Introduction:
The Sacred in the Secular in European Literature

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Most aesthetic concepts are theological ones in disguise. — Terry Eagleton[1]

Senti il mancare di ogni religione | vera. — Pier Paolo Pasolini[2]

The theme for this issue came into being prior to October 2017, which heralded the second postgraduate and early career conference held by the Modern Humanities Research Association (MHRA) at Senate House in London. The subject of 'The Sacred in the Secular in European Literature' was kindly proposed by the MHRA's President for 2017, Professor Judith Ryan, and the conference began with her keynote address; her perceptive and chronologically wide-ranging contribution is included in amended form in this volume under the title of 'Time, Space, and Sacred-Secular Configurations in Modern European Poetry'. The excellent papers presented by conference delegates encompassed a multitude of topics, such as the fragile line between faith and doubt, the experience of living in the sacred, epiphanic moments, and the political and ethical implications arising from such questions. This special issue of *Working Papers in the Humanities* takes its inspiration from that conference.

As Terry Eagleton's remark astutely suggests, the origins of much of the rhetoric, imagery and ideas which characterize a literary text can be traced back to religious notions and traditions. This heritage constitutes a pressing demand upon the reader and critic: the aesthetic experience compels an evaluation of one's own relationship to the sacred, the secular, and the interaction between them. European literary texts are one privileged site for an exploration of this intersection, and, alongside it, a re-examination of modern narratives of secularization. Volume 13 of *Working Papers in the Humanities* considers the intertwining of the sacred and the secular across eight different contexts, ranging from the end of the eighteenth century to the present day. Across a multitude of literary genres in its broadest sense, including hymn, poetic parable, fairy tale

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[1] Terry Eagleton, 'Monotheism and Violence', in *The New Visibility of Religion,* ed. by Michael Hoelzl and Graham Ward (London: Continuum, 2008), pp. 88–96 (p. 94).

[2] Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Le ceneri di Gramsci* (Milan: Garzanti, 1957), p. 82. '[Y]ou feel the lack of any true | religion', *The Ashes of Gramsci*, trans. by Norman MacAfee (London: John Calder, 1984), p. 19.

and novella, to name but a few, and often poised at the intersection of philosophy and literary studies, this collection of articles both answers and raises questions about sacralization and secularization. In particular, it celebrates the work being done by early career researchers on questions of Christianity and atheism, epiphany and experience, and contemporary transformations of the ethical.

Spirituality in modernity is sometimes framed as a question of preservation: what can the critic justifiably preserve or retain of historical conceptions of the sacred? The novelist Gustave Flaubert (1821–80), for instance, rejects organized religion in favour of a highly ironized but nonetheless *preserved* sense of sacred feeling and aspiration: 'Chaque dogme en particulier m'est répulsif, mais je considère le sentiment qui les a inventés comme le plus naturel et le plus poétique de l'humanité'.[3] Textual irony is a technique which might preserve the heart of the sacred whilst simultaneously defending against the charge of naivety. As Jonathan Culler puts it in his *Flaubert: The Uses of Uncertainty*, 'The sacred, one might say, is the sentimental purified by irony, emptied of its content, so that it may come to represent in the allegory of interpretation the formal desire for connection and meaning'.[4] Without indulging in dogmata, then, Flaubert stands up for the sacred, reinterpreted as a natural human sentimentality which animates belief and communication.

Alongside the notion of preservation come other spatio-temporal formulations of the relationship between the sacred and the secular. Sacred spaces or clearings can be carved out through rituals, festivals, myths and holy ceremonies. Mircea Eliade argues for a vision of the sacred as configurations of space and time that confirm and renew originary forms of connection with the divine. Such configurations connect with the 'transcendent times of "the beginnings"'; as such, they create a 'sudden breakthrough of the sacred' into the ordinary space/time of everyday, profane existence.[5] This structure of cosmic renewal reoccurs in apparently secularized rituals such as annual New Year celebrations, and even in the ritualized hermeneutics of the modern art world.[6] The sacred appears as an irruptive experience within time and space, rather like that of the witching hour.

Since the so-called 'sacred canopy' has ceased to cover the entirety of human existence, as it used to do in the heyday of Christian monotheism, European modernity has experienced an increasingly fluid and fractured reality. Its citizens are asked to choose their own identity repeatedly, since it is no longer fixed in given forms, spaces and times.[7] Religion participates in this fluid — or

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[3]   Gustave Flaubert, *Correspondance: nouvelle édition augmentée* (Paris: Arvensa, 1926), p. 840. 'Each dogma in particular is repulsive to me, but I consider the feeling that engendered them to be the most natural and poetic expression of humanity', Frederick Brown, *Flaubert: A Life* (London: Pimlico, 2007), p. 350.
[4]   Jonathan Culler, *Flaubert: The Uses of Uncertainty* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974), p. 226.
[5]   Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, trans. by Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), p. 6.
[6]   Ibid., p. 50; p. 189.
[7]   We are here referring to the foundational essay by Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of*

liquid, in Zygmunt Bauman's famous formula — identity, which both authors and critics are asked to take into consideration when writing and reading.[8] When Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922–75), in his imaginary dialogue with Antonio Gramsci's ashes, talks about feeling the loss of proper religions, what seems to be at stake is precisely a process of secularization.[9] Whether it be necessary but destabilizing, or indeed positively challenging, this shift implies the sunset of institutional *religions* in favour of plural forms of *religiousness*, subjective faith, and individual spirituality. This issue of *Working Papers in the Humanities* sheds light on the wide variety of outcomes of this epochal change, often linked to the process of modernization (although chronology is a highly delicate matter, as we shall see below).

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> In its combination of natural landscape, the Christian cross, ancient
> heroes, heavenly beings and even an 'evening being', Hölderlin's hymn
> 'Mnemosyne' is a prime example of syncretism at its most captivating.
> — Judith Ryan

Judith Ryan (Harvard University) opens this volume with an appraisal of sacred/secular syncretism as it appears in the last two centuries of European poetry. Beginning with the German writers associated with the syncretic thinking of 'Das älteste Systemprogramm des deutschen Idealismus' ('The Oldest Systematic Program of German Idealism'), Ryan examines polytheism and multiplicity in the poetry of circa 1800. For instance, in Friedrich Schiller's 'Der Spaziergang' ('The Walk'), the walker traverses space and time, nature and self, just as Friedrich Hölderlin's 'Mnemosyne' effects a synthesis between the Christian, the classical and the pagan. Ryan's analysis emphasizes the role of place in the German poets, seeing the twentieth-century poet Johannes Bobrowski's quasi-mythic geography as their natural successor. This salience of place is also found in William Wordsworth's and Alphonse de Lamartine's lyrical fusions of natural, spiritual and psychological elements. Pressing on chronologically, Ryan's argument culminates in an examination of Seamus Heaney's 2005 poem, 'The Tollund Man in Springtime', which, she argues, develops an even deeper understanding of the intertwining of sacred and secular traditions. Ryan alludes here to Talal Asad's anthropological approach to poetry, which relates the physical body and the senses to the sacred or religious experience. The Tollund Man's physical location in the peat bog affects his state of preservation and his ongoing connection to nature, thanks to which

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a Sociological Theory of Religion (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967).
[8]   See in particular Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), but also, by the same author, *Liquid Life* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), and *Moral Blindness: the Loss of Sensitivity in Liquid Modernity* (Chichester: Polity Press, 2013).
[9]   See the quotation from Pasolini in the epigraph.

he undergoes a Christ-like resurrection. Heaney's 'Tollund Man' is shown to cross both past and present, both ancient and modern worlds, and both pagan and Christian beliefs — perhaps heralding a resurgence and renewal of the syncretic method in poetry.

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Hymns are still sung in the Millennium Stadium but, in a way, they have become secular. — Nathan Munday

Nathan Munday (Cardiff University), in his essay entitled 'The Welsh Hymn: Sacred or Secular?', takes as his starting point a reflection about the significant number of dead or dying signs and symbols in British languages, most of them associated with Britain's Judeo-Christian past. It is precisely in this forgotten past that the Welsh hymn is rooted, despite its largely secular character today. This framework connects aesthetics to spirituality, psychology, and politics. Munday recalls the scholarship that has already been done on the Welsh hymn, delineating the context in which his analysis of the secularization of this poetic form carves out a niche. As Munday explains, it is of the utmost importance to understand that the Welsh hymn has shifted from a vertical and personal realm, often related to the individual soul, to a horizontal and collective one, where social exercises prevail over spiritual practices. Munday illustrates this path by means of a threefold narrative. First, the reader is brought to a late-eighteenth-century *Seiat* in which the hymn still features highly personal, intimate, and experiential traits. Then, one enters a nineteenth-century square where Temperance hymns are sung in the context of an ethicized religion. Finally, one proceeds into an early-twentieth-century *Cymanfa Ganu* (Singing Festival), in which the hymn becomes more poetic, more cerebral, and musically superior to its earlier counterparts. The Welsh hymn is therefore followed until the final stages of its secularization, when it becomes much more an indicator of culture than a sacred act of worship.

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Why does Dumas stage a Christian in a secularized setting and an anti-Christian in a religious setting? Undoubtedly, this technique of inversion conveys Dumas's own anticlerical and Republican views. — Steffie Van Neste

The jewel in the crown of the next article by Steffie Van Neste (Ghent University) is an incisive and original close reading of a passage from Alexandre Dumas *père*'s novella *Un Cas de conscience* (*A Question of Conscience*, 1866). Paying careful attention to the critical reversals and sleights-of-hand that Dumas performs in this text, Van Neste demonstrates the latent tensions that subtend his treatment of the sacred and the secular. In her investigation of the intersection of these two elements, Van Neste emphasizes Dumas's striking

use of connotation; she analyses, for example, the narrator's decision to sit in a garden filled with climbing plants over a Voltairean armchair in a drawing room. An analysis of allegory and metaphor also features prominently. In particular, Dumas's inclusion of a fictionalized Giuseppe Garibaldi points to a political reading. Dumas's characterization of religious tensions, as Van Neste deftly illustrates, is indicative not only of a Romantic blending of sacred and secular features but also of the socio-political context of the French Second Empire. In France, debate raged around the unification of Italy and the Roman Question. Van Neste's nuanced approach to Dumas's novella reveals Dumas's criticism of the proselytizing of reactionary Catholic ultramontanes, but also his enduring convictions and affiliations with a natural religion that privileges human happiness.

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> An individual may realize the presence of the divine just by encountering it, but this experience has no authority over other minds, and like any personal state of feeling is subject to delusions and relapses. — Valeria Taddei

In 'The Sacred Mind: William James and Modernist Epiphany', Valeria Taddei (University of Oxford) raises questions regarding epiphany and narrative, complicated by both William James and the literary modernists in ways that show the confluence, and in some cases direct influence, of James's writings and modernist literary writing. In particular, the author analyses Katherine Mansfield's story 'The Escape' (1920) and Federigo Tozzi's 'Tregua' ('Truce', 1911) in view of a Jamesian interpretation of epiphany, which downplays the narrative-driven idea of religious epiphany as analogous with conversion. Taddei notes that in his *Varieties of Religious Experience* James inventories mystical states as mental experiences independent from an institutional sense of the divine. Similarly, the two modernist authors — who read James, as Taddei suggests in her analysis — are said to retain a desire for transcendence, but this is presented as intrinsically problematic and problematized by a modernity that, whilst retaining a quasi-mysticism, is distant from the axiomatic religions of classical antiquity and Christian theology. Thus, across different cultural and political contexts, Mansfield's and Tozzi's narratives are exemplary in demonstrating the potential of James's view of mystical experiences, thanks to its fascinating ambiguity and appealing sense of possibility.

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> The 'frame' of secularism is only immanent insofar as it admits no *religious* transcendence. Yet it simultaneously fails to get rid of atheistic forms of transcendence, *as well as* to accommodate immanent religions. — Marie Chabbert

Returning to a French context, Marie Chabbert (University of Oxford) sets out to provide a new understanding of contemporary secularism in the light of Gilles Deleuze's ontology. In her article, entitled 'On Becoming-Secular: Gilles Deleuze and the Death of God', Chabbert examines Deleuze's engagement with Friedrich Nietzsche's death of God and Nietzschean pluralism. For Deleuze, the death of God in question here is the death of transcendence itself. Chabbert guides her reader through an investigation of Christian theology, humanistic atheism, and a Heideggerian reading of Nietzsche in turn. With each new step in our understanding of the sacred and the secular, the transcendent place which was conventionally occupied by God is nonetheless retained in some form. The same is true within secularism itself, as Chabbert convincingly argues: at first glance, secularism privileges an immanent framework, but it often continues to borrow from the notion of transcendence. Deleuze's atheism, by contrast, draws from Nietzsche a pluralist ontology in which difference is primary. A Deleuzian re-reading of Nietzsche's will-to-power supports this interpretation. Fixed identities are replaced with a creative, affirmative process of becoming. Chabbert characterizes this radical, immanent secularism — which she terms *becoming-secular* — as a positive force that works in favour of freedom in both artistic and religious realms.

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> Literary language can make suggestions that a more functional presentation of reality cannot perceive. — Emily Holman

In '"No great statement about reality [...] can be static, like simple information": Literary Language and Reality', Emily Holman (The Van Leer Jerusalem Institute) undertakes an exploration of the kernel of any literary process, that is to say, language and its capacity to shape reality. With reference to theoretical pronouncements made by F. R. Leavis and Marilynne Robinson, Holman assesses language's mediated relationship to the particular sense of reality conveyed in a text. If language assists thinking and can expand one's mind beyond conventional patterns of thought, it is to a non-conventional language that a writer must turn to in order to express the sacred depths of reality. Analysing Rowan Williams' approach to themes such as opening and embodiment, and her own figure of *enabling*, Holman examines how they participate in art's creation of conceptual worlds. Rhetorical figures, style, syntax, and punctuation are but a few among the elements that Holman considers in this context. In a meta-analysis, readers are led to question their current ways of reading and thinking, alongside their potential acts of writing and talking. Given that this issue of *Working Papers* investigates the interfolding of the sacred and the secular, Holman's proposal is utterly relevant. An unconventional language engenders in the secular realm a complexity whose traits, both deep and elevated, cannot but be conceived as sacred.

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> In place of socio-political critique, [these texts] evoke the negative pleasure of the sublime, the passive form of wonder rather than its active and activist double. — Sara Helen Binney

In her article entitled 'Creating a "space for the mystery": The Sacred in the Twenty-First Century', Sara Helen Binney (University of East Anglia) gives an insight into contemporary fiction inspired by folkloric narratives. Compared to the works of the 'fairy tale generation' of writers, such novels might seem to be detached from political critique. *The Crane Wife* by Patrick Ness (2013) and *The Snow Child* by Eowyn Ivey (2012) are chosen as case studies in order to propose the element of the unknown as a form of the sacred that compensates for the apparently apolitical turn in twenty-first-century novels. Binney's reassessment of the role of enchantment (as it is found in the titular 'space of the mystery') reveals that this so-called apolitical turn actually demonstrates political and ethical implications. The sense of stoppage that these novels often suggest is supported by literal pauses created by blanks; these linguistic stoppages, both *de dicto* and *de re*, allow for the representation of mystery in post-secular spirituality. The author scrupulously elucidates four different terms that critics have used to refer to mystery: 'wonder', the 'sublime', the 'sacred', and 'enchantment', each of them offering interesting nuances that inflect the aforementioned pause, whose value lies not only in the ability to question, but also to scrutinize and to access reality.

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> Reversing comparison's direction into double affirmation, [...] this world must be *like the world*, poetry's object divided, *semblable* to itself. — Sam La Vedrine

In the final article of the issue, entitled 'A Bit of Faith in Ecology: Paradox in Michel Deguy's Poetic Parables', Sam La Vedrine (University of Nottingham) offers a magisterial tour of contemporary French poet Michel Deguy's recent collections. La Vedrine's analysis situates itself within current debates regarding the destabilization of ontological identity and the viability of dialectical resolution. He argues that the unresolved contradictions raised by such debates inform Deguy's philosophical poetics. La Vedrine's analysis turns on the notion of the poetic *comme* (meaning 'like' or 'as if'), which takes centre stage. Identity is irreducibly and parabolically doubled, and thus becomes expressible through analogy. Applied to the notion of paradox, this move in Deguy's *oeuvre* allows one to think of difference without effacement; La Vedrine explores how the paradox becomes a technique of analogy, rather than performing an operation of negation or replacement. As this article rigorously demonstrates, Deguy's work creates a locus for a non-transcendental form of the sacred, based around

analogy and double affirmation. In this way, the poet not only transforms Christian figurations; he also paves the way for a terrestrial, ecologically focused poetics. La Vedrine highlights this secular core at the heart of a poetics that is nonetheless imbued throughout by a deconstructed sacred.

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Given the multifaceted character of the debate, we must remark on the absence of religions other than the Christian in this special issue. In our view, this is largely ascribable to the slow pace of Europe's turn towards a deep comprehension of non-Christian confessions, especially when compared to the inherently plural tradition of the United States. Narratives of secularization adopt the same bias. Indeed, in Charles Taylor's landmark publication *A Secular Age,* to which a number of the articles here refer, Taylor defines the secular age as a development that has taken place within 'Western Christendom'.[10] Hans-Michael Haußig goes so far as to state that the very concept of religion has a Eurocentric value, given the European character of the assumption that links religion to monotheism.[11] As Ulrich Beck points out, it is precisely this view which has prompted sociologists, such as Georg Simmel, John Esposito and others, to endeavour to distinguish between 'religion' as a noun, which involves an *aut aut*, and 'religious' as an adjective, which takes on the logic of a *vel vel*.[12] The authors represented in this issue perform precisely an operation that, albeit rooted in that singularity that is almost inevitable when dealing with the *religion* of European writers, expands beyond it and opens up to *religious* matters that have social, political, and cultural relevance in our present day.

A complex play of seemingly dialectical oppositions runs through this issue as a *fil rouge*. At times, the sacred is derived precisely from the clashing of dyadic opposites, a productive tension that paves the way for a secularized vision of the sacred in which conflicting elements are somehow held together. This is certainly the case in La Vedrine's theoretical framework, which addresses the oppositions between *tout* (all) and *rien* (nothing) in Deguy's paradoxes. La Vedrine's emphasis on the a-logical over the illogical finds a parallel in Taddei's analysis of the a-logical Jamesian epiphany. Taddei contrasts and juxtaposes the heights of the spirit with the depths of the subconscious, finding elements of the sacred in both. Holman's essay, too, explores the productive interchange

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[10]   Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 29.
[11]   Hans-Michael Haußig, *Der Religionsbegriff in den Religionen* (Berlin: Philo Verlagsgesellschaft, 1999).
[12]   In Latin, *aut aut* indicates a choice that means 'either, or, but not both', whereas *vel vel* implicates a choice between two equally viable possibilities. See Ulrich Beck, *Der Eigene Gott. Von der Friedensfähigkeit und dem Gewaltpotential der Religionen* (Frankfurt am Main, Leipzig: Insel Verlag, 2008). Beck refers to Georg Simmel, *Die Religion* (Frankfurt am Main: Rütten & Loenig, 1922) and to John L. Esposito, Darrel J. Fasching and Todd Lewis, *World Religions Today* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

between circumstance and experience in Denis Donoghue's categorization of human acts and narratives. Binney examines the interplay between binaries such as rationality and the senses; indeed, according to Marina Warner's definition of wonder, this doubling of opposites is what characterizes moments of wonder.

In Munday's piece, the liminal gesture proves essential in a rather different way: the sacred is attenuated but nonetheless retained as a sort of shadow or 'relic' within the secular canopy. Munday tracks how personal spirituality and collective religiosity both find expression over time. Munday's historical approach chimes with Stephen Bullivant's observations regarding the diminution of the collective self of the parish and the church in favour of individual beliefs: 'the rise of the non-religious is arguably the story of British religious history over the past half-century or so', says Bullivant. In particular, Bullivant's report identifies the phenomenon of 'nonversion' in modern Britain, describing people who have been brought up in a religious household and who make the choice to 'convert' to atheism.[13] Once again in a Christian context, Chabbert's, Ryan's and Van Neste's accounts speak less of the sacred *in* the secular and more of the sacred *and* the secular. In her discussion of secularism, Chabbert dismantles the fault-lines between negation and affirmation, immanence and transcendence, whereas Van Neste emphasizes the tensions that raged between Republican values and ultramontane Christianity in nineteenth-century France. Each article in turn poses the possibility of reconciliation, without promising false resolutions to the enduring interaction that maintains both sacred and secular alike.

Talal Asad proposes in *Formations of the Secular* that modern anthropology is different to philosophical thinking in its 'comparison of embedded concepts (representations) between societies differently located in time or space'.[14] Asad makes the case that the diverse spatio-temporal dimensions of secularism in all its forms cannot be simply elided. Furthermore, as was alluded to above, the process by which human beings question their position in space/time through examining their relationship with the sacred and the secular is not clearly ascribable to definite dates or places. The authors in this issue return time and time again to the problem of time and space as slippery and shifting dimensions.

On the one hand, the secular is not simply a destination that can be arrived at, but rather involves a collaboration of active forces in the here and now. Indeed, Chabbert introduces the matter of time in her title by discussing the *becoming-secular* (rather than post-secular) dimension of Deleuze's challenge to religious transcendence. Ryan's article also imagines space/time as an

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[13] Stephen Bullivant, *The 'No Religion' Population of Britain* (Twickenham: Benedict XVI Centre for Religion and Society, 2017), p. 12.
[14] Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 17.

element within textual syncretism; consequently, both time and place become warped and reconfigured in a poetic work, creating consonance and dissonance between syncretic elements. On the other hand, La Vedrine invokes the dawn of secularity as a present phenomenon, referring to our modern-day 'post-theological community'. Likewise, Munday offers the reader a guided tour through three places and times which attest to secularization as a social zeitgeist.

On the more restricted scale of individual attitudes towards the sacred and the secular, Binney's linguistic stoppages and Taddei's transient moments present the sacred as a sudden transcendence within time and space, one which thereby stands outside of ordinary temporality. In a similar vein, Van Neste demonstrates the extent to which contemporaneous religious arguments can be crystallized artistically through the symbolism of a secluded garden; and Holman argues that the artistic task gains glimpses of entirely different dimensions and realities, opening up knowledge that would otherwise be unavailable. In these cases, the space/time of the text stands aside from ordinary life, if only temporarily, to highlight the crossing point where the secular meets the sacred.

Indeed, the sacred and the secular are not simply philosophical concepts, but rather they have social and political relevance. Binney and Munday grant sacred writing a political responsibility by underscoring the social value of the act of reading and its effect on people's values, be they personal or national. Holman emphasizes language's power to determine which ideas and experiences people are able to grasp, thereby creating different social and theological realities. In the closing pages of her article, Chabbert advocates for the social importance of the coexistence of all possible forms of religiosity. La Vedrine's cultural and political ecology, and Van Neste's analysis, imbricated as it is in the topical issue of papal sovereignty, also engage contemporary debates.

The articles that comprise this volume respond to unresolved questions and scholarly interest in the theme of the sacred and the secular, with a particular focus on how European literature has developed this theme, and on the enduring relevance of the sacred to the so-called secular age. The responses collected here reveal that the sacred can be located *within* the secular — as a shadow on the secular canopy or a bright spark that punctuates it — or can find itself newly incorporated *alongside* the secular in a levelling and transformative move. Chabbert's and Holman's approaches are primarily theoretical, while Ryan, Munday, Van Neste, Taddei, Binney and La Vedrine pay close attention to textual rhetoric and the specificities of their chosen literary form. Taken together, their versatile and multifaceted contributions are precious for their intertextual and critical value. It is our hope that these eight articles may stimulate further research and serve as a valuable reference point in the wider discussion.