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A Swinging Pendulum and Future Possibilities

A Response to “Exploring the Secular Paradox”

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Abstract

This essay is the author’s response to a forum focused on *The Secular Paradox: On the Religiosity of the Not Religious* (Blankholm 2022), which was published in *Secular Studies* in December 2024. The essay has three parts. The first part summarizes *The Secular Paradox* as the author sees it today. It emphasizes the importance of taking the titular “paradox” seriously, as an ostensible contradiction rather than mere confusion. It also considers the persistent challenges we face when trying to study something paradoxical. Our language and concepts fail us, and *The Secular Paradox* diagnoses that failure. The second part summarizes the essays in the forum and engages with each of them to highlight their insights and draw attention to the important projects from which they’re drawn. The final part describes several future directions in the study of secularism, secularity, and secular people.

Keywords

paradox – secularism – atheism – nonreligion – nonbelievers – anthropology – sociology

1 Introduction

Thank you to Niels De Nutte for imagining and organizing the forum published late last year in *Secular Studies*, “Exploring the Secular Paradox” (De

Nutte 2024). Thanks also to John Shook for supporting the idea. De Nutte worked tirelessly to bring the forum's essays to publication, and he did so with great patience and care—all while finishing his dissertation (De Nutte 2025). I acknowledge his work here at the outset not only out of personal gratitude but also on behalf of our shared, eponymous field: secular studies. We remain nascent and siloed, so work like De Nutte's sustains us by keeping us in productive conversation. I'm grateful, too, to the anonymous reviewers who shared their valuable time and will never be named. We're fortunate to be in community.

De Nutte constructed the forum creatively, as a dialogue among scholars more than a set of responses to my book, *The Secular Paradox: On the Religiosity of the Not Religious* (Blankholm 2022). In that same spirit, my goals in this essay are to build on the forum's contributions and identify several promising new directions in secular studies. I've learned a great deal from reading my colleagues' essays, so I do my best to summarize their research accurately, with generosity.

This essay has three parts. In the first, I summarize *The Secular Paradox* as I see it today. I emphasize the importance of taking the titular "paradox" seriously, as an ostensible contradiction rather than mere confusion. I also consider the persistent challenges we face when trying to study something paradoxical. Our language and concepts fail us, and *The Secular Paradox* diagnoses that failure. In the second part, I summarize the essays in this forum and engage with each of them to highlight their insights and draw attention to the important projects from which they're drawn. In the final section, I describe some future directions in the study of secularism, secularity, and secular people.

2 Getting beyond a Paradox

When we study the secular, or even just think about it seriously, we face the same problems again and again. I wrote *The Secular Paradox* to help us understand why these issues keep coming up and why they're so hard to resolve. I want to free us to move past them. A paradox is an ostensible contradiction; it's not mere confusion, and it's not inherently bad. The secular paradox is the contradiction of being secular. By definition, "secular" means not religious. It's not a mere absence, however, because the secular is a tradition of its own. Atheism can help us think about this problem in an unexpected way. In early Christianity, the polytheistic Romans called Christians "atheists" because they denied the existence of their gods. Those same Christians called the Romans "atheists" because they denied the existence of the Christian God (Whitmarsh 2016).

Everyone's an "atheist" to someone's God or gods. Because atheism is a negative term, it only tells us what people don't believe. Calling Christians "atheists" tells us about their relationship to polytheism, but there's obviously more to Christianity than not believing in the Roman gods. There's more to being secular, too.

As an adjective for people, "secular" seems to tell us that they're not religious. As I show in *The Secular Paradox*, however, and as a whole field of scholarship is showing, secular people are not nothing (C. Campbell 1971; Asad 2003; Lee 2015; LeDrew 2015; Manning 2015). They have a distinctive culture that includes beliefs about knowledge and death (Blankholm et al. 2024). They have certain practices, even rituals, that feel authentic to those beliefs (Cimino and Smith 2015). They also have distinctive structures of feeling, (Schaefer 2018; Scheer, Fadil, and Johansen 2019; Schaefer 2022), and they've disciplined their senses in ways that, for example, foreclose the possibility that a bump in the night could ever be a ghost (Hirschkind 2011; Asad 2011). Secular culture has a history, and it has many varieties (Geroulanos 2010), so I call it a "discursive tradition" and dedicate one of the book's chapters to explaining why the secular makes more sense if we give it a positive half and pay attention to its internal differences and disputes (Asad 2009; Anjum 2007; Blankholm 2022).

Part of secular culture is having a negative relationship with religion and defining oneself against it. Even the most "religious" nonbelievers whom I spent time with during my field research felt this negative push. Secular distancing from religion often blinds us to the secular's presence because we want to refuse the reality of any aspect of secular culture that resembles religion. We feel like these resemblances are contradictions, but many aspects of any culture, including secular culture, can seem "religious" in one sense or another. If we think of the secular in only negative terms, we miss its positive contents. The secular can go unmarked and its particulars overlooked. This includes the particulars that secular people share with one another. Adopting an overly negative understanding of the secular means seeing only one of its two halves, which contradict one another. It means missing what actually binds secular people together. Though nonbelievers are something, they often feel like they're not anything, which is also how the world treats them most of the time. Living this paradox has real effects, which is what *The Secular Paradox* is about.

The book pairs two empirical explanations: one is ethnographic and proves the paradox by showing its effects, and the other is historical and explains its origins. Ethnographically, the book focuses on nonbelievers, so atheists, agnostics, humanists, freethinkers, and so on. These are secular people in a narrower sense than "not religious." They are not the "spiritual but not religious" (Mercadante 2014), and they are a smaller group than the religiously unaffiliated,

or the so-called “nones” (Burge 2021). Demographers combine three groups to make the “nones”: atheists, agnostics, and those who say they’re “nothing in particular.” The latter group is not a “group” in any meaningful sense and is deeply heterogeneous (Lim, MacGregor, and Putnam 2010). The “nones” include those who believe in God, those who pray, and those who believe in angels, ghosts, and demons. Even Christians who are so intensely religious that they think the term “religion” doesn’t properly capture the directness of their relationship with Christ are “nones” when they claim they don’t affiliate with any Christian tradition (Heft and Stets 2021). *The Secular Paradox* focuses on nonbelievers, so a subset of the religiously unaffiliated that usually shows up on surveys as “atheist” or “agnostic.” These are the people who are likely to identify as secular, and they’re the people that groups with “secular” in their name are trying to organize in the United States. They share many substantive traits, and they experience the secular paradox.

Unsurprisingly, nonbelievers—secular people—define themselves by their beliefs. Despite their non-, atheists, agnostics, and other kinds of nonbelievers actually share fundamental beliefs with one another. They hold a “worldview,” or belief system, in which a supernatural deity cannot be real in a literal sense (Scheitle and Corcoran 2020; Taves 2020). People who self-identify as “atheist” or “agnostic” in the United States tend to be exclusive empiricists who believe in mortal finitude. This means they prioritize the senses as the only valid source of knowledge, and they trust the scientific method to test what their senses perceive. Believing in mortal finitude means they consider death the final end of individual consciousness (Blankholm et al. 2024). These beliefs shape what they consider real and set the bounds of what’s meaningful to them. Researchers have shown that these beliefs are common among secular people in many places around the world (van Mulukom et al. 2023). Paradoxically, though nonbelievers are not supposed to have beliefs, they do.

It’s very likely that people who identify as atheist or agnostic are exclusive empiricists and believe in mortal finitude, and it’s also very likely that those who hold those beliefs identify as atheist or agnostic. This means that exclusive empiricism and mortal finitude are not just common among nonbelievers; they are distinctive *to* nonbelievers (Blankholm et al. 2024). Nonbelievers are also distinct in other ways, such as their leftist voting behavior and high levels of civic engagement in the U.S. (D.E. Campbell, Layman, and Green 2020; Burge 2023). In the most recent U.S. election, in November of 2024, 82% of atheists and 80% of agnostics voted for Kamala Harris. Though a clear majority, far fewer among those who say they are “nothing in particular” voted for Harris: just 64% (Grose 2024). By comparison 85% of white evangelical Christians voted for Donald Trump (PRRI Staff 2024).

Secular people often distinguish themselves based on belief-based criteria. For example, many of the people I spent time with consider themselves different from nonreligious people with New Age beliefs, who are rarely welcome in their secular communities (Blankholm 2022, 33–34). Courts in the United States have accepted this awkward reality since at least the 1960s. For legal purposes, they allow secular people to claim they have shared beliefs and a shared tradition, but they can also claim they have no beliefs and are not religious. Sometimes courts even allow nonbelievers to claim they are not religious and still receive the unique rights accorded to religious people in U.S. law (Blankholm 2018). Ever practical, the courts have created a working solution to the secular paradox without naming or theorizing it. Though legal regimes vary throughout the continent, nonbelievers have gained similar recognition in Europe (Tyssens, De Nutte, and Schröder 2024).

Belief is the central paradox for nonbelievers, but being secular also means being ambivalent toward other aspects of religion. Some nonbelievers form local communities with those who share their beliefs, while others feel that these groups are too much like religious congregations, and still others seek communities that emphasize values and goals that cut across ontological or epistemological distinctions (Stacey 2022). When nonbelievers mark major moments in their lives, like a wedding or the death of a loved one, they usually come up with “new” rituals that are authentic to their belief systems. These (re-)inventions often resemble secular rituals invented in earlier decades or even centuries (Schmidt 2021; Engelke 2015; Rejowska 2021), however, because they are growing from a shared secular culture, authentic to shared secular beliefs. Nonbelievers who were raised religious usually consider themselves to have deconverted when they become secular, though when some encounter humanism, they find who they already are in its beliefs and values. They realize that they have in fact converted to something. Sometimes nonbelievers even consider themselves “religious” (Kaplan 1958; Wine 1985; Altizer 1966; “Humanist Manifesto 1” 2019; Olds 1996).

The history of atheism explains how we ended up with the secular paradox. Ada Palmer and Alan Charles Kors have shown how a sense-based philosophy and way of life was preserved and developed in Christianity, within a Christian logic, especially after Renaissance humanists began recovering the texts of the ancient Epicurean and Skeptic schools (Palmer 2014; Kors 1992; 1990; 2016a; 2016b; Robert 2021). These Christians created arguments for atheism by drawing on these sources, which they defeated dialectically to prove the truth of Christianity’s God. As Kors shows most clearly, Christian theologians invented what we consider modern atheism from mostly Epicurean and some Skeptic parts, and there was atheism before there were avowed atheists (Kors 1990).

Eventually, the French materialists—Julien Offray de la Mettrie, Baron d'Holbach, and Denis Diderot, and others—began espousing modern atheism as their own. These materialists were among the first people to call themselves “atheist,” a term that had been an epithet meaning roughly “heretic” since its coinage in ancient Greece (Whitmarsh 2016). They appropriated it in a flip way, but by the middle of the nineteenth century, “atheist” and “atheism” had become recognized as self-descriptors, though not always accepted as ways of life (Holyoake 1871; Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann 2006; Edgell et al. 2016).

This history explains the secular paradox we experience today: within our current discursive conditions, which are deeply shaped by Christianity, adopting a term for “heretic,” or religion's other, remains the most legible way for a person to signal they live a sense-based way of life. Our broader culture is so Christian, and Christianity associates secular ways of life so much with heresy, that when secular people are writing, speaking, and thinking in European languages, they struggle to literally *be* anything more than heretical not-Christians. This is the secular paradox; it has a history and many effects.

Though the secular tradition was gestated within Christianity, Islam, and Judaism for many centuries, it has stood on its own—as a way of life with distinctive beliefs, practices, and institutions—since at least the early nineteenth century (Charlton 1963; Comte 1851; Post 1943; Warren 1943; Onfray 2007; Robert 2021; Stern 2018). The paradox forces hard questions on us: is atheism an ancient tradition, preserved by Christianity as its antithesis, and rearticulated in various modern ways? Or is it merely the denial of the existence of the Christian God, or any god, or the supernatural in general? The awkward social reality is that atheism is all of these things at once. Atheism is not believing in God *and* having a belief system in which God cannot be literally real.

Though we have concepts and language that can describe being secular without reference to religion, our discursive conditions will eventually drag any attempt to purify the secular back into Christianity's orbit, which is weakening but remains strong. It happens as soon as someone wants to get married, hold a memorial service, send their children to summer camp, or legally defend their right to be a conscientious objector. In general, I found that certain stages of life make belief-based distinctions more salient: higher education, marriage, the death of a loved one, raising children, and dying. These are times when it becomes clear that our basic, usually unspoken assumptions about knowledge and reality differ meaningfully from some of those around us. They are times when secular people differ substantively, but their difference is usually framed negatively.

The irony is that even the people who are trying hardest to free themselves from these conditions cannot. Many of the very secular people I spent time

with, whose lives I share in *The Secular Paradox*, are downright brilliant, and they're doing the best they can to be not religious. The more they dig into what they believe and how they behave, which helps them articulate their difference from the religious, the more they find they believe and behave in ways that they share with other secular people, which they've shared for centuries. Despite their efforts, they find again and again that within the conceptual framework we inherit, they are both not religious and part of a tradition that looks a lot like a religion. They cannot be secular without contradiction because it's paradoxical.

Calling a way of life a tradition can legitimize it. This is, after all, one of the criteria that U.S. courts use to determine whether a person's religious freedom is legitimate (Sullivan 2020). As I write near the end of *The Secular Paradox*, however, giving the secular its tradition cuts both ways: "Setting secular people in their tradition makes them one among many. It denies the eternity of our truth but provides us a place in the pantheon" (Blankholm 2022, 219). I shift to the third-person plural in that second sentence because I understand intimately the existential danger of the secular paradox. While some of the nonbelievers I spent time with consider themselves part of a freethinking or humanist tradition, every person I interviewed believes that science has given us undeniable, universal truths about the world. They do not consider the beliefs they hold to be merely one tradition's way of perceiving reality among others. In my intellectual labor, I understand that we have a history, that we are culturally situated and contingent, and that I disagree about many things with other secular people. But I can't shake the feeling in my everyday life that we're right; feeling right about secular beliefs is being secular. Our beliefs are not a creed, though Christians don't share a single creed, either, and they're part of the Christian tradition. We deserve the same recognition of both our tradition and its internal diversity, even though that recognition makes it hard to argue that reality is ours alone, despite our feelings (Connolly 2007).

I also recognize that many of us are secular at work even if we are privately religious. As I write in *The Secular Paradox* about the -ity suffix, "Christians inherit the Christian tradition, but even as a non-Christian, so do I. The secular tradition is no different. Just as there is Christianity, there is Christianism; just as there is secularism, there is secularity" (Blankholm 2022, 219). There are many ways to be secular, secularity's reach is broad, and the secular paradox generates much of the variety among secular people because it frames the debates we have amongst ourselves and with others. Though I don't think we can escape this paradox, we can relate to it differently once we're aware of it. Sharing that awareness is what *The Secular Paradox* tries to do.

3 The Secular Paradox in Global Conversation

The forum in *Secular Studies* that engages *The Secular Paradox* gathers a wide range of scholars from around the world, who take up my arguments and apply them to their own work. I'm grateful for the essays that read the book generously, and I respond as generously as I can to those that don't. These essays show the limits of the secular paradox's application, and they also show me where I wish I'd been clearer or repeated myself more. A paradox, after all, is by definition difficult to grasp, so it bears repeating. I take up the essays in the order they appear in the forum, which is to say, in alphabetical order by the author's last name.

M.G. Barathy's essay (2024) focuses on nineteenth-century anti-caste activist and writer Athipakkam Venkatachala Nayagar and his twentieth-century reception. Nayagar published in the journal of the Madras Secular Society, which operated in South India from 1878 to 1888. From his writings, Barathy identifies Nayagar as a deist who is anti-religious and anti-clerical. According to Barathy, Nayagar wrote two important texts: a prose work criticizing the exploitation of farmers who were members of the Vanniyar caste and a collection of poems condemning superstition in Hinduism. Barathy's essay shows how later activists and thinkers who interpret and reprint Nayagar's work have to wrestle with the secular paradox. Nayagar's anti-religiosity, his theism, and his caste identity all pose different challenges to the groups who want to canonize him. In the parlance of the twenty-first century U.S., Nayagar appears to be a "skeptic," since he is critical of superstition and not necessarily non-theistic (Blankholm 2022, 54), fitting into only the negative half of the secular.

The struggle over the "true" Nayagar is a wonderful example of the conflict I try to convey in the epilogue of *The Secular Paradox*, where I tell the story of the Helmet of Mambrino, from Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (Blankholm 2022, 221–224; Cervantes 2003). Is the secular religious or anti-religious? Is it a helmet or a barber's basin? Sancho's coinage of "basihelm" (*el baciyeľmo*) captures the secular's ambiguity as only a symbol can. Barathy's intersectional analysis of Nayagar's afterlives gives us an insightful case study for understanding how labels like "secular," "theistic," and "anti-religious" can be deployed strategically to support diverse political narratives. Their meanings and significance, as Barathy shows, depend on the specifics of cultural context.

Silvia Baldassarre's essay argues for legal "recognition of non-theistic religious freedom in both its individual and associated forms" (Baldassarre 2024, 122). I'm most interested in how Baldassarre concludes her essay. She suggests a simple fix to create legal equality between religious people and nonbelievers in Europe:

The semantic-legal misunderstanding could be avoided, for example, by overcoming the ambiguous qualification crystallised in [the phrase in] Article 17 TFEU [Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union] “philosophical and non-confessional organisations,” replacing it with a more inclusive qualification “organisations of conviction.”

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In *The Secular Paradox*, I suggest that the secular is “both a rejection of religion and a religion-like tradition of its own; each half can be concealed when its generative pendulum swings far enough in one direction or the other” (219). In Baldassarre’s recommendation, we should swing the pendulum all the way to religious inclusion, using “conviction” as the defining criterion of what makes a person or group “religious” or analogous and equivalent to “religion.” Others have suggested the concept of “worldview,” rather than “conviction,” which emphasizes differences in beliefs instead of the intensity with which they’re held (Hutchings, Benoit, and Shillitoe 2022; van Mulukom et al. 2023; McCrary 2022). In Baldassarre’s approach, everyone with a “conviction” is as good as “religious,” and the legal regime that protects the logic of religion, it seems, remains unchanged. We should ask, however: If “religion” is not actually special, and if everyone has a religion-like conviction, then why not protect what we’re calling “conviction” with other rights, such as freedom of speech or conscience (Sullivan 2007)? In other words, if religion isn’t special, then what’s the point of affording it special protections? Of course, many secular people—and many religious people—would reject this totalizing expansion of religion that can swallow up even its antithesis; they would deny that science’s claims about reality are merely a “conviction.” This is why the secular paradox is so strange and so generative. Those who refuse Baldassarre’s inclusion and declare the secular’s non-religiosity—and thus also religion’s specialness and its difference from the secular—swing the pendulum back the other way.

I learned an enormous amount from Marc Lebranchu’s essay (2024), which is a small piece of an impressive project that I hope to one day read as a monograph. Lebranchu draws some especially helpful distinctions when describing how people are “Taoist.” “Converts” to Taoism are few in number, ordained by Taoist institutions in China, and possess ritual knowledge and expertise. “Adepts” are a much larger group of people who have undergone a ceremony that initiates them into the lineage of a Taoist master, though their engagement with institutional Taoism is intermittent at most. “Sympathizers,” who are the largest group globally, identify with Taoism, perhaps after reading the *Tao Te Ching*, but do not practice it formally or institutionally. Adepts and sympathizers often participate in what Lebranchu calls “Western Taoism,” which

as he shows, bears a resemblance to paradoxically nonreligious secularism. He argues convincingly that this resemblance is a result of shared underlying conditions, which lead Western Taoists to borrow piecemeal from the Chinese Taoist tradition and strip it, strategically, of its cultural specificity and ostensibly “religious” dimensions. This allows them to make it appear “secular” or “spiritual” as needed, which is the same transformation that Barathy shows us with Nayagar’s afterlives and Ozbarlas shows us with New Age therapy (below). I hope Lebranchu and I will have an opportunity to engage one another’s work again in the future since we clearly share an analysis of what religion is and does in the modern world.

Carlos Nazario Mora Duro and Arturo Fitz Herbert’s essay (2024) focuses on the religiously unaffiliated in Latin America. Their essay affirms what I explain in the book and above: the secular paradox doesn’t apply to so-called “nones” as well as it does to atheists, agnostics, and other kinds of nonbelievers because “nones” are a larger and much more spiritually heterogenous “group.” I’m most grateful to Mora Duro and Herbert for introducing me to the work of Bolívar Echeverría. The authors are right that his concept of the “baroque” helps explain the uniqueness of Hispanic freethinkers and the ways they mis-fit the normative secular (Echeverría 2019).

Echeverría offers a critique of secular aesthetics that echoes the critique of a brilliant humanist activist I spent time with, whom I call Juan in the book. Here’s Juan explaining to the White leader of an atheist group in Los Angeles why more Hispanic people aren’t interested in attending the group’s events:

Religion is a culture as much as being Mexican is. We have to include a lot of culture when we reach out to the Latin community. We need people who communicate with culture. This culture in here looks a certain way. It’s the culture of white older people. It won’t feel like a cultural home to Hispanic people. There needs to be music, people handing over knowledge from old to young, color. You have to create a cultural environment. What elements would have to be included to provide a culture? You can’t just have jalapeños painted on the wall. There needs to be music, more color, an emotional connection. There needs to be a reading, some poetry, some homemade food—and not pizza like this. Kids need to be involved.

2022, 81

Juan also told me how much he loves “the symbol of the cross—not necessarily the Roman Catholic but the Celtic gothic cross”—and how much he misses wearing it now that he’s a committed humanist (2022, 83). Echeverría gives theoretical support to Juan’s aesthetic insight. He shows us that part of what Juan

recognizes as culturally Mexican is the baroque ethos, which developed in reaction to colonialism. Juan's aesthetics are *mestizo*:

More than by realizing a "creative copy" of European art or embellishing any imported style, the baroque first appeared and developed initially, in the Americas, as the lower and marginal classes of *mestizo* cities constructed a social ethos of their own during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. [...] This was a curious transgression that, while being radical, did not intend to contest Spanish rule. Based on an informal economic world whose informality took advantage of the formal economy's narrow limits, the baroque appeared in the Americas first as a strategy for survival, as a method of life spontaneously invented by that one-tenth of the indigenous population that was able to survive its sixteenth-century extermination and that had not been expelled to inhospitable regions.

2019, 133

Juan's baroque aesthetics subtly call out the lies of Spanish and secular supremacy. Echeverría helps us understand part of why Juan is so perceptive:

By discovering its own legitimacy, a necessity or "naturalness," in something so ungrounded, so contingent and even improvised, as a staged world, absolute theatricality [the baroque] attempts to reverse things, to approach the legitimacy of the real world as a questionable legitimacy. It discovers that this world is also essentially theatrical or staged, that it is also ultimately contingent and arbitrary.

2019, 133

Juan's observation that secular culture is often "the culture of white older people" is pointing out that the secular is culturally specific, contingent, and arbitrary, inasmuch as it's a product of history, so a product of particular times and places. As I write in the book, Juan taught me this insight. He "explained, gently and in few words, something I had observed but struggled to fully understand, much less articulate" (2022, 81). Juan's baroque ethos and his secularism are at odds; he is a secular misfit whose mis-fit can tell us much about the White Europeanness of the normative secular.

Nash's essay (2024) misreads *The Secular Paradox* but offers a wonderful counterpoint to Baldessarre's simple solution. I take the core of Nash's misreading to be that I've written a critique of secularism that impugns secular people as self-contradictory. Through the voices of historical freethinkers, Nash ventriloquizes contradictions in the text of the Bible and argues for the log-

ical superiority of secularism. In his concluding paragraphs, he suggests, pace Jacques Derrida (2002), that in the world we live in today, anyone can simply be free of Christian language and assumptions if they choose. He also suggests that young people who reap the benefits of secularization are unappreciative and complacent in the face of encroaching religious and spiritual dangers. How can we argue against Nash's truisms? Might they be the negative half of the secular paradox? Can we grasp its other half and trace the history of a tradition that makes his truisms feel true? Perhaps reading all of *The Secular Paradox* would help answer these questions. ˘(˘)˘

Zeynep Ozbarlas's excellent essay (Ozbarlas 2024), which draws from her larger dissertation research, is an ethnographic study of Family Constellation Therapy (FCT) in Turkey. FCT is based in New Age spirituality, so Ozbarlas's study focuses on people on the other side of the "woo-woo line," to use the terminology of a humanist leader whom I spent a lot of time with (Blankholm 2022, 33). Historians like Catherine Albanese have shown that New Age beliefs and practices are grounded in what Albanese calls metaphysical religion (Albanese 2007; Bender 2010), though the tradition has many names among scholars and practitioners, such as harmonial religion (Ahlstrom 1972), spirituality (Schmidt 2005), spiritual monism (Weir 2012), and esotericism (Haneegraaff 1998; Finley, Guillory, and Page Jr. 2014). The metaphysical tradition is distinct from the secular discursive tradition that I identify in *The Secular Paradox*, but the two overlap within a particular notion of "secularism," as other scholars have observed (Asprem 2018; Josephson-Storm 2017; Farman 2020; Modern 2021). Ozbarlas explores this overlap with great insight by observing how those who practice FCT embrace scientific discourse to legitimize themselves, mask their spirituality, and criticize Islam as superstitious. In doing so, they participate in a global New Age economy that scholars have skillfully critiqued (Crockford 2021; Jain 2020). Ozbarlas's broad conception of "secularism" indexes political liberalism and secular governance more than it does the sense-based tradition that I mean by the term, though to Ozbarlas's credit, anthropologist Talal Asad has argued, pace Saba Mahmood (Mahmood 2016), that the two are inseparable (Asad 2003; 2018). I look forward to learning more from Ozbarlas in the coming years.

Alexandros Sakellariou's well-written essay (Sakellariou 2024) is based on nearly sixty interviews he conducted with Greek atheists. Sakellariou draws a sharp distinction between atheists who are part of a group for atheists, such as the Atheist Union of Greece, and those who are not. This is why he argues for a "lived atheism" approach to the study of secular people, which adapts the "lived religion" approach pioneered in the study of religion (Hall 1997). As sociologist Nancy Ammerman observes, scholars who embrace a "lived reli-

gion” approach tend to emphasize practices over beliefs to correct the biases of belief- and clergy-centered studies of religion. In doing so, they sometimes ignore beliefs and institutionalized religion altogether (Ammerman 2016). I agree with Ammerman, who finds much to praise in “lived religion,” but warns that it can lead scholars of religion “to drift toward an individualist approach, as if each person is operating alone or in newly invented groups” (Ammerman 2021, 7). A “lived atheism” approach falls into this trap more easily because it takes at face value most nonbelievers’ claims that they don’t have beliefs, despite growing evidence that ostensibly negative identities like atheist and agnostic are labels people use to express that they believe in secular worldviews that include exclusive empiricism and mortal finitude (Blankholm et al. 2024; van Mulukom et al. 2023). I agree strongly with Sakellariou that attending to secular practices is important, and fieldwork, in addition to interviews, is clearly the best way to study those practices. If we overlook affirmative beliefs, we conceal the secular paradox yet again by swinging its pendulum to the secular’s negative half.

4 A Pervading Paradox

Too often scholars treat ethnographies as if they’re small, non-representative samples of an idiosyncratic target population. I can only guess how little use this sort of positivism has for philosophy or literary criticism, much less actual literature. Anthropologists, to their great credit, tend to read more humanistically, and they recognize that ethnographies are often descriptively rich, theoretically sophisticated analyses that capture nuances of life that cannot be reduced to disambiguated variables in a spreadsheet. Reading ethnography in this second way requires a generous dialogue between author and reader, in which the reader considers whether the insights the author offers can apply to other parts of the world beyond that particular ethnography’s scope. I’m grateful that many of the essays in the forum on *The Secular Paradox* have engaged in this generous dialogue. Among scholars, especially in a subfield like secular studies, it’s a gift.

Despite our collective efforts, many aspects of the secular remain understudied. By outlining the lines of inquiry I’m about to share, I hope they spark some interest, so that we might take them up together, in conversation. They are what I consider the horizons of my thought, its very edges. It would take lifetimes to reach every edge, so I see no point in coveting these thoughts. Scholarship, after all, is for sharing. I commit myself and its erasure to our collective endeavor.

The secular's flat literalism so saturates scholarly research that a symbol like Sancho's "basihelm" is nearly inscrutable. Émile Durkheim saw this clearly, as a careful analysis of "symbol" and "metaphor" in *The Elements of Religious Life* would surely show (1995). Secular semiotic ideologies are distinct, though they bear some resemblance to Protestant semiotics (Keane 2011). Despite helpful starting points (Asad 2018; Harding 2019; 2020), how secular people assume language relates to the world and the implications of this relation remain almost entirely unexplored. I look forward to seeing more work in this area, and I suspect it will be anthropologists who take it up, since they've thus far pioneered it.

Though I touch on secular aesthetics at various points in *The Secular Paradox*, I don't sustain a focus, which is a shame. Only the book's index hints at such connections, with its entries on laughter, jokes, and feelings. As I hope I've shown in my return to Juan's deep and provocative insights above, we have much to learn from a study of not only what looks good to secular people, but also what tastes good, sounds good, and feels good. Of course since being secular is also being not-religious, it'll be important to consider what doesn't look, taste, sound, or feel good, too, which is to say, what seems too aesthetically religious. For white secular people in the U.S., this often means the baroque. The irony of the secular being a sense-based tradition and there being so little focus on secular aesthetics is not lost on me and makes the subject all the more ripe for investigation. I'm grateful to scholars like Donovan Schaefer, as well as a range of anthropologists, who've already taken the aesthetics of secular discourse seriously (Hirschkind 2011; Asad 2011; Schaefer 2014a; 2014b; 2018; 2022; Scheer, Fadil, and Johansen 2019). Their work has provided a strong foundation.

The secularity of our scholarship is a touchy subject as we argue with one another about what counts as evidence (Orsi 2018; Kripal 2022). I hope that by considering the secular a discursive tradition we can at least get a hold of ourselves and begin to think through the implications for academic culture, which in many ways reflects secular culture and its history. I worry about overly conspiratorial readings of that history, which consider it the plot of a few rather than a global sea change in feeling (Smith 2003), though of course secular leftists sometimes do the same when writing on the deep influence of Christianity (see Rolsky 2019). These questions also apply to law, which usually resists ambiguity, to a gullibly literalist fault (Crapanzano 2001). I often wonder, for instance, if the empirical isn't the most reasonable ground for collective agreement simply because it's what we all share and not because it's the only truth. Perhaps these are dangerous horizons, so we should tread carefully.

The global reach of secular discourse has been documented and critiqued, though the scholarship tracing secularity's diffusion doesn't usually focus on the sense-based tradition. With sophisticated and notable exceptions (Quack

2011; Binder 2020), scholars have operated as if “liberalism” is a regime of governance that is coincident with “secularism,” despite the confusion this clumsy equivalence leads to and the non-liberal forms of secularism it occludes (Smolkin 2018; Weir 2024). That Karl Marx wrote his dissertation on the ancient atomism of Epicurus and Democritus, and that his revision of the sense-based tradition, his materialism (Blankholm 2020), has had a massive global impact on the many things we now call “secularism” remains largely overlooked. I look forward, especially, to more scholarship in English that examines the sense-based tradition’s impact on China, where I’m told by colleagues a robust body of thought already exists in Chinese.

This is a brief list, and many edges remain on the horizon. My thanks again to Niels De Nutte for giving me the occasion to revisit *The Secular Paradox* and do so in conversation with a wonderful collection of essays. Thanks again to the authors of those essays, who have taught me a lot. And thank you to the community of scholars who have created and sustain secular studies for giving me an intellectual home in which to learn, think, and work. I know many of us are grateful.

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