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Secular Bodies, Affects and Emotions

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Secular Bodies, Affects and Emotions: European Configurations

edited by Monique Scheer, Nadia Fadil, and Birgitte Schepelern
Johansen, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019, 256 pp., £85.00 (hb),
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Chapter 11, “The Shifting Role of the Biblical Account of Nature”, impressively well. He explains the freedom of German scholars to embark on modern criticism by their working in state- rather than church-supported institutions. He then moves with flexible mind and sure step through British and American Protestantism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In chapter 12, Constance Clark (Worcester, Massachusetts) tackles anthropology and its centuries-long struggle to escape from the doctrine of original sin. Setting against this an evolutionary but non-Darwinian picture of progressive advance, compassionate (often Quaker) Westerners strove towards the impossible ideal of objective accounts of less technically advanced societies. One concludes from Clark’s generous and wide-ranging survey that, even in the late twentieth century, anthropology was still searching for its own identity, as it had done in the days of Tyler and Boas a century before.

Finally, Bernard Lightman (Toronto) writes under the teasing title “The Theology of Victorian Scientific Naturalists”. He principally discusses Spencer, the fundamentally optimistic evolutionist, Huxley, the ultimately pessimistic one, and Tyndall, contriving an optimistic account even of thermodynamics. These three men would all have claimed either ‘agnostic’ or ‘atheist’ labels, yet each was as influenced by his Christian upbringing as such superficially diametric opponents as Paley before them or Thomson (Lord Kelvin), their younger contemporary. The resultant essay is superb—clear-thinking and deeply sensitive, a fitting last chapter. However, I wonder whether several of the previous authors would have liked to (be allowed to?) concentrate on a similarly focused topic.

Collections present much diversity of style, approach, thought level, and worldview, in addition to the obvious diversity of allocated topic, so that a cover-all judgement is never wholly satisfactory. Overall, nevertheless, *Science without God?* provides a fascinating, highly informative series of supplements to my knowledge and challenges to many long-held assumptions.

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Secular Bodies, Affects and Emotions: European Configurations, edited by Monique Scheer, Nadia Fadil, and Birgitte Schepelern Johansen, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019, 256 pp., £85.00 (hb), ISBN 978–1–3500–6522–2 (hb), ISBN 978–1–3500–6524–6 (eb), ISBN 978–1–3500–6523–9 (ePDF)

Secular Bodies, Affects and Emotions gives a long-awaited answer to Charles Hirschkind’s provocative question ‘Is there a secular body?’ (Hirschkind 2011). The contributors to this volume argue that there *are* secular bodies and support this claim, not only by providing a convincing theoretical argument that invites more ethnographic inquiry, but also by presenting ethnographic accounts which include concrete examples of secular bodies in everyday European societies. The book

combines perspectives from the material and sensory-affective turn in the study of religion, in order to investigate practices, embodied experiences, and emotional attachments related to secularity. In doing so, it approaches “secularity as a social and cultural reality, richly textured by embodied performances as well as commitments, attachments, hopes, obligations, fears and joys” (1).

The chapters present case studies where contributors examine all kinds of issues related to the body—contraceptives, cremation, an imagined temple, objects in a museum, marriages, beauty practices, rationality—to explore whether these issues can be conceived as secular or to investigate what they tell us about secularity. In doing so, the authors seek to grasp what secularity might (not) consist of at an embodied and affective level.

The book is divided into three parts, with an introduction and afterword framing them. The first part, “Bodies and Other Secular Things”, approaches the body as “something people ‘have’, and must handle in some way, in life as well as in death” (13). The second part, “Being Secular”, investigates cases in which a secular way of life is pursued and cultivated. The third part, “Making Secular Citizens”, explores cases where a secular sensibility is discovered or enforced through encounters between individual actors and the state or an institution. The first and second part provide the most innovative contributions, as these chapters focus on actual secular bodies. The chapters in the third part mainly deal with secular interference and regulations of religious bodies, which is a more common way to study secularity.

In his afterword, Matthew Engelke argues that it is time to move beyond the notion of religion and secularity as co-constitutive because, by now, a secular tradition has come into being that actually consists of more than a relationship with religion. I agree, but want to add, taking the book’s insights into account, that it remains germane not only to explore what this secular tradition might consist of, but also to investigate what powers determine the contours and content of this tradition. This would help us to gain a more comprehensive insight into which actors seek to delineate the religious from the secular and how they draw on particular acts, objects, and affective regimes to carve out this line and aim to convince others of their proposed delineation.

In this context, the book’s third part is insightful and thus also very important. Particularly the chapter by Jennifer Selby and the joint chapter by Birgitte Schepelern Johansen and Riem Spielhaus stand out in this regard. Selby explores the French state’s monitoring of French Muslims’ marriages and shows how the state keeps these marriages under surveillance in order to determine whether they meet the constellation of sexual-secular citizenry regarding the standards of romantic love (166). Schepelern Johansen and Spielhaus analyse research polls and surveys to show how quantitative knowledge about Muslims in Europe frequently emanates from, but also further amplifies, secular suspicion of religion. Both chapters demonstrate that a self-perpetuating logic often underpins secular interventions, as these endeavours aim to settle public concerns about Muslims’ attitudes and loyalties, while simultaneously reproducing suspicion by posing questions that are clearly undergirded by suspicion.

However, once one further reflects on the idea of the powers behind delineations of the religious and the secular, it becomes clear that the book features an interesting tension. On the one hand, the introduction suggests that the authors aim to build further on Hirschkind’s reflexive essay and its proposed interpretation of the secular as an unstable category and as continuously negotiated (Hirschkind 2011, 633–634). On the other hand, many contributors seem to have taken a more concrete approach and, following the vein of studying ‘lived religion’, ‘just’ examined whatever they deemed to be secular bodies.

Talal Asad’s (2003) work shows, however, the challenge of the latter approach: even the most ostensible clear-cut feature of secularity does not have to be secular at all. As,


for example, Stacey Gutkowski's chapter shows, the category of rationality—a value, the books shows, many tend to ascribe to secularity—can of course not be considered as a secular feature in an ontological sense. Similarly, Pamela E. Klassen demonstrates that contraception cannot be seen as a secular value because it can just as easily be conceived as an icon of religious agency. Both rationality and contraception might be considered as secular by particular people in particular contexts and times, but then, again, this identification depends more on the categorising actors than on the inherent status of these phenomena. This is in line with the editors' conceptual point of departure as stressed in the introduction: "But if we conceptualize the secular as an operation of drawing boundaries, then perhaps the secular body is one that does the work of discernment, of sensing and reacting in ways that make the divisions between the secular and the religious seem somehow grounded in nature." (6)

The understanding of the secular as an operation that discursively draws boundaries implies, as Schepelern Johansen argues elsewhere (2011), that academia, too, takes part in reproducing differences between religion and the secular. Somewhat ironically, this means that the book's contributors can also be considered to be secular: given their selection of which bodies to study, they have taken part in the secular act of mobilising the religious/secular tension to propose a differentiation between religious and secular bodies. Moreover, it is stated (9) that the authors do not conform to or advocate a single definition of the secular, which means that they have delineated the religious from the secular in different ways, adding an interesting layer to the book, which invites for further reflection.

Recalling my memories of the scholars participating in the 2016 conference in Tübingen where the draft chapters were presented and commented upon, I think it is interesting to think further about what the authors' delineations tell us about the secular body's relations with other axes of difference such as age, class, and race. Most contributors were born after the baby boom generation, all are highly educated, and most are white. I do of course not propose that the book's suggestions about secularity can just be reduced to the social identities of the contributors, but a reflection on this issue might be interesting, given the germane role taken by the contributors in selecting what secularity consists of. These last reflections should also be seen as an outcome of the book's inclination to let scholars think further about secular materiality. *Secular Bodies, Affects and Emotions* is the first collection of ethnographic accounts of secularity that I am aware of. The book's main aspiration—to bring the enquires of the secular down to earth (58)—will make it an apposite contribution to the study of the secular.

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