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On the (un)doing of anthropology and secularity, and its relevance for religious studies

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ABSTRACT


This essay is a response to the inquiries and discussions of ‘anthropology’s secular conditioning’ that Khaled Furani, Joel Robbins, Jonathan Boyarin, Matthew Engelke, Richard Handler, Elayne Oliphant, and Eduardo Dullo initiate in this thematic issue of *Religion*. I focus on the moves that constitute anthropology and secularity. Whereas I endorse the grounded approaches that Boyarin, Engelke, Handler, Oliphant, and Dullo represent, and their highlighting of ambiguities and complexities in practices of anthropology and secularity, I am critical of Furani and Robbins’ attempt at ‘moving outside the secular condition’ by turning anthropology into an attitude in which openness to the divine appears vital. Historically, the religion/secular binary is intrinsic not only to a Christian conditioning of Western scholarship but also to political and popular practices that have materialized across the world. To me, therefore, doing religion does not seem like a credible way of undoing anthropology’s secular conditioning.

KEYWORDS

Anthropology; secularity; religious studies; scholarly moves

As I see them, anthropology and secularity are both made of the moves their practitioners make. Anthropologists proceed primarily with method in mind, usually combinations of fieldwork, reading, and analytical writing, pursuing questions about the forms and conditions of human life. They enact a discipline that aims at opening oneself up to the Other, by temporarily embracing the latter’s ways, and coupling the insights thus gained with the latest of scholarly theories, for the sake of personal, academic, public, and sometimes governmental or corporative understandings of cultural diversity, social complexity, and human variability. In stark contrast, the moves that constitute secularity are about identifying, distancing oneself from, and disqualifying certain forms of otherness: in particular religious practices and postulates, and the supernatural subjects, objects, and relations that they invoke. Disciplining themselves, others, and the world in specific settings, secularists suspend the validity of epistemological claims and ontological observations that do not come across as rational or natural to them.

What, then, are the relations between doing anthropology and doing secularity? Or between being an anthropologist and being a secularist? These big questions are at the heart of the reflexive essays written by Jonathan Boyarin, Matthew Engelke, Richard

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Handler, Elayne Oliphant, and Eduardo Dullo for this thematic issue of *Religion*. Preceding them is a visionary introduction penned by Khaled Furani and Joel Robbins, the guest editors, inviting readers to reimagine anthropology as a holistic practice of life beyond secularity. Let me comment on the essays first and return to some of the problems of the introduction afterwards.

The authors of the essays are pondering how, when, and why anthropologists (like themselves, and comparable scholars) are (or should be) secularists (or not). They explore discrete cases and develop their ideas in dialogue with different interlocutors. Calling attention to intersecting aspects of a theme that is too large to cover by any researcher or publication alone, they are offering grounded interpretations and raising challenges that deserve debate. There is a fruitful fluctuation of perspectives even within their essays, a drift of doubt that drives the inquiries, forbidding them from becoming straightforward, generating more questions than answers, emphasizing intriguing tensions instead of easy solutions. Anthropology and secularity are anything but exact sciences – and it is hard to isolate properly the lived exchanges that in each instance make up each one of them. In this mix and flux of anthropological considerations and positions, there is a lot at stake also for religious studies, the field or discipline that I trained in and now teach.

Above all, we must acknowledge the openness that Boyarin (2021) demonstrates with regard to the entanglement of personal and professional commitments, the conflation of private life, community participation, and academic work, and the connection between immersion, attachment, and analytical edge. He offers vital insights into the complexity of long research processes and the blend of bewilderedness and lucidity that they often set off. The display of such honest introspection is more common in anthropological writing than in texts from religious studies and other neighbouring fields. I think there are valuable things to learn from the ways in which anthropologists practice transparency and reflect on their generative involvement with whomever and whatever they are studying, including their partial and often hesitant submission to the demands and structures of traditions beyond their own discipline, something that serious fieldwork sometimes requires. Boyarin's brilliant essay about his own relations in and beyond a yeshiva on the Lower East Side of New York City is a masterclass – a careful study of how to study with an open mind and awareness of both the contingencies and the continuities of bodies: his own, those of other persons, those of communities, those of institutions, and those of knowledges.

There are numerous reasons for being envious of the freedom or privilege that anthropologists have when it comes to conceptualizing the subjects, objects, and relations that they target in their professional practice. Especially at the early stages of their investigations, they often seem perfectly okay with not being sure about what the main thing they focus on is. Of course, in practice, such uncertainties affect researchers in all fields. Yet we handle them differently. Students in anthropology zoom in otherwise than students in religious studies. Although hegemonic languages and customary categorizations restrain their options (it is, for example, difficult to pass exams and peer reviews without drawing on a vocabulary that professors will recognize as the tools of the trade), in principle, anthropologists can grasp or translate their findings with the concepts that they deem most enlightening. In comparison, in religious studies, we are trained to look for and at religion specifically, manoeuvres

which require that we translate at least some of our findings into religion. Moreover, we are taught to treat almost all other matters (everything we translate in other directions) as mostly secondary (and secular). Religious studies is thus not only conceptually but also technically bounded in ways that anthropology is not.¹ While religious studies seems unable to escape the religion/secular binary because of this basic way in which the discipline is set up, anthropology may at first glance appear to be in a better position to free itself from the predicament of religion and secularity – unless the moves that in practice constitute both or either one are fundamental also for anthropology.

In my reading of them, the authors of the individual essays and the authors of the introduction differ on this crucial point. The guest editors portray secularity as an obstacle that can be overcome, whereas the case studies indicate that anthropology may be contingent on moves that engender secularity as long as the discipline is to remain distinguished from theology and philosophy, and consist of more than first-hand reporting of experiences and ideas that large parts of the public will recognize as religious or superstitious. Yet, as Engelke (2021) observes, the secular conditioning of anthropology and related human sciences is neither given nor predetermined when it comes to its forms and locations, since it is almost always embedded in explorations of cultural and historical specificities. In his elegant essay, he identifies critical passages in two outstanding books from death studies, where the authors, one anthropologist and one historian, in their descriptions of the dead, let their own emotions and metaphysical ideas spill into their texts, breaking with the bulk of their work throughout which they come across as relatively sober secularists. When their awe of the dead body makes them speak of enchantment and shift to religious or near-religious rhetorical registers, in those passages they transgress longstanding rules of anthropology and history. Such moments and moves, which open windows to transcendent matters, are not at all unheard-of in the human sciences. According to Engelke, they are actually on the rise, and increasingly acclaimed, for example among advocates of an ontological turn who aim to take seriously other modes of being and the existence of multiple worlds.

I think it is symptomatic of a fundamental difference between the disciplines that the debates about ontologies and affect, which for a while were so hot in anthropology, have not been met with the same enthusiasm within religious studies. Apart from a few significant exceptions (Arkotong Longkumer [2016, 2018, 2020], for example, has original and interesting perspectives), scattered sceptical comments are mainly what I have heard in my vicinity. Among most of my colleagues, 'letting ghosts be ghosts', as Engelke puts it in his final headline, is tantamount to trying hard to keep such beings away from interference in our own analytical actions. In my opinion, this secularist move or stance should incite us to follow Engelke's example and pay closer attention to the radical moves that otherwise hard-nosed colleagues make in the odd moments when they partner up with ghosts, gods, spirits, or comparable beings to animate bodies, things, and worlds that they study. Instead of rejecting them up front as religious deviations that are irrelevant to

¹In departments of religious studies, students who come back from their first fieldwork with their notebooks full, but without mentioning religion or anything that their tutors will associate with religion, are likely to be asked to look again at their material and search it more closely for religion. Alternatively, they might be advised to switch to anthropology. If they do not take such advice, they will run the risk of having their work rejected. For the record: I find this unfortunate.

serious scholarship, or letting them pass unnoticed as if they were simply unfortunate slips, we might actually benefit from taking longer looks at the metaphysical digressions that our colleagues across disciplines make. The purpose should not only be to critique their scholarship (although that too), but mainly to search for a better understanding of the contingencies of the secular conditioning of religious studies and its concurrences or conflicts with other disciplines. Because this is about much more than a simple border issue that we have with theology.

Both Handler (2021) and Oliphant (2021) underscore that the concept of the secular or secularity, including the distinctions that it enables, is a product and tool of politics that, regardless of how sophisticated its uses may be, fits imperfectly in the fixtures and flows of the lives of most persons, communities, and institutions. This insight is far from new, as Handler shows in his exemplary essay on Alexis de Tocqueville (1805–1859) and Louis Dumont (1911–1998) and some of the things they have taught him about social science and social orders, including ideas about divine order. Oliphant's frank description of the puzzlement that overtook her after an academic encounter with a theologian, and the deliberations that this triggered, which have brought her to consider what anthropology can learn from political theology and what the differences between these two approaches are, also testifies to how secularity's limitations is a recurring topic, irresolvable once and for all. Like Handler (and Tocqueville), she finds in theology creative and challenging perspectives that are interesting and relevant for anthropologists (and for other scholars in the humanities and social sciences), but, again like Handler (and Tocqueville), she stops short of turning anthropology and political science into theology (and vice versa).

Theology may be a great source of inspiration or contrast for theorizing. Oliphant finds that in political theology's critical engagement with discrimination and violence, and Handler finds it in Tocqueville's comparisons of social and divine orders. To empirical studies, however, theology has less to offer, as it tends to eschew, flatten, or consume the complexity of the material, to make it fit in its own framework. Christian theologians are experts at translating the unexpected and strange into familiar Christian terms and practices – and at translating Christian doctrines into indigenous concepts and customs wherever they come across them. The basic ways in which theologians and anthropologists treat difference and similarity are not the same, Oliphant observes. Their tactics of translation and interpretation diverge. According to Oliphant, theology has developed a habit of foreclosing difference and presuming similarity – even universality – in moments and places where anthropology should insist on keeping possibilities of ontological pluralities open. This is especially the case in analyses of Christianity, she claims, and nowhere more apparent and urgent than in the accounts of the events that have unfolded from 1492 onward in America. Handler's reading of Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* leads him, too, to note how the constitutions of socio-political and theo-political orders differ fundamentally, even if many of the moves that make them – practical relations between people, abstractions, the construction of common objects, and allegiances – overlap and, ideally, keep each other in check. His (and Tocqueville's) thinking of the relationship between social sciences and theology seems reflected in this observation.²

²Another reflection, which is hard to avoid seeing, and whose effect is enhanced by not being made explicit in their essays, is of course the domestic political situation in which Handler and Oliphant, two Americans, have been writing. Their essays beg to be read also as comments on current conflicts in American societies.

As I have been reading these essays, and as I have read other anthropologists' writings on comparable topics, I have kept wondering why the references to work in religious studies are so scarce, when so much has been said about relevant matters by some of my colleagues. Why do anthropologists prefer to turn to theologians for sharper tools when they want to scrutinize the secular conditioning of their own discipline and gain a better understanding of more-than-secular practices in the worlds and works they study? I am not saying that they should not do that, as I too think there are things to learn from interacting with theologians, but why this strong imbalance, as if theologians were the sole experts on that-which-secularists-cancel, apart from the anthropologists themselves? I have already stressed how religious studies would benefit from engaging more with anthropology, and anthropology could certainly also benefit from approaching religious studies more frequently. With four entries, Oliphant is the one who refers to most scholars from religious studies in her essay (David Chidester, Kathryn Lofton, Birgit Meyer, and Winnifred Fallers Sullivan). Dullo refers to two (Tomoko Masuzawa and Birgit Meyer), as does Engelke (Jason Ānanda Josephson Storm and Birgit Meyer). While Boyarin mentions his own brother (Daniel Boyarin), Handler cites nobody who I recognize as a representative of my discipline. Of course, this might be partly due to the particularities of their case studies. It is more curious that Furani and Robbins, in their introduction, assumingly giving an overview of the field, do not mention anyone from religious studies except Birgit Meyer (who trained, has held a position, and is equally known as an anthropologist).³ What about the outstanding and highly relevant work of scholars like Jonathan Z. Smith (2004), Bruce Lincoln (1996, 1999), Timothy Fitzgerald (2000, 2006), Daniel Dubuisson (1998), Robert A. Yelle (2019), Elizabeth Shakman Hurd (2015), Paul Christopher Johnson (2018, 2021), Pamela E. Klassen (2018), Markus Dressler (2013, 2019), and Arvind-Pal S. Mandair (2009)? Many other names and references could have been added here.

Among the case studies, Dullo's (2021) focus most unambiguously on what anthropologists themselves do when they are defining religion and practicing social analysis. He, too, emphasizes that anthropology's secularity is not fixed, but rather fluid as it plays out as part of historical events and processes. Writing from Brazil, he pertinently points out that the anthropology and secularity under discussion here are the hegemonic Euro-American and mainly anglophone variants, and not any asymmetrically situated aspirant or substitute from elsewhere speaking a different dialect. The two modalities that he distils from this admittedly multifarious field of practice, and names 'extinction' and 'captivity', are good to think with and highlight key aspects of what he promises to show us: How 'the discipline's engagement with alterities that dispute our ontological secular conceptions makes evident its form of knowledge production' (Dullo 2021). In both modalities, Dullo declares, anthropologists have been good at tricking themselves and their Euro-American audiences into believing that their secularity represents a natural human condition. Other societies might constitute themselves and the natures and cultures of things differently, Dullo continues, echoing other voices from Brazilian anthropology, but to realize this we must first recognize the immanent and changing character of our own discipline's secularity.

³Furani and Robbins refer to the work of Bradley Onishi (2018) and Tyler Roberts (2013) as representing religious studies, thus assuming that philosophy of religion is part of religious studies.

I find Dullo's perspectives very interesting for three interdisciplinary research projects that I am involved in, and he might find it interesting to take a closer look at each of them. 'Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities' is a huge long-running project led by Monika Wohlrab-Sahr and Christoph Kleine from Leipzig University, whose ambition it is to investigate 'forms and arrangements of differentiation between religious and other social spheres, practices, interpretive frameworks, institutions and discourses in different eras and regions' – forms and arrangements of anthropology included.⁴ The second project is titled 'Bodies in Translation: Science, Knowledge and Sustainability in Cultural Translation' and is organized by John Ødemark from the University of Oslo. It scrutinizes a spectrum of practices of translation that includes actors, moves, and settings that overlap with Dullo's two modalities and the times and spaces in which he finds them.⁵ The third project is called 'The Governmateriality of Indigenous Religions', or GOVMAT, and is coordinated by me from UiT The Arctic University of Norway and the University of Bergen. Over the coming years, we will explore how materializations of indigeneity and religion emerge in different settings to take part in 'cosmopolitics' (cf. Stengers 2005; Latour 2004; de la Cadena 2010, 2015), settings in which scholars may play conspicuous roles.⁶ Reading Dullo's essay has helped me think clearer about moves and modalities that we should look for in these three projects. In fact, I recommend that all ongoing projects in religious studies assign a session of their reading group to discuss how Dullo's observations relate (or not) to what they are doing.

Finally, much could be said about the introduction that Furani and Robbins provide. Most critical, from my point of view: It does not do justice to the essays. It kidnaps them and holds them hostage for a cause that they do not necessarily share. According to the two guest editors,

the essays in this thematic collection ultimately pursue a discernment. They aim to discern that which conditions the anthropological intellect into being mostly an academic discourse vastly severed from the fullness of a life-attitude: an attitude to living the full presence of life, where everything connects with everything else. No fieldwork 'elsewhere,' as crucial as it is in other respects, is inherently required to find this life-attitude. Travel within, and not away, suffices to recognize our essential 'relationality' as humans and as scholars who study humans and more. (Furani and Robbins 2021)

Alternatively:

Attentiveness to our secular conditioning essentially involves a concern with orders of truth and with the kinds of life that the modern academic discipline of anthropology allows and disallows to fall within the regimented activity of its reasoning, as distinct from say prophetic or poetic reasoning. More specifically, this attentiveness arrives as an exercise, however fragile, to perfect reasoning by moving past contingent divisions or blinding tensions, towards an intellect whose oneness with life's totality is fully lived out, not merely professed by professionals. The objective therefore lies even beyond developing a discursive refusal of

⁴The quotation is from the front page of the Multiple Secularities webpage, where much more information about the project, its findings, and the directions in which it is heading can be found: <https://www.multiple-secularities.de/>. See also Kleine and Wohlrab-Sahr (2021), and Dressler (2019).

⁵For more about Bodies in Translation, see the project webpage: <https://www.hf.uio.no/ikos/english/research/projects/bodies-in-translation-science-knowledge-and-sustai/index.html>.

⁶Visit the GOVMAT webpage for a fuller presentation of the project and the perspectives it starts out with: <https://en.uit.no/project/govmat>.

the separation between being and cognition. It lies in allowing anthropology to reemerge as an attitude of life. (Furani and Robbins 2021)

To me, the clear and nuanced essays are about much more substantial matters. What exactly would these statements from Furani and Robbins mean in practice? Maybe it comes down to my limited imaginative capacities, but the practical side of what Furani and Robbins are saying here escapes me.

However, it is evident that Furani and Robbins want anthropology to become ‘a place where the intelligence of humans (*anthropos*) opens to that of the divine (*theos*)’ – a place where the divides between anthropology and philosophy and theology ‘cease to make sense.’ This entails not just expanding the field and adjusting the moves but changing the game fundamentally. Would they not then cease to be anthropologists and become something else? The ‘awakening’ that they are calling for is supposed to take us even beyond what philosophers and theologians are currently doing. Furani and Robbins are proposing to convert anthropology into a new and much more comprehensive endeavour. They present it with prophetic vision and poetic dreams – a game that demands that we never step back from embracing religion totally.

If only undoing secularity from scholarship was possible by doing religion – or at all doable! Over the past four decades, while anthropology has been dealing with different aspects of its ‘crisis of representation’ through a series of ‘turns’ (to and away from politics, discourse, ethics, affect, ontology, and more), critical scholars of religious studies (some of them mentioned above) have been bent on revealing the many theological presuppositions that underpin the academic study of religion. Contributions from anthropology, first and foremost the work of Talal Asad (1993, 2003, 2018), and that of scholars influenced by him, critics included, have been crucial for the exposure of biased translations that prevail not only in the study of religion but also in the study of secularity – and in all sorts of politics thriving on the religion/secular binary. A finding from much of this research, and a premise for subsequent theorizing, has been that Western scholarship is confined by a Christian conditioning. In other words, the problem has usually been posed as being a particular religious (pre)condition, embodied in hegemonic conceptual apparatuses (close to doctrinal vocabularies), and naturalized through practical academic techniques (ritual-like procedures or repertoires). Notions and practices of secularity are an intrinsic part of this arrangement. They are not external matters. They are part and parcel of the very same conditioning. The historical origins of this scheme are European (cf. Dressler and Mandair 2011). Colonialism, including Christian missionizing, and other practices and ideologies associated with modernity, perhaps principally education and research, have subsequently led to the identification and domestication of religion and secularity in different societies across the globe.

Today, religion and secularity materialize in myriad relations or situations. Anthropology and religious studies are involved in many of them, through our own disciplinary moves and as witnesses and often encouragers of the moves that others make. Each part of the binary postulates the other, explicitly or implicitly. They work as what Carol Gluck and Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (2009) characterize as ‘words with shadows’, ‘words that expand’, and, sometimes, ‘words unspoken’ (cf. Maghraoui 2009). Yet religion and secularity are much more than words. Their performances and presences within and beyond our disciplines mean we cannot change or do away with them as we please.

What we can do is continue to study them carefully wherever we come across them, and whenever we enact them ourselves, which is what the authors of the five essays in this thematic issue all do so compellingly. Credit to Furani and Robbins for heartening disciplinary boundary breaking, even if we favour different kinds. More engagement between anthropology and religious studies is a challenge for the future. On our way there, we must keep looking, warily, for moves and modalities that constitute not only secularity but also religion in all that we are doing.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Bjørn Ola Tafjord has just arrived at the University of Bergen after having been Professor of Religious Studies at UiT The Arctic University of Norway. He is the PI of an international collaborative research project called ‘The Governmateriality of Indigenous Religions’ (or GOVMAT), and a member of other collaborative research projects titled ‘Multiple Secularities’ (at the University of Leipzig) and ‘Bodies in Translation’ (at the University of Oslo). Most of his research is ethnographic, takes place in and around Talamanca (on the border between Costa Rica and Panama), and raises basic questions about methodologies.

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