bank explains the rise of figures of recipients, beneficiaries, and the gift. Lederer traces the diffusion of the knowledge of blood type in America in the early twentieth century. She observes how blood type was taken up in to various projects of discrimination and differentiation, for example, in regulations of the Board of Health of New York, or as mass surveys in preparation for an atomic attack. Carsten uses an ethnographic study of the labs and blood banks of two private hospitals in Penang, Malaysia in order to examine how these labs transform blood from bodily substance into a scientific object, ready for analysis. She argues that throughout the bloods movement in the lab, the blood acquires “everyday” meanings. For Carsten, this shows that even though blood is “detached from its source...[it] retains a symbolic potential” (145).

In his study of blood portraiture of freedom fighter martyrs in India, Jacob Copeman links two threads which have appeared in the previous essays, blood as a source of politics and as a source of truth. He argues that the blood portraits are a response to a perceived problem, a lack in the set of nationally recognized martyrs of independence. For Copeman, the Indian blood portraits are a “direct political intervention” in that they are an attempt to "intervene in the negotiation process of collective memory in order to revivify and stabilize a particular body of remembrances” (154). The final essay by Emily Martin investigates the absence of blood from in representations of the brain in neuroscientific research. She suggests that such bloodless representations of the brain continue to project an untenable body/brain division as well as “relegate blood to the lower, ‘female’ portions of the human body” (180).

This collection of essays is a worthy read providing something of a prolegomenon to an anthropological study of blood symbolisms and practices. The book also includes a handful of color images which add an effective visceral element to some of the essays, particularly those of Bildhauer, Whitfield, and Martin.

Ryan Olfert
Department for the Study of Religion
University of Toronto


In October 2009, at the Great Hall of New York City’s Cooper Union, Jürgen Habermas, Charles Taylor, Judith Butler, and Cornel West spoke and engaged into a dialogue on what seems to be a pressing concern for today’s academia, politics and beyond: the inclusion of religion in the ‘public sphere’ and implications thereof. The book under review here, The Power of Religion in The Public Sphere, comprises of essays, abbreviated versions of which were first presented at the mentioned public forum, which the editors understandably call an ‘undeniably epic event’ (viii). The fact that since Rawls barely any philosophical contribution has been to the study of religion in the public sphere justifies the editors’ choice of attribute; and, in fact, this also points to the significance of the theoretical intervention these four scholars goes on to make in the field.

In this book, the quadruple has set out to problematize what Charles Taylor nails at the very outset of his essay: the assumption that “modern democracies have to be ‘secular’” (34). They question the philosophical discourse of modernity and its liaison with secularism that has increasingly depleted traces of religion from the domain of the public sphere, and made “cultures of
religiosity” appear redundant from the point of view of modern frames of regulation and governmentality. It is interesting to note that in this collection Habermas, who had been a staunch supporter of the Enlightenment discourse, has, as the editors aptly point, “turned increasingly to questions of religion” (3). His piece, “The Political,” can be read as a revisionist intervention to his erstwhile notion of the “secular public sphere,” which, for the last few decades has been come down with serious criticism by scholars (including Craig Calhoun himself, who has written a brilliant afterword to this collection), for having neglected the question of religion, and has now been referred to as the “post-secular public sphere.” It reconsiders how religion contributes to the “public sphere” and legitimizing the democratic apparatuses of the state. In historicizing the nexus between “the religious” and “the political,” Habermas posits that religion is, in fact, a crucial force in sacralizing the law.

Critiquing Carl Schmitt's reliance on the sovereignty of statist authoritarianism, immanent in his concept of “the political,” Habermas, more along the line of Rawls, emphasizes the ‘communication flows of civil society’ (27), wherein a “rational-critical debate in which matters of the public good” (132), as opposed to the religious, or statist interests, becomes prior within the discursive ambit of modernity. That been said, Habermas acknowledges:

[I]In the course of its [sovereignty’s] democratic transformation, “the political” has not completely lost its association with religion. In democratic discourse secular and religious citizens stand in a complementary relation.

and, in so doing, envisages citizens, both secular and religious, of a pluralist, non-discriminatory society, “meet(ing) in their public use of reason” (26), and engaging in a dialogue in mutually “accessible languages” (25).

Charles Taylor, on the other hand, makes a case for conceptual broadening of “secularism.” He points to how secularism, as is prevailing in the West, has increasingly depleted diversities in practices of reason. According to Taylor,

[T]he notion that state neutrality is basically a response to diversity has trouble making headway among “secular” people in the West, who remain oddly fixated on religion as something strange and perhaps even threatening. This stance is fed by [...] a specifically epistemic distinction: religiously informed thought is somehow less rational than purely “secular” reasoning’ (51).

Although Taylor does not invoke Nandy, there is a striking overlap between his line of argument and Ashis Nandy’s critique of secularism. 1 “The idea that secularism makes a special case of religion,” Taylor insists, “arises from the history of its coming to be in the West” (37). Taylor, much like Nandy, ascribes this uncoupling of religion from politics, that what Nandy calls “devaluation of religion in public life,” 2 to Western modernity. Taylor’s notion of ‘neutrality’—the idea that the state ought to be neutral not only toward all religions but also Marxism, Kantianism, utilitarianism and so on (50)—is something, I assume, Nandy would have issues with. As Nandy reminds: “One could be a good secularist by being equally disrespectful towards all religions...” 3 Given that the line between indifference and ‘neutrality’ is infinitesimally thin, I wonder why Taylor forecloses the conditions for possibility for one (or the state) to be non-neutral, but tolerant.

2 Ibid., 14.
3 Ibid.
Butler, however, makes a distinction between tolerance and cohabitation. She points to the incommensurability in different religions trying to co-exist in a state that endorses secularism. For Butler, tolerance /neutrality gives rise to universalization, while ‘plurality implies differentiations’ (87). This, in fact, raises a very pertinent question: what if a secular state (or, person) is intolerant of the Other? In other words, Butler questions the very basis of desirability of secularism, while reminding us of an ethical responsibility toward the Other. Cornel West invokes the metaphor of musicality, to be precise, the polyphony of blues and jazz (92), in order to gesture toward a more inclusionary and pluralistic future. Both Butler and West are critical of the reductionism involved in neutrality. Overlapping in a number of interesting ways, both their concerns talk about the emancipatory potential in feeling a prophetic empathy for the Other, while at the same time signaling a kind of regimentation wherein issues of religiosity are taken over by political elites.

The book concludes with an afterword by Craig Calhoun who charts out the thrust of the contributions by the four authors and discusses it in terms of national(ist) identitarian politics. This volume, to put in Taylor’s phrase, rather “goes beyond a static way in which religion and nonreligion co-exist” (111) in order to bring out the stakes and contentions in envisaging religion and secularism as oppositional categories. Much of the concerns raised here resonates with, and may be better illustrable with, the context of South Asia, albeit none mentions of it. This is, however, entirely my personal expectation that the book did not promise. That said, I consider this book as a critical intervention and a point of reference for rethinking both religion and secularism.

Avishek Ray
Department of Cultural Studies
Trent University