The Secular Paradox: On the Religiosity of the Not Religious
by Joseph Blankholm and: Wild Experiment: Feeling Science and Secularism after Darwin by Donovan O. Schaefer (review)

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BOOK REVIEW

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In two pioneering works on the limits and affordances of the secular in North America, scholars of religion Donovan O. Schaefer and Joseph Blankholm underscore the fictitiousness of the secular/religious binary while also revealing how this very binary has been at the foundations of American secular culture for the past century. To do this, both authors use the resources of religious studies to critique secularism’s self-sufficiency: the notion that secularism can, or somehow has, overcome the contaminations of religion and is therefore above or immune to social critique advanced through the language of religious studies. Both Schaefer and Blankholm develop theoretical models that challenge the idea that secularity transcends religious modes of being in the world by making the secular/religious binary the theoretical conundrum at the heart of both books—including its staying power, its consequences, and its contradictions. On the other hand, both authors refuse the proposition that the category of religion can exhaust the secular, choosing instead to develop analytics that are uniquely suited, and respond to, the particular concerns of self-identifying secular thinkers and communities. The result of this approach is tentative, experimental, and yet
a passionate theoretical enterprise in which Blankholm and Schaefer find their voices as secular scholar-practitioners who defend secular commitments partly through their thorough critique of what Schaefer calls the “racialized reason” (24) of American secular culture. By taking a normative stance towards secular formations of world-making, these two books also probe the very boundaries and terms of American religion as a field, offering insights about the peculiar nature of American secular culture and the contributions that studying it might make to the broader field of religious studies.

Blankholm’s interventions are more explicitly embedded within an “American” context. The Secular Paradox is a thorough ethnographic exploration of organized secular culture in the contemporary United States. Blankholm aims to give readers an accurate sense of the organizations, players, and debates that structure the individual and collective lives of those most invested in the project of secularism. Blankholm skillfully narrates his visits to secular organizations such as the American Ethical Union, the Freedom from Religion Foundation, the American Humanist Association, and the Center for Inquiry. He recounts and quotes interviews with leaders and participants, and he describes the enactment of secular summits, trainings, and events. By capturing the central questions that animate these spaces, Blankholm makes the persuasive case that those who most invested in the secular as a redemptive negation of religion ultimately work to reproduce cultural forms that resemble and mimic religion itself (including performing rituals, debating sources of communal authority, and cultivating embodied and linguistic discipline). This is the experience of the secular paradox: the constitutive ambivalence of secular attempts at purging contemporary American life of religion, which emerge in spite of themselves as “surprisingly religion-like” (6).

Blankholm’s writing style throughout the book is crystal clear and could be easily followed by popular audiences and undergraduate students. His analysis shines in particular when he applies classic concepts in religious studies, such as the ritual theory of Catherine Bell (112–113) or the concepts of religious purity and pollution (5), to illustrate the everyday and pervasive workings of the secular paradox in shaping the emotional and intellectual lives of secular individuals and organizations. This attentive, on-the-ground analysis also allows Blankholm to give voice to the experiences of marginalization of “secular misfits” (3), the racialized subjects who are seen as carrying a religious and racial excess that limits their access to, and authority within, white secular spaces. Here the secular paradox—the persistence of religion, and in particular white Protestantism, in and through American secular culture—provides the avenue that allows Blankholm to critique the persistence of structural racism in secular communities. Black atheists, humanistic Jews, Hispanic nonbelievers, and secular Muslims
and ex-Muslims are among the misfits whose voices find a place in Blankholm’s book and help to complicate narratives of secular belonging, ritual, and community. Throughout this analysis, *The Secular Paradox* gives voice to a diverse cast of characters who can represent the increasing diversity of secular communities in the twenty-first-century United States and help to dispel views about secularism’s inherent whiteness and maleness.

Taking a markedly different approach from Blankholm’s ethnographic thick description, Schaefer’s *Wild Experiment* can be best understood as an interdisciplinary intellectual history of secular passion. Schaefer shows how embodied affect, as a form of power, has imbued and shaped secular commitments and moralities in over a century of European and Euro-American scientific thought. The premise of Schaefer’s analysis is the foundational insight, from the field of affect theory, that reason and feeling are inseparable. Even science—often imagined as the dispassionate pursuit par excellence—must be understood as passionate, one whose unfolding is always shot through with feeling. Schaefer uses this insight to show how the binary of secular reason and religious feeling is persistent in the history of secular thought, but also entirely fictitious: to understand secular thought, he argues, it is rather necessary to understand the passionate affects that sustain and shape secular ways of looking at the world.

To this end, Schaefer proposes “cogency theory,” which argues that feeling is central to knowing; we know ideas are true, in part, because they “click,” and this “we believe because it feels right” (20). Starting from this hypothesis, *Wild Experiment* unfolds as an excavation of cogency theory in a variety of contexts, spanning the fields of affect theory (chapter two), secularism studies (chapter three), and neurobiology (chapter four). Each chapter unearths cogency theory in a different field of knowledge that has influenced the intersection of secular thought and the philosophy of science. Here Schaefer gives astute re-readings of affect theorist Silvan Tomkins, sociologist Max Weber, and philosopher of science of Karl Polanyi, showing that inklings and tracings of cogency theory can be gleaned throughout their seminal interventions in these various fields. These theoretical pathways, while they are sometimes hard to follow, make cogency theory increasingly tangible and persuasive as the book progresses. As readers journey through Schaefer’s rendering of these theoretical debates, cogency theory starts to “click.”

In the second half of the book, Schaefer applies the theory’s insights to specific case studies, namely Darwin and Huxley’s racialized approach to evolutionary theory, the “secular circus” of the 1925 Scopes Trial, and New Atheist “conspiracism.” In these chapters, cogency becomes the key to interpretation through which Schaefer understands the shifting relationships among race, secularism, and US politics in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Cogency
theory allows Schaefer to theorize why some committed secularists, who espouse scientific rationality and shun purportedly irrational religious views of the world, instead perpetuate social biases and build them into the very foundations of secular thought. In particular, Schaefer targets New Atheist secularists who, like conspiracy theorists, reduce religion to a “simplex system” that provides easy answers to a complex problem. This reduction rests on racialized reasoning, particularly evident in its anti-Islamic iterations. Here the ambivalence at the heart of cogency theory—its capacity to inspire passionate search for scientific truth as well as to make the improbable feel probable—works marvelously to bring together disparate subjects of religious studies scholarship in one cohesive analysis. Schaefer’s treatment of New Atheism as conspiracy theory may retain the most staying power in religious studies classrooms, though Schafer’s review of early contributions to cogency theory should also be helpful to scholars with a particular interest in affect and Science and Technology Studies (STS). Key terms like “feeling of click” (36) and “simplex system” (24) will likely prove useful to anyone working at the intersection of American religion and politics as much as students of affect theory or STS.

Perhaps precisely because it is aimed at the field of STS and the history of science as much as scholars of religion, religion itself is conspicuously absent from Schaefer’s analytical toolkit. To neglect certain kinds of religious “clicks” (like the existence of God) in his analysis reads like a strategic and political choice on Schaefer’s part, and one that marks his book as aimed for an already secularized audience, committed to non-theistic modes of pursuing the “feeling of making contact with reality” (16). Schaefer explores secular affects in part by self-consciously reproducing them while maintaining a posture of humility, which he himself commends in the secular scientists and intellectuals he engages throughout the book. While its theoretical density might make Wild Experiment a challenging read for a broader public, Schaefer’s nuanced exploration of secular feelings also clarifies some of the epistemological and affective dimensions of the paradox Blankholm describes. For example, the secular’s resemblance to religion might produce a kind of “click” for secularists looking for a sense of belonging and community, but that very feeling of click might also elicit a sense displeasure at secularism’s resemblance to religion—a paradoxical feeling. Schaefer’s idea of cogency, then, can help to delve further into the felt and subtle dimensions of Blankholm’s secular subjects.

Partly because they are concerned with the reception of their books by secular audiences, both authors ultimately attempt to manage, direct, and even resolve the paradox. Blankholm chooses a more cautious format than Schaefer, slowly building his way towards the climax of his theoretical intervention, which comes in the last chapter. Here Blankholm makes a claim that may seem paradoxical to
secular people, but that will sound largely intuitive to most scholars of religion: that the secular is a (non)religious tradition in its own right, a way of constructing and living in the world that parallels and also draws upon, rather than transcend or negate, religious modes of doing the same. To bolster this argument, Blankholm turns to Talal Asad’s concept of “discursive tradition” (196). By positioning American secular culture as a discursive tradition, Blankholm leans into the creative and generative possibilities of secular thought that are created in the midst of its paradoxes. Under the rubric of a/theology, Blankholm envisions a form of ethical communal reasoning—a tradition—that is grounded in a rejection of theism. And while a/theology continues to inhabit the secular paradox of religion’s influence on the secular, at some level it is also the closest Blankholm gets to resolving the paradox by proposing independent ontological grounds for secular norms. Like Schaefer, Blankholm pushes the boundaries of religious studies through this intervention. Both authors defend and advance the moral authority of secular reason by critiquing its blind spots while recommitting to its overall project. As such, their careful and self-conscious redemption of secular reasoning in religious studies offers a nuanced counterpoint to disciplinary tendencies to either re-entrench normative secular assumptions or reject the secular altogether.

America looms large as an unproblematic absent-presence in both books. Both Schaefer and Blankholm take the US as the primary location for their study. Blankholm’s ethnographic locations are situated within the US, while Schaefer expands occasionally beyond, especially in his theoretical explorations, to incorporate larger debates in Western secular thought. If, however, America is not simply a geographic and social circumscription but rather an imperial formation that cannot be understood without reference to the asymmetries of power that characterize its modes of knowledge production and propagation, it becomes paramount for the study of American secular culture, even in its most lofty and idealized dimensions, to account for the felt and affective dimensions of empire and acknowledge them as integral to its development. Blankholm and Schaefer’s analyses gesture towards this task, especially when they stress the racialized dimensions of American secularism. Schaefer clearly states, for example, that “what feels like an unbiased and objective criticism of Islam, to New Atheists, is an affectively encrypted racial hierarchy” (203). By attending to the social consequences of secular norms and traditions, both authors demonstrate the necessity for a transnational analysis of secularism attentive to America’s colonial and imperial dynamics.

Overall, both works inaugurate a project of secular theorization that adds a distinctive and needed methodological angle to studies of the secular in North America, currently focused primarily on questions of governmentality. Further
research that responds to both the constructive and disciplinary dimensions of American secularism could continue to probe relationships of power among the “misfits” of the secular paradox, center the a/theological concerns of feminist and decolonial secular groups, or pave explorations of other geographic and historical sites. Read together, these two books raise significant questions about the normative commitments that imbue scholarship on American religions and define its scope, project, and relevance. Both books do this by experimenting with the implicit and explicit norms of secular culture and their entanglements with the discipline of religious studies. They are must-read for scholars of American religions and are sure to influence future scholarship in the field.