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Binder, Stefan

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1086/705467>

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ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-253831>

Journal Article

Published Version

Originally published at:

Binder, Stefan (2019). Magic is science: Atheist conjuring and the exposure of superstition in South India. *HAU : Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, 9(2):284-298.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1086/705467>



ARTICLE

Magic is science

Atheist conjuring and the exposure of superstition in South India

Stefan BINDER, *Centre for Modern Indian Studies, University of Göttingen*

This article examines so-called Miracle Exposure Programs conducted by Atheist activists in South India as a performance of secular difference. It retraces how activists use the sociopsychological properties of conjuring for performing an Atheist epistemology of the production, maintenance, and eradication of “superstition.” In debunking miracles as magic tricks, Atheist conjurers consistently emphasize the importance of immoral social relationships and abuses of differential knowledge rather than questions of ontology. In contrast to the large body of anthropological theorizing on magic, the article’s main focus is the aesthetic production of secularity and secular difference. Pushing beyond the critical discourse on secular disenchantment as itself productive of magic and reenchantment, I propose to understand practices of “exposure” as an aesthetic form that enacts a reflexive distance from both magic and reenchantment inasmuch as it makes their sociopsychological nature the object of performative display and sensible perception.

Keywords: atheism, secularity, entertainment magic (conjuring), aesthetics, superstition

Exposition

The Silver Jubilee Hall was filled with around seventy primary-school pupils and their teachers, who had come for the annual “Miracle Exposure Program” of the Atheist Centre in Vijayawada, one of the most prominent institutions of the organized Atheist¹ movement in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, the two predominantly Telugu speaking states of South India. Pasala Bhimanna, an Atheist writer and activist, conjuring aficionado, and long-time associate of the Atheist Centre, was about to perform one of the classics: sticking his tongue out, he started piercing it with the pointy end of a small, metal trident (*triśūlam*), a common divine weapon in Hindu iconography. The

piercing of the tongue or other body parts is a rather common devotional and supplicatory practice in certain Hindu festivals. To bear the pain of this feat and perform it without incurring physical harm is usually taken as a confluence of both pious devotion and divine power. The audience gasped, someone shouted “*Bhayam!*” (scary!), while Bhimanna grimaced, wrinkled his forehead, clenched his eyes, and slowly, ever so slowly, pushed the small pike of about twenty centimeters in length and the diameter of a thin pencil through his bared tongue. He had covered his mouth while doing so, but when he had finished he stretched out his hands and stared with wide eyes into the room, the trident apparently stuck in the middle of his protruded tongue.

He waited, letting the audience bathe in amazement, savoring the suspense, before he removed the pike and grinned with his tongue still intact and not a single drop of blood spilled. The atmosphere of tension collapsed. Some children started laughing, others clapped or cheered, as Bhimanna began to repeat the same trick once more, only this time he explained what he had done. Showing the small *triśūlam* the first time, he had held it in such a way as to conceal an indentation in

1. This movement consists of a number of groups and individuals who self-identify as atheists (*nāstikulu*), rationalists (*hētuvādulu*), or humanists (*mānavavādulu*). I use capitalized “Atheism/Atheist” to refer to the larger movement because atheism is considered a taken-for-granted philosophical foundation and the controversial debates about the movement’s name and history revolve around the terms “atheist/*nāstika*.”





its middle. He did not actually pierce his tongue but squeezed it into the bend, which he then turned backwards, thus hiding it in his mouth cavity when stretching out his tongue. The kids were excited, some could not hold still anymore, and Bhimanna asked, “Is this a miracle?” (*Idi mahatyamā?*), to which the delighted children yelled in reply: “No!” (*kādu!*). This routine was repeated again and again throughout the workshop: “Is this divine power?—No! Do supernatural powers exist?—They don’t! Can you do this too?—We can!”

The whole workshop lasted more than three hours, during which Bhimanna and his conjuring colleague, Gautam, continued to perform a series of such magic performances followed by explanations of the “real” tricks behind them. The workshop had begun with three members of the Gora family, the administrators of the Atheist Centre, explaining to the audience that this event was not merely an entertaining magic show but a “Miracle Exposure Program,” an educational and scientific workshop intended to capacitate its participants to dispel “superstition” (*mūḍhanammakam*) in themselves as well as in society. As the Atheist Centre had invited members of the press, one English and five Telugu newspapers ran articles the next day. The following is a quote from the widely circulating Telugu daily *Eenadu*, which captures well how the Atheist Centre and other Atheist organizations project the overall rationale and conceptual background of this sort of program:

“*Bābās*³ say they perform miracles. They do magic based on science and say they have supernatural powers. They take the people for a ride,” said Doctor Samaram. He said that, as a means for entertainment and education, *magic-science* was based on factual reality. Under the auspices of Gora Science Centre, a magic training workshop was conducted on Sunday in the Atheist Centre at Benz Circle. . . . Niyanta, director of Gora Science Centre, said they had set up this study program in order to promote understanding, knowledge, and scientific temper in the people. The magician Gautam explained the science behind many magic tricks. (*Eenadu* 2014; my translation)

The reporter’s use of the rather unusual, transliterated English compound “magic–science” is a concise render-

2. My atheist interlocutors tend to use the word *bābā* rather indiscriminately as a generic term for a whole range of different religious actors claiming various forms of spiritual or extraordinary power, such as *svāmīs*, *ammās*, *gurus*, *sādhus*, deity-saints, etc.

ing of the Atheist understanding of conjuring as a pedagogic device, which combines the debunking of claims to supernatural power with the promotion of so-called scientific temper (*vijñāna drṣṭi*). After the workshop had finished, Vijayam, current director of the Atheist Centre, explained to me that this sort of program was meant to make people understand that miracles are nothing but magic, and that magic, in turn, is nothing but science. This unequivocal equation of miracles, magic (in the sense of conjuring), and science expresses a materialist worldview, where these things are ontologically identical, insofar as they are based on knowing and technically manipulating “factual reality” (*yathārtham*)—that is, the physical or material properties of the world. From an Atheist perspective, what is ultimately unreal about miracles is their difference from science; and this unreality is socially harmful and morally reprehensible because it is strategically produced and maintained by so-called *bābās* who rely on secrecy and deceit to exploit people’s gullibility for their own selfish gain. Conjuring as a form of entertainment, by contrast, is considered morally neutral, whereas science is based on supposedly transparent truth conducive to the salutary progress of society.

This article seeks to contribute to an ethnographically grounded anthropology of “lived” secularity and irreligion by focusing on the concept of exposure as an Atheist practice and aesthetic form for the production and perception of secular difference.³ As such, this article is *not* about miracles, because I am primarily interested in the role that exposure plays for Atheist activists themselves, rather than what it does—or fails to do—to those who are supposed to “believe” in miracles or perform them. In other words, my methodological aim is to explore a way to think about exposure not only in terms of the absence, destruction, or mis-/representation of miracles, nor as a mere detour toward a better understanding of how they “really” work; instead, I reflect on practices of exposure as a means for Atheist activists to cultivate and inhabit a form of secular difference that is not reducible to its negative relation to religion. I therefore approach Miracle Exposure Programs as a complex performance, display, and enactment of an Atheist perspective

3. I use the concept *aesthetics* here in the way it is currently developed in scholarship on religion—namely, as a methodological framework for integrating the analysis of sensory, embodied, mediated, and cognitive aspects of religious practices within specific historical and political contexts (Meyer and Verrips 2008; Grieser and Johnston 2017).



on miracles revolving around the ambiguous relations of difference and sameness between miracles, magic/conjuring, and science. Discourses and practices of exposure thrive on ambiguity and definitional murkiness, precisely insofar as they are heavily invested in a rhetoric of truth, clarity, and transparency (Copeman 2018). The specificity of the practices of exposure under consideration in this article consists in acts of distancing display, through which miracles are repudiated by sidestepping the question of their ontological status—which is taken for granted—and by displacing them into the domain of social relationships and power.

A number of authors have pointed out that Atheist materialism in the activist form it takes in contemporary India is not only an ontological stance but also an ethical project, an “epistemic-moral entanglement” (Quack 2012: 272; see also Copeman and Reddy 2012; Macdonald 2015; Srinivas 2017). Jacob Copeman and Johannes Quack (2015) furthermore show how secular materialism is itself produced and mediated through practices and material things such as body donation or Atheist conjuring. For the activists among whom I have conducted ethnographic fieldwork in South India (Andhra Pradesh and Telangana), Atheism exceeds an intellectual critique of belief in gods, for it aims at nothing less than a fundamental reconstruction of society through an all-encompassing and constructive secular way of life. Hence, Atheist activists are not primarily concerned with disproving particular miracles but with dismantling what they consider a larger sociopsychological condition that enables the fraudulent masking of science as miracle; they call this condition “superstition” or “mental slavery” (*bhāvadāsyam*) and contrast it with its inverted mirror image of “scientific temper.” From an Atheist perspective, the reality and truth of materialism is at no time in doubt. I therefore argue that what is at stake in Miracle Exposure Programs is not only belief in materialism or disbelief in miracles but above all the attempt to display—to make perceptible—the socio-historical situation that Atheists hold responsible for *preventing* the cognizance of a materialism they consider an otherwise self-evident reality. After contextualizing my approach within current anthropological scholarship on secularity, the following sections will successively develop the various dimensions of this concept of exposure.

Exposing the magic of anthropology

The project of an anthropology of the secular found a programmatic beginning in Talal Asad’s *Formations of the secular* (2003), whose intervention was to retrace

how the difference between the religious and the secular is produced by a larger episteme of secular modernity in which the anthropology of religion played an instrumental role. As a consequence, the secular has come into view as a specifically modern project and “moral narrative” (Keane 2013), which has turned out to be as constructed and constructive as its other: religion. One way of dealing with anthropology’s complicity in the epistemological regime of secular modernity has been to genealogically deconstruct the religious/secular binary and the essentialist claims to secular difference it has often entailed. Critical interrogations of secular modernity have traced, for example, how modern projects of disenchantment, including the academic project of anthropology, produce their own reenchantments, myths, and magics (Morris 2000; Meyer and Pels 2003; Dube 2009; Saler 2011; Josephson-Storm 2017).

A major site for retrieving the persistent magic *in and of* modernity has been, unsurprisingly and particularly relevant for this article, the art of conjuring or entertainment magic. The history of conjuring appears less as the disenchantment of magic than as a field of continuous ambivalence and categorical fuzziness undercutting rigid dichotomies like natural/supernatural, fake/real, or secular/religious (Schmidt 2000; During 2002; Landy and Saler 2009; Jones 2017). Ironically, the enchanting powers of conjuring seem to flow from a combination of disclosure and concealment—that is, from implicitly disavowing “real” magic as illusion and technique while, simultaneously, keeping secret the knowledge of that technique. In his historical and ethnographic study on street magic in India, Lee Siegel (1991) has moreover shown that the very boundaries between entertainment magic and real magic are porous and can be subject to strategic manipulation. Similarly, more recent anthropological scholarship has construed practices of magic as inevitably containing within themselves aspects of fakery, moments of skepticism, and acts of exposure (Shipley 2009; Pedersen 2011; Graeber 2015); this includes the exposure that comes in the form of anthropological analysis and explanation.

A seminal example of the latter appears in Michael Taussig’s reading of E. E. Evans-Pritchard’s *Witchcraft, oracles, and magic among the Azande* (1937), where he shows how the anthropologist’s text is “part of a larger and more complex staging in which exposure of tricks is the name of the game” consisting of “the skilled revelation of the skilled concealment necessary to the mix of faith and skepticism necessary to magic” (Taussig 2016: 477). Magic encompasses here its ethnographic



explanation whose modes of production and textual fixation replicate the mix of concealment and revelation constituting magic in the first place; it merely adds another turn to “an endless circle in which magic explains magic” (2016: 479). Taussig’s own analysis seems to speak from a perspective that seeks to escape this magical circle by explicitly disavowing not magic but exposure: “Far be it for me to expose such exposure.” (2016: 476). By refusing to commit yet another act of magical exposure/exposing magic Taussig seeks to escape the re-enchantment of science by abstaining from the disenchantment of magic. While this may, at first sight, appear as a reinstatement of magic, it accomplishes the contrary: an exit from the circle of magic in which, in the Asadian sense, a *secular* anthropology of religion is already subsumed. Though Taussig’s example may be rhetorically extreme, it illustrates a larger trend within anthropology, where the religious/secular binary is “retracted,” as it were, into a self-reflexive move of retrieving a conceptual genealogy where the religious and the secular constantly contaminate each other. This “postsecular turn” has, in turn, sparked a debate about the role of faith in anthropology itself (see, for example, Blanes 2006; Oustinova-Stjepanovic 2015; Willerslev and Suhr 2018; Copeman and Hagström 2018).

In contrast and as an alternative to discussions on faith, a number of scholars, taking their cue from the growing interest in materiality and mediation in scholarship on religion (Meyer 2009; Vásquez 2011) have started to engage secularity more directly as an ethnographic topic by foregrounding embodied sensibilities, material culture, and everyday practices of people who consider themselves secular, irreligious, godless, et cetera (Hirschkind 2011; Quack 2012; Schielke 2012; Blanes and Oustinova-Stjepanovic 2015; Engelke 2015). This emerging ethnography of secularity, however, remains at times haunted by a reflex to distance itself from its own secular past manifesting in a tendency to methodologically parallelize the secular and the religious as well as a reluctance to theorize difference. Elizabeth Roberts’s proposal of a “programmatically non-secular” (2016: 209) anthropology, for example, takes its cue from Science and Technology Studies in order to show how science and religion are both constructed and dependent on processes of mediation:

both make reality through mediators, things crafted through relationships. Scientific mediators, such as microscopes, air pumps, and graphs, are “indirect” and “artificial” means of making the tiny or the faraway and the

counterintuitive, like germs or quarks, into an objectively seeable, knowable reality (Latour 2010: 114). Similarly, religious images or mediators have the ability to bring deities close by transforming those who experience them. (Roberts 2016: 210)

Yet *similar* does not mean *identical*, which is why it is necessary to analyze exactly how processes of mediation in science laboratories and in religious rituals are different in their similarity. While Roberts shows persuasively that socioeconomic factors condition whether people are able to opt for secular or religious mediations, she pays less attention to how those processes of mediation themselves are different besides the *content* they mediate. Regarding Atheist conjuring in India, Helen Macdonald goes further and describes how attempts by a Chhattisgarhi rationalist to expose traditional healing practices as trickery share with those practices “similarities in presentation and style,” which she identifies as a common “aesthetics of revelation” (2015: 486). The similarity in aesthetic form is contrasted with divergent social effects based on different epistemologies: illumination through naturalist empiricism versus divine revelation. With the concept of exposure, I propose to push this line of inquiry further by developing an analytical vocabulary capable of tracing the production of secular difference in the aesthetic forms of its presentation. Exposure as an aesthetic form is here not approached as a container for “conflicting discourses of materiality and rationality” (Srinivas 2017: 381) but as itself subject to historical transformation by the epistemological or ontological stances it shapes and mediates.

The Atheist materialism under consideration in this article rests on the premise that there is nothing but the immediately given material world, a world which is in no need of being mediated but merely of being exposed; religious mediations are precisely what ought to be undone. By juxtaposing mediation with exposure, I do not intend to reproduce materialist claims of immediacy or deny the constructed nature of materialist worldviews. I do, however, argue that such worldviews may be constructed differently than religious ones, not for “being” secular in an ontological sense but for producing difference at the level of aesthetic forms and practices of mediation. In order to do so, the analysis of the secular needs to abstain—at least for a moment—from a focus on its conceptual entanglement with religion. This has been demonstrated by Abou Farman (2013) with respect to Charles Hirschkind’s question: “Is there a secular body?” (2011). In his study on North American



immortalism, Farman argues that secular discourses like materialism or rationalism may have originated in an oppositional stance toward religion but have by now established their own “tradition” (Farman 2013: 738); they therefore generate identifiably secular bodies and notions of personhood at the nexus of institutional, legal, and technological frameworks. By analyzing the secular on its own, contingent terms, traditions, and in the case at hand, aesthetic forms, we may be better equipped to reengage, in a second step, the issue of its genealogical production. Concretely, I propose to approach Atheist practices of exposure not by asking how adequately or erroneously they represent miracles or how successfully they “disenchant” those who believe in them, but how they display and therein produce and shape a specific form of secular difference. I want to stress that this notion of secular difference is not structuralist, insofar as it does not entail absolute difference or mutual exclusivity. The Atheist practices I analyze may share traits with religious practices at different levels, including the level of aesthetic forms. However, a premise of the following ethnographic theorizing of secular difference is precisely that difference can be made sensible only on the basis of similarity: the question is not whether Atheist conjuring *is* different from religious miracles in a structuralist or ontological sense but how Atheists employ similarities between miracles and conjuring in order to make difference perceptible.

Exposing superstition: Epistemology as narrative

The Atheist movement in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana has distinct regional boundaries, partly due to linguistic reasons, but it is also part of a larger secularist tradition in India (Quack 2012: 47–106). The Atheist movement is predominantly a male, middle-class, and upper-caste phenomenon, especially at the level of leadership, yet generalized charges of cultural inauthenticity (“Westernization”) and elitism do not necessarily capture the sociological condition of all Atheists and must also be understood as part of the cultural politics that embed Indian Atheism. While modern socioreligious reform movements are the most immediate predecessors of contemporary Atheism, its adherents construct a genealogy that is informed by anti-Brahmin interpretations of the so-called Aryan migration theory and reaches back to an ancient prehistory of the Indian subcontinent (Trautmann 2005; Pandian 2007). This

is essentially a loss-and-destruction telling of an original Atheist civilization in India that has been corrupted by a religion (Brahmanic Hinduism) brought from elsewhere.

Accordingly, a cornerstone of Atheist activism is the public critique of religions, and Miracle Exposure Programs have been the most well-known and spectacular form thereof. They have been an integral part of rural “mass meetings,” where activists address whole village communities and conjuring is integrated with song and oratory into a larger program of Atheist propagation. In this form, Atheist conjuring was first popularized at a larger scale in India by the Keralite rationalist Abraham T. Koor (1898–1978), who started touring India in the 1960s and used magic tricks as a means to debunk alleged miracles performed by *bābās* and similar religious actors (Koor 2013). Koor and his successors, Basava Premanand (1930–2009) and Narendra Nayak (b. 1951) have continued to travel all over India in order to spread the message of Atheism. Besides such events in rural areas, Atheist conjurers increasingly target students at secondary schools and colleges in an effort to recruit younger members. The popularity and attractiveness of Miracle Exposure Programs has been such that some within the Atheist movement have begun to distance themselves from them, fearing that the entertaining qualities of conjuring risk undermining its instrumental character and that Atheism may get lost in magic. At the same time, it is conceded that the efficacy of conjuring rests precisely on its capacity to fuse propagation and pedagogy with recruitment and entertainment.

Examples of the most common magic tricks performed are the production of so-called sacred ash (*vibhūti*) or small trinkets “from thin air” as well as fire tricks like the combustion of camphor pieces on hands and tongues. Besides sleights of hand or psychological manipulation (illusion, misdirection), most tricks are either based on chemical properties of substances (having them change color, density, or reactivity) or on technical apparatus (false bottoms, hidden compartments) (see Quack 2012: 109–44). While Atheist conjurers usually cultivate unique styles regarding their repertoire of tricks, the props they use, including costumes and multimedia support, or the general tone of the event (humorous/serious, mimetic/caricatural), Miracle Exposure Programs usually realize variations of the following script: First, the miracle to be exposed is introduced by portraying the context in which it is usually encountered. This can happen through a verbal description or by imitating a *bābā* and casting a



volunteer from the audience as a client-devotee. The second step is the actual performance of the miracle, followed by a third step: disclosing how the trick is accomplished and, if not already addressed in step one, how it is used to defraud believers.

The concept of exposure, however, is more complex than step three of this script, because it does not exhaust itself in the debunking of *particular* miracles as technical magic tricks. According to the explicit agenda of Atheist activists, they use the exposure of concrete miracles as a means to eradicate superstition and mental slavery *in general*. Telugu words used for superstition (*mūḍhanam-makam*, *guḍḍinammakam*, *andhaviśvāsam*) all translate literally as “blind belief” as well as “blind trust.” Already at the level of semantics, superstition points beyond an intellectual realm of assent to propositions and toward an affective relationship of “trust.” Belief in gods, for instance, refers not only to the ontological existence of deities but encompasses trust in their efficacious power to impact the life of devotees. The everyday usage of these terms furthermore shows that superstition is not considered problematic primarily for being erroneous knowledge but for leading to behavior that is inconsequential and undesirable—or outright dangerous and harmful. Blind trust is usually described in a way that makes it hardly distinguishable from the “blind customs” (*mūḍhā-cārālu*) it is said to sustain.

If asked to define superstition, most of my interlocutors tend to produce lists of concrete examples, which include practices like astrology, numerology, temple worship, ritual propitiations of deities, “social evils” (*durā-cārālu*) like widow immolation or child-marriage, “black magic” (*bāṇāmati*) as well as abstract concepts like karma, soul, rebirth, or indeed gods. In more abstract conceptualizations, they mainly define superstition historically—namely, as anachronisms. Beliefs and practices are not blind for being erroneous *sub specie aeternitatis* but for not being discarded once their inaccuracy and futility have been established objectively. Hence, superstitions are disproven beliefs who nonetheless persist. For Atheists, it is this counterfactual persistence of trust that requires explanation and intervention; this is the basis for a defining aspect of exposure: a sidestepping of ontological questions, which are taken for granted, and a redirection of attention to the plane of social and affective relationships. It is therefore not coincidental but *constitutive* of Atheist discourse on superstition that it tends to take the form of narrative (e.g., Mahārāju 2009; Kooor 2013). An illustrative example for such a narrative is the

Telugu autobiography of the cofounder of the Atheist Centre, Saraswathi Gora (1912–2006), where she relates an episode that took place in 1927 in Colombo between herself and her husband Goparaju Ramachandra Rao, commonly known as Gora. This account concerns beliefs and practices related to solar and lunar eclipses, which are considered inauspicious by some Hindus. Especially pregnant women have been enjoined to remain at home and refrain from eating and drinking, lest their children be born with cheiloschisis. Here is Saraswathi’s narrative:

I was pregnant when I came to Colombo. The future child was my first. Therefore, I was naturally a bit afraid. But, because Gora explained in detail over and over that there was no relationship between the eclipse and the child in [my] womb, and because as a father he bore as much responsibility for the unborn child as I did as a mother, I summoned up courage. . . . Some of the Muslim, Christian, and Buddhist women around me were pregnant. During the time of the eclipse, none of them behaved differently. From the start, they had never been afraid of an eclipse. Had their children actually ever gotten a cleft lip, they too would have been afraid and behaved cautiously. Seeing all this, I stopped being afraid. In the end, when I had my girl, she had no cleft lip. She was born beautiful and normal. Therefore, if I still had any deep-seated, little fear or doubt, they too were gone. This incident was a turning point in my life. The determination to courageously examine old customs grew. I developed the notion that one should not trust in anything blindly. (Gora 2003: 44; my translation)

Saraswathi narrates that the operative factor leading to her “turning point” (*malupu*) was not astronomical knowledge but courage—that is, a changed affective relationship to the knowledge that was triggered by her observation that women from other religious backgrounds appeared to be without fear. Colombo’s multireligious environment together with Gora’s admonishments enabled Saraswathi to construe her affectively charged beliefs as the result of a socially instituted and therefore contingent tradition: They turned out to be *Hindu* beliefs. This is not to pit reason and knowledge against affect, because neither Saraswathi’s fear nor her courage were unreasonable; quite the opposite: They were firmly embedded within her knowledge about the expectations, duties, responsibilities, and predicaments of a Hindu wife and mother. Saraswathi could anticipate that, even though her child was born “beautiful and normal,” her



parents later on “severely castigated” (*cālā nindistū*) (Gora 2003: 44) her for recklessly jeopardizing the well-being of her firstborn.

Atheists are routinely criticized—often by scholars of religion—for simplifying and reducing religion to questions of erroneous belief. However, the process of overcoming superstition is here not described as an epistemic event contained in Saraswathi’s mind, but as a process unfolding in time and social, gendered, and multireligious space. In this process, the power of family pressures and traditional beliefs and customs did not contend with astronomical truths as such—which Saraswathi claims to have never doubted (Gora 2003: 43)—but with her affective readiness to heed her husband’s authority as a source of trustworthy knowledge. This is why Atheists conceptualize superstition as a form of “mental slavery” or “slave mentality” (*bānisabhāvam*): people are bound by blind trust even in situations when they actually know better. The crux of Atheist understandings of superstition is therefore that blind trust must have been perpetuated strategically by those who profit from it, by those who gain from social inequalities between genders, between priests and devotees, between *bābās* and their followers, between astrologers and their clients, et cetera. My interlocutors maintain that religious history clearly demonstrates that the performance of miracles and supposedly supernatural powers has been a major technique for keeping people in thrall to mental slavery. Against this background, I interpret Miracle Exposure Programs as an attempt to translate complex narratives of superstition into a perceptible aesthetic form of exposure: a performance that seeks to *show*, in a choreographed display, the social and affective mechanisms that create mental slavery as well as the learning process of its eradication. The following section explores how the sociopsychological properties of conjuring enable this sort of *performed epistemology* of superstition.

Exposing the power of secrecy: The mechanism of conjuring

The day after the Miracle Exposure Program at the Atheist Centre, Bhimanna invited me to accompany him to his hometown of Rajahmundry, around 160 kilometers to the east of Vijayawada, in order to show me his magic school. Bhimanna had been interested in conjuring since his school days but had related to it merely as an entertaining amusement—until he met Premanand in the late

1970s and acted as his assistant and translator during a Miracle Exposure campaign in Andhra Pradesh. It was then that he saw his rationalist commitment, his passion for conjuring, and his vocation as a pedagogue conjoined in the format of Miracle Exposure Programs. During our train ride to Rajahmundry, he started showing me a card trick and watched amusedly as I got stuck halfway trying to repeat it. I eventually gave up and asked him to explain where I had made the mistake, but he shushed me hurriedly, put away the card deck, and whispered: “I will show you back in Rajahmundry. People are looking, and I don’t want to expose the trick.” When I asked him later if commercial conjurers, like his colleagues organized in the Andhra Pradesh Magicians Association (APMA), got angry with Atheists for revealing the secrets behind magic, Bhimanna answered in the negative and clarified:

Bhimanna: I am not exposing magic tricks. I am only exposing the tricks of *bābās*.

Stefan: But, what is the difference between magic tricks and tricks of *bābās*?

Bhimanna: There is no difference. The only thing is that they say that it is based on supernatural powers. But what they say is false, because science doesn’t accept. [Seeing me take notes] You want to write this down? Okay, do it. [Dictating:] Definition of miracles: A wonderful, supernatural event. They say that ordinary people cannot understand them and cannot do them. Science won’t accept supernatural powers and events. Next sentence: So-called miracles done by *bābās* are also magic tricks, there is no difference at all. Magicians do magic tricks; they don’t cheat people. *Bābās* do miracles and cheat people.

Bhimanna reiterates here the equation of miracles and conjuring not only at the ontological level but also at the technical level: they are the same tricks. And yet they are different in the moral qualities and intentions of their performers and the social effects they produce: cheating and mental slavery on the one hand and entertainment on the other. It is this difference and moreover the capacity to discern it, rather than the technique of particular tricks, that Atheists seek to expose. In a crucial sense, then, exposure is less about showing that magic tricks and miracles are the same—something that science has already done—but showing *how they are made to seem different*.

Historical and sociological literature describes conjuring as a form of commercialized entertainment, where a



magician performs ostensibly extraordinary, supernatural, or superhuman feats that are clearly marked or implicitly understood as tricks accomplished by illusion, sleight of hand, or technical apparatus (Nardi 1984; During 2002; Jones 2011). Technically speaking, the performance of conjuring consists of a magician's skillful combination of different strategies to manipulate the attention, perceptions, affects, and ratiocinations of an audience; it is a technology of "psychological manipulation" (Gell 1988: 7). At the same time, it is an interactional process that is coproduced by magician and audience:

The audience brings to a magic event several features necessary for its effectiveness: (1) knowledge and rational faculties; (2) perception; (3) expectations; and (4) a willingness to be entertained, in fact, to be tricked. . . . An audience must bring to a magic performance *some* amount of knowledge concerning the existence of scientific and technological explanations in order for tricks to be framed as entertainment. (Nardi 1984: 37)

If miracles are defined by supernatural powers, as they are according to Atheists, one can argue that those who believe in them also need to have some "rationalist" notion about how the natural world ordinarily works in order to even cognize miracles as extraordinary. Even without any claim to supernatural feats, however, the ability to ostensibly break the laws of nature remains a demonstration of differential knowledge, skill, and ultimately power: "The process of performing a magic trick involves a kind of deceit that involves power, control, and one-up-man(*sic*)ship. Magic is an aggressive, competitive form involving challenges and winning at the expense of others" (Nardi 1988: 766). The decisive moment for the success or failure of conjuring is thus the creation of a social situation where the magician's demonstration of skill and power is carefully deployed in order to manipulate the audience into a "willingness to be tricked." In his ethnography of commercial conjuring in France, Graham Jones (2011) shows that such situations are precarious and need to be handled and cultivated with great care by conjurers, lest the audience becomes defensive; as it turns out, a willingness to be entertained is not necessarily coterminous with a willingness to be tricked. As one of Jones's interlocutors put it: "It's very disagreeable for a spectator to have someone in front of him, someone who does things that people don't understand. It's practically unbearable" (2011: 150). What makes such situations "practically unbearable" is their dependence on a

demonstration of superior power based on access to exclusive, secret knowledge. And this technically produced epistemic-affective complex of power and secrecy is precisely what the practice of Atheist exposure seeks to reveal and make perceptible. It is indeed not the *magic trick* that is to be exposed but the *tricks of bābās*—that is, the complex process of how *bābās* use the secrecy and power dynamics inherent to the practical skill of conjuring in order to turn a willingness to be tricked for the sake of entertainment into a condition of mental slavery.

The Atheist practice of exposure is thus not a subtractive act—the removal of the secret behind miracles—but an additive one. Instead of merely revealing that superstitions are false, it performs and makes sensible *how* this falsity comes into being and is maintained. It demonstrates how superstition relies on the power of secrecy by undoing it, yet this act of disclosure adds a reflexive surplus: it shows not only the immorality of *bābās* who translate secrecy into deceit and superstition; it also exposes the morality and pedagogic agency of the Atheist conjurer who retranslates superstition into entertainment. This reflexive and moral surplus of exposure constitutes "scientific temper" as the positive message of Atheism and the inverted mirror image of superstition. Exposure is thus both transitive (exposing something) and intransitive (being exposed). This intransitivity resonates with the colloquial use of exposure, where people tend to use the English term, also when speaking in Telugu. In everyday conversation, to say that somebody "has exposure" refers to a diffuse set of skills and dispositions, like being able to interact confidently with strangers, preferably in English, feeling comfortable with foreign food, cutlery, or escalators, or commanding certain codes of professionalism. In short, it indicates a certain habitus acquired by being exposed to "modernity," especially in its urban and cosmopolitan guise. In postcolonial India, this modernity includes "scientific temper" as one of its crucial elements.

Exposing scientific temper: Modernity and the encounter of knowledge

Returning for a moment to Bhimanna's performance at the Atheist Centre, it is important to note that the dramaturgical arc of his piercing routine pivoted on the exposure of how the trick is done but did not end there. It continued into an enactment of scientific temper, as he made the school children recite in unison the



answers to his questions: Is this a miracle? Do supernatural powers exist? Can you do it too? Bhimanna had furthermore brought a plastic banner, which he had hung on the wall and had the pupils recite collectively at some point during the show. It comprised six bullet points:

- Scientific attitude is scientific thinking
- Develop scientific attitude
- Supernatural powers and events are false
- Adopt scientific method to solve problems
- Prayers do not solve problems
- Miracles done by Babas are magic tricks

Bhimanna's performance had been preceded by speeches in which members of the Atheist Centre explained the need for scientific temper. Samaram, a respected medical doctor and Atheist author, gave this succinct definition of scientific temper: "Questioning! What happened? How did it happen? How did you do it?" The pupils were told to remember these questions, and some of them were summoned onto the stage during the event and prompted to "question" Bhimanna with exactly these words after each magic trick. What would be the didactic value of this kind of rehearsed performance of scientific temper as well as its abstract, tautological conceptualization? On Bhimanna's banner, scientific attitude is qualified as scientific thinking, which is, in turn, qualified as scientific method. In a seemingly contradictory way, the tautological indeterminacy and proceduralism of scientific temper as a method of questioning is juxtaposed with fixed, quite dogmatic iterations of the insights it is foretold to yield: supernatural powers are false, prayer is futile, miracles are tricks.

The example of another Miracle Exposure Program by a different Atheist conjurer, G. D. Saraiah (GDS), will help clarify why I propose to conceptualize scientific temper—like superstition—as a complex and historically informed social situation, rather than a merely cognitive state. GDS is a former member of the radical Maoist movement and a seasoned orator and conjurer, who is lauded by his supporters for sacrificing everything, including his professional and family life, for the cause of the Atheist movement. In the mid-2000s, he founded his own organization called People's Atheist Society (PAS), one of the smaller groups in the region. GDS's activism, including the material infrastructure for his Magic Shows (stage, lighting, sound, etc.) is largely facilitated by a network of sympathizers and collaborators, who are often personal friends or allied activists. The event de-

scribed in the following, however, was requested and organized by a local superintendent of police. Some weeks earlier, a death had occurred in the village of Shanigaram, after which the afflicted family had started making allegations of being victims of *bāṇāmati*, a form of malevolent magic. Since they had threatened and already beaten up an accused sorcerer, the local police invited GDS to conduct a Miracle Exposure Program in order to prevent worse things from happening. Retaliatory murders of alleged *bāṇāmati* practitioners are reported quite regularly in the media, which tend to portray belief in sorcery and the crimes it inspires as prime markers of the "backwardness" of rural and especially low-caste communities.

When GDS, a group of six PAS activists, and I arrived at Shanigaram, we found a stage set up at the central crossroads of the village, where a sound system broadcast the latest Telugu cinema songs into the surroundings. A few high-ranking police officials were already seated on chairs next to the dais. GDS started the show with his standard repertoire of magic tricks interspersed with Atheist songs and short speeches about the principles of Atheism and its history in India. GDS tends to include audience members in his magic tricks, especially children and women, and is very adept at performing them in a humorous register, which contrasts starkly with the severe, uncompromising, and sometimes aggressive style of his speeches. About an hour into the program, the superintendent of police, a stern, tall, and muscular man in his late forties, mounted the dais. He addressed the village community in an authoritative language, using pronouns usually reserved for children, very close friends, and family, or for marking addressees as subordinate. He made an "appeal" (*vijñapti*) to the villagers' reason, asking them to discard their belief in *bāṇāmati* and to desist from any acts of retaliation. He would not tolerate any illegal activity, and the event tonight was a "warning" (*heccarika*); severe consequence awaited those flaunting it. One of GDS's local collaborators delivered another speech, where he explained how superstition consisted of the three main components: fear, blind following, and cheating. As an oblique reference to the presence of police officers, he stressed: "This is not a government event. These people [PAS activists] are here only to tell the real facts [*tatvālu*] and then they will be on their way. That's all. No money is involved here." Toward the end of the three-hour show, Sujatha Surepally, a renowned sociologist, feminist and anti-caste activist concluded the event with a long speech arguing that superstitions like *bāṇāmati* were above all instruments for



maintaining social inequalities based on caste and religion. She assured the audience that they were in no way inferior to “educated people” (*caduvukonna vāllu*), who had their own kinds of superstitions: “If you believe in god, do as you please. Although we [gesturing toward the stage] do not believe, we are here only to oppose superstition and deceit.”

In order to flesh out the significance of this episode for my conceptualization of scientific temper, it is necessary to take a brief digression into its history in postcolonial India. Scientific temper is closely associated with the personality of India’s first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, who coined the English term as a cornerstone of his project of national modernization (Parekh 1991; Roy 2007: 105–32). After independence, big science, large-scale industrial projects, and institutions for technological education (IITs) became key components of nation-building and state-directed development. As such, science was firmly embedded in a discourse of lack—the flip side of development—where it figured as the solution not only to the nation’s economic needs but also its social “backwardness.” Srirupa Roy (2007) argues that this discourse of lack cast citizens as backward, infantile, and in need of being modernized by the state. At the same time, however, it encompassed the state itself: “Citizens were simultaneously exhorted to believe in the promise of state intervention and to develop skills of ‘self help’ in recognition of the inherent limits, fallibilities, and inadequacies of state-sponsored modernity” (2007: 46). Thus, state-driven big science could only fulfill its function of developing the nation if that nation itself developed the necessary skill to receive the gift of “Nehruvian Science” (Arnold 2013). Not all individual citizens needed to become scientists themselves, but for science to do its modernizing work, it was their duty to develop scientific temper. In 1976, during the emergency rule of Nehru’s daughter and India’s third Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, this duty was enshrined in the Constitution of India as article 51A(h).

From the mid-1960s onward, however, some of the certainties underpinning the project of Nehruvian modernization had been coming under attack by an emerging criticism of the top-down dispensation of big science in the service of industrialization and development. In 1990, this criticism found institutional shape in the All India People’s Science Network (AIPSN), which fought for an alternative science that would be closer to the people, serving their needs rather than filling the coffers of industrialists and capitalist corporations (Kannan 1990;

Varma 2001). AIPSN rallied behind a Marxist vision of “science for social revolution” (Zachariah and Sooryamoorthy 1994: 66) and encompassed a variety of goals and agendas, ranging from literacy programs, to science popularization, or medical health campaigns. The discourse of “People’s Science” still pivoted on the concept of scientific temper, regardless of whether it was located in technocratic elites or associated with the alternative of a popular, indigenous science. Scientific temper thus survived the Nehruvian Era and continues to structure public debates about the relationship between knowledge, state, economy, and society (Subbaram 1989). The common thread running through its conceptual history is that it addresses above all the relationship between knowledge and power.

According to Atheist materialism, science and technology are a progressive approximation to and control of “factual reality,” and as such effectively disprove beyond any reasonable doubt beliefs in supernatural phenomena. Regardless, the fact remains that these beliefs persist. While this confirms for Atheists their status as anachronistic superstitions, it also evinces that science and technology alone are incapable of dispelling them for good. The distinction between science and scientific temper thus registers an attempt to safeguard the battered authority of a science beleaguered by its perceived failure: Atheists and other promoters of science must explain why the people remain superstitious even though they are repeatedly told the truth. My interlocutors usually argue that people are afraid and simply follow what powerful individuals like elders, leaders, or *bābās* tell them to do. Hence, superstition is considered less a lack of knowledge or rationality than a tendency to be led by fear or sheer force of habit into misplaced trust in questionable authorities, and then into mental slavery. Bhimanna’s choreography of scientific temper demonstrates that Atheists treat it less as an individual capacity to generate knowledge than the cultivation of the right attitude when *encountering* knowledge; it is about how to manage access to and the beneficial utilization of knowledge. If scientific temper means “questioning,” this unfolds in two dimensions: it means putting into question false authorities, but it also means putting questions to legitimate ones—in order to then receive trustworthy answers. As Bhimanna explained to me, the ultimate object of Atheist exposure is not the *trick itself*; rather, it seeks to provide the audience with a perceptible display of the *moral difference* between *bābā*, stage conjurer, and Atheist,



which derives from their distinctive use of the power and authority that come with differential access to knowledge.

By subsuming the eradication of superstition under the larger goal of spreading scientific temper, Atheists inscribe themselves into that concept's ambiguous discursive relationship with the authority of the postcolonial state. Like the People's Science movement, of which many Atheist activists have been members, the Atheist movement latches onto the compromised moral status of the developmental state by presenting itself as carrying on where "Nehruvian Science" has failed. In GDS's Miracle Exposure Program, the sheer presence and domineering demeanor of the police, likely the most tangible way most ordinary citizens encounter the state's power in everyday life, lent authority to the event but also required an explicit dissociation from the state by stressing that this was *not* a government event and that *no* money was involved. The oblique reference to money may evoke various associations, from quotidian experiences of corruption to a specific Indian discourse of financially incentivized conversion, in particular by Christian missionaries (Jenkins 2008; Roberts 2012); though my interlocutors insist that they are opposed to all religions and reject the vocabulary of conversion, Atheists are sometimes accused, especially by Hindu nationalists, of being merely the avant-garde of a Christian/Western conspiracy to destroy Hinduism. By assuring the assembled villagers of their equality with "educated people," Sujatha further distances the Miracle Exposure Program from the discredited elitism of Nehruvian state-modernism, which has invested scientific temper—or "having exposure"—with a distinctly urban, cosmopolitan, and middle-class/upper-caste habitus by construing practices like *bāṇāmāti* as iconic signs of rural, low-caste "backwardness." She even mitigated the need for disbelief in god, which led to a heated disagreement with GDS after the show had ended.

Such careful and preemptive framings of Miracle Exposure Programs highlight the amount of semiotic labor that goes into the performative crafting of scientific temper as a distinct and above all benevolent form of authoritative knowledge. The practice of exposure emerges here as more complex than simply the debunking of miracles and *bābās*, as it navigates a multilayered and historically shaped moral discourse about the relation of power and knowledge. Exposure therefore does not eradicate secrecy or expulse power and authority from questions of knowledge, as scientific temper must not be misunderstood as a transparent and egalitarian substitute for su-

perstition. Atheist conjurers themselves are anything but shy about being more skilled, knowledgeable, or rational, hence more powerful, than their mentally enslaved audience. Yet through the performance of *exposure*, they seek to resignify and legitimize this power differential as a positive and benevolent hierarchy within a pedagogical encounter—an encounter well-rehearsed by a paternalist postcolonial state that increasingly loses its moral mandate in postliberalization India. This resonates with Roy's argument that nation-building during the Nehruvian era was not based on internalized persuasion but on external pervasion in the sense of iterative *encounters* with "public actions, performative displays, spatial interventions, and political discourses" (2007: 14).

It is thus crucial for the concept of exposure that the resignification of differential knowledge and power is not realized in an act of affection or reception. It does not refer to a postulated transformation of the audience's minds. Instead, I theorize Miracle Exposure Programs as attempts to *display* to an audience the semiotic process of resignification they seek to affect. This feature of reflexive display can be fruitfully, if somewhat counter-intuitively, profiled against a rather different type of instrumental conjuring: Christian "gospel magic" in North America. Jones describes how Evangelical Christians in the United States appropriate conjuring as "gospel magic" (2012: 194) in order to spread their religious message. Quite like Atheist Miracle Exposure Programs, Christian gospel magic thrives on the sociopsychological properties of conjuring, insofar as it evokes a differential of agency and power between magician and audience. According to Jones, gospel magic seeks to resignify this conjured up power and agency as an iconic expression of God's power rather than an indexical sign of the human conjurer's power. This semiotic resignification is risky because, if it fails, Christian magicians may appear vainglorious for arrogating to themselves the power and glory that belong to God:

This modulation of agency in the performance of gospel magic thus requires a kind of spiritual virtue—and semiotic virtuosity—beyond whatever manual skill the magician might need to produce an effect. . . . In the eyes of these performers, making conjuring Christian not only means presentationally coupling magic effects with biblical motifs but also decoupling magical performance from personal projections of agency. (Jones 2012: 210)

The symbolic modulation and semiotic virtuosity required of Atheist conjurers is even more complex due to the added component of exposure. Miracle



Exposure Programs seek to ensure that those who claim miraculous powers end up as the Hindu equivalent to a *failed* gospel magician: The aim is to show that *bābās* arrogate to themselves powers that not only do not belong to them but do not exist in the first place; the aim is to expose the rather unvirtuous semiotic virtuosity that goes into the making of superstition. It does not stop there, however, because the second dimension of Atheist symbolic modulation seeks to firmly redirect back to the Atheist conjurer the “personal projections of agency” that, going through the process of exposure, are to be reconstituted as a benevolent, socially responsible power of pedagogy. Atheist conjurers assure their audience that no divine power is involved: “I did that.” But they add: “You can do it too!” and on top of that: “I will teach you how.”

It is here that Miracle Exposure Programs differ in their aesthetic form from the miracles they seek to expose. Similar to Birgit Meyer’s concept of “aesthetic formations” (2009), this includes not only the material and sensorial aspects of magic shows (costumes, props, staging) but also their conceptualization and discursive framing in different affective registers (humor, severity, argumentativeness). In an article on the followers of the late Sathya Sai Baba, a famous miracle worker, deity-saint, and erstwhile archnemesis of Indian rationalists, Lawrence Babb argues that miracles become significant for devotees because they enable transactional relationships rooted in Hindu devotional traditions:

The so-called miracles seem to derive their real energy from their role as media for deity-devotee relationships. . . . Put differently, the deity-saint’s acts . . . have as much to do with a devotee’s feelings about himself as about Sathya Sai Baba and the things he can or cannot do; or rather, in this context his feelings about himself and about “Baba” are conflated. This is Sathya Sai Baba’s true magic. (Babb 1983: 123)

In Babb’s analysis, Sathya Sai Baba’s magic is quite impervious to scientific rationality and critique because “it engages with it only obliquely” (Babb 1983: 123). In this article, I sought to describe this obliqueness from the perspective of Atheists: Miracle Exposure Programs do not intend to replicate the pattern of deity-devotee relationships in order to fill them with a different, materialist content; rather, Atheist conjurers attempt to take the “energy” of those relationships and put it at a distance—namely, on stage—in order for it to be “looked at” *as* and *through* the Atheist concepts of su-

perstition and scientific temper. In other words, Miracle Exposure Programs seek to produce difference and distance from Hindu traditions of devotional or transactional visibility and display (e.g., Babb 1981; Eck 1998; Pinney 2004: 181–200) precisely by exposing them to the senses as objects of perception. Because of this obliqueness, we should not look for the effect of exposure in a functional replacement of the deity-saint with the Atheist conjurer or an immediate transformation of the audience but in its semiotic and aesthetic efficacy as a representation of secular difference. Put differently, exposure produces the secularity of Atheist conjurers rather than the “conversion” of their audiences.

Dénouement

I proposed to conceptualize Atheist acts of exposure as a performative arc where the debunking of miracles as magic tricks serves as a reflexive semiotic technique that lays bare the sociopsychological properties of conjuring in order to present superstition as an immoral use of power and knowledge. By so doing, it does not evacuate or forsake the power-knowledge contained in that gesture of unveiling but attempts to resignify and display it as an implementation of the historically entrenched pedagogic relationship of scientific temper. Exposure thus consists in a simultaneous move of distancing and reflexivity that seeks to make perceptible the social and affective mechanisms that either sustain or dismantle a supposedly erroneous belief in miracles. In the critical literature on secular modernity mentioned at the beginning of the article, the persistence of differential knowledge and power in the very promise of secular transparency and egalitarianism is often interpreted as a reenchantment of science and secularity. I tried to show, by contrast, that the production of secular difference is not necessarily premised on the disavowal of power but on its moral and aesthetic manipulation.

The following narrative of a failed Miracle Exposure Program can furthermore illustrate why notions of enchantment, and especially of *re*-enchantment, do not go far enough in theorizing difference. Some months after the event at the Atheist Centre, I accompanied Narendra Nayak, one of the most famous contemporary rationalists in India, to a conjuring training camp at the Tiruchirappalli campus of the National Institute of Technology. At one point, he recounted a story from one of his Miracle Exposure Programs in North India.



After his performance, he had been approached by a man from the audience who supplicated him to use his powers and help him with a personal problem. Narendra Nayak had tried to explain, once again, that he had no real supernatural powers, and that the very purpose of his performance had been to expose their nonexistence. The man would not relent and, turning angry, had started accusing him of being just the same as all the other “big people”—gurus, *bābās*, deity-saints, et cetera—who kept their powers to themselves and refused to help a “common man” like himself. Narendra Nayak’s story caused much laughter and was intended to demonstrate the extreme obduracy of superstition. However, another interpretation would take the man’s “disbelief in disbelief” as a sign of that particular Miracle Exposure Program’s mixed success. Narendra Nayak had managed to get across his message about power or, at least, make it resonate with previous experiences of his audience: People who claim extraordinary powers and knowledge are selfish and immoral. It had failed, however, to produce scientific temper as the capacity to discern the crucial *moral* difference between the exploitative power-knowledge of *bābās* and the pedagogic power-knowledge of Atheists. More important for my argument, however, is the fact that, like many other Atheist activists, Narendra Nayak himself understands the reenchantment of secular exposure as a *failure*, irrespective of his inclination to put the blame on his audience.

I would like to bring out the significance of this by returning to Taussig’s example above, where he repudiates the circle of magical explanation by insisting that it be far for him to “expose such exposure.” As mentioned before, he sidesteps questions of ontology by making such questions an intrinsic part of magic, which he relocates to the level of social power and practices of knowledge. He *shows* how the magic of Evans-Pritchard’s text lies ultimately in its aesthetic form—namely, its *rhetoric* of science. Taussig himself produces—through *another* rhetoric—the difference or oblique distance of his own text, subtitled “Another theory of magic.” This assumes, of course, that rhetoric and theory are not opposed, since every theory necessarily has an aesthetic form; an assumption Taussig is likely to have deployed strategically. My Atheist interlocutors would insist in a similar (though not identical) way that it be far for them to reenchant disenchantment. It is precisely in the *how*—in the aesthetic form—of distancing displays of magic that I propose to analyze the production of secular difference. One of the many things that makes my interlocu-

tors’ and Taussig’s repudiations of magic different is that Taussig consequently circumvents ontological judgments whereas Atheists take them for granted. What makes them similar, however, is a *form* of exposure that distances itself from magic by *showing* how it works, by making its modus operandi—be it as performance or rhetoric—an object of perception rather than ontological theory.

This concept of exposure as a secular aesthetic form does not imply that practices of distancing display are unique to the secular or define it in a substantial manner in all places and at all times. By contrast, it is precisely the historical context within which an aesthetic form is deployed that determines the cultural conditions for the production and the aesthetic efficacy of secular difference. Beyond the connections with postcolonial nation-building and postsecular developments in anthropology, which I adumbrated in this essay, it is of course the social history of photographic mediations and “reality effects” as well as technological mechanisms of exposure that spring to mind as other relevant fields to be explored for a more systematic aesthetics of the display and perception of secular difference. Thus, the historicity of exposure itself, and other aesthetic forms yet to be theorized ethnographically, may serve as heuristics for exploring new fields for research within the larger framework of an anthropology of the secular.

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Stefan BINDER is a postdoctoral researcher at the Centre for Modern Indian Studies (CeMIS) at Georg-August-University of Göttingen. He has published on secularity and religion in South India and is currently pursuing a research project on Shi'i Islam, masculinities, and queer communities in Hyderabad. He is the author of a monograph on subjectivity and Buddhist meditation practices, *Die Erzeugung von Welt in Praktiken des Selbst* (LIT, 2012).

Stefan Binder
Centre for Modern Indian Studies
University of Göttingen
Waldweg 26
37073 Göttingen
Germany
stefan.binder@uni-goettingen.de