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SPECIAL SECTION: AN ANTHROPOLOGY OF NONRELIGION?

Introduction

An Anthropology of Nonreligion?

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ABSTRACT: This introduction engages with recent scholarship on what has been dubbed 'lived' forms of nonreligion. It aims to profile the anthropology of the secular and nonreligion, no longer treating it as a subdiscipline or 'emerging trend' but as a substantial contribution to general debates in anthropology. Drawing on the ethnographic contributions to this special issue, we explore how novel approaches to embodiment, materiality, moral sensibilities, conceptual distinctions, and everyday practices signal new pathways for an anthropology of nonreligion that can lead beyond hitherto dominant concerns with the political governance of religion(s). Critically engaging with the notion of 'lived' nonreligion, we highlight the potential of ethnographic approaches to provide a uniquely anthropological perspective on secularism, irreligion, atheism, skepticism, and related phenomena.

KEYWORDS: atheism, embodiment, ethnography, lived, materiality, nonreligion, secular, situated practice.

> An arrival takes time, and the time that it takes shapes 'what' it is that arrives.
>
> — Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*

While religion has long been a central topic in anthropology and other social sciences—whether understood as ritual, mysticism, or organized forms of piety—irreligion, secularism, or nonreligion have only recently emerged as explicit objects of empirical study. This is especially the case in anthropology, as a result of the discipline's history and changing self-understanding as well as its own entanglement with secularization narratives. As Fabio Vicini suggests, "anthropologists have long excluded the secular from their analysis much like sociological explorations have tended to neglect the resilience of religion in Europe" (Vicini 2020: 127). But what does it mean to understand the anthropology of nonreligion as a 'latecomer', and how does the belated arrival shape the questions we ask, the places where we look for answers, and the resources we deem suitable for finding them? If the anthropology of nonreligion has arrived after the anthropology of religion, what—if anything—does that imply for the nature and relationship of religion and nonreligion as ethnographic, historical, and theoretical themes of anthropological inquiry?

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With this special issue, we intend to intervene into both anthropological and larger social scientific debates on secularism and nonreligion by exploring what it means for an anthropology of nonreligion to emancipate itself from its 'late' arrival. In this introduction, we argue that this 'emancipation' can be observed in recent ethnographic studies on what may be called lived, embodied, situated, or everyday forms of nonreligion. By exploring atheist, rationalist, humanist, and other nonreligious commitments, as well as ambivalent and less readily identifiable forms of nonreligion, the contributions to this special issue move beyond a mere critique of binary distinctions of the secular and the religious—or reiterations of their mutual entanglement and cultural specificity; instead, they investigate ethnographically how such distinctions and their possible translations become relevant or, conversely, fail to do so in a diverse range of regional and historical contexts as well as concrete situated practices and interactions. They also pay attention to instances where such conceptual distinctions do *not* significantly shape the role of nonreligion in people's everyday lives or what it means to live nonreligiously. We suggest that by doing so, anthropological studies of nonreligion no longer form an emerging field of scholarship, another specialized subdiscipline organized around a discrete object of study; rather, they take diverse and possibly disparate forms of nonreligion or modes of nonreligiosity as a *starting point* for ethnographic investigations into more general themes and anthropological debates. In other words, the maturation of the field we seek to profile does not manifest as a concise, consolidated definition of nonreligion nor as a unique methodological approach but as a commitment to probing how ethnographic attention to the shifting and sometimes elusive nature of nonreligion yields substantial contributions to general anthropological debates regarding, for example, political practice and hegemony (Hecker, Zwissler), moral experience (Binder), personhood and belonging (Quack and Schulz), the making of distinctions (Hagström and Copeman), or the embodied and emotional textures of everyday life (Richter).

The Study of Nonreligion: Moving beyond the Legacy of the Secularization Thesis

About a decade ago, several review and programmatic articles on the anthropology of secularism were published, seemingly independently of each other (Cannell 2010; Scherer 2011; Schröder 2011; Starrett 2010).[1] At that time, few ethnographies focusing on secularist, rationalist, or nonreligious people and positions existed. Nevertheless, the timing of these essays was not coincidental but spoke to broader shifts in public and academic debates as well as changing global power dynamics. The articles problematized the secularization thesis and engaged with theoretical debates inspired by the seminal publications of Talal Asad (especially 2003) and anthropologists who pursued related approaches (Hirschkind and Scott 2006; Mahmood 2005, 2006), as well as philosopher Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* (2007). Some of these review essays documented an increased ethnographic interest in secularism since the early 2000s, including studies on 'secular sentiments' inspired by Talal Asad's work (which we discuss below), ethnographies of secularism as state ideologies in places where it was highly contested, such as Turkey (Navaro-Yashin 2002; Özyürek 2006; Tambar 2009) as well as other countries (e.g., Bangstad 2007 on South Africa), and investigations of state atheism, religious revival, and secularity in post-Soviet contexts (Hann 2000; Luehrmann 2011; McBrien and Pelkmans 2008).[2]

Early anthropological debates on 'the secular' were characterized by a critical—and sometimes oppositional—stance toward theories of secularization, particularly those that posit the decline or privatization of religion as a constitutive, necessary, or inevitable aspect of modernization. The work of Talal Asad (1993, 2003, 2018) in particular has inspired a large body of critical scholarship on how different colonial and postcolonial regimes of power and government rely on notions of 'secular' reason, liberalism, or neutrality to not only regulate but also produce, transform, exclude, and marginalize different forms of 'religion'. While anthropological scholarship within this framework has produced important critiques of supposedly Western ideologies and political regimes of 'secular', 'liberal' modernity, it did not investigate the identities, practices, and aspirations of 'nonreligious' people ethnographically. It remained focused on religious individuals—in most cases pious Muslims (e.g., Agrama 2012; Hirschkind and Mahmood 2002; Hirschkind and Scott 2006; Mahmood 2006; Pool 2016). A major concern of studies within this framework was to show how secularism as a discursive tradition and political regime functions to exclude Muslims in Euro-American contexts (Amir-Moazami 2016; Fadil 2009; Göpffarth and Özyürek 2020). However, by persistently juxtaposing Islam and a supposedly secular West, and by placing disproportionate emphasis on piety in the study of the lives of Muslims, anthropologists have tended to reinforce the very binary they had set out to deconstruct (see also Bangstad 2009; Gholami 2015: 29–56; Schielke 2012).

More recently, a growing body of scholarship has attempted to move beyond the paradigm of the anthropology of secularism, mainly through ethnographic studies that foreground the diverse experiences and lives of humanists, rationalists, atheists, secularists, or others who identify, or are identified, as secular, irreligious, nonreligious, or entirely indifferent toward religion (e.g., Binder 2020; Blechschmidt 2020; Bradbury 2019; Copeman and Quack 2015; Engelke 2012, 2015a; Fader 2020; Gholami 2015; Quack 2012; Quack and Schuh 2017; Schielke 2019; Schulz 2021). The articles in this special issue continue this effort by bringing together complementary perspectives on what may be called lived forms of nonreligion in diverse regional contexts.

Ethnographic studies such as Johannes Quack's (2012) monograph on organized rationalists in India or Matthew Engelke's (2012, 2015a) research on the British Humanist Organisation are pioneering works in this context. At the same time, categories such as 'nonreligion' or 'nones' have become more widely used in sociology and religious studies to capture practices, identities, or phenomena that are related to but different from religion (Lee 2015; Quack 2014). The special issue "Being Godless" edited by Ruy Llera Blanes and Galina Oustinova-Stjepanovic (2015) is the first publication to develop a more explicitly anthropological agenda for exploring diverse nonreligious convictions and people's attempts to disengage from religion. The contributions to that special issue sought to move beyond intellectual or philosophical commitments to irreligion, introduced themes such as materiality, doubt, and uncertainty, and reconsidered anthropology's methodological atheism. The present special issue continues this effort, but it also seeks to rethink some of the premises that have so far limited the scope and direction of anthropological engagements with nonreligion.

In "Being Godless," Blanes and Oustinova-Stjepanovic positioned their intervention with reference to a general "ethnographic silence around godless experiences" and a "lack of nuanced ethnographic and historical studies" (Blanes and Oustinova-Stjepanovic 2015: 3), which made it difficult to find articles based on long-term ethnographic research on godlessness. Against this backdrop, they found it necessary to substantiate that "'being godless' is an important empirical reality" (ibid.: 1) and therefore an appropriate object of anthropological investigation. This framing profoundly shaped their overall approach, which remained tethered to the anthropology—and category—of religion (see Engelke 2015b). Practices of religious (self-)cultivation remained the foil against which godlessness, as a process of disengagement, gained salience as a mirror image, analogue, or dialectic antipode. Furthermore, the constitutive entanglement of belief and doubt—or, put differently, the equal impossibility of either complete religious devotion or total godlessness (Blanes and Oustinova-Stjepanovic 2015: 2)—continued to be a central focus, just as the notion of godlessness continued to be grounded mainly in a European conceptual history of atheism.

Perhaps because anthropology was a latecomer to these debates, many anthropologists felt the need to legitimize their interest in nonreligion as being an appropriate and significant field of study. This may also be why earlier anthropological studies tended to focus on explicit articulations of nonreligious commitments, organized groups, or contested state secularisms. More recent ethnographies—including the contributions to this special issue—indicate a further diversification of methodological approaches, themes, and research questions, which bring more ambivalent, hidden, or situational forms of nonreligion into focus. Therefore, it has become possible to address not only the continuing need for nuanced ethnographies on the variety of experiences and modes of nonreligion but also to explore how such ethnographies contribute to broader anthropological debates as more than a specialized subfield within, or addendum to, the anthropology of religion.

Thus, the heterogeneous studies that have emerged in the anthropology of nonreligion over the last two decades indicate a gradual diversification and broadening of research perspectives. With the emergence of ethnographic approaches to diverse configurations ranging from state secularism (e.g., Navaro-Yashin 2002) to organized forms of rationalism or atheism (e.g., Blechschmidt 2020) to more ambivalent, subtle, and hidden forms of nonreligion (e.g., Fader 2020, Gholami 2015), there has been more focused attention on social dynamics at the micro-levels of interactions and actors' views. This contrasts with the macro-perspectives on national or organizational discourses, which have often been the dominant frame of reference for other disciplines like sociology or political science. It has also contributed significantly to rethinking how anthropologists working on nonreligion situate themselves in wider debates. Arguably, they have at least partially emancipated themselves from a primary preoccupation with secularization theories and the problematization of categories and definitions. Approaches that emerge from ethnographic engagements have raised different and more diverse questions. As such, the anthropology of nonreligion no longer needs to be called for and profiled as an 'emerging trend' but, we contend, constitutes a research field that offers substantial contributions to a wide range of debates in anthropology.

For example, several articles in this special issue contribute new insights to debates on morality and normative orders. Stefan Binder's contribution on moral exemplarism among South Indian atheists explores how narratives of idealism indicate a distinct register of moral experience unfolding through the affective texture of concrete personal relationships and a reflexive policing of the boundary between religion and nonreligion. Paying attention to this moral register of idealism adds to our understanding of exemplarism as one among a range of ethical frameworks that may also be relevant for people who do not happen to self-identify as atheists. Other contributions highlight the ways that moral conceptions of personhood and normative orders, which posit religious belonging as primordial, are crucial for understanding how self-identifications as nonreligious are obviated, strategically circumvented, conditioned by specific legal and historical trajectories, or only situationally salient. In their research in India and Bangladesh, Johannes Quack and Mascha Schulz examine how people's identification with different forms of non/religion—or whether they understand 'atheism' to be progressive or transgressive—is shaped by moral orders, life trajectories, secular imaginations, interactional dynamics, and concepts of personhood informed by doxic understandings of *jāti* ('religious') belonging.

Such doxic and normative orders are shaped by complex historical trajectories, political projects, and nationalist discourses. This is also elucidated in the contribution by Pierre Hecker, who draws on the concept of hegemony to retrace how a state-enforced regime of pious conservatism in contemporary Turkey registers in biographic narratives of nonbelievers. And yet, as Lena Richter shows in her article on nonbelievers in Morocco, lived nonreligion can also unfold below the threshold of discursive or categorical identification—or even unequivocal visibility—

when it is constitutively entangled with bodily dispositions, feelings, or mundane practices like eating at fast-food restaurants, walking a dog, dating in a specific manner, or wearing certain clothes. Hence, nonreligion comes into view not only as a question of ideology, conviction, or identity; it is also a potentially unstable, situational, and situated *practice*, one that is interrelated with more general theoretical issues pertaining to ethics and normativities, performativity, materiality, personhood, social conflict, or nationally hegemonic discourses.

While it may seem counterintuitive at first, we argue that it is precisely by not limiting itself to studying specific categories (secular, atheist, godless, etc.)—or the people who explicitly identify with them—that the anthropology of nonreligion can make valuable contributions to the critical debate on those categories, their presumed Eurocentrism, and their fraught relation to 'religion'. As these have been central topics in scholarship on the secular within the hitherto dominant disciplinary frameworks of philosophy, sociology, history, and political science, it is worth revisiting the troubled relationship of anthropology with categories like 'the secular' or 'nonreligion' and explaining why we have chosen the latter as a suitable umbrella term for this special issue.

Committed to Religions' Others?

As an emerging subfield since the early 2000s, the anthropology of the secular has been characterized less by the study of phenomena such as unbelief, religious doubt, or atheism than by a sustained critical and genealogical attention to the *category* of the secular as well as its cognates and derivatives (although there were predecessors in philosophy and the history of ideas since the 1960s, e.g., Blumenberg 1985; Lübbe 1965). This has entailed analyses of the historicity, instability, and inadequacy of binary and substantialist distinctions between the religious and the secular as well as their implication in political and ethical projects. Talal Asad's (2003) seminal intervention suggested that the proper object of an anthropology of the secular ought to be the conceptual grammar that regulates how such distinctions, and the power relations through which they emerge, become institutionalized and cohere in complex "formations" of the secular. Consequently, the secular has largely been abandoned as an analytical category.

The problematic nature of 'the secular' has become what Matthew Engelke (2019: 200) calls "accepted wisdom," which resonates with anthropological commitments to anti-essentialism and a focus on the historical embeddedness of academic concepts and agendas in socio-political contexts. Yet, despite apparently being common wisdom, analyses of the instability of the secular or its co-constitutive relations with religion frequently continue to be delivered as gestures of exposure (for discussions of the relationship of the secular and exposure, see Binder 2019a; Copeman 2018). It seems that the problematization of the secular not only bears but also requires repeated reiteration and, thereby, presents a particularly irksome challenge for approaches that seek to grasp the secular in its material, embodied, affective, sensual, and aesthetic dimensions. As Engelke cautions in his reflections on the debate on secular bodies, affects, and emotions, "We need to be wary . . . of making the secular into a black hole" (Engelke 2019: 207).

However, the category of the secular is of course not unique in this regard. Its problematization merely extends the long debate about religion as an entity *sui generis*, which has demonstrated the pitfalls of making disciplinary identities and methodologies contingent on the presumed uniqueness and historical constancy of a specific object of research. Like religion, the secular is neither simply given as a substantial entity *sui generis*, nor is it purely a second-order, generic concept that is "created by scholars for their intellectual purposes and therefore . . . theirs to define" (Smith 1998: 281). It is not simply one or the other because the secular, and related concepts like irreligiosity, atheism, secularism, rationalism, nonreligion, or godlessness, exist beyond anthropological theory. Our interlocutors and research participants may—or may not—use these concepts, define them, and argue about them in various ways and contexts. As Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued for other supposedly Western analytical concepts, categories like 'the secular' or 'nonreligion' are "at once indispensable and inadequate" (Chakrabarty 2000: 16; see also Copeman and Quack 2019; Schulz 2021).

While many scholars have shown why these categories are problematic, some of this special issue's articles demonstrate why they are indispensable. Hecker's analysis of biographic narratives of Turkish nonbelievers, for instance, shows that Turkey's complex history, with both Kemalist state secularism and Sunni religious nationalism, makes any explicit commitment to categories such as 'irreligious' (*dinsiz*) or 'atheist' (*ateist*) an inherently political act. It is this political salience and functionality that makes these categories indispensable within the empirically observable dynamics of nonreligion in contemporary Turkey despite their arguable inadequacy as analytical categories. From an ethnographic perspective, it is not only crucial *which* terms are employed, but rather *how*, *when*, and with *which implications*.

Our contributions certainly recognize but also seek to move beyond existing critiques of the presumably Western origins of concepts by ethnographically examining how power structures, social dynamics, and local traditions contextually shape the significance (or lack therefore) of terms such as 'religious', 'secular', or 'atheist' as well as their various translations in other languages. Rather than streamlining our categorical apparatus to generate a universalist comparative perspective, we seek to highlight and dwell in the diverse ways in which categories are used, reflected upon, rejected, ignored, or displaced in concrete ethnographic contexts. By retracing why people are committed to certain categories and not others, this special issue analyzes the normative force and work performed by categories, and their implications in domains such as politics, ethics, activism, or everyday life. Hence, the contributors to this issue work with different understandings of secularism, atheism, nonreligion, or secularity precisely because they are speaking from different ethnographic contexts and to different theoretical questions. Therefore, we do not advocate for a specific taxonomic or conceptual innovation or refinement of existing nomenclatures; instead, we take it as given that categories are contingent, historically shifting, porous, and possibly inconsistent, and that this is a general feature of most if not all analytic categories as well. We thus approach the discursive and contextual nature of categories as an inevitable premise and starting point for concrete ethnographic or historical inquiries rather than—at this point in the debate—a (particularly exciting) result of research.

We choose 'nonreligion' as an umbrella term for the special issue without presupposing a coherent definition of an object of research and without limiting possible methodological approaches. The category 'nonreligion' is certainly not without its own difficulties (Engelke 2015b), but it is less overdetermined than 'the secular', and its current usage in scholarly debates better indicates the position we take in this special issue. We have consciously adopted a non-hyphenated spelling to stress that in some historical or ethnographic contexts nonreligion *can* be approached 'on its own terms' whereas the word's morphological structure—the privative 'non'—simultaneously allows us to retain a critical awareness that, in other contexts, relations to religion may be constitutive. While 'being nonreligious' can mean that people label and imagine themselves as either religion's Other or certain religions' Other, it is not necessarily the case.

For example, in discussing the cases of a nonbelieving Hindu in Bangladesh, who refuses to be labelled an atheist, and an Indian interlocutor, who identifies simultaneously as an atheist and as a Muslim, Quack and Schulz highlight how social location and situational dynamics shape when and how people identify as 'atheists' in South Asia. They show that categories like 'Hindu' and 'Muslim' are often more polyvalent than a rending of them as markers of 'religious' identity would suggest; they are constantly being reiterated and inscribed into the body through everyday actions such as naming, addressing or greeting, through food conventions, and other habits. For instance, as Muslims and Hindus in Bangladesh tend to use different words for 'water' (*pāni* and *jal* respectively), the mundane communication involved in buying a bottle of water makes the community belonging of the speaker visible to others. This results, along with its political, social, and legal significance, in a quasi-ethnic usage of these categories. Within concrete situations of interaction, to identify as atheist may therefore entail both more and less than claiming a position of otherness vis-à-vis specific religions or religion as such—and differently so in India and Bangladesh.

The contribution by John Hagström and Jacob Copeman demonstrates that practices of making distinctions are themselves an important theme of research, which links the history of anthropological theory with ethnographies of nonreligion. They show how ideas about the kind of practices and symbols that can be retained or must be discarded to live a nonreligious life are contested and inherently linked to moral discourses and claims about what it means to be 'human'. Accordingly, diverging interpretations among humanists and rationalists about whether certain practices and symbols—such as wearing a turban as a Panjabi—are 'religious' or 'cultural' lead to contestations and heterogeneity and also to moral policing among activists. This question of morality and categorical boundaries is also central to Binder's article, albeit in a different way. In his article, he shows that atheist activists in South India use the religion / nonreligion binary not only as an analytical tool to make distinctions but also as a moral judgment to evaluate them: a practice that is deemed morally problematic can be classified as religious regardless of whether it is linked to any historically recognizable religious tradition.

The meaning, function, and nature of nonreligion—as well as related categories like atheism, secularism, disbelief, and so on—varies in different contexts and research projects. It is precisely by refusing a priori judgments about the applicability, coherence, and cultural (in many cases 'Western') specificity of certain categories that ethnographies can explore the varying ways that nonreligion figures in, shapes, and constitutes specific situated social practices. Our choice of nonreligion as an umbrella term to encompass heterogeneous phenomena is thus not only pragmatic but also programmatic; we use it to convey the diversity of themes and approaches that can be pursued within an anthropology of nonreligion.

While early ethnographies have mostly researched explicit forms of nonreligion, such as humanist and atheist organizations or state secularism, this special issue brings also ambiguous or less explicitly articulated forms of non-religiosity into view. Laurel Zwissler's article on the 'nontheistic' but 'religious' critique of the dominance of religion in the USA by The Satanic Temple illustrates how forms of nonreligion can be elusive or even disavowed. The concrete history of secularism in the USA and pervasive privileging of notions of religious freedom by social and legal institutions form the background for an ambivalent texture of 'serious parody' that makes The Satanic Temple's activism intelligible as 'religiously nonreligious' precisely because of its adamant claim to being recognized as 'religious'. Yet, there are also other examples where nonreligion in everyday life is hard to grasp, fuzzy, or implicit. Attitudes of religious indifference (Quack and Schuh 2017), for instance, may entail such a fundamental disengagement from religion that even forms of critique or explicit commitment to a nonreligious alternative may appear superfluous or beyond the scope of everyday relevance. Some staunch atheists, by contrast, may not disclose their commitment publicly and even participate in 'religious' rituals, like Christmas or Eid celebrations—and this for different reasons that can and need to be studied ethnographically. There are also complex but elusive affective dynamics of nonreligion, as when a rationalist parent feels uneasy singing a lullaby with religious content but, because of the beauty of their own childhood memories, does it anyway.

If the term 'nonreligion' defines some of our objects of inquiry only indirectly or in negative terms, we consider this as part of its analytical strength, because a certain resistance to definition, labeling, or public naming is at times a constitutive aspect of what is empirically observable about those phenomena as a 'lived' reality. This is not specific to nonreligion but rather of significance for anthropology more broadly. As such, the anthropology of nonreligion shares common ground with other fields of 'late arrivals' such as the anthropology of ignorance and 'non-knowledge' (Chua 2015; Dilley and Kirsch 2015), reflections on the significance of 'minor gestures' (Manning 2016), or the broad field of affect studies (e.g., Mazzarella 2017; Singh 2018). The articles of this special issue demonstrate the value of researching and theorizing from the in-between and the fuzzy.

Ethnographic Perspectives: Nonreligion as Situated Social Practices

What Nathaniel Roberts diagnoses for the anthropology of religion applies in equal if not greater measure to nonreligion:

> Relatively few [anthropological studies of religion] look seriously at what people do when they're not "doing" religion, or what they talk about when they're not talking about it. . . . Fewer still have attempted to grasp the systematic connections between religion and everyday life, or to show how what goes on in the street and in the home gives meaning to religion—and not just the reverse, as commonly supposed. (Roberts 2016: 4)

Roberts' critique of a too-narrow focus on religion in the anthropology of religion is very close to what we propose for the anthropology of nonreligion, not because nonreligion is necessarily like religion, genealogically or theoretically derived from it, or functionally equivalent to it (see also Hagström and Copeman, this issue). Instead, like any other anthropological theme of inquiry, nonreligion can be studied most fruitfully by placing it within the specific historical and ethnographic contexts of whatever else may be going on in people's lives.

Most of the articles of this special issue engage with nonreligion in the context of what we call 'situated practices'. The argument that humanism, atheism, secularist stances, or critical engagements with certain aspects or forms of religion(s) should not be analyzed in isolation or only at a cognitive and ideological level is probably an obvious point for most anthropologists. While it may nonetheless be worth restating, given the history of the study of nonreligion, we also want to go one step further by specifically highlighting situatedness.

Our understanding of situatedness is inspired by Donna Haraway (1988). When she coined the term 'situated knowledge', she did not just mean that knowledge is socially situated and reflects social locations. Her essay on science and feminism was a more fundamental intervention into debates about objectivity in science. While Haraway argues that *all* knowledge regimes are situated and thus partial, she emphasizes that only *some* of them, like feminism(s), are rhetorically marked as such. This allows her to reflect on the power dynamics implicated in the production of 'objectivity' and the role of feminism in science:

> So, not so perversely, objectivity turns out to be about particular and *specific embodiments* and definitely not about the false version promising transcendence of all limits and responsibilities. The moral is simple: only partial perspective promises objective vision. (Haraway 1988: 583, emphasis added)

Rather than suspending the ideal of objectivity altogether and embracing relativism, Haraway advocates for privileging partial perspectives, that is, for considering the conditions in which knowledge is produced and taking responsibility for epistemic claims. Building upon the fundamental point that knowledge reflects the conditions in which it is produced, she can make far-reaching claims about the legitimacy of feminism(s) and the scientific concept of objectivity.

Haraway's insights serve as a model for our approach to nonreligion because they show how an emphasis on social situatedness and 'specific embodiments' nevertheless allows us to make arguments whose significance extends beyond specific cases or to ask comparative questions. This special issue brings together articles focusing on North Africa, Europe, South Asia, and North America, but we do not claim that they are comparable in a direct or "lateral" (Candea 2018: 17) sense. In contrast to existing comparative approaches (e.g., Bilgrami 2016; Cady and Hurd 2010; Kleine and Wohlrab-Sahr 2021; Künkler et al, 2018; Vliek 2018), which tend to be grounded in frameworks of methodological nationalism or multiple modernities, we do not consider each contribution as a 'case study' representing a particular geographical or cultural location as the relevant unit of comparison. In other words, we do not posit nonreligion as a fixed or quasi-objective meta-concept that guarantees direct comparability. We focus instead on the different configurations of nonreligion that emerge in specific ethnographic research situations.

We propose that ethnographic analyses of nonreligion as situated practices allow for new questions addressing the different ways in which nonreligious positionalities and their concomitant social dynamics are shaped by the contexts in which they are embedded. Thus, new or hitherto neglected axes of comparison and criteria for assessing the scope of arguments derived from concrete ethnographic analyses may emerge. Consequently, many contributions in this special issue address nonreligion in ways that offer comparative perspectives on how specific dispositions, sensibilities, and expressions—including those of everyday, ambivalent, or less obvious forms of lived nonreligion—are linked to specific social configurations and imaginaries, power structures, and transnational entanglements. They examine not only what people doubt or disbelieve—or how these positions are shaped by particular intellectual traditions—but when, how, and why criticisms of religion, skepticism, or unbelief emerge in specific embodied and situated practices to begin with.

That people choose to disclose nonreligiosity situationally is particularly apparent in Hecker's as well as Quack and Schulz's contributions. Both articles stress that people's reluctance to self-identify as 'atheist' in certain contexts—even if they claim this label in other contexts—is not merely a question of not believing in god(s), but is contingent on how specific situations are structured by power dynamics, national discourses, and normative orders. Similarly, Richter's article highlights the importance of embodied practices such as clothing, consumption patterns, social relations, and emotions for how people navigate and inhabit nonreligion. The form that criticism of religion takes, the aspects that are focused on, and the language and symbols that are mobilized reflect social locations and local contexts. This becomes particularly apparent in Zwissler's article on The Satanic Temple, which promotes critical engagement with religion by claiming to be a nontheistic religion. Her analysis reveals that Temple members critically reflect on the cultural and political purchase of the *category* of religion itself. Their 'religious' secular activism and its commitment to moral values like reproductive rights or antiracism challenge not only the privileged status of the category 'religion' in the US legal system but also its conflation with Protestant 'Christianity' in US-American legal and moral frameworks. However, it thereby also reinforces certain premises of public discourses on religion and runs up against the diversity of Christianities—Protestant and otherwise—in ways that threaten to undercut The Satanic Temple's progressive agenda and self-understanding.

By focusing on situatedness and aesthetic practices concerning clothing, taste in music, media usage, material things, or affective sensibilities, several articles in this special issue engage with recent calls for aesthetic (Binder 2019b; Gholami 2015) or material approaches (Copeman and Quack 2015; Engelke 2015a), which have challenged a narrow focus on intellectual and verbal articulations of nonreligion. Furthermore, they highlight interactions and performativity to show how nonreligion is navigated, made in/visible (esp. Quack and Schulz), and shaped in practices—such as creating Satanic literature or participating in a 'pink mass' to celebrate samesex love (Zwissler)—that cannot be reduced to their apparently 'religious' dimensions. Richter's article also illustrates that, in the context of lived nonreligion in Morocco, attitudes toward certain practices and symbols—such as veiling—depend on many factors, may change over time, and are often closely related to navigating relationships and emotions rather than religiously grounded ethical discourses or clearly articulated arguments. Bodily habits, names, ways of dressing, or material artifacts may reflect non/religious attitudes, but they may also express other forms of belonging, lifestyle and milieu backgrounds, norms of propriety, tacit values, or habitus. As such, they may be symbolically related but not, therefore, reducible to 'religion'.

By approaching nonreligion as a complex of situated practices, the contributions to this special issue provide new insights into the diverse ethical, social, and political dynamics inherent in nonreligious positionalities. However, an anthropological commitment to situatedness and the primacy of ethnography does not foreclose programmatic and conceptual approaches. Hagström and Copeman demonstrate this in their article, where they propose 'clarification' and 'disposal' as a conceptual pair that enables comparative perspectives that are not hamstrung by the usual issues of translatability, a narrow focus on the problematization of categories, or a too-confining framework characteristic of many other comparative approaches. Moreover, their careful theoretical work on clarification and disposal brings not only ethnographic material from different contexts into conversation but, crucially, includes anthropological theorizing itself as an important voice in that conversation.

Towards an Anthropology of 'Lived' Nonreligion?

In this introduction and with this special issue, we seek to contribute to recent anthropological studies that emphasize 'everyday', 'embodied', 'casual', or 'lived' forms of nonreligion (e.g., Binder 2020; Fader 2020; Gholami 2015; Schulz 2021). Yet, what do we mean when we talk about 'lived' nonreligion? From what exactly do we distance ourselves when we claim that this turn to 'lived nonreligion' signals an anthropology of nonreligion that has 'emancipated' itself from its late arrival? Especially Richter's contribution provides precise and extensive answers for her ethnographic case, but it is nonetheless worthwhile reflecting on these issues and the popularity of the term 'lived' in this introduction as well. Why 'lived' or 'everyday'?

While the term is sometimes used in praxeological critiques of 'intellectualist' accounts, it hardly makes sense to imagine intellectual aspects or any other form of nonreligion as 'dead' or 'unlived'. We suggest that rather than designating specific 'forms' or 'aspects' of being nonreligious, the current prominence of terms like 'lived' or 'everyday' among scholars conducting ethnographic research in the field of nonreligion indicates dissatisfaction with previous approaches and methodological legacies. Although precise understandings and usages vary, we understand 'lived' and other similar terms as a shorthand for the kind of anthropological and ethnographically grounded approach that we aimed to profile in this introduction. More specifically, they seem to mark a new wave of studies that have—at least partially—moved beyond the legacy of secularization theories and the disciplinary frameworks of sociology, history, and political science, within which that theory had been developed and critiqued. Rather than taking core debates of modernization theories or postcolonial criticism of categories and binary distinctions as their point of departure, these works provide new perspectives and, crucially, new questions due to their commitment to anthropological approaches, an ethnographic perspective, and 'methodological presentisms' (Binder 2020; Ringel 2016; Schulz 2021).

The different articles in this special issue contribute substantially to a critical attention to the variegated effects and implications of categories and distinctions without limiting this to a question of 'the West-and-the-Rest', which has long characterized and dominated the field. At the same time, we do not intend to claim 'nonreligion' as a distinct object of research or subfield of anthropology, which is of interest mostly to certain specialists working on or beyond the margins of religion. Instead, we seek to bring research on nonreligion into conversation with larger anthropological debates and theoretical questions about ethics, personhood, embodiment, normativity, or social conflict. Our aim is not to isolate a distinct object of inquiry but to *ground* nonreligion as an important, diverse, contextual, and sometimes elusive dimension of the contemporary. Perhaps, the fact that 'nonreligion' has become in recent years a research object that is deemed adequate and interesting for a general anthropological audience—and the above-mentioned developments that have enabled this—reflects a change in anthropology as a discipline more broadly.

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NOTES

1. For engagement with humanism, atheism, rationalism, or irreligion by anthropologists during the earlier periods of the discipline, see contributions by John Hagström and Jacob Copeman and by Lena Richter in this issue.
2. Unfortunately, significant scholarship on state secularism and atheism in post-Socialist contexts (see Blanes and Paxe 2017; Ghodsee 2009; Luehrmann 2015; Pelkmans 2017) tends to be underrepresented in current debates.

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