticized its object, thus making such objects impenetrable to study. He called for it to be used 'with economy in its rightful context rather than be liberally sprinkled over any number of allegedly holy events, persons and locations' (2004, 64). If Thomas saw a restricted use for it, others dismissed it altogether, particularly those poststructuralist critics, such as McCutcheon (1997) and Fitzgerald (2000), who were not only eager to disclose hidden theological agendas, but also to unseat essentialist notions and emphasize the constructed and historically situated nature of scholarly concepts, including the 'sacred', 'religion' and the 'secular'.

Although there have been some new ontological theories of the sacred – which, like their forebears, tend to conflate the 'sacred' and 'religion' (Lynch 2012, 16) – the majority of recent initiatives have their roots in the work of Durkheim rather than Otto, and explicitly take heed of criticisms raised post-Eliade (e.g. Alexander 2003; Anttonen 2000; Knott 2005; Lynch 2012; Paden 1991, 1992; Taves 2009). They take as their starting point two Durkheimian tenets: the distinction between the sacred and the profane (Durkheim 1976, 37), an opposition found in all religions, but not necessarily confined to them (1976, 213); and the observation that nothing is inherently sacred, but that everything has the potential to be designated as such (1976, 122-23). A distinction of substance, between 'religion' and the 'sacred', is established is such theories.

As Lynch notes, however, there are different ways to read Durkheim on the sacred. We are faced, he writes, with 'a fork in the road' between different neo-Durkheimian traditions that focus on either the 'pure/structural' or 'impure/antistructural' sacred (2012, 20), of which he favours the former, an Anglo-American tradition from Shils through Bellah to Alexander that attends to 'processes by which particular sacred forms operate as normative constructions of absolute reality that tend to maintain their power over long periods of time' (2012, 20). This he distinguishes from that broadly continental 'impure' tradition of studies of the sacred, developed by Hertz, Caillois and Bataille, but including Turner, that 'focuses on fleeting moments of ecstasy, transgression, creativity, and *communitas*, which give life by temporarily releasing people from cultural structures' (Lynch 2012, 20; cf. Knott 2005, 141-48, 222-28).

Whether pursuing a Durkheimian trajectory really forces us to differentiate between these approaches is open to debate (Anttonen 2000, 279), and I will return to this and my own position on the sacred later in the chapter after I have introduced and discussed the other key concept in this argument, the 'secular'. Whilst I am in full agreement with Lynch that conceptual gains are to be had from analytically distinguishing between rather than conflating 'religion' and the 'sacred', my view is that this is best achieved, not 'through the temporary suspension of the terms "religion" and "secular"' (Lynch 2012, 17), but rather by strategically retaining them. To do so is not to conflate the sacred with religion, but – as I will show – to reinforce the point that the 'sacred' does not respect the boundary between the two and may be identified and studied within secular as well as religious contexts and in secularist and well as religious discourses. This helps to avoid any suggestion that the 'sacred' floats free of its context or that it operates as a third space in between the religious and the secular.

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[2] For more on this tradition of work on the 'sacred', see Anttonen (1996a, 2000) and Lynch (2012).

No Getting Away From It: The Modern Binary of the 'Religious' and the 'Secular'

There are sound historical and discursive reasons for a strategic use of these terms. The terms 'religious' and 'secular' are intertwined; each needs the other in order to be fully understood. Their relationship is at the heart of the Western symbolic order, and they have been commonly used, along with other dichotomies – church and state, private and public – to signal a significant cultural and political tension which is perceived to operate variously in different European societies (Berger et al 1999; Davie 2002), and is often transposed comparatively beyond Europe (e.g. Asad 2003; Cady et al 2010; Fitzgerald 2007b; Kosmin and Keysar 2007). Under the influence of colonialism and globalisation, the concepts of the 'secular' and 'secularism' have been adopted and localized in different national contexts.

In the medieval period, the term 'religious' came to refer to those who pursued a monastic life, with 'secular' (from the Latin *saeculum*) referring to those working within the world, to ordinary parish clergy and those in higher ecclesiastical positions (Asad 1993, 39). With 'temporal', it was also used to refer to ordinary or profane time, as opposed to God's time or spiritual time (Taylor 1998, 32). Commenting on the difference underlying these meanings, Taylor argued that, 'the existence of these oppositions reflected something fundamental about Christendom, a requirement of distance, of non-coincidence between the Church and the world … but more fundamentally, the need for distance, for a less than full embedding in the secular, was understood as essential to the vocation of the Church' (1998, 32).

It is in this need to distinguish otherworldly affairs from those of the worldly order that the relationship between the 'religious' and the 'secular' arose, bringing with it the possibility of disagreement, tension, and – later - opposition regarding the nature of both the relationship and boundary between the two. This distinction, then, exists as a historical resource on which academics and intellectuals, politicians, religious leaders and policy makers have been able to draw in characterising the changing symbolic order of Western societies.

They are frequently presented in opposition to one another, for example, as two counter spheres of interest with separate centres and peripheries, and distinctive powers, ideologies and hierarchies, as well as in the encounter between religion and secularism and their various 'culture wars'. But, as Jantzen insists (1998, 8), 'the religious/secular divide is a binary constitutive of modernity which cries out for radical questioning. Rather than seeing the secular and the religious as opposites, I suggest that they should be viewed as two sides of a coin, the coin itself being of peculiarly modern mint'.

Jantzen, with other poststructuralist critics (e.g. Carrette 2000; Fitzgerald 2000; King 1999), draws attention to the minted or constructed nature of this binary (and by implication its twin terms). Others, however – including secularization theorists and political theorists – have favoured a substantive approach to defining the terms in order to plot a progression from one ('religion') to the other (the 'secular'), or to argue for the institutionalized separation of the two. In most cases, however, this has meant working with a substantive definition of 'religion', for example as belief in God, religious adherence, or church attendance, whilst religion's Other – the 'secular' – has remained insubstantial (Lee 2011, 32-54). As Asad (2003, 16) noted, 'the secular is so much part of our modern life, it is not easy to grasp it directly', and indeed many of those writing about modern social shifts such as secularisation and privatisation have not really attempted to grasp it at all. They have assumed common agreement about its nature and role, and – until recently – have left it a largely empty category, albeit one whose identity is coloured by the absence of something that *has*

been substantively defined: religion (Lee 2011, 34-38). In the process, they have nevertheless reinforced the boundary between them on the basis of both substance and history, whilst binding them together in the project of modernity.

It is important, then, to distinguish this approach to defining and engaging the two terms from one that favours a nominal definition and a discursive relationship. I suggest that, rather than pursuing the meaning or destiny of religion in a secular age, a more fruitful approach is to investigate representations of the 'religious' and the 'secular', and the territories and boundaries that are constructed, negotiated, even transgressed in the process of representing them (cf. Beckford 1999). Such an approach focuses on how these terms have been represented and deployed in discourse as an entry point for understanding more about beliefs, values, practices and the spaces in which they are played out: 'For representations of "the secular" and "the religious" in modern and modernizing states mediate people's identities, help shape their sensibilities, and guarantee their experiences.' (Asad 2003, 14)

Exploring the historical roots of this modern project, Fitzgerald (2007a, 2007b) identifies 'religion' and the 'secular' as mutually-conditioned, oppositional terms that were developed discursively during the Enlightenment, alongside 'politics' and 'economics', in a rapidly developing colonialist context. He argues that the notion of privatized piety made space for the conception and production of a secular domain (2007a, 234), for 'the representation of the world as a secular, neutral, factual, comprehensively quantifiable realm whose natural laws can be discovered by scientific rationality, and whose central human activity is a distinct "non-religious" sphere or domain called "politics" or "political economy"' (Fitzgerald 2007b, 6).

The tacit boundaries between 'religion' and the 'secular', and 'religion' and 'politics', continue today to be reproduced in various ways in public discourse, for example, in the making of laws, in policy and security debates, in political struggles for communal identity, and in media commentaries on the nature of contemporary plural societies. In the process, the concepts themselves are reworked, re-imagined and co-produced. Their relationship is far from settled.

In earlier work (Knott 2005, 71-77, 124-26; Knott 2010a, 121-22), using what I called a 'spatial-discursive approach', I depicted the arena in which these terms continue to be constructed and their relationship played out dialectically, presenting the 'religious', 'secular' and 'postsecular' (a third, synthetic term) as different camps within a single knowledge-power field.

Figure 1: The religious/secular field and its force relationships
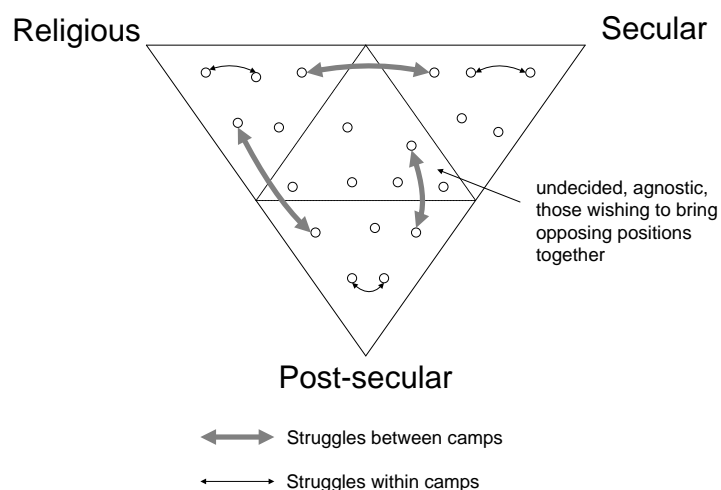
Drawing on Carrette's reading of Foucault on religion – and extending that to include the secular – I presented them as 'part of a set of force relations and discursive practices which order human life' (Carrette 1999, 32). I suggested that exponents of such knowledge-power positions bear a family relationship to one another, despite the fact that they may variously portray others in the same field as opponents, rivals, competitors, fellow travellers, supporters, or friends. They draw on symbolic markers, discursive strategies, and practices of inclusion, exclusion and boundary-making – including sacralisation – to represent and perform their views about their neighbours and their inter-relationships.

Modelling ideological positions and their relations in this way not only builds on the historical and discursive inter-relationship mentioned earlier, but reflects the representation of struggle and warfare repeatedly reiterated by religious, secularist, atheist and, increasingly postsecularist exponents, as well as in academic and media commentaries on such positions. These representations – particularly the territories and boundaries established within them – then become open to deconstruction and interrogation (by means of either critical discourse analysis or a spatial approach).

No less than the terms 'religious' and 'secular' and the meanings attributed to them, such territories and boundaries are unstable. From some positions and on various occasions, they appear substantial and impenetrable, separating insiders from alien outsiders; from other perspectives, territories may seem continuous, with hardly a boundary to speak of and with those around it conceived as allies rather than enemies. Boundaries between positions are thrown up and come into sharp focus at the time of controversies about the place of religion in public life or the crisis of contemporary secularism, such as *The Satanic Verses* controversy, the Danish cartoons crisis, or in European and Canadian debates about the wearing of *hijab*, *nicab* or *burqa* (Knott 2008, 2010a). Even those from the same broad group, who ostensibly share a common identity, may find themselves facing up to one another across an insurmountable ideological divide, for example, Anglicans from different parts of the Communion with opposing beliefs about homosexuality, or secularists with differing views about euthanasia and assisted suicide.

The 'Sacred' and its Role vis-à-vis the 'Religious' and the 'Secular'

> There is a historically valid understanding of the sacred-profane dichotomy … which cuts across the modern religion-secular dichotomy and consequently subverts it. (Fitzgerald 2007a, 108)

Although Fitzgerald's principal interest is the religion/secular dichotomy, his timely concession supports my case, that the 'sacred' is a meaningful concept that transcends the boundary between them and indeed has the potential to overturn or 'subvert' it. How important it is then to keep that dichotomy in play! For strategic reasons, where it clarifies things to do so, I will draw on the terms 'religious sacred' and 'secular sacred', despite the fact that I am clear that it is only the cultural context and conditions that vary between them and not the meaning of the 'sacred' or the process of sacralisation. Distinguishing them in this way is an operational not a substantive move.

Before discussing how I understand the 'sacred', it is important to make a further distinction, between everyday and scholarly uses of the term. As the Finnish comparative religionist, Veikko Anttonen, has shown in his ethnographic and theoretical work, 'vernacular terms for "sacred" date back thousands of years' (1996a, 5), and provide linguistic indices in different cultural contexts of how people distinguished places, beings, things and times on the basis of their

value and import. Why, for example, were specific topographically exceptional places and wilderness sites, such as springs, marshes, lakes and mountains, designated as 'sacred'? Such *emic* usage preceded any formal theorising about the 'sacred' – whether ontological, sociological or anthropological – and its development as an *etic* scholarly concept.

As Paden (1992, 73) noted, 'there are thousands of systems of sacred things', and the study of such vernacular attributions of the 'sacred' has provided the data to enable scholars to construct theories to explain, define and generalize it, to juxtapose it to the 'profane', to distinguish its pure and impure (right and left) modes, and to identify its operation in different environments and periods.

Increasingly scholars have been at pains to stress that the 'sacred' as a category and sacralisation as a process do not respect the boundaries between the religious and secular or between different religions and, in so doing, they have built on a legitimate reading of Durkheim's work (1976, 213, 229; Durkheim 1975, 62; cf. Breese 2012). The 'sacred' (or its equivalent in other languages) can be attributed by people in non-theological as well as theological contexts, irrespective of the nature of their belief systems: 'It is not a uniquely religious category, although its religious meanings and the history of its use dominate the popular as well as scholarly discourse.' (Anttonen 2000, 274; cf. Paden 1992, 72) Furthermore, this fact is endorsed by non-religious people themselves. As the humanist philosopher, Ben Rogers (2004, 1), states in the introduction to the edited collection, *Is Nothing Sacred?*, whilst most 'can get on just fine without believing in the divine godhead, the devil, or the existence of supernatural or transcendent realms … [they] do not find it easy simply to jettison the concept of the sacred'. Drawing on Taylor's (1985, 3) work on 'strongly' and 'weakly' valued goods, he suggests that the reason that,

> many anti-religious philosophers can't quite stop talking about things being 'sacred' or 'sacrosanct' (and relatedly, 'mundane' or 'profane') is that these quasi-religious concepts offer them another powerful way to articulate this fundamental distinction between different forms of worth … 'between things which are recognized as of categoric or unconditioned or higher importance … and things … of lesser value'.
> (Rogers 2004, 4)

Of the atheists and agnostics contributing to *Is Nothing Sacred?*, all but two take the view that the idea of the 'sacred' can be freed from its religious associations, with most of the opinion that it has a place in 'a secular ethics' (Rogers 2004, 5).

Rather than distinguishing religious from secular goods *per se*, the term 'sacred' is premised on the idea of 'setting things apart' (Durkheim 1976, 40-41, 47). Sacred-making activity then, whatever its ideological origin, is that which separates things, creating a place for those things of supreme value and distinguishing them from profane or impure things that are negotiable or may contaminate. The process of representing and experiencing the force of that which is set apart is a collective one (Durkheim 1976, 45-47, 172) engaged in by people of both religious and non-religious persuasions, and from time to time binding individuals across the religious/secular boundary on matters of ultimate significance such as freedom of expression, human rights and sanctuary for strangers (in English such liaisons are ironically referred to as 'unholy alliances').

If we return now to the earlier diagrammatic representation of the religious/secular dialectical field with this inclusive conception of the 'sacred' in mind, we can illustrate the principle that attributions of the 'sacred' are made by exponents and actors rights across the field, albeit with specific reference to things set apart.

Figure 2: The religious/secular field and attributions of the 'sacred'

Religious   Secular

"sacred" attributions
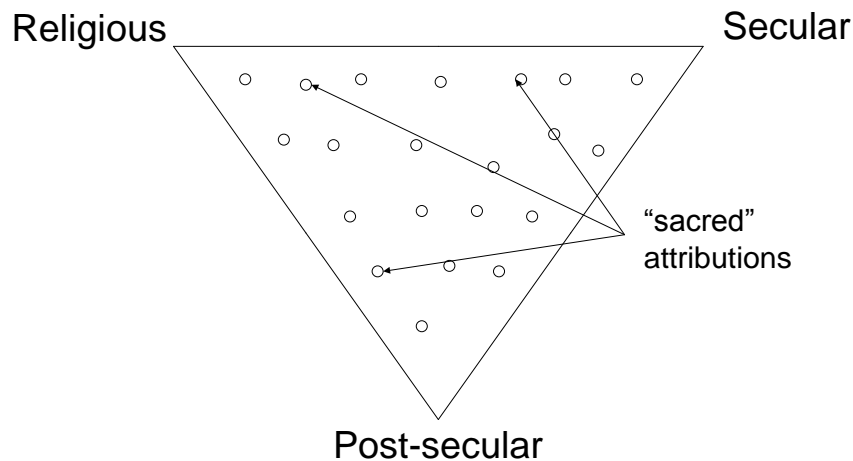
Post-secular

Whilst attributions of the 'sacred' are made irrespective of ostensible boundaries between the religious, secular and postsecular, such attributions nevertheless mark other boundaries, notably those of a categorical or unconditional nature. Scholars who argue the case for the 'sacred' and its role in boundary-making and marking have approached the issue from differing disciplinary perspectives, whether philosophy (Taylor 1985), phenomenology (Eliade 1957), cultural sociology (Alexander 1988, 2003; Lynch 2012), psychology of religion (Taves 2009) or cognitive anthropology (Anttonen 1996a, 2000). As a result of its focus on embodiment, spatiality and cognition, my personal preference is for the last of these, and I have drawn on it extensively in my own work on the 'sacred' and its capacity to illuminate ostensibly secular spaces, beliefs and values (Knott 2005, 2008, 2010a, 2010b). It is to this perspective that I now turn.

       Experiences of the body and the spaces inside and around it are resources that people draw on at pre-conceptual level for representing notions of containment and difference: inside, outside and, most importantly, the boundary in-between (Johnson 1987; Lakoff and Johnson 1988, 1999; cf. Anttonen 1996a, 1996b; Knott 2005, 2008; Taves 2009, in press). For Anttonen, the sacred 'becomes operative in connection with boundary-crossing situations taking place inside and outside the human body and the inhabited territory' (1996a, 8). Such a categorisation, he says, 'is a major cognitive element on which various population groups have traditionally based their symbolic behaviour' (8). Drawing on their embodied experience of inside, outside and boundary, people have developed concepts, metaphors and rituals in order to make distinctions, to differentiate between things on the basis of their value, and to give special meaning to places and times when boundaries (between the inside and outside) are crossed (Anttonen 2005).

       Despite the importance given to fundamental embodied, spatial and cognitive structures in this account of the sacred, it is nevertheless attentive to social and cultural contexts. The 'sacred' has been used semantically by people and groups to mark boundaries in accordance with their beliefs, values and practices: it is culturally dependent. This attention to culture is common to both Anttonen's account and that of cultural sociologists such as Alexander and Lynch. Where they differ on the 'sacred' is in the nature of their projects, with the latter working with the 'pure/structural' aspect of Durkheimian tradition to uncover the 'non-contingent realities which present normative claims over the meanings and conduct of social life' (Lynch 2012, 29) and exploring the therapeutic potential of cultural explanation (53), and the former developing a

semantic approach to the 'sacred' which can be used to unravel the underlying cultural logic at work in particular contexts. This semantic approach, which has methodological as well as theoretical value, makes it suitable for research on representations and discourses of the 'sacred' in any time or place, and in either 'pure' or 'impure' mode.

Although Anttonen's focus on the pre-conceptual structures of body and territory and his semantic approach have a particular resonance for an analysis of secular as well as religious spaces (Knott 2005, 2008, 2010a), it is pertinent also to mention the work of Ann Taves (2009, in press). In Taves's reconsideration of religious experience she develops a model for mapping experiences in terms of both their 'specialness' (a term she prefers to 'sacred' in part because of the latter's frequent conflation with religion), and their ascription as 'simple' or 'composite' (2009, 12-15). Her 'building-blocks' approach is attentive to degrees of value, recognising that some things are special but more weakly valued and negotiable, with other strongly valued and inviolable (cf. Taylor 1985; Rogers 2004). Whilst I would not want to exchange the resonant and symbolic concept of the 'sacred' for the everyday but bland term 'specialness' (Knott 2010b), I applaud the development of a scale that can be used to differentiate the degrees of value people attribute to things, events, places and so on. It is particularly useful for helping us to see that, when people are required to make a choice on the basis of things they value, there are times when they are willing to negotiate (in the face of something special but not 'sacred' to them), and others when they are not (when they apprehend the force of something inviolable). Richard Dawkins (2004, 135) – who notes that 'they don't come much more anti-religious than I do' whilst accepting that 'there are objects and occasions which invoke in me a profound sense of the sacred' – makes the point that, for some, the consumption of human placenta is acceptable if highly unusual and challenging, whilst for others it breaks a powerful taboo: it is cannibalism and an act of profanity (2004, 137).

Furthermore, there is nothing either universal or permanent about what may be deemed sacred: 'The "sacred" can be located in reversible category positions, whether in things pure or impure, licit or forbidden (taboo), fixed or unfixed, violable or sacrosanct.' (Anttonen 2005, 198) Various things, places and people are set apart according to time and context. The boundaries that become the focus of sacred-making discourse and activities have the potential to erupt as sites of struggle but for much of the time lie dormant and, as such, invisible. Routinely tacit, they have the potential to become the focus of deep-seated principles and interests. In terms of the 'religious sacred', for example, we might note ideological fractures within and between Christian groups, such as the deepening of liberal and conservative Evangelical differences focused around contentious debates on women bishops, homosexual clergy, and same-sex relationships. In such cases traditional categorical boundaries based on gender and sexuality have the potential to re-ignite repeatedly as sites of sacred concern (cf. Anttonen 2000, 277).

Boundaries based on gender and sexuality are charged with symbolic meaning within secular as well as religious circles. In the final section, I will turn to the intertwined and much-debated issues of marriage and same-sex relations to explore some of the contours of the 'secular sacred'.

Gender Difference, Marriage and Equality: Sacred Boundaries and Values

> There will be no church bells for us, no hymns, no doting vicar to join us together, and tell us when we are allowed to kiss. Because no church would have us. Too many miles on the clock, you see. Too much life lived.

I thought that I would regret that too. The lack of the sanctified. I thought that would be a definite damper on the proceedings.

But when she takes my hand, somehow it doesn't matter anymore, because I can sense something sacred in the small secular room with the women in their hats, the men in their suits, the children in what my mum would call their Sunday best.

Everybody smiling, happy for us, white lilies everywhere, their scent filling the air.

There's no place more sacred than this place.

And if anyone is blessed, then we are blessed …

And to tell the world – the best is yet to come. What could be more hopeful than that? What could be more right? More sacred? ...

Just a simple ceremony joining together two complicated lives. (Parsons 2003, 5)

Tony Parsons opens his novel *Man and Wife* by exploring the sacrality of secular marriage. This is no Christian celebration and does not take place in church; Harry, the main character, assumes then that it will not be a 'sanctified' event. But the 'simple ceremony joining together two complicated lives' turns out to be no less sacred for taking place in the 'small secular room' of a registry office. Palpable feelings and hopes are generated by this ceremony that at once sets apart, binds together, crosses temporal and social boundaries, and confers new status on the couple. This non-religious marriage and the place where it is enacted, both of which are resolutely secular (no religious words, iconography or music are allowed), are deemed to be 'sacred'; Harry and Cyd feel 'blessed' by it and by their life together.[3]

In 2012, a public consultation was held on the proposed introduction of same-sex civil marriage in England and Wales (BBC 15/05/12).[4] It sparked a fierce debate between those opposed to the idea on principle (a broad coalition, but with a majority of religious organisations) and those in favour of it (mainly but by no means exclusively non-religious exponents, including Quakers, Unitarians and Liberal and Reform Jews) (Coalition for Marriage 2012; Equal Love Campaign 2012; Guasp and Dick 2012).[5] In the Government's consultation document (Government Equalities Office 2012), a ring fence was proposed around religious marriage (which would remain the province of heterosexual couples only), with civil provision to be expanded to include the opportunity for same-sex marriage as well as partnership (legal in the UK since 2005), and with those already in civil partnerships being entitled to have them converted to marriages. Whilst exponents welcomed the proposal, many stressed the continued inequality vis-à-vis *religious* marriage. Gay rights campaigner, Peter Tatchell, stated emphatically that 'this is not only homophobic but also an attack on religious freedom. While no religious body should be forced to conduct same-sex marriages, those that want to conduct them should be free to do so' (BBC 15/05/12). Whilst supportive of same-sex civil partnerships, the Church of England opposed any change in marriage legislation on the grounds that it would fundamentally alter the definition of marriage 'as being between one man and one woman' (Church of England 2012). Roman Catholic leaders also deplored the proposal, with an Archbishops' letter to churches in March 2012 fearing

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[3] In the UK in 2012 heterosexual couples could opt to have a religious marriage or to be married in a civil ceremony in a registered non-religious venue. Neither non-religious marriage (heterosexual) nor same-sex 'civil partnership' in England and Wales may have religious content:
http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/Governmentcitizensandrights/Registeringlifeevents/Marriagesandcivilpartnerships/DG_175715.

[4] By 2012 same-sex marriage was legal in seven European countries (the Netherlands, Belgium, Iceland, Sweden, Norway, Portugal and Spain), and in Canada, several US states, South Africa, Mexico City and Argentina. Various alternative same-sex civil unions had been introduced elsewhere, including the UK.

[5] See Guasp and Dick (2012, 2-3, 15): In a YouGov poll, 71 per cent of British people were in support of Government proposals to extend marriage to same-sex couples; 58 per cent of people of faith in support of proposals.

the devaluation of marriage as a union between a man and a woman, rooted in their complementarity, and vital for social stability and the bringing up of children (BBC 15/05/12). Some church leaders, however, disagreed with official church positions and cited their support for the change (BBC 12/04/12).

Public statements made during the consultation showed how varied the ideological positions were and how complex the issues. Marriage was denoted as 'sacred', by secularist as well as religious exponents, and by lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transsexuals (LGBTs) as well as heterosexuals. Moreover, it was the *right to marry* as well as marriage itself that became a matter of non-negotiability and, for religious LGBT people, the right to have a religious marriage not merely a civil one (cf. Equal Love Campaign). They were joined by those religious as well as secular bodies for whom *equality* – as well as marriage – was a sacred and inviolable principle.[6] Whilst marriage is not the sole province of the religious, equality as a matter of 'sacred' concern is not the preserve of secularist exponents.

In Anttonen's (2000, 277) discussion of the 'sacred' as a category boundary, the legalization of homosexual marriages is one of the cited examples. He notes that, despite public religious utterances, the anxiety about the role of marriage for reproduction and species continuity is not the only one of importance: 'What is primarily at issue is the fundamental significance that gender difference has as the moral foundation of society.' (277) Gender difference has been so taken for granted in western society that until relatively recently its precariousness was not realized. 'Homosexuality' as a condition and 'homosexual' as an identity only began to be formally conceived in the late-nineteenth century (Katz 2001, 9-12). Since then, the construction and differentiation of a range of approaches to sexuality and sexual identity, and the rise of insecurity about sexual self-identification and gender relations have tended to reinforce one another.[7] Homosexuality – especially the idea that same-sex relations could provide the basis for legally endorsed married relationships and family life – threatens the traditional boundaries of the social self (Sibley 1995, 42; cf. Bourke 2005). As Anttonen (2000, 277) states, 'homosexual marriages are opposed and seen as sacrilegious and impure because an acceptance of intercourse between spouses of the same sex is seen as threatening gender difference as a fundamental category-boundary in Judeo-Christian cultures'.

In modern Western secular cultures rooted in Judeo-Christian traditions, the notion of the 'sacred' continues to be experienced and attributed to issues in which the 'fundamental category boundary' of gender difference is at stake. The sacrality of this boundary, which generally goes unnoticed, comes to the fore when it is publicly under threat, as in the case of the legalisation of same-sex marriage, or – to cite another example – the case of gender reassignment (Anttonen 2011). Nevertheless, its routine invisibility does not mean that it is not repeatedly being transgressed; rather, such transgressions are not experienced collectively and not brought to public attention. Seen from a normative perspective, however, the taboo of homosexual intercourse violates the sanctity of gender difference and heterosexual relations. The breaching of the category boundary is experienced in the call for same-sex marriage, but that merely brings to the fore – despite

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[6] The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain, for example, for whom equality and the honouring of *all* committed relationships are key tenets, approved same-sex Quaker marriage in 2009, with the first marriages taking place in 2010. These marriages were denied civil legal status however, with couples being required to undergo a civil partnership ceremony in addition to their religious marriage.

[7] Perhaps the most highly charged example of this was the collective Western moral panic of the 1980s surrounding HIV/AIDS, often referred to at the time as the 'gay disease' (Bourke 2005, 306-12).

appearances to the contrary – the boundary's unsettled nature. The unstable nature of gender and sexual identities and the differences on which they are based are the subject of repeated experimental transgressions whether publicly performed or privately enacted (in peripheral and secret places, behind closed doors, on covered bodies, in desires, jokes, dreams, and the imagination) (Butler 1990).

If, for many, the sacred concern is the celebration and endorsement of gender difference within marriage, for those who call for the right of same-sex couples to marry – whether in a civil or a religious ceremony – both marriage and equality are sacred matters. This is illustrated in Daniela Haskara's (2004) short film, 'Voices for Equality', which recorded events in San Francisco in February and March 2004 when same-sex civil marriage was briefly endorsed and marriage licenses issued.[8] Part of a series entitled 'Sacred Films', Haskara's piece shows couples – many of whom had been together for decades – speaking of the joy of being equal at last, able to validate their relationship publicly and to have it recognized in law. The legalization of same-sex relationships is seen as one of a number of landmark achievements – along with equal pay, disability rights, legal recognition of gender reassignment and so on – in democratic societies in which equality is a core value. For those who support same-sex marriage the category boundary between male and female, which operates as a defining feature of marriage in most legal jurisdictions and is held to be normative and inviolable for the majority of religious organizations, is not deemed to be a sacred matter. For them, the human right to equal treatment 'trumps' gender difference in the call for same-sex marriage (cf. Equal Love Campaign 2012).[9]

I suggest that the tension between competing conceptions of what counts as sacred in relation to marriage has its origins in the shift from a hierarchical to an egalitarian system (Dumont 1972; Tcherkézoff 1987). In a hierarchical social model, roles, genders and other classes of people and things are differentiated, ordered and ranked, with values appropriately accorded; in an egalitarian model, the individual, rather than society as a whole, is the principal unit with each created equal in theory and undifferentiated in terms of rank or status. To mark someone out in such a system is to discriminate for or against them. In a modern society then, in which equality is a core value and where making social distinctions (e.g. on the basis of class, gender or race) is illegitimate, discrimination is the necessary corollary (Dumont 1972, 305; Knott 2005, 143-8).

According to the egalitarian ideal, the failure to allow any two people – irrespective of their gender, race, disability – the right to marry is to withhold a right afforded to others and thus to discriminate against them on the basis that they do not conform to the heterosexual norm. Those democratic countries which resist the introduction of same-sex marriage arguably breach their own core egalitarian principles by retaining a law and practice which preserves a traditional hierarchical approach to conceptualizing difference rather than one of equal rights for all.

It is not surprising then that same-sex marriage becomes a matter of such public concern. For those for whom marriage can only be a union between a man and a woman, it is a violation of the very definition of marriage, whilst for others it is a sacred union and human right founded on the principle of equality. What is clear though is that marriage and the social identities associated with

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[8] This practice ceased on 11 March 2004 when the State of California ordered the County of San Francisco to cease granting licenses. Same-sex marriage was legalized by the State in 2008 when the Supreme Court found marriage to be a fundamental right irrespective of sexual orientation. However, a constitutional amendment came into force the following year declaring that only marriages between a man and a woman could be recognised in California. After various appeals the ban on same-sex marriages was declared unconstitutional in February 2012.

[9] Matters that are non-negotiable in same-sex marriage extend beyond equality to freedom and justice. In order to make a clear case for the 'secular sacred' in this chapter, I have deliberately over-simplified the issues.

it are attributed with sacred significance by people whose beliefs and values are underscored by liberal secular views as well as those whose beliefs and values are religiously informed. If their commitments are under threat, people – irrespective of the ideological basis of their views – may take up intractable positions, stand up for their beliefs, go to law, even fight for what they hold to be true and right.[10] But, as I have intimated above, there is no necessary correlation between religious commitment and opposition to same-sex marriage, or indeed between lack of religious commitment (including secularist, atheist and humanist stances) and support for it. There are a variety of belief and value positions associated with the religious, secular and postsecular (see figure 1) which cannot be mapped straightforwardly onto particular attributions or experiences of the 'sacred' in specific times or places.

In this chapter I have resisted three common and interrelated conceptions: (a) that the 'sacred' is an exclusively religious category, (b) that it stands over against or opposes the secular, and (c) that the secular, therefore, by its very nature, cannot produce or host the 'sacred'. I have argued that the notion of the 'sacred' can be attributed irrespective of religious or secular context, though attributions may vary according to the ideology and values to which people subscribe. As such there is no gap *between* the 'sacred' and the 'secular' in which social identities could emerge or be situated. Rather, those forging social identities in secular contexts – who draw on non-religious commitments and beliefs including atheism, humanism and secularism – mark as 'sacred' those occasions (such as marriage), persons (a lover), things (a ring), places (a registry office) and principles (equality and justice) that they value above all others, and that they see as set apart and inviolable: those things that may be deemed to be *both* secular *and* sacred.

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[10] For example, four couples – two gay and two heterosexual – from the UK took their legal case for 'Equal Love' direct to the European Court of Human Rights in February 2012.

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