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Jian Ghomeshi and Secular Sexualities

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The public conversation swirling around Jian Ghomeshi's termination from the Canadian Broadcasting Company (CBC) is a grand exercise in secular sexualities.

It begins with his Facebook post. Explaining that he was fired because of his private BDSM consensual acts with an ex-girlfriend, he castigates the CBC for both acknowledging that his acts were consensual and then wrongfully pulling the plug on him because he would serve as a poor role model. To quote Ghomeshi at length:

CBC execs confirmed that the information provided showed that there was consent. In fact, they later said to me and my team that there is no question in their minds that there has always been consent. They said they're not concerned about the legal side. But then they said that this type of sexual behavior was unbecoming of a prominent host on the CBC. They said that I was being dismissed for "the risk of the perception that may come from a story that could come out." To recap, I am being fired in my prime from the show I love and built and threw myself into for years because of what I do in my private life.

Ghomeshi's case – his self-defence and the media revelations from at least nine women (three of whom have also come forward to the police) over the last week that his actions were not consensual – highlights precisely the interest over the last decade in religious studies on the emergence of secular sexualities. Drawing from Talal Asad's *Formations of the Secular*, the reason that Ghomeshi's supposedly private acts can be described as 'secular' is because they are outside of the governing purview of the secular state. Dividing citizen subjectivities into two halves, the secular state is only interested in the public activities of its citizens – political participation, economic productivity, civic engagement. What happens consensually in the bedroom is outside of the state's reach, as long as it is consensual, articulated as egalitarian, and does not inhibit civic productivity.

At the end of *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor calls the privatization of these consensual sexual acts 'secular sexualities,' an arena so ripe for research that Joan Wallach Scott has given us the term 'sexularism' to describe the assumption that "secularism encourages the free expression of sexuality and that it thereby ends the oppression of women because it removes transcendence as the foundation for social norms and treats people as autonomous individuals, agents capable of crafting their own destiny."

That private expression is free until a citizen gets hurt because civic productivity is indeed inhibited. The CBC fired Jian Ghomeshi because, as CBC's executive producer Heather Conway put it, he showed them videos that showed "for the first time, graphic evidence that Jian had caused physical injury to a woman." Indeed, just a week ago, feminist religion scholars Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini would argue that the CBC's act compromises the secularity of the CBC; the CBC itself said in a memo that when Ghomeshi denied that he had assaulted the women without consent, "We continued to believe Jian." They were trying to do what Jakobsen and Pellegrini prescribe in *Love the Sin*: they wanted to avoid regulating Ghomeshi's sexuality, for regulation often reveals that the regulator – in their case the state, in Ghomeshi's the CBC – is beholden to some notion of religion, usually some form of Protestantism. Granted, we might also hear some Catholics, such as Robert P. George in *Making Men Moral*, argue that regulating vice produces a moral environment that would

encourage the practice of virtue as a public good. But for Jakobsen and Pellegrini, these would reveal all the same that there is some kind of religious establishmentarianism lurking behind the secular face of the modern state.

Everything changes when a citizen gets hurt. During the Toronto police press conference, Inspector Joanna Beaven-Desjardins told journalists that she had ordered a preliminary investigation to begin after Lucy Decoutere, Reva Seth, and others had come forward in the press. Ghomeshi's sex life crossed from his private life to the public interest when allegations of non-consensual acts began to circulate, for now the bodies of citizens were now under attack. This code of ethics based on the law of consent must also be of interest to scholars of religion, for even the practice of secular sexualities has a "sacred" line of appropriateness that limits what can and cannot be done. The arbiter of this line is the state. The catalyst for the state's involvement is the public. The theology that is practiced may be secular, but contra George, it is no less moral than the past of vice regulation. Yet contra Jakobsen and Pellegrini, secular sexualities are not marked by the absence of theology. Instead, they ground the theology that the boundaries of private sexual practice and public interest are regulated by the state.

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