

Book Review

***The Secular Paradox: On the Religiosity of the Non-Religious.* By Joseph Blankholm. New York: New York University Press, 2022. 312 pp. ISBN: 9781479809509. \$89 hardcover, \$32 paperback, \$17.60 eBook.**



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Religious identity is a difficult thing to talk about. As many scholars of religion have argued, it is often highly contingent on historical, geographical, and cultural factors, requiring the individual to parse it out on their own. The author of *The Secular Paradox* follows in this intellectual heritage to argue that this is no less true for the secular person as well. The text argues that secular people find themselves in a paradox that marks who they are and how they understand their own (non)religious identity while constantly under the pressures of religion. The secular paradox is a tension between avoiding religion while embracing something quite religion-like. Blankholm argues this is what all secular people share, and it influences nearly all aspects of life. How can one be nonreligious without the language of religion? Has religion's influence contaminated everything? How does one respond to another's sneeze in a way that is unburdened by religion's presence? Blankholm's text introduces secular individuals who wrestle with the tension of the secular paradox, negotiating in many different—often competing—ways with the persistence of religion's influence.

As an ethnographic study of those who identify as secular, much of the argument unfolds through the words and experiences of Blankholm's participants, nearly all of whom are located in the US and described as *organized* nonbelievers. The author chose to delimit the scope of participation to those who organize or participate in nonbelieving communities in order to capture, as he describes, “the strangeness of the secular-religious until I managed to make sense of it” (16). The book is structured by five topical chapters exploring the ways in which secular people negotiate their secular identity while simultaneously resisting, adapting, co-opting, or perhaps embracing (to an extent) religion. These topics are belief, community, ritual, conversion, and tradition, all of which contribute to the secular paradox in different yet equally important ways in the lives of these organized nonbelievers.

At the core of the struggle induced by the secular paradox is both the limits of language and pressures of identifying the boundaries of religiousness. These two factors often overlap, or perhaps compound each another, as secular people describe their experience negotiating their secular identity. Concerning the former, each chapter includes conversations surrounding the difficulty of identity. This is particularly true of the chapter on belief, which details the many labels by which secular people identify to capture their intellectual and, sometimes, ethical

commitments, including freethinker, humanist, secular, agnostic, or atheist—although the author notes that no participant identifies fully with only one descriptor. Beliefs, Blankholm finds, are often implicit among these individuals, but become clearer when another appears to cross the line into territory deemed too religious by the community. Words can only do so much; but when they begin to signal religion, secular people are much more aware of the baggage their language carries.

Concerning the boundaries of religiosity, there is rich discussion around the role of ethics among nonbelievers. In the second chapter, covering community, the author spends considerable time on the history of the so-called “atheist church” movement in the UK and US, from the Sunday Assembly to the Ethical Community, or smaller, local meetups for nonbelievers in public spaces such as public parks in Brooklyn, New York, that began after the more traditional models failed. A persistent problem among this population is found in both their struggle to gain respect from others in their social circles, as well as the difficulty in meeting others who have experienced the same transition to nonbelief. This is especially true among non-white, non-Christian nonbelievers, who include Humanistic Jews, Hispanic nonbelievers, Black atheists, and secular Muslims. In Blankholm’s words, “[i]n their struggles to become legible and to carve out new ways of being secular, they are the exceptions that prove the rule...These secular subgroups are inventing new ways of being secular that are literally changing what secularism is and can be” (101).

In the illuminating chapter on conversion, Blankholm describes a conversation between three atheists who wonder together if resistance to racism is an inherent concern of atheism, or if such a concern is wholly outside of its scope in order to probe an important question about the secular experience: does one choose the secular worldview, or does it simply happen? Answering this question raises others concerning secular ethics, including the one presented above. In the author’s words, “[c]onversion both is and is not a secular problem” (148). Identifying the many concerns, questions, and struggles of secular people in how they negotiate the boundaries of religion is an ongoing effort among this population. These problems might be beyond solving, but the conversations, presentations, and lectures will certainly continue to try.

The conclusion makes a final argument that is laid out from the beginning yet goes unnamed throughout, supported *de facto* in each chapter, viz., that the secular is in fact a religious tradition. In the same way that Christianity’s current runs through society, affecting far more than only Christians—an oft-cited argument throughout this text—Blankholm argues that the secular tradition does the same. In his words, “the secular tradition imbricates all of us in secularity, even if we are not all followers of secularism” (219). I agree with Blankholm that this is the book’s most controversial claim. However, it is certainly a well-supported one that deserves continued scholarly attention.

While the organization and framing of the argument are largely compelling, the book leaves me with some room for wanting. It is interesting that each of the individuals we meet throughout the book were raised in a religious tradition—predominantly Christianity, Judaism, or Islam—which raises the question: is the secular paradox unique to those secular people who have decided to leave a religion with which they were raised? Secular people who were raised secular are noticeably absent in the text. Do those who were raised and remain secular experience this paradox in the same way? The absence of such secular people is difficult to

ignore, as it highlights the significant assumption that all secular people perceive the influence of religion in a deeply personal way. Perhaps their perspective would challenge the claims made about the secular paradox throughout the book.

I am also left thinking about the terminology Blankholm uses to describe this paradox. The author frequently references the fact that secular people are striving for a life that is markedly non-religious while frequently doing so in ways that are remarkably religion-like. For a text concerned with secular and its variations—*secularism*, *secularization*, *secularity*—it is interesting that there is virtually no attention paid to the *post*-secular, which, as philosophers such as Jürgen Habermas and Ola Sigurdson have articulated, appears to capture precisely this idea. This is paradigmatic in statements such as one found in the conclusion: “the relationship among [multiple] traditions is being reconfigured, and new hybrid forms are emerging” (218). Such hybrid engagement between traditions is precisely what the post-secular hopes to capture. Though it is not named either by the author nor the participants (so far as readers can tell), attention to this conversation could provide another potential avenue for understanding this tension that is rooted in a continuing intellectual history.

Overall, *The Secular Paradox* provides a unique and valuable perspective on secular people and communities in the US. Beyond theorization or simple observation, the stories, experiences, questions, and contributions provided by Blankholm’s participants give a rich and textured voice to secular people who want to experience something like religion without the burden of religion. Whether or not one agrees with the author that the secular is itself a tradition alongside those such as Christianity or Islam—and I suspect even many of those we meet in the book would not—Blankholm offers a compelling case that ought to be of interest to any scholar of religion and secularity.

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