

Shuhita Bhattacharjee, *Postsecular Theory: Texts and Contexts* (Orient Blackswan, Hyderabad, India, 2023), 264 pp, ISBN 9789354421402

Shuhita Bhattacharjee's book *Postsecular Theory: Texts and Contexts* – part of Orient Blackswan's Literary/Cultural Theory series – lives up to the series' ambitious promise to 'present students of humanities and social sciences exhaustive overviews of theories and theorists, while also introducing them to the mechanics of reading literary/cultural texts using critical tools' (ii). Indeed, what I found most admirable about Bhattacharjee's book is its distillation of complex theoretical concepts into lucid prose, ensuring accessibility to a wide range of audiences. Readers of *Victoriographies* will find it useful for themselves and for their students at both the graduate and advanced undergraduate levels.

The first three chapters provide comprehensive reviews of the field of postsecular theory since its establishment in the 1990s. Chapter 1 introduces the ubiquitous 'knowledge–faith binary': the supposition that knowledge and faith are mutually exclusive. The most familiar narrative is of knowledge supplanting faith, which is rejected as primitive and naïve. The chapter asserts powerfully that acquiescence to this narrative has resulted in 'acute cultural impoverishment' (9).

This impoverishment is difficult to acknowledge, let alone ameliorate, in a polarised political climate – one in which religion is weaponised across the globe by its strategic tethering to oppression and violence. Finally, the chapter offers a variety of definitions of ‘religion’, drawn primarily from philosophy, which will expand many readers’ views of what it might mean to be religious. In a sense, religiosity is simply a willingness to welcome something outside of the rigidity of ‘knowledge’ and Western neoliberal ‘secular’ values.

Chapter 2 presents a thorough overview of postsecular theory’s tenets, above all, its ‘strong critique of the “secularisation thesis”’ and refusal of ‘any master narrative’ (22, 29). The ‘secularisation thesis’ is a ‘sociocultural axiom and academic staple that assumes the arrival of modernity will inevitably be accompanied by religious decline’ (21–22). Postsecular theory also questions that this goal of secularisation was ever achieved. One of the most salient of the many arguments summarised in this chapter is that what has long been understood as ‘secularisation’ originated from within religion itself. That is, theological and doctrinal shifts, as well as Protestant Christianity’s de-emphasis of the sacraments, all contributed to ‘secularisation’, in part because religion became a private experience in which the individual was granted agency. Chapter 3 outlines the arguments of postsecular theory’s critics. Many of these accuse postsecular theory of relying on the logic of secularisation that it claims to reject; that is, for religion to have created what has been called ‘secularisation’ from within, then the ‘secularisation thesis’ must be true, albeit in different form. Other objections include concerns about disciplinary and methodological approach.

Chapter 4 contains both a historical overview of the Enlightenment’s ‘secular turn’ and an analytical case study of Matthew Lewis’s *The Monk* (1796). The Enlightenment saw the introduction of Lord Herbert of Cherbury’s five-point axiom for religion, which first served as a means of facilitating religious pluralism but soon became central to religion’s internal logic. However, religious enthusiasm and spontaneity, emotional counterpoints to the rational forces at work in religion, were also central to the era. To illustrate the tensions between these rational and emotional forces, the case study demonstrates how *The Monk* relies on Puritan covenant theology – modelled on eighteenth-century changes to the legal system – even as it ‘engages in the most unabashed supernaturalism’, ultimately ‘contain[ing] and convey[ing] the elements of the supernatural by infusing its very representation and rhetoric with the empirical’ (97). The chapter also explains how *The Monk*, as an example of ‘the fantastic’, is distinct from the Gothic and other categories of the anti-empirical novel.

Chapters 5 to 8 will be of particular significance to Victorianists. Chapter 5 offers helpful historical context for the three chapters that follow, recounting how the Victorians described their so-called ‘crisis of faith’ and how their version of ‘the secularisation thesis’ can be challenged. At the very least, there was a two-part (pre- and post-Darwin) secular shift; but the popularity of both unquantifiable forms of religiosity and ‘re-conversion’ narratives suggest that the ‘crisis of faith’ was somewhat manufactured.

Chapters 6 to 8 are traditional monograph chapters containing original arguments, all of which are remarkably clear and befit a monograph designed to model argument formation. These chapters ‘critique not religion, but the “secular” imaginary which imposes a woefully narrow definition of religiosity’ (119). They explore, respectively, the New Woman novel and the possibilities it presents for meaningful pain and sacrifice; novels of colonial India and the potential Eastern religions carry both to reveal the relative ‘desiccation’ of British faith *and* revitalise it for British readers; and the unique way Marie Correlli’s *A Romance of Two Worlds* (1886) breaks the science–religion (knowledge–faith) binary. This half of the book is also a treasure trove for those of us looking for new texts to study and teach as we answer the call to undiscipline Victorian Studies.

Chapter 9 both analyses an individual text and demonstrates how that text encapsulates the concerns of the book as a whole. Its analysis of Marjane Satrapi’s ‘graphic autobiography’ *Persepolis* (2003) exemplifies how the West’s imposition of ‘secular’ neoliberal values on Islamic countries not only strips Muslim communities of meaningful cultural traditions, but also exposes the vapidity of these values after 9/11. At the same time, the dangers of an Islamist fundamentalist regime loom large, leaving the protagonist bereft as she bounces from Europe to the Middle East and back again. Rather than trying to resolve these painful tensions, *Persepolis* permits them to stand.

By ending with this text, Bhattacharjee’s book lets them stand, too. This is fitting: acceptance of uncertainty is one of the criteria of ‘religion’ introduced in Chapter 1, along with making the impossible possible (12). There is no ‘going back’ to anything, the book reminds us, but perhaps reading the book is the first step in making possible conversations that now seem impossible.