Theorizing sexuality, religion, and secularity in postcolonial Europe

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Introduction

This special issue addresses the ways in which sexuality, religion and secularity intersect in everyday lives and biographies in postcolonial Europe. The focus is on experiences and practices of religion and secularity in relation to gender, sex and sexuality. In bringing together the research presented here, we aim to move beyond the focus on religious-secular contestations in the public sphere. Rather than viewing gendered sexuality as a battleground, we wish to draw attention to the subjective experience and actualization of sexuality, as it is an important domain in which self and relationality come to be articulated and shaped. This takes place in a context that is deeply informed by colonial histories, as well as competing narratives of modernity and progress in which the migrant and/or religious 'other' often represent the past as being left behind. Therefore, rather than focusing only on religiously and culturally defined others, whose different attitudes toward sexuality and gender are thought to need special attention and explanation, we also turn the lens toward the everyday practices and implicit genealogies that are embedded in those actors that are the standard bearers for the norm. We thus propose to look beyond controversies to focus on how people with different cultural trajectories encounter one another, whether in person or in public debates. In short, we propose the notion of *cultural encounters* to study and disentangle the interconnections of sexuality, religion and secularity in actors' day-to-day articulations.

The most notorious intersection between sexuality, religion and secularity appears in what has come to be called the 'migrant crisis' (Mavelli and Wilson 2016). Recent research on diversity in Europe has pointed to the racialization of migrants and refugees, and more specifically to how Muslims have become racialized as xenophobia and Islamophobia strengthen and legitimize each other (De Koning 2016; 2020). Particular understandings of Christianity's secular and historical role in Europe often play an important role in these debates (Topolski 2018), while simultaneously these understandings come to be reshaped and fixed in the spectrum of political parties across Europe. What is noteworthy is that, in particular issues around gender, emancipation and sexuality become the battlegrounds for articulating differences (Shield 2017; J.W. Scott 2009; Knibbe et al. 2018). In these public contestations, Europe is presented as progressive, secular and enlightened in its approach to gender and sex, but also as pitted against the migrant, often religious 'other', who is regarded as someone who has to be brought into secular time to fully belong to the nation (Butler 2008). This is most evident in relation to Islam, which is often framed as dangerous and oppressive. As a consequence, it is often represented as a threat undoing the gains in emancipation for women and sexual minorities that are perceived to have been made since the sexual revolution (Bracke 2011; 2012; Balkenhol, Mepschen, and Duyvendak 2016; Shield 2017; Brandt 2019). In contrast, a Christian background is often viewed more benignly as 'folklore', as something that marks the cultural heritage of particular groups of migrants. Christianity is seen as more easily fit-

ting into the European context, with its particular trajectory in which religion is seen as a part of life that can be left behind or privatized. Nevertheless, when the Christianity of migrants does not appear to follow that trajectory, the frame of religion as backward and as a threat to modern and 'healthy' approaches to sexuality expands to include Christianity. This sometimes occurs in combination with a negative racialization of 'black' churches and in relation to sexuality (Knibbe 2018). In short, in these debates, implicit and explicit civilizational hierarchies are being formulated in what Balkenhol and colleagues call 'the nativist triangle' of sexuality, race and religion (Balkenhol et al. 2016; Mepschen 2016).

A focus on public contestations may obscure how these matters present shifting realities beyond the politicization of religion. We ask how do public contestations around sexuality, religion and migration reverberate in people's everyday lives? Do they play a role in articulating the ways in which sexuality, secularity and religion interconnect at this level (Pool 2022)? For example, how do supposedly 'sexually oppressed' religious women and sexual minorities work towards their sexual well-being? How do they deal with the secular and/or migration frames through which they are viewed? Research that focuses on the interactions of sex, secularity and religion *in practice* is scarce (but see Roodsaz 2018; Rasmussen 2010; Roodsaz 2022), especially where it concerns how the secular operates as a cultural, embodied formation (Fadil 2011; Scheer, Fadil, and Johansen 2019). In addition, gender is a dimension that has been addressed surprisingly little at the level of everyday life, in contrast to its quite obvious position in debates on Muslim women and contestations around veiling (J.W. Scott 2009; Fadil 2011; Brandt 2019; Bracke and Fadil 2012; Moors 2014).

To develop the notion of cultural encounters, we build on the anthropology of the secular to study how particular groups appear as other through their perceived religiosity (Asad 2003; Bartelink 2016; Scheer et al. 2019; Schrijvers and Wiering 2018; Hirschkind 2011; D. Scott

and Hirschkind 2006; Amir-Moazami 2016; Fadil 2011). The concept of the secular brings into view how not only the religious 'other' is of interest, but also, or even more so, the cultural specificity of those cultural and institutional arrangements which are considered to be 'native', having passed through a process of secularization. For instance, an important materialization of the gains in emancipation that are perceived to be in danger from religion are public health approaches to sex, such as sex education in high schools, strong HIV-prevention policies promoting the acceptance of homosexuality and the low threshold of access to contraceptives, abortion and other such services, both in the Netherlands and in other European countries (e.g. Denmark, Shield 2017). Often, these services are characterized as based on scientific evidence, free from cultural and religious influences (Bartelink 2016). Indeed, religion, culture and tradition are often depicted as a hindrance to an enlightened approach to gender and sexuality, with religion in particular cast as promoting conservative values and upholding taboos (Bartelink and Knibbe, this issue; Bartelink and Wiering 2020). In this special issue, we question this claim and instead conceptualize secular approaches as also embedded within particular histories and cultural formations.

Accordingly, rather than asking how migrants 'adapt' to the native 'host' society and leaving unexamined the pluralities of which the latter is composed, the contributors to this issue conceptualize their research contexts as sites where different cultural trajectories intersect within the wider context of post-colonial Europe (Boehmer and Mul 2012; Bhambra 2009; Chakrabarty 2009). Thus, they de-naturalize the implications of the terms 'host' or 'receiving' society and, as a result, ask how an (implicit) rendering of differences comes about. Instead, the contributors focus on the underlying processes of how people navigate social norms and personal aspirations. The research presented here reveals the ways in which people negotiate particular contexts that are characterized by different ideologies, reli-

gious, secular and otherwise, and create new possibilities for self-formation (Rana, Burchardt), relationalities and becoming sexually knowledgeable (Bakuri and Spronk). In short, the confrontations between religious and secular approaches to sexuality can be conceptualized as *cultural encounters* and be researched as such. Moreover, they need to be studied in ethnographic detail so as to move beyond discursive claims (Rana 2022).

From discourse to practice: researching the intersection of sexuality, religion and secularity

Five of the six articles in this special issue focus on the Netherlands. Known as exceptionally progressive with regard to matters of sex and sexuality, and typically (re)presented through a frame of the acceptance of gay marriage, the liberalization of prostitution and drugs, and permissive attitudes generally to adolescent sexuality, the Netherlands provides a profound case through which to study the normative implications and contours of secularity. Studying the interconnections between sexuality, secularity and religion from the experiences of migrants and/or religious people in their encounters with hegemonic secular tropes is thought-provoking for the following reasons.

First, the Dutch regime and the historical practice of religious pluralism to accommodate particular traditional religious groups means that there are strong patterns of the accommodation of religious diversity. At the same time there is a very strong popularized notion concerning the 'backwardness' of religion and the inevitability of secularization (Schuh et al. 2012). This fascinating paradox needs further investigation. Second, the hegemonic self-perception of the Dutch as progressive in combination with a pragmatic view of the regulation of morally delicate questions offers interesting insights into the governance of secularity. For instance, adolescent sexuality has been approached in such a pragmatic manner (Schalet 2011), giving Dutch organizations working on sexual health a reputation worldwide as progressive and exemplary (Roodsaz 2018; Bartelink 2016). Third, since the

early 2000's, the Netherlands has engaged in a particularly intense debate on how the religion and culture of migrants can be reconciled with so-called 'progressive' values with regard to gender and sexuality focusing mostly on Islam. These debates have generated interest worldwide (Veer 2006; Fassin 2012; Butler 2008). Fourth, Dutch integration policy has shifted from a secularity accommodating a diversity of religious groups (commonly known as the 'pillarization model') to one in which individual liberty is the guiding principle, though one that is assumed, implicitly or explicitly, to be threatened by religious strictures (Schuh, Burchardt, and Wohlrab-Sahr 2012). Moreover, discourses in the Netherlands have shifted increasingly towards the country viewing itself as in essence a culturally homogeneous nation (Van Reekum 2012; Van Reekum, Duyvendak, and Bertossi 2012). This approach fails to recognize religious sources and alternative social dimensions of human well-being (Pool 2022), going so far as to prescribe 'becoming more Dutch' as a medical answer to differences in sexual morality (Ayuandini and Duyvendak 2017). A focus on sexuality *in practice* may throw new light on the dynamics of the 'nativist triangle' (Balkenhol et al. 2016; Verkaaik and Spronk 2011) beyond the public debates.

What is also noteworthy is that several articles in this special issue focus specifically on the African Diaspora. Research has so far neglected how the debates on the intersections of migration, gender and sexuality are played out in the context of these groups, where both Christianity and Islam play a role. This is interesting, given the (submerged) notion of Africans as fundamentally 'other', e.g. as racially other, pre-modern, exotic or primordial (Mudimbe 1994). Many of the matters emerging in such conflicts in the Netherlands characterize public debates in Europe more broadly, where concerns about migration and religious 'others' inform nationalist discourses. As we will show below, the notion of Europe as a postcolonial space is deeply informed by colonial histories which continue to inform the diversities produced.

The special issue opens with the article by Brenda Bartelink and Kim Knibbe, which analyses the historical trajectory of the Dutch sexual revolution, often referenced by champions of the (strongly secularist) Dutch approach to sexual health. By attending more closely to developments before the sexual revolution and to some of its most iconic moments, they show how religious stakeholders have in fact been pivotal in shaping the progressive formation of sexuality that the country has become famous for. Amisah Bakuri and Rachel Spronk show the consequences of such a discourse. In their article, they cite a Muslim woman who grew up with the idea that Islam is not hospitable to sexual pleasure, only to find out that she was wrong. They analyse how religious women create a trajectory of becoming sexually knowledgeable by following religious discourse and authorities. Jasmijn Rana's analysis contends that kickboxing Muslimas forge pious selves through their engagement in a sport that is considered masculine by emphasizing femininity andmodesty and by developing female-only sociality centred around 'heterosexy-ness'. While combining femininity with strength, the most admiration among the kickboxers goes to those who are able to combine the sport with pious modesty, presenting an alternative trajectory for the development of personal agency to that of liberal feminism. The fourth article in this issue, by Jelle Wiering, is based on auto-ethnographic research with sex educators. It carefully draws out not only how a secular bias operates but also how it is normative in ways many people do not recognize, as Dutch sex education is lauded as a progression beyond 'traditional' and religious regimes around sex and gender. Wiering shows how secular sex education promotes particular gendered ideas about role divisions around sex that build on and consolidate the association of women with the private domain and thus assign men the status of naturally unruly and sexually dangerous bodies to be disciplined and domesticated (by women). Brenda Bartelink's article introduces a group of women who often go relatively unnoticed: women leaders in Pentecostal churches. They craft interesting ways into leadership, negotiating their own images of sexuality in a secular society and the images secular society has of them. In doing so, they play a crucial role in dealing with the messiness of people's actual sex lives, drawing on, bending and reshaping discourses on sex among Pentecostals. Marian Burchardt's analysis extends the analysis of a secular bias to queer Catholic believers in Spain. He explores how the progressive decoupling of notions of national belonging from both religion and sexual identity has been accompanied by the proliferation of new subject positions around queer spirituality and religiosity.

As the name of this journal, *New Diversities*, suggests, we can no longer speak of cultural pluralism proceeding along straightforward paths of ethnicity, race, migrant/non-migrant, religious/non-religious etc. Even in public debates, the language of intersectionality pioneered by black feminist scholars (Crenshaw 2017; Wekker 2016; Essed 1991) is now employed as a matter of course, however clumsily sometimes. As we show in this special issue, intersections are also about processes, that is, about relating, positioning, enacting and navigating personal aspirations and social expectations. For example, the biographies of queer subjects in Spain discussed in Burchardt's article show the non-linear nature of the ways in which people navigate between religious, secular and spiritual registers, countering the straightforward narrative of queer secularity as an exiting, a breaking away, from religious constraints. The focus on daily praxis and individual biographies provides knowledge about the entanglements and inherent contradictions of people's lives that are otherwise too neatly captured in binary terms, such as conservative versus progressive, restrictions versus freedom, or pious versus blasphemous.

Life is characterized by messiness, complexity and ambivalence (Ahmed 2004), and reducing matters of diversity to fit scholarly categorizations skews our productions of knowledge (Brubaker 2003; Spronk and Nyeck 2021). The categorizing effects of using religion and secularity as self-

evident classifications obscures how seemingly contradictory identifications sometimes co-exist and co-produce another, such as religious queer people. The literature on the secular frame has already shown convincingly that this frame too often represents religious people as conservative and dependent on a higher authority and irreligious people as more sovereign, emancipated citizens (Bracke and Fadil 2012; Bracke 2011; Brandt 2019). In other words, religious women are easily represented as sexually repressed, and secular women as liberated (Schrijvers and Wiering 2018). However, as the contribution by Bakuri and Spronk (this issue) shows, this dichotomy may be entirely irrelevant to people's own experience and positioning, as they find ways to become sexually knowledgeable, weighing sexual pleasure and piety. Furthermore, as Wiering (this issue) shows in his contribution on sex education, both religious and secular structures reproduce certain gender hierarchies and normative frameworks. In addition, a closer look at the historical record of Dutch religious history shows that religious actors have made major contributions to the liberalizing of ideas and practices around sexuality, a fact often forgotten in current representations of the Dutch sexual revolution (Bartelink and Knibbe, this issue). In other words, what new perspectives and conceptualizations can we develop from this 'messiness', from the ambiguities and vicissitudes that characterize day-to-day lives, to the historical and cultural processes that become cleaned up by dominant narratives?

Religion and secularity in postcolonial Europe
The articles in this special issue are concerned in particular with religious/secular differentiations in relation to gender and sexuality, and they all do this against the explicit or implicit understanding of Europe as a postcolonial space, where the history of colonialism and its consequences are simultaneously present and denied. With the resurgence of the demonstrations and discussions about racism and Europe's BLM (Black Lives Matter) movements, it has become clear, once again, that Europe is particularly coagulated in a way that obstructs the acceptance and recognition of its colonial past and its continuing legacies. As Paul Gilroy summarized, '[T]he modern histories of numerous other European countries [besides Britain], particularly Belgium, France, Spain, Italy, and The Netherlands [are] sites characterized by the inability to disentangle the disruptive results supposedly produced by an immigrant presence from the residual but potent effects of lingering but usually unspoken colonial relationships and imperial fantasies' (Gilroy 2004, 109, see also Wekker 2016). A continuing discourse on migrants and their classification creates a view that migration-related difference is naturally given: migrants forever remain that – wanderers, outsiders – and will not easily become (cultural) citizens (Van Reekum, Duyvendak, and Bertossi 2012). Some of the research on sexuality and migration has become entangled with a particular migration-policy apparatus and discourses that normalize migration and ethnicity-related differences (Krebbekx, Spronk, and M'charek 2016). The articles in this special issue move away from this, aligning with the call by Dehinden to 're-migranticize' the current discourse by 're-orienting the focus of investigation away from "migrant populations" towards "overall populations"' (Dahinden 2016; see also Penkala-Gawęcka and Rajtar 2016).

How might the notion of post-colonial Europe be made fruitful in relation to the intersections of sexuality, religion and secularity? Recently, Birgit Meyer has proposed to conceive of Europe as a postcolonial frontier zone where religion becomes articulated, inspired by David Chidester's suggestion for the study of the history of religion in Africa (Meyer 2018). Chidester defines the frontier zone as 'a zone of contact, rather than a line, a border, or a boundary. By this definition, a frontier is a region of intercultural relations' (Chidester 1996, 20-21) where ideas about religion are developed in interaction. We would like to extend this notion to suggest that, in fact, Europe as a frontier zone is also the place where not only religion but also *secularity* comes to be articulated at the levels of both pub-

lic discourses and everyday practices, embodiments and affects. Much of the literature on the secular discusses this topic in terms of the governance of religion from the levels of international diplomacy, particular nation states to that of municipalities (Wilson 2012; Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt 2012; Tamimi Arab 2017). In contrast, in this issue we focus on the secular in terms of everyday practices and shared cultural norms, as well as on the implicit and explicit histories and binary oppositions that inform those practices (cf. Scheer, Fadil, and Johansen 2019).

In this articulation of secularity, sex is one of the primary topics around which secular actors differentiate themselves as more progressive, enlightened and modern than religious 'others' (Wiering 2020; J. W. Scott 2017; Butler 2008; Puar 2007). This does not mean, however, that 'natives' (as in 'native' Dutch, Belgians, French, Germans etc.) are by implication always non-religious, nor that they are in fact more progressive towards sexual minorities and in relation to the emancipation of women.

Interestingly, competing concepts of modernity and progress are often implicit in both the grand narratives dominating public debates and the daily lives of how people pursue well-being, both religious and non-religious. People traverse a landscape of contradictions produced through the cultural encounters of different historical trajectories, as well as minority-majority and religious-secular dynamics. From right-wing slogans expressing Islam as 'culturally backward' to Pentecostal celebrations of a modern global lifestyle to queer believers aspiring for emancipation, each ideology claims its place in a hierarchy of time and civilisation. Aspirations tie into visions of a personal future, which are tied to grander visions of the future for one's family, one's nation of origin, of Europe. Such aspirations indicate interesting similarities between groups that are usually analysed as being in opposition to one another. Integrating a focus on how the secular is produced denaturalizes the differences that are also often embedded within research frameworks. Indeed, as some of the articles here show,

secular and religious aspirations may not be recognized as distinct or as in opposition to each other in everday life (see the articles by Rana, Bakuri and Spronk).

In other words, we propose that, central to ethnographies of religion and secularity, an approach is needed that analyses them as two sides of the same coin. Such an approach implies integrating the awareness that both secular and religious regimes articulate particular (gendered) moralities, ideas of personhood and specific practices and techniques of the self. Techniques of the self are understood as the ways that are offered to and taken up by individuals to shape and fashion themselves, aligning themselves with particular ideals of personhood and thus regulation (Burkitt 2002; Foucault 1978; Mahmood 2001). Examples of techniques of the self may include dress, ways of monitoring one's physical and/or mental health, particular forms of secrecy and disclosure regarding sexuality, and prohibitions encouraged within both religious and secular settings. By taking secularity and religion together as a joint field of inquiry, commonalities appear, such as normative expectations of dress as hip, chaste and feminine, as outlined by Rana in her piece on kickboxing Muslimas negotiating their place in a masculine sport in secular Dutch society.

Positioning secular and religious assemblages together, we propose, may suggest a particular symmetry, which would be misleading. Inequalities within the Dutch society and Europe more generally are the result of longer-term imperial and colonial legacies (cf. Wekker 2016) and processes of in- and exclusion based on class and/or religion. As Chidester notes, cultural relations are also, and always, power relations (Chidester 1996, 20-21) that, so we add, are unstable and contested and that produce encounters of conflict and co-optation as well as collaboration and appropriation. All the ethnographic encounters presented here occur in relation to the deep inequalities of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, age and more, that characterize Europe as a postcolonial space. For this reason, we choose

not to characterize the Netherlands, nor Europe more generally, as a post-secular space or as a space that is entering a post-secular period. Rather, we see religion as one of the axes along which inequalities are articulated, and secularisms as very much implicated in these articulations (Knibbe 2018; Butler 2008; Balkenhol, Mepschen, and Duyvendak 2016). A secular bias against religion is one of the results of deep-seated power relations, and the bias also implicates gender and sexuality in particular ways. For instance, religious queer believers are considered as not yet fully liberated (Arab and Suhonic 2017), while migrants are often assumed to have more conservative ideas and practices around gender roles. As Bartelink shows in this issue regarding religious leaders, the reality is more complex: while indeed promoting conservative gender ideals and premarital chastity, the Pentecostal contexts in which she conducted her fieldwork are also a fertile ground for strong female leadership and discussions about sex.

In sum, cultural encounters take place in a postcolonial context where power inequalities persist. Yet, this must not blind researchers to the instability or internal contradictions of power which generate shifting possibilities and enable agency where it may not be expected. Moreover, the affordances of the normative ideas and practices of both religious rules and secular assumptions of neutrality create and enable unexpected possibilities (Alava, Clarke, and Gusman 2022). Ethnographic research into daily experiences and encounters will reveal such seeming contradictions, as elaborated in the articles in this collection.

Why sexuality?

Why is it that *sexuality* in particular is implicated in the dynamics of religion, secularity and migration? Sexuality is a dimension of life that is both deeply personal and subject to strong cultural, religious and political constraints and direction (Foucault 1990; Lorde 1978; Gagnon and Simon 2017 [1973]). It is a vehicle for powerful feelings – affection, eroticism, shame, aggression, and

more – that are experienced subjectively (Wekker 2006; Spronk 2014). Sex and sexuality occupy a particular place in subjective experience; while sexuality is often experienced as a very private matter, it is usually enacted in social forms of dating, cruising, marriage, and so on, and it takes place online and in person. Sex, in the sense of arousal, sex acts, eroticism and *jouissance*, is probably one of the most universal of experiences and practices, yet it remains shrouded in discourses on silence, discretion and indirection. Silence is often interpreted in terms of suppression, yet ethnographic research shows that it actually has a productive quality; what is not put into words is open to interpretation (Dankwa 2021; Bakuri et al. 2020). In various ways, sex and sexuality are also, and importantly, central to self-understanding and identity (as wo/man or neither, as a group member, as a cultural citizen) and therefore play an important role in agency and emancipation (Plummer 2002).

Besides the personal dimension, sexuality and gender roles are also often understood as essential to the social and moral order because of reproductive hetero-sex, and so a host of ideological discourses exist to produce and maintain the social fabric (Rubin 2002). Discursive formations of sexuality form and inform subjectivity and our deepest ways of feeling a person, as expressed in (proper) behaviour, dress sense, humour or political views, as well as in reactions against normative expectations (Aggleton et al. 2012; Donnan and Magowan 2012). While discursive formations play an important role, they never fully form subjectivity, while personal orientations provide a scope for deviations (Allen 2011; Boellstorff 2005; Hossain 2022), or what has come to be known as 'being oneself' in Euro-American understandings. In other words, people navigate personal aspirations in relation to social expectations in their enactment of gendered and sexual self-realization. More often than not this creates conflict, tension and ambiguities when people do not readily comply (for instance, with ideas about beauty or morality); sexuality is also often a site where people fall victim to conflicting

forces. As sexuality is a public as well as a personal affair, involving communal concerns and individual desires, it can be the cause of ideological debate as much as a source of both pleasure and problems.

With regard to the heated public debates on the multicultural society, we may understand sexuality as taking the form of the calm in the eye of a storm. Although it produces one loud issue, pitting sexuality and religion against another, it also produces silences and invisibilities, such as on the ignorance about the religious knowledge of erotic practice in Islam the interlocutor explains in the article by Bakuri and Spronk in this issue. Whereas public debates are preoccupied with, for instance, a select part of migrants' lives, namely their religiosity and how it is assumed to act as a constraint, major parts of migrants' lives go unnoticed. An example is the immensity and influence of the global religious networks that migrants tap into, the variety of religiously inspired sexual advice and support from religious leaders (Moyer, Burchardt, and Van Dijk 2013), and the ways in which piety and pleasure may be mutually reinforcing rather than mutually exclusive. Another example is how the direction of secular progress mentioned above may be subverted, such as for instance, the unexpected process of emancipation from queer secularity to finding queer spirituality, or how piety enables religious women to engage in sport, articulating the existing diversity of how religion and sexuality connect. Whereas queer emancipation is typically tantamount to opposing heteronormative patriarchal religion, queer believers in Burchardt's research (this issue) contest this logic by developing queer spiritualities within normative structures and beyond queer secularity.

Sexuality is part of a broader palette of the ways in which religion, belonging, health and happiness interconnect in people's pursuit of the good life. At the same time, sexuality is a field for conflict and tension as people manoeuvre normative realities that may be in conflict with their personal desires. As the articles here articulate, one way to study how problems and pleasures are not mutually exclusive is to uncover how normative regimes also provide the tools for agency and sometimes dissent (cf. Mahmood 2001). Moreover, for many believers, sexuality is not only determined by scriptures (cf. Alava, Clarke, and Gusman 2022), but is entangled with both non-religious and religious normative expectations of the nuclear family, as well as anxieties around reproduction (to have or not to have children) and other gendered social expectations. Sexuality as it is lived is therefore a unique prism to further theorize the intersections of religion, secularity and modernity, opening up questions that throw new light on the entrenched oppositions that are inherent in public contestations around these issues.

In conclusion
Together, the articles in this special issue provide illustrative cases of the ways sexuality becomes implicated in both religion and secularity, and how both possibilities rely on narratives of progressive modernity in their reshaping over time. Whereas some narratives, now often representing dominant cultural norms, have developed the notion that only 'secular' sex can be liberating, articulating particular meanings of 'good' sex, religious actors may present quite different possibilities. It seems that it is in particular those people who have been excluded from public debate historically (women, queers, migrants) who are reshaping the dichotomies to be found in dominant discourses, sometimes openly, but more often slipping below the radar. While avoiding public scrutiny, they work to address and resolve tensions and problems, formulating new ideals and aspirations. It is to be hoped that such developments will in time also find their way to informing more nuanced public debates around sexuality, religion and/or migration. Whereas the recent popularization of intersectionality as a lens in public debates is hopeful, the simultaneous political polarization around gender, sexuality and migration that is currently taking place is worrying. In the meantime, we hope researchers will continue to conduct ethnographic research

on the everyday realities and developments such as those presented here.

In such research, as we have argued in this introduction, it is crucial to understand 'New Diversities' in terms of the plurality of cultural trajectories that are encountering each other on the unequal playing field of post-colonial Europe. In them, secularity needs to be made productive for ethnographic research, while also bringing into view religious resources for working on self and well-being. Sexuality has gained a new form of normativity in recent decades in nationalist discourses in postcolonial Europe, and new sexual sensitivities have replaced former ones. So far, scholarly discussions deal with these sensitivities in a more deconstructivist and critical manner, denaturalizing discourses on culture, identity and religion. However, these debates do not consider the experiences of these implicated in these debates, and their often emotional and political engagement in matters where sexuality and religion intersect. We propose the notion of cultural encounters, combined with a focus on how secularity is produced in the context of postcolonial frontier zones, so as to move beyond the study of controversies and conflicts. This denaturalizes the religious 'other', moving away from a migration framework that takes for granted the cultural homogeneity of a so-called host society. Moreover, it unravels how normativity is both a religious and a secular inclination. In fact, religion and secularity co-produce each other. Furthermore, in moving towards studying cultural encounters ethnographically rather than through public discourses, we show how apparent conflicts and convictions are in practice much more ambiguous, malleable and less straightforward. While recognizing power relations, such a move also enables us to see the similarities in the forms of well-being and the futures people strive towards.

In closing, we urge scholars not to forget that sexuality is not only a subject of highly mediatized contestations, but also one of the major domains of life through which the (gendered) self and relationality come into being. It is thus an important lens onto life in the context of diversity.

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