Beyond Church and State

Democracy, Secularism, and Conversion

Secularism is often imagined, in Thomas Jefferson’s words, as “a wall of separation between Church & State.” Beyond Church and State moves past that standard picture to argue that secularism is a process that reshapes both religion and politics. Borrowing a term from religious traditions, the book goes further to argue that this process should be understood as a process of conversion. Matthew Scherer studies Saint Augustine, John Locke, John Rawls, Henri Bergson, and Stanley Cavell to present a more accurate picture of what secularism is, what it does, and how it can be reimagined to be more conducive to genuine democracy.

Matthew Scherer is Assistant Professor of Government and Politics at George Mason University.
Beyond Church and State

Democracy, Secularism, and Conversion

MATTHEW SCHERER

George Mason University
For my parents,

Patricia Scherer and Oscar Scherer
Contents

Acknowledgments

Introduction: Beyond the Separation of Church and State – Secularism as Conversion

1 Authorized Narrative and Crystalline Structure: Conversion in Augustine’s *Confessions* 30

2 Toleration and Conversion in Locke’s Letters: It Is “Above all Things Necessary to Distinguish” 71

3 The Crystalline Structure of Conversion: Henri Bergson’s *Two Sources* 97

4 Saint John (Rawls): The Miracle of Secular Reason 132

5 The Wish for a Better Life: Stanley Cavell’s Critique of the Social Contract 168

Conclusion: From *Supernovas* into *The Deep* – Secularism as Conversion, a Conversion of Secularism . . . 219

Index 237
Acknowledgments

This book wouldn’t be anything like it is without William E. Connolly: thanks, Bill, for everything your work makes possible, and for showing me something new every time we talk. Jane Bennett and Dick Flathman are two of the most original and creative voices in political theory; while I was their student, they taught me a lot about trusting my own ideas and following them wherever they lead. I could not have had better teachers. Paola Marrati and Hent de Vries welcomed me with extraordinary graciousness in their seminars in the Humanities Center – I’m immensely grateful for the privilege of studying with them and for the time I have spent with each of them. Johns Hopkins was a wonderful place to be a graduate student – in large part because of the people there with me – and I thank in particular Jennifer Culbert, Frances Ferguson, John Marshall, Lars Tønder, Paulina Ochoa, Smita Rahman, Rob Watkins, George Oppel, Simon Glezos, Bhrigupati Singh, John Olson, and Patrick Peel for the important and timely interventions they made in my work, for their sustained and continuing friendship, or for both.

The two years I spent as a postdoctoral Fellow at UC Berkeley were enriched by the generous influence of many people. My thanks especially to Wendy Brown, Judith Butler, Charles Hirschkind, Saba Mahmood, David Bates, Pheng Cheah, Niklaus Largier, Bob Sharf, Felipe Guterriez, Shalini Satkunanandan, Marianne Constable, Yves Winter, Katherine Lemons, Michael Allan, Karen Feldman, Ramona Naddaff, Ivan Ascher, Nancy Weston, Vicky Kahn, Ron Hendel, Victoria Frede, and Samera Esmeir.

Talal Asad read the entire manuscript of this book – I can’t thank him enough for taking an interest in my work and sharing his
time and thoughts with me. José Casanova, George Shulman, James Martel, Terrell Carver, John Seery, Mort Schoolman, Stephen White, Kennan Ferguson, Steve Johnston, Char Miller, Mike Gibbons, Simon Stow, Jason Frank, Sam Chambers, Davide Panagia, Tracy Strong, Roxanne Euben, Kirstie McClure, Andrew Norris, David Alvarez, Tom Dumm, Lori Marso, Chris Nealon, Joshua Dienstag, Sara Rushing, David Gutterman, Andrew Murphy, Barbara Arneil, Emily Nacol, Danielle Allen, David Kim, Lisa Ellis, Ted Miller, and Brad Bryan made invaluable comments on this manuscript and/or were indispensable partners in conversation. Thank you all. I benefited greatly from invitations to share my work in progress by giving lectures or participating in workshops at Johns Hopkins, Berkeley, Maryland, Columbia, and George Washington – my thanks especially in those contexts to Ingrid Creppell, Derek Malone-France, Abe Newman, Robert Adcock, John Sides, Fred Alford, Jim Glass, and Ian Ward. My thanks to Tom Banchoff for appointing me as a research Fellow at Georgetown’s Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, & World Affairs. Thanks are also due to the Nuttle family for endowing the Patrick Henry postdoctoral fellowship in early American politics at Johns Hopkins, and to the Mellon Foundation for funding my postdoctoral fellowship in the humanities at Berkeley – both fellowships supported the research and writing of this book.

Libby Anker, my most cherished critic, read each chapter many, many times – she also made me rewrite each many, many times. I am very lucky to have such a tireless and incisive interlocutor; more lucky still to have such an amazing and beloved life partner.

Finally, love and thanks to my family – who are everything: Elisabeth Robin, Daniel Jay, Lilah Eve, Pat, Oscar, Carol, Billie, Shell, Annie, Berkeley, Mark, Jon, David, Dara, Christie, Bridget, Bella, Charlotte, Madeline, Elias, Everett, Noah, and Nathan.
