

Disavowing Disability

1 Introduction

From colonial classrooms to Allied trenches, the exploits of John Bunyan's redoubtable "Christian" have provided such a sedimented mythos of masculine self-mastery that we can easily forget how haphazard, even clumsy, his progress often is. For modern readers, plagued as we are with more despair than demonic foes, few episodes of Pilgrim's Progress seem so touch-and-go as his run-in with the "Giant Despair," a castle-doctrine landowner who pressures his despondent prisoners to kill themselves. After more than a week of starvation and beatings in the dungeon, Christian escapes improbably with a key he has had all along. A simple pillar is erected to warn later travelers, but the burden of actually conquering Despair is left to the unlikely heroes of the undersung 1684 sequel: women, children, "halt," and "feebleminded." Though it is the superhuman Great-Heart who decapitates the giant, it is ultimately these "weakly" pilgrims who protect the reader from despair. As an updated pillar explains, any who doubt their deliverance from despair can find assurance in the (illustrated) dancing of "Ready-to-halt," who "could not dance without one Crutch in his Hand," but still "footed it well." Along with his fellow traveler "Feeblemind," these "weak" pilgrims figure quite prominently in the narrative, explicitly serving to consecrate communal values such as care, companionship, and mutual accommodation. Neither rehabilitated nor cured, "Ready-to-halt" and "Feeblemind" attest to the fact, noted by scholars such as Lennard Davis and Kim Nielsen,³ that cultural history abounds with disability, appearing as it does in poems, songs, diaries, letters, paintings, engravings, sermons, and even objects. As Douglas Baynton put it, "disability is everywhere in history, once you begin looking for it, but conspicuously absent in the histories we write."4 Indeed, we need not look far for discussions of disability in Bunyan. He argued elsewhere that the transformative process of conversion emerged from disability – not just contrition or spiritual "trouble," but "a heart disabled . . . as a man whose bones are broken, is disabled, as to his way of running, leaping, [or] wrestling."5

The very deliberateness with which Bunyan connects "disability" to impairment,⁶ however, reveals the quagmire that any history of disability encounters from the outset. The term had a different meaning in Bunyan's day

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Bunyan, *Pilgrim's Progress*, 150–154. ² Bunyan, *Second Part*, 181.

³ Davis, *Enforcing*; Nielsen, *Disability History*. ⁴ Baynton, "Inequality," 31.

⁵ Bunyan, Acceptable, 45–46.

⁶ The distinction between impairment – "a form of biological, cognitive, sensory or psychological difference that is defined often within a medical context" – and disability – "the negative social reaction" rooted in social structures – remains useful for marking the structural sources of injustice (Goodley, *Introduction*, 8), but it has been criticized for oversimplifying the complexities of embodiment and materiality.



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than it does in our own, so modern notions of disability cannot be readily applied to discussing seventeenth-century experience. After all, Bunyan is promoting *spiritual* disability, and the impairments of his pilgrims are allegorical – connected with divine rather than social justice. But any attempt to reconstruct the ancestry of modern disability demands an investigation of such episodes, especially if we hope to identify what is so distinctive (and perhaps limited) about our own attitudes. Put simply, we cannot eschew such archives without missing what disability was and is. There is evidently more than mere nomenclature at stake here; the relevance of such sources, along with the broader role of historical research, hinge significantly on whether we can call premodern instances of "lameness," "infirmity," or even "disability" by the name of disability.

Taking this quagmire as its starting point, this Element explores how disability was conceptualized in seventeenth-century religious writing, in particular that of the influential divine Richard Baxter. Joining the ongoing (and contentious) debate about the ancestry of the concept, this Element aims to demonstrate how some of the essential groundwork for its later development was laid by theological shifts during this early period. I thus offer a prehistory of modern disability, one that complements and complicates conventional periodization by explicating some of the antecedents of the shifts that scholars typically foreground. Many of the features that usually signal a modern paradigm of disability, such as the ascendancy of medical authority and the dominion of industrial capitalism, were not yet established in Baxter's day. And that is partly the point here; Disavowing Disability examines the notions of "natural ability," human nature, and personal culpability that underlie later developments. The negotiation of such elemental categories, particularly through the social contract theory rooted in the seventeenth century, seminally informed the tradition of subjecthood, rights, and justice that we live with today. As theorists and activists now recognize, this tradition is profoundly problematized by disability, which represents an exception to the standards of rationality and autonomy that liberal theory, from Locke to Rawls, normally presumes. Baxter encountered analogues of this problem, both theoretical and practical, when he pursued his own reconfiguration of justice. His endeavor to capacitate "all men" under one standardized "law" jarred with the heterogeneity of the people he sought to compass. In elucidating this bind, I draw on theory from modern Disability Studies, as it illuminates the stakes that connect debates about disability across historical periods. Disability complicates our systems of categorization and discipline, so my approach necessarily transgresses disciplinary boundaries; Richard Baxter sits unusually alongside Judith Butler and Jasbir Puar. Lumbering across entrenched battle lines so optimistically is characteristic of Baxter himself, but I hope my own attempts at alliance-building are more successful, or at least less abrasive.



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Unearthing the "ideology of ability" broadly ascribed to the Enlightenment will require us to visit some archives of disability that are dated, daunting, or even dusty. While today fateful discussions about disability happen in policy documents, scientific journals, court decisions, and social media channels, in the early Enlightenment much of this discursive negotiation occurred in sermons, theological tracts, and moral guidebooks. Both as concept and as lived experience, disability was an important battleground in the epochal clash over Christian salvation: Who was saved? What faculties were involved in making them righteous? How should the Christian community be constituted and regulated? These questions represented foundational debates about divine justice and pastoral access, and their stakes overlap meaningfully with modern discussions about social justice and accessibility. The possibilities and challenges of engaging these debates through modern disability theory are examined in Section 2, "Contexts and Connections," which provides a critical overview of how religion has (and has not) figured in Disability Studies, as well as how recent research on secular embodiment has (and has not) attended to disability. Foregrounding the filiations between the histories of ableism and secularism, I suggest in this section, could enhance our understanding of not only Baxter, but also the norms of embodiment and personhood established by the Enlightenment.

The 'Enlightenment,' of course, was not a monolithic entity, nor was early Enlightenment 'religion.' As Section 3, "Enabling 'Every Man," demonstrates, shifts in the landscape of seventeenth-century theology altered the role and implications that "disability" held in religious thought. The Calvinistic theology that defined the first half of the century emphasized the depravity and utter impotence engendered by the Fall, such that "disability" was regularly considered the "natural" and universal state of humankind. In the decades that followed the Civil War, however, England witnessed a far-reaching transformation of Reformed theology, salvation being increasingly offered on conditions and performance, rather than as a gratuitous gift. This shift entailed a variegated process of what I call soteriological enabling, significantly modifying the theological and moral definition of "disability"; by the early eighteenth century, the term became far less commonly used to describe the universal limitations of postlapsarian humankind, which allowed it to more firmly demarcate exceptional incapacities that deviated from "ordinary" life. From this angle, the "decline" of Calvinism involved not simply an exaltation of "natural faculties," most notably reason, but also a pathologization of "disability." As the idea that "disability" was the "natural" or inevitable state of the postlapsarian person

⁷ Siebers, Disability Theory, 7.



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went out of fashion, the category became (particularly in religious writing) the differentiating rather than defining character of humankind.

There was perhaps no writer more entangled in this reconfiguration than Richard Baxter, the protean divine - 'puritan,' 'liberal,' 'moderate,' 'heretic' who intervened in the theology of the age so provocatively.⁸ Section 4, "Disputing Disability, Conditioning Salvation," turns to his voluminous oeuvre, examining his efforts to redefine and regulate the concept of disability. Driven at once by fears of social collapse and hopes of universal harmony, Baxter propagated a theology that extended the promise of redemption to "all men" - on certain conditions. Put simply, he declared that no one was disabled. This redistribution of salvific agency entailed a normative imputation of universal capability: Every person had the potential to be saved because they possessed the "natural faculties" necessary to do their part. To maintain the integrity and justice of this schema, Baxter had to disavow and circumscribe disability so that nobody, whether "reprobate" or "lame," could be constitutionally excluded from the laws of salvation. In defining and defending this system against criticisms and alternatives, Baxter channels a telling dissonance: Faced with impairment - in his readers, his parishioners, even himself – he could not significantly abrogate the demands of capability, even (or perhaps most of all) when they seemed unfair, impossible, or even cruel. In presuming ability so relentlessly and imperiously, Baxter's theology was "ableist" in the sense theorized by modern Disability Studies. But this framing serves less as an indictment than as an invitation to explore why Baxter was so anxious about the exceptions disability represented. Since this tension emerged from his naturalization of a presumptively capable theo-political subject, the bind Baxter encountered can be seen as an early expression of a "problem" inherent to the liberal paradigm rooted in this period: Persons with disabilities were disadvantaged or excluded in adverse ways by the very mechanisms that otherwise promised inclusion and liberty.

As Section 5, "Diversity, Inclusion(ism), Discipline," argues, the imperative to regulate "disability" was entirely consistent with a strategy of "inclusionism" that recognized, even celebrated, human variability and vulnerability. Though his touting of 'diversity' often served to impugn the Established Church (from which he reluctantly dissented), Baxter's sensitivity to physiological differences was reflected in his vision of education, church membership, and health care. These systems had to be finely adjusted to the irreducible heterogeneity of humankind. Implementing a sufficiently differentiated system, however, was tellingly complicated. Baxter's attempts to tailor support to every member

⁸ On Baxter's life and thought: Boersma, *Pepper Corn*; Cooper, *Formation*; Keeble, *Puritan*; Lamont, *Millennium*; Rivers, *Reason*, 89–163; Sytsma, *Mechanical Philosophers*.



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illustrate how the potential injustice of conditioning salvation inhered in the scalar gaps between an ideology of ability and everyday care. These gaps are particularly apparent with respect to intellectual disability, which Baxter encountered in relation to "idiocy." Though he refused to explicitly exclude "ideots" from salvation, since this would compromise its universality, they were rendered socially invisible by his procedures of community membership. In this

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responses to intellectual disability, particularly in educational contexts.

sense, he had recourse to the same techniques of deferral that still define liberal

For personal and polemical reasons, Baxter was unable to so defer the problem of melancholy. This impasse occupies the final section, "Melancholy, Means, Ends," partly because it haunted Baxter and partly because it still haunts us. Rooted in theological conflicts of the seventeenth century yet resonating far beyond his age, this problem was at once plain and perplexing: A vast swathe of "all men" seemed to be legitimately "disabled" by melancholy, yet this was systemically inadmissible. While Baxter affirmed that melancholics, living as they did under the same "law" as "all men," necessarily retained their moral capability and culpability, his accounts of their experience tell a more complicated and implicating story. As he discovered so variously and tragically, the problem with melancholy was that it frustrated all discursive means and methods, focalizing the violence that remained, in the final instance, at the foundation of his theo-political framework. Probing the systemic boundaries exposed by melancholics provides an occasion to think about how far a system of justice premised on capability might go, as well as what collateral damage its procedures and practices might cause.

Baxter's own attempts at plainness spawned tomes of tangled logic, so it is worth announcing our promised destination now, before detours and disputations draw us off track: This Element argues that Baxter's response to disability, particularly as it troubled his ableist soteriology, represents an important moment in the theological prehistory of disability, exposing some of the conceptual problems that continue to haunt the liberal tradition of justice.

2 Contexts and Connections

Disavowing Disability connects two traditionally separate topics of study: disability and secularism. The differentiation of "disability" examined here emerged from trends that critical reassessments of secularism have made visible. Yet, the most profound consequence of secularization – its impact on paradigms of personhood – can only be fully understood through the frameworks developed in Disability Studies, since they explore alternatives that persist here and now. A rapprochement of these seemingly discordant fields suggests that they are



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excavating, albeit with different tools, the same historical process: The normative "ableism" bequeathed by the Enlightenment emerged from the process of secularization, particularly the antiquation of high Calvinist "disability."

Reconstructing the history of disability has been among the most integral endeavors of Disability Studies, but also perhaps the most complicated and contentious. Whether highlighting alterity or continuity, investigations of disability have revealed how distinctive and contingent is our 'modern' conception of disability; the meaning and implications of disability differ enormously across periods and cultures. This recognition, evidenced and enriched with period- and case-oriented studies, has helped denaturalize many modern assumptions about disability, illustrating that they are not inevitable or universal. But while the distinctiveness of modern notions is regularly invoked, there remains abiding disagreement about its periodization: When exactly did this 'modern' paradigm take form? Many scholars, such as Lennard Davis and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, 9 have anchored this shift in the nineteenth century, and broad historical studies of disability, such as Disability Histories, 10 typically reflect this periodization in their focus. A constellation of current research, however, situates this shift significantly earlier - in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The pioneering Recovering Disability in Early Modern England is premised on the idea that "'disabled' was indeed an operational identity category in the English Renaissance," and Elizabeth Bearden has recently contended that "early modern people were working with many of the same discourses of disability and embodiment that we engage now." These projects have not lacked historical accuracy and rigor; dating 'modern' disability is partly a matter of conscious emphasis, hinging on which elements of disability are foregrounded. Whereas privileging topics like medicine and statistics pulls our attention to the nineteenth century, foregrounding issues like stigmatization and institutionalization often points us to earlier developments.

For studies of disability focused on notions of personhood and rights, the seventeenth century is an indisputable foundation. Prevailing conceptions of rationality are rooted in the philosophy that emerged from this period, as are our attendant definitions of human nature and species-membership. For better or worse, the tenets of philosophers like Descartes and Hobbes continue to inform debates about disability, both directly and indirectly via modern thinkers like John Rawls, Amartya Sen, and David Gauthier. Theorists of disability have often invoked the legacy of the Enlightenment in broad strokes, noting how its

⁹ Davis, Enforcing; Garland-Thomson, Extraordinary.

¹⁰ Burch and Rembis (eds.), *Histories*.

Hobgood and Wood (eds.), Recovering, 7; Bearden, Monstrous Kinds, 75. Also, Love, Theatre; Williams, "Enabling."



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definitive "optimism about the rationality and autonomy of man" cast disability in a new role – as the boundary or exception to rational personhood. The precise details of this epochal "ableism," particularly as it emerged from early Enlightenment political theory, are now being more finely articulated by scholars like Stacy Clifford Simplican and Barbara Arneil, who have variously demonstrated how social contract theory "bases political membership on a threshold level of capacity and excludes anyone who falls below." From this perspective, the liberal tradition proffers a "capacity contract" or "ableist contract" that incidentally or even integrally excludes persons with disabilities from the domain of justice. Martha Nussbaum has argued, these inherent biases of social contract theory leave disability as an "unsolved problem of justice" in the liberal tradition, one that we can trace back to its origins in writers like Locke and Kant.

However pragmatic or precise our approach to the topic, any study of disability that makes transhistorical connections is confronted with a lexicographic quagmire as deep and daunting as the Slough of Despond: The definition of disability was not the same in seventeenth-century English, so premodern instances of impairment cannot be called "disability" in any straightforward or unqualified way. As such, studies of premodern disability have usually focused on discourses of "deformity," "monstrosity," and "defect," which provide more coherent categories than "disability." Premodern writers did use the word "disability," but were they really talking about disability in any sense commensurate with our own? Though the term was sometimes used to characterize the effects of bodily impairment, it was also enlisted to describe various other forms of incapacity; we find individuals disabled by injury and defect, but many others are "disabled" by financial or legal incapacity, by poverty and policy. Well into the nineteenth century, the term "disability" was used in ways that cannot be cleanly aligned with our own,

¹² Campbell, "Ability," 12.

¹³ Erevelles, Difference, 29–30. Also, Garland-Thomson, Extraordinary, 38–40; Siebers, Disability Theory, 93–94.

Simplican, Capacity Contract, 27; Arneil, "Self Image." On disability as a "problem" for liberal theory: Arneil and Hirschmann (eds.), Political Theory; Ball, "Autonomy"; Barclay, Dignity; Breckenridge and Vogler, "Limits"; Davidson, Concerto; Hirschmann, "Freedom and (Dis) Ability"; "Disability Rights"; Kittay, "Ethics"; Kittay and Carlson (eds.), Cognitive; Nussbaum, Frontiers; Riddle (ed.), Theory to Practice; Silvers and Francis, "Justice"; Wong, "Duties."

Pinheiro, "Ableist Contract"; Simplican, Capacity Contract.
Nussbaum, Frontiers, 3.

¹⁷ Classen (ed.), Old Age; Deutsch and Nussbaum (eds.), Defects; Garland, Beholder; Garland-Thomson (ed.), Freakery; Knoppers and Landes (eds.), Monstrous Bodies; Metzler, Middle Ages; Singer, "Social Body"; Turner and Stagg (eds.), Social Histories; Wood, "Staging."

For definitions of "disability" in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century writing: Nelson and Alker, "Perfect," 33–34; Turner, *Eighteenth-Century*, 16–34.



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as Essaka Joshua has recently argued. 19 Jeffrey Wilson has contended that this conceptual disjunct undermines projects (such as the 2009 "Disabled Shakespeares" special edition of Disability Studies Quarterly) that claim to uncover modern "disability" in early modern writing. 20 When I have taught units and classes on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century disability, students have eagerly compared our own various experiences of impairment (such as hearing impairment, in my case) with those we are reading about – from John Milton, Sarah Scott, or William Hay. Such meaningful resonances may tempt us to disregard the nomenclature of "disability" as a mere philological quibble, but it is more instructive – for students and scholars – to unpack the semantic complexities of the term as it was used in the seventeenth century. The fact that the word disability was far more context-dependent, describing incapacity in relation to specific circumstances (often not bodily), occasions queries that can denaturalize its modern meaning: How is being disabled for military service different than being disabled for domestic labor? How did civil disability, as was the fate of Dissenters under the Clarendon Code, relate to the legal disability experienced by "ideots" and "lunatics"? If disability is socially mediated, how is being disabled by poverty connected with being disabled by injury? Precisely because we cannot treat seventeenth-century "disability" as a monolithic category of identity or experience, it is all the more worthwhile to carefully investigate the discursive fields in which it possessed specific meanings. This may point us toward fields, terms, and topics we might not expect; whereas today medical discourse draws the most attention in studies of disability, seventeenth-century tenets about the extent and character of human ability were rooted far more deeply in religious discourse – in accounts of the Fall, notions of providence, and ideas of divine order. Before the cultural ascendancy of doctors and medical technology, it was religious writers who were often debating and determining what humans were capable of physically, mentally, and morally. Though the occasions for these debates may seem alien or immaterial to our own age, the attendant discussions about the dynamics of ability frequently entailed the same fundamental concerns as we have today: the boundaries of community, the ethics of accommodation, the nature of justice, and the commensurability of human experience.

Unpacking the ramifications of such an archive, however, will arguably require a more fine-grained account of religion than we currently use in studying disability. Though scholarship on the connections between religion and disability is expanding, generalized conceptualizations of 'Christianity' (not to mention 'religion' more broadly) have typically inhibited historically and

¹⁹ Joshua, *Physical*, 1. ²⁰ Wilson, "Trouble."



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analytically nuanced treatments of those connections. Despite the 'turn to religion' in both historiography and theory, Disability Studies remains a conspicuously secular field. Monographs and collections, such as the ambitious Disability and Social Theory or the well-established Disability Studies Reader, 21 feature little to no engagement with religion, 22 and the otherwise thorough Keywords for Disability Studies moves right from "rehabilitation" to "representation."²³ As Shaun Grech suggests, the marked absence of religion in Disability Studies is "symptomatic of the broader secularism" that permeates such scholarship,²⁴ a trend apparent not only in topics of study but also in the way religion is imagined. Whereas disability emerges (quite rightly) as a complex and culturally inflected locus of identity and experience, religion regularly functions as little more than an inert set of cultural norms or dicta. This tendency is rooted in the disciplinary position and history of Disability Studies, 25 which coalesced around methodologies, particularly Marxism and identity politics, that have been characteristically antipathetic to religion in many modalities. As such, the 'religious model' of disability has traditionally appeared oppressive and backward even in comparatively intersectional approaches to disability. More recent correctives to this trend, such as Disability and Religious Diversity, 26 have indicated how important religion, in all its lived complexity, might be to the history of disability. Historical and comparative studies, such as Saul Olyan's Disability in the Hebrew Bible, have uncovered the cultural contingency of notions like "wholeness" and "defect," 27 while disability-oriented theology, most notably Amos Yong's Theology and Down Syndrome, has challenged the ableism inherited by modern Christianity.²⁸

Yet, partly because such research has been breaking new ground, the consequences of more localized historical shifts have been almost entirely neglected, such that arguments about concepts like 'sin' or 'punishment' are often detached from the particular circumstances in which they were contested and experienced. This generalized approach is especially ill-suited to seventeenth-century England, a moment at which the very definition of Christianity,

²¹ Davis (ed.), *Reader*; Goodley et al. (eds.), *Social Theory*.

²² On this trend: Creamer, "Theological Accessibility"; Imhoff, "Religion"; Tomalin, "Rights-Based."

²³ Adams et al. (eds.), *Keywords*. ²⁴ Grech, "Majority," 64.

On the history of the field: Burch and Sutherland, "Not Yet Here"; Garland, Beholder; Hall, Literature, 19–29; Hughes, Invalidity; Kudlick, "Disability History"; Rembis et al. (eds.), Handbook; Stiker, History.

²⁶ Schumm and Stoltzfus (eds.), *Diversity*.

²⁷ Olyan, Hebrew Bible; Schipper, Hebrew Bible; Schumm and Stoltzfus (eds.), Sacred Texts; Wheatley, Stumbling Blocks.

²⁸ Yong, *Theology*. Also, Eiesland, *Disabled God*; Reynolds, *Vulnerable*.



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including its fundamental structures and practices, was thrown into question. When persons with disabilities were excluded from communion, for instance, did this reflect on 'Christianity,' on 'Protestantism,' on a specific sect, a specific controversy, or even a specific minister? Seventeenth-century scuffles over sacraments and church government may sometimes look irrelevant or even quaint to modern scholars of disability, but they had a far-reaching impact on Enlightenment thought and policy. What is often broadly imagined as the 'Enlightenment model' of disability emerged from the exigencies, concessions, and outcomes these localized struggles yielded.

While repositioning disability at the center of historical analysis might alter our account of Enlightenment philosophy and political theory, such a reorientation could also enrich our understanding of the secular condition we have inherited – its origins and limitations. The classical 'secularization thesis,' which asserted that religion was inexorably declining in cultural importance, has long been dethroned both by revisionist historiography and political theory.²⁹ But the extent to which modern experience is nevertheless mediated by secularity is only now coming into focus. Whether refurbishing or renouncing secularism, recent discussions have revealed that secularity reaches far beyond institutions and policies, engendering a mode of embodiment defined by self-reflexivity, impermeability, and continence. In renovations of secularism, ³⁰ this is reflected in the "epistemic stance" enjoined by Jürgen Habermas or the "autonomy" sanctified by Will Kymlicka. 31 In critical treatments of secularism (sometimes labeled "postsecular"), the "buffered" self deconstructed by Charles Taylor is the most prominent touchstone, ³² but a number of theorists have suggested more specifically that the "secular body" is defined by its distinctive relationship to injury and pain – mediated, partitioned, insulated.³³ This is partly why Talal Asad has suggested that secularism might be most fully understood by querying its norms of embodiment: "How do attitudes to the human body (to pain, physical damage, decay, and death, to physical integrity, bodily growth, and sexual enjoyment) differ in various forms of life? What

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For established critiques: Balibar, Cosmopolitanism; Berger (ed.), Desecularization; Casanova, Public; Fessenden, Redemption; Keane, "Secularism?"; Stark, "Secularization, RIP"; Warner, Secularization.

Butler et al., *Public Sphere*; Calhoun et al. (eds.), *Rethinking*; Ghosh (ed.), *Sense*; Habermas, "Religion"; "Notes"; Maclure and Taylor, *Secularism*; Stout, *Democracy*; Warner et al. (eds.), *Varieties*; Zuckerman and Shook (eds.), *Handbook*.

³¹ Habermas, "Religion"; Kymlicka, *Citizenship*.

³² Taylor, Secular Age. Also, Abeysekara, Politics; Bilgrami, Enchantment; Fraser, "Rethinking"; Sandel, "Procedural."

³³ Asad, "Secular Body"; Hirschkind, "Secular Body?"; Mahmood, "Secular Affect"; Scheer et al. (eds.), Secular Bodies.